THE CITY: A PLACE OF PLACES

EXAMINING THE LINK BETWEEN PLACE, ARCHITECUTRE AND HUMANITY
WITHIN THE URBAN FABRIC

ABSTRACT:

The city is a composition of individuals. Every resident in a city builds their own place and is built by those places that surround them. It is this interaction of places that make the city unique; transforming the city into a place of places. The interaction of places transcends the cities physical constructs, such as shelter and safety, and instead creates a spiritual dwelling for the cities residences, and giving rise to community. This spirituality is not one of pure religious thought, but rather of the indicative nature of the humanity contained within every resident of the city. It is this humanity that is then reflected in the architecture of the city's residents, and shapes not only the individual places of the residents, but the overall urban structure of the city as well. This project focuses on the understanding and exploring the link between place, architecture and humanity within an urban context by examining the act of place making, both in terms of physical construction (i.e. architecture) and metaphysical reasoning (why we build) for both individuals and communities. To accomplish this, we deconstruct the city into its natural element. Next, the notion of place is addressed as how it pertains to the relationship of the individual and their interactions and is both reflected in and shaped by the architectural perceptions around them. Finally, the city can be broken down into three key aspects of place making which reflect the inherent nature of its residence, with those being: Node, Path and Boundary.

INTRODUCTION

We say that our cities are alive. Words like living, breathing, dying, evolving all illustrate the notions of vitality and life that have become associated with both city composition and living. Often these words are directly associated and attributed to physical elements like economics and transportation, or to societal constructs such as governmental politics and culture. But these elements cannot be alive. They do not breathe, feel, react or act in any way on their own. All of these elements are but extensions of a driving force that constructs the city, people; or more precisely a person. The city at its foundation is a human construct, a convergence of individuals that generate these surrounding environmental, sociological and cultural elements.[i] The person breathes life into the city and its extensions; their interaction the driving force behind its construction.   Through these interactions form is generated, directly reflective of the humanity that constitutes the physical makeup of the city, a humanity that is derived directly from the inherent nature of the consciousness.

Why then do architects often focus narrowly on these generated elements, while neglecting the central component of the urban fabric, the individual? Perhaps it is because the physical elements are ones that are easy to obtain, categorize and respond to. Likewise for the societal constructs. These are measureable elements, but not determinants. They should be studied and responded to but not drive design, as they often do. Designs in this way disconnect and fragment both the individual and community from the fabric by isolating them and destroying their places. This begins to raise the fundamental question of the relationship between architecture, humanity and place, and how each one influences the other.

The focus here then is to re-examine the way in which architects can understand the city, not as broad physical and societal constructs but as a reflection and generation of the human element that animates and forms it. To begin we deconstruct the city into its root element, the individual. Focus then shifts to the identifying the unique relationship between architecture and

humanity and how that relationship is manifested (i.e. building) for the individual as they create the uniqueness of the city. Finally, a detailed look at the urban fabric through the three primary architectonic elements which incorporate the individual relationships which underscores the true human driving element that constructs the city and its inhabitants.

CITY CONSTRUCT

To understand the nature that constructs the city it is vital to look at what "moves it". Aristotle tells us that the true nature of any element is directly linked to the "thingness "of that element; with "thingness being that which constructs it and gives to the element its motion (drive).[ii] This motion then generates all of the external reactions that interact with the environment that surround it. To understand the thingness of the city we must ask a fundamental question of what; that is to say what is at the core of its inception, *what is the city*? To answer the question of what, we must first look at the notion of how. How the city is constructed provides a pivotal clue in unraveling the "thingness" that exists within it, since these external elements are reflections of the natural driving force behind their creation.

