Peer Reviewed

Title:
Laminations in the Cityscape [Forum]

Journal Issue:
Places, 12(2)

Author:
Campbell, Robert, American Institute of Architects, Committee on Design

Publication Date:
1999

Publication Info:
Places

Permalink:
http://escholarship.org/uc/item/0d61z41s

Acknowledgements:
This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe, visit www.places-journal.org. For reprint information, contact places@berkeley.edu.

Keywords:
places, placemaking, architecture, environment, landscape, urban design, public realm, planning, design, forum, laminations, cityscape, Palais Royale, Fondation Cartier, Paris, Boston, AIA

Copyright Information:
All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author or original publisher for any necessary permissions. eScholarship is not the copyright owner for deposited works. Learn more at http://www.escholarship.org/help_copyright.html#reuse
"Paris is elephants and parrots." That was a saying of my one-time boss, architect Joseph W. Selig. The long rows of six- to ten-story, whitish-grey buildings, humped at the top with their mansards, were the elephants. The bright dashes of color at the street—paraphernalia, awnings, posters—were the parrots. He loved the effect and tried to emulate it in his own work, splashing spots of color against gray concrete.

I thought of this again during the visit of the AIA Committee on Design in June. When brought to mind was the perception, by Baton Phelps, FAIA, of the laminar quality of the Paris streetscape. Once you've seen it, you can't miss it.

On our trip up the St. Martin Canal, we could make out as many as six slices of space between the water and the building facades, each delineated by a row of fences. Phelps calls them "precisely controlled layers of space and movement and propriety that, in their overall unity, might be thought of as being laminated." Parrots and elephants are laminar too, like a row of ducks in a shooting gallery moving against a neutral background.

In Paris, layers slide past each other as you move through the city, like stage flats, very strongly so in a place like the Palace Royale, where the environment establishes a way of seeing people as theater. In a newer example, the Fondation Cartier, the laminar principle was adopted as a mannered and literal expression by a contemporary architect, who erected a giant screen in front of his building. I've often had occasion to compare Paris with my own city of Boston. The two cities—the cities proper, excluding suburbs—comprise about the same area, depending on how much water you count. Yet Paris is home to about five times as many people, although Boston is much denser than most American cities. Paris achieves its greater density without any great sense of crowding and without, for the most part, intimidating its inhabitants with tall buildings. The price you pay is smaller rooms at home; the prize you gain is a correspondingly increase in the size and richness of the public realm, which becomes, as it seldom is in the U.S., truly part of where you live.

The population density of Paris brings many benefits. It supports continuous shopping on almost every major street. It supports some 280 Métro stops (compared to Boston's 56). And many people live near their work, reducing the pressure of commuting. Best of all, of course, it makes the public realm of the city feel alive and fully inhabited.

There's an obvious relation between this density and the laminar quality of the streetscape. In Paris, people live close packed. Definition of space becomes important. Because the path from the private world to the public world is a short one, the thresholds along the way matter immensely. With such a richness, you move a step closer to the public realm—your door, your stairwell, your courtyard, your concierge, your own street, then the big street that runs by at the corner. A Parisian's trip is much shorter than an American's is likely to be, and therefore each step, each threshold is more insistently defined. Hence the laminar of space.

Laminar takes other forms. Parisians typically live in a poussé-cats world of horizontally layered apartments; whereas such apartments first appeared in American cities, they were called French flats. The British or Dutch, by contrast, traditionally live in a bookshelf world of vertical layers called terrace houses. In keeping with this national trait, British architects tend to solve their problems by elaborating the section, French this plan. The bookshelf
performs the self-contained independence of each family unit, as well as its hierarchies (stairs, downstairs). The horizontal flat, often sandwiched with other flats, used for commercial or institutional purposes, suggests a more anonymous, less perhaps more extended, family identity.

There are also limitations in time, what Kevin Lynch called "temporal collage: the row on the new, as at Parc de la Villette, which resembles a computer-generated overlaying of one system on another; the row on the old, as at the Louvre, the Viaduc des Arts or, most remarkably, at the Maison de l’Arme, with its concrete block facade inlaid into stucco Paris, the old on the new, as at the Centre Cultural Suisse, where old architectural skins of no special merit are maintained as a memory, then filled with new life, and everywhere, of course, the old on the older.

Sometimes the collage works, but not always. At Parc de Bercy (another symphony of thresholds) old railroad tracks were left in the paving of the new park. The remains of the old were deliberate quotation, not giddy survival, and you felt you couldn’t make your own discoveries, that every experience had been pre-ensconced by the designers. At la Villette, the empty red pavilions felt lonely and toy-like, a staid model train set existing in a conceptual grid that defined neither time nor place. At Cité Balzac, as Don Schön, FAIA, put it, we saw a "medieval order sanitized, as the latest evolution" in imagining Paris—the expression, but not the realization, of a longing for physical community.

Our "Cross Sections in Time and Place" were taken through many such Luminations. What are the lessons for Americans? One, I would think, is that city planning isn’t always a bad idea. Only powerful, well-financed and sometimes ruthless central planning could pull off the successes of Paris, especially the interstitching parts and the munificent public transit. You have to admire, too, the willingness to plunge in and mince, and the understanding that a city must embody a promise for the future as well as a memory of the past. But, at the same time, you wonder if a dose of the chaos of American citizen participation might not have helped here and there, as at the new Bibliothèque Nationale, a building driven more by ideas than by experience, a witty Mithraic reversal of Le Corbusier’s towers in a park, it’s a sad park in towers.

If there’s another lesson, one we need, it’s simply that cities do come back. The Marais quarter, where we spent much of our time, was a notorious slum as late as the middle of this century. Perhaps all great older neighborhoods today were once, by the standards of our time, slums. Paris shows us that you don’t need to knock them down. But you needn’t be afraid to mess with them, either.

Robert Campbell, FAIA, is architecture critic for the Boston Globe.