Towards A Hybrid Urbanism

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If the discipline of urbanism could be condensed into a single question, it would be 'what will the city of the future be?' Architects and designers have been trying to answer this for centuries, with visions ranging from Le Corbusier's monumental Ville Contemporaine to Walt Disney's utopian Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT), and everything in between. This essay will attempt to posit an answer in turn, but before being able to theorize on what comes next, a brief discussion on the city as it currently stands would be prudent, both to situate the hypothesis in a specific discourse and to better understand the existing condition, for to treat the infinitely complex urban condition as a tabula rasa to reshape at will would be likely less than fruitful. So, then, the question becomes: what is the city of today?

If Antoine Picon and Rem Koolhaas are to be believed, there is no city of today; we only live in the bones of the city of yesterday. Most urban conditions are much older than living memory, and were designed and built for societies with much different needs than today's. Take L'Enfant's Washington DC, Cerdà's Barcelona, and Haussmann's Paris as examples; all three cities were built in significant part (DC in entirety, Barcelona's Eixample neighborhood, and Paris' complete reorganization) in the 19th century, and as such reflect the needs and desires of the 19th century population; namely, the management of circulation (Picon, Smart Cities: Theory and Criticism of a Self-Fulfilling Ideal 2015). The medieval and colonial cities these stood in opposition to were dark, crowded, and extremely disorganized—given the chance to create something different, these architects designed the wide avenues and repetitive gridirons that characterize cities from this time period—and beyond, for this layout proved a natural home for the automobile, the ubiquity of which in 20th century culture allowed this conception of the city as little more than a means of connecting destinations to continue to propagate.

But this vision of the city is no longer compatible with today's society; with urban populations increasing rapidly and the needs of the populace shifting sometimes daily, the 19th century city is far too rigid for contemporary urban life. Its focus on boundaries and overarching rules are dated in an era of ever-increasing irreverence and mutability (Koolhaas 1995). However, for better or worse, this is the framework we must work within, for more often than not there is little opportunity [read: funding] to reshape the city in the broad, sweeping, urban-scale strokes of the past; instead, intervention must come at the more manageable building- or development-scale. This, in turn, creates the problem of how to reshape the urban macroscale through the microscale intervention. If this is not considered, architects run the risk of creating object buildings, devoid of interaction with their environment and thereby actively harming the urban condition, for a building disengaged from its context encourages its inhabitants to similarly disengage, creating holes in the urban fabric that take valuable space and give nothing in return (Picon, What Has Happened To Territory 2010).

This form of negative contextualism is all too present today, with the most dramatic urban interventions often being private developments with minimal public interaction (see Manhattan's Billionaires' Row). Of course, not all construction can be 100% public use, but forgoing any interaction with its surroundings whatsoever is hardly the mark of a successful work of architecture. By not engaging with the city, a built work only serves to perpetuate the city as it currently stands, i.e. the rigid 19th century urbanism that less and less reflects its present inhabitants as time goes on. This, then, leads to the question at hand: how can the building-scale intervention support an evolution of the urban condition?

If the city of yesteryear was one of boundaries and destinations, grids and nodes, the contemporary city is one of blurred edges and hybrid conditions; one of concentrations rather than zones. In the past, separate zoning was in some respects a product of necessity, keeping similar industries together to facilitate easier material transit as well as to distance them from quieter, residential or recreational neighborhoods. However now, with much of a city's livelihood occurring digitally, these artificial separations are no longer necessary, creating potential for hybrid conditions. This hybridization through digitization is also being reflected in the hierarchies of society; where before people on opposing ends of the socioeconomic spectrum might never have crossed paths, in the age of the internet they are more interconnected than ever before—a condition that, now existent in society, can now easily be applied to the built world (example: shared workspaces such as those made popular by WeWork create cross-border spaces available to anyone) (Sassen 2011). The growth of these hybrid spaces allows the city to move away from conditions of either/or towards ones of both/and, where fluidity of use is a ubiquitous state. This also has potential to extend to a new hybridization between the urban and landscape conditions, a dichotomy that has been one of the most pronounced in division between its two ends in cities up to this point.

