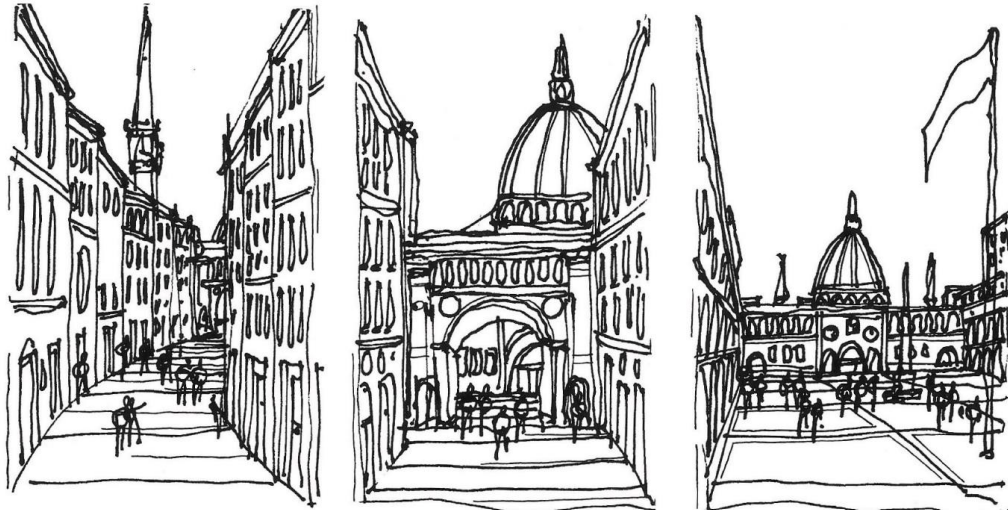


PATH • PORTAL • PLACE

APPRECIATING PUBLIC SPACE IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS



Edward T. White



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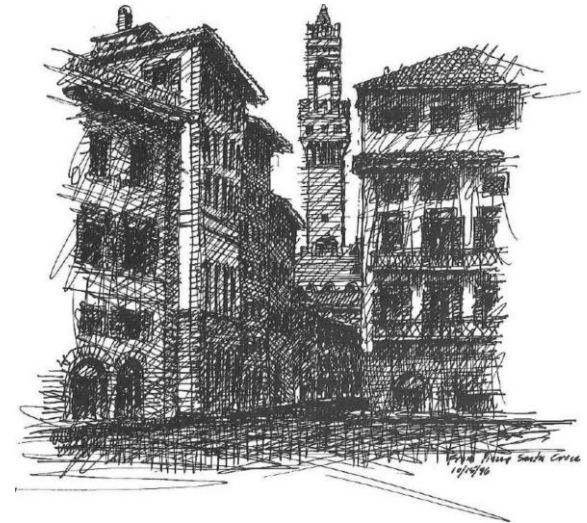
Edward T. White



