

JUST PASSIN' THRU.

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He could never quite get it right.

*Speaking at the convention he could list the names
of cities, squares, avenues and principal buildings
but they only translated into abstractions:*

*Avenue Desolation, The Boulevards of Coma,
Grand Place Estrangement.*

.....

In those deserted cities there were no words for:

the moment the valley fills with mist ,

when the snow suddenly slips from a tree,

when the sun passes from some perfect alignment

At one stage in the fifteen year saga of unbuilt proposals for the rebuilding of the South Bank Centre, London, "the largest arts centre in the world" as it called itself, a model of the scheme made entirely of clear perspex was (briefly) displayed. Tiny little manikins in various bright colours were the only clearly visible substantial forms. This was a piece of virtuoso architectural model making and was a static and sculptural showpiece, but, unwittingly, it offers a primitive icon for the approach to urban design and city planning that this paper sketches - except that the dissolution of the architectural explored here is far more deliberate : imagine approaching our subject without mapping, forecasting and mapping anything except the movement of real people - not static little model makers' standard manikins and the gloss of perspex but the real complex dynamic universe of events.

This paper asks the questions :

Suppose the distinguished professions of urbanism have been looking in the wrong direction, shaping space when they should have been engaging with time and sequence, designing things when they should have been choreographing events?

If there is a history of such an ephemeral urbanism what are its lessons? If there are models and theories where do we find them? How would they relate to the heavy urbanism of development and all that physical, that concrete stuff?

The structure of the paper is broadly chronological. The origins of an a systematic approach to events as the focus of planning and design are patched together from overlooked, long forgotten and discredited writers, ideas not followed up, and

compared to the current mainstream of ideas about urban design theory, where events and activities remain peripheral. These are contrasted with some more recent texts, and combined with a review of some earlier papers of my own that seen in this context begin to cohere as an approach to urban design that is *event orientated*.

The paper concludes with a re-reading of a recent major architectural project in London that has been widely reviewed as *architecture* but hardly as an event.

The key words, that town planners of my generation were taught as being central to their activity (and are the title of my first degree) are *land use*, which is considered here not as the technical noun phrase that professionals use (land use as an epistemological category) but as a verb: the uses that people make of land and space in their ordinary life, a key distinction that the late David Thomas made in his work in the late 1960's¹.

Cities as systems of events: the lost opportunity.

It was dusk just as you walked up Purfleet Street and smiled.

*We passed once at the entrance to the department store, but did not speak.
We met on the corner of the alleyway, between the TV repair shop and the boarded up shop.*

The lane was so narrow we could not help but greet each other after all those years.

Meeting by chance on the concourse we embraced, before our paths diverged again.

Did I see you in the restaurant that night?

Though the "systems view of planning" has been so discredited that it gets only a one line dismissal in a recent text on planning theory² it is surprisingly relevant as a starting point for this exploration because at its origin at least is the idea of everyday use and activity. The first chapter of J Brian McLoughlin's book³, for instance, is detailed, if fictional, descriptions of human activity in coping with, responding to and adapting to environments: the problem is that a key phrase like "optimising action taken by an individual or group at a particular time has repercussions which alter the context for decisions to act by other individual actions or groups at subsequent times"⁴

¹ Thomas DO, 1970, *Planning the Design of Settled Topographies* National Coal Board, London 1970, parts 1:3 a-c.

² Almendinger P, 2001, *Planning in Postmodern Times*, RTPI Library Series, Routledge, London, 2001, p.3.

³ J Brian McLoughlin 1969 *Urban and Regional Planning: a systems approach* Faber, London 1969

⁴ *ibid*, p 37.

is taken at a scale of crude blocks of use and the operations of organisations rather than individuals and the brute reality of everyday life : to a choreographer such a phrase would have a very different implication from the abstract mathematical models it lead to in the systems view of planning.

In retrospect the potential that such a view of the city offered was never realised; the idea of a city made up from continually interacting human activity and response is grossed up and made into the large scale mathematical geographical models that came to dominate “the systems view”, and the fine grained realities that were their starting points were forgotten. The great humanistic, event centred systemic approach to urban design was never written.

