

Scenes of the Urbane Vernacular: Meaning and Figuration in a Minor Mode

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INTRODUCTION

To confront, both analytically and analogically, the difficult existence of urban form in the American landscape may, in fact, be one way to engage the survival of an American *artform* of city building. By focusing on pre-Modernism's vernacular sites, I believe we trace the representational limits but also the softer, figurative contours of American urban formation. In fact, the vernacular has provided throughout history an experimental site of "civic art" in America. Its study brings to urban theory today a *working ambivalence* as far as the practice of city building is concerned in its search for a meaningful framework beyond nostalgic imitation. We should look back upon the urbane vernacular as a mode of knowledge through which urban or civic meaning is embodied through figuration rather than through form.¹

CIVIC ART IN THE GUISE OF THE VERNACULAR

The American landscape has always been caught in a double bind for the city has appeared throughout history as an anachronistic as well as an inevitable form. For instance, in the early history of colonization, under the economies of ephemeral settlement and expedient desires, the western Main Street metonymically refashioned an archetypal urban impulse. Examples from the more recent past in the artwork of Saul Steinberg, from his collection *The Discovery of America*,² present the familiar patterns of the vernacular scene. As critical images, Steinberg's drawings convey at the same time the strangeness and naturalness urban forms seem to embody in the vernacular landscape — landscapes, it should be noted, that are rapidly disappearing today, outmoded under new economic pressures and social trends.

From examples such as these, however, we learn of the persistent if indeed fragile nature of the discipline of civic art. To follow Walter Benjamin, however, it is precisely in outmoded landscapes that we find the traces of a critical discipline. The vernacular is a dialectical landscape that transcends the American dilemma of city building. There can we truly understand Aldo Rossi when he writes of the

American scene: "the contributions of, and the intersection with European experience here, have created an 'analogous city' of unexpected meaning."³ The urbane vernacular is not so much a model of urban practice than an optical tool through which the latent and figurative structures of urban meaning are revealed.

What is often neglected in contemporary vernacular studies is the strife between vernacular forms and their disciplinary opposite, the urbane forms of European origin. In the fascination critics have held for the vernacular, from J.B. Jackson's incisive excursions to Venturi's theory of strip symbolism, none of yet have come to terms with the conflict — the figurative conflict — still present in most towns and cities. Cultural critics have generally been more sensitive to the inborn struggles with European precedents, questioning the breath and purity of indigenous developments.⁴ As a vernacular enterprise, the American city is as much a struggle with European precedents as it is their ruin. Though to speak through Benjamin again, we might admit that the ruin the American city presents us with points not to the fatal decay of the idea of the city but to what is precisely natural about it.⁵ Dialectically, the inherited concepts of urban form remain today as they have since the beginning of colonization always at once present and absent, distant and close.

What becomes of the art of city building when the aesthetic discipline finds potent representations in the minor and mostly unauthored forms of the vernacular scene? To appreciate the quality of urban meaning as it lies embedded in vernacular form it is necessary to theorize the passage from high models of urban form to vernacular ones, to trace and name "genealogies" whose mechanisms reveal the figurative structures of American urban formation.

DERIVATIONS AND REPLICATIONS

The passage from high architectural styles to vernacular form, or from major to minor contexts of building, is commonplace and not limited to the American scene. One well-illustrated demonstration of the more intricate relations between the urbane and the vernacular, or between major and

minor architecture, is provided by Richard Goy in a book on the palazzetti of the Venetian lagoon.⁶ The axiomatic character of the Venetian palazzo serves as a "prime object," in George Kubler's sense, for the particular workings of a vernacular building practice: the canonical Venetian palace, a type developed through the political and social economy of the thriving central city-state, became through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the object of what Goy calls "derivations." In what were basically typological and figurative analogies, "the lesser strata of society" from Venice's outlying neighborhoods emulated through their architecture the cultural standing of the Republic's elite, forming a chain of architectural references into the far regions of Venice's satellite communities. Erecting scaled-down versions of the major typological expressions of cultural wealth, the smaller lagoon communities generated a practice of vernacular building wholly contingent upon what were explicitly urbane characteristics.

