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Author

Wood, Denis

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When you're alone — and life is making you lonely — you can always go — downtown.



LOOKING FOR LIFE IN THE HEART OF THE CITY

I am watching a little black kid, maybe two years old, chase a pigeon around the fountains in front of the Wake County Courthouse. His patient, amused mother follows him with eyes bright with pleasure. Watching bird, boy and mother in this moment of relative abandon, I feel my eyes shine, too. It is maybe 75 degrees out, sunny with a slight breeze at 11:45 on this Tuesday morning. The fountains — concrete aggregate pools each with a trio of bubblers — flank the axis that runs out the front door of the courthouse, across the mall to the front door of Belks, Raleigh's premier department store. The courthouse, mall and fountains are the result of planning. The pigeons remain in spite of planning, for little effort has been spared in the attempt to make them leave the center of the city.

And then what would the old man who just spilled peanuts for them onto the pavement have done?

At 11:30 there are still few enough people on this block of the mall for me to count without trying. As we coast toward noon the number is rising. A woman stops to ask if I am interested in reading the latest issue of *The Watch Tower* magazine; now she is approaching another who has perched on a corner of one of the fountain pools to read in the sun. The smell of cigarette smoke and cologne is also on the rise as people pop from office building doorways in growing numbers. The surf of voices is high enough to compete with the hum of the ever-present air conditioning compressors and the growl of the not-too-distant cranes. Snatches of conversation. Laughter.

By now there are too many people to count. Belks, behind me, is a major destination (it has a superb cafeteria on its fourth floor), but most people are just passing through this block. The hot dog stand — long opposed by local merchants — is doing business, if maybe less than it would like, and Ron's luncheonette down on the corner is busy, but the block is dominated by institutions like the courthouse, its annex, the post office, a couple of banks and an International-style office building crammed with lawyers and advertising firms.

After lunch the hot dog stand will close. Belks will close its cafeteria line at 2:30. Ron's will close at 3:00. Then there will be no place on this block of the pedes-

Photos by Denis Wood.

trian mall in the heart of downtown Raleigh — county seat, state capital — to get a Coke, much less a cup of coffee. Shortly afterwards there will be no one on this block at all except the pigeons.

But for now, for a moment, there is the sense that this is a place, there is the buzz of life, folk hailing one another, the sound of feet, the purposeful staccato of the Florsheim-shod lawyer with his two briefcases, the shuffle of the slippers of the old lady from the Sir Walter Apartments nearby. There is the smell of food and perfume, birdsong in the trees, the flap of pigeon wings, the shrill of the occasional cicada, “How ya’ doing?” “All right,” laughter, shifting light, the high voices of kids, the boom-slap of the hal-yard on the flag poles.

plus a scattering of elderly from the Sir Walter Apartments and a streetperson or two. There will be a major flurry when the high schools get out and a very brief one at five when the suits and secretaries run for their cars.

Mostly, though, it’s like this: empty. Across from where I’m sitting the night guard has let a cleaning lady out of the courthouse. It is 9:45 in the evening but my block of the mall has been just like it is now for all of four hours, ever since the laggards descended from their offices to find their cars and zoom off to home, that is, *to somewhere else*. The old folks have retreated to the safety of their apartment building. The shelters for the street people lock up awfully early, or perhaps something else explains their

When you’ve got worries — all the noise and the hurry — seems to help I know — downtown.

The sunlight is slipping across the mall. Secretaries in their fashionably long dresses, construction workers in their shirts cut off above the navel, lawyers in their tailored suits, clerks in their long-sleeved white shirts, delivery men in the matte brown or matte blue of their uniforms, loungers like me in jeans and jackets, a streetperson in her mismatched sweater, knit cap and overcoat. Raleigh for a moment is present in its bewildering diversity of ages and sexes and classes, come together for a moment to eat and be in the sun and the presence of each other.

The moment slips away so fast. It is not yet 1:30 and already again I can count the people on the mall. The number is not small — there are maybe 130 people on this block — but the flood of folk is over, and without continuous rejuvenation the number shrinks rapidly, though not as rapidly as the diversity does. The construction workers and delivery men are back at work; so are the secretaries and clerks. Mainly here now are white males in suits, every now and then with a gym bag in hand — suits,

absence. But there is *no one here* from 5:30 in the afternoon until 6:30 the next morning, no one at all, not even a cop, not even a pigeon. The fountains run though, the vacuity of the bubblers painfully evident now that theirs is the most evident sound on the mall, a vacuity marked in this silence by a singular absence of purpose, even for a fountain.

