A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time

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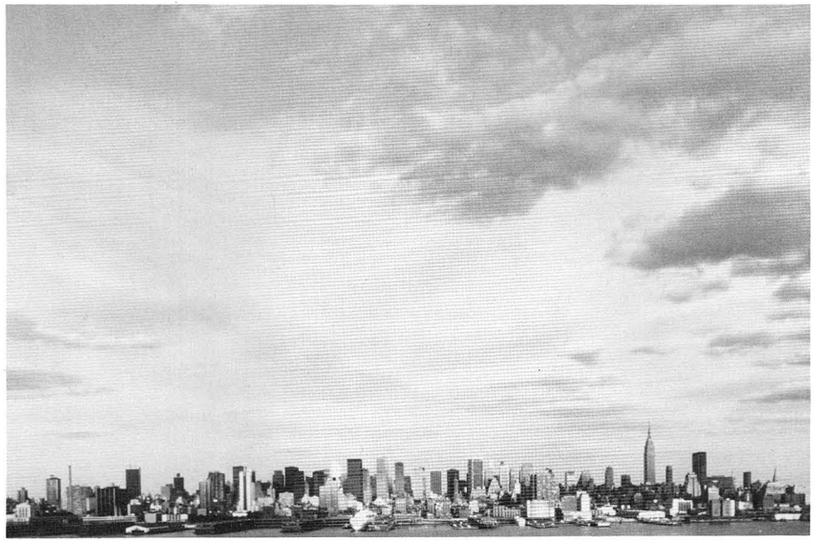
One of the features of America that the foreign visitors like to criticize is the sameness, the monotony of our landscapes. They object in particular to the sameness of our cities. With the exception of Boston and New Orleans and San Francisco they find that they not only resemble one another, but that each of them is uniform in texture. We lack neighborhoods with an individuality of their own, and the critics ask how can the people living in such cities feel any sense of belonging, and sense of place?

This is not an easy question to answer. Most of us, without giving much thought to the matter, would say that a sense of place, a sense of being at home in a place, develops gradually as we grow accustomed to it and feel that we belong there. It is something that we ourselves create. But there are many others, especially those who are sensitive to their surroundings, who on the contrary believe that a sense of place is our immediate response to esthetic factors which are already there, either inherent in the environment, or introduced by design — the creation of history or of nature or of art.

Plenty of Americans in this latter group agree with foreign critics, and over the last two decades they have tried to inject life and variety into the downtown area of a number of our cities. The streets are adorned with planters, small plazas containing walkways with fountains, and pieces of sculpture have been



inserted among the glass high-rise buildings. It has become the custom to insert a complex of boutiques and gourmet restaurants in a restored 19th century building, usually an abandoned warehouse or an abandoned railroad station. In Charlotte, North Carolina, they have used an old Methodist Church. That is not all that has been done to enliven and beautify our cities and give them individuality. There are concerts of Baroque music in the park, and guided tours of the local architecture. In the new civic center in Albuquerque, there are weekly ethnic pageants: Greek and then Spanish, then German or Pueblo Indian fiestas, each featuring appropriate costumes, dances, and food specialties.

On such occasions downtown is transformed. There is a kind of invisible confetti in the air and a sense that the city is at last becoming an exciting and colorful place, the old monotony banished forever.

In the long run this may well be what happens. But if as an outsider you find yourself passing through the downtown district after midnight, on your way to a destination hundreds of miles distant, you are likely to see the city in different light. The dominant view is not of the variety of forms and colors and movement, it is the long, empty perspective of evenly spaced red and green traffic lights. The tall glass buildings, so brilliant and imposing by day, are half obscured in darkness, like stage decorations pushed aside to allow the street, the one permanent element in the landscape, to thrust ahead, unimpeded. It continues straight through the less glamorous parts of the city, through blocks of silent houses, through the tree grown suburbs, until it becomes a highway heading into a dark, featureless landscape.

