

# “Understanding Urban Form”

David Howard Bell

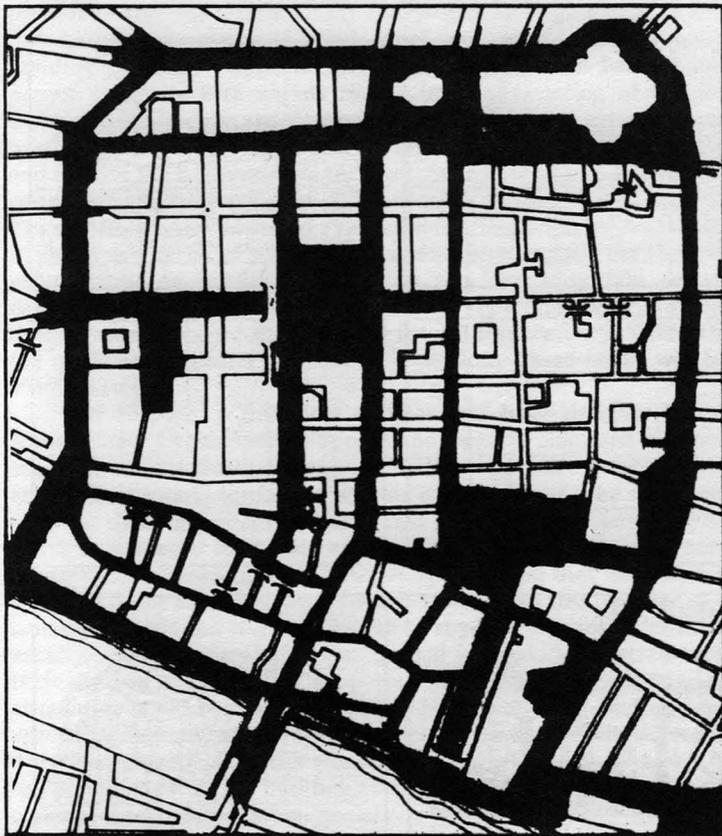
*I had the sense of occupying space within space, of wallowing in it, of growing with my protoplasm in various directions, but as I said, I don't want to insist on this quantitative and material aspect, I want to talk above all about the satisfaction and burning desire to do something with space, to have time to extract enjoyment from space, to have space, to make something in the passing of time.*

Italo Calvino

The primary emphasis for this fall 1979 fourth/fifth year combination architectural design studio was the consideration of architecture as an urban phenomenon. There were a total of seven projects of varying duration assigned during the semester which explored specific and general issues relative to this theme. These projects were supported by readings and class discussions about the morphology, typology and physiology of urban architectural form. Selected responses from the three major projects of the semester are illustrated on this and the following pages. The first two of these projects attempted to inculcate an awareness and understanding of the order and content of urban form as a continuous distribution of

solid and void and establish an appreciation for figural space and its structure by stressing two sets of general categories: Lynch's five urban topological constants (path, node, landmark, domain and edge) and Maki's five operational categories of linkage (mediation, sequence, similarity, definition and selection). The final project of the semester was the design of a specific building (a mixed-use repertory theater/restaurant/bar) for a selected urban site in Kansas City, Missouri. This project placed in the vicinity of a well-known Kansas City urban landmark, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, had to include the design of urban space(s) within and at the edge of the site. These spaces as well as the building had to gesture to several local contextual constraints. One of the students in that studio, Marsha Hale, has written an essay included in this issue of Oz in which she describes the ideas and issues which she perceived as significant in the development and design of her project for this final assignment of the semester.

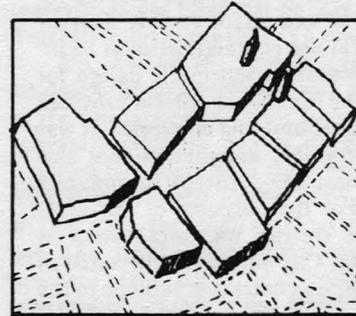
The first major project of the semester entailed the analysis and interpretation of an existing European urban situation. The students were asked to select from a list of twenty-five possibilities any one district of approximately ninety acres. This district was centered on



