

Conclusion

The Poetics of Scale

These essays emerged as a meditation on the historical layers of architectural thought that shaped my home city of Philadelphia at the moment I left it for young, shallow Miami. In truth, from my new position in the fast-growing economic capital of the Caribbean, these explorations of the delicate scale of Philadelphia's buildings and the rhythms of its streets, the form of architecture above the rooftops, and the corporeal rumblings of infrastructure can seem laughably irrelevant. Yet, the questions persist. If I ask about Miami's measures, its heights, and its depths, the city reveals a very different architectural narrative. Most of Miami is built on fill rising only slightly above the water to present an insistently horizontal demeanor ordered by a one-mile grid of major streets in the dimensions of Jefferson's national grid, agricultural land grants, and car travel.¹ Between streets, landowners planned large parcels as independent housing developments quixotically linked to the larger urban matrix. Single-story houses with broad tile roofs below a fragile tree canopy adjoin horizontal slab shopping malls stretched into parking lots to define a thin habitable layer that rides just feet above the water table. Where the land eases into the waters of Biscayne Bay and finally the Atlantic Ocean, the wafer layer of building turns upright in highrise condominiums clad in reflective glass that parody Le Corbusier's vision of urbanity. Miami authors Carl Hiaasen and Joan Didion write of a surreal, half-submerged city built on a fleeting image of tropical

paradise. The power of the image is not in the narrative of a story, as Dickens appeared in Headhouse Square, but in the very weightlessness of the image, as if architecture is a quality of light.

From the distance of this ephemeral Miami, Philadelphia seems small, heavy, and nostalgic. From Philadelphia, Miami appears thin and forgetful. The architectural patterns and spatial reality of each city shape a distinct sense of locale that draws on the broad western traditions, which both inherit but interpret differently, for better or worse, in a confluence of history and landscape. Their urban structures and the stories they tell both respond to and shape a quality of urban experience embedded in each city's habits and the character of its citizens. The most articulate architecture gives expressive form to this urban identity in part by revealing the underlying structures of the city and interpreting them in a spatial narrative particular to that place. Through this reciprocal process, urban architecture in both cities pulls against the forces of global sameness.

The shaping of urban identity has emerged as a design issue in the face of increasingly global architectural education and practice. Ironically, architects, such as Frank Gehry and Santiago Calatrava who create the most visually striking buildings, are called upon to strengthen the image of cities everywhere, until every city has one. Assemblages of high art architecture, like collections of old master paintings in American art museums, may give a city status yet often override local patterns and cast local traditions into shadow. Such new buildings are often mute in the intellectual dialogue of the city, speaking rather to an international audience through photographs.

This is not to suggest that cities should be limited to hiring local architects. After all, Benjamin Latrobe, who built Philadelphia's first water system, was neither a Philadelphian nor an American, while Philadelphia native son Edmond Bacon saw his modern interpretation of the city's underground rejected by the citizens. Rather, I propose an approach to design that engages a local narrative, acknowledging its roots in a larger, shared tradition, and adding to the story. In

Philadelphia, Latrobe, Bacon, and Paul Cret, a Parisian-Philadelphian, each built in reference to the symbolic logic of William Penn, interpreting his narrative in light of larger mythical cycles of the Roman urban tradition as well as their own contemporary ethos. On that intellectual ground, they built boldly to define new urban patterns out of the old. They, as all architects, intervened in the habits of the city by modifying part of the physical structure, like mechanics called in to make an old machine do new tricks. The old machine and the old stories remain, useless sometimes, but still spinning. In the terms of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, an architect working in an old city is a *bricoleur*, one who cobbles together bits of already-made objects to devise something for a task alien to any of the parts. The best of them create new things and tell new stories that let us glimpse something of who we are, or might be as citizens, built out of who we were.

The contingencies of this task, as well as its poetic potential, compound with the depth of an architect's inquiry. Every building project is an opportunity to engage a site as an articulate partner in dialogue; the more a city has already been thought and built, the more the conversation builds the intellectual history of the locale. Of course, this architectural dialogue is based on a primary and continuing engagement with the natural history of the site, first expressed in the founding gestures of the town: Penn's plan in the case of Philadelphia. Miami too was strategically established as a fort at the mouth of the Miami River, where recent archaeology has revealed a thousand-year-old settlement built by the Tequesta people who also constructed a ceremonial circle of wooden posts adorned with coral rock carved in the shapes of dolphins, manatees, and fish. This find argues that site had already been shaped architecturally to tell mythical stories long before European settlers arrived. In response to the discovery, Miami's citizens insisted that the marks in the ground not be erased by new construction, even when the most legible evidence is a set of well-located

dimensions: 24 posts holes around a 38-foot circle where the river meets the Biscayne Bay.

This returns us to the question of scale. The underlying hypothesis of this book is that a city's scale, which defines its physical habitability, is created precisely by this ongoing local architectural dialogue about size and position in the context of a specific place. Philadelphia's architects have been more or less consciously engaged in the process since Penn laid out a set of measured lines in the woods. Miami is new to the game, now rapidly reworking the initial pre-WWII fabric of construction, largely by demolishing old buildings. As we have seen, Philadelphians did not shy from demolition for the construction of Independence Mall, the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Society Hill Towers and the on-going highrise redevelopment of Center City. Nevertheless, Philadelphia's strategic demolition and construction might offer cities like Miami some hard-won advice, whether by positive example or bitter experience.

