Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Echoes of the City: The Sense of Place

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, February 11th, 2015

Introduction

*The **sense of place** is what we read in a place in terms of the proper behaviour it requires, as in the culturally evolved and accepted principles of "a place for each thing and each thing in its place" or in "this is not the place to do this or that."*

The sense of place orients more than determines behaviour; it refers also to the character of a place such as formal and informal.

In the city, private places will need to be marked as such to be distinguished from the generally public urban environment.

The city, akin to a biological organism, has its share of dying places and, as a social organism, has its share of dangerous places to avoid.

Buildings will generally take their place in the city by differentiating their more ceremonial "front" from their more instrumental and generally more easy going "rear."

The city, hopefully, should be made up of good and welcoming places to nurture civil and sociable urban life.

*The bottom line of this introduction is to suggest, as illustrated in the feature image, that **both human and physical features of environment are necessary to reading the meaning of places** and that acting people are essential to generating and sustaining pertinent and appropriate behaviour.*

I trust the reader will recognize in each case presented the behavioural and physical dimensions basic to its sense of place, and that will justify the qualifiers I have used to characterize each one.

Places to be avoided

Either because we are not welcome, i.e. forbidden to enter, or because they feel a bit dangerous for us to venture into, i.e. abandoned and dark and better avoided.

Forbidden

The setting is on the edge of downtown at the limit of an old industrial area ripe for redevelopment.

Given that abandoned industrial buildings are easy prey for squatters and taggers, it is not difficult to understand the decision to fence off what used to be an access alley.

No sign makes explicit the injunction not to penetrate—the fence is high and sturdy enough to convey the message.

Since there is no obvious danger here to trespassers should they climb over, the fence simply allows the passers by to view the alley and go their way.

Abandoned

The building was a commercial one, maybe the offices of a real estate agency, given its situation close to a major residential development.

Signs, or parts of such, are still attached to the buildings, and most openings have not been boarded over and feel strangely menacing. The building is in such a state of disrepair as to make one think that it will most likely be torn down or be taken apart and moved elsewhere.

The site is gone to weeds and the building seems to be accessible to anyone with a squat in mind … definitely to be avoided by most after dark, unless a squatter oneself.

Front and rear places

The “front” of any venue is usually invested with care for it formally presents an image of ourselves, and we usually let the “rear” be more informally treated…and so is our behaviour: more ceremonial in the first and less so in the second.

Front

The “front” is where all coffee houses-restaurants-bistros on this main street present their social image: cool, reserved, etc.

Compared to others, this venue has chosen a well designed sign, chairs and tables softened by planters and umbrellas, and a discrete folding sign for its special of the day.

The choice of small tables caters to couples and students interested in the traffic, i.e. to see and be seen.

On the whole this venue presents a very sociable and attractive front treatment.

Rear

The rear patio offers the pleasures of sun exposures and quiet surroundings with direct access from the rear room furnished with larger tables for groups such as students doing work.

That special connection of indoor-outdoor is a familiar suburban pattern, one that students living in dorms will appreciate as reminder of the comforts of home.

Given the absence of street traffic, the ambiance is quieter and privileges tête-à-tête or group discussions, and that venue has allowed plenty of room and comfortable seats and the luxury of privacy for the couple of tables outside.

Places for private and public life

Private places are accessible to the authorized, while public places are accessible to all … at least theoretically. The basic problem is in how to define their common limit: A line? A fence? Is it more of a transitional area?

Private or public ?

Efforts to enhance the private dimension of large social housing development has resulted in various design strategies to distance the real private realm of units, such as balconies, from street circulation.

In the case of the Montreal Benny Farm Housing Project, the landscape screen of dwarfed trees and lower shrubs is quite convincing as a visual screen and as the definition of a first limit one has to cross before reaching the front doors of the units.

That leaves quite a stretch of lawn between sidewalk and landscaped screen: **is it private or public?**

Methinks it is not territorially neutral, with priority of use by the residents. It does however act as a transition element allowing the visitor to shed the public frame of mind that belongs to the street and to slowly enter the private frame of mind necessary to access the units in civil manner.

