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THE SEARCH FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH URBAN DESIGN: THE CASE OF BERKELEY

Francis Violich

"Years before I met Geddes in person, he taught me how to take in the life of cities . . . , both in time and in space: not as a mere spectator or as a collector of statistics . . . but . . . as a citizen and a worker, participating in the total life of a community, past, present and prospective."

Lewis Mumford.[1]

Paths Toward Meaning in the Environment

Vernacular Urban Places Today?

The often heterogeneous quality of our built environment reflects diverse identities in our society. Conflicts among values held by segments of the urban populace stand apparent in our towns and cities. My basic interest in this paper lies in evolving a basis for interpreting meaning in urban places and for developing a more equitable and socially fulfilling style of environmental design. At the core of this goal lies the task of understanding the sources of identity in environments of differing kinds and scales on the part of a broad cross section of users.

My concern is not only with revealing the expression of social values in already built environments, but with the role of such understanding in bringing forth latent and as yet unexpressed cultural potentials of urban places. A vast psychological distance lies between the users of these places and the decision-makers of urban form -- especially, the economic, technical and political elites of our time. In contrast it was an interdependence of users and builders that gave the vernacular environments of earlier times their ring of human quality. To reduce this gap in our times the question must be asked: first, what is the intrinsic quality of any given urban place that distinguishes it clearly from any other place? And secondly, what is it in the properties of the place that document vernacular cultural sources?

In pursuit of an answer, this paper draws on experiential research done in Dalmatian Coastal towns in Yugoslavia built incrementally[2] -- largely without planning -- and ongoing experience with the urban planning process in Berkeley. The problem studied has been two-fold: in the case of the Dalmatian towns, how to reveal inherent qualities of established urban places that lead to making specific their uniqueness, sense of place and identity through their use by residents and visitors. In the case of Berkeley, the contemporary task is how to build into new places or

those undergoing change, an authentic sense of identity for users that can serve to offset the anonymous influences of modern building technology, rampant economic forces and vastly increased scale.

Thematic Plans to Follow

Five sequential themes drawn from firsthand experience in Dalmatia and in Berkeley will serve as guiding paths to follow throughout the paper. These are: *Identity, Experience, Intuition, Connectedness,* and *Involvement.*

• *Identity* as a major driving-force in our ego-oriented, individualistic and hetero-cultural society provides the take off point. In homogeneous cultures, patterns of values and behavior provide established ways of living, well-related to environmental form. Along with this comes a sense of security and belonging; there is no need to seek an external image of "self" -- identified by Cooper-Marcus -- in the house, the street and the city.[3] In contrast, today with great individual opportunities for regional mobility, physical and cultural environments can be chosen as diverse ways of expressing the self. The city offers the ultimate source in the quest for identity.

• *Experience* plays a fundamental role both in revealing and in establishing a sense of identity with a place. Bernd Jager holds that our first identity stems from *The Body,* our initial source of environmental experience from which we learn and develop sets of values. As we mature this unfolds into *The House;* in our choices of style and furnishings we can first externalize values, even though unaware of the process. As we extend our range of experience to *The Street, The Neighborhood* and *The City,* we extend our identity with (or alienation from) urban places.[4]

The further we move from House to Neighborhood and to City, the more we can increase our experiences; but, we also increase the choices to be made among competing environments and their inherent values. While direct experience with using and shaping environments through the centuries -- whether agricultural, village or urban -- has been the key to moving civilization along; today our chances for direct experience with and control over our environments beyond the Body and the House are remote. Our involvement must be deliberately sought through social, economic and political channels.

• *Intuition* follows as a reliable and creative result of direct experience with environments and a source of interpretation of their meaning and usefulness. Intuitive judgment has been a major source of architectural and urban design throughout history. Today, in much of our environmental and behavioral research, such responses are rejected in favor of factual, descriptive and quantifiable information. For qualitative material, the "objective" urban design analyst turns to responses from samples of users,

rather than to his own experienced senses. In aesthetic terms we have been an-aesthetized. We have been conditioned through the influence of social science methods to restrain intuitive responses and interpretation when we attempt to reveal the uniqueness of places and the basis for our identity with them. I, too, found it difficult to break with this conditioning in my "urban reading" of the Dalmatian towns, though eventually my intuitive responses proved to be the key to small insights that accumulated to provide a full view of the relationship of spatial structures to environmental quality.

• *Connectedness* becomes an overriding theme in this search for meaning: linkages of places with people, the present with the past, and localities with regions. Through this awareness we reaffirm the essentially ecological nature of our environments; we discover the connection between environments and one's "inner self" and, more intimately, the way we feel about a given place. We develop a qualitative sense of awareness of the natural and built environments and of how tightly we are fixed to them.

Reading Martin Heidegger during the design process nurtures this sense of our dependence on the environment. In his "Origins of a Work of Art" and in "Dwelling, Building, and Thinking", he shows how connected we are to Earth and to Sky in a vertical sense. Gravity holds our feet to Earth and our heads point to the dome of the Sky.[5] The asphalt of streets and the floors of skyscrapers replace the Earth and the smog of cities, the ceilings of offices, the Sky. Our eyes provide our horizontal attachment to objects around us and provide us with the ability to seek familiarity and security and to avoid alienation and rejection. As our feet gravitate to the earth, our eyes can lead us toward those people and places that fulfill the need for belonging; along paths of our own choice and making we move in the vertical position with our bodies, we have the built-in capacity to learn to "read" places and people with our eyes and minds. We become a function of and dependent on the environment in our daily lives far more than we realize. Becoming aware of this, we hold the ability to participate deeply with the environment in the aesthetic sense and thus enrich our lives.

