

# LANDSCAPE

MAGAZINE OF HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

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# Kevin Lynch and Malcolm Rivkin:

## A WALK AROUND THE BLOCK

What does the ordinary individual perceive in his landscape? What makes the strongest impression on him and how does he react to it? In recent research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology we have recorded the impressions of persons as they walked through the city streets. Other studies of urban perception have been made, but we believe this to be the first where responses have been recorded while actually moving through the city itself.

In this sample there were interesting agreements about what parts of the scene were most remarkable, and how these parts could be fitted together to make a whole. Spatial form seemed to be a fundamental impression. Spatially dominant buildings, of dominant use or association, also appear in the front rank. Of next importance was the quality of the city "floor," or pavement; and the contents and details of the various store-fronts.

### **The search for order in the environment**

Most of these people felt strongly about their visual world, even if they found difficulty in being articulate about it. Emotions were associated with the spatial characteristics, in particular, and with the apparent coherence (or lack of it) in the whole scene. They seemed to search for, or try to create, a sense of order and continuity in what they saw. The look of the world about them did indeed make a difference in their lives.

The trip began at the corner of Berkeley and Boylston Streets in Boston, and each time the interviewer told his companion: "We are about to take a short walk. Don't look for anything in particular, but tell me about the things you see, hear, or smell; everything and anything you notice." A tiny microphone was attached to the subject's lapel, and the interviewer recorded his comments as they went around the block, through the alley, and into the park. (See Map page 25.)

The block itself is not an extraordinary one. It has many typical features of an American shopping street, but with some touches of Boston tradition, and much physical contrast in small compass. Boylston Street, on one side, has a wide range of offices and middle-income specialty stores, while Newbury Street, on the opposite side, caters to a wealthier class, with its elegant dress shops, decorators, beauticians and haberdashers. These shops occupy the ground floors of old, narrow-fronted, business buildings,

which vary markedly in height. Traffic on both streets is one-way, and that on Boylston is quite heavy.

Between the streets is a narrow alley, neither meaner nor dirtier than most. At the eastern end, across Arlington Street, lie the Public Gardens, planted in the romantic style. At the corner of Arlington and Boylston stands the old brownstone Arlington Street Church, completed in 1861, and one of the first buildings to occupy the newly filled Back Bay lands. At the western end of our block facing Berkeley Street is Bonwit Teller's, occupying the building built in 1864 for the Museum of Natural History. During the interviews the weather was cold, sometimes sunny. The trees were bare, and there were a few patches of old snow on the ground.

Twenty-seven subjects made this tour, which was an outgrowth of earlier tests along Copley Square, in Boston, and Brattle Street, in Cambridge. After the walk, the subjects were tested for their memories of the event, both verbally and through photographic recognition. Some of the subjects were very familiar with the area, and for others it was their first visit. They varied in age, sex, occupation and national background, but the group was too small to be truly representative of American city dwellers.

Since the process of perception is so rapid and complex, often so difficult to verbalize, the findings must be regarded only as the perceptions which were "at the top of the heap" in the whole conscious-unconscious sensing of the environment. Furthermore, a recorded tour in itself is sufficiently abnormal as to intensify, and possibly distort, the usual day-by-day perception of the city.

→ Yet with all these qualifications, the results are a first clue as to how our cities affect us. Even aside from its value as a research tool, the method used has potential value in the training of designers, and as a device to make the layman more directly aware of the environment in which he lives.

### **The walk itself**

The walk proceeded first along the wide Boylston Street sidewalk. Two-thirds remarked almost immediately on the spatial quality of the street — its breadth, the width of the sidewalk, the height of the flanking buildings and the open vista at the Garden end.

"I like the openness, I like the width of the sidewalks, I like the feeling of uncrowded space. You can never feel at the bottom of a well on this spot."

One or two referred to the heights of the buildings along the street, with the remark that they were not so high as to be uncomfortable. This same sense of scale is implied in the word "house" which several people used, even though few of these business buildings could have been residences in the past. Some subjects were conscious of the general architectural disunity:

"Each individual building is almost ugly, and they don't seem to fit together at all."

