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## Places

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## On Places

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of each of a variety of players in the development process, how to make judgments about the suitability of the collective result of multiple initiatives, and how to project alternatives that may have consequences in the further evolution of our neighborhoods and cities. What may critical thought do to enable us to make better the places we live in and guide their evolution and change and direct their stewardship? And/or how may criticism make us see and draw nourishment from more aspects of the places in question than we routinely do?

When considering criticism of place, it is not the works produced but the way in which they become a part of the larger structure and the way they enter into the lives of the people who encounter them that are the subject of concern. The internal character, integrity, and ingenuity of any given work will certainly become a part of that concern, but only insofar as those qualities are seen as important constituents of the experiences afforded by the place or are more broadly instructive regarding the assumptions and conditions that govern our thinking about places and the works that make them.

We have been invited to consider forms of criticism that examine places, “places that result from several works juxtaposed,” as opposed to criticism that locates a “single work of architecture in a chain of works.” Lurking behind this distinction—between criticism of a single work and criticism of place—is, I believe, the implication that single works are products of intentional design actions, which can be coherently related to precedent works, while places are unique and fortuitous. Such a distinction exaggerates the difference between the single work and “several works juxtaposed.” To anticipate my argument, I am going to claim that the distinction between single works and places is only a matter of degree. One reason for this continuity from single work to place is that places are also often the result of considered design actions. However, the point I wish to emphasize is the complementary one: single works also participate in the not fully determined nature of places. I want to claim, in a way that I hope to make clear, that the whole of the physical environment is characterized by quasi-autonomy, a degree of independence from precedent, from intentions, from specific patterns of use and meaning; an availability for re-use and reinterpretation. Such quasi-autonomy requires a theoretical and critical component in any study of environment. Furthermore, since aspects of this quasi-autonomy may be revealed anachronistically, the physical environment must be studied not only in its origins but also in its duration.

### Critical Study of Urban Places

When, in the past, I attempted criticism of places, my interest was directed to small sectors of cities, areas small enough and yet large enough that one could be concerned with both architecture and urban structure. I found myself engaged in certain kinds of analysis and in the issue I introduced as “the quasi-autonomy of the physical environment.” The following examples clarify the issue.

#### Savannah, Georgia

In the 250 years since its foundation, the plan and the physical fabric of Savannah have been resilient in the face of new demands; yet much that is environmentally sound has been preserved through boom and bust. I conjecture that both the adaptability and the tenacity of this urban fabric have been aided by the unusual city plan of Savannah. Consider some of the characteristics of the plan:

The modular plan is additive, without a defined boundary. The plan is multifocal, devoid of a predetermined centrality. The additive module is internally structured by an extensive differentiation of streets. The module is also structured by a differentiation of parcels and blocks. The additive repetition of the module further increases the range of parcel, block, and street differentiation.

A consequence of these features is that the plan can be “read” in many ways, such as a system of squares

joined by axial streets; a set of enclaves (the additive unit, called “wards”) divided by the boundary streets that are continuous through the town plan; a combination of the two previous readings, where the axial streets dominate in one direction and the boundary streets in the other; a set of striated bands parallel to the river, establishing successive, only partially repetitive, zones; or any number of complex intermixtures of these readings.

The scale at which this abstract plan is realized in Savannah further enhances the multiple readings by denying a clue as to a “preferred” reading. As laid out, Savannah turns as many parcels for private development inward to the central square of each ward as it does outward to the boundary streets. This ambiguity of centripetal versus centrifugal forces (which would have been lost in either a larger or smaller ward) enhances the opportunity for multiple readings, whether successively, with changing conditions, or simultaneously, with reference to alternative criteria.

While it cannot be demonstrated here, the history of Savannah reveals that these claims are not merely a formalist reading of the plan. In the years of Savannah’s foundation, the town was organized as a system of wards with physical, functional, and symbolic focus at the squares. In its first period of decline, the river itself became the dominant focus, and the town was organized as linear zones.<sup>1</sup> In its dominant years in the middle of the nineteenth century, the fully ex-

tended Savannah plan offered a complex net in which diverse demands of commercial, institutional, and residential use found discernible niches. The same can be said of contemporary Savannah, although the changes of such uses, coupled with intensified circulation and density, yield yet another “reading” of the plan.

