

Our cities are an intricate environment, built by men and essential to our way of life, yet far from satisfactory. A reformation of this environment is urgent, and for this an understanding of the workings of cities is inescapable. Studies are being made, and some little knowledge is already at hand on how cities function as communications networks, as centers for the production of goods, as settings for social interaction, as biological environments and so on. These studies must be expanded. Yet, there is still another aspect of cities that has hardly been touched to date.

This is the consideration of the city as a complete landscape that is seen, felt, and heard as a complicated sensuous environment that encompasses us throughout much of our life. What is the effect on us of all that we sense while we loiter or bustle through the city streets and squares? What can we do to make this flow of stimuli more satisfying, more inspiring, more humane? That the city today is far from why it is so, except for some elementary notions of too little grass or too much dirt and noise, is not so easy to put.

Some preliminary studies are now being made at M.I.T. which, it is hoped, will lead to a more comprehensive attack on this subject of the "perceptual form of the city". For example, a careful photographic analysis of a small city section is being made, in which pictures are taken at brief regular intervals along a path of movement. Such photographs provide material for a study of the sequence of impressions in a city: in particular how the thread of continuity and order is maintained during such a constantly shifting sensuous experience.

Another study is being conducted on the means of orientation in a city, i.e., how do people locate themselves in such a complex setting, or find their way across it to their particular goal? What are the clues, both in memory and in actual experience, by which they guide themselves? Implicit in this practical problem is the broader question of how, if at all, the citizen manages to put his city together as a sensuous whole.

In still another project the reactions of observers to a walk through the city streets are being taken down on a tape recorder. The object is to locate the sensuous elements that commonly have the strongest impact on people as they move through the city, and, secondly, to find out why people tend to identify certain areas as having a unity of character or meaning.

Still other explorations have begun on the city as seen by the painter and the novelist; on an analysis of the total network of spatial impressions in a city area; and on the "meaning of a city block to an observer, as expressed by signs, symbols and understood forms. A great number of approaches need exploration...the field seems wide open.

Through the studies chosen for trial so far, however, a common preoccupation may be seen to run. The sights and sounds of our cities today are confusing and puzzling to most of us, all too often alien and remote. Our problem therefore is how to make a continuity out of our world, how to shape this world so as to extend the range and depth of the citizen's perception and understanding.

This understanding must be emotional and sensuously direct, as well as conceptual: a man must feel "at home" as well as knowing his address. A fundamental issue, therefore, is to find ways of building cities which can be sensed as an integrated, if complex and various, whole: a whole to which the individual can relate himself and which in turn can be related to the greater world of which the city is a part.