

The Age of the List

David Kolb, 1997

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Our task is the preservation of historic towns. In America as in Europe historic town centers are surrounded by recent additions and suburban sprawl. It is tempting to imagine the task of preservation as protecting our historical heritage from a featureless wave of mediocrity, as the worldwide commercial civilization overwhelms local cultures. This story is familiar from the writings of Kenneth Frampton and others: sprawl, homogenization, loss of distinctive local and regional form.¹

I want to disagree with this story. From what force are we trying to save the historic towns? Might not that force have its own new kinds of order? Might that new order be already at work inside the historic towns? Are its effects only negative?

I want to question a presupposition common in many discussion of historic preservation. This is the presupposition that a spatially distinct historic center belongs to a single community that possesses a unified self-consciousness and a unified aesthetic self-image. Local communities less and less correspond to bounded spatial areas, and spatial areas contain less and less homogeneous communities. There is growing a new kind of discontinuous unity, which is the theme of this essay.

Whether we like it or not, historic towns are becoming nodes in a new kind of network. Even if lovingly preserved, the historic towns cannot be isolated. They are and will be penetrated by new processes. These new economic and social and aesthetic processes are not featureless; they have their own order. I will speak about this order as if it were fully developed. Of course it is not. But it is coming and it is not merely degeneration. It offers new possibilities as well as great perils.

My topic, then, is the context for preservation, and the changing identity of communities. What I offer is an image: the suburban retail strip, together with an abstraction from that image: the list. After examining some complications about multiple identity I pose questions about the self-consciousness of community and offer an answer in terms of the role of aesthetic criteria for our togetherness outside.

An Image for Today

Think about suburban retail strips. Retail stores, service outlets, signs, signs, traffic and parking. These are familiar images, and there are two standard ways to invoke them. One is in a sad tone, to condemn the garishness, degeneration, commoditization of modern or postmodern society. Another is in a triumphalist tone, with echoes of Venturi and of various postmodernisms. Neither of these fits what I want to do, though I will come closer to the second. I want to look at the kind of order that dominates the strip.

On the strip, discontinuity reigns. There are no mediating spaces except the characterless flow-way of the road. Although the road is continuous, it has little quality of its own except for convenience or inconvenience. Its blandness highlights the abrupt transitions among the seductive mini-worlds containing the various enterprises.

One branded island abuts another: McDonalds next to Staples Office Supplies next to Rapid Auto Repair next to Wal-Mart. There is no continuity except the general spatial arrangements for parking and the marketing imperatives of instant seduction. Strip transitions are abrupt and follow no order: food, lodging, Chinese food, tires, travel agency, burgers, book store, animal hospital. Nor is there continuity in time; substantial-looking enterprises abruptly disappear and are quickly replaced.

The strip is very different from the traditional centered city. It is also different from modernist functional zones. Though the strip is busy, it is also different from Jane Jacob's mixed multi-functional urbanity. The place that is the strip caters to isolated shoppers in the insulated environment of the car. It lacks the crowd interaction and reinforcement found in the urban market.

Is such discontinuity new? Not completely. Consider the mix and historical jumble in the Roman Forum, consider not the harmonious Greek temple but the mix of activities in the temple precinct, think of medieval markets and fairs. Discontinuity is not new, but something has changed. It is not the introduction of discontinuity; rather it is a lessening of the concentric and hierarchical identity that once imposed more control on such intermediate zones. Now everywhere is intermediate. Transitions become more discontinuous, because places and worlds can be next-to one another without hierarchy or imposed modulation.

The List

This leads to my second point, which is an abstraction. What kind of order is found in the strip? Unmediated juxtaposition. Next to. This is the type of order found in a list.

Driving the strip is like scanning a list. There is no fixed order of items to create expectations about what the next item will be. The items compete; they do not blend into a structured whole. You face a discontinuity where each item solicits your attention and participation for itself. Driving the strip you are scanning a list just as surely as you are scanning a list when you read the ads in the newspaper, or consult the telephone directory or surf the Web.

