



Gordon Cullen, The Concise Townscape

Appendix F

Observations on Urban Code

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The following is an attempt to decode the syntax of typical city scenes by explaining what is behind the scenes. The hidden forces, unwritten laws that determine why people move, congregate pause and choose particular behaviours in an urban setting are an important element in understanding the way cities work and how we can plan them better.

F.1 People walk in the sunshine

Man will follow the sun blindly. Its bright light and pleasant warmth create a certain allure, which the urban being visibly follows. In a choreography repeated daily, the chairs of small cafes are turned according to the current path of the sun. In the same rhythm, passersby follow sunny sidewalks and illuminated public squares. Janus-faced, they stroll between light and shade. If one moment they are approaching the rays of light, the next they are seeking protection. Vegetable sellers shade their wares and pedestrian take out their sunglasses.

Alongside the daily pulsing reactions to the presence of the sun, its influence has long become a decisive advantage for shops' positions. Shop owners profit from the sun-ripened happiness of people who fall prey to consumerism in the pleasure of sunlight. Yet the ongoing movement of light and shade quickly takes this temporary advantage away from the shops, in order to pass it on to their neighbours. That which eludes the shops forms the very basis of the street vendors; spatial flexibility. Freely mobile, they can always redetermine their position throughout the course of the day.

A city street equipped to handle strangers, and to make a safety asset, in itself, out of the presence of strangers, as the street of successful city neighbourhoods always do, must have three main qualities: ... And their, the sidewalk must have users on it fairly continuously, both to add to the number of effective eyes on the street and to induce the people in buildings along the street to watch the sidewalks in sufficient numbers.

(Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, p.35)

The basic requisite for such surveillance is a substantial quantity of stores and other public places sprinkled along the sidewalks of a district; enterprises and public places that are used by evening and night must be among them especially. Stores, bars and restaurants, as the chief examples, working in several different and complex ways to abet sidewalk safety.

(Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, p.36)



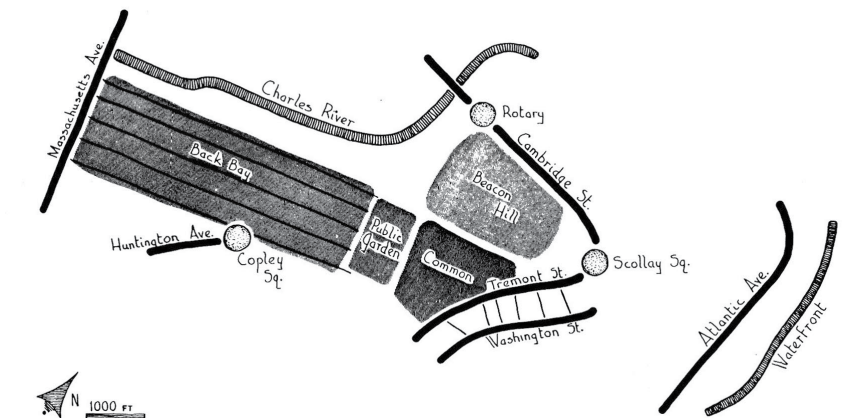
F.2 Passersby have an intuitive knowledge of the district

Whenever passersby enter a new district, they intuitively draw a mental image of their environment. Although only a fraction of the context is familiar, it allows them to orient themselves, to reduce reality and thereby airbrush out unimportant contexts and structures.

All passersby develop their own personal image of a district. Yet fundamental similarities exist between the different images. Urban Planners should therefore not concern themselves with the individual differences between images, but should focus instead on the general perception: the common mental images of a large number of passersby. Here they will find the interactions between physical reality and its general impact. Here they will recognise the intuitively perceived markers of a district, as well as what it lacks.

In the process of way-finding, the strategic link is the environmental image, the generalised mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by an individual. This image is the product both of immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience, and it is used to interpret information and go guide action.

(Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, p.4)



Subjects, when asked which city they felt to be a well-oriented one, mentioned several, but New York (meaning Manhattan) was unanimously cited. And this city was cited not so much for its grid, which Los Angeles has as well, but because it has a number of well-defined characteristic districts, set in an ordered frame of rivers and streets.

(Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, p.67)

F.3 People attract people

William H. Whyte has described the power of attraction that people exert upon other people. Through his capacity to analyse urban configurations, Whyte attempted to explain the growing popularity of public squares. The phenomenon of peoples' attraction to other people, however, does not manifest itself only in public squares; it is a fundamental feature of urban life – it is the reason that social communities are formed in villages and towns. The attraction does not being with individuals themselves, but with the many economic, social, strategic, and cultural dependencies that they create and on which they depend. The appearance of "global cities" is an excellent example of these economic dependencies. International headquarters – which stand for actual people – converge in a highly compressed space.

They evoke a row of dependencies that create new dependencies of their own. Therefore, a network of dense economic relationships develops that constantly attracts new companies – and therefore new people. But also, on a much smaller scale, people attract people. Thus pedestrians walking through the darkness intuitively choose the most popular of all possible routes, because the presence of other people affords them a sense of security. By day, a gathered mass of people arouses curiosity.

What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people.

(William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, p.19)

... that the sight of people attracts still other people, is something that city planners and city architectural designers seems to find incomprehensible. They operate on the premise that city people seek the sight of emptiness, obvious order and quiet. Nothing could be less true. People's love of watching activity and other people is constantly evident in cities everywhere.

(Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, p.37)

F.4 No entrance is the same as any other entrance

For, as Christopher Alexander correctly noted, the people and shops of a city are different. The differing needs of either proximity or distance to public life are reflected most quickly in the respective expression of the entrance position. When entrances constitute a direct transfer to the public realm, they become meaningful points of personal contact, and they facilitate sustainable use through shops on the ground floor.



F.5 Each Building has at least one entrance

It seems self-evident that entrances that face a street invigorate the street spaces. Yet all too often, large buildings are entered via a central courtyard, turned away from the street. The street loses an important identifying marker that facilitates orientation in the public realm. The positioning of an urban entrance should generally be onto the adjoining street.

People are different, and the way in which they want to place their houses in a neighbourhood is one of the most basic kinds of difference.

(Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language*, p.193)

F.6 Locals and tourists use the streets at different times

One way to counter these temporary concentrations is to bring different social classes and uses together in one common place. The more diverse the basis of everyday life in one place, the more scattered the individual activities over the course of a day. For example, if we consider the daily population fluctuation of a purely residential area, we notice that most residents leave home at roughly the same time in the morning; they also return at around the same time in the evening. Thus daily rituals develop, which temporarily block particular streets. If residential buildings are enriched with a second use-for example, offices- the daily morning migration out is countered by migration in, or the evening migration in by a migration out. As office space becomes increasingly available, residential usage decreases; the total space available remains constant. The detested rush hours are thus diluted. If one were to extend the current limited diversity of use by incorporating cultural institutions, shops and businesses of every kind, as well as restaurants, an almost constant population distribution would immediately come into effect.



The district, and indeed as many of its internal parts as possible, must serve more than one primary function; preferably more than two. These must insure the presence of people who go out doors on different schedules and are in the place for different purposes, but who are able to use many facilities in common.

(Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, p.152)

F.7 Small public squares are busier than large public squares

The smaller a public square, a courtyard, or a crossroad, the greater the probability that one will meet one's neighbour or friend. Therefore not only the presence of these places, but also their size has an impact on social networking in a locality. In general, public squares are neither too large nor too small. The size of a square in an urban setting is always relative to the number of people using it. A small square with 15 people on it can be perceived as busy. A slightly larger square, populated with the same number, might seem abandoned. It is possible, according to usage and volume of visitors to determine the right size for a square to appear attractive in its particular context. For example, residential areas, with their heightened need for intimacy and security, always require a few small squares, squares that can be activated by the presence of only 3 or 4 people.

