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Visual order: its limitations and possibilities

When we deal with cities we are dealing with life at its most complex and intense. Because this is so, there is a basic esthetic limitation on what can be done with cities: *A city cannot be a work of art.*

We need art, in the arrangements of cities as well as in the other realms of life, to help explain life to us, to show us meanings, to illuminate the relationship between the life that each of us embodies and the life outside us. We need art most, perhaps, to reassure us of our own humanity. However, although art and life are interwoven, they are not the same things. Confusion between them is, in part, why efforts at city design are so disappointing. It is important, in arriving at better design strategies and tactics, to clear up this confusion.

Art has its own peculiar forms of order, and they are rigorous. Artists, whatever their medium, *make selections* from the abounding materials of life, and organize these selections into works that

are under the control of the artist. To be sure, the artist has a sense that the demands of the work (i.e., of the selections of material he has made) control him. The rather miraculous result of this process—if the selectivity, the organization and the control are consistent within themselves—can be art. But the essence of this process is disciplined, highly discriminatory selectivity *from* life. In relation to the inclusiveness and the literally endless intricacy of life, art is arbitrary, symbolic and abstracted. That is its value and the source of its own kind of order and coherence.

To approach a city, or even a city neighborhood, as if it were a larger architectural problem, capable of being given order by converting it into a disciplined work of art, is to make the mistake of attempting to substitute art for life.

The results of such profound confusion between art and life are neither life nor art. They are taxidermy. In its place, taxidermy can be a useful and decent craft. However, it goes too far when the specimens put on display are exhibitions of dead, stuffed cities.

Like all attempts at art which get far away from the truth and which lose respect for what they deal with, this craft of city taxidermy becomes, in the hands of its master practitioners, continually more picky and precious. This is the only form of advance possible to it.

All this is a life-killing (and art-killing) misuse of art. The results impoverish life instead of enriching it.

To be sure, it is possible for the creation of art not to be so individualistic a process as it usually is in our society.

Under certain circumstances, the creation of art can apparently be done by general, and in effect anonymous, consensus. For instance, in a closed society, a technologically hampered society, or an arrested society, either hard necessity or tradition and custom can enforce on everyone a disciplined selectivity of purposes and materials, a discipline by consensus on what those materials demand of their organizers, and a disciplined control over the forms thereby created. Such societies can produce villages, and maybe even their own kinds of cities, which look to us like works of art in their physical totality.

But this is not the case with us. For us, such societies may be

inreresting to ponder; and we may regard their harmonious works with admiration or a kind of nostalgia, and wonder wistfully why we can't be like that.

We can't be like that because the limitations on possibilities and the strictures on individuals in such societies exrend much beyond the materials and conceptions used in creating works of art from the grist of everyday life. The limitations and strictures extend into every realm of opportunity (including intellectual opportunity) and into relationships among people themselves. These limitations and strictures would seem to us an unnecessary and intolerable stultification of life. For all our conformity, we are too adventurous, inquisitive, egoistic and competitive to be a harmonious society of artists by consensus, and, what is more, we place a high value upon the very traits that prevent us from being so. Nor is this the constructive use we make of cities or the reason we find them valuable: to embody tradition or to express (and freeze) harmonious consensus.

Nineteenth-century Utopians, with their rejection of urbanized society, and with their inheritance of eighteenth-century romanticism about the nobility and simplicity of "natural" or primitive man, were much attracted to the idea of simple environments that were works of art by harmonious consensus. To get back to this condition has been one of the hopes incorporated in our tradition of Utopian reform.

This futile (and deeply reactionary) hope tinctured the Utopianism of the Garden City planning movement too and, at least ideologically, somewhat gentled its more dominant theme of harmony and order imposed and frozen by authoritarian planning.

