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Caring for Places: Memory, Vision and Metropolis

Places are infused with memories. They range from incidents of personal biography to highly refined and extensively interpreted cultural lore, and they are vested in the forms, the refinements of ornament, and the patterns of social encounter with which a place is made. These elements, which are based in understandings shared by participants in a culture, are given specific interpretation in a particular place. Good places are sticky...they attract and hold associations for those who live among them.

Memory is at work in the ways we encounter and experience buildings and spaces in everyday life. Place, I have contended, is space that can be remembered—that you can hold in the mind and think about. It is this capacity for being held in the mind that allows places to accrue significances that are both intimate and public. They dwell in the minds of individuals, yet they also help in the development of shared conceptions that bind our thoughts together. The case of the metropolitan landscapes that are emerging around us is more complex. We can think of New York, or Chicago, or Tokyo as places, but we also know in that instant that they are multiple places—that there are spaces there which we shall never know, yet which live in the minds of their inhabitants as cherished places.

We also know that these myriad places are bound into recognizable entities. Usually, they are bound up with images that characterize the whole and become ways of thinking about the future. Such images may enable; they may also obscure. Thus, the sparkling media and great cultural resources and parks of New York City bring before us an image of glittering promise. But they also sweep from our mind the poverty and degradation lodged in the same metropolitan spread. Encompassing images also can change. Thus, the wastelands of abandoned industrial cities, which have served as abiding symbols of despair, are now being considered for the opportunities they afford. Shrinkage is being reclaimed as open space for recreation, reforestation, and the recovery of vital, large-scale ecological connections.

The troubling insular fragmentation of urban development when examined with a generous, encompassing view, can be seen as containing interstices of opportunity within the metropolitan spread—interstices that can yet be considered as parts of a larger whole. Assembled with purpose and vision, these can become watersheds, or habitat regions, or networks of urban open space that support a variety of forms of life, including freer, more expansive versions of our own.

Constellations of intimate spaces and memories, traced with comprehending scope and projected with clarity, can become the source for both change and continuity. They can help us navigate the “ecological democracy” envisioned by Randolph Hester, or lead us to the “livable streets” called for by our founding editor, Donald Appleyard, in his book of forty years ago. Peter Bosselmann, guest editor of this issue, guides an expansion of this exploration by helping us face a burgeoning metropolitan future and find lines of optimism tracing through it.

The fecundity of nature, the investment of caring attention (both personal and communal), the diverse imaginative reach of a multitude of minds: these, when brought to our attention and made a part of our lives, can subvert, we must hope, even the maniacally destructive impulses of ideologues—whatever their banners.

—*Donlyn Lyndon*