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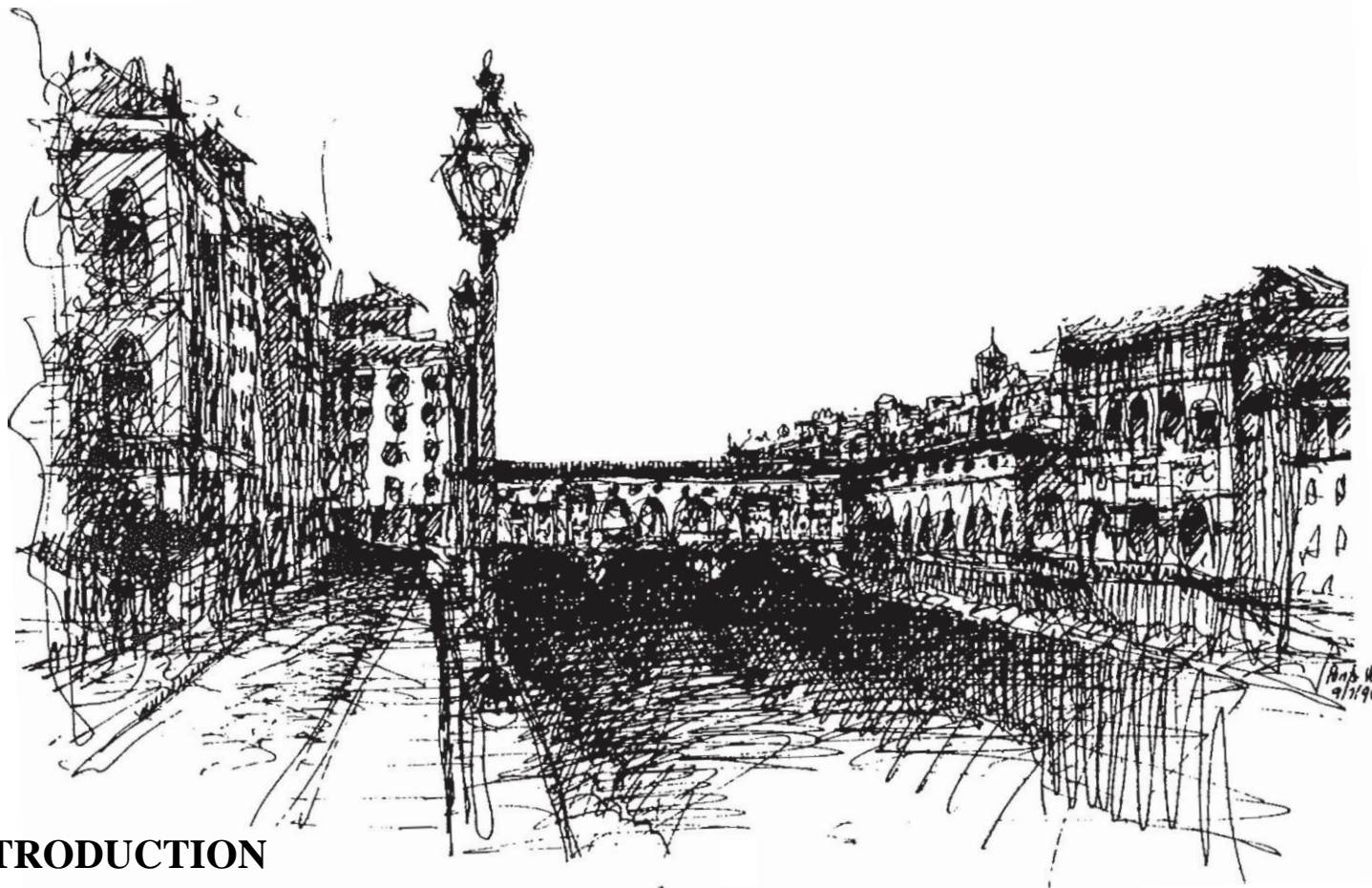
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INTRODUCTION

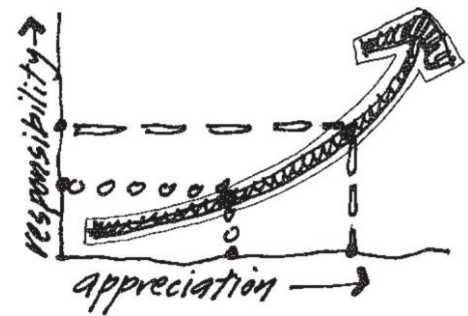
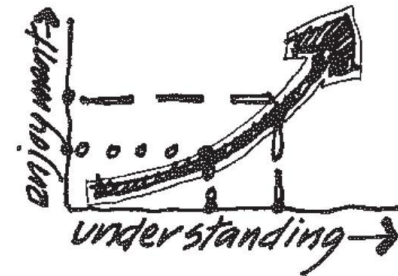
Most of us live and work in urban centers. Whether small town or large city, we inhabit some level of architectural density, a tapestry of streets, buildings, walks, parks, and parking lots that, together with the life that happens there, gives our town its identity, its sense of place.

Wherever we live, our environment becomes more supportive and enjoyable the more we understand and appreciate it. Our quality of life improves when our sensitivity to our world is enhanced, even when this enhanced sensitivity includes seeing what's wrong. When we see our town, workplace, home in a new, more aware way, we experience the joy of discovering, the satisfaction of recognizing, naming and knowing, and the delight of beauty. A better understanding of our environment gives us a stronger connection to it, a deeper grounding, a fuller feeling of belonging to and reverence for the place. We also develop a stronger sense of responsibility for environmental quality when we see more, know more. We become citizens, participants in preserving the good, enhancing the unremarkable, and transforming the mediocre. Our opinions about the environment are more focused and articulate when we process our world with finer sensibility. We grow to be more demanding design clients, more aware and responsive as planners and designers, and more informed as civic leaders and community decision-makers. And when we travel to other communities, we see, understand, learn from, and enjoy them with heightened mindfulness.