The hope for an eventual, simple environment formed of art by consensus—or rather, a ghostly vestige of that hope—has continued to flit through Garden City planning theory when it has kept itself pure from Radiant City and City Beautiful planning. Thus, as late as the 1930's, Lewis Mumford in *The Culture of Cities* gave an importance, which would be puzzling indeed in the absence of this tradition, to pursuits like basket weaving, pottery making and blacksmithing in the planned communities he envisioned for us. As late as the 1950's, Clarence Stein, the leading

American Garden City planner, on the occasion of receiving the American Institute of Architects' gold medal for his contributions to architectural progress, was casting about for some object which might suitably be created by harmonious consensus in the ideal communities he envisioned. He suggested that citizens could be allowed to build a nursery school, of course with their own hands. But the gist of Stein's message was that, aside from the conceded nursery school, the complete physical environment of a community and all the arrangements that comprise it must be in the total, absolute and unchallenged control of the project's architects.

This is, of course, no different from the Radiant City and City Beautiful assumptions. These always were primarily architectural design cults, rather than cults of social reform.

Indirectly through the Utopian tradition, and directly through the more realistic doctrine of art by imposition, modern city planning has been burdened from its beginnings with the unsuitable aim of converting cities into disciplined works of art.

Like the housers who face a blank if they try to think what to do besides income-sorting projects, or the highwaymen who face a blank if they try to think what to do besides accommodate more cars, just so, architects who venture into city design often face a blank in trying to create visual order in cities except by substituting the order of art for the very different order of life. They cannot do anything else much. They cannot develop alternate tactics, for they lack a strategy for design that will help cities.

Instead of attempting to substitute art for life, city designers should return to a strategy ennobling both to art and to life: a strategy of illuminating and clarifying life and helping to explain to us its meanings and order—in this case, helping to illuminate, clarify and explain the order of cities.

We are constantly being told simple-minded lies about order in cities, talked down to in effect, assured that duplication represents order. It is the easiest thing in the world to seize hold of a few forms, give them a regimented regularity, and try to palm

this off in the name of order. However, simple regimented regularity and significant systems of functional order are seldom coincident in this world.

To see complex systems of functional order as order, and not as chaos, takes understanding. The leaves dropping from the trees in the autumn, the interior of an airplane engine, the entrails of a dissected rabbit, the city desk of a newspaper, all appear to be chaos if they are seen without comprehension. Once they are understood as systems of order, they actually *look* different.

Because we use cities, and therefore have expetience with them, most of us already possess a good groundwork for understanding and appreciating their order. Some of our trouble in comprehending it, and much of the unpleasant chaotic effect, comes from lack of enough visual reinforcements to underscore the functional order, and, worse still, from unnecessary visual contradictions.

It is fruitless, however, to search for some dramatic key element or kingpin which, if made clear, will clarify all. No single element in a city is, in truth, the kingpin or the key. The mixture itself is kingpin, and its mutual support is the order.

When city designers and planners try to find a design device that will express, in clear and easy fashion, the "skeleton" of city structure (expressways and promenades are current favorites for this purpose), they are on fundamentally the wrong track. A city is not put together like a mammal or a steel frame building—or even like a honeycomb or a coral. A city's very *structure* consists of mixture of uses, and we get closest to its structural secrets when we deal with the conditions that generate diversity.

Being a structural system in its own right, a city can best be understood straightforwardly in its own terms, rather than in terms of some other kinds of organisms or objects. However, if the slippery shorthand of analogy can help, perhaps the best analogy is to imagine a large field in darkness. In the field, many fires are burning. They are of many sizes, some great, others small; some far apart, others dotted close together; some are brightening, some are slowly going out. Each fire, large or small, extends its radiance into the surrounding murk, and thus it carves out a space. But the space and the shape of thar space exist only to the extent that the light from the fire creates it.

The murk has no shape or pattern except where it is carved into space by the light. Where the murk between the lights becomes deep and undefinable and shapeless, the only way to give it form or structure is to kindle new fires in the murk or sufficiently enlarge the nearest existing fires.

