

PROPOSAL FOR A STUDY OF CIRCULATION IN THE CITY, IN TERMS OF ITS PERCEPTUAL IMPACT

The flow of persons and goods is a fundamental function of urban life; indeed, a case may be made that this, or communication in general, is the basic aspect of a city, and its principal reason for existence. The character and impact of various circulation systems may be studied in many fundamental ways: in regard to their technical efficiency of speed and capacity; or in terms of their social impact or of their economic effects. We here propose to study the perceptual consequences of circulation systems: their direct impact on the individual. He is affected both as a participant in the circulation process: as a driver, pedestrian or subway rider; and also as an observer of this process.

The principal criteria for evaluating circulation systems, from our standpoint, will be, as stated before, both the quality of "x": continuity, meaning and significance; and the growth facilitating quality. As elsewhere in these studies, however, we will concentrate on the criterion of "x". Our experience of circulation in today's cities, dominant emotionally and occupying a large part of our time and attention, is typically exhausting and disorganized, meaningless and "empty", one of the most common complaints of life in cities.

There are a number of facets to this question of circulation, viewed in the light of the criterion of "x". We may first consider the experience of being part of the flow: the sequence of impressions received while walking, cycling, driving, riding, boating; and how the scale, tempo and quality of these sequences differ. The basic problem here is that of giving coherence to all these different sequences, without mutual interference, and without complete separation between these modes of experience.

From the standpoint of the observer of this process, there is the same problem of giving meaning and continuity to what he sees, and preventing the flows from absorbing all his energies or destroying the coherence of the urban setting. It is equally important that the great transportation facilities -- elevated tracks, subways, highways, airfields, harbors -- which have become dominant features in our cities, be expressive forms which carry meaning and significance to the observer.

A key sector of this interrelation is the point of transfer: the perceptual quality of the parking area, the railroad terminal, or the bus stop. Here we are faced with the conflicting claims of contact or segregation, and of carrying the individual smoothly through the change of speed and scale. With the automobile in particular, this is linked to the visual problem of the storage of the unused, "dead", vehicle.

Finally, the circulation system must be considered on a larger perceptual scale. It will be found to be an important unifying element, a spine or network which can link up and give form to a large complex of urban forms. The characteristics which facilitate this large-scale linkage must also be investigated. This aspect will be thoroughly dealt with in the course of the study on orientation.

What is being proposed, therefore, is the broad study of a functional sector of the city, but a sector which will be analyzed only from the special viewpoint of its perceptual and psychological impact. Much work has been done on the technical aspects of traffic, but little on this. Many designers are aware of the problem, and have done a good deal of intuitive, rather unsystematic thinking on the subject, which has had important results in their proposals. The problem itself

is widely recognized, by professionals and laymen alike.

During the last academic term, we have done nothing directly in this line, except that sidelights have been cast on the problem by the photographic and interview studies. Both the principals, of course, have had the general question before their minds for some time, and have a number of ideas for study of it. It is these ideas that are being drawn upon in this proposal.

Our basic assumption, then, is that circulation produces a dominant perceptual experience in our cities today, both for the observer and the circulator, and that this experience is typically disorganized, meaningless and exhausting. It will be our objective to describe the nature of this experience systematically, and to propose certain guides for the organization of the circulatory system, from the viewpoint of its perceptual impact. The following studies are foreseen:

1. A study, in detail, would be made of the sequence of impressions received while travelling along a few principal paths in central Boston by three major modes: walking, by automobile, and by subway. Still photographs, subjective impressions, brief interviews of users, and perhaps motion pictures would be used. The object would be to contrast the total quality of these three experiences, to explore the forms that would improve the meaning and continuity of their experience and to consider the problem of coordinating the perceptual requirements of each mode, when all operate in the same area.

2. The perceptual interrelations between the major types of urban transportation: walking, pedestrian belts, busses, street cars, subways and elevateds, automobiles and trucks, bicycles, boats, light aircraft; would be considered by finding existing examples, throughout the U.S. and

the world, of different combinations of these types in the same channel. These combinations would be analyzed on the spot, or, where necessary, by photographs, to uncover the perceptual influence of one type on the other and on the bystander.

Particular attention would be given to the degree of contact or segregation, and to the physical devices used for this.

3. Three shorter sub-studies could profitably be made, or be given out as student assignments:

a. An analysis of the perceptual implications of the process of interchange, which seems to be a critical psychological moment: the bus stop, parking lot, rail terminal, dock, subway station and airport. The aim would be to uncover means of enhancing continuity in this experience.

b. An inquiry into the visual problem of the storage of "dead" vehicles, not in use -- of parked automobiles in particular. What means can be used, within functional limitations, either to camouflage or to make meaningful these inert masses?

c. A careful comparison of the perceptual qualities of two means of transportation toward which we commonly hold very divergent emotional feelings: automobiles and boats. What factors make for this divergence: length of tradition, use with which they are associated, design of the vehicle itself, form of the channels in which they move, intensity of traffic?

4. The study would be summed up in a series of design recommendations, which would illustrate the general principles arrived at, and would present new alternatives if these developed. Designs would be kept at a general and illustrative level, rather than being applied directly to a specific case.

The total project would require one year in its analytical stages, with the bulk of the design study coming in the following summer or in the second year. One half-time assistant would be required, in addition to supervision by one of the principals, and a third-time attention of a mature designer for the period of an academic term.

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