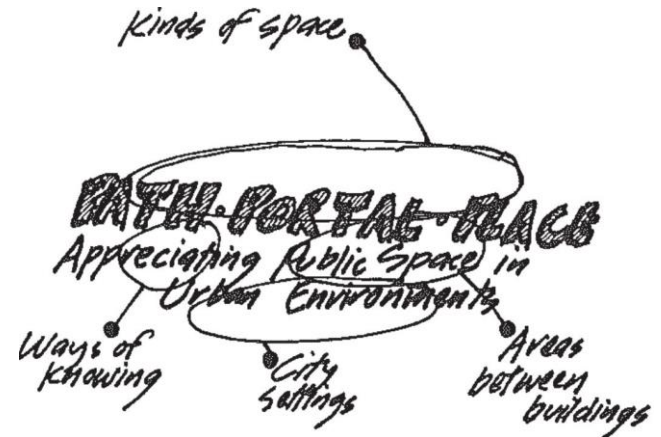
This little book is a modest contribution to the goal of keener environmental knowing. The hope is that by spending time with its pages, we will come to see our urban settings in more penetrating ways, and that we will evolve a personal urban alertness that moves us to finer levels of making sense of places.



more we understand and appreciate



The title of the book serves as the basis for its content organization. Path Portal Place names the three kinds of public space that are addressed. Emphasis is upon the areas between buildings where urban life happens. The subtitle, *Appreciating Public Space in Urban Environments*, provides headings for the three major sections of the book. First, Urban Environments are briefly discussed. Then Public Space is approached using the categories of path, portal, and place. Finally, we move our attention to some ideas about Appreciating, specifically to four ways of knowing urban environments: experiential knowing, historical-factual knowing, analytical knowing, and poetic knowing.

