

Cultural Daily

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PLACE MAKING: On the spatial poetics of the proximate environment

Maurice Amiel · Thursday, June 9th, 2016

Poetic figures of three “sister places”

First reference

I have made reference to the three “sister places” in my very first post for the curious way one of its duplex buildings had a basket ball court in what is usually a status related landscaped front yard. (See feature image)

I went on, in that post ([The Physical City: Agents of Urban Sociability](#)), to discuss the matter by mentionning the fact that the rear yard was given completely to vehicular access to the buildings, and to their garages, resulting in the reversing of front and rear yards conventional uses.

I made mention of the fact that the street address of these building was not given on an ordinary street but on a pedestrian pathway perpendicular to ordinary streets, and identified at each access point as a “Place” as shown in the plan further down.

Present context

Circumstances have made me get re-acquainted with these three “sisters” since I have started walking by them daily to get to the local hospital for treatment. A good twenty minute walk well within the range of my proximate environment.

My eyes first caught a possibly telling cue to this unconventional siting pattern of paired duplex buildings in the fact that their respective name had started as being “name + place” in the English manner and was now reset as “place + name” in the French manner.

Since the English wording was the initial one, I would be inclined to see here a series of three traditional English “closes”, small grouping of buildings within a strong presence of nature and limited vehicular access, each of these closes having perhaps a particular relation to the name attached to each one of them ... be it the name of a land owner, or a first settler on the close, etc.

The image below shows such a typical face to face siting of buildings using natural vegetation to delimit individual properties and insure some privacy...



front yard precinct

... while in the image below shows the shared cut and dry vehicular access running between the backs of buildings of adjoining Places.



rear yard precinct

Poetic figures in the three sister places

I have identified three domains of spatial poetics potential in the case at hand, domains that can be described best by comparing three sets of relations, basic to that poetic potential, **all of them to be described here and analyzed later on in our discussion of the findings.**

1- Between City and Places: spatial relations that structure one's general orientation to the three Places,

As seen below it is clear that the building-side-to-street orientation of the surrounding apartment buildings helps negotiate the left to right slope of the site, by placing its longest dimension parallel to the slope, as one would place the skis to go up or down a too steep slope. See plan below per Google Map.



google map of site

I would be hard pressed to decide which came first: the siting pattern of the above apartment buildings or the one of the three sister Places, as shown in the next four images.

Shown below: Campden Place pedestrian access, off fronting **regular** street, showing building-side-to-street orientation



pedestrian access off regular street

Shown below: Campden Place pedestrian access, off fronting **thoroughfare** street, showing the same building-side-to-street orientation except for its more generous side yard and vegetal screen, and the stucco eclectic building finish found on all pair of buildings framing that thoroughfare entrance.



pedestrian access off thoroughfare

Shown below: Campden Place longitudinal view of **pedestrian access pathway** and front to front orientation of facing buildings. The pathway continues past the tree in its middle to reach the thoroughfare street.



view down pedestrian pathway

Shown below: Campden Place longitudinal view of **vehicular access alley** way and back to back orientation of buildings, also the alley level location of garage entrances of the upslope situated buildings to the right, and the below alley level of garage entrances of the downslope buildings to the left, thereby allowing the respective front entrance of these buildings to be at the pedestrian pathway level.



view down vehicular access alley

2- Within each Place (spatial relations that structure meaningful patterns within each Place)

Within each Place a living relation to the ground is obtained at and on each side of the pedestrian pathway, with generous use of hedging and fencing as private property markers and privacy screening as shown below:

Campden Place landscape treatment of front yard as recreation and reception area



front yard precinct uses

A striking difference is the exuberant presence of balcony as the only mean of access to the

exterior for leisure and sometimes for rear access to the ground. Sometimes the side yard will be expressed at a lower level in the back of the building to break the visual dominance of masonry and asphalt but seldom for living usage as shown below:

Beaminster Place back alley, with its exuberant balcony developments.



back alley balconies

Finally, the use of the side yard is not to be overlooked for those who wish to place their leisure and recreations usage a little back away from the more ceremonial reception function of the front yard as shown below:

Beaminster Place use of both side yards, one for an enclosed basket ball court and the other for a more open trampoline area at the building sited on the main thoroughfare.



side yard uses

3- Across Places (the variety, continuity and breaks in the above spatial relations)

The singular feature that is consistent throughout the three Places, and that makes me see them as ordinary sisters rather than identical ones (that is the limit of the analogy of course) is the repetition of the basic building type and siting, with variations in architectural style, and landscape treatment and use of front and entrance yards.

The buildings at the thoroughfare end of each Place have a deeper side yard and an elaborate finish palette and roof tectonic. The extra depth of the side yard is understandable due to the heavy traffic on the thoroughfare and the architectural treatment can be seen as part of the desire to retain an equivalent architectural status with the duplexes built across the thoroughfare as shown below:

Beaminster Place deep side yard and architectural treatment of building finish and roof line. Note the access to entry porch leads to sidewalk of main thoroughfare and not to the Place pedestrian access pathway.



deep side yard and architectural treatment

Instead of **continuity** I would use repetition to qualify the environmental community of the three sister Places and certainly **variety** in taste, maintenance, etc. and most likely in tenure (owners at ground level and renters at upper level as witness a few “For rent” sign hung from upper level balconies).

Witness also a certain character of exclusivity, not to say class, as witness the subtle feeling of being watched left and right when entering the pedestrian pathway which bears no markers of being a private pathway.

Shown below: Beaminster Place manicure treatment of lawn and air of conventional respectability of entry yard.



manicured entry yard

Discussion

If at all, the master poetic figure for the three sister Places would be, for each, the one of the “Close”: with a village sense of proximity not only physical but, I would venture, also social in its community aspect, rather particular and a bit foreign in a big city.

The environmental concerns are self evident: an ever presence of nature with full grown trees and hedges for privacy, where mutual visual access is accepted without being abused i.e. with a sense of self restraint and respectability.

The social differences associated with tenure, can be seen in various degrees of conscientious maintenance and freedom of intervention on certain architectural features: finish, etc. as indicators of ownership, attachment, imaginative appropriation within given siting dimensional and positional characteristics, of end buildings particularly.

Usually owners occupy the lower floor level and will sometimes lavish on their entry porch treatment ... two such owners went as far as building a common deck between their respective entrances, servicing their adjoining units!

The reader may wish to Google Map any one of these Places by name (Campden, Bradford, Beaminster) to realize that, at bird's eye view, they do constitute what is referred to in urban design as a "planned unit development" ... at eye level however one cannot but read these as separate units of an ensemble implicit only for their common siting structure and particular appropriation features which may be referred to as poetic figures.

Venturing a snaking itinerary, alternating pedestrian and vehicular access, from Place through Place, to see if these poetic figures hold up in spite of the individualities of each Place, I can confirm that they do as a series of three spatial haikus, held together by the common sloping ground, mature trees, separate pedestrian and vehicular access, and paired duplex building type set in a rich hush of greenery.

Weaving through these features I found an astonishing array of individual textures, colors, limit and access markers, and activities ... a degree of spatial surprise equivalent, perhaps, of the usual haiku pleasing and astonishing end verse.

(All photos credit Maurice Amiel)

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