

The Powers of the Eye

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Urban design is a perplexing art, based on uncertainties. The designs offered in this exhibition, despite their great diversity of form, all seek to address the social lives of people in cities. Can social life as complex as that of the city be designed? Should the architect attempt to do so?

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Thirty years ago, in her book The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs attacked the enterprise of urban design as an exercise in tyranny. She attacked the "megalomania" of architects like Le Corbusier, who, in his Plan Voisin for the Marais in Paris, sought to sweep away, with a simple stroke of the pen, a thousand years of dense urban settlement; she attacked Robert Moses, who sought to gut the economic and social center of New York City by creating a highway system radiating out to the leafy and middle-class periphery of the New York region. She affirmed instead the viability of urban forms which accumulated over time from local uses and historical changes; such messy and unsatisfying shapes of streets, houses, shops, and public spaces were, in her view, socially legitimate and democratic, whereas the artist-designer acted as a dictator.

Her attack has deep roots in the history of the Western city. The same fury at the designing eye's claim to organize society appeared in the ancient world, for instance, in Aristotle's attack on Hippodamus of Miletus, whom Aristotle identified as the designer-culprit of the geometric grid plan for cities. Aristotle asserts that the city cannot be the arbitrary creation or invention of one person, because the rules an artist follows differ from the rules citizens must follow, the citizens learning from mutual conflict how to live together; Aristotle declares:

The analogy drawn from the arts is false. . . . It is from habit, and only from habit, that law derives the validity which secures obedience. And habit can be created only by the passage of time; a readiness to change from existing to new and different laws will accordingly tend to weaken the general power of law.¹

The cities we live in are of course nothing like the self-governing city-states of Aristototle's time. Today urban communities form parts of a complicated metropolitan, national, and indeed global economic network; investments made in Tokyo directly affect the work people do in Los Angeles or New York. To celebrate the local community, as Jane Jacobs does, might seem a self-destructive gesture, since the new international network of power certainly has a larger and more powerful design. Yet this critique of the designing eye, from Aristotle to Jane Jacobs, has a dimension beyond the merely local or purely political.

It is the peculiar tragedy of this visual art that the urban designer has far less autonomy than the painter, the sculptor, or the photographer. Urban projects are realized only if the designer can cooperate at every step with banks, investors, and government authorities. Large-scale building projects are today linked to international patterns of investment; they are based on increasingly standardized values in terms of square footage, function, and materials no matter where they are built. The result is that big building projects more and more look like money: they are composed of homogeneous, interchangeable units of value. The shopping mall, office tower, or housing project vary from place to place only in terms of skin treatment or details of decoration.

Critiques of urban design have a particular validity within this context. They ask us to evaluate the urban environment in terms of how much the people who live in it feel aroused by, and so attached to, where they live or work or politic. Yet homogeneity dulls the senses. It diminishes experiences of surprise, the functional replaces the difficult or the challenging. Buildings that function like money, in short, pacify the body.

Yet, just as the urban designer is not a self-sufficient artist, the homogeneous qualities of the urban environment are not simply a result of a single cause like finance. Buildings have come to look like money due to a complex interaction of modern technology, geography, and culture; these factors combine to deaden the bodily sensations of people in urban space.

In this essay, I would like to sketch how these factors produced that result. In turn I hope to give the viewer one critical tool to evaluate the projects presented in this exhibition. How, and how well, would these proposals bring our senses back to life in urban space?

DEAD SPACE

A few years ago I went to see a film with a friend who had fought in the Vietnam War. A bullet had shattered my friend's left hand, and the military surgeons had been obliged to amputate it above the wrist. Now he wore a mechanical device fitted with metal fingers and thumb which allowed him to hold cutlery and to type. The movie we saw turned out to be a particularly gory war epic through which my friend sat impassively, occasionally offering technical comments. When it was over, we lingered outside, smoking while waiting for some other people to join us. My friend lit his cigarette slowly; he then held up the cigarette steadily in his claw to his lips, displaying the metal hand to others as a provocation. The movie patrons had just sat through two hours of bodies blasted and ripped, the audience applauding particularly good hits and otherwise thoroughly enjoying the gore, but now they seemed afraid to look at this tangible sign of the events that had just given them so much pleasure. People streamed out around us, glanced at the metal hand and moved away; soon we were a little island in their midst.

