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In Search of the City

Tall Buildings and Other Urban Myths

Helen J. Maib

Where does one find the city? Is it in a cluster of buildings, a pattern of streets, a collection of cultural amenities and civic services, or a residential neighborhood? Does it always include congestion, blight, pollution, and other manifestations of urban decay? And what exactly does "urban" mean? Does it mean a certain level of density, a defined geographical area of specific dimensions, or a particular population size? Does it perhaps indicate a state of mind shared by its inhabitants? Or does it simply mean tall buildings?

Tall Buildings

Architects and Planners tend to begin the search for the city downtown, in the land of tall buildings. Once the economic, cultural, and governmental, as well as literal, center of the city, the urban core has eroded away over the past 40 years as first residential and later commercial and industrial uses were lured into the suburban hinterlands. What remains is an area primarily devoted to business uses, with a limited selection of commercial enterprises designed to support business needs. Consistent with its function as a business entity, activity in the business district is largely confined to business hours, leaving the area notoriously empty evenings and weekends.

While many urban prophets have heralded this as the beginning of the end for downtown, and have encouraged cities to try to lure residential development back

into the city center, this is inherently inconsistent with the character of the rest of the city. We want our city centers to be bustling with activity day and night, but we don't ask the same of corporate office parks or residential neighborhoods. We accept a balance of activity, distributed between different areas at different times, in the city at large, but we ask that our city center exhibit the activity of all uses at all times.

Perhaps we expect this as a matter of civic pride — after all, downtown in most cases is still the strongest visual symbol of the city, and it's often where tourists begin and end their search for the city. Downtown, then, functions somewhat like the living room: It's not especially useful on a day-to-day basis, but we still need it to impress our guests.

Maybe downtown isn't in need of an infusion of residential development, maybe it only needs a new myth. A myth which separates the concepts of "cultural center" and "tall buildings." Maybe we should let the tall buildings simply do what they do best: Stand out in a proud profile as we speed past them on the interstate, on our way home, or out for the evening, or on to another city. Functionally, rather than expecting the inflated land values of the central business district also to support competitive residential and commercial development, we should perhaps encourage only the most efficient use of this area; namely, for business. Taking the relationship of La Défense to Paris



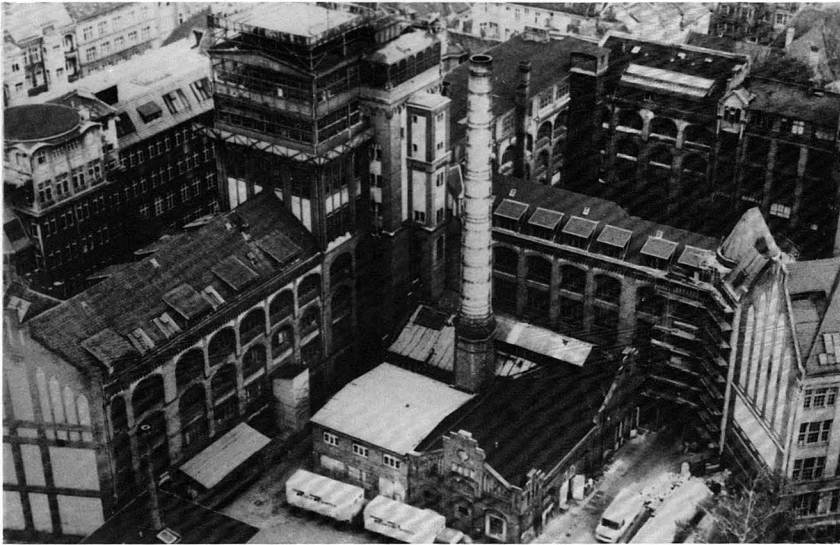
Residential Urbanism: Upper West Side Tenements, Chicago

proper as a starting point, perhaps we should encourage the development of cultural amenities which afford spectacular views of our tall buildings, but are separate from them. In other words, we could let our guests look into the living room from the vantage point of a comfortable chair in the family room.

Located somewhere between the boulevards of Paris and the modern shopping mall, one finds Kansas City's Country Club Plaza. Conceived with the automobile in mind, yet flooded with pedestrians, the Plaza ends up being not completely comfortable for either. Yet, it succeeds on many levels. Parking, as at the suburban malls, is free. Better still, both visually and functionally, parking has been dispersed throughout the Plaza in a number of well-integrated garages,

rather than forming an immense sea of asphalt around a single monolithic structure. While the pedestrian experience is neither completely autonomous nor automobile-free, it at least provides the visual charm and variety of a small village rather than the long, undifferentiated sea of store fronts of the typical shopping mall. And, although the mall is commended for its tempered environment, the variety of indoor and outdoor experiences that the Plaza affords — regardless of the weather — combined with the convenience of its parking garages forms a very viable alternative to the hermetic sterility of the shopping mall.