A woman recalled after the walk:

"There were all different styles of houses, they didn't seem to match, especially the heights of the houses varied so much, with some houses you could see the sides and you could see that they were not really meant to be exposed."

One walker summed it up briefly:

"I think it is the hodge-podgeness of our streets, like down ahead of us, that is so sort of discouraging."

The majority of our walkers commented at one time or another on some sign they saw. However, there was little consensus of recognition of any particular one. Out of the vast number of signs strewn along the path, only a small minority were noticed at all, and some subjects referred to this welter of communication with irritation:

"The first thing I notice are the signs along the street, a confusion of signs."

"They sort of reach out and grab you by the throat."

A large clock on a standard in the center of the wide sidewalk excited the comment of a third of the subjects, as did a sidewalk book stall, both because of their intrinsic interest as well as their position in space. But a mid-sidewalk sign farther down the street was blissfully ignored. Alongside the Arlington Street Church a number of newly-painted trash cans caught everyone's eye, no doubt because of their bright yellow and black colors, contrasting with the gray of the sidewalk and the brown of the façades:

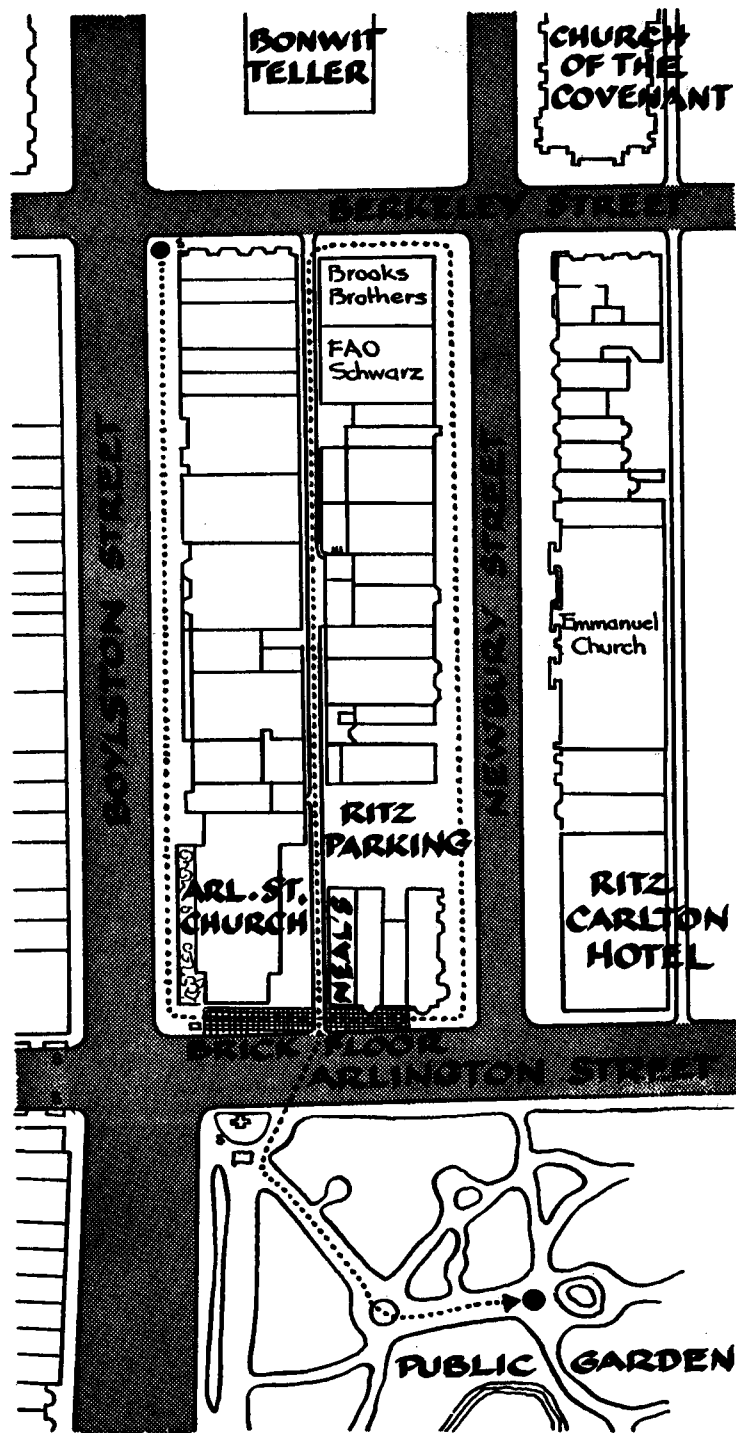
"That wastepaper basket is a bright color, it reminds me of a wasp, it's yellow and black."