What is a list? A list is not a sentence; it has no grammar or syntax. The grammar or syntax of a sentence requires that there be items with holes and connections that demand to be filled. Syntax defines items containing relations that are to be filled with other items: the verb demands a subject, the if-clause demands a then-clause, the cathedral demands the parish churches, the plaza demands the market. Such syntactic demands weaken when each item becomes isolated. Items on a list are independent of one another. The order of words in a sentence can be crucial to letting them be as meaningful words, but the order of items on my shopping list, or the order of stores in a mall or on a strip has no bearing on their being what they are. The order on the list or in the mall may be important for some effects: you are more likely to notice the items at the beginning of a list or the entrance to the mall. But one particular order or another is not essential to the being of the list or of the items that compose it.

Items on a local strip list may be franchises of a world-wide brands such as McDonalds. Those represent a life-style, a sub-world, a corporation, but while this provides some depth to the item on the local list, the connection to a larger entity does not provide any syntax for the list as a whole, since life-styles and brands are just items on other lists.

There are some exceptions where juxtaposition is forbidden. Upscale residential areas insist on their isolation from the list. Toxic activities do not appear at all. In part we can live the list-world because we have repressed big messy industry, extractive operations, and other demanding activities. These are no longer zones within the city; they do not appear at all. But the absences created by these and other exclusions do not give syntax to the cities. Contrast the way a missing verb leaves a sentence incomplete, or the way a missing auditorium is felt as an absence in a school building, with the way we do not feel the absence of ecologically damaging activities that are going on elsewhere.

Cities as lists lack syntax. They lack internal structure that might impose limits and connections. Some places in the city may have their own complex internal grammar and organization, but there is little grammar for the relation of places to one another. Syntactic articulation is replaced by next-to,

juxtaposition.

You know the story about an older, perhaps mythical, centered community where each person saw how their individual life fitted into an organic communal whole. Recall the images from Heidegger and Norberg-Schulz and Harries: the church in the center, the town hall, articulated space with each person able to locate their lives by accepting their part in the norms and roles of the community.² This is breaking down (if it ever fully existed). Some theorists mourn; others celebrate.

This change accelerated when modernism tried replacing the old hierarchical centered syntax with unified functional zones, but even these zones are melting away in suburban sprawl. Everything can be anywhere.

But ours is the age of the list in a double sense. We find ourselves confronted by spatial lists that lack centered syntactic unity, and we also find ourselves inhabiting roles or life-styles that don't fit together into one organic self. Nor do they integrate into a harmonious social whole. Our own selves and societies do not have a neat syntactic unity of classic and modernist theory.³

Society does not fit together neatly any more, if it ever really did. Our multiple selves and multiple communities seem to be juxtaposed with no syntactic articulation. This multi-culturalism and multi-self is a large theme in the United States, but also in Europe where communities that have been more homogeneous now face generation gaps and immigration and refugees and media invasion.

Still, what results is not chaos. Not the dis-order or no-place that many fear. Not the grey modernist maximizing of utility Heidegger fears. But also not the pure flow that Baudrillard celebrates and despises.⁴

In this list-world decisions about preservation become difficult: Must preservation presuppose or restore a grand syntax and grammar for the city? Must it demand zones, quarters, hierarchy? But if not, is the alternative to preserve a list of isolated aesthetic objects?

Complications

Now we turn to the inevitable complications. Lists are not so simple, and there is no pure list. As soon as the list is self-consciously present as a list, it brings structures beyond mere juxtaposition. The list contains hidden linkages.

There are many kinds of order and unity other than those celebrated by nostalgic theorists or spurned by over-zealous postmodernists. Lists are not so bad. Parataxis offers possibilities as well as pitfalls.

Lists are often arranged in the order in which items happened to occur in one's mind, or on the street. But lists can have many orderings; the items can be arranged alphabetically. They can be arranged by the order of conditions: do this before doing that. They can be grouped by subject matter. Each of these orderings captures some linkages among items on the list. But no single order will capture all the links. Some links are cause-effect relations, some are similarities or contrasts in the description of items, some are less obvious, perhaps metaphorical similarities or contrasts, some are links by relation to items not on the list, some are subjective and personal associations. Some links will be overt, some potential. Some will be direct, some will be second- and third-level similarities of pattern, or links to other links.