To begin we look at the physical elements which compose the city, such as buildings, monuments, parks etc. In his writing: *City, Soul and Myth* James Hillman emphasis the relationship between these physical elements and humanity when he describes the "civilized city".[iii] There becomes a distinction between what is civil and what is civilized; for Hillman the civil refers to culture while civilized deals with practicalities of the civil, so that civilized becomes another word for "bureaucracies of maintenance". The civilized city is composed of all the institutions of function and, in the city can function

efficiently utilizing only these functions.[iv] However, cities are not machines of pure function, but in fact a composition of human elements which connects and drives the city construction utilizing the civilized "bureaucracies". Thus places such as movie theatres, parks, public areas, etc are generated within the city as a result of the human elements within it. Without the need for human use, interaction or creation the bulk of city components would exist, as the city is itself a creation of human intent and nature and is reflected in its architecture.

Going further we must also examine the social and cultural elements that are contained within the city. Unlike the physical elements previously, these elements represent the intangible; aspects that permeate the city and seemingly drive it on a deeper level often producing the physical elements. However, like the physical elements these are not generators but rather elements generated by an underlying cause, humanity. John Dewey notes this root cause in his book *The Public and its Problems*, where he underscores the creation of social, cultural and political foundations as mere generations and culminations of individuals.[v] As Dewey points out:

> *"Those indirectly and seriously affected for good or for evil form a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name. The name selected is the Public. This public is organized and made effective by means of representatives who as guardians of custom, as legislators, as executives, judges etc., care for its especial interests by methods intended to regulate the conjoined actions of individuals and groups. Then and in so far, association adds to itself political organization, and something which may be government comes into being."[vi]*

Here the representatives selected are comprised of individuals that share commonality with those that selected them; they in turn generate and enforce the cultural and societal norms which reinforce this commonality.[vii] This quality is also seen in the constant evolution and re-emergence of societal and cultural values over the generations. Viewing history, it is abundantly clear that cultures change, societies rise and fall and political constructs come and go. This type of dynamic shifting (some of which may take generations, other may happen seemingly overnight) illustrates this quality by demonstrating the effect the individual has in constructing these externalities by preventing stagnation.[viii] If cultural and societal determinants were root causes, there would arise a point where communities would cease to generate (thus stagnate) as every individual born is subsumed into the culture and driven by it. This however is not the case. An individual while first introduced to the culture and society of the community, eventually pits the communal meaning against their own, sometimes agreeing and sometimes differing. When differing a divergence happens from the community and their cultural and social values. As more people diverge other communities generate which in turn generate their own values and traditions and the cycle repeats. Thus it is the human element which drives these social and cultural constructs, as they would not exist without one: the commonality shared by individuals of like meaning, and two: the ability of those individuals to uphold and implement the traditions and values associated with them.

As we look into the city as a construct, into its core, we realize that the city is a reflection of the human nature that constructs it. Human nature drives the construction and evolution of both city form and its function by externalizing itself in the form of architecture and Place.

INDIVIDUAL PLACE AND PERCEPTION

Place is a central component of our humanity. But *what is place*? Place can be described as a connection that exists between a person and their environment dependent on the personalization of meaning, a description of being within space.[ix] To put it more simply, place is the external form of the being. Place carries our deepest meanings, feelings and thoughts and turns them into physical forms. This is reflected in Heidegger's writing "Building Dwelling Thinking" where the construction of place within the context of the bridge illustrates the way in which place begins to become manifested through architecture and building.[x] The bridge begins by the construction and placing of the elements that compose it by humanity. This placement begins to separate the space into meaning allocations of place inside that space, thus the embankment is now created as two points along the bank, the span bridging over the water at a specific length and area. This is all linked to meaning generated by the interaction of the individual and the world, and is an act of human dwelling, naturally building through our being. Thus by building we define place as our meaning within the world of space.

For the individual the architecture of their place begins with the internal orientation of themselves within the world.[xi] This internalization is key as it provides the beginning point that allows the process of externalized construction by linking meaning and being through signs and symbols with the physical elements that surround us.[xii] Signs and symbols become the physicality of being. We are able to translate these signs and symbols into architecture through the use of perception.