Public or private ?

The setting is the “rear” side of the buildings previously shown.

Approaching this particular ensemble via a walkway that widens to accommodate a central row of trees, and benches either side of that row, we may be expected to feel we are in a public or at least community space, i.e. non-private.

A printed official looking sign reminds us however that this is private property.

All units being rental, what does “private property” mean? And who is the sign supposed to keep

out of that space that definitely seems to be open to general access and has a non-private feel to it?

So which is it: public or private?

Could it be that this space is dedicated to a particular cross traffic circulation function, i.e. not for general public?

Could it be that this space is meant for bordering residents to come down and enjoy sun and fresh air on an exclusive basis? In that case, where are the rear stairs leading directly to that space?

We called on the architect of the project with these questions and he provided the following clarifications:

That circulation space is indeed a **dedicated mean of access for residents of buildings located beyond the space shown in the photograph,** because these buildings have no street access. As such that circulation space is not meant for use of bordering residents nor for the general public, in spite of the inviting benches we find in it.

The “private property” sign is simply an insurance provision informing non-residents that they use the space at their own risk.

Neither public nor private in the conventional sense of the terms, that space is rather a community one used as a dog run, but mainly dedicated to serving a special set of residents while being accessible to others on particular conditions tied to insurance responsibility.

Formal and informal places

We all know what formal dress vs. come-as-you-are prescription is all about and know, intuitively, what clothes we will be wearing to the grand, enclosed, symmetrical, richly appointed affairs, i.e. formal, and what we will wear to the cozy events that are colourful, open, with lots of windows and furniture on the soft and/or saggy side, i.e. come-as-you-are.

Now for an urban interpretation:

Formal

Check the clothing of the people … looks like a shirt and tie affair for the men and skirt and coat for the lady … right!

This is one entrance to the Montreal Municipal Courthouse, a black granite, grand, staid and modernist affair, down to the security bollards lined in front of the wall-to-wall stairs.

Does it remind you in any way of that famous Paul Strand photograph of businessmen in hat and coat walking, bent forward against the wind, by a New York office building with monumental, dark and mysterious openings?

Well that is what “urban formal” is: monumental, staid, heavy, mysterious in a way; can you just

imagine someone bringing a pet animal along?

Informal

The setting is part of a redeveloped neighbourhood that has remained in its original state, with its old town houses, convenience stores and the beginning of a pedestrian pathway system to knit the neighbourhood to its two subway stations, parks and community coffee house.

The brick paved sidewalk with painted shoe prints is part of that pedestrian pathway system, and the walking lady has informally taken leave of it for a short-cut to the blue painted corner store.

The general state of maintenance of the area could well be also qualified as “cozy, colourful and on the saggy side” … just enough to make one feel comfortable to come-as-one-is to get a pint of milk and a loaf of bread, walking across the service driveway as if it were one’s own … and of course with one’s pet on a leash being welcome!

Discussion: a good and welcoming place

The above image is of a florist stall in a public market, and it illustrates what Professor Donlyn Lyndon calls a **“good place”**.

Why?

Simply because before engaging the florist behind the counter, there is room for the prospective client to get out of the moving traffic to leisurely examine the merchandise, get acquainted with the various services offered, and therefore to be sufficiently oriented before engaging the vendor about his/her needs.

Please note that the same intermediary space, between circulation area and counter, also comfortably accommodates the return to the circulation area after a purchase. “Smart design,” I believe that is called!

Finally, and easy to gloss over perhaps, is the fact that this same transition space allows a certain privacy for the transaction which, for flowers, can be rather personal.

*To paraphrase Lyndon’s ideas, a **“good”** place is therefore informative, well organized and properly lit for ease of reading and reaching, securely laid out for ease of circulation and protection of privacy, and characteristically designed to charm the senses and secure a place in our memory as being, all told, a **“welcoming”** one.*

All images credit Maurice Amiel

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