It never comes to an end; nothing interrupts the journey. There is an occasional brightly lit truck stop like all the other truck stops, and with the hours of darkness comes introspection. A favorite episode in many novels, movies, and TV shows laid in the heart of America is that solitary ride through the silent landscape: the driver thinks back over his past, thinks about his destination, and thinks about the world he is riding through, while the dashboard light shows how fast he is going and how many miles he has travelled. The sameness of the *American landscape* overwhelms him.

This sameness is a product of the grid — not only the grid in every town and city west of the Mississippi, but the grid imposed on two-thirds of a nation, stretching from the Appalachians to the Pacific, from the Rio Grande to Canada, where in a modified form it continues far into the north. The grid, not the eagle or the stars and stripes, is our national symbol. It is imprinted in every child before birth. It so happens that our national grid system is over two hundred years old, and I am surprised that we have not somehow recognized the anniversary. It was in 1785 that the Continental Congress enacted the National Land Ordinance: a law providing for a

survey which divided the entire country west of the Appalachians into an infinite number of square miles or sections. Out of 36 sections we composed square townships and many of our midwestern counties are square in that they are composed of 16 townships. There are several square cities in America: Washington, D.C. is the most familiar example, and when the grid was first authorized, there were hopes that the United States would in time acquire a square state or two. Unfortunately, we have none. Colorado and Wyoming are as near as we have come to the square.

One reason for this emphasis on the square was that in the philosophy of the Founding Fathers the square was thought to symbolize a number of civic virtues: simplicity and equality and justice and interchangeability. It still has something of that connotation when we speak of a square deal or of someone being on the square. A more recent generation, scornful of such commonplace qualities, used the word in a derogatory sense, a dull and law abiding person was called a square, but I believe this usage is now out of date.

For practical purposes, however, the rectangle is just as good as the square, and so most of our large cities (with the exception of Salt Lake City) are made up of rectangular blocks divided into identical rectangular building lots.

No doubt it was in part because of its cosmic significance that the grid was

adopted as a way of organizing space in the new republic, but it had its practical merits: it was easy to survey, it could be extended indefinitely in every direction, and it greatly simplified the description of locations. It was less a plan for the landscape than an outline which could be filled in a variety of ways. The grid merely made it possible for every future American, settling in the newly surveyed regions, to satisfy two basic individual needs: the need for a place — a piece of land to farm and call home and the need for belonging to a community — for the grid produced boundaries for local governments based on the township. But that was all. The grid ignored topography; its straight lines crossed lakes and mountains and forests. It ignored climate and the quality of the soil. One dollar and fifty cents was the price eventually decided on for each and every acre, whether it was rich farmland or unpenetrable wilderness. The Grid made no provisions for towns or cities, none for the exploitation or protection of natural resources, none for special populations or societies such as the Indians. There was no provision for changing or modifying the system, and nowhere a hint of how to continue a traditional organization of space. It is often said that Jefferson and the other proponents of the grid had been inspired by the Roman system of centuriation which produced an extensive grid system, still partly visible, in many regions of the Empire. But the similarity between the two systems is superficial: The Roman grid determined not only the size of the individual holding, it determined its type of farming, the qualifications of the settler, and the location of roads and irrigation ditches and towns. It was an extremely efficient, planned landscape, controlled by the central authorities. The much smaller urban grid layouts of which there were several in Colonial America, prescribed a hierarchial social order and a centralized plan. The national grid represented a radical shift in social philosophy and in the relation between the individual and his environment. What it seemed to say was: "You fought for the opportunity to own your own land and to be its sole master. You asked to have all feudal, all social, all church constraints removed. You wanted the individual to have total responsibility for his own decisions. So here you are, here is your demythologized, existential world. Here is a set of schematic boundaries, here is your rectangular plot of land, here is your chance to shape your own destiny, establish your own relationship with the natural environment and with your neighbors. How you cope with your problems, what kind of house, what kind of town you build — that is for you to decide."