• *Involvement* becomes the final step along this sequence of reasoning. Maximizing this sense of connectedness to the environment, users themselves -- viewed now as participants in environment formation -- can be seen as important sources of linkages to the meaning of place. This awareness inevitably brings those most attached to a particular environment to seek out direct involvement in the planning of urban places, be it a neighborhood, a park, a community or even a city as a whole. "Belonging" to a given place -- as understood by Heidegger -- generates involvement and the seeking of a greater sense of identity on the part of those who have become sensitized to the particular quality of a place.

They become concerned with their relationship to the place. By maximizing awareness of sense of place and identity with it, we ultimately become involved in stewardship of places with a collective commitment to work toward improving their quality.

Thus, with ever-deepening experience, we generate a more meaningful source of contact with our chosen environment and therefore with the reality of our own existence on earth. We can extend this reality to the world at large and our role in it. Multiplied by the totality of residents of a place we build collective force for environmental meaning and identity to offset increasing environmental and architectural anonymity and alienation.

Three Gathering Elements

To more fully understand the potential use of these five themes, we need an environmental framework in which to apply them. Three main ingredients of the source of vernacular quality of places emerged in the course of my work on the Dalmatian towns and served in thinking through this approach to the case of Berkeley. These form a triad of determinants of environmental quality and uniqueness.[6]

● First, the nature of the *Natural Environment* and its specific geo-morphic and ecological properties. This (and the following concept) has been highly developed by Norberg-Schulz in "Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture".[7] Although this was published after I had done the Dalmatian work, the concept reinforced what I had found.

● Secondly, the nature of the *Built Environment* and the extent to which it adapts to the site through what Norberg-Schulz calls the "creative participation" of the user-builders. This concept also fitted well with my Dalmatian findings; yet, Norberg-Schulz's omission of the role of contemporary man in his case studies of Prague, Khartoum and Rome led me to add a third component and to explore its validity in Berkeley.

● The third element is the nature of the *Web of Human Transactions* that forms a non-spatial, fluid and ever-moving social force of human goings-on and doings within and dependent on the physical environment. Here, values are held and negotiations carried on in a wide range of areas of human concern. The effectiveness of this system depends on the quality and level of social organization and collective activism. This is especially true of decision-making for the natural and built environment in view of its interdependent social, economic, physical and political components. Within this web lie many non-spatial worlds: the scientist's, the business world, and -- the focus of our attention -- the environmental world.

THE CASE FOR URBAN IDENTITY IN BERKELEY

Becoming Involved

As a result of doing the basic field studies of the Dalmatian towns in 1979, interpreting and conceptualizing the experience by writing, and developing the "triad", I began to see Berkeley as a physical place with new eyes in a more real and holistic way. The five themes -- Identity, Experience, Intuition, Connectedness and Involvement -- began to unfold and step by step they laid out a path to intensive involvement in the environmental decision-making process of Berkeley.

After 30 years of living and working in it, Berkeley assumed a new identity for me. I saw it as a place of endlessly rich environmental potentials for the community and for deepening my own identity with it through a greater awareness of its properties. By extending this environmental awareness to others, I believed -- as a community planning activist -- that the community efforts of other Berkeleyans could be made more meaningful and their humanistic intentions enhanced.

As I had done in the Dalmatian towns, I asked myself the question: What is a Place? Accepting the answer that a Place is a physical space that has assumed a particular identity and set of properties both in a physical form and in human expression, I asked myself: What is the particular quality of Place in Berkeley? Unlike the spectacularly attractive Dalmatian towns, Berkeley's identity for the world at large focuses on a highly diverse population, strong in the sense of innovation and proud of being at the forefront of new ideas. Yet, in spite of a geography of distinction matching that of the Dalmatian towns, its physical built environment -- exclusive of the University Campus -- is not reflective of those qualities, nor are its policies for the future, as they were stated in the official Master Plan adopted in 1977 and neglected since.

As I had not been able to do in the Dalmatian towns, late in 1982 I took on the "reading" of the "Web of Human Transactions" to try to reveal its true relationship to formulating policies for the built environment. It soon became apparent that many Berkeleyans were unaware of the role environment plays in their identity with the place. Few would be able to draw a mental map of Berkeley, seen as a whole, or describe in coherent words its properties as a whole. Many might do this for their own limited pattern of use, the basis for identity in their own minds. Yet, given a specific planning problem arising at their doorstep -- such as the controversial "Golden Bear" office complex proposed for downtown -- they become exceedingly articulate and aware of environmental impacts on their neighborhood.
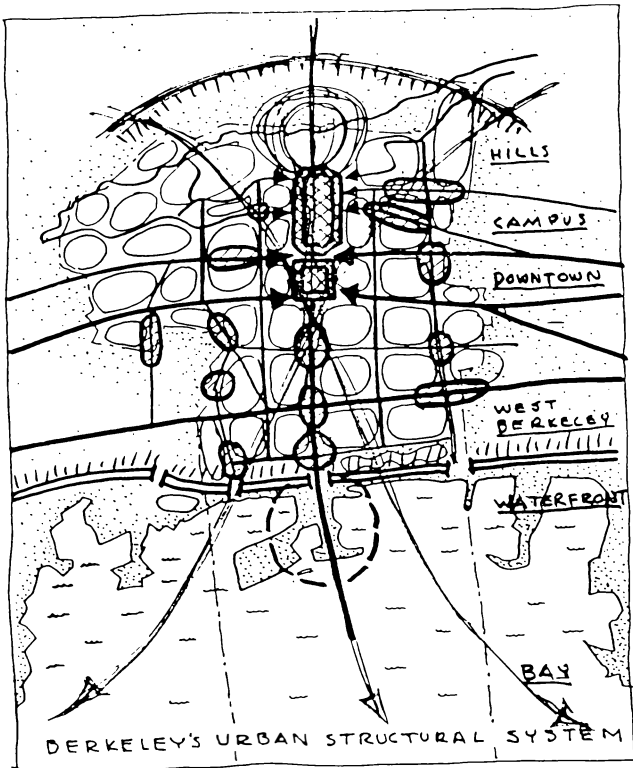
Within the illustration:

HILLS

CAMPUS

DOWNTOWN

WEST
BERKELEY

WATERFRONT

BAY

DERKELEY'S URBAN STRUCTURAL SYSTEM

Illustration 1. Berkeley's built environment is structured by its well-centered social activity nodes, its predominant transportation routes and strong neighborhood system. These create a classic formality well-suited to both the natural environment and a strong sense of urban identity. Only the Waterfront remains to fill out this superior framework.

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How to Experience Berkeley

The question is: How to experience these particular qualities of Berkeley and to thus intensify our sense of connection to its natural and built environment? Drawing on the Dalmatian experience and using the triad of determinants, I looked intuitively at Berkeley's geography in its own right and at the structural system of land uses and movement routes. I found myself carrying out "urban readings" of the Hill Area (the Eastern third of the nine square miles of land area) and the Flatlands (the Western two-thirds) while driving or walking. Mental "maps" of images of familiar parts of Berkeley ran through my mind while I was otherwise unoccupied. A state of continued, off-and-on immersion developed, not in as organized a way as in the Dalmatian studies, but as a part of daily living. This revised method proved equally as effective.

I "read" Berkeley first in its predominant East-West direction. In driving down Cedar Street, one of the last in Berkeley to be allowed to run uphill in a straight line, I became aware of the connectedness between the Hills and the so-called Flatlands with its grid pattern of streets. It became clear that the Flatlands -- long a symbol used to distinguish lower income residents from Hill dwellers -- are not really flat, since all of Berkeley slopes as a watershed in one grand ecological and unifying choreography. I also became aware of the way this connection to the Bay is broken -- both in fact, and in the mind's eye of most Berkeley residents -- by the swath of railroad lines of the 19th century and the freeway of the 20th. Both barriers resulted from public decision-making blind to the wholeness of Berkeley as a place and to the life-giving role of water at a city's edge in establishing its full identity.

I drove the often tangled skein of serpentine roads that traverse the Hills from north to south. The experiences they provoked were very different from those induced by the east-west direction. They revealed how the originally open views of the Bay have been largely hidden by houses on the down hill sides of the streets. Only the steeper downhill sides of streets preserved the Bay views. I became aware of the vast amount of urban forestation that was made possible by domestic irrigation systems. The once bare and sensuously undulating hills, were originally marked only by the green of California Live Oaks, Bays and Buckeyes in the moisture-collecting cleavages.

What had been a taken-for-granted sense of connection of Hills to Flatlands to Bay came to be perceived as a fresh reality through experiencing the topography deliberately. The Bay -- with San Francisco and Mt. Tamalpais to the West framing the Golden Gate -- became a unified vision in itself, changing in light and reflection according to the time of the day and one's viewing point in Berkeley.

The grid system of the Flatlands took on a new meaning in revealing the chronological order of architectural types, lined up in

a geometry that contrasted with the Hill neighborhoods. One could sense the dynamics of development from Victorians of the turn-of-the-century to "workingman's" bungalows of the 1920s, and to the "shoe box" apartments slipped in by the speculative building of the 1950s. In the 1950s, opportunistic builders crowded eight to ten dwelling units where there had been but one before, by offering life-long occupancy to the usually aging former owner of the dwelling. The "bungalow" identity was given a reprieve when aroused neighborhood groups and enlightened political leadership reacted by down-zoning the greater part of West Berkeley -- approximately a third of the land area of the city -- from multi-family to single-family status. One result has been an enduring strength in community participation and leadership in environmental matters in these "Flatlands" neighborhoods. This can be "read" -- as I did -- into the environment by intensively observing one block here and there -- on foot and house by house -- and reconstructing the process that brought together a compatible mix of stucco bungalows, single cottages, Victorian houses -- mansions and modest dwellings.

The threat of building the "Golden Bear" project (first proposed in 1982), a twin-tower, ten-story office and retail complex on University Avenue backed up against this type of neighborhood -- triggered my own direct involvement in support of Berkeley's neighborhood identity. Expanding my scope of "reading", I reconstructed the evolution of the most westerly part of these "Flatlands", once at the shore of the Bay itself, today known as Old Ocean View. There, neighborhood identity became such an issue, that it took six to eight years for residents to reverse a decision made in the 1970s that called for the removal of deteriorated Victorians and the installation of an industrial park. The neighborhood identity was re-established by the building of an architecturally and socially compatible housing complex that included some restoration of 19th century buildings.