For nearly a century, modern culture has sought to liberate the human body, to set it free in particular from the sexual phobias, silences, and prejudices of earlier eras. Yet a great chasm exists between modern images of the body and bodily experience. Just as few soldiers taste the movie pleasures of ripping other bodies apart, marketable images of sexual pleasure have very little to do with real lovers' sexual experience. Few films show two elderly naked people making love, nor naked fat people; movie sex is great the first time. The imagery of bodily pleasure in the mass media supposes a flight from one's own body.

It occurred to me at the war film that where we were might have influenced how others reacted to my friend's hand, that the space in which people live has something to do with flight from the body. We saw the film in a vast shopping mall on the northern periphery of the New York region. There is nothing special about the mall, just a string of thirty or so stores built a generation ago near a highway; it includes a movie complex and is surrounded by a jumble of large parking lots. This place dedicated to material consumption seems a fitting home for tasting violent pleasure in air-conditioned comfort and at a psychological distance. Yet I've come to understand that the space makes a deeper impression on those who inhabit it, stamping into them the fear of a real body signifying pain.

The geography of modern society has shifted in our time from densely packed urban centers to thinner and more amorphous spaces, suburban housing tracts, shopping malls, office campuses, industrial parks. These spaces weaken bodily experience in three ways: modern peripheral space dulls the body's sensations of motion, sight, and touch.

Motion: When a Parisian wanted to go from the Place Saint Michel to the Place de la République in the middle of the nineteenth century, the trip through the twisted streets of the old city took about twenty minutes by carriage, fifty minutes on foot. Today, if the traffic is good, a car makes the journey in four minutes; a walker along the straight streets created by Baron Haussmann in the 1850s and 1860s can go between the two points as fast as a carriage once did. Again, at the end of the nineteenth century in New York, it took about an hour by carriage to move up the straight streets of Manhattan's grid from Greenwich Village to midtown; today, even with the fouled traffic in the city, it takes a third of that time. People experience speed today in terms people in the past could hardly conceive. The technology of motion—from automobile engines to continuous, poured-concrete highways—has changed modern geography; thanks to the power of speed, human settlements have extended beyond tight-packed centers out into peripheral space.

Yet speed is a very curious phenomenon. For one thing, anxiety about moving has developed in the same measure as the ability to move fast; people become uneasy if a subway stops for half a minute, and traffic jams bring out the beast in even the most sedate bourgeois. Earlier travelers, harboring no expectation that they would move without interruption, were free of this instant anxiety. The desire for speed has in turn a marked effect on one's sense of space. The moving body does not want to be arrested in space, it seeks pure forward thrust. This dissonance between speed and space again contrasts to earlier eras. For instance, the "Villes Circulatoires" of the eighteenth century sought to organize a city so that people could circulate efficiently through it yet experience its monuments, churches, and parks as pleasurable elements in the process of moving. Washington, D.C. is perhaps the greatest city planned this way; the late eighteenth-century architect Etienne Boullée imagined circulation through such a city as a journey in space, the course of the journey as significant as its origin and its destination.

2. Martin Heidegger, "Making, Being, Doing," in Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadler (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

Today the anxiety about being stopped or slowed down in space prompts urbanists to evaluate and build places in terms of how easy it is to get out of them, how easy it is to quit them. Space is now a means to the end of pure motion. The look of urban space enslaved to motion is neutral, furnished with standard signs, dividers, and drain sewers streets emptied of street life. This dependency of space upon motion has social consequences. The philosopher Martin Heidegger thought that the modern world weakened the commitment to place, and the rule of motion over space is one physical way that mutual commitment weakens; motion erodes the sense of "being in place," to use Heidegger's words.² In terms of bodily experience, the speed of driving through a place as well as the insulation of people inside a modern automobile, bus, train, or subway, erodes the sense of connection to the environment through which they travel.

The physical condition of the traveling body reinforces this sense of disconnection. The actions needed to drive a car, the slight touch on the gas pedal and brake, the flicking of the eyes to and from the rearview mirror, are micro-motions compared to the arduous physical movements involved in driving a horse-drawn coach. Modern cars, buses, and subways do not rock and jolt the way nineteenth-century carriages and trains did. Navigating the geography of modern society requires very little physical engagement; indeed, as roads become straightened and regularized, the voyager need account less and less for the people and the buildings on the street in order to move, making minute motions in an ever less resistant environment. The modern moving body is thus a pacified body; we move both passively and rapidly through space.

One reason the crowd at the war film watched so uneasily my wounded friend smoke is suggested by this disconnection of motion from place. Of course, out there, on the periphery of New York, we were far from the grim realities of violence in the center of the city, but more, the film had some of the same qualities of release from circumstance as modern travel. My friend's metal hand created something like traffic jam anxiety—the hand which stopped the flow of fantasy, demanded a human connection, displayed the impediment of reality.