Perception is composed of internal constructs and utilizes the external abilities of the body.[xiii] These abilities are translated into the notion of our haptic senses; those senses that deal with

strict physicality's of space. These senses allow a greater depth of connectivity and interaction between the individual and the surrounding environment. Predominately two main senses arise in the translation into place: Sight and Touch.[xiv] Sight allows the individual to experience and interact with a wide range of elements, allowing for a greater context of orientation within spaces. Conversely touch reduces the breadth of the scope into a more personal relationship with individual elements. This personalization allows the individual to ground themselves inside the space by directly establishing a physical connection between themselves and the elements. These senses work always in conjunction with each other, meaning that it takes both to fully translate meaning into physical place. By orienting and identifying contextual elements the individual is able to position themselves into a closer relationship to the elements within the space and then root themselves into the space through direct connections. Physical elements like materiality and color begin to transform into symbolic constructs, ones that carry direct meaning, as the connection between the individual and the space becomes stronger. Each material and every color carries with it significance. The significance (meaning) of these elements is then made physically manifested in their placement within a space.[xv]

The act of physical placement denotes the shift from internalization to externalization. The individual is now actively constructing the world; having already oriented themselves in the space and connected to it. Methods and techniques of placement begin to form a hierarchical construct that unify the order of meaning within the space. This construct does not subvert any element but rather weaves them together. Every element has its significance for itself and for the whole; every element becomes vital to the place that is being created. The integral act of physically placing significance in the world creates the place of the individual within the space of the world. Like the elements that compose the place, the place itself becomes densely interconnected to its surroundings.

THE WEAVING OF NATURE

As we build places within the world, we are inherently drawn together towards points; points where meaning is like our own, where being resonate to the world.[xvi] Each place interacting and connecting to those that surround it. These points develop into communities and then evolve districts and finally into cities that denote a large notion of place amongst human civilizations. As art or architecture speaks to the nature of the person, the city speaks to the nature of the individual's place within the world. Each singular place within a city is a woven together to form the fabric of interlaced meaning and experiences of individual being.

The interaction of places based on individual meaning generates humanistic patterns which in turn generate form and define function.[xvii] These patterns then reveal the unique quality that exists within the urban fabric, a duality of experience in which the individual both constructs place and is constructed by another's place. This duality translates into a spiritual resonance between residences, where the act of living connects the being of every residence. This connectivity, this resonance, is the inherent nature that constructs the city and its residences.

An individual perceives the environment around them, this is already shown in the way they construct place in terms of the environmental factors around them. In the city however, those environmental factors are now all of human construction. The need to orient, define meaning and interact is still present only these now respond to the external inclusion of those that surround individuals that surround the

place.[xviii] This inclusion begins to take into account the meaning and significance appropriated upon a place by another individual, through the architecture of that place. The resultant construction of being by the individual then encompasses both the meaning of the individual, and the meaning of those that surround them; for one is generated from their nature, and the other is responsive to the environment in which they live. Kevin Lynch relates this relationship to the construction of communal "identity" that is held within the city's collective consciousness. [xix] As interaction happens and connectivity resonates between individuals shared images emerge, shared consciousness, predicated on the perceived architectonic elements that surround them. Likewise Jane Jacobs underscores this same relationship in her book, "The Life and Death of American Cities". Jacobs alludes to an inherent connection that exists between all inhabitants in a society, although Jacobs is advocating a social responsibility then a collective connection, the idea of that social responsibility is permeated with a universal connection.[xx] "The eyes of the street" reference put forth by Jacobs intrinsically implies connectivity throughout a neighborhood. This connection serves a common beneficial service to the society as a whole, thus allowing for connections generated by communities to be utilized by a society.

