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AN ARCHITECTURE OF ACCESSIBILITY:
AN URBAN HOUSE FOR A SMALL TOWN

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

An Architecture of Accessibility: An Urban House for a Small Town

by

Cathryn E. King

The accessibility of architecture involves the inherent ability of the mind and body to approach, use, and communicate with the built environment by admitting that the experiences gathered in a place are significant to the individual.

An urban house for six families, inserted within the vacant floors of an historic commercial building, attempts to restructure the events of the intimate downtown environment by transposing the familiarity of the long-lived rural landscape into a new program. By analyzing the repetitive events, objects, attitudes, histories, etc. of the known environment and acknowledging the individual as intuitively active, the architecture progresses toward accessibility. As the building reveals itself to the perceiving inhabitant, the architecture and that individual are brought together through the continuous evolution of a shared vocabulary.
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And to my parents: Thank you, your support granted me the strength and ability to dream.
Introduction

Accessibility offers one to approach, use and communicate with a work of architecture. In my thesis it takes on the role of defining the meaningfulness of the imminent changes of a small town environment pressured by growth and its adjacency to large-scale developments. The small town main street, marked by historic structures and small family businesses, is particularly reluctant to alter its physical and programmatic make up. The need to be accessible is the burden of the new architecture.

Two distinct questions have guided this thesis toward accessibility:

1) How might intuition, in reference to its use as a response process, be useful in architectural design?
2) How is it possible to revitalize a small downtown environment pressured by the inevitability of development?

**to approach**

*intuition: the immediate apprehension of truth in the absence of conscious rational processes.*

Intuition allows one to comprehend and otherwise react to the physical environment. The sensory perception mechanisms of the body bring original experiences to the mind, where they acquire clarity and result in a structure of paired meanings and experience. Unfamiliarity necessitates the restructuring of past experience; new perceptions (meanings) are accessed by the elicitation of known perceptual events in an immediate projection of reason—the act of intuition.

Intuitive thoughts are not directly solicited by the individual. The process is complete within one's body and mind, however, these projected thoughts are not fully possessed by the individual as one cannot control the
process. In their creative utilization, these thoughts generate original form and ideas. The lack of tangible rationalism of the intuitive is both beautiful and suspicious.

In the architectural context the creative power of intuition is of minor concern. The treatment of intuition in this way is problematic because if one cannot track the thought to its origin and fully comprehend its development, then the resulting ephemeral response cannot be brought forward into a rational discourse.

Intuition has a rightful place, a typical existence. An individual acts immediately, *instinctually*.

To aid in defining this concept two important distinctions between intuition and instinct should be considered. First, instinct, an inherited response, usually suggests an individual reacting as a member of his or her species rather than acting as a free-minded soul. Secondly, instinct requires, and is characterized by, a physical response. In contrast the definition of intuition lacks these elements of specificity and will be treated as special to the individual and his or her experience, and furthermore, should not require physical action.

to use

*ruralism*: *of the countryside, non-urban*

Ruralism is supported by the traditions held within the structure of the land and the character of an agrarian community. Suburbanism has nearly made the distinction between rural and urban an obsolete concept, and in some ways, refers to a lifestyle rather than a description of a place. The rural landscape, also sought as a residential refuge, still holds within it a sense of idealism related to the land. The participation in this landscape, however, need
not be solely determined by a reliance on agriculture as a mean of income. It can be a matter of spiritual participation. (being drawn to the wilderness, gazing across an open field) In short, while the rural environment undeniably operates as a suburb, the people who choose to live there, rather than in denser residential communities, must have some affinity for its qualities.

In his own search for the concept of the landscape J.B. Jackson has defined the ideal “as an environment where permanence and change have struck a balance.”1 Jackson's vernacular landscape is similar to the essence I seek in defending the existence of ruralism: both landscapes are supported and marked by agrarianism and continue to exist because of the values, traditions, and attitudes of the people who choose to live within the land rather than in its urban counterpart. He continues to define landscape—

“Mobility and change are the key to the vernacular landscape, but of an involuntary reluctant sort; not the expression of restlessness and search for improvement but an unending patient adjustment to circumstances. Far too often these are the arbitrary decisions of those in power, but natural conditions play their part and so do ignorance and a blind loyalty to local ways, and so does the absence of long-range objectives: the absence of what we would call a sense of future history.”2

