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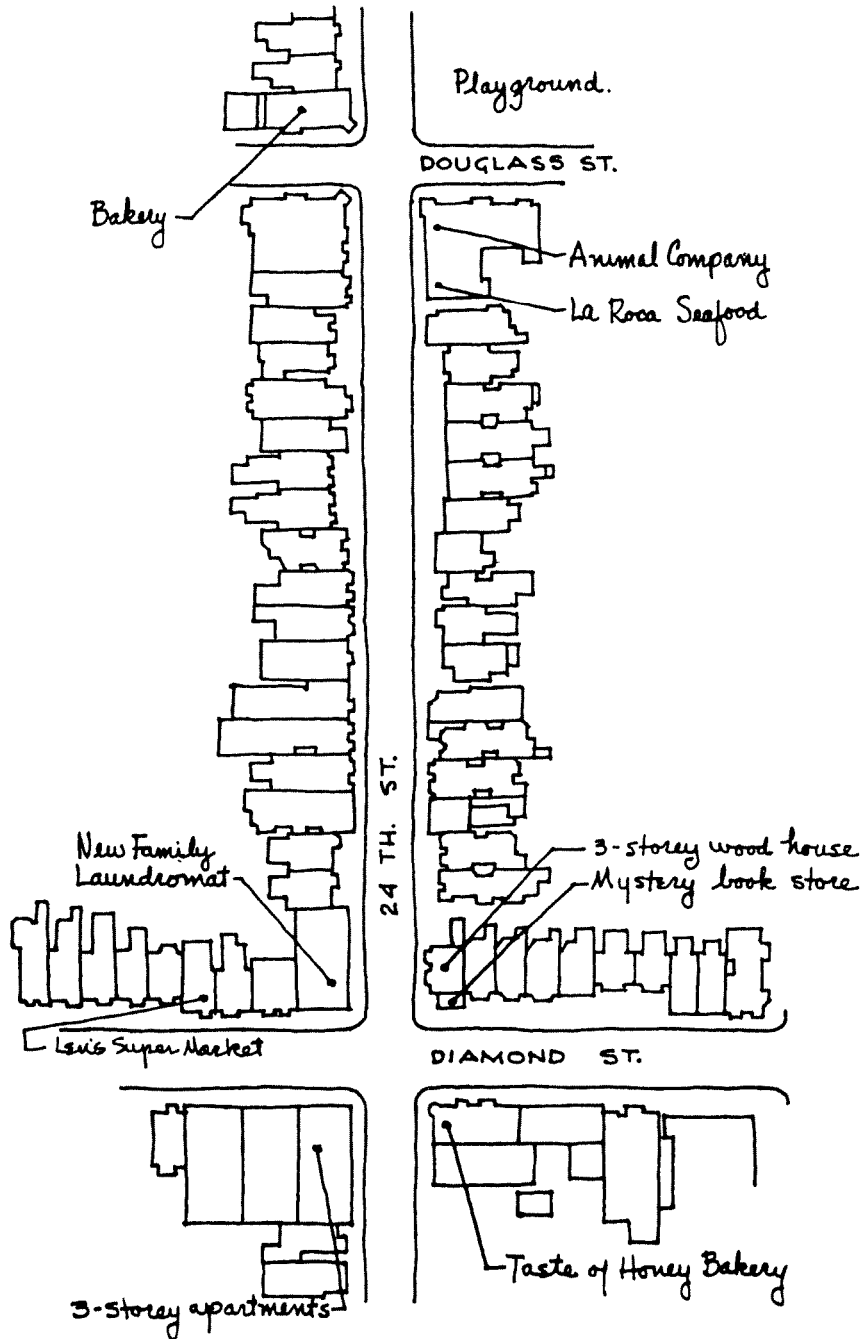
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Looking at Cities

Allan B. Jacobs



You can tell a lot about a city by looking. Consider, briefly, what you can see along a few neighborhood streets, and what it might tell you.