Only intricacy and vitality of use give, to the parts of a city, appropriate structure and shape. Kevin Lynch, in his book *The Image of the City*, mentions the phenomenon of "lost" areas, places that the people he interviewed completely ignored and were actually unaware of unless reminded, although it would seem the locations of these "lost" places by no means merited this oblivion, and sometimes his observers had just traversed them in actuality or in imagination.*

Wherever the fires of use and vitality fail to extend in a city is a place in the murk, a place essentially without city form and structure. Without that vital light, no seeking for "skeletons" or "frameworks" or "cells" on which to hang the place can bring it into a city form.

These metaphoric space-defining fires are formed—to get back to tangible realities—by areas where diverse city uses and users give each other close-grained and lively support.

This is the essential order which city design can assist. These areas of vitality need to have their remarkable functional order clarified. As cities get more such areas, and less gray area or murk, the need and the opportunities for clarification of this order will increase.

Whatever is done to clarify this order, this intricate life, has to be done mainly by tactics of emphasis and suggestion.

Suggestion—the part standing for the whole—is a principal means by which art communicates; this is why art often tells us so much with such economy. One reason we understand this com-

* About a similar phenomenon, regarding highways, Professor Lynch makes this comment: "Many [Los Angeles] subjects had difficulty in making a mental connection between the fast highway and the remainder of the city structure, just as in the Boston case. They would, in imagination, even walk across the Hollywood Freeway as if it did not exist. A high-speed artery may not necessarily be the best way of visually delimiting a central district."

munication of suggestion and symbol is that, to a certain extent, it is the way all of us see life and the world. We constantly make organized selections of what we consider relevant and consistent from among all the things that cross our senses. We discard, or tuck into some secondary awareness, the impressions that do not make sense for our purposes of the moment—unless those irrelevant impressions are too strong to ignore. Depending on our purposes, we even vary our selections of what we take in and organize. To this extent, we are all artists.

This attribute of art, and this attribute in the way we see, are qualities on which the practice of city design can bank and which it can turn to advantage.

Designers do not need to be in literal control of an entire field of vision to incorporate visual order in cities. Art is seldom ploddingly literal, and if it is, it is poor stuff. Literal visual control in cities is usually a bore to everybody but the designers in charge, and sometimes after it is done, it bores them too. It leaves no discovery or organization or interest for anybody else.

The tactics needed are suggestions that help people make, for themselves, order and sense, instead of chaos, from what they see.

Streets provide the principal visual scenes in cities.

However, too many streets present our eyes with a profound and confusing contradiction. In the foreground, they show us all kinds of detail and activity. They make a visual announcement (very useful to us for understanding the order of cities) that this is an intense life and that into its composition go many different things. They make this announcement to us not only because we may see considerable activity itself, but because we see, in different types of buildings, signs, store fronts or other enterprises or institutions, and so on, the inanimate evidences of activity and diversity. However, if such a street goes on and on into the distance, with the intensity and intricacy of the foreground apparently dribbling into endless amorphous repetitions of itself and finally petering into the utter anonymity of distance, we are also getting a visual announcement that clearly says endlessness.

In terms of all human experience, these two announcements,

one telling of great intensity, the other telling of endlessness, are hard to combine into a sensible whole.

One or the other of these two conflicting sets of impressions has to take precedence. The viewer has to combat or try to suppress the other set of impressions. Either way, it is difficult nor to sense confusion and disorder. The more lively and varied the foreground (that is, the better its innate order of diversity), the sharper, and therefore the more disturbing, the contradiction of the two announcements can be. If too many streets embody this conflict, if they stamp a district or a whole city with this equivocation, the general effect is bound to be chaotic.

There are, of course, two ways of trying to see such a street. If a person gives the long view precedence, with its connotations of repetition and infinity, then the close-up scene and the intensity it conveys seem superfluous and offensive. I think this is the way that many architecturally trained viewers see city streets, and this is one reason for the impatience, and even contempt, that many (not all) of those who are architecturally trained express for the physical evidences of city diversity, freedom and life.