On a general level of architectural praxis, this lineage of representational intentionality, from a major to a minor expression of building, is a common formative trope. A particular desire for the city, be it in the satellite communities of Venice or in western mining towns in America, finds expression in the architectural fancies of typological mimesis or representational aggrandizement. However deceitful the urban qualities are, these qualities still show where architecture consents to a function beyond its autonomous requirements of form, reproducing the representational figure of the city.

Contrary to the European tradition Goy exposes, however, it might be admitted that on American soil the translation from a high to a popular architectural form is only half a process of hybridization, for in many ways the translations also function the other way around. The cultural landscape here has certainly abused the clear material hierarchy and typological scales fashioned by the simple economy of building industries and trades of Renaissance Venice for instance. Styles and types of architecture have been, almost from the outset of colonization, free-floating signifiers both in the early domestication of the continent's wilderness and later in the mimetic designs (at both large and small scales) of civic and urban institutional building. As Richard Longstreth has shown, the American typologies of nineteenth and early twentieth-century commercial architecture also demonstrate a historical cross-referencing between vernacular building and high-style architecture.⁷

One way of theorizing a significant architectural tradition in American cities is to describe the process George Hersey has called "free-replication."⁸ Contrary to European models, Hersey notes, the siting, shell, scale, type, and interiors of American architecture have become more fluid concepts, less reciprocally related to one another. Hersey has found a specifically urbane tradition in American building where the dialogical relationships between the building and its context, or between a building's inside and outside, are conspicuously warped. The ties to urban and architectural models

from Europe have become strained through a chain of replications that has fragmented the formal and hierarchical whole of European heritage into discrete and quasi-autonomous entities.

The re-assembly or free-replication of these basic components of architecture into new configurations has significantly altered the city as the site and constitutive fabric of architecture. Confounding traditional urban form, however, replications and derivations never shed all traces of their primary object of transformation: the city is in fact indexed to almost all vernacular experiments in American history. Similarly to how Goy found the Venetian vernacular to be an emulation of grand urban types, it is instructive to view the American urbane vernacular as derivative of the greater tradition of continental models, the expression, albeit never a direct re-presentation, of a remainder of classical urban form ("replication replicated," as Hersey muses).

REPRESENTATION OR FIGURATION

The appreciation of a vernacular art urban must be based on a recognition of the tension that exists between the desire for the city and its constant vexation, between an antagonism toward the city and its structural historicity — tensions embedded in the vernacular. Furthermore, that appreciation must be animated by a discriminating and analytical mindset in reading the exceptional context of the vernacular city. Of this requirement Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, provides an appropriate metaphor when he distinguishes between appreciating the value of a modern text versus that of a classical novel.⁹ The two approaches to "reading" Barthes details are also operative in the realm of American urban form: "Read slowly, read all of a novel by Zola, and the book will drop from your hands; read fast, in snatches, some modern text, and it becomes opaque, inaccessible..."¹⁰ Following Barthes, we might say that the American city is a modern text fashioned out of classical or anachronistic signifiers.

A quick or surface glance, then, over the urban qualities of many American cities, prompts an initial rebuking of the formal or representational value of the city; the urban qualities appear opaque and inaccessible. But as Barthes admonishes, the "layers of significance" will be obtained from a weightier apperception: "to graze, to browse scrupulously, to rediscover" what exists only, at times, by proxy.¹¹ To appreciate the quality of American urban form an "applied reading" is required, one that starts to trace out and acknowledge where and how the city finds expression as a construct, both in itself as well as through its architecture; to grace at once the ambiguous presence and generic absence of urban form as a value of this idiosyncratic expression; to detect in its vernacular form the scintillating dialectic of the city as a figure forged within a middle ground of existence.