These links make the space of the list more complex, with more kinds of structure than could be described by my initial opposition of centered hierarchy versus dispersed list. There is more available than mere juxtaposition.

Such structures within the list do not recreate a traditional hierarchical syntax. These are rather the kind of relations and kinships that would make a hypertext that refuses single unity but also refuses

to be reduced to random associations. Some of these links can be found by search engines, but search engines make more lists. Other links are more abstract, requiring the discernment of an anthropologist or a sociologist or a poet; those links make nets not hierarchies.

Cities as lists also have links among seemingly isolated items. Indeed there are too many links to be all expressed in the architectural ordering of the city. There are links of similarity and contrast, historical connections and oppositions, functional similarities, links by way of relations to other urban areas. There are also links off the list to larger wholes: economic and cultural institutions, franchise operations, opinions and ideologies and identities and ironies.

Think of suburban sprawl; it seems formless but nets and links are its real substance. We live in a sprawl of items that appear as a list but in fact have multi-dimensional linkages that do not reduce either to hierarchical centralized syntax or to pure list discontinuity. They are broken into nodes that insert into many coexisting nets and affirm freedoms that go beyond mobility.

Many of the accusations against contemporary cities and suburban sprawl are justified, but others stem from an inability to read the new kind of text. We keep looking for structures and unities of an older type and we don't see the new structures and unities that are forming. The relevant units may not be the single building or single zone. The new unities may be non-hierarchical, not mappable into continuous horizontal zones. There may be links to distant items, links across levels, items playing more than one role, links to objects formed by sets of other links. There are economic links to other stages of production or to similar industries or to cooperating groups. There are temporary links as project teams assemble and disband. There are family links dispersed about the area, and links due to educational patterns. There are links personally chosen in making a life for oneself or one's children, connecting widely dispersed items through automobile travel or electronic nets. There are elective discontinuous partial communities and partial selves. And on and on. Individuation and unification in the suburbs changes faster than the architecture.

What then are we preserving? Our multiple communities are not static little regions lying next to one another in homogeneous neighborhoods. The multiple elements of society link, reach out, cross borders, within a complex order lived as interpenetrating. We might call them discontinuous quarters. There are multiple communities hyperlinked, paratactic and spatially discontinuous within themselves.

Even we ourselves are such unities. It is not true that each individual person occupies a primary place in only one sub-community. Many of us have identities that are divided among various subgroups and forms of life that do not articulate neatly together. We experience our roles and identities as items linked in complex non-hierarchical ways. There is a kind of subjectivity and community on the move among the list, living explicitly with and in the list, not as a single item on it. The list is self-conscious in new modes of interaction and unity.

Such non-centered, non-hierarchical, hyper-linked life is hardly universal, but it increases. It has been celebrated and cursed. Many political, artistic, religious groups react against such divided linked life and try to re-create one overriding allegiance. It is true that the list-life can be superficial, and it does leave the self open to many kinds of manipulation, but it can be more than superficiality or surfing, and it may have its own ways of keeping a formless center.

All of this complicates preservation. If we give up the hope for a centralized hierarchical grammar, and the ideal of pure zones, and also give up the idea that communities inhabit continuous bounded areas, then what are we building or preserving? And for whom? What community self-consciousness can we consult? What and who are we representing when we map and evaluate?⁵

When we are trying to draw a map of a community for preservation or development, we need instruments that will help us chart that structure of links and its discontinuous self-consciousness. But

even if we succeed in understanding the multiply linked community, there is still the problem of criteria. The temptation is to make the goal of preservation be itself the safeguarding of a list. To try to save a few examples of each historical type of building or neighborhood or activity. To preserve the list of styles in art history or the list of politically acknowledged groups in the city. How do we decide? Must it just be a list?

Aesthetic Criteria

In this situation it seems to me that aesthetic criteria, even fairly formal ones, become more important. This happens in two ways.