Whoa! Here comes a couple, the first in 17 minutes to pass my bench, and



whoa! whoa! the last bus from the outer malls has just stopped on its way to the housing projects where live so many people who serve at the Hardees and McDonald's and Chick-Filets and Dunkin' Donuts out at Crabtree Valley Mall and North Hills Fashion Mall and the Celebration at Six Forks or wherever they're coming from — a sudden, poignant *peakette*, eleven people slipping down my block of the mall, one couple stopping, sitting on the edge of a fountain, talking, looking each other in the eyes. At this tail end of summer there are still insect voices — rasps, shrills, clicks — and the noise of the water, and the halyards on the flagpoles, and now these voices, snatches of their conversation floating over.



block, then, too, it is a lively place and you feel good about living in Raleigh — even if most everybody you meet *is* a lawyer or a banker or politician.

A mockingbird breaks the palpable silence of the mall with his crazy call. I have been lucky in my birds, watching the urbanite pigeon at noon lead the children on and drive the planner crazy, and now listening to a mockingbird sound the dearth of song. I remember when I was much younger, and less disappointed, hearing on the radio Petula Clark singing *Downtown*; oh, it was a stirring promise...

Just listen to the music of the traffic in the city — linger on the sidewalks where the neon signs are

And then they too leave.

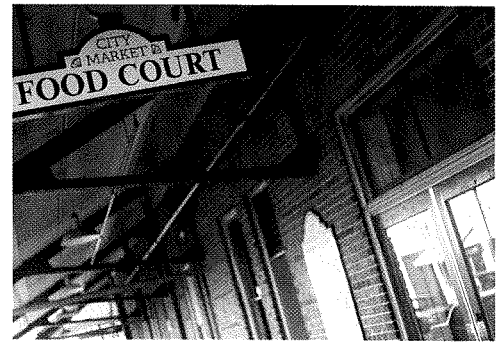
You have to be a geographer to want to stay. The surfaces are hard or heavily planted (under the trees there are flowers of twiggy things) and there is no place to stretch out. With the harsh, bright street lights for keeping the criminals at bay, who'd want to? It is so bright that I can write without strain. Who would come here? Everyone has worked with the best of will to make this a place for people. Cars have been excluded (oh, how the merchants screamed — and fled to the outer malls), the paving is interesting and varied, benches are numerous and provided with backs, trees and flowers and fountains have been thoughtfully arranged in little nooks and angles, giving the sense of an outdoor room. The landscape architect worked closely with the city's planners to incorporate the very best advice, and at noon, when the sun is out and the breeze blowing and little kids are chasing the pigeons, it almost works, for an hour, maybe two. And one night in December, when there are choirs and groups of bell-ringers five or six to a

But there is no need for the mockingbird; the mall mocks well enough the lively promise of the song's words: When you're alone downtown is the *last* place to go, not really bright but harshly lighted and void of life. The only beat here is that of the pump forever recirculating the waters of the fountains, unheard by anyone.

Was Petula Clark lying? Or was there once a time when you could go downtown? Or, for that matter, anywhere? Shopping malls, even if livelier until a later hour, are closed at 9:00 and there is no place to go but out on the highway to an all-night McDonald's if you want to talk about a late film over a cup of coffee.

But it is not just a problem late at night. Where do you go *anytime*?

It is Wednesday, about 10:00 in the morning. I am sitting in Raleigh's Pullen Park, with a nineteenth-century carousel in it, a miniature train and a lake with paddle boats. The operator of the carousel is unlocking its gate. A mother and three children are down by the swings. A couple strolls along the walk



Raleigh can I go and sit outdoors and be served a cup of coffee, much less coffee in a ceramic cup. At the moment it may be that there is no place I can go and sit outdoors and be served ... *anything*.

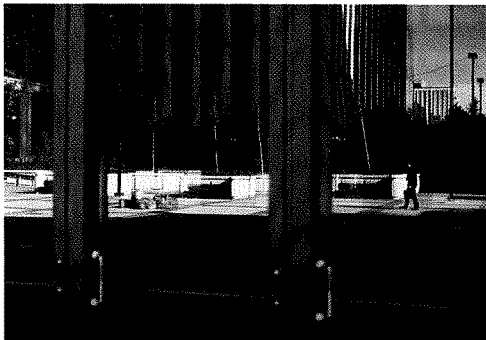
One of the problems is the way we have separated everything. Why doesn't anybody read the daily paper in the park? Because no one lives within walking distance of it; the park is surrounded not by homes but by institutions, though even the parks near homes are rarely used this way.

