

We Americans have long shown ambivalence towards the city. We have been ambivalent about the value of urbanity to our culture, about the appropriate form that the city should take and, especially, about where one is best placed in relationship to the city. How is "a good place to live" typically represented: a charming porch, a conversation held across a trimly kept yard, a bicycle leaning against a picket fence, lots of green space or a stately home? As enticing an evocation as this is, it does not depict a city very well.

Indeed, a number of American cultural predilections inadvertently work against establishing good urban places to live. Among our yearnings, for example, is the desire to be on the move. We want to move up, physically, socially and economically. We want to move away, to start again, to do it better the next time around. We want to spread out, to stand apart, to express our individuality. It is not on the quarter-acre that we already own, but on one of the millions yet untaken that we dream about, believing that on it a good place to live and happiness will be found. Notions of rootedness, stability and permanence of place, which in many cultures are identified with good places to live and with urbanity, have been among Americans a less pressing matter.

Such yearnings for progress, mobility, individuality and space continue to determine thousands of choices for dwelling on the periphery of existing cities. Not surprisingly, municipal officials, town planners and mayors frequently remark on the diminishing urbanity within their towns. They decry the popularity of regional malls, lament the lack of activity along main street, worry about falling downtown investment and the migration of residents and businesses outward. They blame sprawl for their problems while envying the good fortune of prosperous suburbs.

In pondering how their towns might confront such challenges they often, paradoxically, outline a vision that emulates the perceived advantages of life on the periphery. It is not certain whether such emulation ever brings residents back to town, or merchants or places of work, but contributes to the erasure of distinctions between towns, suburbs, hamlets and other forms of settlement. Without its ramifications fully considered, such homogenization has also been an American goal.

Pondering human nature, Ralph Waldo Emerson often reflected on the difficulty of acquiring (much less maintaining) both "rural strength and religion" and "city facility and polish." Less philosophical by nature, nor inhibited by metaphysical opposites, town boosters before and especially since Emerson sought, and often claimed, to have overcome this difficulty. Their efforts to establish what others have ennobled as the "middle

landscape," "borderlands," "garden cities," "edge cities," or "greenfields" ultimately reinforce Emerson's doubts. The great swaths of development between the ever-receding country and the decongested town seem conducive to acquiring neither rural strength and religion nor city facility and polish.

So perhaps Woody Allen's claim that he is "two with nature" contains a useful insight about town design. The long-standing American yearning for a state of settlement in which the benefits of urbanity and nature are enjoyed simultaneously has been exposed as a form of fool's gold that devalues both town and country. To compete with their ever-spreading peripheries cities and towns might best maintain their own virtues. Under the leavening forces of rampant disaggregation, however, we need frequent reminders of what these virtues are.

Density. An essential ingredient of a town is its density, measured not in square feet but in the juxtaposition of artifice with human activity. "I have three chairs in my house," Thoreau wrote, "one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society." He may have preferred solitude but understood the civilizing force of aggregation. Density, as distinct from congestion, promotes engagement. Interaction, made possible by proximity, is crucial and far more difficult to sustain where things are spread out across great distance, e-mail notwithstanding. The photographer, Alfred Steiglitz, urged his students to move in a little closer, to crop their scene a little tighter, *after* they composed a shot. Similar advice would benefit those who build the American city. Outside of a few pockets of genuine congestion, greater proximity among buildings and activities would benefit sociability.

Propinquity. In an age promising ever more instant communication it is easy, but wrongheaded, to assume that physical proximity is no longer important. Each day some 75,000 people visit the Mall of America, located in Bloomington, Minnesota, conveniently outside both Minneapolis and St. Paul. Are they there merely to shop, or does the popularity of the place lie partially in enabling a primitive kind of propinquity to occur? Some do shop, while more seem to be riding the indoor roller coaster, posing with the giant Snoopy, building Lego castles and enjoying the crowd. Our need for contact with others is such that we will commute great distances to places like mall concourses, forgetting that they are but simulations of environments traditionally found in cities such as Minneapolis and St. Paul. The popularity of recreational shopping, tourism, theme parks, sporting events, specialized museums, trade shows, movie theaters (despite five hundred cable channels), even charity walk-a-thons, expresses a subliminal need for social contact—for the sheer pleasure of it.

