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Getting Things Done in Messy Cities

John de Monchaux

Cities are messy places, and on the whole they work well because of that messiness. As urban designers and planners we confront this attribute of cities with a mixture of respect and dismay. Our respect flows from a sense of wonder at the richness of pattern and opportunity presented by the city. Our dismay arises when we contemplate the demands of getting done the kinds of things we want to see happen in the midst of this messiness. My proposition is that more effective ways of getting things done are more likely to emerge if we accept and use in a positive way the fact that cities are intrinsically messy places. In putting forward this idea I am seeking a construct for the city that more aptly captures its complexity without constraining the realm of actions that can be taken to make it a place of greater quality and opportunity. The construct used in thinking about cities shapes the evidence we seek of the condition to be solved and through process of association implies the nature of remedies that might be adopted. I would argue that the messy city provides a departure point for our imaginations that can lead to more complex, more enabling urban design.

A first association with the notion of cities as messy places could understandably be toward the negative connotations of the word “messy.” Indeed the formal definitions of the word seem to support such a reaction:

1. “Marked by confusion, disorder and dirt,” such as an untidy room;

2. “Lacking in neatness or precision,” such as slovenly thinking; and
3. “Tryingly difficult of execution,” such as a lawsuit.

To reveal the positive or creative side of messiness, let me turn each of these definitions around:

1. A seemingly untidy room may be more creatively seen as one organized to afford an accessible, serendipitous environment, one in which the juxtaposition of objects, their associations in memory, one with the other, their visibility and the ready access to them all are attributes of, and congruent with, quality in a city.
2. Something that lacks apparent neatness or precision as we value or expect it to be can in fact be displaying the power and order of chaos, and as a number of recent authors have shown us, there are rich and telling explanations for the world to be found in constructs that accommodate chaos.
3. A process that is tryingly difficult can in itself be a description of the very real and necessary complexity of relationships and of the hard work that has to go into addressing that complexity if we are to achieve consensus.

Thus, I would like to encourage a positive or creative view of messiness. If we can foster an affection for messy situations and engage with the city as an intrinsically messy artifact, then I believe we will be better placed not only to find more appropriate ways to intervene to achieve quality in the built environment, but also to extend the

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repertoire of our interventions. Seeing the city constructively as a messy place will caution us against single-dimension interventions that might, for example, be about tidying it up such as urban renewal or the segregation of housing by income level or tenure type.

Let me reinforce the argument a little by reference to a recent article by Professor Tom Malone of the MIT School of Management that addresses the subject of “the messy desk.”¹ In it he demonstrates, with a good deal of plausibility, the many virtues of a messy desk including, for example, ways in which the “piles and files” on the desk allow us to spontaneously reorder information and understandings to suit new priorities. He suggests that the way in which a messy desk is kept allows easy access, consistent with memory and association, as well as unexpected and sometimes quite fruitful accidental relationships.

Messy places are complex. They are the products of freedom and change across time. They are the fruit of exhausting negotiations and sometimes painful trade-offs. They are the work of many authors using many criteria.

Let me contrast messy places with places acknowledged as unattractive in cities, the waste dumps, the billboards, the graffiti, or the web of overhead power lines. The difference is that these places, which are unsightly, are much more likely to be the products of singular events. They are the works of single

authors, using simple criteria, freer from the weight of negotiation and trade-off, producing results that are regarded uniformly as negative and not contributing to the quality of the city. I do not want to confuse unsightly places with the construct of the city as an intrinsically messy place.

Not only can city places and forms be seen as messy in a positive way, so too can city-making processes be positively regarded as messy. We all see public involvement processes, such as the conduct of an environmental-impact review or the procedure for interdepartmental examination of a project, as intrinsically messy. These are complex processes, engaging many, involving trade-offs across plural value systems. They are messy processes from which we extract an order to reduce the problem to terms around which agreement can be reached. By contrast, a process that we regard as unsightly or unseemly, such as graft, is a much tidier process involving a very limited number of participants and relying upon easy agreement to a single value system.

If we think of the city as an intrinsically messy place, what might be the corresponding ways to “get things done”? As urban designers and planners we need to understand and recommend practical approaches to achieve change in the messy city. Four examples of such approaches seem to me to be a good match for the complexity of the messy city. I have named them as follows:

1. The bold but long-term gesture
2. The trading-floor approach
3. The garden-fence negotiation
4. The high-yield intervention

The Bold but Long-Term Gesture

There is an abiding case for the skilled introduction of larger systems of infrastructure to bring an elegant ordering frame to the messy city. Such large-scale elements of infrastructure are often the most appropriate way to address the abuse of some of the city’s natural systems such as its air or water quality. But we must be prepared to conceive of these pieces of infrastructure as needing sustained support across generations of citizens and planners. The logic and robustness of their design need to be unassailable, and they need also to carry a boldness and coherence that can capture the imagination again and again.

Two examples in Boston come to mind. One is the massive park and drainage system conceived by Frederick Law Olmsted in the nineteenth century, to which we give the name “The Emerald Necklace.” This sophisticated but deeply imageable combination of hydraulic and access infrastructure took two generations to establish in recognizable form and required extraordinary patience and resilience on the part of its advocates. Another, more recent example in Boston is the newly completed Southwest Corridor transit line and its associated opportunities for development in the poorer areas of Boston. This is a transit line on an

alignment purchased 25 years ago for a freeway. It is also a linear park occupying the surplus right-of-way between the narrow path required by the transit line and the wide swath originally set aside for the highway. The process leading to the public commitment to build the park and transit line was bitter and protracted—i.e., messy. The result brings a remarkable set of new opportunities to a previously underserved area of the city.

