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Caring about Places: Learning from Existing Cities

Philbrick, talking of Celie in *The Color Purple*, links her and her evolving “consciousness of her false, lost, and real selves” with the places she inhabits. She observes that “. . . at significant moments . . . people enter into possession of gardens and their houses . . . a first attempt at dreaming; a determined occupancy that celebrates self and places as the recovered parts of a whole.” “Architecture and Philanthropy in a Model Company Town” tells of a place shaped from the start by the ambition, the vision, and the specific intentions of a family. It is a town that invites a reading of its human and social topography.

Places sustain or limit not just through their physical characteristics, but also through how they are perceived and conceived. “My camera clarifies my thoughts about buildings and records my designs on their existence.” Wingwall’s photos are durable and eloquent fragments of an intense relation between self and place.

“This circularity of artifact, intervention, and reflection is critical to the perception of place . . .” and is evoked through the literary and film images that Goring presents in relation to Los Angeles. “The perceived reality of the city comes as much from the expectations generated by pre-exposure as from the

direct experience of dwelling in Los Angeles itself.”

Places themselves can accurately reflect their own recent history. Helphand picks out several “events” of the 1950’s that have changed the American landscape, including McDonald’s and the interstate highway system. These changes to the larger landscape inevitably have their impact on our cities and their design, and they give rise to a struggle between local place character and the standardized products and logos of commercial and corporate identity.

“We usually suppose that truth in history must be dug out, uncovered, but here it is, the cover-up that tells the truth.” Wilson documents how Old Sacramento no longer represents its history but “represents” it in ways that detach it from its origins. “The merely old is not fun—it must have died and been moved, and set up again for it to belong in Old Sacramento.” The appearance of places may neither reveal their past nor their present.

“Four hundred lions have taken over the main street in Zurich. . . .” Joyce Lyndon tells us about how the “lions are changing the codes of the street . . .” how they “jolt the imagination onto new tracks.” Ephemeral events distract, delight, and are marvelous things-in-themselves. But they also

relate to the more durable aspects of the place, making them even more durable, and revealing aspects of them that might otherwise be overlooked.

The perceived reality comes as well from disciplined and codified reflection as presented in specialized words and images by Smith to explain the immensely satisfactory form of selected urban landscapes and to provide a set of tools to discipline design. Drawing from life and from art Smith establishes a strong basis for “Dimensional Self-Stability and Displacement in Field-Ordered Directional Alternations.” This well-defined system of thought dictates observation in ways that anticipate design and facilitate continuity with the form of the past.

Mignucci’s analysis finds “groups of elements and relationships [that] serve as a basis for establishing a vocabulary for the Ballajá Quarter [in San Juan], one with a syntax and identity of its own but one that remains continuous with the language of the city.”

How does one, therefore, learn from existing cities in ways that may be helpful for design? With subtlety, recognizing that there are many layers of appearance and reality; with method, to regulate the eye and to enable abstraction; with dreams that transform what is seen into what can be

meaningfully imagined; and with a measure of madness to let in humor and unpredictability. But most of all our cities should sustain life.

We are grateful to the National Endowment for the Arts which has supported in part this issue and the other three that will comprise Volume 5. Our purpose is to link design and cities. In the first issue we have looked at the Roman Forum and speculated on lessons that can be learned from antiquity. This issue concerns lessons from existing places. The third will be about futurist thinking; and the last about what is and can be done given current and conventional politics and wisdom.



William L. Porter