

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Physical City: Agents of Urban Sociability

Maurice Amiel · Tuesday, October 22nd, 2013

INTRODUCTION

Since my retirement from teaching environment and behavior courses to aspiring designers and architects I have directed my attention to the physical city, analyzing what I see as agents of urban sociability. My friend and classmate, the cultural geographer Falken Forshaw, went as far to describe urban sociability as “*the core of life in a group ... the getting along and where to do it.*” A “where” expressed, according to him, in terms of the various “Heres” and “Theres” the city dweller is conditioned to employ for civil use and occupancy – and sometimes downright appropriation. Street dividers turned into flower gardens and front yards turned into kindergarten playgrounds are examples of this idea. Some residential balconies for instance, participate in the life of the street while others are literally lost in the clouds; making one local urban designer state that for him the city stopped around the tenth floor!

While writing *Justine*, the novelist Lawrence Durrell experienced a perspective shift on this relationship between the “getting along” and the “where to do it.” There was a re-framing of the urban landscape as “*a field dominated by the human wish*” to “*believing that the wish is inherited from the site; that man depends for the furniture of the will upon his location in place.*” (Justine, pp. 112, Faber & Faber)

Considering the above ideas as fertile ground for future discussion, I have come to see the “will to sociability” as dependant on two basic types of urban “furniture.” I intend to explore and report on my findings regarding:

Pathways that orient and condition our movement, with and among others, and modulate exploration of the Here and There. Examples of this: sidewalks, walking trails, hallways, and roads.

Settings that orient and condition our placement of self and activities, with and among others, and modulate use and occupation of the Here and There.

Within these spaces, rituals will orient our interaction in terms of identity and history, and modulate degrees of formality of behavior.

I will try to illustrate each of these types with pairs of situations to allow for comparative exploration of the phenomena of urban sociability while referring, vicariously at least, to the spatial/social experiences involved.

PATHWAYS

The lines along which we move in the city are experientially structured as a series of Here and There places we move through or pass next to. The lines are, of course, abstractions of the circulation routes we move along, in reference to the graphic convention we use when we draw our mental map of the city. By observing them carefully I have come to find some of them as possessing the quality of a “Here” all to themselves.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Here and There are common sense notions we all use everyday. However, in terms of experience they refer to the location of activity and social situations layered over physical differences. This allows us to read them for what they are: situations. Thus readying us for pertinent action and/or choice of same.

“Here” and “There” are best experienced by walking. This act leaves us open to notice markers of potential encounters: doors and gates in particular, or changes in scale from public to private. Sidewalks are nominally located on the side of different territories, mostly along the street for vehicular circulation and buildings or open spaces as settings of formal or informal activities.

“Here” and “There” in the above two images are examples of unusual situations inviting decision by the citizen:

Figure 1: Choice of street to take in order to back up, at a hillcrest edge, in the district I am already in or go down the slope to the neighboring one

Figure 2: Whether to enter (or not) the gated entry to a walkway which seems to go from one public space (a common green) to another (a street) through a setting that has all the trappings of private property but which in fact is not (it is the side yard of a community center); hence calling on our detailed knowledge of the area to ensure an acceptable behavior in order “move through here.”

“Here” and “There” are also distinguished by other landmarks: the tree overhanging its fence marks the hilltop edge of a small incorporated municipality on the island of Montreal, the rose-covered gate marks the rear entrance of the community center butting against the common green of that municipality.

The pathways illustrated here bear the hallmark of presence: of people coming around the bend or coming out of houses to check on who is passing by the gate.

The picturesque nature of these settings imbues them with potential for being used in film shoots on location.

The unique setting also invites us, consciously or not, to reconsider our mental image of the area and our collective definition of certain signs and symbolic markers of occupancy and property that define such territories. After consideration, we might approach, enter, or simply pass by. Such socially-dictated decisions are all manifestations of urban sociability!

SETTINGS

The “Here” and “There” when entered or inside such spaces, encourage certain activities, equipment and social, physical and temporal behavior patterns that limits their use and occupancy. And yet, some areas will appear rigid; defined by one kind of use which potentially dictates the placement of people and activities. This type of situation invites more focused use and discourages the fluidity which encourages informal expressions of sociability. Other spaces are the opposite. They appear fluid and open by eradicating obvious borders or physical boundaries. As a result, they are useful to many people and accommodate informal interactions and activities.

Three types of settings:

Soft vs. hard edges: For instance, buildings facing streets.

Reversed Front vs. Rear building-to-street orientation: Sociability patterns in public or semi private circulation and yards.