If the foreground view, on the other hand, takes precedence, then the endless repetition and continuation into lost, indefinite distances becomes the superfluous, offensive and senseless element. I think this is the way most of us look at city streets most of the time, because this is the viewpoint of a person whose purpose it is to use what exists on that street, rather than to look at it in detachment. Looking at the street in this way, the viewer makes sense, and at least a minimum amount of order, from the intimate view, but only at the price of considering the distance as a deplorable mishmash, better dismissed from mind if possible.

To bring even a chance for visual order to most such streets—and to districts in which such streets predominate—this basic contradiction of strong visual impressions has to be dealt with. I think this is what European visitors are getting at when they remark, as they often do, that the ugliness of our cities is owing to our gridiron street systems.

The functional order of the city demands that the intensity and diversity be there; their evidences can be removed from the street only at the cost of destroying necessary functional order.

On the other hand, however, the order of the city does not demand the impression of endlessness; this impression can be minimized without interfering with functional order. Indeed, by so doing, the really significant attribute of intensity is reinforced.

Therefore a good many city streets (not all) need visual interruptions, cutting off the indefinite distant view and at the same time visually heightening and celebrating intense street use by giving it a hint of enclosure and entity.

Old parts of our cities which have irregular street patterns frequently do this. However, they have the disadvantage of being difficult to understand as street systems; people easily get lost in them and have a difficult time keeping them mapped out in their heads.

Where the basic street pattern is a gridiron plan, which has many advantages, there are two main ways, nevertheless, of introducing sufficient visual irregularities and interruptions into the city scene.

The first means is by adding additional streets where the streets of the gridiron plan are too far apart from each other—as on the West Side of Manhattan, for example: in short, where additional streets are necessary in any case for the functional purpose of helping to generate diversity.

If such new streets are added economically, with a decent respect and restraint for saving the most valuable, the most handsome, or the most various among buildings that lie in their potential paths, and also with the aim of incorporating sides or rears of existing buildings into their frontages wherever possible, to give a mixture of age, then these new streets are seldom going to be straight for great length. They are going to have bends in them and sometimes a considerable tangent. Even a straight street cutting one former large block into two small blocks will not likely form a continuous straight line with its extensions through the next block and the next and next, indefinitely. There are certain to be T junctures where these offset street segments meet intersecting streets at right angles. Ordinary prudence and respect for city variety, combined with an awareness that irregularity in these cases is an advantage in itself, can determine the best of various potential alternative paths for new extra streets. The least

material destruction should be combined with maximum visual gain; these two aims are not in conflict.

Subsidiary irregularity within a dominant grid system is not difficult to understand. Extra streets like these, introduced in between the grid streets, could even be named in recognition of their relationship to the grid.

The combination of a basic, easily understandable grid system, together with purposely irregular streets dropped in where the grid is too large for good city functioning, could be, I think, a distinctive and most valuable American contribution to the tactics of city design.

The second means for introducing irregularities and visual interruptions where they are insufficient, is on grid streets themselves.

San Francisco is a city with many natural visual interruptions in a gridiron street pattern. San Francisco's streets, in general, are regular gridiron arrangements in two-dimensional plan; however, in three-dimensional topography they are masterpieces of visual interruption. The many and abrupt hills constantly make separations between the nearby scene and the distance, and this is true whether one is looking along a street toward a rise, or looking down a slope. This arrangement greatly emphasizes the intimate and immediate street scenes, without sacrificing the clarity of gridiron organization.

Cities without such topography cannot reproduce any such happy accident by natural means. However, they too can introduce visual interruptions into straight and regular street patterns without sacrificing clarity of organization and movement. Bridges that connect two buildings up above a street sometimes do this service; so do buildings which themselves bridge a street. Occasional large buildings (preferably with public significance) can be placed across straight streets at ground level. Grand Central Terminal in New York is a well-known example.*

* It also provides an example of an extra street, Vanderbilt Avenue, with T terminations, and at Vanderbilt's northern T is a handsome new building, Union Carbide, which in effect bridges the sidewalk; the short blocks between Vanderbilt and Madison are illustrative, by the way, of the liveliness and pedestrian convenience natural to short blocks in cities.

