

The Virtues of Cities

By Alex Krieger

We Americans have long shown ambivalence towards the city. We have been ambivalent about the value of urbanity to our culture, about the appropriate form that the city should take and, especially, about where one is best placed in relationship to the city.

Americans always dream of having a good place to live, but their dreams do not often enough include the city. How is "a good place to live" typically represented? They dream of a charming porch, conversation held across a trimly kept yard, a bicycle leaning against a picket fence, lots of green space and a stately home. As enticing an evocation this is, it does not depict a city very well.

Indeed, a number of American cultural predilections inadvertently work against establishing good urban places to live. Among our yearnings, for example, is the desire to be on the move. We want to move up, physically, socially and economically. We want to move away, to start again, to do it better the next time around. We want to spread out, to stand apart, to express our individuality. We want to occupy a sizeable parcel of land. Hence a popular late-nineteenth century railroad poster soliciting migration to California promised "43 million acres of lands untaken! A climate for health and wealth, without cyclones or blizzards." During the 1930's the cover of a Resettlement Administration pamphlet called for, if not promised, "Life by the acre, not by the square foot."

Ever on the move we have shown more interest in consuming than maintaining or nurturing. We want to progress. We believe in the new, and in the future (though increasingly the new must have the feel or look of being old). It is not on the quarter-acre that we already own but one of the 43 million yet untaken that we dream about, believing that on it a good place to live and happiness will be found. Notions of rootedness, stability and permanence of place, which in many cultures are identified with good places to live and with urbanity, have been among Americans a less pressing matter. We are content with depicting stability through symbolism (or is it irony), placing monumental lions to guard our mobile home parks.

Such yearnings for progress, mobility, individuality and space continue to determine thousands of choices for dwelling on the periphery of existing cities. Not surprisingly, municipal officials, town planners and mayors, frequently remark on the diminishing urbanity within their towns. Of course, they do not phrase it that way. They decry the popularity of regional malls, lament the lack of activity along main street, worry about falling downtown investment and the migration of residents and businesses outward. They blame sprawl for their problems while envying the good fortune of prosperous suburbs.

In pondering how their towns might confront such challenges they often, paradoxically, outline a vision that emulates the perceived advantages of life on the periphery. It is not certain whether such emulation ever brings residents back to town, or merchants or places of work. But this emulation clearly contributes to the erasure of distinctions between towns, suburbs, hamlets and other forms of settlement. Without its ramifications fully considered, such homogenization has also been an American goal.

Pondering human nature, Ralph Waldo Emerson often reflected on the difficulty of acquiring (much less maintaining) both "rural strength and religion" *and* "city facility and polish." Less philosophical by nature, nor inhibited by metaphysical opposites, town boosters before and especially since Emerson sought, and often claimed, to have overcome this difficulty. Their efforts to establish what others have ennobled as the "middle landscape," "borderlands," "garden cities," "edge cities," or "greenfields" ultimately reinforce Emerson's doubts. The great swaths of development between the ever-receding country and the decongested town seem conducive to acquiring neither rural strength and religion nor city facility and polish.

So perhaps Woody Allen's claim that he is "two with nature" contains a useful insight about town design. The long-standing American yearning for a state of settlement in which the benefits of

urbanity and nature are enjoyed simultaneously has been exposed as a form of fool's gold that devalues both town and country. We may, at last, be at the point of understanding empirically what early advocates of the model suburb hypothesized: the idea of the suburb should not be about simulating city life amidst nature. It should be about maintaining proximity to both of the realms, city and nature, that are necessary for sustaining civilization. The successful suburb requires the continuing existence of both realms, preferably nearby.

Thus, to compete with their ever-spreading peripheries cities and towns might best maintain their own virtues. Under the leavening forces of rampant disaggregation, however, we need frequent reminders of what these virtues are.

Density. An essential ingredient of a town is its density, measured not in square feet but in the juxtaposition of artifice with human activity. "I have three chairs in my house:" Thoreau wrote, "one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society." He may have preferred solitude but understood the civilizing force of aggregation. Density, as distinct from congestion, promotes engagement. Interaction, made possible by proximity, is crucial and far more difficult to sustain where things are spread out across great distance, e-mail notwithstanding. The photographer, Alfred Steiglitz, urged his students to move in a little closer, to crop their scene a little tighter, *after* they composed a shot. Similar advice would benefit those who build the American City. Outside of a few pockets of genuine congestion, greater proximity among buildings and activities would benefit sociability.