Perhaps, then, we can create a new urban myth for the pedestrian experience. One which allows the social interaction that



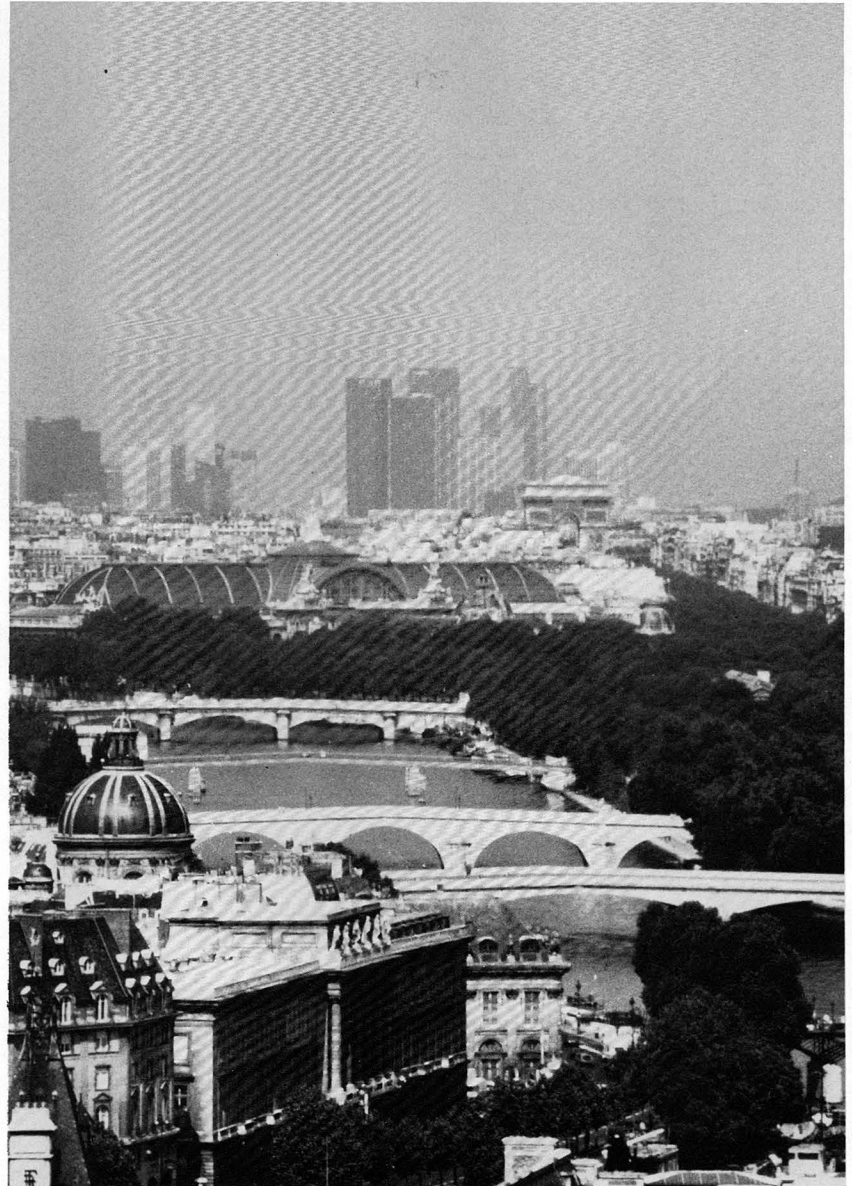
Industrial Urbanism: Kreuzberg Workshops, Berlin, 1906

downtown no longer provides, but in a less anti-urban form than the shopping mall. As with the Country Club Plaza, the pedestrian experience myth has no necessary connection to the tall buildings myth. The pedestrian experience is more suited to commercial or cultural enterprise, rather than business, which explains the difficulty downtown pedestrian zones, such as Philadelphia's Chestnut Street, have had establishing a competitive commercial enclave within the business district. As Mark Girouard notes in *Cities and People*, "a businessman in one room a few square feet in area can earn as much money as a factory full of heavy machinery or a warehouse full of merchandise, and afford to pay rents which would be unthinkable for all but a multi-millionaire to pay for an apartment or house."² If commerce cannot thrive in

this environment, it can go elsewhere, but this does not mean it must of necessity go to a shopping mall.