All but one of the walkers commented at one time or another upon the stores themselves, and the contents of their windows. Window-shopping is undoubtedly a pleasant and absorbing occupation for many of them. Like the signs, the consensus of selection seemed weak, but the interest was real, and not marked by irritation.

At least half spoke of the parked cars along the sidewalk edge, most often in reference to the problem of parking itself. Almost as many remarked upon the moving traffic, although with little emotional connotation at this

stage. But up to this point, of the multitude of other details to be seen or discussed, almost all were passed by in silence or with only scattered comment: street furniture, people, colors, smells, sounds, weather.

At the Arlington Street Church the subjects' animation once again matched that with which they first greeted Boylston Street. Only three failed to comment upon this church which, by its associations, position, material, form



#### THE BLOCK ITSELF:

*The dotted line shows the course of the walk, starting at the corner of Boylston and Berkeley Streets.*



and landscaping, contrasts strongly with the remainder of the block. Their remarks conveyed pleasure as well as interest:

"Seems to be the most exciting thing on the street, the church."

"Every time I look up, I tend to look at our church steeple."

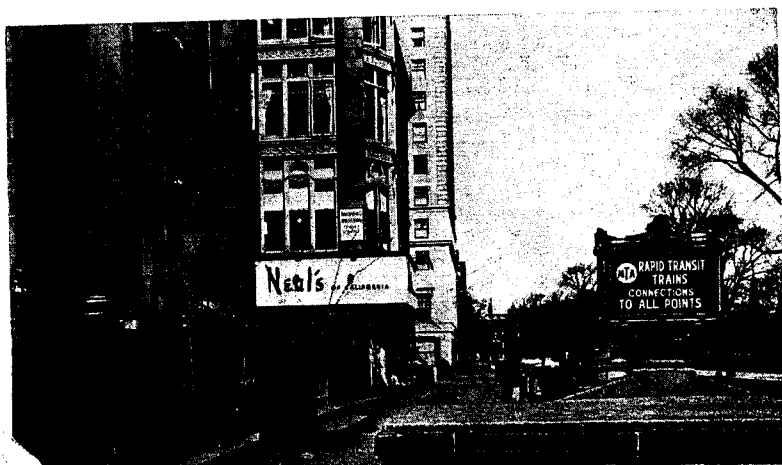
"Being of sandstone, it has a much richer character, really, than most stone buildings."

As they approached this corner and remarked upon the church, they were struck even more forcibly by the space of the Public Gardens opening up across the street. Only one walker was so stubborn as not to mention it at all. The comments were precise and emphatic in their pleasure:

"Well, the nicest part of this section is definitely the Public Gardens."

And the comments are often well-considered:

"I often envy the people who are able to stay . . . [where] they can look out onto the Public Gardens, across the Common. . . . People don't realize what a beautiful thing, not only in the daytime, but at night. . . . Here you get the feeling of spaciousness and at the same time you don't feel lost."



## WHAT THEY SAW:

*(left) looking down Boylston Street to the Public Gardens; the spire of the Arlington Street Church is visible above the clock;*

*(below) Arlington Street; the church, the brick pavement, the Public Gardens to the right; the Ritz is the tall building in the background;*

*(opposite) Newberry Street with the Ritz parking lot and the spire of the Church of the Covenant.*

Distant objects could now be appreciated:

"Look at that dome on the State House. That certainly shines."

The space of the Public Gardens was one of the strongest experiences of the entire journey. It also called attention to details within itself: one-third of the subjects noticed the statue of Channing which faces the church, and several pointed out the old iron fence which encloses the Garden.

Around the corner on Arlington, the subway entrance, a low masonry box in the middle of the sidewalk, elicited diverse comments. To one woman it was:

"These ugly subway entrances—low, squat and dirty, black and cold-looking holes in the ground."