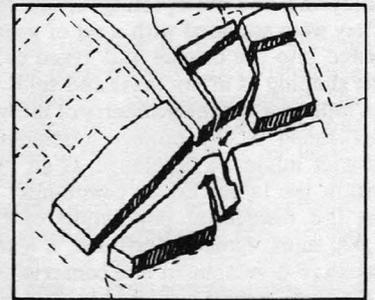
6 SPACE RELATIONSHIPS

MONUMENTS, BUILDINGS, AND PIAZZAS ARE EMPLOYED INGENUOUSLY TO DELINEATE AND DIRECT SPACE IN FLORENCE. THE BUILDERS OF FLORENCE PUT TO USE THE FACT THAT DECISIONS MUST BE MADE AT JUNCTIONS AND PEOPLE HEIGHTEN THEIR ATTENTION AT SUCH PLACES. THIS INCREASE OF CONCENTRATION ALLOWS THEM TO PERCEIVE NEARBY ELEMENTS WITH MORE CLARITY. THE BUILDINGS, MONUMENTS AND PIAZZAS FORM AN INTERLOCKING NETWORK HINGING AROUND THE CATHEDRAL AND PIAZZA SIGNORIA. EACH SEEMINGLY DIRECT ONE ONTO THE OTHER.

Doug McQuillan, excerpt from *Florence, Italy, analysis, Design 3, Fall 1979*



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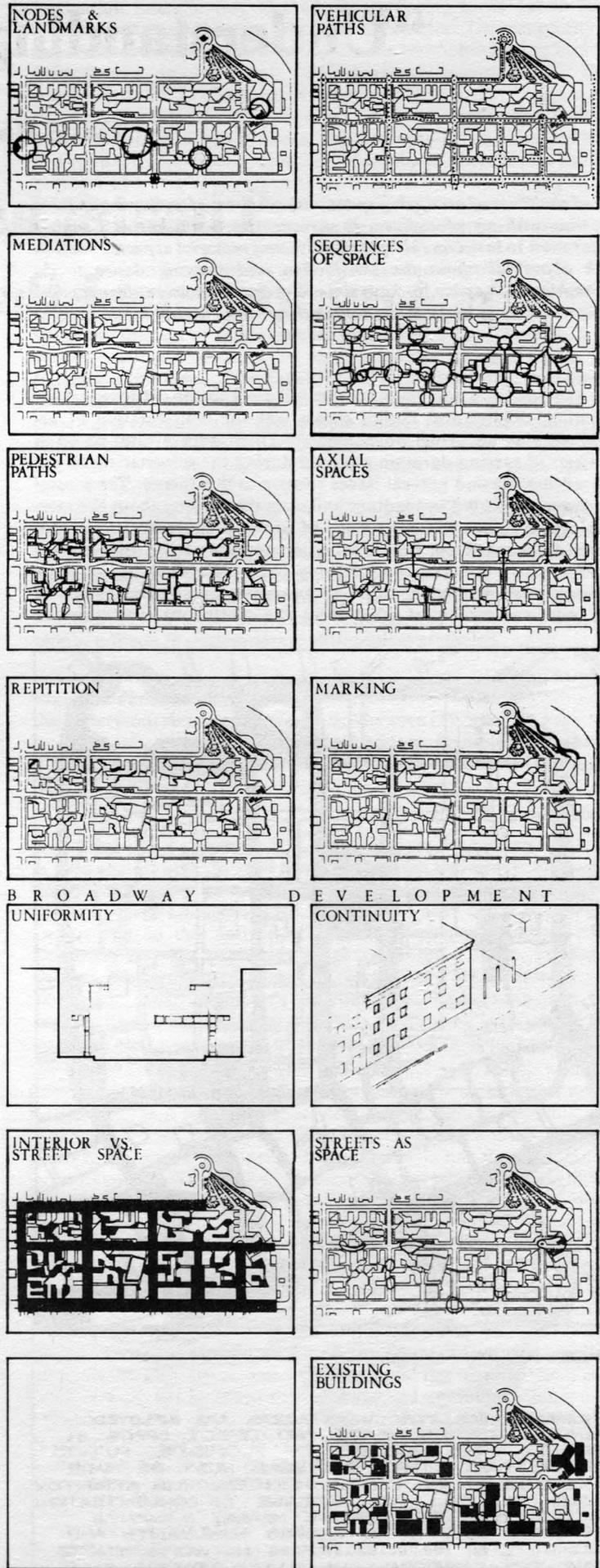


30 THE PIAZZA TRINITA AND COLUMN OF GIUSTIZIA. THE PIAZZA S. FIRENZE (28, 31) SIGNIFIES THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BUILDINGS THAT SURROUND IT. THE SPACE IS NOT LIKE PIAZZA SIGNORIA OR PIAZZA S. GIOVANNI BUT MODEST IN SCALE AND ARTICULATION. THIS INJECTION IN PATTERN IS A RESPONSE TO THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CHURCH AND MUSEUM IN THAT AREA. THIS PIAZZA CAN ALSO BE SEEN AS A DEVICE TO DIRECT SPACE TOWARDS PIAZZA SIGNORIA. THIS PIAZZA ALSO CONTAINS TWO STRONG ORIENTATING DEVICES. THEY ARE TWO TOWERS, ONE MEDIEVAL TOWER TO THE MUSEUM(28) AND AN OTHER TO BADIA.