There is a three-story wood house, a not very fresh yellow ochre in color, at the northwest corner of Diamond Street and 24th Street in San Francisco.¹ Though clearly not one of San Francisco's Victorians, there is a Victorian sense to some of the details. Maybe it is a house of the turn of the century or of the teens. Stairs climb to a small second-level porch, off of which are two doors. There are also two house numbers, 748 and 750, so there are probably two dwelling units. The main body of the house is set back from one street. But at the street, in a small construction that looks as though it were added to the original building, is a store: the San Francisco Mystery Book Store. Over the store windows some of the paint is missing where earlier signs have been removed, leaving distinct shapes. The shapes are reminiscent of familiar signs: Did Meadow Gold dairy products have signs like this? Perhaps this was a corner mom and pop grocery store before the bookstore opened.

The windows on the top floor have doublehung woodframe sashes, the upper half of which are divided into three panes. They are probably original. The second floor windows are newer, aluminum casements. Pockmarks in the aluminum suggest that they have been there for a while.

Something about that yellow ochre paint attracts our attention. On a

closer look we can see that the paint is very thick and has some kind of grit in it: the kind of paint surface we have seen and heard advertised by large material companies. The ads promise that this new paint is 20 times thicker than ordinary paint; will last a long, long time, eliminating the need for costly, regular painting; that it will seal leaks; that it is self-cleaning; that it will not crack; that it is guaranteed; and that favorable credit terms are available. The ads are similar to those once associated with asbestos shingles, perma stone, and aluminum siding. But there *are* cracks and it *is* peeling. Why, we ask ourselves, do people choose those materials? They may think that the new paint or siding is better than the old. The new may be aesthetically more pleasing to the owner. Or perhaps the prospect of not having to shell out all that money for a new coat of paint every five-or-so years is what appeals. Then, too, small, local house painting companies require payment in cash; cash may be in short supply and payments on time may be both appealing and negotiable. But there are cracks now. Where are the people who made the guarantee? What happens to the water that gets into the cracks? We think about things like that and look north at the adjoining houses on Diamond Street.

The next four houses are similar and of no familiar style; then there are two small Victorians, another two in a style similar to the four, then a large Italianate Victorian at the corner. This array suggests that development occurred over time,

perhaps from before the turn of the century to the teens, and was carried out by many small developers.

Changes to the original structures are readily apparent. Asbestos siding on one required the removal of original details. Garages were added to two houses. Two have been painted recently. All the roofing looks good—the shingles lie flat. Single light meters, doorbells, mailboxes, and house numbers indicate that the first four houses are single-family dwellings.

House fronts measure 25 feet wide and sides pace off to about 33 feet. That is not very large: 825 square feet for two floors. Housing for “working class,” “blue collar,” middle- or lower-income families?

Back at the southwest corner of the intersection is the New Family Laundromat. An earlier sign reveals that the Diamond Bakery once used the store. Above, through a second floor window of this two-story, stucco, simple building, a white-haired man who looks to be in his sixties rises and turns off a television set. Next to the laundromat are two two-story buildings that once had stores in them. White curtains and blinds behind the large shop windows suggest people in residence. Len’s Super Market, in the first floor of the next house, looks like a classic mom and pop grocery.

There are people at the street intersection. Most of them are women and men in their late fifties or sixties. A lot of gray or white hair is in evidence. Some wait at a bus stop

with small packages. These people are more functionally than stylishly dressed: straight wool coats with simple collars, double-knit slacks in dark colors, and one or two hats. One woman wears a rust-colored coat and fairly bright red pants.

Four or five girls go in and out of the store at a third corner: Taste of Honey—A Natural Bakery (good smells, an arty letter style to the sign). Next to the bakery a new store, Auntie Pasta, promises to open soon.

When buses go by it is very noisy. There is a small boy on a low-rider plastic tricycle. With the one exception of an Asian girl, all of the people are white.

The fourth corner is taken up by a three-story multifamily residential building: mostly stucco, some shingles for decoration, dark aluminum casement windows, large garage doors facing the street, similar white drapes in all windows—a building of the 1970s.

Quickly now, walking west on 24th Street for one block, there are many, many houses—as many as 18 on one side of the street—on 25-foot lots. Very few are alike: one-, two-, and three-story; many different architectural styles; ages that could range from the turn of the century to the 1950s; wood, stucco, and even some brick. Most buildings have one or two units. One house with two entry doors has four recently added mailboxes. Only once are there as many as three houses alike in a row. The diversity continues: some windows clean and



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2 Diversity at 24th and Diamond Streets in San Francisco

3 Diversity at 24th and Diamond Streets in San Francisco

others dirty; neat white curtains in one house followed by a makeshift window covering, perhaps intended to be a tablecloth; some safety devices at doors and windows. One house has relatively new wall shingles. The joinery is ragged, especially at the window frames. The work looks as though it was done by the owner, to improve the house. There are other houses where earlier Victorian detail was replaced with stucco. Two or three houses were painted recently. One of them is for sale.