Straight, "endless" streets can be interrupted and the street itself divided around a square or plaza forming the interruption; this square can be occupied by a building. In cases where vehicular traffic can actually be dead-ended on straight streets, small parks could be thrown across from sidewalk to sidewalk; the visual interruption or diversion would be provided here by groves of trees or by small (and, let us hope, cheerful) park structures.

In still other cases, a visual diversion need not extend across a straight street, but can be in the form of a building or group of buildings set forward from the normal building line to make a jog, with the sidewalk cut underneath. Another form of jog is a plaza at one side of the street, which makes the building beyond stand out as a visual interruption.

It might be supposed that all this visual emphasis on intensity of street use would be rather overwhelming or even inhuman. But this is not so. Districts with many visual street interruptions do not, in real life, tend to intimidate or overwhelm people; they are more apt to be characterized as "friendly" and also to be comprehensible as districts. After all, this is intensity of human life which is being acknowledged and emphasized and, what is more, emphasized in its understandable, close-up aspect. It is city infinity and repetition which generally seem overwhelming, inhuman and incomprehensible.

There can be pitfalls, however, in the use of visual street interruptions.

First, there is little point in using them where there is no visual tale of street intensity and detail to tell. If a street is, in truth, a long repetition of one kind of use, providing thin activity, then visual interruption does not clarify the existing form of order here. Visual enclosure of practically nothing (in terms of city intensity) can hardly be more than a design affectation. Visual interruptions and vistas will not, in themselves, *bring* city vitality and intensity or their accompaniments of safety, interest, casual public life and economic opportunity. Only the four basic generators of diversity can do that.

Second, it is unnecessary, and would even become boring in its own way, for all city streets to have visual interruptions. After all a big city is a big place, and there is nothing wrong in acknowl-

edging or stating this fact too from time to time. (Another of the advantages of San Francisco's hills, for instance, is that the views from them do precisely this, and they do it at the same time as they are separating the distance from the immediate street view.) Occasional endlessness, or else focal endings far in the distance on streets, lend variety. Some streets that run into borders such as bodies of water, campuses or large sports grounds should be left without visual interruptions. Not every street that terminates in a border need reveal this fact, but some of them should, both to introduce distant glimpses of what is different, and to convey casual messages about the whereabouts of the border—a form of orientation clue, incidentally, that Lynch found very important to the people he interviewed for his study of city "imageability."

Third, visual street interruptions should be, in functional terms, not dead ends, but "corners." Actual physical cut-offs to foot traffic in particular are destructive in cities. There should always be a way around the visual interruption or through it, a way that is obvious as a person reaches it, and that then lays out before the eyes a new street scene. This seductive attribute of designed interruptions to the eye was summed up neatly by the late architect Eliel Saarinen, who is reported to have said, in explaining his own design premises, "There must always be an end in view, and the end must not be final."

Fourth, visual interruptions get their force partially from being exceptions to the rule. Too many of the same kind can cancel themselves out. For instance, if plazas along the side of a street are plentiful, the street disintegrates visually as a street, to say nothing of going dead functionally. Jogs with arcades beneath, if they are plentiful instead of exceptional, just give us a narrower street and can even become claustrophobic in their effect.

Fifth, a visual street interruption is a natural eye-catcher and its own character has much to do with the impressions made by the entire scene. If it is banal, vacuous or merely messy, it might better not exist. A gas station or a bunch of billboards or a vacant and neglected building in such a place casts a pall out of all proportion to its size. A visual street interruption which is also beautiful is great luck, but when we go after beauty too solemnly in cities we usually seem to end up with pomposity. Beauty is not

around for the asking, but we can ask that visual interruptions be decent and even interesting.

Landmarks, as their name says, are prime orientation clues. But good landmarks in cities also perform two other services in clarifying the order of cities. First, they emphasize (and also dignify) the diversity of cities; they do this by calling attention to the fact that they are different from their neighbors, and important because they are different. This explicit statement about themselves carries an implicit statement about the composition and order of cities. Second, in certain instances landmarks can make important to our eyes city areas which are important in functional fact but need to have that fact visually acknowledged and dignified.

