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The Resurgence of Place

Modernism is out and building places that fit with the environment and local aspirations is in.

Don Alexander

Over the past 30 years or so, a rich new movement in scholarship and advocacy has explored how better design of the urban environment can affect human behaviour and improve well-being.
Until the Industrial Revolution, most people had a sense of place that they took for granted. Whatever their deficiencies as living environments, pre-industrial places possessed a coherence that derived from the intersection of the three elements that are essential to place definition: objects, activities and meanings. For instance, an English parish church, as an object, embodied local building materials that helped it to fit its geographical context. It expressed traditions in design and construction that were an integral part of local and regional culture. Its form and ambience reflected the sanctity of the activities that took place within it, and overall there was a fit between its form, activities, and meaning to local residents.

With the arrival of the Industrial Revolution, the pace of landscape change quickened, and familiar environments were transformed to meet the imperatives of the new economy. Important landscapes might be turned into slag heaps, treasured forests turned into charcoal to process iron ore, and ancient city precincts torn down to accommodate giant factories and the high-density workers' housing built adjacent to them.

Hallowed meanings and traditions were often cast aside and landscapes more narrowly harnessed to the aims of industrial production. A century later, the built environment would also have to help promote the culture of consumption by becoming festooned with malls, parking lots, billboards and signage.

**THE EMERGENCE OF MODERNISM**

Initially, industrial cities were chaotic, filthy, overcrowded sites of human misery. The profession of urban planning largely arose as a response to the crisis of the industrial city. Its mission was to make the urban environment a more efficient site for industrial production and to improve the lives of the working classes. The new profession also sought to restore some visual coherence to the ravaged landscape.

This was an era when the doctrine of environmental determinism was influential, both amongst the burgeoning social sciences and amongst reformers of various kinds. It was widely believed that "the environment made the man." Thus, order and amenity had to be restored to the urban environment to avoid the moral and physical ruin of the lower classes.

Later, beginning in the first decades of the 20th century, the pendulum of scholarly opinion swung against this doctrine, which was criticized for its obvious deficiencies. These included ignoring the fact that different cultures have made quite different uses of the same environments, and the fallacy that a harsh climate had made Europeans more "advanced" and industrious. In rejecting this doctrine, academics threw the baby out with the bath water. They focused on abstract social relations and processes, such as the accumulation of capital or the bureaucratization of society, to the exclusion of the settings in which they took place. Human experience became devalued as a source of insight. Meanwhile, the economy continued to treat environments as a space of production or consumption rather than as a valued setting for the totality of human experience.

As many scholars and commentators have noted, this tendency to be indifferent to the experiential and the qualitative is one aspect of the dominant 20th century ideology of modernism. In architecture, modernism is characterized by a fondness for tall buildings and large-scale projects, a desire to eliminate ornamentation in favour of stripped-down functionalism, a rejection of regional styles of architecture in favour of an "international style," and a focus on individual buildings rather than the urban fabric of which they are a part.

In planning, modernism has been characterized by a preference for low-density districts (except in central business areas), separation of residential, commercial and industrial land uses, organizing urban systems to maximize speed and access for automobiles, and a "clean sweep" approach to development that believes in erasing an existing site before rebuilding. As David Ley has said, modernism "created spaces, not places" and "masses not meanings." These modernist currents reached their apex in the 50s and 60s, when citizens began to rise in resistance to urban renewal and freeway projects. As the failure of bland, standardized landscapes became ever more apparent, design professionals and social scientists began to take a renewed interest in the effect of environment on human beings. As Tony Hiss has noted, they began examining housing projects, train stations, hospitals, and sealed and sometimes "sick" office buildings; parks, lawns, and traffic-clogged streets; entrances, steps, and views from windows; meadows, fields, and forests; light, colors, noises, and scents; the horizon, small-air ions, and wind speed; and privacy.