Sight: Modern geography dulls our sensations in a second way, through its effect on the operations of the eye. As cities have spread out and diffused, the eye has been obliged to do a kind of sociological work that formerly was also done by the voice, for though the modern environment is full of mechanical noise it is also a landscape of human silences.

The pre-industrial, dense urban center was a place in which strangers talked openly to one another, on the street as in coffee houses, cafes, shops, and government buildings. More than sociable impulses moved strangers to talk to one another; in an age without mass communication, talk was the most important means of gaining information, especially among the large mass of people who could not read. Some critics have argued that the growth of mass literacy began the process of eroding discussion among strangers, so that people increasingly read about others rather than talked to them, but this was not the case. The advent of the modern newspaper in the eighteenth century sharpened, if anything, the impulse to talk; displayed on racks in cafes and bars, the newspapers served as points of discussion for the people who read them in public. Throughout the nineteenth century, men felt free to speak to others on the street,

3. Jurgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, trans. Thomas Burger, with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1989; Darmstadt, 1962); Mary P. Ryan, Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880 (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). See also my The Fall of Public Man (New York: Knopf, 1976).

intervening when something untoward occurred or striking up casual conversations; women, surprisingly, had more verbal contact with other women in public places than we might suspect in retrospect.³ Throughout the nineteenth century the authorities feared the political consequences of strangers gathering together to talk, knowing that social revolt could be ignited by the sparks of discussion. In Chicago and New York as much as in London, Paris, and Berlin, a police system of spies and repressive laws operated throughout much of the nineteenth century, attempting to keep people from talking too much to each other in bars, pubs, and in public squares.

The geographic dispersion of the city, the driver's detachment, and the rise of television accomplished what the nineteenth century police could not. The density of talking bodies has thinned out, and physical contact between them has weakened; watching television is a more passive experience than reading. Of course, people today still talk sociably to strangers in bars or on airplanes, but the talk lacks a space in which it can become collective action.

As the city has fallen silent, the eye has become the organ through which people now get their direct information about strangers. What social knowledge comes to the eye, looking around in silence?

4. Roland Barthes, The Fashion System, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983; Paris, 1967), pp. 100-110.

Under these conditions, the eye can be tempted to organize information about strangers in a repressive way. It may make use of what the critic Roland Barthes has called "an image repertoire of representations."⁴ Scanning a complex or unfamiliar scene, the eye will try to sort out rapidly what it sees in terms of images that fall into simple and general categories, drawing on social stereotypes. Encountering a black man on the street, many white people will register only threat. The urbanist Kevin Lynch has shown how an image repertoire can be used to relate to buildings and places as well as strangers; carrying a snapshot of "home" in the mind, a person compares the building fabric of a new place to the snapshot of home: the less the two correspond, the less connected the person feels to his or her surroundings. In a study of how people walk on the street, the sociologist Erving Goffman described the bodily result of seeing via an image repertoire; after that initial classifying glance at another, people walk or otherwise manage their bodies so that they risk as little physical contact as possible.⁵

5. Kevin Lynch, The Image of the City (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1960); Erving Goffman, Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

An image repertoire is just the opposite of an explorer's binoculars. By scanning their surroundings with an image repertoire, subjecting the environment to simple categories of representation, comparing likeness to difference, people diminish the complexity of their visual experience. The image repertoire filters out visual information. Socially, this means that the operation of the eye deadens experience of the other, the new, and the unknown. Moreover, the experience of rapid movement so deeply impregnated in modern bodily experience encourages the eye to use an image repertoire to classify and judge immediately. Just as rapid motion disconnects the moving body from place, so here the computer-quick operations of the image repertoire dull connection to and stimulation by one's surroundings. People made this use of the image repertoire at the movie theater when they looked for a moment at my friend, then averted their gaze and gave us a wide berth. One glance was enough to see that he was alien, even though he was alien because he was a living war-ravaged body.

For a succinct statement of his work, see Melvin M. Webber, "Revolution in Urban Development," in Housing: Model, Structure, Site, ed. Lisa Taylor (New York: Rizzoli, 82), pp. 64-65.