The first way is emphasized in the Danish SAVE program. The material culture of a community becomes embodied in types and forms: in surface treatments, fenestration, massing, plans, and so on. Living in this historical community has a certain spatial rhythm and visual presence. Preserving this "look and feel" becomes an important goal from which criteria can be drawn and decisions made. This application of aesthetics to preservation has been notably successful in providing guidelines and for creative adaptations of local community aesthetics.

As I have been arguing, though, it will be more difficult to find such unified communities. Even in historic towns there were marginal sub-communities. Today the new generations and the Others arrive, the suburb sprawls, the list and the net penetrate. Town space is shared by multiple perhaps discontinuous communities that would prefer to look and feel differently. In this situation preservation of a unified aesthetic becomes more difficult. It can become oppressive. It can also become the construction of Disney islands that maintain their consistency as they mutate into attractions, or stage sets, lived with a dominant irony that diminishes both traditional identity and the new hyper-linked selves.

However, even we live in a list-and-link world, other aesthetic criteria can still have an important function. These will not be the aesthetic criteria coming from a single unified community, but the aesthetic resulting from discontinuity and the list.

There is no pure list, no simple juxtaposition. The list hides the network of relations within and beyond itself. In the same way, multiple and discontinuous communities are not isolated from one another. They touch and interpenetrate. They share infrastructure and intermodulate rhythms of space. Their buildings confront one another on the city street or the suburban vista. They are outside together with one another.

There has been a long-running dispute within philosophy whether there are criteria of aesthetic value that are more than the preferences of this or that group. Bourdieu claims that even the very idea of aesthetic value is itself group- or class-bound.⁶ But I would argue that there are some aesthetic criteria that are not transcriptions of group preferences or class distinctions. This is particularly true in architectural and urban situations.

Architecture is the art that is outside. Architecture is not only outside under the sky, but architecture brings insides outside alongside facing one another. Buildings are public, they endure, and they are together. They are never seen singly or just by you and me. They can outlast our communal meanings and purposes. They adapt to new values. Urbanism displays what is outside the immediate use and meaning of the building, outside group allegiances and values.

Items in our list-city have relations in and through their very separateness. That is what places do. And we, no one of us is totally contained within one item on the list. We experience the city as an ongoing linked process, even if it is not a hierarchical whole. The juxtapositions, the being outside together, the confrontations and next-to's: we live those as such.

Aesthetic criteria can arise from this very idea of a linked city process that is lived together outside the control of any single item on the list. Such criteria arise from our need to be self-aware and to know the shape of our community and the network that surrounds and penetrates it. What kinds of building do we need to build, or preserve, in order to keep our self-consciousness alive and increase its perspicuity, while not letting it get all ironic and distanced? Is there an aesthetic that can affirm the local in its inner complexity as well as its overall context?

Such criteria would judge the effects of interventions in the shared urban space. They would urge attention to the discontinuities of the list, and tell us not to build as if the city were totally uni-form.

How buildings interact is not settled by the wishes of the sub-community or sub-communities responsible for each building. Nor is it defined by any one architect. Some effects of interaction are tied to historical perceptions. They are cultural habits of long duration. Buildings are involved with historical standards for the way buildings work together, such as the classical orders or Renaissance town plans. These may not be absolute but they have endured. They don't have to be absolute to have shaped people's responses beyond the power of any quick influence to alter.

Other effects of interaction are more deeply rooted. Spatial arrangements have effects independent of any culture or style or symbol. For instance the ratio of street width to building height creates effects related to universals such as human body size, our evolutionary history, how far we can quickly run, our reactions to light and dark, and so on. Labyrinthine or open plans evoke different reactions. These are conditions that engage us; they are not passive facts; we become jittery, we are calm, or oppressed, we hold our bodies differently and we move differently. Those effects seem more or less biologically universal to our species.

Such architectural effects do not in themselves provide aesthetic criteria. But since these effects are unavoidable, they should be taken into account if we are to be self-conscious together. Because there are these effects, and because we live together, the pluralism of the contemporary city encourages liberal architectural values: Don't impose your architectural effects on everyone.⁷ An acknowledgment of our common plurality and togetherness outside can provide an opening for discussion among items on the list. Such discussion might create a shared sense of the built environment as the object of common concern, though not an object with a single form.