Heterogeneity within an ordered fabric. This is a corollary to locating many things and activities close together. The beauty of Boston's Back Bay lies in the tension between the similarities and differences among the facades along a block, and the repetition of such blocks along streets which

themselves subtly differ in dimension, landscaping, edge definition and principal use. Buildings, like citizens, warrant their idiosyncrasies so long as each behaves civilly toward neighbors. Spaced at intervals of a half-acre or more, the need for civility lessens. There is a kind of illusion of autonomy about buildings spread over a vast landscape.

Juxtaposed realms. Lewis Mumford once defined a town as the place where the greatest numbers of choices are available in the smallest geographical area. Nodding approval, we go so far as to label "Central Business District" on our zoning maps and mix offices with shops. The demise of vital downtowns generally parallels the rise in the use of the term Central Business District. Why would anyone want to live, shop, dine, relax, meet a friend, cruise in a convertible, attend a concert, see a movie, go to school, take a walk with a sweetheart, or simply choose to hang out in a place called the Central Business District? Because our downtowns have become mere business districts their appeal diminishes even for businesses that eventually leave in search of environments that offer their employees a wider array of amenities. Instead of pining for the return of business interests to the downtown we should turn our attention to overcoming the absence of all other interests.

Neighbors unlike ourselves. Some of the most charming early suburbs, like Forest Hill Gardens in Queens or Roland Park in Baltimore, contained a rich mixture of dwelling sizes and clusters. Diversity in house types is more likely to accommodate diversity of social, economic and age groups. This is not particularly popular among contemporary suburban developers, many of whom cater their subdivisions to increasingly narrow segments of the population. A growing concern about such environments is that they breed indifference, or worse, intolerance, towards social groups beyond their gates. Such indifference is unlikely to enhance democracy. While towns were always made up of defined neighborhoods, and even enclaves, proximity among them, along with shared streets and public spaces, assured regular interaction. Such interaction, or the mere promise of it, remains one of the advantages of town life.

Social landmarks. A statue of President McKinley graces and organizes traffic in an otherwise graceless rotary in North Adams, Massachusetts. The center of Riverside, Illinois, one of the nation's earliest planned suburbs, is marked by a modest train depot and a beautiful water tower. Landmarks confer coherence and legibility, not status. They highlight things that are dear to a community—like remembering a president or the storage of water. They are not produced by labeling, or through form alone. This is apparently beyond the comprehension of those who name their shopping strip "Center Place," their office park "Landmark Square," and mark each with a faux campanile.

Texture, detail and narrative. The many buffalo gargoyles on the face of the city hall in Buffalo, New York are not only endearing, but relate a

place-name to an entire epoch of frontier urbanization. An old storefront in New Bedford, Massachusetts may carry reminders of ships, whaling and trade, not unlike a street in modern Tokyo that exhibits the near-cacophony of a culture obsessed with digital technology. Public environments benefit from such excesses. Robert Browning's "less is more" was not intended to describe a town's public realm. The aphorism's principal modern proponent, Mies van der Rohe, could also be heard to say, "God rests in the details." A preponderance of detail invested with qualities characteristic of a place was for Kevin Lynch essential to good city form. These details are what Italo Calvino's Marco Polo describes to Kubla Khan in order to make him see the cities of his travels.

Connectivity. Some of today's most frustrating rush hour snarls occur on the perimeter highways, which pass through the uncrowded suburbs. Arterial highways channel traffic and, therefore, limit choice. A network of streets, narrow, crooked and even redundant, provides actual choice and, more importantly, the promise of choice. On a congested highway relief is no closer than the next set of exit ramps, assuming one knows where they lead. By taking a quick left followed by a right while negotiating an urban street grid, a less busy parallel street is found, a traffic back-up may be avoided, a "short-cut" is imagined, a sense of control or freedom is maintained. This is an advantage that every city cabbie understands, but few highway engineers ever acknowledge.

