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Counterpoint: Transect Transgressions

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The rural-to-urban transect may be a good ordering device and may serve as a good explanation for the morphology of some cities, but it falls short describing the formal symbolism and development of the true traditional city—the one built by human volition and affected by climate, culture and topography. Despite efforts to reduce every culture of the world to a single ethnocentric episode, the proponents of the “transect” have yet to realize that the complexity of the city is resilient. It cannot be demoted to a deceptive intellectual exercise with universal or pragmatic pretenses. To think in such reductive terms can only lead to the replacement of the inefficiencies of one system with the promises of another, with ultimately similar consequences.

In traditional urbanism, there is no such a thing as a natural law; incremental development, with its eccentricities, appropriateness, and morphological disobediences is “The Law.” The paradox is that, the model from which the transect-based theory receives its mimetic inspiration and critical power is also becoming its ultimate transgression.

Against Universal Types

At a point when the neo-morphological project of the modernist period is in clear defeat, the rural-to-urban transect is emerging as a pretentious design standard carrying similar yet devastating cultural consequences. Unchecked and unchallenged, its multinational application may eradicate the beauty of places shaped by local cultures, whiten the formal expression of the various world regions, and downgrade the accumulated urban design richness of the last few thousand years.

The idea of one single model based on an ecological transect—which proponents may consider a mischaracterization—is very seductive, but it is also the kind of American pragmatism where predetermined cultural proprieties, ethnocentricity, self-control, transportation engineering, zoning, and land use economics are the controlling agents of a design empire. How many of our most beloved traditional cities would pass, with academic rigor, this pseudo-scientific test?

At the Graduate Program in Suburb and Town Design of the University of Miami, the documentation of traditional cities is a fundamental introductory assignment. The systematic investigation of the incremental city (the traditional/living city) allows domestic and foreign students to increase their awareness of design commonalities and eccentricities. Most importantly, it also helps them develop an acute professional lexicon.

Over the years what this effort has shown is that the study of traditional cities and towns reveals corollaries, but



also contradictions, to transect theory and its explanation of the city. For students from Shanghai, New Delhi, Al-Madinah, Cartagena, Ibiza, Qatar, Lima, Kuwait, etc.—or, even for students from small American cities like Woodstock, Santa Fe, or Williamsburg—the transect is an exotic idea which is valued more for its methodological mannerisms than for its accepted principles.

With a great degree of certainty, design studios at our program have allowed us to see how the incremental city cannot be reduced to the simplicity of the rural-to-urban transect. Furthermore, the living city does everything possible to enrich its own culture, annihilate homogeneity, defy economic descriptions of its geographic territories, and resist the production of undifferentiated public spaces. The traditional city breaks its formal structure into a vast mosaic of small and different subcultures, each with its own spatial territory, and each with its own distinct lifestyle.

To complicate matters even more, these cities present little recognizable structure. The living city offers a combination of land uses and densities which are more or less rambling and incoherent. The high-density areas, potentially capable of supporting high intensity, are too widely spread; the low-density areas, capable of supporting quiet and silence, are also diffusely speckled. The formal result contains neither an intensive center nor a place of absolute peace, but a harmonious collage of both—a collage that might just as easily be achieved through historic evolution and/or traditional experience (e.g., Muslim cities), foundational design rules (e.g., Law of the Indies), or marketing and contractual hierarchies (e.g., medieval cities).



A Folio of Examples

Three examples may bring light back to this argument. First, in Latin American cities a reversed transect may in fact describe traditional city form—with large residential lots occupying the city center (lots which were appropriated by the founding fathers) and small lots at the periphery (given to lower-rank officials). This is a tradition still present in the location of shanty towns surrounding capital cities like Bogota, Guatemala City, El Salvador, Quito, Caracas, etc.

Second, in Muslim cities, the concept of the neighborhood is largely absent, replaced as a basic urban unit by the enclosed family/clan cell. Such a diffuse ordering principle is one of the most evident transgressions of the pyramidal distribution of land intensity advocated in the transect. In fact, no transect-like rules may be found in cities like Muscat, Aleppo, Fez, Baghdad, or Sana'a. And even American cities like Woodstock, Santa Fe, and some originally French towns along the lower Mississippi—or even Williamsburg—defy the hierarchical classification of the transect.

This phenomenon has been widely investigated in books by Tom Brennan, Terence Lee, and Christopher Alexander.¹ In fact, all these scholars agree a center should lie along the boundaries of a neighborhood; or, to put it more succinctly, *the center of a community is usually off-center*. A neighborhood may more normally take the shape of a semicircle (or an oval) with a radius of approximately 1,300 feet, rather than a perfect quarter-mile circle, as advocated by New Urbanist theories.

In addition, research shows that these eccentric nubs are not pure, but bulge into the community and form a horse-

shoe-like shape along the boundaries and toward the side of its geographic center. Christopher Alexander described this as: "...a beautiful gradient of overlapping imbricated horseshoes, not unlike the scales of a fish."²

The Incremental City

The morphology of the city and its housing gradients vary from culture to culture, from place to place, and in accordance with the geography, the climate, and the geometry of their location. The morphological description of the city cannot and shall not be reduced to a standard genre, unique law, or standardized typology. The incremental city, with its eccentricities and morphological disobediences, must regain its original significance as the absolute model and the only law. Please, allow us to preserve its complexity.

Notes

1. Tom Brennan, *Midland City: Wolverhampton Social and Industrial Survey* (London: Dobson Press, 1948); Terence Lee, "Perceived Distance as a Function of Direction in the City," *Environment and Behavior*, June 1970, pp. 40-51; and Christopher Alexander et al., *The Pattern Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Other useful studies are provided in John Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1980); and the Seaside Institute (Todd Bressi, ed.), *The Seaside Debates: A Critique of the New Urbanism* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2002).
2. Alexander et al., *The Pattern Language*, p.145.

Above: The accommodations made in traditional cities would defy coding via a transect. Left to right: Ibiza, Spain; Nizwa, Oman; Prague. Photos by author.