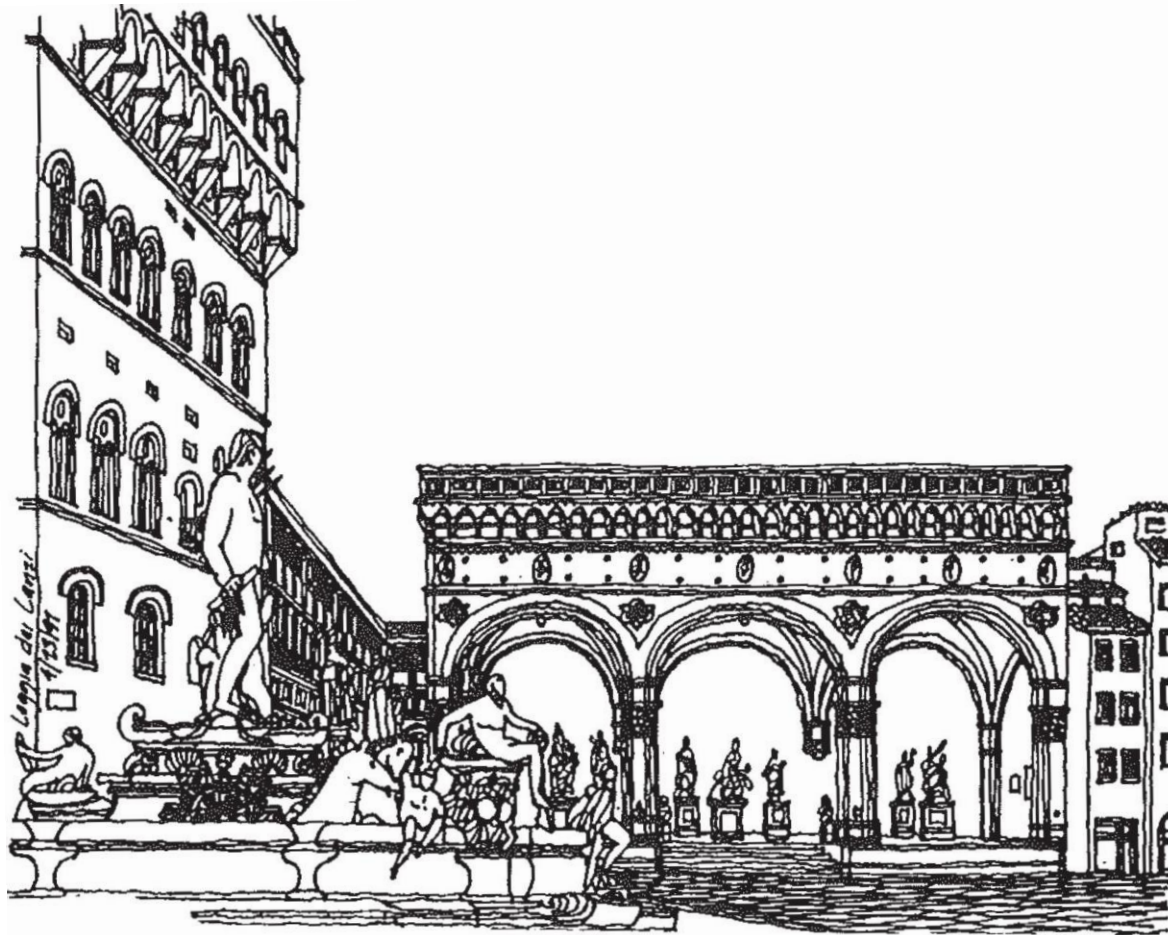


The concept of appreciating can be thought of in two ways. The first is the idea of better understanding public space in order to more fully know, enjoy, and value it. To sense more, experience more, to hold in higher regard. The second involves increasing the beauty, resolution, clarity, and utility of public places through projects that modify them. Design interventions that change them, that leave them better than we found them. Understanding precedes intervention. This book is about the understanding component of appreciation.

The book was inspired by living and teaching for a year in Florence, Italy. That experience of being in a city that is compact, dense, consistent in character, beautiful, and historically rich prompted the awareness shift for the author that he is eager to share with the reader.

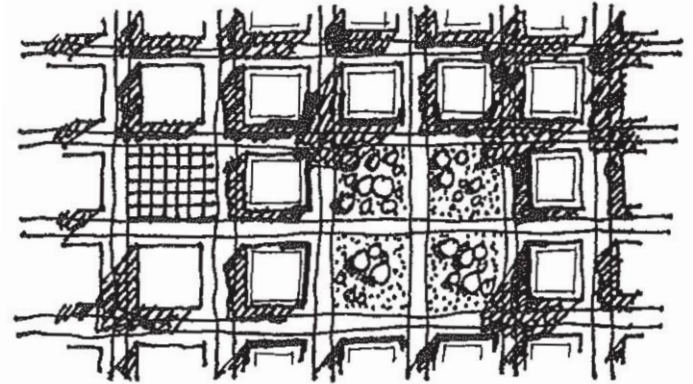


This is the second book inspired by the Florence experience. The first, *Images of Italy*, contains drawings and poems about places, buildings, experiences.



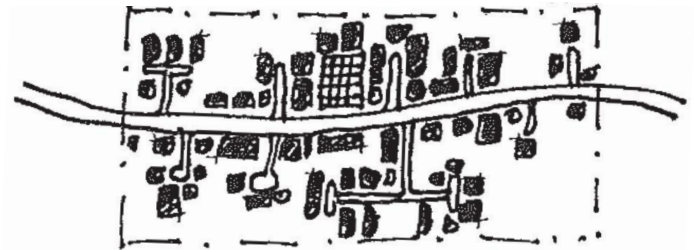
URBAN ENVIRONMENTS

This section briefly covers some ideas about urban environments as a prologue to discussing the topic of appreciating public space. The considerations about community that follow include community scale, character and identity, urban form as a printout of natural and cultural processes, settings for human activity, reverence, and forgiveness, naming the environment, and urban roles of buildings. These issues will serve as a context within which we will address particular aspects of urban environments later in the book.



COMMUNITY SCALE

Our towns and cities are what we normally think of when we hear the term urban environment. They contain enough clustered buildings to create a sense of whole place, some clarity of boundary so that we know when we're in or out of town, sufficient building-to-building proximity to make interbuilding relationships and form public space, and a pathway system for moving through and within the town. Cities and towns are part of a continuum of human settlement types and densities that begins with loosely defined situations such as widely spaced farms or scattered mountain cabins and ends with the mega-metropolis of large cities that have grown together into one continuous environment. The urban scales between these extremes raise interesting questions. How many buildings are needed to create a sense of town? How close do they need to be to one another to establish relationships among themselves and form exterior places? To what extent must intentionality be detectable in the path routes and building locations to discern structure and organization? At what point does a town edge condition



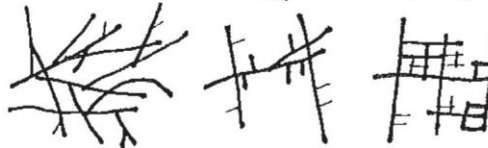
begin to provide a clarity of boundary, of entering and leaving? These same questions can be applied to the formation of streets, parks, and plazas as urban places. At the other end of the scale spectrum, there are similar questions about large communities. At what point in its growth does a city become too large to maintain a sense of the whole in our mind? What are the ways we come to consider areas of town as distinct zones? When does economy of scale shift to uneconomy of scale? How does scale relate to the life-affirming qualities of a community? At what densities and scales do towns begin to choke on their own progress? We don't need to arrive at definitive answers to these questions for them to be useful. Even unanswerable questions can elevate our awareness and stimulate thinking and dialog.