At the time of its introduction, the urban park or garden was intentionally isolated, even fortified against the encroaching city around it, in order to provide an escape from the (then fetid) urban condition surrounding it for those who didn't have the means to escape to the countryside for a weekend of fresh air (example: Olmstead's Central Park in Manhattan, a clearly defined area of not-city in the heart of the city) (Schulyer 1988). In a theme that will continue to rear its head throughout this essay, this is no longer the case; for one, the city has gotten much cleaner, but more importantly the escape aspect of the park has become increasingly diluted as the barriers to travel have become more and more relaxed with passing time. This is not to state that the urban park is obsolete—obviously it is as appreciated by the city's residents as ever—but rather the opposite—the urban condition sans-landscape has become obsolete, with both public desire and technologic ability to integrate the two becoming more and more prevalent.

In looking for ways to reintroduce landscape into the city, one place to start might be its most fundamental aspect: surface topography. Many cities have been effectively terraformed in the interest of creating a more uniform foundation for building, but others have embraced the natural topography, from the famed hills of Rome and San Francisco to the less well known but equally dramatic undulations of the Bronx (Graves 2015). The fact that this integration was born out of necessity does not diminish it, and it gives a glimpse at a potential future for the city: restoration of lost topography. Where rivers have been paved over, perhaps they can be allowed to flow free again like Seoul's Cheonggyecheon; where highways cut swaths through the landscape, maybe they can be taken out and replaced with public space, like San Francisco's Embarcadero. This kind of landscape reclamation is already underway in many industrial waterfronts around the world; when sea shipping was king, industry owned the waterfronts, but now with much of the industries long gone, the waterfronts are open for the taking, and developments such as New York's East River Esplanade and Bushwick Inlet Park, or Realize Troy's plan for the city's waterfront redevelopment are becoming more and more common. Furthermore, even if there's no topography to restore, there is always the ability to create a new one. Per Alex Wall's definition of the urban surface, there is great potential in designing an artificial surface of the city, for it allows us as designers to maximize its capacity for programming. In terms of how many people it will affect, the landscape is far more valuable of a design prompt than any building, since by nature far fewer people will be able to inhabit a given building than the public ground around it. So, then, why not do as much as we can with it? Why even limit design to a single plane? As Seattle's Freeway Park and New York's High Line demonstrate, designing with multiple ground planes in mind can be an extremely productive avenue, and they are still fairly limited in scope. Future developments could take this concept even further, "thickening the surface" and creating two, three times as much public space (and green space, if technology like that used by the New York Lowline, an underground park currently in development, is put into use), while using the increased verticality to make the spaces that much more interesting, and that much more hybridized (Wall 1999).

In all this speculation on how to reintegrate the urban and landscape, it is worth noting that there may be some who ask if the two should be reintegrated in the first place. These arguments mainly stem from concerns that practicing architecture in service to a specific technological pursuit will subsume the discipline as a whole, diminishing its scope and through it the power of architects to affect the built world (Dean 2009). These are valid concerns, in that it doesn't do well to allow any aspect of the design process undercut the design as a whole, but fortunately the fact remains that there are many aspects of architecture, urban, and even landscape design. Beyond the environmental, there is the programmatic, the technologic, the political, ad infinitum aspects of the design process, all of which must be accounted for and interconnected in

a design solution to any project (Whiting 2013). Any design that privileges one aspect over the others, frankly, is not good design—especially one that privileges architecture as pure discipline, as object, above anything else. In the globalized, interconnected world we live in, anxiety about preserving the purity of anything is a retrograde concept, and hardly pronounces a way to move forward (Hight 2014)**.**

So, then, if it is agreed that the city's future lies in an integrated landscape urbanism, the question becomes, "what will it do?" To which the answer comes, "whatever it wants." Having established the hybrid nature of the future urban condition, it would hardly make sense to have rigidly defined programs therein; instead, the goal must be to design conditions that people can use for whatever purpose comes to mind. Today's society and the city it desires are ones of entropy, of "unnamable hybrids" and infinite possibilities; it is the unprogrammed spaces that people desire, and as such it is the unprogrammed spaces that architecture must provide (Koolhaas 1995). But how does one design a blank slate?