The characteristics of the Savannah plan that contribute to its multiple readings are among what I would term its “quasi-autonomous” features. Such elements of the plan are, to a degree, autonomous, in that they cannot be accounted for by reference to systems other than physical design; they go beyond any original intention in the laying down of the plan; and they have served in a number of different ways. Yet this autonomy is limited in that certain parts of the plan are more appropriate than others for any given use; and there are conditions under which the autonomous characteristics of this plan would fail. Even failure would, however, come at a time and in a way that would reflect this particular set of quasi-autonomous features.

There are, of course, many other quasi-autonomous characteristics of the Savannah plan. To mention only one more, the unusually small blocks of Savannah have inhibited the assembly of large parcels for either public or private use. This fact has constrained certain uses while contributing to the preservation of older buildings and uses. When changes of use and building fabric have come, the small block

has denied some popular forms, such as tall buildings with plazas. To the contrary, the small block has helped to preserve what it provides: an extensive public space with intense and proximate relations between the public and private realms.

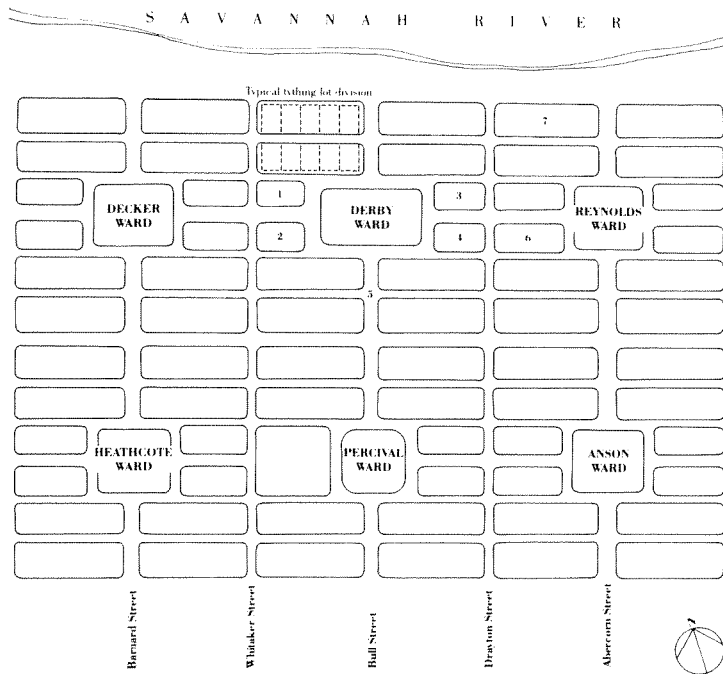
These observations on Savannah reveal what I am prepared to advance as one crucial, though surely not exhaustive, form of the criticism of place. *Any history or criticism of place must reveal, in a given location, specific features of the general problem of the intersection of the internal structure of architecture with a changing historical setting.*

#### Quasi-autonomy

With the example of Savannah, I would like to recall the content of my first intervention in this symposium. A central issue of the internal history of the discipline of architecture is the quasi-autonomy of the physical environment. Quasi-autonomy is a feature of both the general capacity of the discipline of architecture and any specific physical environment.