Pursuing Barthes' exegesis of pleasure, a further distinction between the classic and modern text unfolds in an opposition between "representation" and "figuration"; an

operative distinction that helps theorize how meaning attached to conventional urban forms is conveyed through forms that depart from, transgress, disturb in any case the canonical models of urbanity without abandoning the figure of the city as a working stencil for the compliance of architecture to the larger, public values inherent to urban form.

Representation, for Barthes, is a negative technique, or "*embarrassed figuration*." Through representation, meaning is encumbered with a tautological identity between a desire and the direct, unmediated treatment of that desire (like the desire for a classical city represented through classical models of urbanity). For Barthes, representation translates a literary production "when nothing emerges, when nothing leaps out of the frame: of the picture, the book, the screen."¹² Representation betrays a grand scheme (like the city as a normative project), it carries a righteousness that imposes itself aggressively, and much too literally, into the space of a text.

Figuration, on the contrary, eschews a purely imitative relation between an object, an idea, or a quality and its textual representation. Amid the practices of figuration, the pleasure in reading for Barthes is the discovery of the literary production itself, where the abstract qualities of texture take on the form of a body, take on the grain of the voice, where significance is not sought in some transcendent and abstract purity of intention, but in the gritty happenings of language — as much in its shipwreck as in its celebration.

As it applies to urban form, figuration entails a practice where the artform of city making enters into a genuine material dialogue with the historical happenings of urban form, where the city is rediscovered through the particular derivations and replications through which its forms have passed, disturbing the normative models of urbanity.

TROWBRIDGE REPLICATION, NEW HAVEN

An early nineteenth-century example of a speculative urban development in New Haven testifies to the power of signification embedded in a vernacular case of figuration. It should be noted that the specific character of New Haven's 1638 nine-square plan with its central Green is already that of an urban figure invested with meanings well beyond those associated with the expedient qualities of the common gridiron plan.¹³ New Haven's nine squares have become, in fact, a concentrate of the history of the city.

In a southern development of New Haven the city's nine-square plan was manifestly understood as a discrete figure and intentionally reproduced as a signifying configuration. Trowbridge Square was laid out as the central public space in a miniature replication of the nine square configuration of New Haven's founding plan (see figure 1). Initially called Spireworth Square, the name, as Elizabeth Brown notes, alludes to "a slender spindling sort of grass that grows only in poor soil," an appellation which characteristically underscores the expressive intention of the plan's figurative miniaturization.¹⁴

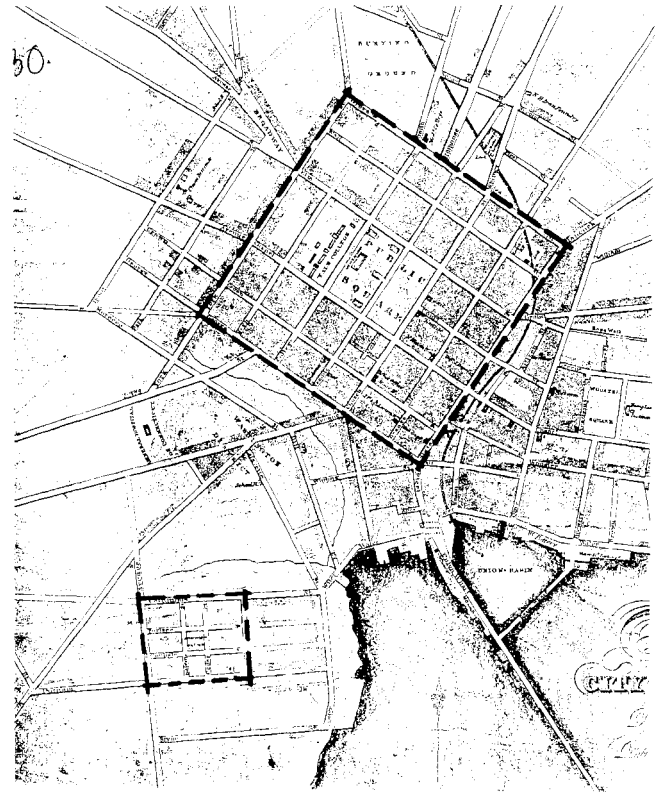


Fig. 1. New Haven's original nine-square plan and the Trowbridge development, 1830.

