

PROPOSAL FOR A GENERAL STUDY OF ATTITUDES TOWARD THE CITY

We are normally immersed in immediate actions and pressures; or when there is time for study, it is put directly to the analysis or elaboration of concepts about the city that are already the subject of discussion. Although this kind of analysis, organized and directed by a structure of existing ideas, is necessarily the dominant one in any field, yet it proves valuable, at intervals, to search a subject "aimlessly," to see "what may turn up." We have an opportunity to pursue a piece of this undirected research, and I propose that we take it up for a minor part of our program.

Since the subject of our study is the perceptual form of the city and its impact on the individual, an undirected inquiry might ideally take two forms: leisurely viewing and subjective analysis of many cities by the research team; and, for insight into the reactions of others, a series of thorough depth analyses of a number of individuals, with reference to their attitudes on the city. Extensive questionnaires given to a large sample population will also come to mind as another possibility.

The first method, that of introspective analysis, is necessarily being employed all the time by the team, as a constant corrector and suggester of new directions. To do it on the required scale, however, will require a lifetime, and thus be beyond the scope of this program. The second method, that of depth analysis, is far too complex, uncertain and time-consuming for our present abilities or resources. It may in the future prove to be a fruitful source of knowledge about the city, but must be laid aside for the time.

The final method, that of questionnaires or interviews on a statistical scale is also beyond our means. More important than that, however, it is a very dubious technique for the type of material we are dealing with: impressions and attitudes toward a complicated object which is loaded with associations. Large-number averages will tend to blue out the very meanings we are looking for.

What methods then suggest themselves? Two, in general. The first is to use the eyes and ears of sensitive observers who do not happen to be directly concerned with urban design, but who are skilled in communicating their observations, i.e., novelists, painters, or poets. They present at a high level and in concentrated form, a series of sharp insights into the impact of city form.

The material may be presented consciously or not. In fact, it is likely that the material which is not consciously presented may be the most important. Thus, in a novel, we may pass over the composed description of a city, which sets the stage for the story, and concentrate on the fleeting comments, the minimum descriptions and observations which turn out to be a necessity in the course of the action, when the novelist's attention is toward his story.

Secondly, we may use a technique for reading attitudes, which avoids the complexities of depth analysis, and yet gives us some selection of impression on the basis of importance. That is, we may ask subjects to recount to us their memories of a city environment after they have been separated from it for a significant lapse of time, perhaps 10 years as a minimum. These might be memories of their childhood or of their adult life; reminiscences of long acquaintance with an area, or of a brief visit.

Here we would depend on the filtering effect of memory, assuming that

the most important features and affects of the environment are retained longest. This is not strictly true, of course, since very important elements may be repressed and consciously “forgotten,” but it is likely at least that the forms remembered will have been of some importance.

It may be easiest to begin with childhood memories, since the perceptions of children are particularly fresh and tend to remain most vivid in the memory, and since it is enjoyable for most people to go back to their childhood, and they are willingly to expend some effort to recall it. It would have to be realized, of course, that what is important to a child in his city, may be quite different from what is vital for the adult.

Some brief tests have been made of both techniques, with promise of interesting and perhaps surprising results. Twenty students were asked to write a brief description of their memory of their childhood environment, and the papers were analyzed and correlated for elements noted and feelings expressed. There were some surprising unanimities, despite a range of homelands from Thailand to Texas. Several of the key elements did not occur in the ranking expected while others tended to confirm previous prejudices. It was enough of a task to suggest real possibilities, but the work should almost certainly be done by interview, and with a carefully-prepared statement of what is wanted.

A number of novels have also been analyzed from this point of view, tending to suggest a value ranking of urban elements. Here again, and perhaps particularly here, there is need for a more consistent system of analysis and for a common area of reference.

Both studies: the traces of the city in the novel, and the traces in individual memories, should be looking for two things: what are the elements in the physical environment of the city that seem most important

to people, and how do they feel about them? Both would therefore be open-ended and searching in nature, embarked upon with as few preconceptions as possible as to what would prove significant.

It would be more useful if both studies could converge on the same city, so that the two views might in some ways be compared. It is also true, of course, that a few sidelights from other cities, especially those quite remote in cultural distance, might add to the study.

With these broad objectives, then, and with no discernable hypothesis, the following two-branched project is proposed:

A common reference city would be chosen, such as New York, Chicago, or perhaps Boston or San Francisco. Both studies would concentrate their examples on this city, except for a few side excursions into, for example, a Chinese or Indian settlement.

1. A series of novels and poems set in this city within the last 50 years would be analyzed for reference to the physical environment and the emotional coloring with which it is rendered. Emphasis would be given to "unconscious" descriptions. Choice would fall generally on writing of high caliber, although a certain number of detective stories, which require continuous action and utmost economy of description might also be employed.

2. A sample of people would be drawn who grew up in that city, and interviewed for their childhood memories. The sample would probably have to be drawn from the student population in Boston, and might be 100 persons in size. Their responses should be recorded, and probably they should be prepared in advance for the questions. A few whose experiences were as adults, or as transients, should also be checked for comparison.

3. The two analyses should be compared to see if it throws further light on how people feel toward their cities, and what is important to them.

The entire study, of course, could easily be expanded in its time limits. As outline above, it should be accomplished in a year's time, with the cooperation of a principal and of one half-time assistant to conduct the interviews and do the initial readings.

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