A look behind the houses indicates large yards. There is much more space here than was suggested by the street scene alone. People could and do grow fruit trees here. People must have spent time in the yards and may still.

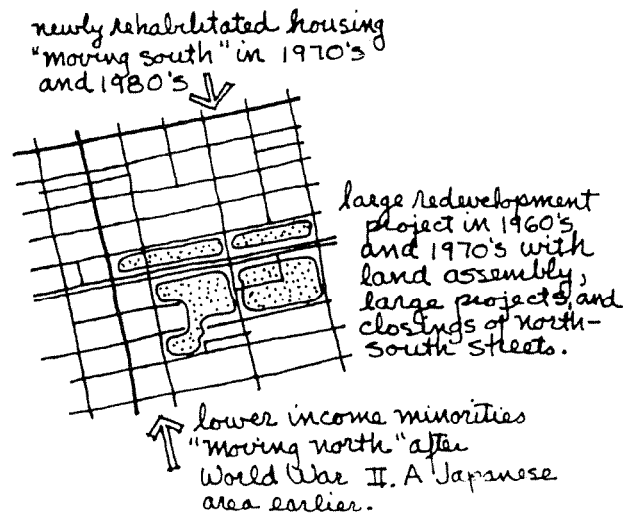
A good place to end this trip is at the Noe Valley Play Area at the next corner. The play equipment, planting, tiles, and concrete work are relatively new; but the one tree and a storage and toilet building are old. The net on the tennis court is metal screening and the surrounding fence does not go completely around the court. Some children are in one corner of the park with a teacher.

We *saw* a great deal in that short walk, more than we could put down in these few pages. And we were able to learn something new about the area. For example, it seems reasonable to conclude that it started to be developed somewhat before the turn of the century and that development occurred over a long period and was done by many

small-scale builders who built only a few houses at a time. The houses are not large, suggesting middle- or lower-middle income families. Single-family units suggest that owners lived in them, and one suspects that the owners of the two-unit and the few multifamily buildings also lived in and maintained them. They were probably families with children. If they were blue-collar workers they could have worked in the industrial areas to the east, at the end of 24th Street, or south of the downtown area—areas that are known to us. Public transit to those areas is good now and would have been then. Office workers would have worked downtown. The older people we saw on the street may not be the original owners and tenants but have been there for a long time.

A quiet neighborhood is suggested, one where people have tried to “keep up,” maintaining their properties, and making modest improvements to them. No major physical condition problems are evident.

There are signs of change, past and present. There are a few signs of young people with modest incomes, the sort of flower children associated with the late 1960s and with environmental movements. Younger people continue to move in. Some are “upgrading” the properties. There are new, trendy stores. Young, professional, downtown-oriented people may be replacing lower-income people. It is the kind of area where “gentrification” might be an issue. Some of the young people now have children. It seems a mixed area and change, so



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far, may have been slow. In a city with an office-oriented economy we will expect more young business professionals to seek this area. People from the large homosexual community nearby would also gravitate here and may have already. The old will die or leave, but slowly.

So, you can tell a lot about a city or neighborhood just by looking: something of its history, when it was built, for whom, what physical, social and economic changes have taken place, who lives there now, major issues and problems that may exist, and whether the area is vulnerable to rapid changes. You cannot tell all that you might like to, but you can tell a lot. Field observation—looking—should be an important systematic, diagnostic tool for professionals and others who design and plan urban environments, as important as other accepted research methods. That is what this article is about: careful looking.

Most people do not look at cities or neighborhoods or even a city block the way we have just looked at 24th Street—but they do look. Indeed, people who live in urban environments, including urban planners, architects, landscape architects, developers, bankers, and other professionals, take cues from the physical environment every day, aware or unaware as the case may be. The messages they receive are often the basis for actions. In some cases, they may become involved in massive physical change to a neighborhood, with all manner of resulting social consequences, based

on their responses to what they see. This is one reason why many urban planners, though they may honor the practice of a field trip or reconnaissance survey, may not consciously use what they see. They prefer what are presumably statistically rigorous and documentable methods of research and analysis about urban issues and change. They are understandably fearful of mis-seeing and misinterpreting because of the values they bring with them.