One manifestation of this new trend was the establishment, in 1969, of an interdisciplinary organization dedicated to environment-behaviour research – the Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA). In addition to encouraging and showcasing research on the built environment through annual meetings and proceedings, EDRA is also a sponsor – along with *Places* magazine – of an annual awards program for development and redevelopment projects that respect and promote a sense of place.

**THE RESURGENCE OF PLACE**

Over the past 30 years or so, a rich new movement in scholarship and advocacy has explored how better design of the urban environment can affect human behaviour and improve well-being. This work has fallen into four broad categories: ecological, functional, aesthetic and civic.

The ecological dimension concerns itself with the environmental implications of built form – for in-
Places are not abstractions or concepts, but are directly experienced phenomena of the lived-world and hence are full of meanings, with real objects, and with ongoing activities. They are important sources of individual and communal identity, are often profound centres of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties. Indeed our relationships with places are just as necessary, varied, and sometimes perhaps just as unpleasant, as our relationships with other people”

- Edward Relph, Place and Placelessness, London: Pion, 1976

stance, the influence of development patterns on global or regional sustainability. Much of this research has focused on the ecological consequences of urban sprawl, typically defined as involving low-density development, separation of land uses, and automobile dependence. These consequences range from excessive consumption of energy, air pollution, contributions to global warming, destruction and fragmentation of habitat, loss of resource lands, loss of recharge capability and contaminated runoff.

Another facet of ecological research has focused on the impacts of built form on human mental and physical health. For instance, the environmental health and environmental justice literatures examine how current settlement patterns and work environments expose certain populations (workers, First Nations and people of colour) to higher levels of environmental risk. The healthy communities movement focuses on how people’s health status is affected as much by their degree of control over their surroundings, access to services, opportunities for contact and social integration, and aesthetic environment as by diet and personal habits. Still other researchers study the effect of natural light and fresh air on worker contentment and productivity, the link between an automobile-dependent society and obesity and poor health, and how environmental design can assist crime prevention.

A second key dimension of the literature on place addresses sectoral issues, such as deficiencies in housing or transportation systems, or with specific populations that are disadvantaged by current development patterns. Sectoral studies consider, for example, how buildings can be better designed for the local climate, and how more attractive public spaces can be designed to fit people’s actual patterns of interaction and usage.

Authors focusing on the effects of built environment on specific groups have looked especially at women, children, the elderly, the homeless, immigrants, and even non-human species. They have, for example, considered how sprawl and fears of abduction have cut pedestrian mobility for children and reduced children’s sense of autonomy and knowledge of the wider world. They have also looked at how seniors are affected by being “warehoused” in special facilities, with little contact with people from other age groups.

A third key dimension of place-based research is aesthetic, which deals with preferences and perceptions. Those who have examined people’s aesthetic likes and dislikes regarding such matters as building facades or open space, have found that despite differences associated with gender, ethnicity and class, many preferences are widely shared and can be respected in architectural projects and the design of open space. Those dealing with issues of environmental perception consider people’s sense of place, and place attachment, as well as the values that different types of environments express and encourage.

As philosopher Allan Carlson has expressed it:

“...we aesthetically appreciate not simply with our five senses, but rather with an important part of our whole emotional and psychological selves. Consequently, what we aesthetically appreciate cannot but play a role in shaping our emotional and psychological being. This in turn helps to determine what we think and do, and think it correct for ourselves and others to think and do. In short, our aesthetic appreciation is a significant factor in shaping and forming our ethical views.”

Also considered are the impacts of direct nature experiences on youth at risk, or in terms of shaping lifelong environmental values and commitments.

The final focal point for place-related research is civic. Two bodies of work can be distinguished. The first focuses on the impact of different environments on the ability and willingness of citizens to participate in civic affairs. Much has been written about the decline in public space and its political implications. Commentary has also focused on the loss of so-called
"third places" - coffee shops, drop-in centres, community hangouts and how this affects people's sense of community.  