The density of housing is so low that most people live too far to walk to the parks, which invariably are large and stocked with *things*: basketball courts, swimming pools, tennis courts — everything but benches on a walk under a tree

an hour a day, *every* day, eight to ten hours a week on the road — it's like a whole other work day.

Finally, folk in Raleigh are in school, younger and younger every year, *hours* a day. The magnitude of the day care problem indicates exactly the numbers of children both of whose parents are working. So it is hardly hyperbole to say that the activity outdoors in Raleigh most of the time has got to be no more than this mindless shuffling. I must be out of my mind to expect to find people in a park on a weekday, sitting outside at a table reading the paper, or on a bench

pretty. — How can you lose? — The lights are much brighter there — you can forget all your troubles —



where a couple, out for a stroll, might sit to rest or to admire the view or the passing scene.

We have separated our homes from everything else, just as we have separated sitting and having a cup of coffee from the strenuous recreational activities that we associate with parks, just as we have separated work from play and both from dwelling.

Where *is* everyone all the time in Raleigh? They are mostly at home, in freestanding private, isolated single-family houses, often on streets without sidewalks in subdivisions so exclusively residential that to do *anything* but be at home requires the use of a car.

Another place where folks in Raleigh are is at work. Severe traffic problems make it perfectly evident that Raleigh residents largely work at *the same time*, everybody lemminglike starting together and stopping together and being home together except when they're in their car together migrating *en masse* from one to the other.

This is the third place Raleighites are, on the road, one per car, more than

talking, or taking in the scene. What scene? There is no scene. Everybody is at work. Or at home. Or at school. Or in his car.

I think of San Cristobal, a town in southern Mexico of some 30,000 residents, of the way that as the shutters begin to go up on the stores at day's end, folk begin to appear in the Zocalo, strolling, sitting on benches, while the lights come on, the sky turns red and darkness drops on the town like a baby's blanket. Down on the corner a woman selling roast corn on the cob is doing a brisk business. *Little* kids are out at the hands of their mothers, young kids are chasing each other, older ones are plying the shoe-shine and evening-paper trades or flirting. Men chat about politics while their fathers sit on the benches with their hands cupped over the heads of their canes.

And only slowly does this beautiful moment dissolve, the young families leaving first, then the older folks, last of all the older students, the young adults, some of whom can still be found here in the city's center hours later arguing pol-

by the lake. I have to imagine there are more people somewhere in this park's 90 acres, but in fact there probably are not. Usually there *are* more mothers and kids, but except in the summer and on weekends, not really all that many. Rarely do I meet anyone here that I know, and when I ride the carousel I am alone or with someone I have brought to share the experience. No one reads the daily paper here, or comes as a matter of course, except the college kids who park in its lot and cross it to get to school.

A woman has just opened the refreshment stand. She can sell me hot dogs and soft drinks in wax paper cups and candy and cigarettes. Nowhere in

itics or sex or aesthetics over a beer or a cup of coffee in the kiosk in the center of the square.

In Raleigh (But why pick on Raleigh? In the U.S.) it is another story. At day's end folk descend to garages or parking lots, where they enter their cars. *And if we wished to stay, if we wished to savor the day's end on the mall?* We would be alone, there would be no lady selling tortillas, no cafe along the sidewalk, no intercourse of families, nothing but a McDonald's box scraping along the gutter. It is, of course, a chicken or egg problem: *Why shouldn't I get into my car?* There is nothing to keep me here. But, if I don't stay, why should there ever be anything here? And what would I stay for?

attention distracted by the cosmos not even these.

There are those who will not share with me my admiration for San Cristobal. I recall interviewing a very senior executive of America's largest brokerage house. He commuted an hour and a half each way from his home in suburban Philadelphia to his office in suburban New Jersey. Wasn't that a lot of time in the car? I asked.

"Not at all," he answered. What, after all, did he *do* at home? He sat in the lounge chair in his den and listened to his collection of classical records. What did he do in his car? Sat in his ergonomically designed seat and listened on a superior audio system to his collection of classical discs.



forget all your cares and go — downtown! — Things will be great when you're — downtown!

I think again of San Cristobal. What do those people gain, strolling around the square? Why do they linger? Because this is what one lives for, this participation in a human community, this sharing of gossip, news, opinion, with one's fellow citizens. This is what it is all about, this is the point, the end of it all. It is like this all day in San Cristobal, just as all day in the U.S. the parks and pedestrian malls and sidewalks are mostly empty.