Ritual: Spaces used in private and public contexts.

SOFT VS. HARD EDGES

Figure 1



Figure 2



In the above examples we see the contrast between these two types of situations: whereas the waiting and sunning area next to the entrance of a major hospital (left) seamlessly blends in with the pathway to the entry (thus providing animation and contact opportunities) the outdoor eating area next to a wing of the same hospital (right) stands isolated and barren between meals but for the grace of a tree and a building overhang, both giving shaded protection to the stragglers.

In the left image note the posture of the seated gentleman with his left elbow resting on the raised concrete box mirrored by the lady on the other end. This is a smart design that aerates the two social groupings.

In the right image we see the physical and social distance from the sidewalk underlined by the small retaining parapet wall. This distance seems to want to be breached by the two persons seated next to it as if on a balcony looking at the street action.

Two degrees of urban sociability: the active one of the waiting and sunning area and the more passive one of the outdoor eating area. Both are needed because they provide choice in setting which increases the quality of sociability.

REVERSED FRONT VS. REAR BUILDING-TO-STREET ORIENTATION

Other settings come under the perspective of urban curiosity here. We see how three short streets interrupt the façade alignment on a main thoroughfare producing three pedestrian alleys for frontal access to residential duplexes and common back alleys for vehicular traffic to and from main streets.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



The residents across the pedestrian alley, in Figure 3, have dealt with the privacy dimensions of these paths by raising sizable hedges and shade trees. These outdoor rooms keep the strangers passing by out of reach and the next door neighbours out of sight until met on the walkway.

In Figure 1, the corner resident became frustrated by the fact that his private backyard was dominated by the sizeable back alley often used for service and emergency access. Thus he decided to pave this front area and turn it into a mini basketball court enclosed with a tall fence to keep the ball in and the eyes out. The relative state of poorly maintained hedges delineating other front yards on the street speaks of problematic relations with this neighbour who has cast aside block solidarity for personal gain.

Finally in Figure 2 it shows how the usual occupancy of a rear yard has been reduced to the width of a parking spot in front of garage doors and minimalist landscaping. I have observed people drive in that alley to join the two main streets at each end of the alley-a reversal of the usual privacy of back alleys!

This pattern of bloc platting is not a familiar one and thus can be seen as touchstone to understanding and experiencing urban sociability.

RITUAL

Rituals imply the return to a given space(s) at certain times for specific activities with some degree of formal behavior.

I present here the pick-up ritual at a private residence daycare setting and the seasonal urban farmers market in the multi-use shed of a large park.

Figure 1



Figure 2



What is striking in both settings, in spite of their vastly different scale and use, is the presence of a roof structure. No single architectural feature spells “Here” as clearly as a roof can.

The lightness of the fabric roof structure goes with its temporary nature (given the various ordinances that make a permanent structure impossible) but it also has a playfulness that goes well with the business conducted inside: occupancy by toddlers and children who need protection from sun and rain. Additionally, the wood fence protects their playtime outside from unwanted onlookers.

The sociability “punctum” of the photograph is the grouping of adults near the entry gate. Some gather inside while one with a stroller lingers outside the defined area in a manifest but innocuous appropriation of the sidewalk.

The air of garden pavilion turns this into a street level landmark which is, in a way, a gesture of urban sociability for ease of orientation and wayfinding to the daycare center.

The large shed in the right image encloses several basketball courts and open-air ice skating/hockey rink (two prime ritual sports) in addition to offering shelter to impromptu and experimental gathering such as this urban farmers market and cooking demo table.

One important detail to note is the interesting bench design in the right image. Constructed side-by-side and front-to-front (and in some cases includes a seat level table area between), this layout encourages mingling as it is virtual impossibility to appropriate the whole bench by occupying one seat, as opposed to the virtual impossibility to sit at a table where one person is already seated.

This attention to the spatial dynamics of socialization goes a long way to facilitate both group socializing and socializing among strangers. The placement of these seats near the entrance to the shed allows for families to establish a home base from which to fan to different exhibits without having to lug strollers, bags, etc.

As in all “good” design these features are only noticeable if one appreciates the lack of crowding and circulation problems and considers the larger social implications in the simple design of this shed.

A NOTE ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS

The square format was chosen because it allows the centering of features to be looked at while inviting the viewer to move into the image so to speak. The sepia tone is softer than black and white, while the monochromatic dimension prevents one from being distracted by color and produces a certain degree of abstraction in the image and, in this respect, a complementariness between image and text.

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