Jackson’s vernacular landscape is rooted in the medieval city and the attitudes that grew outside the city wall. The American countryside, the rural landscape, developed democratically as part of the economic support of what was to eventually become a greater urban network. The history of the land, its traditions, farm structures, and land structures contributes to a sensibility of ones place that extends beyond the landscape’s periphery. The citizens of the small town are almost assuredly affected by the pervasive ideology emanating from the rural landscape. Its boundaries are not set.
to communicate

Intuition (an act of response afforded to the individual) and ruralism (a self-held image of residents in a small community) come together to aid in the revitalization of the small town main street: the use of intuition, the immediacy of the response, makes this project feasible by constructing a method of operating that is directly related to the predicaments inherent in the environment. Intuition, acting deep within the sensory networks of the body and directing relationships between our experiences and perceptions, essentially removes from the individual the obligation to be privileged with the creative knowledge of a new program.
a sketch of sensory perception

reduction to multiple sensory perceptions single senses combined senses

(experience)

addition to experience gaining of insight moving past singular viewpoint into multiple reading

experiences are given to awareness through our perceptions
on site

Charlotte, a small Midwestern town in southern mid-Michigan, population 8000, was settled in the 1830s as the seat of Eaton County. It has minor significance to the motorists who travel the state highway through the downtown and who speed along the interstate freeway on its eastern limit. Charlotte is marked by the typicality that repeats itself throughout the American landscape. Its character has been nearly constant since the 1800s. Its economy then, structured on a compilation of agrarian, commercial and industrial labors, was no different then than it is now.

Charlotte is affected by the numerous changes relating to the continuous development of the land between greater urban areas. The interstate highway (I-69), completed only six years ago, has encouraged further growth along an already congested street. The “strip”, as it is called, runs parallel to the main street, and together these two streets make up the two commercial zones of the city. The main street (Cochran Road), identifiable as the original settlement of the town, is mostly maintained by small, intimate, family run businesses, apparel boutiques, diners, hardware stores, and small professional offices. The “strip”, in contrast is the place for franchise eateries, national department stores, and numerous large-scale utilitarian businesses. The once cooperative relationship between these two commercial zones is beginning to fade as a competitive market favors the larger retailer. The independent businesses survive on reputation.

As Charlotte grows, the make up of its population changes. The transient nature of the suburban population does not favor the building of reputations. The inevitable restructuring of Charlotte’s commercial status has caught many of the locals in a crisis: they want to maintain the historical downtown but generally do not patronize its market.

The city council, reacting to the growth and recognizing the concerns of the residents, is revising the city plan from its 1972 version. The Project 2005 Committee, attempting to rightfully address the public interest,
surveyed residents and business owners on issues such as image, growth, historical preservation, and entertainment. The following is a summary of the published survey:3

— historic preservation is favored by 61% who thought that it was essential to the character of the town and was significantly responsible for bringing people into the city. This position, however, is coupled with the issue of appearance—many felt that the commercial buildings as well as the older residences should be maintained in a more attractive manner.

— 17% favor no growth.

— The poor appearance of residences near the downtown and the “strip” is a particular problem. There is bias in the survey towards the redevelopment of the strip to help manage traffic and make it more attractive. No similar development plans for the main street were addressed.

— 60% of the residents have chosen Charlotte because of its small town character over other concerns such as being close to work (40%), the availability of goods and services (20%), and the quality of its schools (15%).

— Many people feel that the town needs more entertainment, especially for children, teenagers, and the elderly.

The survey does not contain any specific proposals for preserving the historic character in terms of revitalization. If historic preservation is needed to maintain the character and identity of this town, then managing and encouraging growth and redeveloping only the “strip” may continue the present trend toward destroying the economic status of the main street. My point is not to criticize the residents or the Project 2005 Committee; instead, it is to find some understanding of what “history” means to this town. One may address history by celebrating it—using and inhabiting the structures as they were originally intended.

Another view is to rework the structures into something contemporary and useful in terms of present needs. The historic houses in the original part of the city, most of which are Queen Anne Victorian, are still maintained as
single family residences. They have been painted many colors, and in various other ways, show signs of personal use.