People tend to sit most where there are places to sit.

(William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, p.28)

F.8 Benches are found on public squares

William H. Whyte's empirical studies show that the provision of places to sit, while not the only parameter for the liveliness of a public square, is nevertheless the most important. According to his observations, public squares without seats are noticeably poorly frequented. Steps and walls can serve equally as well as benches and chairs. The most popular seating option has always been the traditional bench, with its wooden backrest, designed to fit the human form. This invigoration will unfurl particularly powerfully if the benches are on a city square, where their good overview permits the sitter to observe all of the action. Very often, it is the colourful impressions of playgrounds that move people to sit and observe.



I end, then, in praise of small spaces. The multiplier effect is tremendous. It is not just the number of people using them, but the larger number who pass by and enjoy them vicariously, or even the larger number who feel better about the city center for knowledge of them. For a city, such places are priceless, whatever the cost. They are built of a set of basics and they are right in front of our noses.

(William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, p.101)

F.9 Streets were once communal spaces

Communal spaces are an important component of our society, as both meeting points and interfaces of social contact. In a district, when there is not sufficient space for parks, squares, or other preferred types of urban communal space- the street takes on this role. To the extent that a street is divided into individual areas, its function as a communal space is enhanced.

Without common land no social system can survive.

(Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language*, p.337)

The most important requirements for the development of communal spaces along a street are the functional and spatial preference for pedestrians over cars, a tight network of social interfaces, an environment shaped for humans' needs, sufficient places to sit, get some sun, enjoy shade, find quiet, and engage with others, and a subtle balance between predictability and surprise, so that different sorts of activities can develop and coexist in the streetscape.

At the start of the twentieth century, when cars took over the roads, compensatory spaces were developed for relaxation and public life, while streets were reduced to little more than functional access conduits. Today, the street's function as a communal space has greatly diminished.

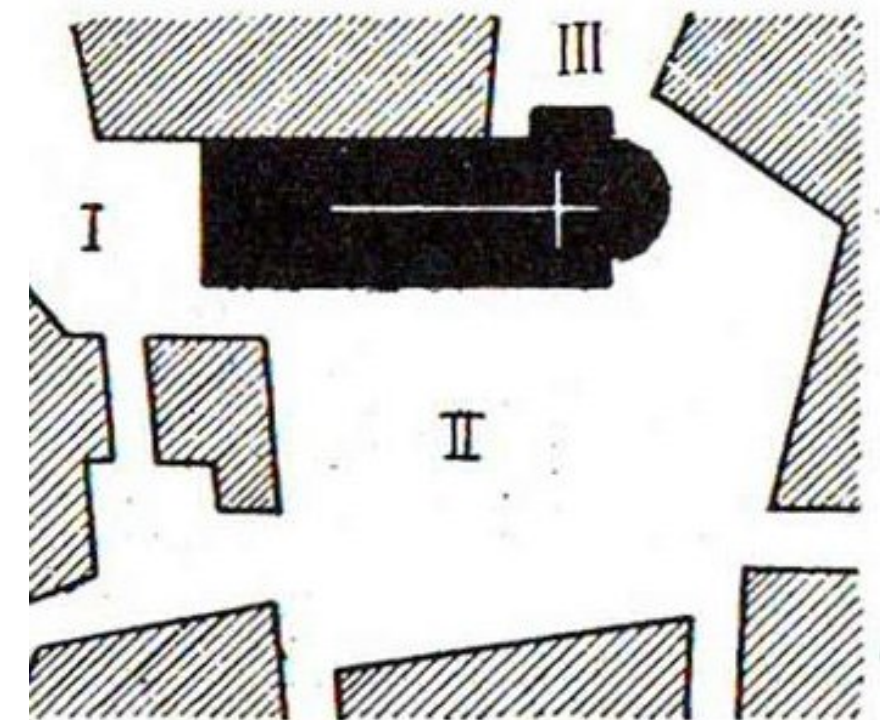
Only in historic city centers can this function be maintained, and even then usually only with immense effort. It often takes many small measures to allow an accumulation of communal spaces to develop out of a homogeneous "modern" street. Alongside the classification of a street into individual zones, which we have already considered, one can also improve the quality of external spaces through the form of their surrounding walls.