In the last few years we have learned how profound a role politics and economics play in shaping experiences of sight. One of the first analysts of the modern urban periphery, Melvin Webber, laid the groundwork for understanding how the image repertoire operates in these modern spaces, due to new forms of labor. Most modern work, he remarked, consists of office and service tasks which do not need to be conducted in a dense urban core; the process of manufacturing a radio or automobile may take place in many sub-factories, not in a single place; electronic communication systems make it possible to disperse workers; the advent of large numbers of lower-level women workers has pulled such jobs out closer to where they live.⁶ The result, a good Marxist would argue, is that the working classes are no longer visible to each other.

Curious about this "de-centered economy," I recently spent some time watching a woman imprint, via a computer screen, a company logo on auto tires in a suburban factory. A prompt appeared on her screen when each tire was ready to be stamped, on an assembly line far from where she sat; if the tire was not exactly in position she pressed a button marked "align," an action performed by a robotic pair of arms; then she pressed a button called "stamp," an action performed by another robotic device. Hour after hour she pressed these two buttons; if by chance the mechanical arms failed, rather than sort matters out herself she pressed a third button marked "malfunction," and a maintenance worker near the assembly line manually adjusted the tires so that the line could move again.

This ordinary use of a computer followed some of the rules that govern the automobile. Speed rules in making tires, as in driving on them, and speed is correlated to spatial dissociation; in front of the computer screen, a worker makes micro-movements which trigger mechanical actions in another place. Even more powerfully, the program built into the machines constituted an image repertoire of the most severe sort, radically restricting what workers see hour after hour. Indeed, in this factory the woman had never seen the stamping machine she operated.

Much had been gained, via this computerized labor, in terms of the safety of the worker and the efficiency of the work, but the labor process evinced some of the same deadening consequences for the body as does modern geography. Boredom was acute, made worse in this factory by the company rule forbidding workers to talk to each other when at their screens; an eerie silence reigned, punctuated by faintly clicking keyboards. Since attachment to the work was low, carelessness was high, and sometimes I observed the woman make a breathing space for herself by pressing the "malfunction" button even though the screen prompt said "stamp"; she then had a minute or two to take her eyes off the screen. The best the managers could do to alleviate boredom was rotate the mass of workers every few days between tasks organized in a similar way. As one of the executives observed to me, the freedoms of high technology labor belong only to the people who control the programs.

Touch: In 1751, William Hogarth made a famous pair of engravings, Beer Street and Gin Lane, meant to depict images of order and disorder in the London of his time. Beer Street shows a group of people sitting close together drinking beer, the men with their arms around each other's shoulders, or touching the women's forearms. For Hogarth, bodies touching each other signaled social connection and orderliness, much as today in small southern Italian towns a person will reach out and grip your hand or forearm in

order to talk seriously to you. Gin Lane displays a social scene in which none of the bodies touch, each person catatonically withdrawn into him or herself, drunk on gin; the people in Gin Lane have no corporeal sensation of one another, nor of the stairs, benches, or buildings in the street. This physical isolation was Hogarth's image of social disorder.

Some of the body contact depicted in Hogarth's Beer Street might look today, to puritanical modern viewers, like sexual harassment. Touching another person's body contains an undertow of intrusion, possibly of violation. We would not, I think, be as likely to measure social order in terms of body contact as did Hogarth and his contemporaries, for modern forms of geography have altered the modern experience of touch.