Propinquity. In an age promising ever more instant communication it is easy, but wrongheaded, to assume that physical proximity is no longer important. Each day some 75,000 people visit the Mall of America, located in Bloomington, Minnesota, conveniently outside both Minneapolis and St. Paul. Are they there merely to shop, or does the popularity of the place (in which retail sales have actually lagged behind industry standards) lie partially in enabling a primitive kind of propinquity to occur? Some do shop, while more seem to be riding the indoor roller coaster, posing with the giant Snoopy, building Lego castles and enjoying the crowd. Our need for contact with others is such that we will commute great distances to places like mall concourses, forgetting that they are but simulations of environments traditionally found in cities such as Minneapolis and in St. Paul. The popularity of recreational shopping, tourism, theme parks, sporting events, specialized museums, trade shows, movie theaters (despite five hundred cable channels), even charity walk-a-thons, express a subliminal need for social contact -- for the sheer pleasure of it.

Heterogeneity within an ordered fabric. This is a corollary to locating many things and activities close together. The beauty of Boston's Back Bay lies in the tension between the similarities and differences among the facades along a block, and the repetition of such blocks along streets which themselves subtly differ in dimension, landscaping, edge definition and principal use. Buildings, like citizens, warrant their idiosyncrasies so long as each behaves civilly toward neighbors. Spaced at intervals of a half-an-acre or more the need for civility decreases. Indeed, there is a kind of illusion of autonomy about buildings spread over a vast landscape. You can presume an indifference toward neighbors when not arrayed cheek-by-jowl.

Juxtaposed realms. Lewis Mumford once defined a town as the place where the greatest number of choices are available in the smallest geographical area. Nodding approval, we go so far as to label "Central Business District" on our zoning maps and mix offices with shops. The demise of vital downtowns generally parallels the rise in the use of the term Central Business District. Why would anyone want to live, shop, dine, relax, meet a friend, cruise in a convertible, attend a concert, see a movie, go to school, take a walk with a sweetheart, or simply choose to hang-out in a place called the central business district? Because our downtowns have become mere business districts their appeal diminishes even for businesses who eventually leave in search of environments which offer

their employees a wider array of amenities. Instead of pining for the return of business interests to the downtown we should turn our attention to overcoming the absence of all other interests.

Neighbors unlike ourselves. We have a notion that the ideal suburb was a place solely of quarter-acre house lots and a homogenous population. Actually, some of the most charming early suburbs, like Forest Hill Gardens in Queens or Roland Park in Baltimore, contained a rich mixture of dwelling sizes and clusters. Forest Hill Gardens was actually an experiment in providing wider housing choices for a diverse middle class. Diversity in house types is more likely to accommodate diversity of social, economic and age groups. This is not particularly popular among contemporary suburban developers, many of whom cater their subdivisions to increasingly narrow segments of the population. A growing concern about such environments is that they breed indifference, or worse intolerance, towards social groups beyond their gates. Such indifference is unlikely to enhance democracy. While towns were always made up of defined neighborhoods, and even enclaves, proximity among them, along with a shared streets and public spaces assured regular interaction. Such interaction, or the mere promise of it, remains one of the advantages of town life.

Social landmarks. A statue of President McKinley graces and organizes traffic in an otherwise graceless rotary in North Adams, Massachusetts. The center of Riverside, Illinois, one of the nation's earliest planned suburbs, is marked by a modest train depot and a beautiful water tower. Landmarks confer coherence and legibility, not status. They highlight things that are dear to a community -- like remembering a president or the storage of water. They are not produced by labeling, or through form alone. This is apparently beyond the comprehension of those who name their shopping strip "Center Place," their office park "Landmark Square," and mark each with a faux campanile.

Texture, detail and narrative. The many buffalo gargoyles on the face of the city hall in Buffalo, New York are not only endearing, but relate a place-name to an entire epoch of frontier urbanization. An old storefront in New Bedford, Massachusetts may carry reminders of ships, whaling and trade, not unlike a street in modern Tokyo which exhibits the near-cacophony of a culture obsessed with digital technology. Public environments benefit from such excesses. Robert Browning's "less is more," was not intended to describe a town's public realm. The aphorism's principal modern proponent, Mies van der Rohe, could also be heard to say that "God rests in the details." A preponderance of detail invested with qualities characteristic of a place was for Kevin Lynch essential to good city form. These are what Italo Calvino's Marco Polo describes to Kubla Kahn in order to make him see the cities of his travels.

Connectivity Some of today's most frustrating rush hour snarls occur on the perimeter highways which pass through the uncrowded suburbs. Arterial highways channel traffic and, therefore, limit choice. A network of streets, narrow, crooked and even redundant, provides actual choice and, more importantly, the promise of choice. On a congested highway relief is no closer than the next set of exit ramps, assuming one knows where they lead. By taking a quick left followed by a right while negotiating an urban street grid, a less busy parallel street is found, a traffic back-up may be avoided, a "short-cut" is imagined, a sense of control or freedom is maintained. This is an advantage that every city cabbie understands, but few highway engineers ever acknowledge.