To look deeper at this relationship and understand how human nature constructs the urban fabric it is key to look at the three main architectonic elements which construct the city: the Node, the Path and the Boundary.[xxi] Each element is inseparable from the other as they form the fabric, the physical stuff, which composes the city. However, they are not without their own hierarchy in importance. To begin the node is the dominate element it emerges first among the three. Second comes the path, as nodes emerge the path connects and allows interaction. Finally boundary spaces emerge as both path and node interact and weave throughout the environment.

NODE

The node is the first element that arises from the perception and interaction of residences joined in this spiritual residence. Nodes are centralized areas that emerge within the overall fabric, often around places of communal value. This value is sometimes linked to physical necessities, such as markets or housing blocks, and in other cases to monuments or public spaces. However, in each case it is the underlying interaction of individuals that give rise to an emergence of singular place, comprised of multiple layers of places. This emergence is then reflected in the architecture that both surrounds and constructs this new place as well as the cultural traditions.

The city of Cleveland illustrates this nodal function. For Cleveland the decline of the main urban areas can be seen as a re-emergence and evolution of a smaller city. Intense areas of urban place have slowly faded, as new areas emerged. The farther areas of urban context, in this case it is the boundary between suburbia and the edge of urban influence, received an influx of residences, generating communities around the foci of the city. These communities became nodes of interaction among the citizens, many of whom still identified with the image of the holistic city, calling themselves Clevelander's. Paths then began to formulate from the outlining nodes to places of continued and new urban experience, such as sporting events and business locales. As such, the utility of freeways began to express the predominate paths that connect the underlying fabric of nodal places. This causes a shift in the scale ability of the boundary as vehicular destination points now reside within nodes. The shift went from intra boundary spaces between path and node to inter-boundary spaces that lie within the nodes themselves.

PATH

Second to the node is the path. The path transverses between nodes within the city, thus allowing for a greater amount of interaction from place to place. Paths compose the intertwining tissue that supports the nodes of the city, becoming central to the way in which nodes interact and perceive one another. This interaction of places creates an emergence on a larger scale. This is often associated with the notion of singular identity and city image, as each place forms an integral whole in the perceived form and function of the city fabric.

Mike Davis touches on this issue of paths within the urban fabric in his book *The City of Quartz*.[xxii] Los Angeles can be seen as a primarily pathway experience through its horizontal density. This is almost a complete reversal of New York City experiences, as the sprawl of the city has spread the density among the ground. This type of sprawl creates a hyper path, allowing the pathway to dominate the urban landscape. This creates a similar situation to that of Cleveland, the problem of scaling between the paths and nodes, but on a much larger level. We can see pathways becoming ever wider, removing boundary areas between them to small isolated areas.

BOUNDARY

The final element to arise is the notion of boundary space. These boundary spaces reside on the connective edges of paths and nodes, in effect blending and layering the way in which they are able to interact. This softening of rigidity allows for smooth organic flow from one place to another, while enhancing the perceptive qualities of each place by easily transmitting scales. Through scaling the boundary condition either shrinks or grows the amount of perceivable area to the correct proportion, giving the city its often dynamic shapes and functions.

New York City denotes the hyper dense and vertical experience. Here the density predicates an intense boundary condition between inter-spaces and individuals at street level and slowly declining as you ascend vertically through the fabric. This decline through assent ion removes interaction and splits connectivity by isolating the individual. Thus the primary node can now be seen as a small unit, such as a single apartment, with the building acting as a foci nodal point. The pathway connection and overlapping of individual places is often contained within a vertical dimension, as the buildings themselves become dominate boundary elements among the overall pathways of the residences. This is illustrated in Rem Koolhaus's writing *Delirious New York*; where the separate floors of buildings begin to manifest into individual realms that stand apart from one another.[xxiii] Each realm is separate but there exists a tension between realms as boundary conditions blur together each one.