The large masonry commercial structures linger as back drops to the fading activity along the main street. The street level shops are usually occupied, some by businesses with a long history, while others seem to come and go with the influence of public interest and other market demands. The upper stories are often empty, some are noticeably neglected. The decay of the wooden boards covering the window openings are testimony to abandonment. This treatment (or lack of) defends a third view toward historic preservation and one which I think Charlotte is struggling with. In their effort to “preserve” these precious buildings they have become forgotten, as if they were jewels encased in glass boxes.

Another sense of history operating in Charlotte is related to the land. As the city has grown, the suburban development of residences outside the city limit has subdivided the land, long ago marked only mile by mile. The expansive quality of the land has disappeared as the properties have become smaller and new roads cut across the grid.

The appeal of the land, its openness and earthiness, is sought by many people in the present and perhaps is analogous to the pioneering spirit responsible for originally settling the land. The following excerpt, written in 1845, characterizes the enthusiasm one of the original settlers had with the location of Charlotte.

“We are bold to challenge the world to present a more beautiful location than that on which the village of Charlotte stands. Nature has been lavish of her beauties to extravagance. The plat consists of a beautiful prairie, containing about 600 acres, and surrounded on all sides by heavy timbered lands. It presents rather a curious appearance to the eye of the stranger, and takes him by surprise on emerging from heavy forests into a beautiful open plain, unmarred by brush or stumps or swamps. This lovely opening resting in the bosom of a dense forest, like an oasis in a desert, we have no doubt was once an Indian cornfield; it bears many evidences of it upon its surface. . . .”
"At this season of the year our prairie presents beauties that no imagination ever dreamed of. Reader, you who have never been here, picture to yourself a beautiful prairie, level as the sleeping surface of the lake, and surrounded on all sides by waving forests, forming a complete circle; within, a lovely carpet of grass, begemmed with flowers of a hundred varieties and ten thousand hues, rolling back and forth to the summer breeze. Here, in the midst of all these beauties, is the village of Charlotte, the county seat of Eaton, its white cottages contrasting richly with the green foliage in which it is embowered."

It would be unfortunate to mistake the author and appreciate his enthusiasm for the land in only its historical context. The land has always had a bold influence on people. The respect for the history of the land, still resides in the rural community and the appreciation of the land will be the basis for approaching the design and inhabitation of the vacant commercial buildings at the center of the city.
SCALE: REGION
Eaton County
1873 and 1995

logic of grid structure
mile by mile ideal grid (black)
geographic grid (red)
1873 land pattern (grey)

SCALE: COUNTY
participants

the farm.
an agrarian community,
a family lineage of ownership in the land allowing
the land to resist restructuring,
work the open space inside the mile square.

the freeway traveler
I-69 — Indianapolis to Port Huron
destinations: Chicago, Lansing, Battle Creek, Canada
participation in economy strip development, motels, mini-marts

the highway traveler
M-50 — Jackson (and northwest). ends.
destinations: Eaton Rapids, Ionia, Vermontville
participates minimally in economy.
experience of downtown. slowness.

local auto traffic
internal destinations, external destinations

local pedestrian traffic
observer, spectator
visually and bodily present

the city grows

spreads across land, concentrically
densifies within isolated pockets
inserts itself into greater land structures
rural growth--LAND
working within the square mile
structure within square rather than the structure of settlement grid
idealism/character/desirable quality of living in the land vs. property/democracy/settlement

rural growth---HOUSE
begin with center
addition to house on periphery of box
center/core is community space of house while peripheral additions are minor/private
resulting balance of house plan, house section, composition of land
The following elements are common to any residential landscape, but when considered in the context of the rural landscape certain consistencies reveal themselves from house to house. The elements, as they will be described, are typical to farmhouses and to most newer residential (suburban) developments. Whether old or new, the houses of concern are built on large lots of at least four acres with a direct connection to the main roadway and the interior land within the mile by mile grid system. These elements have a longevity in the rural landscape—some of them have personal histories maintained for over 100 years. The notes and descriptions refer to their consistency, usefulness, longevity, and character.

The understanding of these elements, the experiences they hold within themselves, will be used to define the urban house.