And how to get one built? As stated above, much of what gets built today comes from private funding for private interests, with designing for the public good rarely in the scope of the project. However, with infrastructure investment far from a priority of the state, the private project, at least for now, appears to be the only reliable vehicle for design available. This precludes the possibility of urban-scale interventions due to the sheer amount of capital and permissions that the undertaking would involve, but this is not, perhaps, the worst thing. If design interventions are limited to the development scale at largest, it forces them to be more tailored to the communities they take part in, thereby increasing their engagement in the urban fabric. One-size-fits-all macroscale interventions, when put into practice, rarely turn out well; focusing on the idiosyncrasies of a community and harmonizing with them will result in a better project for that community, and if this is repeated for a large number of communities, then a more engaged urbanism is built brick by brick (Cruz 2013). And how to convince the private funders that it is worth their while to do something good for society? Here, perhaps, today's interconnected, global society may prove a solution, for the court of public opinion is ever-present and ever-judging. Companies increasingly face more public pushback than ever when caught in unethical positions, while often being praised to the same extent for wholesome, charitable endeavors. Today's world is about branding, and what better branding is there than altruism? This may be an overly idealistic vision of the future—basing any prediction on the goodwill of mankind is a dangerous endeavor—but it is a possibility. Whether or not this vision of the future of the urban landscape comes to fruition remains to be seen, and will remain to be seen for a long ways yet. After all, there is only so far that speculation can take us; when it comes down to it, the future will not be known until it ceases to be the future, and becomes instead the present.

Figure 1: Plan of Washington D.C, Pierre Charles L'Enfant


Figure 2: Plan of el Eixample, Barcelona, Ildefons Cerdà


Figure 3: Billionaire's Row, Manhattan


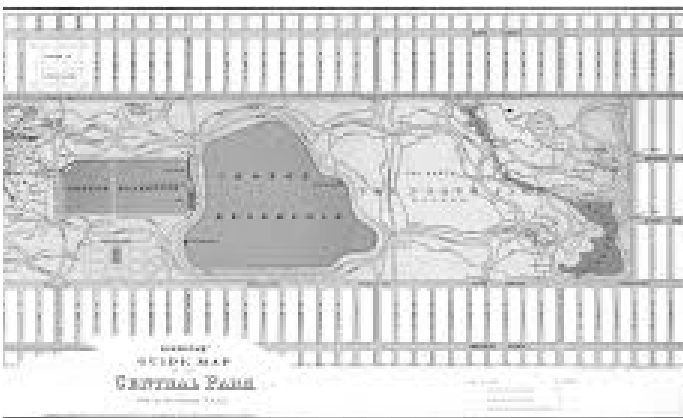Figure 4: Example of Shared Workspace


Figure 5: Plan of Central Park, Manhattan, Frederick Law Olmsted


Figure 6: Capitoline Hill Cordonata, Rome, Michelangelo


Figure 7: Lombard Street, San Francisco


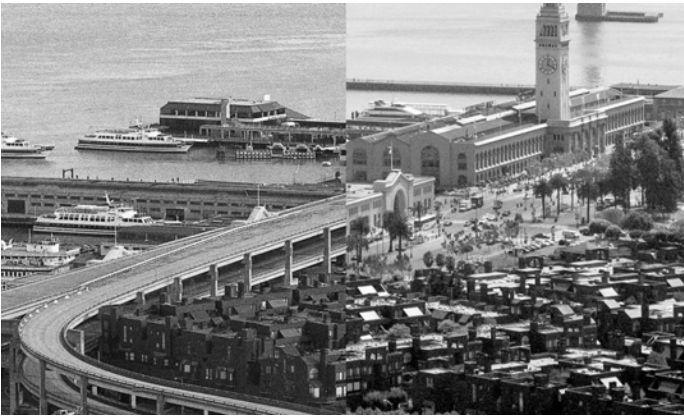Figure 8: Clifford Place West, Bronx

Figure 9: Embarcadero, San Francisco (Before/After Freeway Deconstruction)



Figure 10: Bushwick Inlet Park, Brooklyn



Figure 11: East River Esplanade, Manhattan



Figure 12: Chonggyecheon River Renewal



Figure 13: Realize Troy Waterfront Redevelopment Projection, Troy



Figure 14: Freeway Park, Seattle



Figure 15: High Line, Manhattan



Figure 16: Lowline Projection, Manhattan

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