Finally, I took to the Bay itself to experience the nine square miles of water surface with which few Berkeley residents identify at all. To experience this on a Sea Scout boat carrying thirty to forty citizens, along with Council and Commission members, most on the Bay for the first time, became an exhilarating common experience. Seeing the Bay from the boat and engaging in conversation about it, brought a new perception of the dominance of the Bay and its shoreline over the now distant hills and foreshortened Flatlands. Seen at water's level the ridge of Mount Tamalpais, the Golden Gate and the skyline of San Francisco became "borrowed" landscapes permanently integrated into a new perception of our own Berkeley turf.

It was only one more step to even greater intimacy with the Bay to sail in a small craft close in to Berkeley's landfilled shore at high tide. This experience took on new meaning in the company

of five or six decision-makers and civic leaders who were considering the question of what uses and development should be allowed on the 400 acres of waterfront land that forms Berkeley's undeveloped front yard. This experience, heightened by the reality of the issue at hand, removed some of the abstractions of judgment -- maps and statistics -- that typically surround environmental decisions. Our sense of identity, belonging and community involvement were all enhanced by the fact of a first-hand maritime "reading" of Berkeley.

The Experiential Triad
In this experiential perceiving of Berkeley, incrementally developed over a good part of a year, I increased my awareness of the first two items of the triad of environmental determinants -- geographic form and the related morphology of the Built Environment. More significantly, this laid the ground work for the third -- the Web of Human Transactions, that became the richer and more revealing experience.

• *The Natural Environment of Berkeley.* It became clear that Berkeley, when it stood as the home of the Ohlone Costanoan Indians, followed a truly grand design of nature: Hills tumbled down from a height of some 1500 feet at Grizzly Peak, along an axis centered on the Golden Gate; the Western-facing hills made Berkeley the only place on San Francisco Bay with a direct view to the Pacific. This axis is reinforced by several major creeks that channel the rainfall and carry it to the Bay, watering the riparian Live Oaks, Buckeyes and California Bay trees, and nurturing wildlife. This vegetation provided shelter and sustenance for Indians within a stable ecology over some two thousand years.

These Berkeley Hills offered the view first seen by a European, when Ayala entered the Bay through the Golden Gate in 1775. This axial, structured landscape has much of the classic quality of sites chosen by the Greeks and the Romans for their shrines and new cities. Indeed, calling Berkeley the "Athens of the West" stems from more than the founding of the University here. The setting has a western focus and a formal geographical symmetry centered on its East-West axis and the arms of the shoreline to the north and south of Berkeley. These reach out to frame the axis as it cuts across the Bay and out through The Golden Gate, framed by the headlands of Marin County and San Francisco.

Here is a noble joining of land and water: only on these Berkeley shores -- out of all those of the Bay as a whole -- does the force of Pacific Ocean waves wash sand on what was once Berkeley Beach. A renewed awareness of this crescent of shoreline that once stretched across most of its three-mile waterfront, before its destruction by railroad line, freeway and land fill, has today given rise to a community movement that seeks restoration of the Beach.

• *The Built Environment.* Berkeley's spatial system of land uses and transportation routes has grown naturally out of this East-West axial system. The East Bay Regional Park greenbelt flanks Grizzly Peak and the upper reaches of the Berkeley Hills. The University of California Campus is set on the foothills, an appropriate blend of open space and buildings of strong cultural symbolism. Its own axis, laid down by Bernard Maybeck and John Galen Howard, is anchored by Berkeley's best-known source of identity, the Campanile, and runs down between the two forks of Strawberry Creek to Downtown. The geographic axis in Downtown Berkeley is intersected by the main North-South axis defined by Shattuck Avenue, connecting Downtown with the Campus, at a central point in relation to the city as a whole. Land uses along the north-south axis offer limited competition to Downtown. It is this axial, centered quality that contributes a uniqueness to Berkeley in this day of centerless suburbs elsewhere (see Illustration 1).

University Avenue then picks up the axis where the Campus and Downtown join and boldly carries it to the city's waterfront. There, the Berkeley Pier, built in the 1930s to link a car ferry with San Francisco, provided Berkeley with a maritime entrance. Today -- partially rebuilt as a popular recreation site -- the unused portion of the Pier still carries the axis visually some three miles across the water to San Francisco. Once made aware of this central spine, a Berkeleyan's perception of place can continue the axis through the Golden Gate, out to the Farallon Islands and across the Pacific to China!

These two components of Berkeley as a distinctive place -- the Natural and Built Environments -- have greatly contributed to forming the values held by the residents. *They live tilted to the West with their backs turned to the continent.* They focus on the regional diversity of the Bay Area, and on the international linkages close at hand. All are set forth as cultural resources before its residents. These qualities are heightened by the innovative force of the University of California as Berkeley's physical and intellectual centerpiece. Surely it was this geographic setting that caused the new state university in the 1860s to move to this unique situation, "Exactly Opposite the Golden Gate", a term used by so many of the early residents of Berkeley to identify their new choice of residency.[8]

And now, the third component in this triad of determinants:

• *The Web of Human Transactions.* The Dalmatian studies provided a sense of environmental decision-making that continued from generation to generation, although Yugoslavia's method of organization for environmental policy-making was not clear. It was in this area that I felt a gap in understanding the origins of identity formation, and Berkeley provided a rich opportunity. This began in 1980 when I became involved in forming a grassroots neighborhood group for the purpose of guiding

restoration of fifteen-acre Codornices Park, whose native California landscape character and built facilities had badly deteriorated. To restore its indigenous identity and to bring about re-design of the developed portion, our group came before numerous city commissions and the City Council. As a result, we learned our way through the channels of socio-political decision-making. In quest of sources of identity, this intuitive experience guided me to a sense of connectedness and active involvement in creating a park advocacy group on a city-wide scale. This advocacy group worked to improve the quality of parks and especially to establish participatory management programs between the City and other neighborhood groups.