**LAND**
land is property. land is an agricultural field. land is a homestead. land becomes a field, a lawn, a garden. land is built upon. land is sowed. land is flat (a plateau), a plane. land is marked. land is enclosed. land is planted. land is colorful. land is grey, brown, green. land is a collector. land obeys the seasons and the climate. land ends at a property line, a tree, a fence, the road, the horizon. land is seen. land can be seen as long as the air is clear. land has a smell. of earth, of air, of matter. land is harvested. land is consumed. earth replenishes the land. land is vital land is alive land is cherished.

**PORCH**
porch belongs to the front door. porch is formal, an entry for strangers. porch is minimal as a transition between the lawn and the house. porch can be enclosed. porch can be a remnant.

**DECK**
deck is at the back of the house, adjacent to the back door and interior living space. deck is an addition. deck is neighborly. deck is a host. deck connects interior and exterior. deck is an extension of interior living space. deck is an extension of exterior living space.
+others

OUTBUILDING
a barn, a silo, a pair of silos: the (intention) for storage is vastly interpreted

A FEEL FOR THE LANDSCAPE. MEASURE.
thermometer
barometer

bird feeder
bird bath

the view

pond

LEFTCOVERS
mudroom
well
workbench
trash barrel
weber or gas grill
satellite dish
fireplace
wood burning stove
firewood pile
The Urban House

The purpose of the urban house is to insert a new program, the family residence, into the downtown in order to redirect the pervading tendency of letting these large historic buildings fade away into non-use, as the land beyond the city limit is broken into smaller properties.
urban house ORGANIZATION
three available stories, divided into six semi-equal houses

second floor
private spaces, bedrooms, are placed along the side and back edges of the building.
the front, main street, edge, divided into six equal other spaces (having no programmatic designation), close to street.

fourth floor
kitchen and living spaces radiate from the center of the building plan and toward the external landscape.
urban house CIRCULATION
third floor

the creation of an object inside the masonry shell, leftover spaces are occupied by the residents of all six houses in a cooperative event. the clustering of spaces, partly necessitated by the organization, puts the body in a deliberate position with its neighbor.
PLAN I
first floor house
second floor building

private/family space
bedrooms and (other)

vulnerable spaces,
the family unit is tightly arranged along the minor edges and closest to the ground plane.
PLAN 2
second floor house
third floor building

circulation
a network, knotting of the house

community/neighborhood
a tightness contrasting to the ideal landscape
body in movement, passing another.
registration of other occupants is non-visual.

the object-space of the ideal landscape.
a community space forced between the privateness of the house and the public
ness of the street.
a cooperation of place making.
PLAN 3
third floor house
fourth floor building

public space of house
kitchen. dining

free flowing body
continuity of visual into the exterior landscape

likeness to openness of land. views beyond property/periphery.
an outline of general sensory reactions

**nature**
at the micro-scale
at the macro-scale
nature contains within it sensibilities of time, color, aroma, rhythm
  material: natural and raw
  material: crafted, fabricated, worked

**material**
as material is found, as material is worked
the working of a material gives away the abilities of a human being:
crafting, harnessing, constructing, transforming, polishing
material gives away the denial of human intervention:
age and roughness
material is dimensional / spatial
  the footsteps on a wood floor, concrete floor, tile floor, a carpet
  the feel and the look of texture (texture cannot be perceived only
  through touch—other senses must contribute)

**form**
spatial
the human body reacts to space. the human body is given dimension
through juxtaposition (in every sense—visual, audial...)
visual system simplifies complex forms
audial system gives away form of which the body may not be physically
present

+ others
some conclusions on the urban house

to land -- to landscape
elements, as they are repeated, are intended to
set up a meter--or measure--that elicits a sense
of equivalency.
within land measure--the meter changes

the view
the ability to see across a relatively flat land-
scape
the ability to physically interact with the land-
scape

the ability to "see" within the landscape of the
house
the view to outside is individuated, by prox-
imity
a short view, limited by the visual reach

meter--measure extends reach of view

the visual body is connected to the landscape
the segmentation of the house breaks down
its physical boundaries

banality is rigid
abstraction is fluid
notes


2 p. 151.


bibliography

architecture, perception, theory


Charlotte- histories, maps, articles