When is a town a town?



When is public space formed?



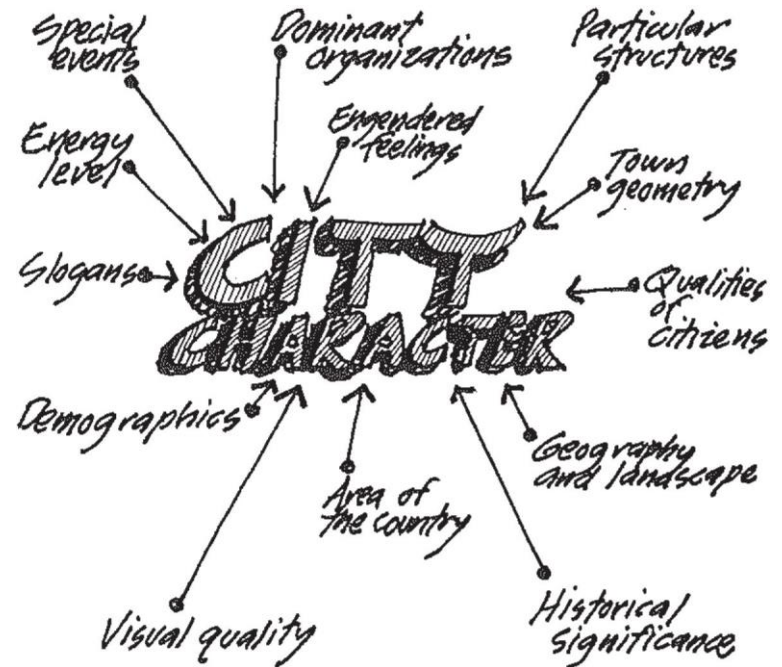
When is a path network organized?



When is a sense of boundary created?

CHARACTER AND IDENTITY

Cities and towns have personalities. Their character can often be summed up with brief descriptions of attributes or elements that establish the overall environment's identity. Character can be defined in many ways. For example, we may mention a dominant organization that is situated there (It's the state capital. It's a university town. It's a company town.). We could reference the area of the country where the city is located (That's a New England fishing village. There's an Italian hill town.). Identity might be addressed in terms of geography and landscape (This place is about red clay, Jive oaks, rolling hills and canopy roads.). We can describe a place demographically (It's a working class community. There's a retirement village.). Sometimes character is established by the qualities of the citizens (This is a friendly, open city. It used to be snobby.). The feelings engendered when we're in a place can influence identity (That's a scary place. A good place to visit. It's a peaceful little corner of the world.). A place is occasionally defined by its level of energy and activity (What a revved-up city! There was a nice easy pace there. The atmosphere here is very competitive.).

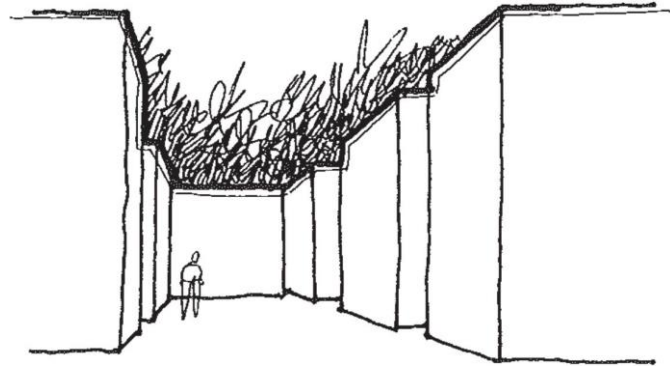


Urban character and identity is frequently described using the visual quality of the environment (It's still a city of austere elegance. That's a wonderfully ornate labyrinth. A hum-drum town with a few bright spots. This is a brick town. This place is about tan stucco, green shutters, and red tile. There it is, two stories high and 20 miles long.). Definition of identity may be through historical significance, symbolism, or values (This city is about power. It's the cradle of the Renaissance. That little hamlet is how life should be lived.). Special events can set the character of a place (We're in the home of the Mardi Gras. It's where the film festival is held. Billy the Kid was shot here.). Cities

often have their identities based on diagrammatic maps that express the geometric organization of the place (The whole town is a series of concentric rectangles. It's a checkerboard of parks.).