CONCLUSION

We began by saying that our cities are alive, and in essence they are. Driven by the underlying nature of human connectivity and spiritual residence the life of the urban fabric is sustained and nurtured. It is not the physical buildings or the social or cultural conditions of cities that shape its form and define its function; these are only the resultant. The architecture of every individual place culminating in a shared sense of identity and community. This singular place constructed of places holds our humanity and becomes the embodiment of our nature.

Through our individual perception and interaction our architecture melds creating "realness" throughout the urban fabric.[xxiv] This realness enhances the quality of spiritual resonance and connection by allowing a individual to orient, interpret and react to those places around them. In doing so the individual

is also shaped by the places that are around   them.

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[i] Zumthor, Peter. *Thinking Architecture*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2010. Print.

[ii] Aristotle, Joe Sachs, and Aristotle. *Aristotle's On the Soul ; And, On Memory and Recollection*. Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion, 2001. Print.

[iii] James Hillman: City, Soul and Myth

[iv] Here Hillman underscores that every city is the "civil" city, as natural tendencies in human nature begin to form these institutions on their own.

[v] John Dewey: The Public & its Problems

[vi] John Dewey: The Public & its Problems Pp. 35

[vii] Commonality in this sense does not stem from a cultural perspective. Here commonality refers to elements that precede the creation of cultural values and traditions that are associated with them. For instance a group of people may come together around the singular identification of an object say a tree. They all agree that the tree is beautiful and provides shade and is something that should honored. Out of this agreement then arise traditions of honoring (like worshipping the tree) or preserving (pruning and caring for it).

[viii] This can be likened to Hegelian philosophy outlining the emergence of history and in fact shares similar ideas in the following lines. However, unlike Hegel who treated history, and to some sense the human spirit, as a singular entity which is searching for completion, the approach is to underscore the relationship which humanity has to the construction of worldly elements and events.

[ix] Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1980. Print.

[x] Heidegger, Martin, and Krell David. Farrell. *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

[xi] This can be seen in phenomenologist's and existentionalists notions of self and world. The world can only be perceivable and meaningful for an individual when the individual first transcribes their meaning onto it. Thus all meaning is first generated internally as it must come from the individual first, and not from the outside; for the external world has no meaning relative to the human spirit.

[xii] Robert Venturi: Learning from Los Vegas

[xiii] Aristotle: De Anima

[xiv] Pallasmaa: Eyes of the Skin

[xv] Significance is often associated with physical value or worth, and tends to denote a intended hierarchical value among objects. However, significance here is used as a means of illustrating the importance and meaning that the element takes on from the individual.

[xvi] This notion can be likened to ideas in physics, where like elements often converge and harmonized.

[xvii] Christopher Alexander: A Timeless way of Building; underscores the relationship of patterns and their inherent construction within the city. Here Alexander describes the city as being a construction of its inhabitants through the patterns that are generated by their activities and nature and directly linked to their places. These patterns are a result of the individuals, which are in turn a creation of patterns in their being; so that from the molecular level to the consciousness of mind, the person is a construction of patterns constructing patterns in the world grounded within a certain place.

[xviii] This can be linked to Peter Zumthor when discussing the notion of place in Atmospheres. Often the individual becomes aware and attuned to those that surround them, immersing and enriching the sense of place that is constructed.

[xix] Lynch, Kevin. *The Image of the City*. Cambridge [Mass.: Technology ; MIT ; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960. Print.

[xx] Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities.* [New York]: Random House, 1961. Print.

[xxi] Kevin Lynch points out five major architectonic elements in city construction: Node, Path, District, Monument, and Boundary. However, these five can be condensed into three as both monument and district fall within the node. Each one represents a singular point, at differing scales, of which a person is able to enter, move around and interact with; while also serving as an orienting piece for the inhabitants.

[xxii] Davis, Mike. City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles. London: Verso, 1990. Print.
[xxiii] Rem Koolhaus: Delirious New York
[xxiv] Benedikt, Michael. *For an Architecture of Reality*. New York: Lumen, 1987. Print.