Other civic writers have questioned whether our current administrative boundaries allow us to manage our impacts on ecosystems and have proposed watershed and bioregions as alternative frameworks. Other writers have suggested that changes in the economy mean that cities need to be given a lot more political power than they currently enjoy.

**POST-MODERN URBAN DESIGN**

All of these discussions are pointing to the value of a distinction that Eugene Walter makes between the modernist view of "place" as a neutral container into which you move all the independent contents of your experience" and the view that "place ... actively shapes ecological, social, and individual health and well-being." As manifested in the fields of planning and architecture, this latter perspective has led to the emergence of a post-modern sensibility.

In contrast with the [two-dimensional] space of modernism, post-modern space aims to be historically specific, rooted in cultural, often vernacular, style conventions, and often unpredictable in the relation of the parts to the whole. In reaction to the large scale of the modern movement, it attempts to create smaller units, seeks to break down a corporate society to urban villages, and maintain historical associations through renovation and recycling.

Through the influence of noted theorists and practitioners - Jane Jacobs, Christopher Alexander, Kevin Lynch, Donald Appleyard, Allen Jacobs, and the New Urbanists - this post-modern turn has led to the emergence of an evolving set of design principles that can be applied to planning urban space. For instance, there is now a strong emphasis on avoiding single-use districts (e.g., residential tracts or industrial parks), which produce monotony and encourage automobile dependence. Megaprojects with monolithic designs and low potential for adaptable re-use are seen as less desirable than more incremental changes, which are more flexible and allow us to respond to our mistakes.

Incorporating bioregional themes and traditions into local architecture, design, and public art is encouraged - celebrating local place names, species, and styles rather than referencing London, New York, or California.

All development and redevelopment should be planned to minimize its associated ecological footprint (considered at local, regional, and global scales). Where it has not already been lost, a community's "green infrastructure" (stream corridors and ravines) should be preserved. Existing vegetation should be protected and new vegetation planted, especially indigenous species. Finally, the needs of the most vulnerable should be considered in every project and, to the greatest degree possible, their needs put first.

This new approach to creating and healing our urban habitat can be described as place-making. In contrast with the one-off utilitarianism of much of modernist planning and design, the new approach considers the ecological, functional, aesthetic, and civic implications of how we mould built environments, seeks synergies between these dimensions, and involves residents in their design.

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Vancouver, BC: A place-making practice can be as simple as creating a community garden, which simultaneously has ecological, functional, aesthetic and civic benefits, and has been credited with beginning the renaissance of a community.

A place-making practice can be as simple as creating a community garden, which simultaneously has ecological, functional, aesthetic, and civic benefits and which, in the experience of many inner-city neighbourhoods in New York City, has often been credited with beginning the renaissance of a community. Other place-making practices include traffic calming, community mapping, community art, the
co-design of buildings, and citizen participation in the planning of neighbourhoods.

In the wake of the spaces and masses of modernism, a place-making approach seeks nothing less than "the re-enchantment of the built environment." The built environment is, after all, our habitat. It shapes our quality of experience and affects how we view and interact with our world. Rather than allowing it to be fragmented and cheapened by narrow agendas of industry and commerce, we must tend it like a garden, for we grow in its soil.

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NOTES
8. One book, still refreshing relevant, that summarized many of the findings and perspectives of the early days of this movement is T.F. Saarinen, Environmental Planning: Perception and Behavior (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1976). For more information on EDRA, see the organization’s Web site at <www.telepath.com/edra/>.
25. Ley, "Modernism" [note 6], p. 53.
27. Ley, "Modernism" [note 6], p. 53.

Follow Up
www.cnu.org The Congress of New Urbanism site offers a range of resources including an image bank of New Urbanist projects, CNU publications, an extensive bibliography, links, CNU history and charter.
www.places-journal.org Places is a US journal that explores how good design can be a catalyst for creating meaningful places.
www.telepath.com/edra/ The Environmental Design Research Association site includes on-line publication of articles, membership information, and updates on conferences and other activities in which the organization is involved.

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