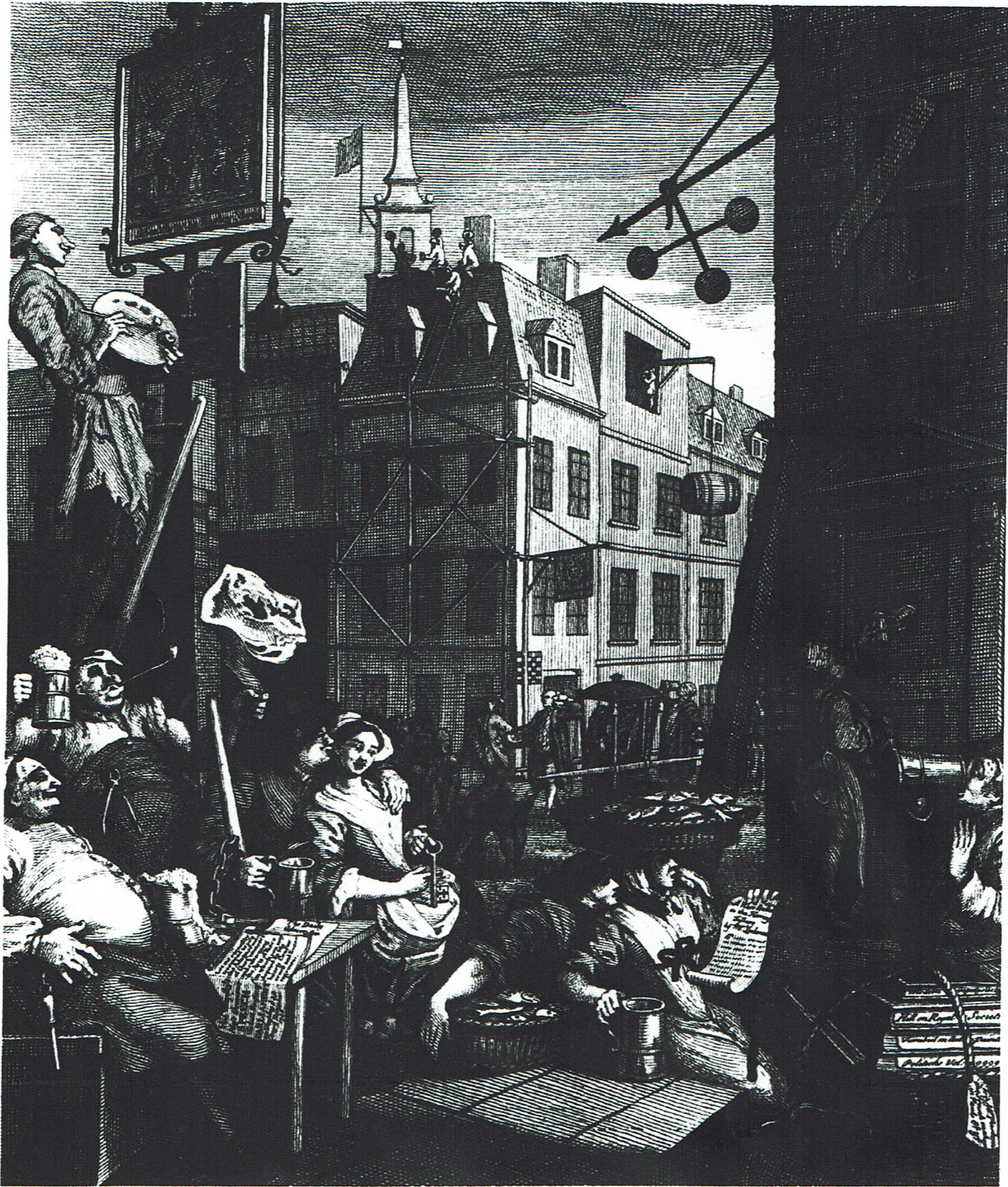
As a commercial and labor market, the eighteenth and nineteenth century city inevitably concentrated and forced into contact a great variety of people. The economic dispersion of modern urban settlements has undone the necessity for contact. Thus, while a city like New York is today as a whole as ethnically diverse as it was a century ago, that diversity is spread out, and the urban region has become a landscape of discontinuous communities with little material contact or linkage between its parts.

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The way urban planners deal with this stretched-out geography reveals a certain attitude about the sensation of touching. Modern planning seeks to create social order in distended space by deadening possible points or places of contact between different kinds of people. In siting highways, for instance, the river of traffic will often be located to seal off a residential community from a business district, or run through residential areas to separate rich and poor, or ethnically divergent sections. In community development, planners will concentrate on building schools or housing at the center of the community rather than at its edge. More and more, the fenced, gated, and guarded planned community is sold to buyers as the very image of the good life. Contact seems to these planners, contrary to Hogarth, to be a source of unruly conflict or unmanageable disorder.

The makers of these closed communities defend themselves by saying that sealed space simply responds to a real fear of physical contact with outsiders. The mayor of Paris recently declared that he sympathized with native Parisians' aversion to the armpit smell of foreigners impregnating their clothes, that he too was disgusted by the dirtiness of most foreigners on the buses and in the subways; he shocked some people but sounded a deeply resonant chord even in that once most open of cities. Playing on fears of physical contact is good politics as well as economics; both draw on an analogy to bodily violation. To deaden the places where different groups meet is like de-sensitizing the skin. The inward center, the "heart," of a community can then be shielded from the disturbing stimulations of difference.

If class and ethnic politics play a large part in deadening human zones of contact, culture also plays a role. The vocabulary of freedom does not demand contact between different groups—mutual toleration, perhaps, but not touch, not visceral contact. In cities like London, New York, or Los Angeles, which contain many different ethnic groups, the boundary streets are often neglected and amorphous zones; few people cross from one side to the other to shop or walk with their children. Fear justifies all. I suppose this is what most struck me at the movie theater, the fear that my friend's metal hand might reach out for someone's lips or eyes.