F.10 Public squares and niches create positive outside spaces

Outdoor spaces which are merely "left over" between buildings will, in general, not be used.

(Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language*, p.518)



Streets are used because they link together different parts of a city. However, as pure access mechanisms, they lack the necessary quality of affording people a pleasant stay. A city is only truly lively and attractive when its streets offer spaces for stopping and lingering, in addition to their fundamental access role. This supplementary function requires a spatial quality that invites lingering. It has been shown that people feel more at ease when they are not in leftover spaces in buildings, but in main spaces, whose boundaries are clearly defined.

A positive external space, then, is a place that one can contain, as Camillo Sitte emphasises in *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*. If a space is actually negative, though, like a street in SoHo, it can be divided into positive parts with small ledges, flights of steps, niches, and different uses. These can then be perceived as defined areas. In these small, positive, external spaces, people feel more at ease and secure than in negative external spaces. This need for encapsulation and enclosure goes back to our most primal instincts.

There are two fundamentally different kinds of outdoor space: negative space and positive space. Outdoor space is negative when it is shapeless, the residue left behind when buildings which are generally viewed as positive- are placed on the land. An outdoor space is positive when it has a definite shape, as definite as the shape of a room, and when its shape is as important as the shape of the building which surrounds it.

(Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language*, p.518)



For example, when a person looks for a place to sit down outdoors, he rarely chooses to sit exposed in the middle of an open space. He usually looks for a tree to put his back against; a hollow in the ground, a natural cleft which will partly enclose and shelter him.... To be comfortable, a person wants a certain amount of enclosure around him and his work.

(Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language* p. 521)

F.11 People sit with their backs protected

Human anatomy has evolved to possess a privileged front and a disadvantaged rear. While our sensory organs constantly monitor movements forward, our back remains in need of protection. This imbalance in our body structure leaves us with an urgent need to protect our backs at all times. It is for this reason that covering one's back becomes a critical criterion in our choice of a place to sit. First, it summons a sense of security- it is difficult to observe anything that happens behind one's back- and second, the protective enclosure often offers a pleasant opportunity for relaxed reclining. Without the various parapets, flights of steps, and façade ledges whose cosy perches transform SoHo's streets into a busy sitting room, generous dining room, and relaxing recreation ground, many pedestrians would flee to cafes, shoe stores, public squares, and their own apartments, to seek relaxation there. Therefore, if a street is to detain people longer, it must be perceived as a pleasant place to linger. As people have varied requirements for an urban seat, a street should offer a variety of different seating options, delivering a good range of qualities, affording a good view, orientation, shade, and protection from the element. Sometimes it is the position of the sun, sometimes wind speed, and other times quiet surroundings that are decisive in choosing the right place to sit.

Choosing good spots for outdoor seats is far more important than building fancy benches. Indeed, if the spot is right, the most simple kind of seat is perfect.

(Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language*, p.1120)

F.12 Sitting people observe their environment

Our unconscious protective instinct has a decisive influence over our choice of seat. Yet one is unlikely to sit on a balustrade if the resulting view is of a deserted, miserable wasteland. Thus there is another factor that influences our choice of seat: activity. Sitting people love to observe their environment, sometimes to the extent that street events are elevated to a dramatic production in the eyes of the observer. With canny interventions, the city planner can create an exciting and varied backdrop, with highly diverse potential usages. The more exciting the twists and turns in the urban drama, the longer people will sit and watch. Unlike classical theatre, "street theatre" involves all of its protagonists as both actors and audience. Jane Jacobs describes this reciprocal observation of various story lines as the origin of a secure locality. This is the essence and arrangement of a well-functioning street.

Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvellous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city. It is a complex order. Its essence is intricacy of sidewalk use, bringing with it a constant succession of eyes. This order is all composed of movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dancenot a simple-minded precision dance with everyone kicking up at the same time, twirling in unison and bowing off e masse, but to an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole. The ballet of the good city sidewalk never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations. .

(Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, p.50)



F.13 Tourists stand still. Residents pass

It is a familiar image: residents hurrying to their destinations, while tourists stand still examining their maps and focusing their cameras. This contrast between the dweller and the visitor makes the different uses and rhythms of the urban realm starkly visible. A balanced relationship between passive and active attentiveness, and the tension that arises as a result of this contrast, is one of the basic facts of the urban code.

F.14 When people stand still, group develop

Who is not familiar with the feeling of missing out on something? Conspicuous ogling of a well-arranged shop window display will inevitably attract others's glances. SoHo features many situations that lead to spontaneous group formation many times each day: at countless intersections, outside popular shops, behind street vendors' booths, outside cafes, on flights of stairs, at entrances, by interesting shop windows, and at snack kiosks. Sometimes, these gatherings can be explained by normal pedestrian density and the "stop/go" movements on sidewalks too full for people to pass each other, or because of a red light, promenaded, and thus the more it grows.



We do not say categorically that the number of people per square foot controls the apparent liveliness of a pedestrian area. Other factors- the nature of the land around the edge, the grouping of people, what the people are doing- obviously contributes greatly.

... A small group attracted to a couple of folk singers in a plaza gives much more life to the place than the same number sunning on the grass.

(Christopher Alexander, A Pattern Language, p.597)

F.15 Destinations are more attractive when they invite a stay



Many destinations create situations where standing in line and waiting arouse displeasure and impatience, such as the visit to an overflowing post office, or lining up at a cash machine. Other destinations that induce a stay, such as a cinema, a cafe, or a sunny square, calm and gratify their users. These destinations are different from the first set mainly because they do not compel anybody to stay.

The same is true of the bench outside the bakery, which permits locals impulsively to modify their original intention of quickly buying some bread. Destinations that invite a stay can make an experience of a transaction. Instead of gradually ticking off the elements on their shopping list, shoppers spend time in attractive squares, are inspired by new offers, and buy products that they had never planned to buy. Needs have long been recognised and taken into account by vendors. Not only does the extravagant product compel one to buy; shopping itself is increasingly made into an experience. The attractively wrapped service extends to the actual product.

At the same time it is made more and more difficult for customers to decide for themselves whether they want to agree to a purchase or not. Apparent freedom is constantly manipulated. Along with the economic health of the vendor, the street realm benefits as well. Various small interventions push up its value, keeping it attractive. Yet one quickly forgets that a place's increased value has not grown out of the locality's inner social microstructure. The advantage evolves from a business between a provider and a consumer, who pays for it. The resulting economic dependency can become dangerous for the sustainable development of the borough, and if demand stagnates, can lead to a rapid diminishing of glamorous appearance. Of decisive importance, therefore, are those checkpoints that exist continuously, to cover the basic needs of inhabitants: grocery stores, drugstores, bakeries and hairdressers.

F.16 Grocery stores on street corners have an advantage

Street corners are the location of choice for SoHo's grocery stores. Not only do street corners provide merchants with the advantage of presenting their goods on two street fronts simultaneously, they also have the advantage of luring pedestrians who are waiting to cross streets or emerging from taxis. The competition for storefront locations at crossroads is keen. This is directly reflected in rental rates and property values.



If a break in transportation or a decision point on a path can be made to coincide with the node, the node will receive even more attention. The joint between path and node must be visible and expressive, as it is in the case of intersecting paths.

... These condensation points can, by radiation, organise large districts around themselves if their presence is somehow signalled in the surroundings.

(Kevin Lynch, The Image of the City, p.102f.)