We seem to lack faith in the fellowship of community, and consequently we experience no more than the anomie that comes from getting one's news about the world — but not about the neighborhood — from televised evening news broadcasts from Los Angeles or New York. Not even from there, actually, for there is nothing of L.A. or New York on the news either; the correspondents are from everywhere, from anywhere, that is, from no *where* at all.

We cannot encompass *everywhere*. We can barely, with all the good will in the world, deal with our immediate environment or close friends, and with our

Where does this man *live*? He spends at least a day a week — 15, 16 hours — on the road. He spends some time sleeping. *What is left for where he lives* — his putative community — especially if we acknowledge the hours in the den with his headphones on? Evidently he lives ... *in his head*. He has no community, not even at the office, where, like others at his level, he moves from job to job or position to position as challenged or paid. Are his children in a different situation? Leonard Bowden once argued that neighborhoods are knit together by 11-year-old prepubescent males. No longer. These kids are as likely as their parents to spend three hours a day on the road en route to their exclusive schools (if they don't board) or the public schools where busing attempts to overcome for children the differences their parents' lives create.

This is a caricature, but no one in this country is free of these energies that *work against* the possibility — even if desired — of having in our communities an experience like that of the residents of San Cristobal.

What would it take? We delude ourselves when we imagine that what is at stake here is a matter of benches and trees, grass and pedestrian precincts. When we talk about planning for a sense of place we are really talking about ourselves, about the silly lives we lead, and it is these that will have to change before any other kind of change can have effect.

The pedestrian mall *has* benches and trees, fountains and a breeze, and those who pass through on their way to their cars think it's just dandy and what a nice thing it is to have. But these people are walking five, six, miles per hour and even when a friend hails, even here in the friendly, slow-paced South, nothing more than a slight slowing takes place, because the rush hour's a bitch, and

heavily in this block, which two or three years ago was a green haven for winos and panhandlers. To the west the city has constructed a nine-story parking deck-bus transfer facility with lots and lots of brick, fountains with cascades, young street trees, bollards, clock towers and heavy wrought-iron chains. Just in front of this is the city-supported Gallery of Contemporary Art, a classy venue for traveling shows of serious painting and sculpture. To the north is the site of a future children's museum. Across the park is the old city market, now a food court ("Charlotte's Gourmet Sandwiches"), and Greenshield's Pub, one of those trendy bars that brew their own on the premises, much brass in evidence, dark green carpet and the air of

Wood" that and Mr. Coats always had an apple for Randall, even after he'd gotten too big for his stroller. On cool mornings there would be a couple of braziers out and the sunlight would lace the smoke like something from heaven and there was about the market that sense of place that vanished — in a day — when the city took over to "revitalize" things.

I'm sure more money changes hands at Greenshield's in a night than ever did in the market in a week, but there's no *there* at Greenshield's, no sense of Raleigh or Wake County or North Carolina or even the South, just a sense of the new and the everywhere.

Why don't these kinds of efforts pay off with a sense of place? Because even

No finer place for sure — downtown! — Everything's waiting for you . . .

besides, one might miss *All Things Considered* on the radio.

It is going to be very hard to change this, to relocate the sense of importance now lodged in the national and international to the local, to the very local. We complain that Americans don't know where the Pacific is. In fact, they don't know the names of the streets in their own neighborhood.

In what we are pleased to call communities little is done but sleep, and that neither deeply nor undisturbed. To recognize this is to recognize a lack of something we almost uniformly possessed until the very recent past: a sense of place.

When designers talk about a sense of place they always show you slides. There are always lots of bollards in these slides, cobblestone paving, awnings, window-boxes overflowing with flowers, and alleys, benches and balloons. But a sense of place is something you can't photograph, it's something you have to live.

I am now sitting in Moore Square, the heart of Raleigh's downtown revitalization efforts. The city has invested

the well-fed and comfortable. Mostly empty storefronts await the mandatory quota of antique shops, candy boutiques and hairdressers. The second floors await their young lawyers and computer software specialists.

Ten years ago there was a real local market in the old market, mostly Wake County farmers selling their own produce, but also a couple of retailers who'd been to the big wholesale market really early in the morning. You could get fresh greens there every week of the year, fresh sausage and souse meat, homemade liver pudding and country cakes, preserves and pickles, and in season, vegetables and fruits and flowers. It was always "Mrs. Wood" this and "Mr.



in the best of cases — Portland, Oregon, — the cancer that killed the downtown originally rages unchecked. We don't really care *to be* with each other, we have too little to say to each other, we cannot imagine any longer what it would be like to live in a real community of our fellows unmediated by the events programming of jazz concerts, '50s sock hops, sidewalk art shows and ethnic food fairs. These we know how to handle. The bunting goes up, the Budweiser booth rolls out, the public address system is plugged in, yes! The moment has been certified ... *an official event*, we have something to consume, our time will not have been wasted. (At least we can give a name to what we did. We did not just hang around.)