The continuing architectural narrative of Philadelphia argues that buildings, which engage in the local discussion, add to the fabric, while those that do not either look away from the city toward a larger audience (e.g. the signature buildings now appearing around the world), or they are mute, taking up space without meaningful comment. Like a boring or obnoxious dinner companion who either leaves social time empty or fills it uselessly, a thoughtless building leaves space too empty or senselessly full.

To make buildings behave rationally (from "ratio"), the classical architectural tradition specified proportional measures to order a building so it might fulfill a role as mediator between the dimensions of a human body and those of the ordered universe. This Platonic model, long overturned by Copernicus and Galileo, now finds an echo in the logic of ecology. In a new iteration of architecture's proper position, the overarching order is neither formal nor dimensional, rather a complex of social and ecological interdependencies that have consequences reaching from local to global. In the largest assessment, the

architectural patterns of dimension that shape cities have a profound effect on ecosystems. Dense cities with interwoven uses are inherently more efficient, taking less land and using less energy than diffuse suburban development, and thus are less destructive of the environment. Yet to succeed in a market economy as places people choose to live and work, cities must offer people a good life in good dimensions. The architect's challenge is to build cities that are socially and culturally rich, so a diverse citizenry may take pleasure in urban life.

In a finer grain of ecological reasoning, the dimensions of buildings are embedded in the habits of a city and can be read as the visible part of routines of urban life that citizens take for granted. Personal habits such as walking to work or driving, having lunch in a café or out of a paper bag are established as much by urban patterns and proximities as by individual choice. Likewise, larger urban conditions that arise from these habits such as the volume and speed of traffic, the overhead costs of doing business, and whether educated young people choose to settle in a city or move away result in part from the urban layout and its architectural dimensions. Whether established habits of use give shape to architectural traditions of measure, or whether architecture precedes use, is moot, for they are intertwined in spatial experience and in memories that are already stories. Architectural decisions that establish urban scale and position, the high, the low, and the interconnected measures in between, modulate those habits in relation to the larger systems of the city and the underlying natural order of the landscape.

The built examples explored in Philadelphia, which articulate those relationships poetically link quotidian habits to a broad intellectual tradition, which gives identity to the place. Even if the buildings tell specific stories that are now obscure, the over-arching narratives contribute to a common, evolving culture even among a diverse population. They are working parts of the city, whose power can be measured in the accumulation of other stories over time, until the mythic or heroic stories embedded by their architects bear little resemblance

to the immediate personal stories told in the footsteps of citizens on the ground. Habitual uses, architectural space, and the stories that cling to them respond to one another to produce new patterns of use, new architecture, and new stories.

In rapidly changing cities such as Miami, a large proportion of the citizenry has arrived from elsewhere carrying urban stories, expectations, and memories from other cities, such as Havana or perhaps Philadelphia. Here, the mismatch between patterns of use and architecture is sometimes visible in spontaneous gatherings or ad-hoc structures that chafe against the existing urban structures, a designer's intentions, or ordinary use. Such events are clues for architects, which speak of emergent cultural desires seeking a place. They ask for creative, nimble design that engages the spatial patterns and the stories at issue in architecture that can modify the city at large.

The essays above attempt to tease apart some of the knots of space and narrative that characterize Philadelphia. The focus on the single block of Headhouse Square casts the block as a microcosm, a case study, or a stock character in the city. In this sense, the narrative builds on a tradition at the intersection of literature and architecture, by watching the city almost wistfully at the pace of a stroll. In Paris, this tradition is strong. Louis Aragon, Pierre Sansot, and Georges Perec wrote as poetic ethnographers in their own culture, recording the rhythms of the city just as their most familiar places were passing away. Writing in 1927, Aragon described the ageing Passage de l'Opera as an almost erotic architectural experience that enveloped him in its dusty half-light.² At the depth of his reverie, he paused to transcribe notices in the shop windows that protest a plan to demolish the street to make way for a new boulevard. Sansot wrote in the 1970s of fragments of French cities that survived from the 1930s: open markets, cafés and bistros, vagrants, and prostitutes in the old style, which mix romantically in the streets. He recorded his musings at a time when the old patterns were giving way to a newer configuration, which he reviles, in the form of the Prix Unix supermarket³. Georges Perec similarly wrote observations of a

single street: the old woman at the window, the boulangerie and children in the streets, over a period of years.⁴ Gradually his buildings were vacated and demolished, and his last visit confronted bulldozers scraping the site for a new Grand Projet.

Each of these writers chose a part of the city on the verge of dissolution, at the moment it is about to be rebuilt. Only then does it seem to have the depth and poignancy of true urbanity, a heightened ordinariness that makes a street emblematic. Headhouse Square is also in the process of dissolution and renovation, as is much of Miami and parts of every other major city in the world. In each, new teams of architects will remeasure the site, reinterpret, and reconstruct it to be inhabited yet again. In the spirit of this creative process, I offer these essays.

¹ This pattern orders most of the City of Miami on the mainland. Miami Beach was developed in a smaller, urban grid based on New York City.

² Louis Aragon, *Paysan de Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

³ Pierre Sansot, *Poétique de la ville* (Paris: Meridiens Klincksieck, 1988).

⁴ Georges Perec, *Infra-ordinaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).