But to a little girl it held promise of adventure:

"Why don't we go down there, and go out to another town?"

Here the sidewalk material changed from patched cement slabs to brick. This drew a surprising amount of attention, mixing pleasure with the uneasiness of high-heeled women:

"Brick sidewalks, hazardous, but very pleasant just to have a different texture for a sidewalk."

Over one-half spontaneously recalled the floor material in the post-walk interview:

"I recall here the sidewalks seemed to be the major point of interest or the things that struck one most. It was a sidewalk which was in rather poor condition, extended for a great distance before the eye."

The mouth of the alley did not escape attention. Some were struck by its narrowness alone, others by a happy accident of the city—the view that opens up at the far end of the slot:

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"The spire of the New England Mutual Hall at the end of the alley — certainly dramatic — I've never noticed that before."

"Particularly striking at night as you come along, to see the tower lighted as you glance up the alley."

Past the Arlington Church and across the mouth of the alley is one of the few stores in which there was common interest. "Neal's of California," with its gaudy display of women's apparel, stands in sharp feminine contrast to the church on one side and a dignified antique store on the other. Since the stores abut directly on the sidewalk, while the church is well set back, Neal's is also spatially prominent. Half of the observers seem impelled to pick it out.

A woman's shoe store with the whimsical address of "Zero Newbury" leads around the corner and into Newbury Street itself. Only one-third of the subjects referred to the Newbury space in comparison with the two-thirds who spoke up about Boylston Street, but among these there seemed to be a new enjoyment of the total composition:

"I think looking down the street here, where the sun hits the buildings two blocks or so down, is a sort of unified loveliness. At least, all are approximately the same height, all built at approximately the same time, all have certain characteristics very definitely in common. . . . And I like the punctuation marks of church steeples here and there."

While another puts the feeling of harmony in a more prosaic way:

"There aren't any old signs sticking out."

Three separate buildings draw comments from one-half to two-thirds of the walkers on Newbury: the Ritz Carlton Hotel on the corner, with its connotations of luxury, its sheer cubical mass standing in contrast to the space of the Gardens; the Church of the Covenant at the Berkeley Street corner, whose tall spire is silhouetted against the sky; and the Emmanuel Church, which is also in architectural contrast to its surroundings, but which gets less mention, due probably to its more subordinate mid-block position. It is interesting to note that this is the only building in the entire walk to sustain any significant comment which is not spatially exposed on at least two sides.

One feature on Newbury Street roused more comment than any building: the Ritz-Carlton parking lot, which separates the corner stores from those further up the street, and whose cars project forward over the sidewalk itself. The spontaneous remarks expressed annoyance:

"An ugly little spot where they've cut out some buildings and provided parking . . . a gaping hole."

"This parking lot here has always annoyed me. It separates the shopping. I always hate to walk across the from one store to the next."



Newbury Street was impressive particularly for its social connotations and personal associations. The non-familiar subjects immediately picked up its class character:

"This seems to be the more fashionable sector. Seems to be more exclusive, since they don't have too much show and pomp in the windows, and no big signs."

The habitués found pleasure and many memories:

"Dear old Newbury Street . . . it's just the epitome of the top aristocratic Boston."

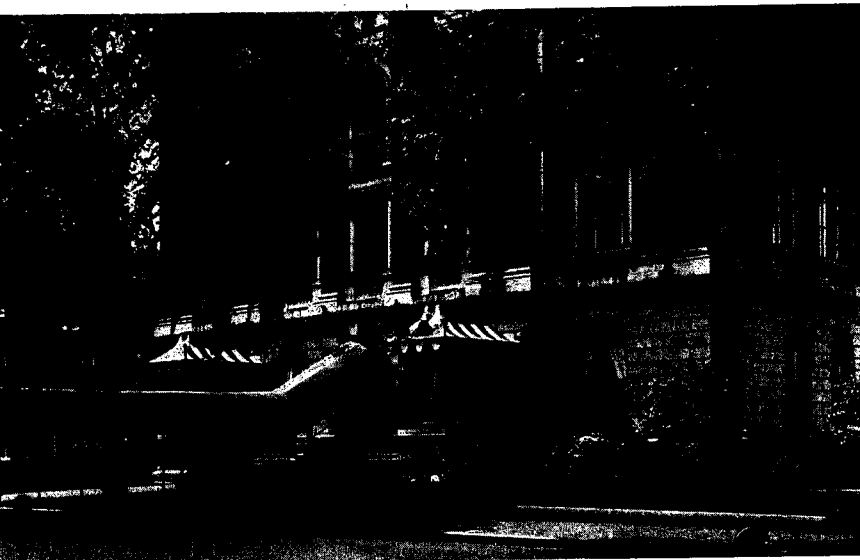
"I can walk in this area and never get tired of it. When I'm away, this is the only — not really the only place — but the place I think of most."