Streetfronts. In a typical contemporary subdivision the elements furthest away from the street right-of-way seem to receive the greatest design attention. Unfortunately, this leaves much of what influences the experience of the public realm under-designed. On the inside of the fence in a Phoenix subdivision there are beautiful homes, immaculate lawns, wonderful terraces, decks and gardens. On the public side there is simply a road for circulation assumed to require none of the pleasures provided by fronting on a street, instead of an artery.

Immediacy of experience. Americans are known for their dislike of walking. Yet they actually walk hundreds of yards each day through parking lots, through shopping malls, through corridors of large buildings, through airport terminals. Much of this walking is caused by providing for the convenience of the automobile, and much of it is forgettable. In a car, or on foot, we commute to a destination. The suburban landscape seems to only offer destinations. But it is the seductions along an interesting path that make walking—and cities—enjoyable.

Sustainability, persistence, and adaptability. While few parts of any city warrant strict preservation, virtually all have potential for reuse. Unfortunately this is often overlooked in the zeal to build anew, usually somewhere else, under the dubious supposition that rebuilding will enable us to get it right the next time. The town of Southfield, a few miles north of Detroit, now boasts a daily commuter population greater than Detroit's.

Largely made up of office parks strung along a highway, Southfield's chief advantage seems to be that it is new and not Detroit. And so with each new Southfield a Detroit withers, but, one suspects, only temporarily. Long after the single-function office towers of Southfield become outmoded (or simply less new and less profitable) enough of the infrastructure, street grid, building stock, cultural institutions, historic monuments, and neighborhood domains of Detroit will have survived to initiate, perhaps even inspire, reuse. The archetypal suburban landscape, with its coarse grain of development, relative absence of history, and single-use zoning has yet to prove as adaptable to changing social habits or needs.

Overlapping boundaries. A city is like a stacking of translucent quilts, with layers of social, architectural and geographical strata sometimes carefully, sometimes imperfectly registered. Subtle or precise, such overlapping of precincts is crucial to place-making. An environment without perceivable boundaries is amorphous, indistinguishable from its surroundings and generally place-less. This is sadly characteristic of much of the modern metropolitan landscape. With apologies to Robert Frost, good fences may not insure good neighbors but neither does their absence foster connectivity or communality.

Public life. A large downtown shopping mall is a marvel of design and a magnet for activity. But a careful observer will note the limited range of activities that takes place inside. You will be ushered out unto the street for behavior deemed inappropriate by the management. On that street, lowly or grand, you have rejoined the town. In a city the sense of proximity to a public realm remains palpable, with standards of acceptable public behavior discreetly reinforced. An urban environment cherishes this relative openness and, therefore, yields to privatization only with considerable reluctance.