Such criteria would promote different strategies in different locations. In an already diverse city such as New York liberal architectural values might encourage overall variety to keep the city from being dominated by one single architectural effect. On the other hand, in the special uniform environments of smaller historical towns or in larger cities such as Venice or central Paris liberal architectural values might encourage a milder self-assertion that would not overly disturb the received historical effects, but also a refusal to shut out the rest of the world. Historical towns that were once the exclusive property of one group take on new meaning as places where a divided community can come together.

The new urban processes do not deny locality; they often emphasize it, and not always for good. Local differences become more self-conscious as architectural effects are produced as commodities for touristic and recreational consumption. Some of this is fearful reaction to change, some of it is positive creativity, but much of it is a second-level homogenizing that turns locality and particularity into attractions. Heritage is a business. It is true that being self-consciously one item on a list of attractions does not automatically devalue particularity, but locality still has to be defended against a reduction to quick thrills. To discuss this issue would be a long story about the need for complexity and more explicit linkages, about refusing the purity of a simplified identity, and about resisting the reduction of complex local identities to shallow serial intensities, all without trying to rebuild a centralized grammar. To discuss these problems without despair we need first some sense of the new processes and the new order within

which localities find themselves. In that order aesthetic criteria may have a moderating function, provided that something like a liberal consensus defines what is acceptable in terms of public seductions.

Everywhere, especially in suburban sprawl, and increasingly even in historic towns, liberal architectural values would mean not pretending to be alone. Openness to the network. What kind of building do we need to preserve, or build, in order to keep us aware of the whole process and net? Of who and where we are?

In the suburbs this might lead to an aesthetic of nodes, nets, and links from here to beyond what is present. An expressive refusal of isolation. Aesthetic as well as political repugnance to the gated community. Buildings that look linked, partial, not all here. Making the node prominent as a node, individual enough to be noticed while also showing openness to linkage in unexpected directions. A change from the monumental isolation of so many suburban institutional buildings. It might mean finding ways to make roads and parking symbolic of movement and linkage. It might mean probing beyond both agricultural typology and the factory image. A further development might be an aesthetic of emergence, denying monumentality and celebrating temporary orders and relations.

Whatever the future for sprawl, the unified historical towns still express the old hierarchical grammars. But they are now inserted into the new discontinuous context. What surrounds historic centers is not a wholly negative force. If we can free ourselves from old presuppositions we may come to a new conception of locality that will make preservation a positive affirmation of local culture and of the new world. Though we live in a time of multiplied identities, we can look for aesthetic criteria in being outside together, in the interaction and linkage among the items on the list. Being self-aware of where we are can renew our obligation to care for the urban process as a whole.

- 1 See Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995); and "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: The Bay Press, 1983), and *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present* (London: Architectural Design, 1982).
- 2 See Martin Heidegger, "Bauen Wohnen Denken" in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954); and Christian Norbert-Schulz, *Genius Loci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984); *Architecture: Meaning and Place: Selected Essays* (New York: Electra/Rizzoli, 1988); *The Concept of Dwelling* (New York: Electra/Rizzoli, 1985); and Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997).
- 3 Such changes in the modern self demand long study about desires and values, examining the ways in which our civilization encourages a paratactic self as opposed both to the classical self with hierarchized values and to the modern one-level self with its calculation of utilities.
- 4 See Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: The Bay Press, 1983); and *Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).
- 5 "With so many pasts and futures making claims on us, it's hard to know which way to turn." (Alexander Wilson, quoted by Lucy R. Lippard in *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New Press, 1997. p. 83)
- 6 Pierre Bordieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).
- 7 The word *liberal* is meant here with the sense of tolerance and liberating groups and individuals from oppression while fostering concern for the whole. This is not the narrow meaning of the word in recent American politics (secular statism) nor its polemical meaning in recent European

theory (individualism and an avoidance of flow).