The Trading-Floor Approach

If we see the city as a web of complex transactions not always understood, not always revealed, the mechanisms that help sort out the information used, that help reveal the values that influence the trade-offs, that leave a clear trace of the actions taken, are more likely to be fruitful ways of getting things done.

In conditions where decisions are to be taken by many individuals, each with access to a great deal of information, it has been suggested that hierarchical approaches to decisions work far less well than decision mechanisms that emulate the working of a market, where it is possible to gather and exchange information with great economy and to share this with many others in a common currency. We then enable better informed decisions by all participants in the process.

One historic example that comes to mind in this regard is the introduction of the Torrens system for

recording title to land. This system is universal, accessible, and extraordinarily direct, yet it records sufficiently, but no more than sufficiently, the data needed to reassure purchasers of a piece of land of their entitlement to it.

A mechanism of recent invention in Boston to address the complex nature of the transactions that go into an urban design decision is the creation of the Boston Civic Design Commission. The Civic Design Commission acts as an accessible public forum for the consideration of all comments and reactions to new guidelines for urban design in the city. It also holds a public review of all new development proposals from the public or private sector that will have a significant impact on the public realm. The Commission has no statutory powers and is to render its advice to the mayor in an entirely advisory way. The ordinance that created it, however, does require that if the mayor chooses to ignore the Commission's recommendations, he or she has to provide a written account of the reasons why.²

This is a mechanism of exchange and response, each event in which leaves behind a clear trace of argument and reason relating to urban design proposals. The buildup of a web of argument and counterargument will, it is hoped, provide a rich body of case law on urban design matters for the city that is accessible, defended, and subject to continuing change and responsiveness.

The Garden-Fence Negotiation

A third type of mechanism to get things done in the messy city are mechanisms that allow the resolution of an issue to occur at a very fine grain of consideration without requiring reference to unnecessarily ponderous and possibly arbitrary public decision processes. Obviously such mechanisms should apply to matters that are relatively free from wider externalities—that don't involve effects on the community as a whole. Pearce, writing in 1981 in *Town Planning Review*, suggested the possible nature of such mechanisms, in his article on the use of development rights, rather than development control, wherein exchanges can take place between consenting parties that will shape those aspects of a new development such as covenants for access or rights to light.³ Another mechanism that has the attribute of allowing for very fine grain resolution of complex problems is the use of the tools of mediation and negotiation, currently enjoying a great deal of favor in the United States for the resolution of environmental disputes. In a messy city it may well be the case that there is no right answer to a development proposal but only an answer that through patient negotiation reconciles the widest set of contending views.

The High-Yield Intervention

A fourth type of mechanism appropriate to getting things done in messy cities are those that achieve a high yield for relatively low effort.

If in a messy city we observe actions that many people take or motives that many people share and we can attach a system of rewards or sanctions to the actions that are taken by many, then the yield in terms of the quality of urban design can be enormous. The 1968 historic preservation tax legislation in the United States is a current example of such high-yielding, low-effort, incentive mechanisms. With a very small increase in staff at the Internal Revenue Service and tax code changes such as to the depreciation period that applied to investments in historic buildings, the prospects for the survival of such buildings were changed overnight with remarkable and positive results. Information strategies are another example of a mechanism that achieves high yield on low effort. The Essex County *Design Guide* is of course a classic example of such an information strategy, which placed an accessible and engaging document in the hands of designers, builders, and reviewers of new residential buildings to very positive effect.⁴

Summary

These four approaches to getting things done, and there are certainly others, share a number of attributes. Each seeks to inspire and inform rather than threaten; the latter three are all aimed at a fine grain of action and transaction; each calls for extensive sharing of reliable information about the actions contemplated and their effects; and each relies upon

determined patience and clear vision.

As urban designers and planners a potentially rewarding perspective we can have of the city, if we seek change and improvement and a greater certainty of achieving it, is to think of the city as an intrinsically messy place. It is, incidentally, a perspective that can be shared by all of the city's people as well as by those working for it and toward its improvement. The complexity of messiness enables a wider view of problems and a wider inventory of plausible interventions by time, resources, and place, as well as by wit and imagination. To think of cities as messy places will properly caution us against the use of exclusive, unidimensional, or egocentric actions. To respect the messiness of cities encourages the opportunity for pluralistic actions that not only will serve the very diverse interests of the city's people, but in the end, I maintain, will give greater delight and reward.

Notes

- 1 Thomas W. Malone, "How Do People Organize Their Desks? Implications for the Design of Office Information Systems," *ACM Transactions on Office Systems*, vol. 1, no. 1, January 1983, pages 99–112.
- 2 Article 28 of the Boston Zoning Code (approved in June 1986) sets out the role and composition of the Boston Civic Design Commission. As of September 1988 the Commission is still awaiting passage of state legislation that will enable it to meet without risk of contravening Commonwealth of Massachusetts conflict of interest laws.
- 3 B. J. Pearce, "Property Rights vs. Develop-

ment Control: A Preliminary Evaluation of Alternative Planning Policy Instruments," *Town Planning Review*, vol. 52, no. 1, January 1981, pp. 47–60.

- 4 Essex County Council, *A Design Guide for Residential Areas*, May 1973.