But some of the comments were uncomfortable:

"In an area like this, I've always felt sort of like a stranger . . . sort of like this wasn't particularly your street . . . where the stores sell expensive things not particularly useful to myself."

The small, select stores with their carefully chosen, unpriced displays all came in for comment. But only two, F. A. O. Schwarz and Brooks Bros., caught nearly as much attention as Neal's of California. Schwarz has windows full of attractive toys and Brooks Bros. is remarkable for its corner position, and for its social standing. It might be noted here that throughout the walk only three stores drew the attention of more than half the observers, and all of these had spatial position in which at least two sides of the store were exposed.

At this point another of the strong impressions of the walk appears — the Bonwit Teller store across Berkeley Street, occupying the entire narrow end of the block from Boylston to Newbury. Spatially isolated on three sides, set among trees and grass in a stony environment, it is an



*Bonwit Teller's on Berkeley Street.*

obvious period piece of warm red brick and carved stone trim set against the massive smooth backdrop of the New England Mutual building. It is particularly remarkable for its contrast of contemporary commercial use in a building symbolizing institutional values of another time, and for its mannered additions of awnings and show windows. More people chose to comment on this single structure than any other in the total walk, except for the Arlington Street Church.

"And I do like Mr. Bonwit. I like it largely because of space, the effect of non-crowding. I know it was an old M.I.T. building at one time [it wasn't]. It's very distinguished, it's done with taste, and mainly it's space, I think, that makes it largely attractive. If the front steps were level with the sidewalk, and there was a new building on each side, it would just be something else, another rather homely spot."

The attention may be captured just as handily, even if the feelings are quite different:

"I hate that monstrous awning coming out, it's so affected . . . like a worm coming out of a hole. . . . I've never heard anything so silly as converting a museum into a women's dress store and then showing it from the outside."

Two spontaneous post-walk memories of this building are interesting:

"Bonwit's . . . was the dominant thing. It filled your eyes . . . set the mood for the whole place."

"I have never realised that it was a museum until the other day [i.e., during the walk], when I looked at it from across the street at Brooks Bros. and noticed that these columns went up the front of it and gave it this museum or post office-like, type of atmosphere. Suddenly I saw the building as a whole though I had passed by it a million times. I had noticed its very obvious distinctive qualities but not the whole building."

Half of the walkers looked up along Berkeley long enough to catch a glimpse of the towering silhouette of the John Hancock building, two blocks away. The majority opinion was unfavorable:

"You are suddenly faced with a very ugly mass, the John Hancock, which rises much too high, much too out of shape."

Just as the tour seemed about to end, we turned abruptly down into the alley, which, though not spotless, was reasonably neat by alley standards. In emotional vigor, the comments on this alley and on the Public Gardens stand alone. Three-quarters of the subjects reacted strongly, particularly to the spatial constriction of the alley and to its real or imagined dirt. The tone of voice, the facial expression conveyed the impact as well as the actual words:

"Do we have to walk down here? There is no place to walk. Oh, this is awful . . . if they did have a fire people would come down here and land on the garbage, and they'd be killed for sure. . . . I'll bet it's stinky in the summer."



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"Heaven knows what we're going to get into, in the way of rats and trash . . . it's back alleys and they should all be done away with . . . they're horrible eyesores."

"Seems like the alley wants to make you look down not up. Seems as the walls are closing in."