In many cases, a particular structure comes *to* stand for the city. It becomes a logo for the whole. The Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, Empire State Building, and Golden Gate Bridge are examples.

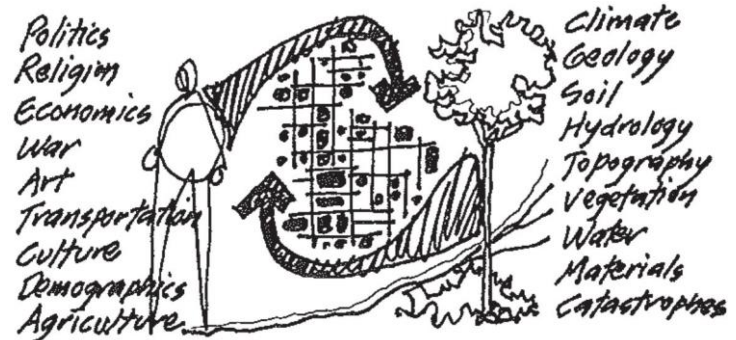
Identities can evolve naturally with no direct intentional assistance from citizens or may be deliberately managed and cultivated to promote a desired image or reputation. Often, identities can be summed up with slogans that convey the spirit of the place. Instances are the Big Apple, Tinseltown, City by the Bay, Big Easy, Windy City, Old Pueblo, and Big D. "Big" seems to be a popular adjective.



Even when a town has no remarkable features, having no identity is a kind of identity (It's Nowheresville).

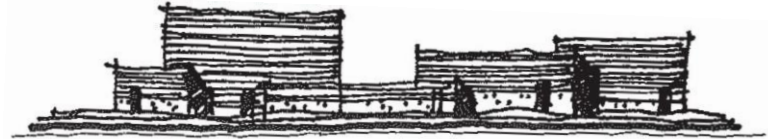
URBAN FORM AS RESULT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL PROCESSES

A useful way of making sense of urban form is to imagine it as a result of the shaping forces of nature and man. In the same way that tides and currents shape shorelines and wind and rain shape cliff configurations, human values, institutions, policies, and decisions shape cities together with climate and geography. The original siting and settlement of communities is often influenced by waterways, topography, and vegetation. The evolution of city form

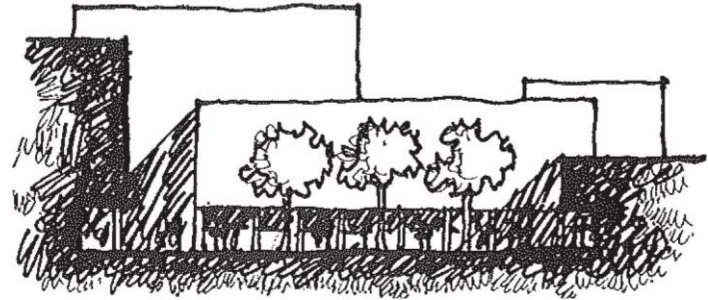


can be shaped by gravitation to amenities such as water edges, high ground, and mature landscape. Avoidance can also be a form influence. Flood plains, poor soil, storm potential, and unbuildable topography may affect community configurations. Mountains and shorelines make clear urban boundaries, and open, flat land invites sprawl. Available local materials frequently determine the forms of buildings and visual character of the town.

City form is also guided by politics, class struggle, power and status, religion, competition between towns, economics, warfare, cultural values, and social dynamics. In some cases, sweeping, large-scale



projects such as highways, perimeter walls, ring roads, and new boulevards cause dramatic shifts in growth patterns. Type and rate of development are sometimes influenced by the arrival or departure of large companies and institutions. In other cases, change is small scale, incremental, and long term.



SETTINGS FOR HUMAN ACTIVITY

Great cities provide public places for human transactions. The streets invite strolling, shopping, sitting and people watching, seeing and being seen. They support easy movement and entice us along with engaging destinations and wonderful invitations to explore side streets and courtyards. The uses along them promote activity. Pathway protection from vehicles. Plazas and gardens offer opportunities to sit, be, and enjoy. They have a clear feeling of place, of definition, and character. They are urban rooms that embrace us with a graceful generosity.