The conscious replication, however, also points to the discursive potential of urban figuration: Trowbridge Square and its attendant eight blocks, while they concede in their depreciated scale to a formal and political hierarchy with the constructed authority of central New Haven also undermine the uniqueness and preciousness of the founding city plan. Contingent upon the meaning and significance of that plan, the Trowbridge Replication literally figures itself into a dialogue with it. The Trowbridge Replication is the uncanny return of the urban history of New Haven upon itself like a disturbing and distorting mirror held up to the sanctity of "Elm City."

In the heart of a working-class neighborhood where old Victorian homes are not infrequent, the square is mainly bordered by small, single family bungalows. Trowbridge Square has preserved the two-story, white clapboard composition of a historic New England Green. Four of the corners are marked by outstanding buildings, which only discretely and indecisively superimpose the bare edges of a formal square on that of the less constricted Green. This double condition of the square, caught between the major replication of New Haven's canonical figure and the minor, unassuming quality of its architecture, is a remarkable instance of the blurring of figurative systems into a discursive and intense urban setting. The red brick, corner tenement building is alone a reminder of another urban order, and all the necessary evidence to represent the figurative tension inlaid around Trowbridge Square (see figures 2, 3).



Fig. 2. Aerial view of Trowbridge Replication

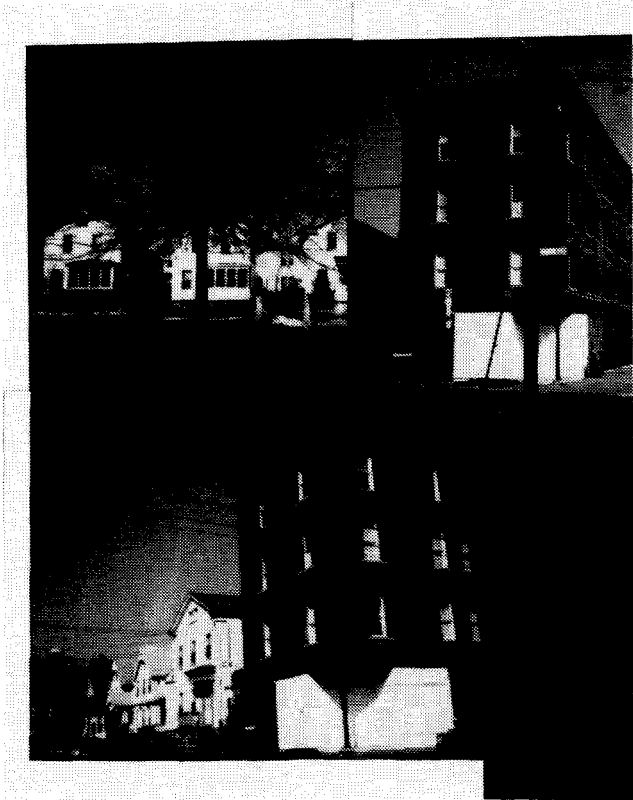


Fig. 3. Corner tenement building, Trowbridge Replication

With the church and school sited at the edge of this miniaturized nine-square configuration, turning their backs to the central square, the formal and institutional hierarchies that have described the character of New Haven's Green for centuries now are at least inverted.¹⁵ While there is no evidence to the claim that through formal analogy the planning was intentionally transgressive — the categories of progressive urban planning in the 1830s could hardly be

called polemical and the economies of the neighborhood would explain away much speculation — the result today is instructive precisely because of the clear distinctions that over time have stamped the two nine-square grids. In the replication of New Haven's unique grid Trowbridge Square forces the history of the city to expression. In the figurative use of the characteristic grid this example demonstrates how urban form can be enlisted to appropriate, challenge perhaps, redirect in any case the forms and contents of urban history.