But simply to sit in the park or on the mall for the sake of being among others, of sharing, even if wordlessly, each other's presence, this, this has become inexplicable. "What do I do?" my acquaintances want to know, and when I say "just sit around" or "walk around" they presume me afflicted by an insufficiency of things to do, unmention-

able perversions, nostalgia for the gutter, or the need to flirt with danger.

The city will revitalize downtown, but it will be for the eyes only. (When I need to urinate, I am reminded how little of the rest of the body was kept in mind.) It will look like a page from an architecture magazine and it will be no more real. There will be no people, or only those with money to spend in the pub. There will be no smells, or only that of the exhaust from the automobiles taking the pub's patrons back to the suburbs. There will be no sound, except for that of a bill slipping from a wallet.

And even these are exaggerations, downtown really *is* for the eyes alone, as conceptualized at the desk of designers who will *draw* in birds for local color,

but loathe them underfoot. When the fountains on the mall were first installed it was discovered that under moderate winds the water was whipped everywhere (that is, people got wet). An anemometer linked to the pumps soon solved that problem. Like well-bred children, fountains are to be seen (and, if the ambient noise level allows, heard) but not otherwise experienced. The water, like everything else, is for the eyes.

So are the little white Christmas tree lights festooning the trees in the plaza that terminates the mall. They are very pretty and there is always enough of a breeze to make them twinkle among the branches and the leaves. But what are they for? They bespeak a festivity that is rarely here.

I alone command at 9:00 on a balmy night this enormous space. Within eyesight are 18 benches long enough for six people apiece, and there must be twice the number in the space as a whole, to say nothing of steps, stairs, planters edges, railings and the vast paved interior. Before me stretches the mall, but above to my left reach the 16 stories of

Raleigh's Radisson Plaza Hotel; above to the right are the 22 stories of the Center Plaza Building with its restaurant-club and the 16 stories of Hanover One. Behind me is the Raleigh Civic and Convention Center where workers are in the process of installing a show.

This should be *it*. People should be sitting on these benches laughing and talking. There should be a vendor handing a customer a cup of coffee or a hot pretzel. The sidewalk cafe beside the hotel should have people at its tables, a lunatic with a guitar should be soliciting coins for his recently concluded performance, and over there beneath the arcade a young man should be holding a young woman and whispering sweet nothings in her eager ear.

Where are they? Are there so many other places to be doing these things? Tonight, in any case, I can assure you they're not happening at Nash Square or Moore Square or in the shadow of the capitol in Union Square. The parking deck-bus transfer facility is deserted. I saw a cop in his golf cart on the second block of the mall, but the bus from the outer loop has yet to disgorge its fund of flesh, so no one's here either. I know without checking that there's no one on the state government mall, which is deserted even in the daytime. The shopping malls on the belt road are closed (it's after 9:00). Where is everybody?

In front of their televisions, I guess, watching *Jake and the Fat Man*, or in bed already, resting up for another day of driving, working and going to bed.

Do I hyperbolize? Probably. But not about these downtown spaces, spaces identical to those in downtown Portland and Louisville and Atlanta and Cleveland and St. Louis and Spokane. There are pockets of life, of course. Out across from the university a strip of eateries remains clogged by students and

— *whoops, someone is crossing the plaza* — and out on the highways — *bold it, an actual couple, and I thought for a second they were even going to sit on a bench, and...they have!!!* — and, as I was saying, out on the highways there are all-night gas stations and fast-food franchises. But mostly it is a stony silence punctuated by the wail of sirens.

If we are ever to turn this around it will not be with bollards and granite pavers. It will not be with the service of the design and planning professionals who have come to imagine their function as one of specifying to manufacturers and contractors the nature of the hardware they imagine that we, in our desperation, have called for. We don't need hardware. What we need is ... *to get*



together. If we do, physics alone will insure the presence of a place. It is not a lack of place that keeps us apart, but our apartness that keeps us without a place.

The problem cannot be solved by design, but only by a thousand individual acts of will. We are going to have to lean over, turn off the TV, get off our butts, walk out of our air-conditioned condos and ... *hang around*. Soon enough we'll be joined by others. When we start to talk we'll have begun construction of the only kind of place that's *ever* mattered.