We have been cautioned rightly at every turn on this matter of trusting what we see, notably by environmental psychologists. Not only are we advised that the environment frequently operates below our level of awareness, at the same time, environments provide more information than can be processed. What do we miss? And, much as we might like, we cannot stand apart from the environment; we can only participate.² Many, many studies advise us that we cannot observe with objectivity.

What to do? We cannot say to people, “Don’t take messages from what you see because you may be influenced too much by the biases you bring with you to the situation and will act inappropriately.” That would be like asking people to go around blind. People *will* look, they *will* see, and they *will* respond; most important perhaps professionals will also. That being the case, they ought to do it well.

Looking at and taking messages from urban environments should be as important a research and

analytic method as any other that we choose to use, one used in concert with others both as a discrete research act and as a constant part of our professional and personal lives. Certainly, too, looking and interpreting is fun for those who are enthralled with cities as wonderful, exciting places in which to grow and do what we do.

In our striving to “do it well,” young colleagues and I have, over the past six years or so, tried to come to grips with what you can and cannot tell about the history, evolution, and present status of urban areas by looking. Our studies have included a review of what others have done in this field, investigations of individual clues to see what they might mean in different situations, and interviews with urban planners, educators, doctors, developers, and architects.

Most important, we devised a series of case study experiments in neighborhoods of large urban areas to see how much we really could tell about an area, just by looking. Walking field trips were carried out by one to three observers in urban areas that were completely unfamiliar to them. A staff person in a local planning agency had selected an area that could be walked in about three hours, was well known to people in the agency or community, and for which data were available. The field observers were given only a street map on which the area they were to observe was delineated. Three hours were spent in the area observing and interpreting what was seen.

At the end of the walk the observers spent an hour mulling over what had been seen and thinking about what it might mean. They then presented a general analysis of the area's history, evolution, and present status, including issues and problems, to people supposedly knowledgeable about the area.

Comparing their conclusions to both the staff member's knowledge of the area and to other available data, the field observers could assess the extent to which they were correct in their diagnoses. They could also determine which physical clues were most revealing and reliable, how clues were combined to draw conclusions, the function of personal knowledge and of knowing urban histories, and some of the limitations and pitfalls of the method. They could, as well, review the process that was used and observe how the eye-mind relationship works in the field.

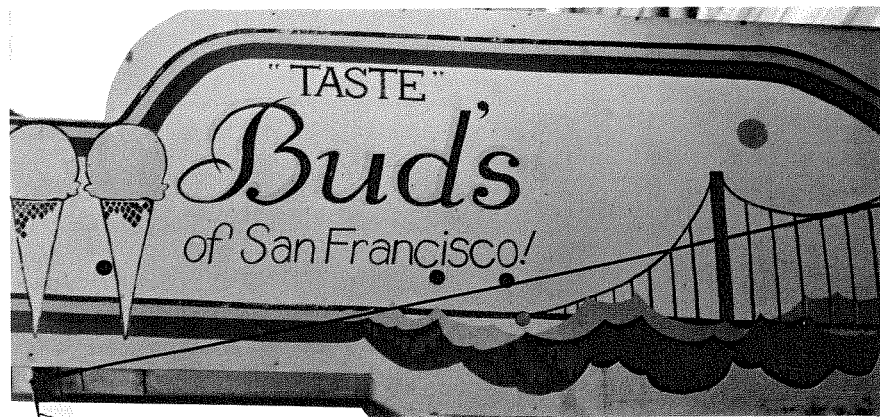
That is the method used with nine cases in the United States and Canada and four in Italy,¹ which may be likened to larger and more complete versions of the Diamond and 24th Street description that opened this article. In every case we have been able to gain a reasonable understanding of an area's past and present states, usually to the surprise of local planners and residents. Moreover, it has been possible to teach relatively inexperienced people how to take messages from what they see, particularly about physical and socioeconomic changes that are taking place, messages that do not turn up through other research methods.