This is certainly a very perfunctory way, as we see it, of fixing once and for all the landscape of a new and growing nation. If we were now to undertake the same sort of job we would go about it in a much more deliberate, scientific manner. We would haggle for years, if not decades, over the economy, the social composition, the evolution of the various regions to be defined. There would be sharp ideological disagreement and once we had decided on a plan, we

would at once begin changing and improving it to make sure that we had the future well under control. For it is very difficult for us to suppose that an optimum environment can not or should not be created by the expert. That is why many of us have trouble accepting the grid system. We dismiss it as a neoclassical abstraction, as a convenient method of selling land in order to pay the debts incurred by the war for independence. But I think the scheme can also be interpreted as the recognition of a new kind of individual: free at last to act on his largely benevolent instincts, autonomous, and capable of striving for perfection without the encumbrance of history or repressive social institutions.

It is very doubtful that Jefferson had any idea of the kind of landscape he was helping to produce. The Founding Fathers had grown up and lived in the landscape of Colonial America, a landscape created by homogeneous societies of English men and women who sought to reproduce in a modified form the compact farm villages surrounded by fields and meadows of the Old World. The farmers of the land ordinance assumed that the new West would be populated by the same time-honored method: by groups of families with their appointed leaders, their church, their customs and traditions. Even the Southern members of the comittee, loyal to the Southern policy of individual settlement, endorsed the notion that the wilderness West of the Alleghenies would be gradually replaced by neat farms and small villages with a church or courthouse as the center of community activity. They all agreed that the grid landscape should be settled in an orderly and consecutive fashion. One of them, Albert Gallatin, had lived in the frontier region of Western Pennsylvania and knew from experience that the newer, less docile generation of settlers wanted no part of the traditional village with its social and moral constraints. He knew that they preferred to strike out for themselves, exploit a piece of land for a year or two, and then move still further

West. Nevertheless, the Founding Fathers were convinced that the European and Colonial heritage of the landscape as determined by the natural environment and by tradition would eventually prevail.

Yet there were many signs even before the Revolution that a new kind of landscape was already beginning to emerge. In the ideal traditional landscape the family's position in the community depended not only on the ownership of land, but how much and how well it was taken care of. Houses, fields, structures, and spaces were in those days the best indications of the solidity and prosperity of the village. But gradually even these ceased to be reliable: land was bought for speculation and whoever bought it often neither lived on it or worked it. Land was occupied by squatters who did not own it, and still other land was briefly exploited for its natural resources — its forests, its grazing, its game — by persons who neither lived on it or bothered to buy it. We are all now aware that the new western states were rarely settled according to predictions, that from the beginning there was repeated turnovers in land ownership, great mobility, great mortality among towns and villages.

Most 19th century descriptions of the still new landscapes of the Midwest and Great Plains dwell on their bleakness and rawness and their makeshift quality. A book entitled, *Cities of the American West* by John Reps is an invaluable guide to the towns and cities which sprang up west of the Mississippi between the Civil War and 1900. This remarkable collection of city plans and of contemporary lithographs, together with the descriptive text, tells us how the traditional town and city layout was gradually abandoned in favor of a uniform grid of undifferentiated spaces, and how the focal point of the community shifted from the political and institutional buildings to the commercial and industrial part of town clustered around the railroad station and the tracks. When we look down as our plane descends to land at any one of the dozen contemporary cities in the Midwest and West, we see the omnipresent grid from a new perspective: each square a compact composition of modest, one story stucco houses with attached garage and miniature front lawn. We see that there are rich parts of town and poor parts: districts near the country club where the houses are large with circular driveways and districts close to the tracks with one trailer court after another. Some streets are tree-lined, and have a timid curve; some are unpaved and full of parked cars. But sooner or later we discern, or think we discern, the uniformity underlying most of the houses: none of them is ostentatious; none is squalid beyond redemption and gentrification. All can be seen as variations on a national prototype: a dwelling modest in size and simple in design, oriented more to the street than to its neighbors, pleasantly anonymous in landscaping, and entirely without that quality called pathos. We look in vain for any examples of a regional style or of historical reference.