By understanding these other services, we can understand why many different uses are eligible and useful as city landmarks, depending on their contexts in the city.

Let us first consider the role of landmarks as announcers and dignifiers of diversity. One reason a landmark can be a landmark is, of course, that it is in a spot where it shows to advantage. But in addition, it is necessary that the landmark be distinctive as a thing itself, and it is this point with which we are now concerned.

Not all city landmarks are buildings. However, buildings are the principal landmarks in cities and the principles which make them serve well or ill apply also to most other kinds of landmarks, such as monuments, dramatic fountains, and so on.

Satisfying distinction in the appearance of a building almost always grows out of distinction in its use, as discussed in Chapter Twelve. The same building can be physically distinctive in one matrix because its use is distinctive in that context, but can be undistinctive in another setting where its use is the rule rather than the exception. The distinctiveness of a landmark depends considerably on reciprocity between the landmark and its neighbors.

In New York, Trinity Church, at the head of Wall Street, is a well-known and effective landmark. But Trinity would be relatively pallid as an element of city design if it were merely one among an assemblage of churches or even of other symbolic-looking institutions. Trinity's physical distinction, which is any-

thing but pallid in its setting, depends partly on its good landmark site—at a T intersection and a rise in ground—but it also depends greatly on Trinity's functional distinction in its context of office buildings. So dominant is this fact of difference that Trinity makes a satisfying climax for its street scene, even though it is much smaller than its neighbors. An office building of this size (or any size) at this same advantageous spot, in this context, simply could not perform this service nor convey this degree of visual order, let alone do it with such unlabored and "natural" rightness.

Just so, the New York Public Library building, set in its commercial matrix at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street, forms an excellent landmark, but this is not true of the public libraries of San Francisco, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, as examples. These have the disadvantage of being set among institutions which contrast insufficiently in function or—inevitably—in appearance.

Back in Chapter Eight, which deals with the need for mixed primary uses, I discussed the functional value of dotting important civic buildings within the workaday city, instead of assembling them into cultural or civic projects. In addition to the functional awkwardnesses and the economic waste of primary diversity that these projects cause, the buildings assembled into such islands of pomp are badly underused as landmarks. They pale each other, although each one, by itself, could make a tremendously effective impression and symbol of city diversity. This is serious, because we badly need more, not fewer, city landmarks —great landmarks and small.

Sometimes attempts are made to give a building landmark quality simply by making it bigger than its neighbors, or by turning it out with stylistic differences. Usually, if the use of such a building is essentially the same as the uses of its neighbors, it is pallid—try as it might. Nor does such a building do us that extra service of clarifying and dignifying diversity of uses. Indeed, it tries to tell us that what is important in the order of cities are mere differences in size or outward dress. Except in very rare cases of real architectural masterpieces, this statement that style or size is everything gets from city users, who are not so dumb, about the affection and attention it deserves.

However, it should be noted that some buildings which depend

on size for their distinction do provide good landmark orientation service and visual interest for people *at a distance.* In New York, the Empire State Building and the Consolidated Edison Tower with its great illuminated clock are examples. For people seeing them from the streets close by, these same buildings, inconsequential in their differences from neighboring buildings, are inconsequential as landmarks. Philadelphia City Hall, with its tower surmounted by the statue of William Penn, makes a splendid landmark from afar; and its true, not superficial, difference within its intimate matrix of city also makes it a splendid landmark from close by. For distant landmarks, size can sometimes serve. For intimate landmarks, distinction of use and a statement about the importance of differences are of the essence.

These principles apply to minor landmarks too. A grade school can be a local landmark, by virtue of its special use in its surroundings, combined with visibility. Many different uses can serve as landmarks, provided they are special in their own context. For instance, people from Spokane, Washington, say that a physically distinctive and beloved landmark there is the Davenport Hotel, which serves, as hotels sometimes do, also as a unique and major center of city public life and assembly. In a place that is mainly residential, working places that are well seen can make landmarks, and often do.

