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## Places

### Title

The Transect [To Rally Discussion]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/87m6k1nd>

### Journal

Places, 18(2)

### ISSN

0731-0455

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### Publication Date

2006-06-15

Peer reviewed

# The Transect

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I was pleased to read the “transect” discussion in the spring edition of *Places*, and was moved to consider its positive and negative aspects to the practice of urban design. I found the piece interesting but very different from our experience in the SOM-San Francisco urban design studio in both international and North American contexts.

In their theme article for the issue, Charles Bohl and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk write:

*Generally, the theory is represented graphically through a simplified typology of “transect zones.” The transect most widely used by New Urbanists divides the human environment into six such zones, from very rural, to sub-urban, to urban.... What distinguishes the physical character of each of these “immersive” settings is the manner in which everything—e.g., building types, heights and setbacks; open spaces; the character of streets, alleys and passages; the design of street lighting, landscaping, trees, and street furniture—reinforces a certain overall physical character of place.*

This wish to define a desired physical character for each transect zone implies that cities are static and specific like architecture. Our experience is quite different: city form is constantly changing. Specifically, cities grow through resident births and immigration, and they decline following job loss and out-migration.

We would agree that compatibility among physical elements is important, but compatibility should not mean replication. Instead, it should establish the limits of a range of visual tolerances that are nondisruptive to the visual character of a particular place.

Most importantly, our responsibility as designers and planners should be to make all cities anticipate and be adaptable to population change. Rather than focusing on specific prescriptions for physical compatibility, a more necessary and useful response is to develop tools to manage and guide population change to higher levels of sustainability and livability.

The theme article also presents the transect concept as a tool to help define a regional framework for planning by encompassing “a more complete range of human settlement types, addressing relationships between urban, suburban and rural areas, and attempting to define the basic physical characteristics that differentiate them.” In our experience, this is not the principal regional planning problem. Across much of the world, the regional problem is not how settlement looks, but where it locates. The planning tools that are really needed are ones that help protect valuable, irreplaceable land, promote air and water quality, and conserve energy.

Today and in the future, all development forces conspire to make cities look the same. To minimize risk, developers copy existing, successful projects. The same technology and building materials are used worldwide. In the interest of simplifying building conditions, mountains are leveled, valleys are filled, and waterways are channelized. Language and culture are in similar distress, and eventually all cities may end up looking and feeling alike.

To counter such forces of homogenization, it seems a positive framework for settlement and development should use every means possible to encourage the unique identity of particular places. But this purpose seems at odds with a transect concept which

seeks to regulate physical character. This is not to argue against the use of regulation, but to suggest that the quest for compatibility should not be the logical beginning point when imagining future cities or rebuilding existing ones.

In his article “Counterpoint: Transect Transgressions,” Jaime Correa observes “in traditional urbanism, there is no such thing as a natural law; incremental development, with its eccentricities, appropriateness, and morphological disobediences is ‘The Law.’” This observation is largely consistent with our own position as urban design consultants.

As we have studied cities worldwide, we have come to realize that the most memorable reflect their unique natural features, climate, culture, and built environments. Their character may, or may not, be related to the descending scale of density from urban to rural that defines the transect concept. For example, the built environment of Hong Kong is beautifully framed by mountains and water. But buildings are located on so small a land area that the minimum residential building height is 40 floors. Only 23 single-family homes remain in a city of 8 million people.

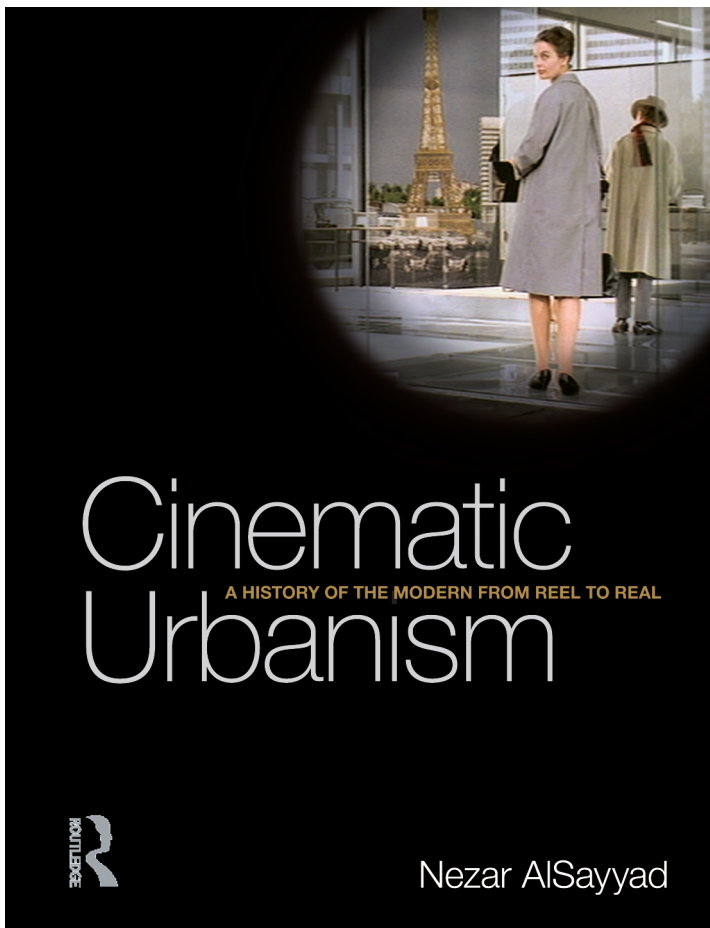
In San Francisco local conditions lead to a different outcome. Tall buildings are located on hilltops and ridgelines to promote views and to avoid blocking the views of others. Downtown San Francisco is conceived as a manmade hill, and the skyline itself is a matter of public policy and design. It is a cold city, and access to the sun in public parks is protected, tree-created shadow is not always desired, and the wind is buffered where possible.

These conditions contrast markedly with those in Isfahan, Iran, a desert city centered on a mag-

nificent 1,500-by-450-foot plaza, or “Maydan,” surrounded by 40-foot-high walls. This open space is enormous, and the height of the surrounding buildings is unusually low; but together they create a place for cool nighttime strolling, away from walls that re-radiate the day’s heat. Like these few examples, all memorable cities derive their uniqueness from some combination of the expressions of culture, climate, and natural and manmade features.

We have high regard for the success of the New Urbanism in creating new models for suburbia that are both denser and more livable than the norm. The transect concept is proposed to further this effort through additional rules and regulations for its multiple districts in order to distinguish between them. However, we find this focus frustrating because for many years, our best urban design talent has focused on making better suburbs. This has been helpful, but

from our point of view, it also emphasizes the continued taking of rural land to serve population growth. What is missing in our schools and practices are new visions for creating a highly desirable, much-higher-density, inner-city neighborhood. We need more choices.



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