The more we ponder these houses the more they seem to reflect the characteristics of the grid landscape: its simplicity and uniformity and interchangeability, its rejection of the past, and its indifference to nature. The

history of American architecture could well be rewritten, leaving out the evolution of styles and dwelling entirely on the slow, persistent stripping away of the accumulation of myth and symbolism, traditional forms and traditional restraints. Once this is finally done, what we will discover is a demythologized house: small, compact, convenient, cheerful, resting lightly and briefly on a small green rectangular space in the demythologized grid landscape. But it is not a landmark. It resembles a trailer, a mobile home eventually moving away.

This then is what the critics have been telling us: our cities are uniformly monotonous, and therefore, they lack any sense of place. But is this in fact true? When we join the chorus of denunciation of the American urban environment for having no individuality, no variety, are we not perhaps accepting too easily a verdict based on one and only one criterian: that of the architect-urbanist designer?

I cannot help feeling that the current debate about what creates a sense of place is largely confined to an educated and environmentally sensitive minority. It is characteristic of the establishment, (the spectator, the tourist, the professional observer), to admire visible and formal relationships. But it is *not* a characteristic of the average citizen, and we have to be very obtuse, very remote from the everyday world if we fail to see how alive most Americans are to what seems to them the unique qualities of the town or city they live in: of climate, of politics, of cuisine, of perverse driving, of accent and dress and daily habits. In these respects each place is unlike any other. No one will claim that each is architecturally or urbanistically beyond compare, but all will recognize its social individuality.

We fail to see "social uniqueness" because most of us establish the sense of place not by its forms, its spaces and structures, but by the way it tells time,

by the sequence of daily, weekly, yearly events. This has in fact always been the case with the vernacular element in the population. The old world farm village came to life when it observed both the traditional farm calendar with special days for plowing, planting, and harvesting, and the traditional church calendar with its special rites for honoring of the patron saints and celebrating of local festivals. It was the public event which gave dignity to place: it was not the composition of open spaces and surrounding structures that made the marketplace beautiful, it was the moment, the day.

It is the very absence of monuments and architectural works of art in most American communities that foster this emphasis on occurrences as rallying points for the city. We have, of course, largely abandoned the traditional agricultural calendar, based as it was on the cylce of seasons and the recurring movements of heavenly bodies. To take its place we have evolved, in town after town, our own much richer cyclical calendar: holidays, the opening and closing of school, the baseball or basketball or football season, elections, weekend excursions, the routine of commuting to and from work, the weekend shopping spree. The spaces in our contemporary urban environment are for the most part without interest or artistic merit, yet given the appointed day or hour, the parking lot, the shopping center, the sports arena, the playground and the street all come to life and serve as the setting for some brief popular event which gives rhythm and vitality to the city.

The sociology of time is a new and a still largely unexplored field, and by far the best recent book on the subject is *The Seven Day Circle* by Eviatar Zerubarel: a fascinating study of the week, especially the week in modern urban society. As the author says, "The week is the only major rhythmic component of our environment that is essentially artificial and totally oblivious to nature." — which perhaps is why it is so important an element in American urban life: it provides us with what might be called "time-marks" to punctuate and lend variety to a demythologized calendar and a demythologized environment.

It is this sociology of time which by rights now belongs in the study of the landscape: for different rhythms, different calendars, different daily routines separate one group very effectively from all others, just as similar rhythms and similar calendars bring us together in many ways, and help create the community.

It is my belief that landscape studies in America stand in great need of this other dimension. We tend to be anti-historical and too much concerned with the permanent forms of the landscape, whether natural or man-made, we are too much concerned with space and the organization of space, and too ignorant of time, its organization and its importance. Paul Tillich has written,

> "The power of space is great and it is always active both for creation and destruction. It is the basis of the desire of any group of human beings to have a place of their own, a place which gives them reality, presence, power of living, which feeds them, body and soul ... But every space is limited, and so the conflict arises between the limited space of any human group, even of mankind itself, and the unlimited claim which follows from the deification of this space ... Tragedy and injustice belong to the God who acts in time and through time, uniting the separated space of his universe in Love."

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