This small urban ensemble signifies through two common semiotic devices: through the replication of a known and signifying form (the nine squares) and through the recognizable processes of transformation through which the form is channeled (the change of scale, the inversions). In addition, however, the meaning of the Trowbridge Replication transcends the purely abstract qualities associated with such common urban or architectural means of expression: the play of figures here involves the form and history of the city as a whole. The grain of New Haven, the gritty happenings of its history and in particular the hierarchies and values embodied in its founding plan, all this and more is conveyed and "re-figured," not through the imitation of form per se but through a process of figurative distancing. Trowbridge Replication is as much a celebration of New Haven's urban history as it is its critique.

In the analytical model of figure/ground representation, it is evident here that the ground, that is the historical texture of New Haven, becomes as significant an entity in the process of meaning as does the particular form of the nine-square figure itself. Powerful urban meanings are set in motion through expressive devices that have little to do with classical or archetypal models of urban form. Modes of vernacular expression, derivations and replications — in that they play on the two registers of figure and ground at the same time — have that capacity to construct "meaning"-ful city form.

CONCLUSION

Contemplating the urbane vernacular, a contemporary practice engaged in figuration would only draw the idea of the city closer through a partial and fragmentary expression of a dismantled tradition. It would acknowledge and appreciate that any inherent truth or value attributable to the idea of the city as a stable organism of meaning is in principal lost.

Nonetheless, to take note of typological and representational derivations and replications; to recall the prime object of a series of mutations; at a smaller scale, to take pleasure in the traces of authored gestures in anonymous vernacular building, and in the vernacular inflections of urbane characteristics; finally, to find the figures of the city in multiple but damaged form: these analytical operations are all preconditions for a contemporary practice where classical urban form is the absent term of a non-imitative practice.

From the scenes of the urbane vernacular, where the city

appears to be between tradition and obsolescence, an artform of city making will find the compositional figures that have already negotiated urban America's double bind.

NOTES

- ¹ See Alan Colquhoun, "Form and Figure," *Essays in Architectural Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), pp.190-202. For an important discussion of figuration see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: dissemblance et figuration* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990).
- ² Saul Steinberg, *The Discovery of America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).
- ³ Aldo Rossi, "Introduction to the First American Edition," *The Architecture of the City*, trans. Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 15.
- ⁴ See, for instance, John A. Kouwenhoven, *Made in America: The Arts in Modern Civilization* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948). I'm also thinking of contemporary critics like Alan Trachtenberg.
- ⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

- ⁶ Richard J. Goy, *Venetian Vernacular Architecture: Traditional Housing in the Venetian Lagoon* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), in particular Chapter 9, pp. 150-171.
- ⁷ Richard Longstreth, "Compositional Types in American Commercial Architecture," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture IV* (1986), 12-23.
- ⁸ George L. Hersey, "Replication Replicated, or Notes on American Bastardy," *Perspecta* 9110 (1965), 211-248.
- ⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Noonday Press, 1994).
- ¹⁰ Barthes, *The Pleasure*, p. 12.
- ¹¹ Barthes, *The Pleasure*, pp. 12-13.
- ¹² Barthes, *The Pleasure*, pp. 55-57.
- ¹³ See John Archer, "Puritan Town Planning in New Haven," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* Vol. XXXIV, No. 2 (May 1975), 140-149.
- ¹⁴ Elizabeth Mills Brown, *New Haven: A Guide to Architecture and Urban Design* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 94.
- ¹⁵ The perimeter of the Green and the Green itself have become the institutional center of New Haven. All of the city's major institutional buildings face the Green with City Hall to one side, Yale University to the other, and three churches lined up in its middle.