The Pedestrian Experience

If we no longer require downtown to be a microcosm of the entire city, where then will we find the "city" as such? Perhaps we will find it where the people are: At the shopping mall. As Paul Goldberger pointed out in "Pride of Place," the shopping mall now serves as the communal center of the city, a function previously reserved for the city center. "As these places have grown," he notes, "they have taken on all of the functions of a traditional city," in which people come "not necessarily to consume," but "to wander ... to have the kind of urban experience that modern cities ... really don't allow them in any other way."¹



View from Notre Dame: Foreground, Tuileries, Grand Palais, Champs Elysées; Background, La Defense

The important concept here is not that the shopping mall has become our downtown, but that it fulfills a human need for social interaction. Therefore, it follows that this need could be fulfilled by different types of urban developments, as long as they provide the same types of amenities as the shopping mall. And what does the shopping mall typically provide? Parking, for one thing: Although it's often congested and inadequate, it's generally free. More importantly, the mall provides a space, however cavernous and noisy, for a genuine pedestrian experience, free from the menace of automobiles. Paris succeeds as a walkable city for precisely this reason: The sidewalks of Paris were conceived as true pedestrian "streets," rather than simply being treated as the setback necessary to allow for proper sightlines for vehicles. The most extreme example, the Champs-Élysées, has sidewalks so wide that one is almost unaware, as a pedestrian, of the enormous width of vehicular street bisecting it.

The Suburbs

Along with commercial enterprise, residential development has fled from the inner city, pushed out by both escalating land prices and a desire for more space than the urban center could provide. As the congestion of the industrial city escalated, broad-ranging responses to try to alleviate it appeared, from the suburban withdrawal of Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities to the nihilism of Le



The Impetus for Plan Voisin: Riquet District of Paris

Corbusier's Plan Voisin. While Le Corbusier's conception was consistent with the dictum of CIAM's Athens Charter, Article 46: "We must insist that the distance between home and place of work be reduced to a minimum,"³ the modern city has shown a very marked willingness to forego this requirement. The rise of mass transit, and later the automobile, assured the suburban development championed by Ebenezer

Howard. This is not to say that Le Corbusier's visions were never realized: They surround Paris, they make a strong showing in Brooklyn, they were even blown up in St. Louis.

In formulating a new myth, or perhaps restating the old myth, of the suburb, we need to remember its primary function as a residential entity, and take great care in how we integrate commercial and

business uses into it. Strongly segregated residential and strip commercial development assures that the residential areas will never acquire the feeling of a neighborhood, with its sense of enclosure and autonomy, which inner city residents moved to the suburb to find.



Plan Voisin in Action: Redevelopment Project in Riquet

The Automobile

The automobile, while allowing us to move to the suburbs, has, we feel, ruined the city; it has stripped it of that special charm and rustic character found in most medieval towns, and even in some industrial cities. We expect our experience of the city to go beyond the disengaged views afforded from the automobile, even though this is how we most often ex-

perience it. We discredit the streets we drive on as a modern urban eyesore, as a purely utilitarian device which rips apart the urban landscape without providing any aesthetic value.

Yet, the history of the city has always essentially been the history of the street. Long before the automobile or the rise of mass transit, the street formed the nucleus of the city. More than simply a

transportation route, it provided the opportunities for social interaction now taken over by the "interior streets" of the shopping mall.

Our sense of identity with the city is still inherently bound to the street. When asked to draw their city, most people draw a cognitive map of familiar street patterns: Their everyday routes from home to work, or school, to the grocery store, bank, or

shopping mall, back home again. Their sense of "city" is primarily found in the relationships, created by streets, between the places they frequent, and not in a skyline or other landmark.

We find the city, then, where it began: In the street. Along with new myths for tall buildings, for the pedestrian experience, and for the suburbs, we need a new myth for the street. One which reminds us of the street's importance as an aesthetic and social experience, as well as its purely functional role. One which is respectful of the solid/void patterns of "urban" and "suburban" development. And one which respects both the automobile and the pedestrian.

These new myths would not be capable, on their own, of creating a radically new city type, or even a city substantially different from our own, for the function of the myth is not to change reality. However, as a catalyst of human understanding, myths could provide a means for us to accept the strengths of our cities as they exist, and at the same time encourage us to adapt them to new uses in ways that are consistent with our needs, without being either blatantly nihilistic or unduly nostalgic.

1. Paul Goldberger, "Pride of Place" series, episode entitled "The Places Within"
2. Mark Girouard, *Cities and People*, Yale University Press, 1985, page 320.
3. Le Corbusier, *Concerning Town Planning*, translated by Clive Entwistle, Yale University Press, 1948, page 59.