Some outdoor spaces that are focal centers, or, as they are sometimes called, nodes, behave very much like landmarks and get much of their power as clarifiers of order from the distinctiveness of their use, just as in the case of landmark buildings. The plaza at Rockefeller Center in New York is such a place; to users of the city on the ground in its vicinity it is much more of a "landmark" than the towering structure behind it or the lesser towers further enclosing it.

Now let us consider that second extra service which landmarks can perform to clarify the order of cities: their ability to help state explicitly and visually that a place is important which is in truth functionally important.

Centers of activity, where the paths of many people come together in concentrated fashion, are important places economically and socially in cities. Sometimes they are important in the life of a

city as a whole, sometimes to a particular district or neighborhood. Yet such centers may not have the visual distinction or importance merited by the functional truth. When this is the case, a user is being given contradictory and confusing information. The sight of the activity and the intensity of land use says Importance. The absence of any visual climax or dignifying object says Unimportance.

Because commerce is so predominant in most city centers of activity, an effective landmark in such a place usually needs to be overtly uncommercial.

People become deeply attached ro landmarks that occur in centers of activity and in this their instincrs about city order are correct. In Greenwich Village, the old Jefferson Market Courthouse, now abandoned as a courthousc, occupies a prominent site abutting on one of the community's busiesr areas. It is an elaborate Victorian building, and opinions differ radically as ro whether it is architecturally handsome or architecturally ugly. However, there is a remarkable degree of unanimity, *even among those who do not like the building as a building,* that it must be reained and used for something. Citizens from the area, as well as architecrural students working under their direction, have devoted immense amounts of time to detailed study of the building interior, its condition and its potentialities. Existing civic organizations have put time, effort and pressure into the job of saving it, and a new organization was even started to finance the repair of the public clock on the tower and get it going! The Public Library system, having been shown the architectural and economic practicality, has now asked the city for funds to convert the building to a major branch library.

Why all the to-do over a peculiar building on a centrally located site which could make a lot of quick money for somebody and some extra taxes for the city, if it were used for commerce and residences, like most sites around it?

Functionally, it happens that just such a difference in use as a library is needed here, to help counter the self-destruction of diversity. However, few people are aware of this functional need, or conscious that just such a building can help to anchor diversity. Rather, there seems to be a strong popular agreement thar

visually the whole busy neighborhood of this landmark will lose its point—in short, its order will blur rather than clarify—if this landmark is replaced by a duplication of the uses that already exist around it.

Even an inherently meaningless landmark in a center of activity seems to contribute to the users' satisfaction. For instance, in St. Louis there stands a tall concrete column in the middle of a down-at-heel commercial center in declining, gray area surroundings. It once served as a water tower. Many years ago, when the water tank was removed, the local citizens prevailed on City Hall to save the pedestal, which they themselves then repaired. It still gives to the district its name, "The Watertower," and it still gives a bit of pathetic distinction to its district too, which would otherwise hardly even be recognizable as a place.

As clarifiers of city order, landmarks do best when they are set right amidst their neighbors, as in the case of all the examples I have mentioned. If they are buffered off and isolated from the generalized scene, they are contradicting, instead of explaining and visually reinforcing, an important fact about city differences: that they support each other. This too needs to be said by suggestion.

Eye-catchers, as already mentioned in the case of visual street interruptions, have an importance in city appearance out of all proportion to the physical space they occupy.

Some eye-catchers are eye-catchers just by virtue of *what* they are, rather than because of precisely *where* they are: an odd building for instance, or a little group of differing buildings standing out, because of themselves, in the wide-angle view across a park space. I think it is neither necessary nor desirable to try deliberately to create or to control this category of eye-catchers. Where diversity is generated, where there is mixture in building ages and types, and where there are opportunity and welcome for many people's plans and tastes, eye-catchers of this kind always turn up, and they are more surprising, various and interesting than anyone, aiming primarily at city design, could deliberately plan. Truth is stranger than fiction.

