

APRIL, 1951
A STUDY ON THE VISUAL FORM OF CITIES

The subject is a difficult and ambiguous one. We feel it to be one of major importance, and one that is under-emphasized in current city planning design. This may be due not only to the difficulties of accomplishing such work, but also to our lack of ability to come to grips with it. We propose a study of the subject, beginning with an volunteer group for exploration of the problems. Later it can develop into a systematic study, tied to a regular graduate seminar, thesis work, supported research, etc. The following discussion is intended to start discussion by the original group.

We might limit ourselves by proposing to deal with the physical form of the urban environment, particularly those aspects which are significant for their visual impact on the observer. We should take as a central point of reference the eye neither of a specially trained designer nor of any kind of "average man", but rather that of some sensitive observer who is part of our own contemporary culture.

This study should move toward answering two questions:

- (a) Of what importance are these visual effects to the well-being or pleasure of the individual and the group, relative to other objectives sought for in shaping the urban environment?
- (b) In our present developing society, how may this well-being or pleasure best be promoted by the visual arrangement?

This should simply be the direction of the study: i.e., we must develop our basis for action as design technicians. Certainly we cannot attempt or pretend to get any formal answers to these questions.

There are various dangers in attacking this whole ambiguous subject. One lies in being broad and superficial in our present state of understanding. Another in considering that the visual form is something isolated from the other aspects of the environment, even though we may attempt to isolate it for study. Another that we can pretend to be "universal" or "scientific" or "objective", when our main task should be to sharpen our own subjective evaluations.

The subject might be studied from several viewpoints, none of them mutually exclusive:

- A. In relation to culture: the way in which various urban forms have resulted from, expressed, or satisfied the demands of, the culture in which they are created, and any conclusions we can draw as to the proper forms for our own time.

- B. From a subjective, personal standpoint: analysis of the effects on the observer of various forms and situations, leading to some conclusions as to satisfactory forms from this viewpoint.
- C. In relation to the problems of design technique: what criteria can we set up, what techniques can we use, what are the possibilities and limitations, in achieving visual effects in the planned shaping of the environment?

It is very probably that any general framework first set up will dissolve soon enough when critical study begins. Much of the battle is to select the key problems in this maze and to express them clearly: another major portion, to set up concrete methods of attacking them.

To be more suggestive, an incomplete series of questions in the field is proposed below, roughly grouped under the general headings. Most of them lack clarity, and they vary widely as to scope, importance, and the ease with which they might be handled.

- A.
 1. Ways in which urban environments have reflected and expressed previous cultures, and how they were achieved.
 2. Histories of form ideals and form interests, in relation to the societies in which they arose.
 3. How has the aspect of an area changed over time: what new forms changed it, by whose actions, and with what in mind?
 4. What, if any, are the visual demands of our present culture, and how does our environment fulfill them?
 5. Is any generally recognized and satisfactory symbolism possible now in various types of building groupings? If so, what should their nature be?
 6. In various urban areas, what is a valid balance now between variety and stimulus versus calm and order?
 7. Why do we go on country vacations, and romanticize rural areas?
 8. How do visual forms affect choice of residence, travel paths, place of work, etc?

9. In relation to their social functions, what should be the visual treatment of various types of areas: squares, waterfronts, residential areas, shopping centers, etc., etc.?
 10. What physical forms do people think of in remembering or characterizing a locality?
 11. What limits are set and major new problems posed for the visual form by the present pattern of human activity in cities, and by new technologies?
- B.
1. What is the relative importance of various aspects of the visual effect: emotions arising from the esthetic order; recognition of social symbols; participation in the creative act; appreciation as a setting for social activities; psychological comfort; etc?
 2. What esthetic elements appear in an existing urban area after systematic observation? How do they interact, and how can they be evaluated?
 3. What visual impressions are first received in passing rapidly through a new area?
 4. What importance has lucidity of plan, and ease of recognition and orientation?
 5. How do visual impressions vary depending on speed and manner of observer approach and motion? Under various conditions of traffic, activity, weather, etc?
 6. How does observer reaction depend on the relation of the visual organization of an area to its larger setting, physical or cultural, when this setting is only recalled in the mind of the observer?
 7. When a person technically untrained draws a plan of a building group or a city area, what relation does such a sketch have to a precise plan?
- C.
1. In an urban area, what are the limits of visual grasp, what can be organized as a visual whole? What can a land use and circulation plan operating on a large area achieve in the way of visual form? What is the role of observing distance, of memory of successive pictures?

2. How do visual impressions from a model compare with those from the actual grouping represented? What techniques can be used to close the gap?
3. On completed projects, how have the effects sought for by the designer compared to the effects actually produced?
4. What is the value of certain general criteria of large-scale design that have been proposed (closure, light and color, scale, unity and variety, expression of ground, space perception, sculptural form, etc.)?
5. What could be achieved by operation on minor treatment alone, within a given framework of structures and spaces?
6. What is meant by "realization of site"; how is it achieved? Do certain land forms suggest particular types of design?

We suggest that the group begin by a discussion of the general field, leading to a decision on some of the critical problems worth study. In the second session, a list of projects might be set up which attack these agreed problems, and various projects could be taken on by members of the group. Succeeding sessions might be devoted to discussion of some of the chosen problems led off by the staff and supported by the current results of the projects. A final session should be devoted to a brief summary of project work and the results of the group's work, plus a setting down of the problems for intensive research that have crystallized.