THE PIAZZA TRINITA(29, 30) IS MARKED BY THE COLUMN OF GIUSTIZIA. THIS PIAZZA IS THE FIRST OPEN SPACE AS YOU COME FROM THE RIVER. THE INFLECTION IN SPACE AND COLUMN DIRECTS SPACE TOWARD THE PIAZZA SIGNORIA. THE COLUMN IS USED TO MARK THE SPACE AND BREAKS UP THE SPACE.

one or more major urban formal/spatial events. Unless there was present a very strong physical edge to the district, the students made arbitrary decisions as to the location of the ninety acre district's boundaries. Once this was established, the students then had to analyze these districts in accordance with several categories: streets and open spaces, monuments and landmarks, major buildings, differentiation of various kinds of pathways, identification of functional entities and their spatial distribution, major landforms, landscape features, the identification of major urban formal themes (like the linear progression of Nash's Regent Street or the network of piazzas which constitute Rome), etc. In addition to this analysis an interpretation of the meaning and significance of the urban order had to be undertaken. This required the student to think of buildings and spaces as having communicative capacities, as being things which suggest and manipulate human emotions and activities. In doing this analytical and interpretative exercise the students read Camillo Sitte's *The Art of Building Cities*, selections from Bacon's *Design of Cities* and the published work of the Krier brothers.

The second major project of the semester was a study and subsequent remapping of an approximate thirty-five acre district in the Kansas City, Missouri downtown. This district is one which has at present very little substantial content and a random distribution of open space (other than the street grid) and buildings. Most of the open space is parking lots and most of the buildings are old, many are vacant, but virtually all are sound, good structures. Several of these buildings are rather nice examples of a spare Renaissance Revival vocabulary typical of turn of the century speculative office buildings. Of those buildings which are occupied the uses vary from warehousing to offices to light industrial. The primary intent of this project was for the students to apply their newly acquired skills for analyzing and interpreting urban form and space to this district. They were supplied with a set of general use characteristics to be injected into the district and asked to prepare a schematic design for the shaping of urban mass and void. The functional criteria provided an indicator for the geometry of individual building envelopes. It was envisioned in the project statement for this assignment that this district might be developed as an almost self-sufficient community within the larger urban community. For the purposes of this project the residential population of the district was established at 5,000 souls. Arnold Garfinkel, a Kansas City developer interested in urban re-development and conservation, was quite sympathetic to the "utopian" model proposed by this project and acted in an unofficial capacity as advisor and consultant. As he is involved in a somewhat similar effort in a district immediately to the south of the one dealt with by this studio project, he was able to provide us with valuable practical and empirical insight into the vagaries and vicissitudes of the economic, political and bureaucratic issues such an effort involves. Many of the schemes which students developed for this project made a judicious effort to maintain the traditional qualities associated with the grid plan of mid-western cities and towns. This district of Kansas City particularly makes visible this aesthetic of opening the city up to nature because the north ends of the north-south running streets in the district open up to vistas of the "endless" Kansas prairie across the Missouri River. Over this existing Cartesian grid students placed a contemplative introverted network of pathways and open spaces. Doing this allowed the interiors of urban blocks to be opened up and the provision of an intimate counterpoint to the energetic insistence of the linear grid. Students were allowed in the exercise to take some liberties with the shaping of building envelopes. They were aware, however, that the most exotic shapes ultimately would be compromised by functional necessity. Policies also had to be adopted in the students' designs towards such significant micro-events as entries (at all stages of the urban hierarchy), colonnades and connectors, fenestration and massing rhythms, etc.



David Altenhofen, excerpt from *Quality Hill Remap, Kansas City, Missouri, Design 5, Fall 1979*

David Howard Bell was born in Hagerstown, Maryland, in 1945. He holds degrees in physics and architecture, obtaining a M. Arch. from the University of Virginia in 1973. Currently he is a faculty member of the Department of Architecture at Kansas State University.