David Thomas's *magnum opus* was unfinished : only his “general theory” of Topographical Planning Design “means of thinking creatively about realities as features of localities” was published ⁵, though his students undertook extensive detailed observations and simulations of everyday activities these were never published. The direction that some of Chris Alexander's early papers ⁶ opened with their telling and precise descriptions of the role of everyday interaction in shaping places, are but one aspect of the mystical *quality* his later books seek. *Patterns of Events* in *The Timeless Way of Building* touches at the heart of our concerns:

“the life and soul of a place, of all our experiences depend not simply on the physical environments but on the patterns of eventsa building or a place is given its character, essentially by those events which keep happening there most often”

It is only recently that a significant attempt to provide a means of systematically connecting use, users activity and design and planning has emerged, though, it has received little critical attention. Drawing especially on Roger Barker's Ecological Psychology⁷ and Grady Clay's Close Up- how to Read the American City⁸ Phillip Thiel has identified “experiential enviroecture”⁹. The “behaviour

⁵ Thomas DO 1970, op cit.

⁶ Alexander,C and Poyner,B 1965 *The Atoms of Environmental Structure* originally Min. Of Buildings and Public Works, London.Ref 3016

Alexander, C 1966, *A City is not a tree* in *Design* No.6, Feb 1966 and frequently reprinted.

⁷ Barker, R 1968 *Ecological Psychology* Stanford University 1968.

⁸ Clay, G 1973 *Close Up - How to read the American city* Preager, New York, 1973

⁹ Thiel, P 1997 *People Paths and Purposes : notations for a participatory enviroecture* Washington University Press 1997

circuits” of “user participants” that comprise its essential focus have more familiar names in everyday language, but the special technical distance that these terms provide Thiel enable him to work to a virtually total charting of just about everything that might possibly condition people’s everyday patterns of perception, use, activity and experience in urban space.

What makes Thiel’s work especially relevant here is the way that he looks to the time and performance based arts for models and approaches only for notation of what is essentially urban choreography but to offer insight into a design process where “experience is the overall comprehensive goal- the ultimate purpose of the operation”¹⁰ To this end he draws inspiration from the stage, film and television. He cites Ingmar Bergman and Sergei Eisenstein briefly and describes aspects of urban place-making in the language of theatrical design, stage craft, dance notation and TV script writing.

Urban Design : brief physical episodes between individual imaginations and collective memories.

At the moment that... just as the tape is cut , but before the signs are switched over and the first sweepers follow the suitcase perfumiers as the architectural photographers are folding away their tripods and their reflectors and the first bench is moved to catch the sun a little better and the chalk painters stretch out their canvasses before security gets too heavy, a wonderful moment when the model exists full scale, just for a second when we are all strangers in this dreamed up place. Yet already someone has chiselled their name into the zinc behind the toilet pans.

Though there are some glimpses of a healthy disrespect for the massive, physical, architectural products of urban design - mostly in a tradition that might be traced from the mid 1960’s in some of Rayner Banham’s essays -

(cities) could be regarded as the archaeological remains of a civilisation that ought to have died when gizmos came in. They represent the kind of enormously massive infrastructural deposits that were left behind by handicraft civilisations for whom....the only way to get any thing halfway clever done was to pile men up in vast unhygienic heaps....On such man warrens were built the only concepts of civilisation that we know.. ¹¹

and the later wilder freedoms of Archigram:

cars, homes, workplaces, fun palaces,are not determinate as artifacts so why should they be determinate as zones, symbols or parts of a hierarchy ...there may

¹⁰ Thiel P 1997 op cit ,p200.

¹¹ Banham R, 1965 p113 *The Great Gizmo* reprinted in *Design By Choice*, Academy, London 1981
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*be no buildings at all in Archigram 8*¹².

the traditions of urban design emphasise object and space rather than event and experience, as a brief discussion of three overviews of urban design theory and ideas demonstrates.