Through these activities during 1982 and 1984, I experienced intensely the network of human interactions among official and non-official groups concerned with the physical environment in general. Even though -- as a Berkeley resident of many years -- I was aware of these forces, I had never examined them first hand in this deliberate and intuitive way (see Illustration 2).

Let me attempt to make more concrete the sense of my experience. From my 1983 calendar, I totalled some 120 meetings attended, fifty of which were official and seventy of grassroots origin.[9] These ranged from six or eight persons to several hundred; the total number of persons I was in contact with came to several thousand. To gain a sense of community views, some meetings required two to three hours of listening to a wide range of speakers. No more than three minutes was allowed normally for individuals at public hearings; in others--of smaller and less official scale -- there was fuller participation. In order to break this "Three Minute Bottleneck", I wrote regularly for the local press once or twice a month and made copies of my commentaries available to public officials and community leaders. (See the appendix for a list of my contributions to the local press during this period.) These would often incorporate ideas shared with others who were clearly involved in a quest for the "collective consciousness".[10] No small part of this learning came from membership in some half-dozen community organizations.

Downtown and the Waterfront

Two critical environmental issues appeared on the horizon with which the city was ill-prepared to deal, largely because of an inadequate staff and an unclear sense of how to respond to development proposals. These were the static character of Downtown and the indecision regarding the Waterfront.

Downtown. Downtown's proximity to the Campus and its need for space triggered a study of its West side by the University of California. For many Berkeleyans, potential development threatened a loss of identity. Furthermore an imposing "Golden Bear" office complex was proposed in a location and on a scale
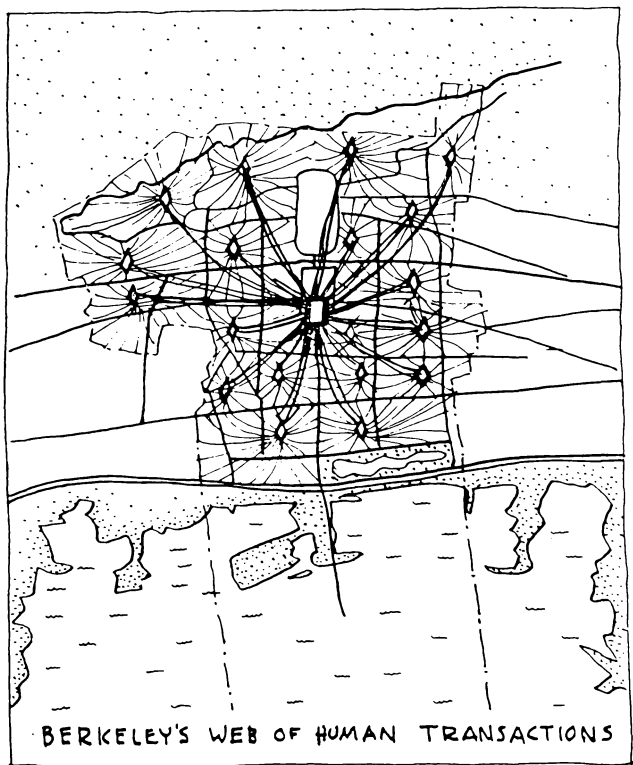
BERKELEY'S WEB OF HUMAN TRANSACTIONS

Illustration 2. Human interaction in response to development issues forms a network that -- though invisible -- serves as an essential determinant of future urban form in Berkeley. In this web, neighborhoods and community organizations together with city government provide the main points of interchange of ideas and values. Sense of place will derive from their genuine reflection in the built environment.

incompatible with Downtown and close-by neighborhoods. Other projects threatened buildings of the historic architectural character that uphold the city's social evolution and cultural identity.

In public discussions I pointed out -- with popular support -- that the Downtown as it is, and the University's proposed policies failed to reflect the particular social-cultural quality of Berkeley. As a unique urban center of innovative intellectual and academic life the city lay vulnerable to a process of homogenization driven by external market forces. It took only a little amount of "reading" Downtown's qualities to become aware of such development issues and opportunities. Communicating these at public meetings, writing about them for the local press and drawing on my experience with park questions, I found myself carrying out a "reading" of the decision-making web in Berkeley, as I had done with the physical systems in Dalmatia.

This involvement led to forming a community group (the Downtown Planning Study Group) with the purpose of framing an approach to planning for Downtown to fill the leadership vacuum in City Hall. This organization, composed of a representative group of citizens, including environmental professionals, led to the preparation of a full report outlining the elements needed for a Downtown Plan.[11] Its contents were exhibited at the Berkeley Urban Fair of Spring, 1984. Soon after, an official Committee on the Downtown Plan was established by the City to work with staff on the Plan itself.