As they proceeded down the alley they were preoccupied with the confinement of space, the lack of light, the dirt and water on the ground, the trash barrels which line the way. In this constricted volume their eyes no longer moved freely about but were turned downwards to the floor, or were fixed on the spot of light at the alley's end. Yards, breaks in the side-walls or lighted windows caused them to turn their heads automatically. Smells were mentioned for the first time, not because the alley was actually very odorous, but because alleys are supposed to smell, and the subjects noticed the lack of them.

Little contrasts caught their attention, such as a small window with shelves of china displayed, or a "poor little weed tree" fighting for life in a storage yard. Their eyes went up to see such things as the tops of fire escapes, outlined against the sky.

But the principal impression, along with the space and the dirt, was the contrast between the backs of the shops lining the alley, and the memory of their fashionable façades on Newbury Street. To the strong physical impression was added the dramatic and human one — of the wealthy shoppers in front and the poor workers behind.



Almost half of the tourists were moved to speak when they passed the windows of a basement workroom:

"Isn't it amazing — you walk down one street with ladies in furs, and you go down the alley . . . tailor shops down there. Miserable place to work. . . . You forget how many people there are working out of sight."

"Ah, this is the true life of the city with the false façade!"

Yet despite the sense of drama many of them felt, they were glad to get out again:

"The one thing that really saves this alley is the fact that you look out and see that very broad space which gives relief to it. Pigeons flying there, and the sun silhouetted by the buildings."

The spatial release at the end of the alley was correspondingly strong. The Ritz-Carlton parking lot, which had been an irritation on Newbury Street now became a window from the alley prison:

"What a relief! This parking lot with the open space. . . . It feels so good coming out of that dark alley!"

And when they came to the end of the alley itself, with the space of the Gardens before them, they were full of joy. These moments of relief were vividly remembered later:

"When we finally came out into the Ritz parking lot, it was open, open space and the sunshine came in . . . everything looked so sunny and so clean and nice."

"Crossing that street into the park was like . . . a sense of freedom, really."

In all of these reactions to space, it is notable how closely interwoven was the perception with the sense of potential movement on the one hand, and the sense of light or sun on the other.

Before reaching the Gardens, however, they had one more trial; they must cross the traffic of Arlington Street. Until this spot their reaction to traffic and parked cars had been mild, primarily sympathetic with the problems of the driver. There had been little consciousness of traffic noise, and some even managed to call a street a "quiet" one, in the midst of sounds of auto horns. But at this crossing they were faced with the problem of fording the traffic stream, and each one betrayed the anxiety and tense care that this required:

"Cars keep coming around here. These cars keep coming around and I can't get by. They never stop — yes, here they come! Exactly what I'm talking about; they never stop going down the street!"

During the crossing, there was no mention of any other feature of the environment.

It was with a sense of marked relaxation and pleasure that all entered the Public Gardens. The spatial liberation

## WHAT THEY REMEMBERED:

*The signs, the broad pavement, the view of the Public Gardens on Boylston Street; the brick pavement and Neal's of California on Arlington Street; the Ritz parking lot on Newberry Street, and the spire of the Church of the Covenant.*

again came in for almost universal comment. For a second time a significant number of comments were made about other people in the scene: the moving, brightly dressed skaters, enjoying the last ice of the season. Half the walkers specifically mentioned the trees.

"It seems like a very good idea to have a park in the middle of the city, if only for cars to go around as well as a place for a quiet walk in between the trees. . . . This is a place I'd like to explore more and look at in more detail. . . . The very idea of trees is pleasant, and there haven't been many on surrounding streets, if any at all."

Several people seemed to enjoy being able to see and hear the city from a little distance while in the park. They were particularly taken by the contrast of park and the city which visibly encloses it. Here they enjoyed two worlds simultaneously.

One man voiced his underlying anxiety that this open space may be one day swallowed up:

"Tremendous real estate value this area must be! I wonder if and when Boston will do away with it?"

While another looked at it in terms of personal associations:

"A park has always been for me a sort of quiet ground from the battle of the city. As you walk along any of the avenues that lead to Central Park, this one also, the battle crowds on, and when you finally get to the park, all of a sudden things are quiet and it's a different world."

### **The walk analyzed**

After the trip, in some cases within a few hours and in others in two or three days, the subjects were interviewed again. First they were asked:

"Try to put yourself back at the beginning of the walk, and describe to me in detail the sequences of things and events you noticed."