Gosling and Maitland ¹³ refer to ideas of the sequential experience of space (Gosling collaborated with Gordon "serial vision" Cullen¹⁴), the organisation of city space as coherent experience, and even urban design as theatre "*where the urban designer is producer or script writer*" but continue "*we may have to limit the repertoire to certain sustainable forms*"¹⁵ - emphasising the set rather than the action or the story. Geoffrey Broadbent separates "urban realities" - the work of Jane Jacobs, Chris Alexander and others, who had already been identified as the core of a "social usage" approach to urban design¹⁶, to construct, a compendious overview, a tradition of urban design that is "urban space design"¹⁷ .

Though Nan Ellin lines up many of the same architectural suspects in *Post Modern Urbanism*¹⁸ her conclusions "*reconceiving the city and culture*" are a response to "*the crisis in the architectural profession*" and open up new connections with the social context drawing on perspectives from cultural theory, literature and anthropology:

"...Characters might create their own stories...In literature, urban design and anthropology this approach reflects the absence of the author, or at least the apparent absence of author, and entertains the possibility of people shaping their own destinies ...As the city was being reconceived as a text and collage the task of the urban designer shifted accordingly" ¹⁹

¹² Cook, P 1966 Editorial *Archigram 7*

¹³ Gosling, D and Maitland B 1984 *Concepts of Urban Design* Academy Editions, London 1984

¹⁴ Cullen, G 1961 *Townscape* Architectural Press, London 1961

¹⁵ Gosling, D and Maitland, B 1984 op cit pp 132-3

¹⁶ Jarvis RK 1980 *Urban Environments as Visual Art or Social Settings* in *Town Planning Review* Vol 51 :1 pp 51-66

¹⁷ Broadbent, G 1990 *Emerging Concepts of Urban Space Design* Van Nostrand Reinhold, London 1990

¹⁸ Ellin N 1996 *Post Modern Urbanism* Blackwell London 1996

¹⁹ Ellin, N 1996, op cit pp 255-6

Performance Theory

They say: there is a city that is made only of light, air and time, and that its beauty is unimaginable.

They say: many have tried to make such a city but as they constructed it so it disappeared.

Others say we all lived in such a place, once upon a time.

Then, as we specified its walls, pavements and monuments, built its substance and solid parts,

it became the territory of poets and dreamers.

Attempts to rewrite urban design, to re-orientate towards the event and the moment have usually because they have been fixed on the object as the end point of design, the cursed inheritance of architecture, the concern with the stage setting when the play's the thing. But if *performance* is made the focus, if the substantial and permanent deferred from consideration.....

Richard Schechner, developing the ideas of Erving Goffman and anthropological research through and in his own dramatic work, concludes *Performance Theory* with a double page charting of the locations and durations "performances" ²⁰ : consciousness of "being" a performer not the location or scale is the vital aspect. By designating all urban life as performance - as Jane Jacobs started to do in her seminal discussion of the *sidewalk ballet* of Hudson Street ²¹ land use becomes a script around which the everyday performers continuously improvise, just as De Certeau has discussed "Walking in the city"²² as a point at which the user transforms the city from an abstraction into an experienced reality.

If performance is made the focus then urban design needs to be able to read the unwritten performances with the sensitivities of a choreographer:

*"As we cross a town square, or stand in a crowded bus, we both change and are changed by the space around us. How we walk sit and stand is influence by the space around us. Space includes usyou commit yourself to an action when:
on your own with another person with an object
at any point :
stay and find your way through or*