The Waterfront. The second critical area -- the Waterfront -- provided a similar and mutually supportive experience, since both issues were dependent on channels in Berkeley's Web of human connections, though with differing role players for certain purposes.

In this case, development without organized community participation was threatened when plans for the commercial development of almost two hundred acres of filled land under private ownership (Santa Fe Railroad) were revealed. This proposal threatened the ultimate public uses of the three-mile shoreline. Through pressure from environmentally-oriented citizens, some who had been previously sparked by the Golden Bear controversy, others by park and recreation issues, the City Council set up a planning process in two phases starting in January 1983. Through the City's action, the developer's proposal to negotiate rather than use normal planning processes was subverted. The community's opportunities for establishing development goals were established and an informal communication network became visible, recognized and respected. A weekly and a daily community newspaper facilitated keeping the public informed and provided an outlet for commentaries by members of this network. These communications were directed towards providing perspective and criteria on the scope and sequence of the planning process and the role of the

community in it.

I particularly brought attention to the need for first-hand experiencing of the site by community leaders and the inherent properties of the site as it relates to Berkeley's identity. Continuous participation in public discussions and workshops of Phase I brought about a concept of development that I believed would maximize expression of Berkeley's identity.

The Waterfront involved restoration of natural ecological systems interrupted by years of landfill, the social and educational needs of the citizens as related to the maritime setting, and the economic advantages in terms of jobs and revenue that could occur from intensive use. The particular need I stressed -- gained from the Dalmatian studies -- was to increase a sense of awareness of the connection of the waterfront to mainland Berkeley. It seemed essential to reinforce in a genuine way the city's identity on the waterfront in the same way that each of the neighborhoods in the Hills and the Flatlands, the Campus and Downtown, have established an identity growing out of their inherent geographic character. These areas constitute a mosaic that gives Berkeley's urban structural system a coherent framework for its unique coherence. The geographic diversity of the waterfront, with its peninsulas, coves, hills and views, offered great potentials for expressing the diversity of the physical and cultural make-up of the people of Berkeley.

Experiencing the Decision-Making Process

With two years of this kind of intuitive experiencing of the web of decision-making, a new understanding developed that offered insights into this non-spatial world. These insights served to round out and confirm my concept of the interdependence of the three environmental components, and their use in maximizing social and cultural identity through a humanistic style of urban design.

From this community experience and the liaisons that developed through common attendance at meetings, a network of some twenty-five persons evolved, who came to see eye-to-eye on approaches to planning issues. These community "activators" tended to act collectively across political boundaries whether as individuals, through community organizations, or as members of official commissions. In a sense this spontaneously-formed group provides a leadership corps that is initiating a potential Renaissance in urban planning at Berkeley. This attempt to assert genuine urban identity through immersing oneself in this "Web of Human Transactions" has not only confirmed its importance with relation to the natural and the built environments, but has resulted in influencing planning and urban design directions in Berkeley.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION - KEY TO URBAN IDEN-TITY

Five Essential Findings

Out of this experience in Berkeley several "facts of life" -- and some opportunities as well -- were revealed. These might be used elsewhere as points of departure in attempting to breathe vernacular quality into urban design in our technologically-oriented times. Some of these conclusions may sound familiar and possibly self-evident. However, in this case, they took on greater substance since they were learned and conceptualized as the result of direct experience and, for myself, clearly reinforced the specific theme of urban identity. Applied to the Berkeley case at hand, they reflect a deeper and more motivating level of awareness than their casual knowledge may imply.

• *People Identify More with People Than with Places.* It appears to be a prime "fact of life" to face up to that, for the most part, people demonstrate greater awareness of compatibility with other people in the transactions that go on between them, than with the environment. Their experience level is high in relation to non-spatial issues that occupy their daily lives, while low on perceiving their dependence on the environment about them. Survival depends on the capability of the environment to sustain human life, yet survival is perceived as related to success in dealing with people, rather than with the places they use to work and live in.

Success with regard to place relationships is taken for granted, and left to others -- city government, landlord, services -- to look after. People show a limited sense of responsibility toward the spaces and places they use that determine their quality of life. They base their sense of identity mainly on the ideas and values that surround them. The exceptions are those involved in the shaping of the environment -- architects, planners, builders, developers, and the like. Yet, even they typically have too narrow a spectrum to reflect a full sense of identity and belonging to the city or neighborhood as a whole.

An outdated interpretation of aesthetic perception has contributed to this disassociation of people from places. Architecture has become an object to be judged for its form alone and as an isolated subject for photography, rather than as an integral part of our lives. Our anaesthetized relation to the built environment needs to be replaced with a more dynamic and personalized form of "participatory aesthetic" values as a basis for increased identity.[12]

• *Experiencing of Places Generates Identity with Them.* In spite of people's lack of environmental awareness, places in themselves have the power to develop within users a sense of identity and connectedness. When individuals come together over a common environmental cause, this phenomenon becomes a major collective

force that can serve to strengthen the sense of community. The result of my experience with Codornices Park was as much related to lasting community formation, as it was to park improvement.[13] Along with the cases of Downtown and the Waterfront, an unstructured, though forceful, community "network" came into being in all three cases. The end products were greatly increased awareness of the qualities of the place in question and an evolving "collective consciousness" for its environment. This sense of caring for an environment on a group basis develops proportionately with the extent to which the community takes initiative to assert its involvement with the institutions in charge. It also depends on the degree to which the physical properties of the particular place are experienced first hand.