When they had completed this description they were then asked various questions; whether they remembered any particular buildings, features of buildings, people, sounds, smell, traffic signs or pavements. They were asked how many definite areas they had passed by; if they felt the areas had any order or continuity and why; and whether this part of the city seemed to fit into their pictures of Boston. Some were asked to describe their feelings on the walk, and to say what made the greatest impression on them. All subjects were given a set of photographs of buildings, street views, pavements, details, etc. They were asked to say which objects they had seen on the journey.



In general the items noted in the walk interview and in the spontaneous recall of the post-walk interview coincided very well, and a lapse of two or three days versus a lapse of one or two hours made surprisingly little difference in what was mentioned.

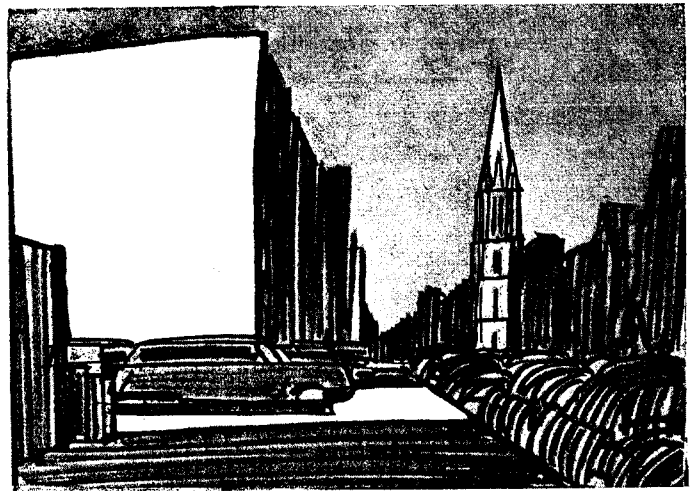
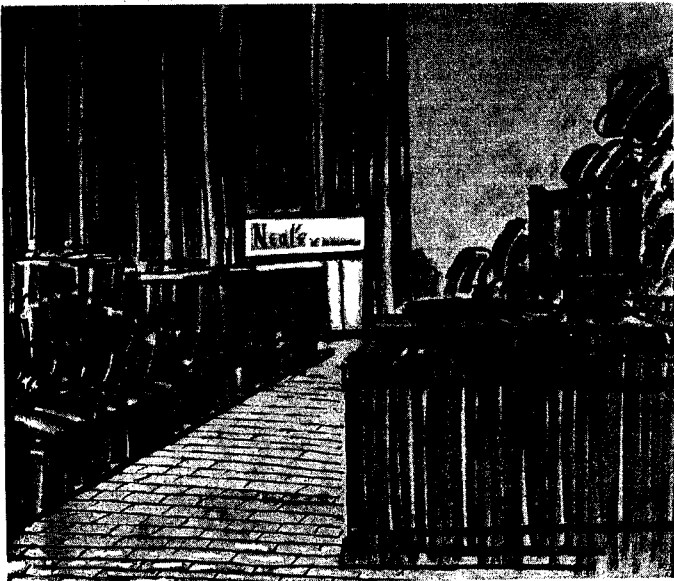
The fundamental impressions for almost all our observers came from certain individual buildings and open spaces. Moreover, there is agreement on particular buildings or spaces, and this is consistent between walk and recall. The buildings noticed are remarkable for singularities of style, material, use or association, but particularly for their spatial quality. Only a few structures received significant mention which were not somehow prominent in space.

We might assert that open space is the most impressive feature of all in the cityscape. We might buttress this assertion by speculation that "building" is an expected element of city description, culturally what one "should" discuss; while space relations are seemingly more esoteric and more difficult to verbalize. Thus their frequency is all the more striking.

The spaces remembered afterwards seemed to be either those which were clearly defined in form, or which made evident breaks in the general continuity. In certain earlier (and less systematic) interviews for instance, the space of entering cross streets was ignored, except where heavy on-coming traffic forced recognition of the street as a break in continuity. There was a unanimous reaction of dislike to what was described as the "huge and formless" space of a railroad yard.