²⁰ Schechner, R 1977/1988 *Performance Theory* Routledge, London 1988,pp252-3

²¹ Jacobs, J 1960 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, p60

²² De Certeau M 1988 (translation) *The Practice of Everyday Life* California UP 1988 pp91-114

leave to watch and find another situation ²³

What happens when urban design uses reportage, observation and case study of people making out the best they can - whether it's selling paintings on the buses, making a garden with dumpster debris in bits of Laurel Canyon nobody had noticed, or offering storefront weddings, in Spanish, for \$160 is suggested in *Everyday Urbanism* ²⁴. The theoretical underpinnings of "urban design" will give you the wrong answers, because it "conceptualises people in the city and then presumes to order their daily life from without" : instead what we need to attend to is "the situational bricolage of daily life" (and so consigns Le Corbusier, Victor Gruen, Alison and Peter Smithson, Ed Bacon, Jonathan Bartlett, Chris Alexander, Venturi and Rauch, The New Urbanism, Kevin Lynch and Rem Koolhaas to the trash can in 19 pages).

Existential Urban Design.

*Buildings, pavements, trees, doors, park benches, service ducts,
even ticket barriers may last for ever;
but cities die when the events that surround them stop.
In the twinkling of an eye. endless a
The lady sits on the balcony knitting, all of the lunch hour.
Step into my shoes.
They have come to discuss a journey they will take together,
but as we arrive their finger tips move apart.
Talk it like you walk it.
Allen Ginsberg passes us on the stairs, talking to the General Manager.*

Events occur in time and only have existence through our perception of them²⁵, the events that are places only exist in the myriad continual moments of their using in the endless and shifting routines of daily life. Usually, when urban designers speak about "urban structure" they mean something physical and spatial - a pattern of buildings, plots and spaces, considering the place from some remote and omnipotent view point, outside of anything but the abstraction of historical time.

²³Tufnell, M and Crickmay, C *Body Space Image : notes toward improvisation and performance* Dance Books, London 1993 p82 and p.89

²⁴ Chase, J, Crawford, M and Kalisky, J 1999 *Everyday Urbanism* The Monacelli Press, New York 1999

²⁵ There is something here to be explored that relates these ideas first sketched intuitively in *Readers Travellers etc..* (Jarvis 1983, foll.) and the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) who is cited in Chase et al 1999 (op cit) and whose prolific writings, primarily on literature, are summarised in Holquist, M, 1990 *Dialogism : Bakhtin and his World* Routledge, London.

But another possible model would be to start with the relationship between the user and the place, starting from “*the moment of use when places are both themselves and part of ourselves*”²⁶. - and to consider the events of everyday life from an existential perspective.

Places may be known indirectly through reports, images and impressions prepared by others , Or places may be seen in passing, glimpsed...sometimes incidentally....or they may be visited whilst home is always somewhere else....or they may be part of beats, neighbourhoods or home territories habitual places (or) recalled and remembered, fragments in mind that establish some past event remembered places . Familiar words describe these relationships : traveller, visitor, inhabitant for the three (immediate) spatial relationships, reader, storyteller for the two mediated extremes²⁷

These categories can be refined further : Lars Lerup used the terms *kibitzer* and *denizen* to describe visitors and inhabitants in his studies of spaces in Stockholm²⁸, terms which are more descriptive and precise. David Thomas in an unpublished introduction to a student seminar series made the natural and ordinary distinctions between users who were either *familiar* or *unfamiliar* with a place, and whose use was either *urgent* or *leisurely*.²⁹

Notes for an Existential Urban Design concluded with two sets of examples of how the events of everyday life could be used as a starting point for urban design. In the first example relationships of different users to rapid transit interchanges - passengers passing through, alighting from and boarding trains, people crossing and using the public spaces and those who overlooked the interchange. The second example took the five relationships discussed in the paper to a town centre. These approaches to urban design thinking are simple in concept and require nothing more technical than empathetic and careful observation of everyday life, but they start with events rather than things³⁰ .

²⁶ Jarvis, B 1983 *Readers Travellers Visitors Inhabitants and Storytellers : Notes for an Existential Urban Design* Gloucestershire Papers in Local and Rural Planning 18. 1983. Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology, Gloucester, p20.

²⁷ Jarvis, B 1983 op cit p 3

²⁸ Lerup, L 1972 *Environmental and Behavioural Congruence as a Measure of Goodness in Public Space: the case of Stockholm* in *Ekistics* Vol 204, November, pp 341-358.