Perhaps, after all, it is not the "Place" that is "Placeless" as Ted Relph implies,[14] but rather, people themselves. People live without awareness of the environment about them, except for the bare essentials of transportation from home to work to market. Experiencing almost any place and becoming involved in its development can spark a sense of the quality of the place *within* the person. The ecologically-aware human sees himself as an integral part of all sectors of the environment -- Natural, Built and Web.

• *Awareness of Qualities of Urban Places can be Deliberately Increased.* An enormous potential exists for increasing awareness of the qualities of a given place in decision-makers. The built-in sense of connectness via official duties can become a take-off point for a sense of environmental connectedness. Typically, lay persons concerned with a wide range of city affairs often have a predilection for the political role. They are likely not to understand the significance of particular places or the methods of policy-making and planning in anticipation of design problems.

It becomes the responsibility of environmental designers to motivate decision-makers and their constituents in the community to perceive environments in a more realistic way. They can become catalysts of environmental change for public benefit. Certainly, new community leadership among lay persons can be created by urban designers who can visualize the social implications of problems and the alternative future-oriented methods for their solution. Essential to this task of building identity into urban design, is the existence of a local press supportive of environmental issues.

• *People Have Difficulty Perceiving Time Projected in Planning Processes.* Just as the public in general is less aware of their relationship to places than to people, so also do they have difficulty in thinking in terms of the time sequences found in steps in environmental decision-making. As our urban places -- like Berkeley -- are filling up the envelope of the built environment, vacant land becomes scarce and social economic issues become increasingly

interactive with physical development options. This augments the complexity of planning and its potential impact, thus generating greater community reaction in a diverse range of areas.

Consequently, greater emphasis must be placed on designing the sequence and timing of each of the steps in the planning process. Defining the issues, formulating goals, analyzing data, setting of spatial and design policies, finalizing plans and setting forth implementation strategies -- all must be designed along a prescribed time line over months or even years.

For many in the community, the objectivity and seeming abstraction underlying this approach becomes a force working against wholehearted participation. The sensitive and community-oriented designer is challenged to "de-mystify" the design process and help the client-public to understand the process and become involved with it. The professional should find methods to bring along members of the concerned community step by step through the process. This would insure the expression of community-based, rather than technically or professionally-oriented values.

• *Urban Designers, Too, Can Learn from Directly Experiencing Environments.* More effective community participation in the planning and design process can come about by planners' direct experience with the environment. This experience would serve as a common ground of understanding between urban designers and the community. Too often, urban planners communicate with the public about environments in the abstract -- through maps, plans, surveys, quantitative analysis, and charts -- while the community thinks in the more qualitative and intuitive way growing out of direct experience in the daily process of living. Using the experiential approach stressed in this paper, urban designers will be better prepared to use their analytic skills to reach out to the public and to help them formulate their goals for development. Designers can become more integrated to community life. They could serve as the vehicle for linking social value systems expressed by community groups to the built environment and its geographic underlay. They can join forces with the community and gain stimulus in the search for authentic identity and vernacular sense of place. This can be done in the equity-oriented spirit of the advocacy movement of the 1960s and 1970s, instead of seeking on a personalized basis their own individual identity as creative designers.

• *The Processes Involved in Environmental Design are an Integral Part of the Creative Act.* The deeply experiential analyst or designer will broaden his vision and see the inter-relationship of the Triad of determinants of environment form as one integrated creative experience. He will realize the value of process as a stabilizing framework for balancing community inputs and his own intuitive judgment with the hard reality of factual data. Too

often the detailed processes of working with public bodies, members of the community, corporate clients or private developers is minimized as a rewarding and fulfilling experience. This work is classified as tedious or relegated to the "nitty gritty". In the making of vernacular urban places -- as in any design process -- it is just those kinds of activities that can give the end product its own particular quality and distinctive expression of both site and users. Such has been the Berkeley experience reported here.

However, I would like to close with another local, though more telling example: the case of the "Running Fence" project of the environmental sculptor Christo in Sonoma County a few years ago. In choosing the site he perceived the integrated wholeness of geography -- wind, clouds, sun, grass, rolling hills and ocean waves -- as his point of connectedness. The fabric fence was introduced as Built Environment to define the quality of these elements and to help us increase our awareness of life in an intimate relation with the first two environmental determinants.

But, Christo also revelled in the third determinant -- our "Web", and in this case a prolonged process of community decision making: planning commission permits, Environmental Impact Reports, legal arrangements, negotiating of contracts with farmers (who often grew to love the land all the more for this new experience with it), and the convincing of the general public. All of these role-players were "gathered" into a close-up view of what the artist had perceived -- the beauty of the curtain fence blowing its way over the hills and in turn "gathering" together a vast array of forces, materials and people as an integral part of the work of art on a massive scale. As Christo did, we can design our own "Running Fences" and bring people closer to their urban habitats, use their participation in the environmental design process as a source of identity in daily human life.