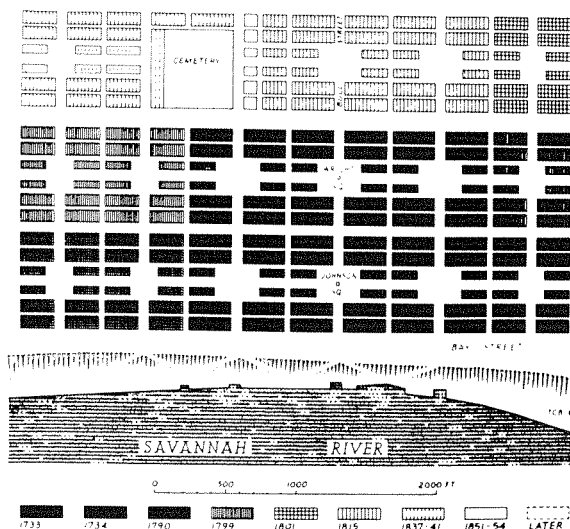
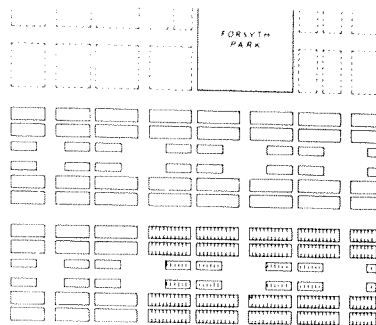
The issue set for this symposium was the problem of the critical response to single works versus the critical response to places. I asserted that there is not a fundamental difference between the single work and “several works juxtaposed,” although there are differences of degree.

A single work is, in the terms I have introduced, a product of the pro-



FOUR ORIGINAL WARDS

- 1 Public mill
- 2 Public lake house; House for strangers
- 3 Public storehouse
- 4 Church site
- 5 Public well
- 6 John Wesley's parsonage, 1736-1740
- 7 Trust reserved lots



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profession and can be accounted for, although not fully, in a narrative history. In the first instance, there are those exceptional single works that can immediately be given a place in “a chain of works” and thus be located also in the internal history of the discipline. It is also my claim that even single works that are not immediately recognized for any contribution to the discipline may, in the duration of their use, reveal unanticipated potentials for meaning and use. For these reasons, I have argued that the history of architecture must address the conjectures harbored within the discipline and also consider the duration, not only the origin, of the physical environment.

Any work of architecture, then, can and should be considered both in the particularity of its historical moment—with due respect for “external history”—and within the theoretical, critical, and historical construction of the discipline of architecture.

### Criticism of Place

The point at which I arrive, then, is this: “place,” the product of “several works juxtaposed,” is not radically different from the single work, but it does require a shift in our historical and critical response. The single work may be quite amenable to a conventional history and may then reveal unanticipated potentials only over time. On the other hand, “several works juxtaposed” in a place may be too disjunctive for a compelling narrative history and yet immediately reveal poten-

tials that can only be accounted for by the critical and theoretical analysis of their quasi-autonomy. Place, as opposed to the single work, thus requires a heavier emphasis on the quasi-autonomy of the environment and a concomitant emphasis of criticism and the critical dimension of history.

Before concluding, I would like to illustrate my argument with two other, briefer, examples.

#### **New York City: Typical Manhattan Block**

The typical Manhattan block is generated by a network of broad avenues extending most of the length of the island and smaller streets that traverse the island. The strongly directional shape of the island is thus reinforced by the hierarchical relation of the north-south avenues over the cross streets. The blocks that are the complement of this network are long and relatively narrow: 600 feet, more often 800 by 200 feet, with the short dimension on the dominant avenues.

The intensity of circulation on the avenues early led to the reorientation of the end parcels of the blocks toward the avenues. The hierarchical relation of the streets was thus complemented by the contrasted parcels and uses on the various sides of the blocks. Larger parcels and buildings at the end served a more metropolitan scale of use, while small parcels and buildings preserve a diversity of other, usually residential, uses. A deceptively simple plan was organized and dimensioned in such a way

as to sustain local diversity even in the face of extensive development.

With the pressure for greater and greater building size on the avenues, and thus for the assembly of ever more parcels into the end block parcel, the complementary relation of the long sides of the block is threatened. The remainder of parcels in midblock becomes too small and too isolated to sustain an alternative environment relative to the intensity of the avenues. A plan that has shown remarkable resilience is reaching, or has passed, its limits.

Conceivable corrections to such a problem can be either conservative or still acceptive of development: either resisting the assembly of end parcels over a certain size or designing these larger buildings such that traits of the side-street parcels are restored.