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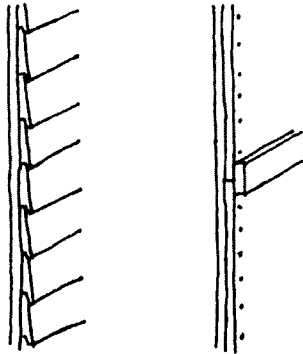
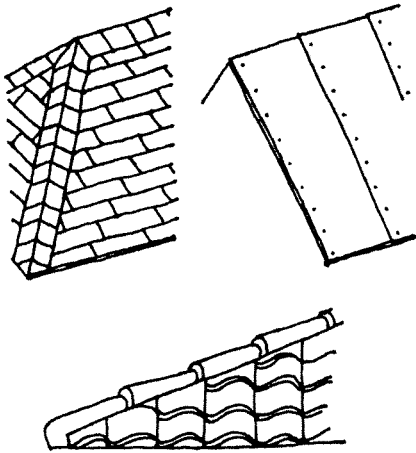


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5, 6, 7 Details that are clues to understanding an urban area



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If you spend enough time looking at urban environments, questioning what you can tell about the physical and socioeconomic dynamics of an area of city, a number of physical indicators—clues—emerge as most helpful. For the most part, they are what one might expect: buildings (and units within them), particularly their architectural styles, age, size, quality of materials, maintenance, and condition; land uses; landscape material, design, and maintenance; special purpose buildings; peoples; an almost endless number of public and private details—mailboxes, doorbells, grilles, signs, furniture, meters, wires—that we call artifacts; commercial areas; street patterns and block and lot sizes; streets, walks, trees, and curbs; topography and other natural factors. Taken alone, any one clue might mean very little. A single family house is, by itself, not much more than a single family house. An older white man is an older white man. It is the combination of clues, the patterns, and the breaks in patterns that are most useful in gaining an understanding of the dynamics of an area. But individual clues offer a beginning.

Central to the method of inquiry and diagnosis is the combination of observing those “things” that make up the physical environment and a constant questioning of “why” and “what.” Why does a particular thing such as a sign limiting parking to certain hours during certain months of the year exist? Why is a law office located in an old Victorian house on the fringe of downtown? What might a new

residential building in an older area mean? What might have been the reason for a concentration of board and care homes? What might a large number of older people with fewer younger people in newly rehabilitated housing suggest for the future? All the diagnosis, including the continuous formulation and reformulation of hypotheses about an area, is dependent upon this constant questioning related to what was observed.

Presumably, urban planners are concerned with change: to guide it, to encourage it, to stop it, or to document it in order to anticipate and possibly to act on its consequences. Observation can help do this as much as other research methods can and often much faster. A set of relatively straightforward questions carried in the back of the observer’s consciousness seems to do the trick: Are there patterns and, if so, what are they? Do the patterns fit with expected patterns and processes of urban development for the type of area being observed? Are there new elements that break the older patterns? What is different? Does the rate of change seem fast or slow? What might the new elements suggest about why change is taking place? Are the changes deviations from what one might expect given the location? Are there changes from original quality or from existing conditions that suggest vulnerability to future changes? Is there a discernible direction of change? Do the observed changes in the area in question suggest anything for the larger urban area? What kinds of additional information would help

8 The qualities of building materials are different and visible

answer the questions raised by what is seen?

The suggested location of these kinds of questions toward the back of an observer's consciousness is purposeful. A significant potential problem with the kind of visual diagnosis that is being discussed is that of looking too hard for problems and for change. "If you look hard enough you will find." Maybe the observer will find something that is not there.

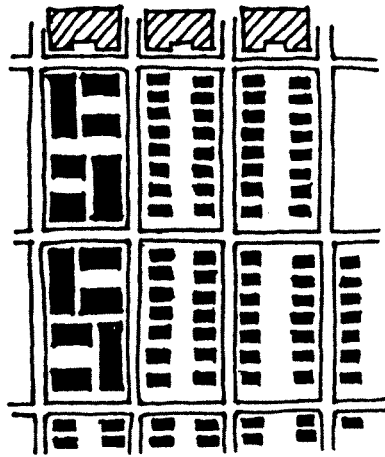
Ultimately, we return to a continuous interactive process of looking and questioning. For those concerned with urban change and with planned responses to it, as well as with what urban areas could be, looking at the place and asking the questions that help identify change are the starting points.