A Return to Guiding Themes

Experiencing Berkeley in a holistic way indicated that social identity can be built into urban places through the planning and design processes. The key to making this approach function is the development of a close working relationship between the community of users of the place in question and the designers assigned to the task. In this task, we return to the five themes that were introduced at the opening of the paper: *Identity, Experience, Intuition, Connectedness,* and *Involvement.* These stand forth in their essence as the resulting leading concepts emerging from this exploration in environmental perception. For practical purposes, these can serve as working guidelines in our endeavors to bring forth environments and urban places of human quality and collective meaning. Toward that goal urban designers of today and the coming decades might well grasp and update Mumford's "new sense of personal and public purpose" by more deeply identifying

with and experiencing the community life and urban places they serve.

> "From the moment I grasped Geddes' message and method, I began exploring the streets and neighborhoods of New York and tramping over the surrounding countryside with a new sense of both personal and public purpose".
>
> Lewis Mumford[15]

NOTES

1 From Lewis Mumford, *Sketches from Life, The Autobiography of Lewis Mumford: The Early Years,* New York: Dial Press, 1982, p. 155. Under Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford's influence this personal form of inquiry into the city as a human place was a part of the generation following the Depression and into the 1940s, prior to the growth of city planning as a "scientific" field. While accepted, "science" did not explain enough to make the field fully reliable. The social intangibles remained, and the experiences told in this paper were undertaken in that earlier spirit.

2 See my "Towards Revealing the Sense of Place: An Intuitive Reading of Four Dalmatian Towns", in *Dwelling, Place, Environment,* David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer, eds., The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985.

3 Clare Cooper-Marcus, "The House as a Symbol of Self", in *Designing for Human Behaviour: Architecture and the Behavioural Sciences,* Jon Lang, et al., eds., Stroudsburg, PA: Dowden, Hutchison and Ross, 1974.

4 Bernd Jager, "Body, House, and City: The Intertwinings of Embodiment, Inhabitation and Civilization", in *Dwelling, Place and Environment,* David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer, eds., The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985.

5 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language and Thought,* New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

6 The concept of a "triad" of environmental determinants was developed with David Seamon in refining for publication a paper presented on the case studies of Dalmatian towns at meetings of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences, Pennsylvania State University, October 1982. This essay entitled, "Towards Revealing the Sense of Place: An Intuitive 'Reading' of Four Dalmatian Towns", appears with others in *Dwelling, Place, Environment,* Seamon and Mugerauer, eds., 1985.

7 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture,* New York: Rizzoli, 1980.

8 Phil McArdle, ed., *Exactly Opposite the Golden Gate: Essays on Berkeley's History,* Berkeley: The Berkeley Historical Society, 1983.

9 Meetings of an official nature included:
City Council; City Manager's Office; Planning Commission; Planning/Community Dev. Dept.; Parks and Recreation Commission;

Berkeley School Board; State Coastal Conservatory; Civil Arts Commission; Transportation Commission.
Meetings of grassroots community groups included:
Council of Neighborhood Assoc.; Berkeley Design Advocates; Downtown Planning Study Group; Eastbay Shoreline Advisory Committee; Los Amigos de Codornices; Berkeley Arch. Heritage Assoc.; Friends of Berkeley Parks; Berkeley Historical Society Assoc.

10

Paola Coppola Pignatelli, *Roma: Esperienze di Lettura Urbana* (Rome: Experience in Urban Reading), Rome: New University Press, 1973.

11

Downtown Planning Study Group, *Outline for a Plan for Downtown Berkeley,* Berkeley: DPSG, November 1984.

12

For a stimulating introduction to the concept of "Participatory Aesthetics", see Arnold Berleant, "Aesthetic Participation and the Urban Environment" in *Perceptions of the City: Images and Individuals,* Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, Urban Resources, 1983.

13

One such outcome of continuous participation in the upgrading of Codornices Park was the group's official "adopting" of the park as the first neighborhood group to do so under an "Adopt-A-Park" program established by the city.

14

The relation of people to place was first explored by Ted Relph in *Place and Placelessness,* London: Pion Ltd., 1976.

15

Mumford, 1982.

APPENDIX

Examples of Community Dialogue Via the Local Press
1. Urban Design and Cultural Identity: What Does Downtown Berkeley Want to Be? *Montclarion, Jan. 1983*

2. Opening Up the Planning Process. *Berkeley Gazette, Feb. 1983*

3. The Search for Berkeley's Waterfront Identity. *The Montclarion, March 1983*

4. Berkeley - City by the Bay: Viewing the City from the Bay Offers a Whole New Perspective. *The Montclarion, April 1983*

5. Waterfront Planning: Creating a Collective Conscience. *The Montclarion, May 1983*

6. On the Waterfront: Doing It Right. *Berkeley Gazette, June 1983*

7. Art in Public Places Lauded. *Berkeley Gazette, July 1983*

8. Golden Bear and City Planning. *Berkeley Gazette, July 1983*

9. Berkeley - Centerpiece for an Eastshore Riviera. *Berkeley Council of Neighborhood Assoc., Sept. 1983*

10. Three Compatible Concepts for the Berkeley Waterfront. *The Berkeley Voice, Sept. 1983*

11. An East Bay 'Riviera' in Berkeley. *The Berkeley Voice, Sept. 1983*

12. Discovering Berkeley Bay: Our Unexplored Coastline. *Berkeley Gazette, Oct. 1983*

13. A Look at Phase I - Waterfront Planning. *Berkeley Gazette, Nov. 1983*

14. Getting Organized on the Waterfront. *Berkeley Gazette, Jan. 1984*

15. Community Involvement in Urban Design: Learning from Berkeley Experience. *Concrete, CED, Dec. 1984*