Streetfronts: In a typical contemporary subdivision the elements furthest away from the street right-of-way seem to receive the greatest design attention. Unfortunately, this leaves much of what influences the experience of the public realm under-designed. On the inside of the fence in a Phoenix subdivision there are beautiful homes, immaculate lawns, wonderful terraces, decks and gardens. On the public side there is simply a road for circulation assumed to require no character. In 1904 an anonymous photographer produced a view of a suburban street which he labeled "the perfect street section." Everything that is in the public eye is carefully designed -- hedges, berms,

drainage swails, sidewalks, tree alignments stoops, porches and facades. -- all of the pleasures provided by fronting on a street, instead of an artery.

Immediacy of experience. Americans are known for their dislike of walking. Yet they actually walk hundreds of yards each day through parking lots, through shopping malls, through corridors of large buildings, through airport terminals. It is ironic how much of this walking is caused by providing for the convenience of the automobile, and how much of it is forgettable. In a car, or on foot, we commute to a destination. The suburban landscape seems to only offer destinations. But it is the seductions along an interesting path that make (pedestrian urbanism) walking -- and cities -- enjoyable.

Sustainability, persistence and adaptability. While few parts of any city warrant strict preservation, virtually all have potential for reuse. Unfortunately this is often overlooked in the zeal to build anew, usually somewhere else, under the dubious supposition that rebuilding will enable us to get it right the next time. The town of Southfield, a few miles north of Detroit, now boasts a daily commuter population greater than Detroit's. Largely made up of office parks strung along a highway, Southfield's chief advantage seems to be that it is new and not Detroit. And so with each new Southfield a Detroit withers, but one suspects, only temporarily. Long after the single-function office towers of Southfield become outmoded (or simply less new and less profitable) enough of the infrastructure, street grid, building stock, cultural institutions, historic monuments, and neighborhood domains of Detroit will have survived to initiate, perhaps even inspire, reuse. The persistence of a city's morphology and institutions strengthens people's connections to a place. The archetypal suburban landscape, with its coarse grain of development, relative absence of history, and single-use zoning has yet to prove as adaptable to changing social habits or needs.

Overlapping boundaries. A city is like a stacking of translucent quilts; with layers of social, architectural, geographical strata sometimes carefully, sometimes imperfectly registered. Subtle or precise, such overlapping of precincts is crucial to place-making. An environment without perceivable boundaries is amorphous, indistinguishable from its surroundings and generally placeless. This is sadly characteristic of much of the modern metropolitan landscape. With apologies to Robert Frost, good fences may not insure good neighbors but neither does their absence foster connectivity or communality.

Public life. A large downtown shopping mall like Toronto's Eaton Centre is a marvel of design and a magnet for activity. But a careful observer will note the limited range of activities that take place inside. You will be ushered out onto the street for behavior deemed inappropriate by the management. On that street, lowly or grand, you have rejoined the town. In a city the sense of proximity to a public realm remains palpable, with standards of acceptable public behavior discreetly reinforced. An urban environment cherishes this relative openness and, therefore, yields to privatization only with considerable reluctance.

The potential for a centered life. Against most planners' predictions, Los Angeles -- the proverbial score of suburbs in search of a town -- has recently grown a visible downtown. It is really mostly a collection of corporate office towers, the product of speculative land economics at work. Yet perhaps there is something in human nature that seeks comfort in centering, and such vertical outcroppings of commerce satisfy that impulse, at least scenographically. While there may be fewer economic and technological reasons for concentration, the new Los Angeles downtown or, for that matter, the continuing reinvestment in Boston's much older center, are expressions of support for centering -- concentration as a matter of choice rather than as an historic imperative.

This recalls Kevin Lynch's concept of significance and consonance, and occurs at varying scales of urbanity. Certainly at any moment the reigning economic and political institutions require

visible expressions of presence and power. A democratic society retains a healthy skepticism about such grand or imperial tendencies to center. Yet, at the scale of a town common, a courthouse or city hall square, a library, a neighborhood school and its grounds, or even at a particularly messy though vital intersection this tendency to center can be found.

There are those who believe that we will continue to disaggregate, leaving cities to live in closer proximity to the splendors of nature, with technology providing a modicum of (electronic) social contact. Then how does one explain the invention of the "internet" cafe? Will not the very convenience of being able to perform most daily errands, most work functions, and most business transactions from the privacy of our own homes (or anywhere else for that matter) compel us to escape the attendant disengagement from society? Retarding isolation will remain the special virtue of the contemporary city. In it and no where else as poignantly, a citizen can still partake of the pleasures of overlap, the pleasures of proximity, the pleasure of propinquity.

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