

## PROPOSAL FOR A STUDY OF THE USE OF WATER SURFACES IN THE CITY

The powerful emotional impact of bodies of water in an urban environment, the sensuous delight of water surfaces, is undeniable. It also seems clear that this is a design resource little used in contemporary urban design, partly for functional reasons, but also for lack of knowledge.

It is our contention that, besides the sensuous delight of its play of color, light and form, and beside its recreational value, that water is one the most inherently significant materials that can be used in a city landscape. Significant, that is, in our particular sense, that it carries a very rich load of emotional meanings, connoting not only human pleasure and adventure, but also the existence of the much larger natural universe. Thus a great river may connect us symbolically with a vast hinterland, or a small fountain, in its flow and sparkle, may suggest the dynamism, complexity and yet continuity of life.

These are not new ideas, and are commonly held or felt by many people. The fascination in watching the sea is almost universal, and such studies as we have made of childhood memories of the city include, to a surprising degree, vividly-pictured streams, lakes, ponds and oceans. It seems, therefore, that the study needed is not so much a documentation of this attraction, as it is an analysis of design possibilities, and of the means by which we can enhance the sensuous delight and the emotional significance of the water we use. That is, we require a design vocabulary for water, which will present it systematically in all its many forms: rivers, streams, cascades, lakes, ponds, seas, pools, fountains, canals. It is probably significant that we have such a rich vocabulary for

expressing the various forms that this simple element can take.

The form-qualities of water in the city may perhaps conveniently be analyzed in three categories: its general pattern – the plan-form, the various shapes and their distributions, the amount of interpenetration; secondly, the more detailed form, motion, color or texture of a given piece of water; and finally, the character of the all-important boundary, where it comes in contact with people and with the non-liquid environment.

There are, of course, many technical climatic or cultural reasons why water has been used in this or that form in the past, and such factors are often quite different in our own cities. Therefore one cannot be freely eclectic in borrowing water features. Yet a broad survey of past and present forms can serve as a background for design decisions, and as a stimulus for new forms particularly applicable to our own urban centers. A general resume of the possible situations in which water might be used today would, however, be a useful adjunct to an eclectic survey.

It will also be important to avoid a limitless amassing of examples. The “main line” of the study must be the means of enhancing significance and delight, and examples for study should be carefully selected for what they can say about the general principles. There is a good deal of material collected and published on the use of water in cities, either per se or included in more general descriptions. We are not entering upon a new field, therefore, but our collection can be more systematic, and our analysis keyed to general principles. As in the circulation study, we have done no directly relevant work in the past half-year, but have a

number of previous ideas to draw upon.

A very similar project, incidentally, could be based on the use of trees in the city, since these are elements with the same universal emotional significance and ability to give sensuous pleasure. This study must wait until a later time, however.

Our underlying assumptions, therefore, are of the powerful psychological impact of water; of its under use or misuse today, and that its essential satisfying qualities are its sensuous play and its emotional significance. The objective of the study, is to develop a vocabulary of the use of water in cities, and to uncover means of enhancing its delight and its meaning.

The following program is proposed:

1. A study of the character of typical water-bodies in metropolitan Boston, as well as a general survey of its location and distribution. Each description of a typical water use should cover its general form, its detailed motion and texture, and its boundary treatment. A subjective analysis of its impact in terms of significance and delight would be made, as well as notes on its use. Conclusions may be drawn as to the extent that good value is being received from the local water resources.

2. This survey should be complemented by open-ended interviews with perhaps 30 Boston residents, asking them to map the water areas they know, to characterize the major ones, to state their feelings about these areas, and to suggest how they might re-plan them were they free to. This should be compared with the results of the study above.

3. A major survey should be accomplished on the use of water in cities of the world, using photographic material, selecting and organizing it primarily to suggest techniques of heightening its value in terms

discussed above.

4. Lastly, illustrative designs may be prepared, showing how these forms, and techniques, might be applied to our present cities.

Studies 1 and 2 can be relatively brief, being concluded within the first half of the first year. The collection and analysis of material in study 3 would require a lengthier time – probably an entire year – while the design sketches could be evolved toward the end of the first year, which should see the completion of the project. One half-time assistant, the supervision of a principal, and the third-time services of a designer in the latter few months of the study would be required.

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