William Hogarth, *Beer Street*, 1751. Engraving
Courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University



William Hogarth, *Gin Lane*, 1751. Engraving
Courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

As this sketch may indicate, making urban designs that rouse people's senses is a far more complex matter than giving people a sense of ease in the environment. A good city, Aristotle declared, is a place that lets people confront all of life, its pains as well as its pleasures, its difficulties as well as its comforts. In terms of modern cities, a design full of life would be based on the following three principles:

First, it would privilege space over motion. This is far more than a matter of creating pedestrian zones for shopping, as inside a mall. Being in space—the sort of experience Heidegger imagined—requires attachment to the spaces in which people live. The automobile breaks those attachments by making everything in the mobile environment instantly legible, known at a glance. People become attached to space when it is puzzling or unfamiliar, when it requires interpretation, not when it is familiar.

This principle takes us back to Jane Jacobs, for the kind of environment that engages people in this way contains a great deal of indeterminacy. Rather than its functions being laid out clearly and at a single stroke, an urban design following this principle has the capacity to change, thanks to the presence of the people who inhabit it. It is an environment that can grow more convoluted in the course of time. To take a concrete instance: many modern urban designs establish rigid boundaries between public and private zones, so that people immediately know where they do and do not belong. To make those boundaries more flexible, as in the classic pattern of the courtyard which mediates between private and public space, means that in time the space becomes more arresting; in a city like Jerusalem you need to look at different courtyards in order to know where you are, where you can and cannot go. You must interpret the space; it engages you; you move in it rather than just through it.

This first principle leads to a second. A live urban space must break down the power of the image repertoire. It can do so through containing diversity, but diversity of a specific sort.

Almost all planners today pay lip service to the principle of diversity but don't take it seriously, socially or economically. The diversities that stimulate people are disruptive; they would involve, for instance, putting a hospital or welfare center in between the shops in a mall. They require desegregation of the eye. This kind of diversification in space is obviously no easy matter. It means that space focuses the tensions in a society, rather than isolates them from one another.

In American cities, we have become so accustomed to the regime of fear which inspires isolation that cities like Naples or Bombay seem unthinkable to us. In Naples, the pressure of housing has mixed the classes together, and over the course of time a certain equilibrium has been established; in Bombay, the lack of housing among the poor has mixed together religious and ethnic groups who hate one another but have similarly established a modus vivendi. No planner engineered either of these equilibriums, which is Jane Jacobs's point. Yet so strong is the image repertoire in our society that the planner who believes in diversity can make it work only by insisting on the concentration of dissonance as an urban value—the most political statement a modern planner can make.

Because fear of crime—a lightly veiled fear of race—so dominates modern thinking about cities, other diversities in American society are often overlooked. If we have long segregated the races, increasingly we segregate people of different ages, or the well from the sick. The growth of peripheral fragmentation and edge cities has separated places of work from schools, schools from housing tracts, government offices from non-bureaucratic activities. Mixing any of these elements would prove threatening or jarring—but it is exactly in that disturbance that people become aware of one another.

Where could this arousal occur? That question puts forward the third, and perhaps most challenging principle of urban design contained in our bodily sensations. Almost all of the thinking we do about the values of community gives greater value to the geographical centers of community life than to the boundaries between communities. The community seems strengthened, its identity revealed, by defining the center. The center as a place of life, and the edge as a weak zone, seems indeed a kind of natural order. Yet in the ecology of most natural systems, the greatest biological activity occurs where different zones meet, as in a swamp or a forest; species congregate at the boundaries where they interact with other species.

To strengthen that sense of touch and contact, an urban design has similarly to focus on the edge as a scene of life. In practical terms, this means finding ways to use the dead space on the fragmented periphery separating housing projects from malls, malls from office campuses, office campuses from hospitals or schools. It may well be that the American downtown is dead, but the urban problem of connection and contact has not therefore disappeared; it too has migrated to the periphery.

Of course a planner could make pretty and profitable places ignoring these three principles. But at a price. The isolation and climate of fear that rules American society would not be addressed. The possibilities for living in difference—which are the very essence of urban culture—would not be explored. Urban design is urban to the extent it tries to confront the difficulties we have living with each other. The gain of confronting our difficulties is a more vivid bodily awareness of our environment, and of ourselves.