Conclusion

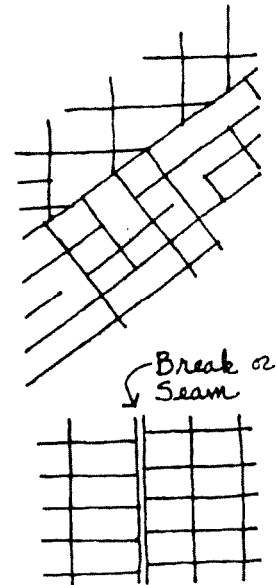
We take messages from urban environments by looking and we act upon those messages to maintain or to change or to create places that seem appropriate responses to urban problems and opportunities. I do not think we have been aware of the extent to which we make use of what we see in our work. Many professionals and lay people associated with urban matters shy away from deliberately using personal, visually gained experience as one basis for reasonable conclusions and actions. The knowledge gained from looking seems to them somehow too personal, too open to question, too "soft," or nonquantifiable and, thus, too chancy to be used in serious company.



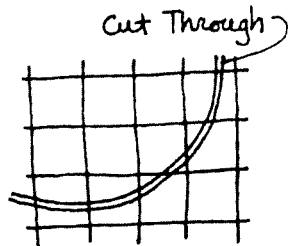
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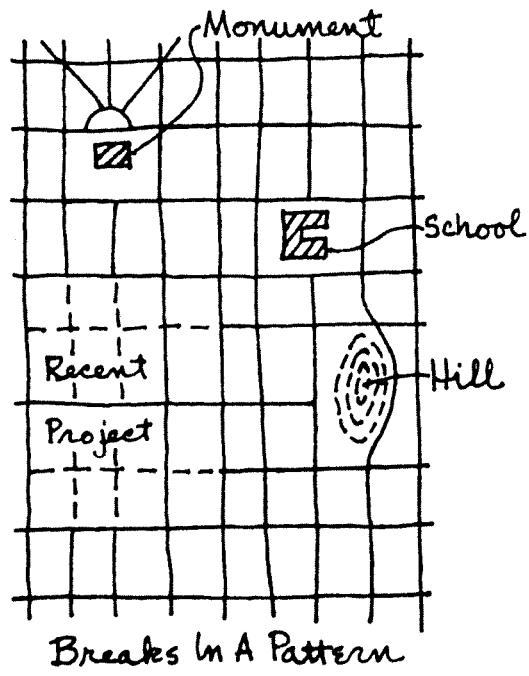
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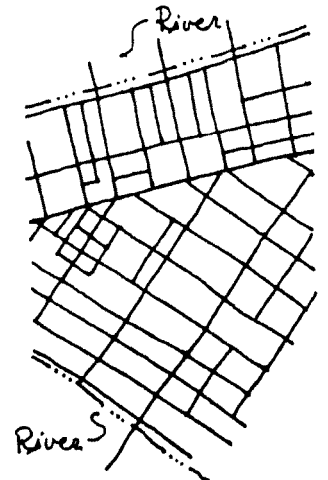
Break or Seam



Cut Through



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River S

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In avoiding or underusing what can be seen, we simply fail to take advantage of an important, available, inexpensive tool. It is important to get involved with what we see, to learn from the observed urban environment and to use what we learn to help answer questions of concern and to achieve better places for people to live in concert with one another and with the land. Urban planners should employ observation as an analytic and decision-making tool more consciously and regularly than we have done. If conscious, systematic observation, as opposed to unconscious and haphazard visual experiencing, does nothing more than to help avoid unfortunate decisions and actions that affect peoples' lives, it will have served well. We think it can do much more than that.

Seeing people and their environment is a different matter than gaining knowledge secondhand. It underlines the difference between reality and abstraction. Policies and actions, we suggest, are more cautiously arrived at when images of real places and actual people's faces are associated with the decisions.

Notes

- 1 William H. Ittelson et al., *An Introduction to Environmental Psychology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), p. 13.
- 2 William H. Ittelson, *Environment and Cognition* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), pp. 13–15.
- 3 The case studies are: East Palo Alto and Naglee Park in San Jose, CA; East Walnut Hills in Cincinnati, OH; Prescott and South Prescott in Oakland, Modesto, and North Sacramento, CA; the Fan District of Richmond, VA; an area in Charlottesville, VA; a Calgary neighborhood; two areas in Rome; a section in Milan; and one in Bologna. The first four case studies have been published as working papers by the Institute of Regional and Urban Development, University of California, Berkeley.