A quasi-autonomous feature of a plan is thus under severe stress and requires either protection by legal constraints or an architectural solution. Failing one of these steps (or some other stratagem), a complete re-interpretation of the entire city sector is required.

#### **Paris: Block between Avenue Kleber and Rue Lauriston near the Etoile**

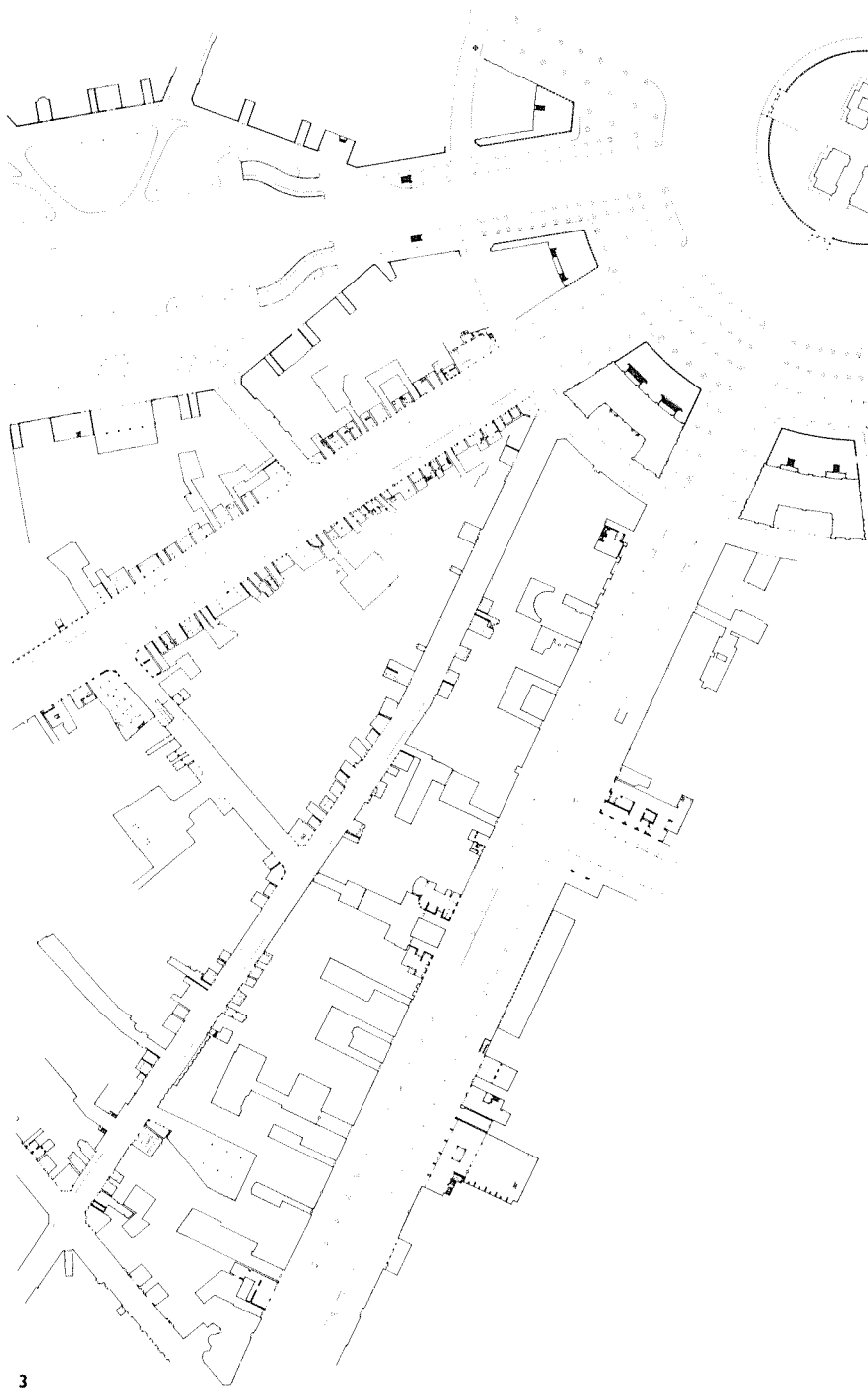
The major streets of Paris typically bound large urban sectors. There is a passage from metropolitan uses along the major streets to ever greater privacy as one penetrates the intersecting but descending order of streets within each sector. Typically, a broad side of a block, or