²⁹ Thomas DO 1969 *Unpublished introductory notes to student seminar series in Topographical Planning Design*, Department of Town and Country Planning, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. The authors contribution to this series evolved into Jarvis B (op cit).

³⁰ For an expansion of this opposition see JarvisB, 1996 *Mind: Body, Space: Time, Things: Events in Urban Design Studies*, Vol 2, 1996, pp 101-114.

How things happen.

*Gypsies' children invade and occupy the cash and carry warehouse,
that's the first sign.*

*They leave the car park scattered with ashes
from vinyl car seat covers.*

*Next: dog packs roam the embankments
where marsh grasses struggle through the track beds,
long after the rails have been lifted.*

*Slugs breed in the underpass,
enriched with urine and darkness.*

The “transformation” of Bankside Power Station into Tate Modern which has been extensively discussed and reviewed in architectural terms³¹ , is really more to do with a huge change in the patterns of events that take place there : the consequences, in terms of planning procedures, of a *change of use* (which is development)- a quality that is emphasised by Herzog and deMeuron’s minimalist interventions in the building. What is taken for granted is that a building that was designed to offer no access (even its oil fuel arrived by barge), to deter visitors (power stations contain valuable materials and dangerous machinery) and employed only a few people (modern power stations are machines) - as well respond to its monumental context across the Thames from St. Paul’s Cathedral - has become a building that is visited throughout the year by millions people, many of them strangers to London, changes that affect all the streets and spaces and land uses around the site. These changes seem only now to be entering into consideration, while the ice-cream vans draw up³² , local pubs and snack bars revamp their fittings and their menus and even Tate Modern itself rolls out a kiosk to sell coffees in the resolutely geometrical planting schemes. A shop specialising in rare books on modern art and a contemporary furniture gallery opens in the ground floor of the newly converted and styled up lofts. The paper merchant closes and puts their property on the market. But the route to the newly opened underground station still needs a sign ten storeys high to re-assure the visitors as they leave the cool blue spaces of Southwark station (with still unrealised air rights development) and are pointed to the back streets of car washes, bike repairers and self-storage blocks.

Tate Modern have commissioned an “Urban Study” from Richard Rogers

³¹ Sabbagh, K.2001 *Power into Art : the making of Tate Modern* Penguin 2001

³² Though these are often unauthorised and subject to an continuing battle with the local authority
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Partnership³³ which concentrates on the physical context, speculates on opportunities for building projects and sketches airy perspective views for projects on land that Tate Modern does not own, while Southwark (the local planning authority) are reviewing their Unitary Development Plan for the whole borough which will deal with strategy issues. Somewhere between the two, unspoken in the technical concerns of planning, design and development, lie the events that are the everyday life of the area, shaping experiences and responses of residents and visitors alike.

Planning and urban design need to develop a language for considering their places as events and considering the time and sequence of experience as well as space. A design plan for Bankside, for instance, could start with a clear analysis of the different patterns of use and sequences of events that follow from them. Such an approach did not need to have waited for the impact of the opening and the achievement of a year's forecast visitors in the first three months : behaviour can be forecast and expected as easily as buildings.

***The real subject of planning is everyday life.
It's nothing special,
which is why it's so important.***

To do that though requires a shift of *standpoint* ³⁴ in planning and urban design, so that consideration of "land use" does not lead directly to "buildings" but opens up for consideration the myriad and continuous *events* that are peoples' everyday usage of time and space.

*When ruthless decisions have to be made,
what's left is just a rattle in an empty skull;
shells wrapped on a doorstep
left with no message;
an illusion in plans drawn up on the wall;
a gap in the conversation*

where the void seeps in.

*The end is silence anyhow.
The old astrologer dries up.
Management consultants prepare their reports.*

³³ Richard Rogers Partnership, 2001 *Bankside Urban Study* RRP, London 2001,

³⁴ Another term used crucially by David Thomas (op cit)