Other eye-catchers, however, are eye-catchers because of *pre-*

cisely where they are, and these are necessary to consider as a deliberate part of city design. First of all, there must be spots that, simply as locations, do catch the eye—for example, visual street interruptions. Second, these spots must count for something. These highly visible spots are few and exceptional; they are only one or two among many scores of buildings and locations comprising a street scene. We cannot therefore depend on the law of averages or on chance alone to deliver us visual accents in exactly these natural eye-catcher spots. Often, no more is needed than a good paint color (and a subtraction of billboards) on a building that already exists. Sometimes a new building or new use is needed in these spots—even a landmark. By raking care with the relatively very few spots that are inevitable eye-catchers, much character, interest and accent can be given to a whole scene by suggestion, and with the least design regimentation and the greatest economy of means and tactics.

The importance of such places, and the importance of making them count are points well made in *Planning and Community Appearance*, a booklet prepared by a committee of New York planners and architects formed to investigate the problems of municipal design control. The committee's principal recommendation was that the crucial visual spots in a community be identified, and that *these small spots be zoned to require exceptional treatment.* No good can come, said the committee's report, of blandly including such eye-catching locations in general schemes of zoning and planning.* Their locations alone give buildings on these few sites special and exceptional significance, and when we ignore that fact we are ignoring the most tangible realities.

There are some city streets which, in the absence of excellent eye-catchers, or even in addition to eye-catchers, need another kind of design help too. They need unifying devices, to suggest that the street, with all its diversity, is also an entity.

I have mentioned, in Chapter Twelve, a tactic suitable for some

* This booklet, obtainable from the New York Regional Plan Association, also discusses the legislative, regulatory and tax arrangements required by such an approach, and is thus valuable to anyone seriously interested in city visual order.

streets of mixed residences and commerce, to prevent them from being visually exploded or disintegrated by incongruously large uses. The suitable tactic for visual unity on these streets, as already explained, is to zone a limit on the length of street frontage permitted any single enterprise.

For another family of street unifying tactics, we can exploit the principle that a strong, but otherwise unobtrusive, design element can tie together in orderly fashion much happenstance detail. This kind of unification can be useful on streets that are heavily used, much seen and contain much detail without much real variety of use—streets almost entirely commercial, for instance.

One of the simplest such devices is trees along the stretch to be unified, but trees planted close enough together to give a look of continuity when they are seen close up, as well as when the space between them is elided by distance. Pavements have possibilities as unifiers; that is, sidewalk pavements with strong, simple patterns. Awnings in strong colors have possibilities.

Each street that needs this kind of help is its own problem, and probably needs its own solution.* There is a pitfall inherent in unification devices. One reason for a unifier's power is that it is special to a place, The sky itself, in a way, ties together nearly every scene, but its very ubiquity makes it an ineffective visual unifier of most scenes. A unifier supplies only the visual suggestion of entity and order; the viewer does most of the job of unifying by using the hint to help him organize what he sees. If he sees exactly the same unifier in otherwise disparate places and scenes, he will soon unconsciously discount it.

All these various tactics for capturing city visual order are concerned with bits and pieces in the city—bits and pieces which are, to be sure, knit into a city fabric of use that is as continuous and little cut apart as possible. But emphasis on bits and pieces is of the essence: this is what a city is, bits and pieces that supplement each other and support each other.

* The effects of various kinds of unifiers—as well as of visual interruptions good and bad, landmarks and much else—are pictured and explained in two remarkable books on design in English cities, towns and countryside, *Outrage* and *Counter Attack*, both by Gordon Cullen and Ian Nairn.

Perhaps this all seems very commonplace compared with the sweep and swoop of highways, or the eerily beautiful beehive huts of tribal kraals. But what we have to express in expressing our cities is not be be scorned. Their intricate order—a manifestation of the freedom of countless numbers of people to make and carry out countless plans—is in many ways a great wonder. We ought not to be reluctant to make this living collection of interdependent uses, this freedom, this life, more understandable for what it is, nor so unaware that we do not know what it is.