#### **1 Map of the first six wards of Savannah in the 1730s.**

The small blocks, such as those marked 1 to 4, are single parcels reserved for communal use. The typical division of the larger blocks into private parcels is shown at the top center. The continuity of the private parcels from ward to ward and the greater number of streets accessing those parcels yield linear zones, paralleling the river, in contrast to the nondirectionality of the additive square wards. Other "readings" are discussed in the text. From Stanford Anderson, "The Plan of Savannah," *Harvard Architectural Review* (Spring 1981), p. 63.

#### **2 Map of historic Savannah.**

The successively lighter shading shows the chronology of the extension of Savannah. The alternative "readings" discussed in the text can be recognized in this plan. From Turpin Bannister, "Oglethorpe's Sources for the Savannah Plan," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (May 1961), p. 61.



*ilot*, coincides with the major street, while the opposite side of that block will be part of a much different urban structure. Typically, again, the block will be so deep that buildings fronting the streets will have courtyards and even other buildings behind them on the same parcels. Thus growth and intensification of use on the parcels fronting the major streets may have relatively little impact on parcels that adjoin but face lesser streets. Radical change in one element is possible without necessarily altering the urban sector radically.

Avenue Kleber is a major street of the kind just described and has come under intensive development. As it exits from the Etoile, the first long block of avenue Kleber is bounded on the west by an atypically narrow block. The paralleling long side of this block is rue Lauriston, a narrow street ascending a hill and, until recent decades, a double-sided street with residences and local commerce. The narrowness of this block has made it vulnerable to the intense development initiated from avenue Kleber. Metropolitan commercial forces penetrate the block, pushing out both residential and commercial use and making rue Lauriston a fragile, one-sided environment. Although rue Lauriston may have seemed a minor feature, with its decline, the viability of the entire urban sector of which it is a part is in jeopardy.

A quasi-autonomous feature, typical within Paris, is here weakly configured and stressed beyond its

limits. It may be too late to solve this problem either through legal constraints or by architectural design. A complete re-interpretation of the entire city sector has been achieved *de facto* and only radical steps could offer yet another, more positive interpretation. Rue Lauriston may provide a warning for other less inherently vulnerable urban sectors.

## Conclusion

I would like, finally, to reflect on the set of examples I have put before you. The peculiarity of the block in the Paris example is certainly susceptible to an historical account, but it would probably be neither very interesting nor very contributive to any deeper understanding. The systemic character of both the Savannah and New York examples invites and will reward conventional historical analysis. Yet, in all three cases, if we go beyond an account of their historic origins to an account of their temporal duration (as sketched in my presentations), we are rewarded with new questions and observations that reach to what I have termed the quasi-autonomy of the physical environment and of the discipline. I am then led to propose that certain features of these places should receive our critical attention: street hierarchies, network configurations, block and parcel organization, building types and forms, the differentiation of these elements and their relations to one another, and finally, the remarkable tenacity of all these features. The quasi-autonomy of these elements gives

them a different temporal structure than that of the daily unfolding of the city and also a different explanatory, critical, and projective role.

## NOTE

- 1 Stanford Anderson, "The Plan of Savannah and Changes of Occupancy during Its Early Years: City Plan as Resource," *Harvard Architectural Review* (Spring 1981), pp. 60–67.

### 3 Map of part of the 16th Arrondissement of Paris.

The place Charles de Gaulle is partially shown at the upper right. The very large street running west from the Etoile is avenue Foch. The two large radials south and east of avenue Foch are avenue Victor Hugo and avenue Kleber. Between these two avenues is the smaller rue Lauriston.  
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