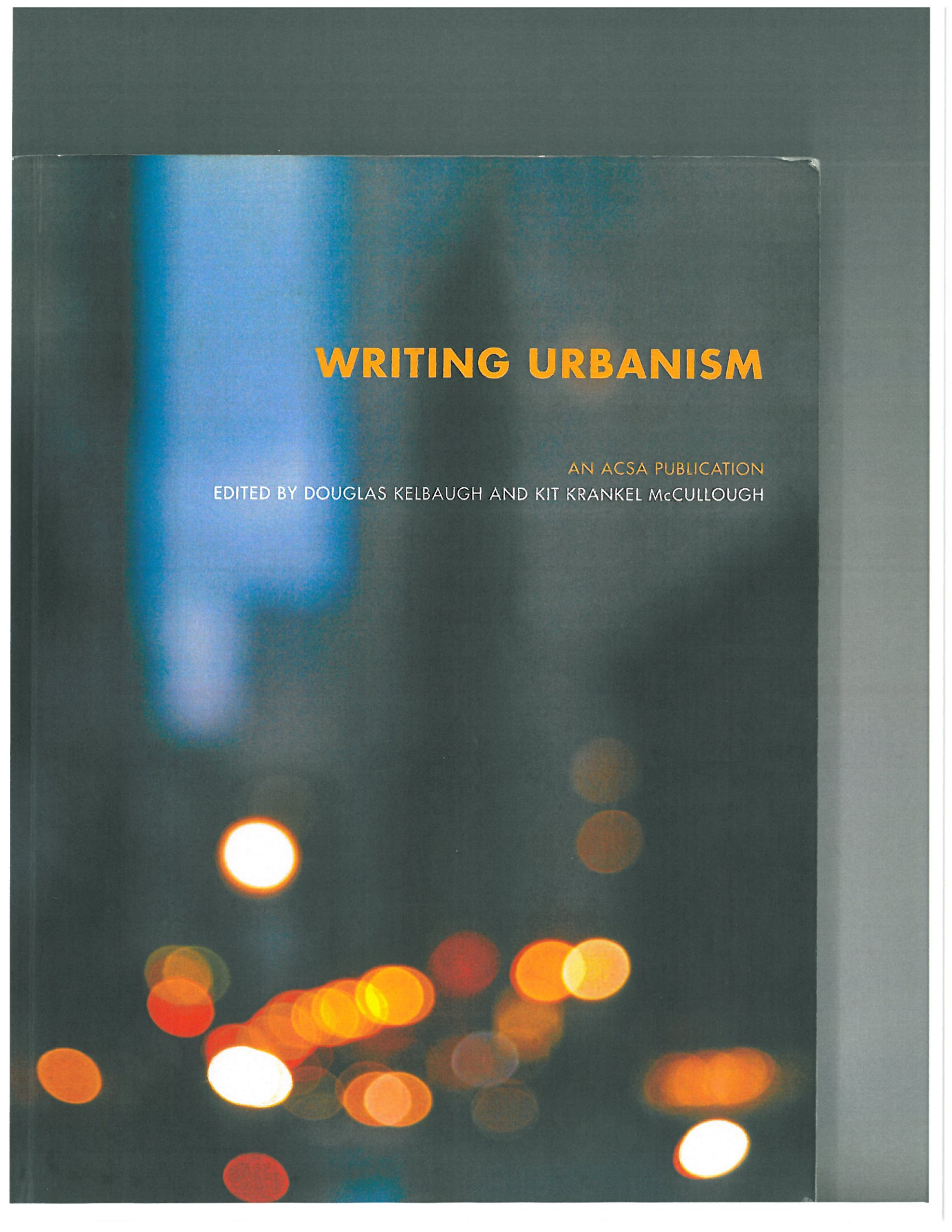
The potential for a centered life. Against most planners' predictions, Los Angeles—the proverbial score of suburbs in search of a town—has recently grown a visible downtown. It is really mostly a collection of corporate office towers, the product of speculative land economics at work. Yet perhaps there is something in human nature that seeks comfort in centering, and such vertical outcroppings of commerce satisfy that impulse, at least scenographically. While there may be fewer economic and technological reasons for concentration, the new Los Angeles downtown or, for that matter, the continuing reinvestment in Boston's much older center, are expressions of support for centering—concentration as a matter of choice rather than as an historic imperative.

There are those who believe that we will continue to disaggregate, leaving cities to live in closer proximity to the splendors of nature, with technology providing a modicum of (digital) social contact. Then how does one explain the invention of the "internet" cafe? Will not the very convenience of being able to perform most daily errands, most work functions and most business transactions from the privacy of our own homes (or anywhere else for that

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matter) compel us to escape the attendant disengagement from society? Retarding isolation will remain the special virtue of the contemporary city. In it, and nowhere else as poignantly, a citizen can still partake of the pleasures of overlap, the pleasures of proximity, the pleasures of propinquity.

This essay is abridged from the original, which first appeared in Places: Forum of Design for the Public Realm, September 1995.

The background of the cover is a dark, textured surface. A vertical blue light streak is on the left side. The bottom half of the cover is filled with numerous out-of-focus light spots in shades of orange, yellow, and white, resembling city lights or bokeh.

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