Somewhat less strong than spaces or structures, but still a dominant impression, was that of the city floor, the sidewalk pavement. Particularly evocative were the material and the state of repair. There was interest in variations of texture or color, but some irritation at rough surfaces, especially from women in high heels. As a footnote, it is surprising to find that 16 out of 27 people commented on the width of the Boylston Street sidewalk in their spon-

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one type of detail which has been the subject of some recent design discussion—the street furniture (parking meters, light poles, etc.)—was only rarely mentioned.

There was somewhat greater unanimity in regard to the people selected for comment, and usually the remark seemed to involve a class or group: the dramatic contrast of the seamstresses in the alley basement; the well-dressed women on Newbury who symbolised the street; the skaters in the Gardens, bright moving objects in a peaceful setting. Some of the subjects indicated that during a more normal walk they would be much more observant of others than they seemed to be in these experiments. It may be that there was something in the test situation which implied that their attention should be upon the inanimate environment, and that the rest was not “the city.”

Traffic came in for some comment, with somewhat more focus on the parked cars than on the moving ones, until the street had to be crossed. Up to this point, the emotional reaction was low, except where the parked car protruded onto the sidewalk. Feelings were intense and anxious while crossing, however, and all other perceptions were momentarily shut out. These pedestrians seem to accept, or at least to be hardened to, the car, until it threatens their safety, view, or freedom of movement.

Vegetation also played a role of some significance; not only its presence but its absence was expressed. Comments ran toward wishful replantings of street trees, or sadness at “pathetic” grass islands in the vortex of traffic. In fact, there was not much vegetation to notice, but where it occurred, as in the Public Gardens, there was a universal, and very positive, reaction of pleasure. Curiously enough, as with the signs, the recall of this part of the environment seemed to be quite low, in contrast to its relatively high mention during the walk. Why it should be forgotten so easily is a puzzle.

Few people talked about the weather, although there was perhaps a significant unconscious impression which was not verbalized. Sounds and smells were both equally low in conscious awareness. Some sounds were recalled after direct questioning, but even then smells could not be

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aneous recall. Four described it in their first sentence, four more in the second, and six in the next few sentences.

Next in interest was the impact of store-fronts and their window contents. For most of our subjects these were a pleasant and absorbing feature of the stroll. But there was little unanimity as to which particular stores were singled out for comment. Much depended on the particular interests of the observer.

Signs were also important during the walk itself, but we found only one sign which drew common remark. Some sense of this scatter of attention may be gleaned from the fact that 78 different signs were noted by some one of the walkers; yet only six signs received the attention of more than two people, and only three the attention of more than three. Of these latter three signs, two were associated with buildings or stores which had received overwhelming attention for other reasons, the third was the clock in the Boylston Street sidewalk. Ninety-five percent of the people commented on signs while walking, but only 25 percent later recalled them. The subjects seemed highly conscious of the visual clamor, and often irritated by it, but particular signs seemed to make only a scattered and transitory impression.

Succeeding in frequency of mention were the two categories of street detail and people. The former includes such a miscellany of smaller objects as street furniture, fences, fire escapes, waste containers, subway entrances and statues, and this makes generalization difficult. Specific reasons may usually be attached to the choice of specific items, such as the relation to the Gardens of the Channing statue and the iron fence; the spatial prominence of the book-stall, or the subway entrance; the association with dirt of the alley barrels and the Boylston waste paper container (although the latter was undoubtedly also characterized by its bright color); the spatial constriction of the alley which forced an upward view and thus the silhouetting of the fire escapes. It is interesting to note that

remembered. In both cases, we are probably dealing with a level of habituation, so that the signal rarely receives attention unless it varies significantly from the normal level. Thus, many of the "mentions" of sound or smell were actually the lack of it, i.e., a "quiet" street or an "odorless" alley.

Several obvious elements drew almost no comment at all: color for example (which may nevertheless be important in making another object noticeable), or the sky; wall materials and textures, overhead wires, upper floor façades or doorways.

The recognition of photographs also agreed with the interview results, since people tended to recognize easily photographs of items which were mentioned frequently, and vice versa. Unfortunately, since the photographs did not always cover what later proved to be some of the key visual features of the environment, this particular test was not so useful as it might have been.

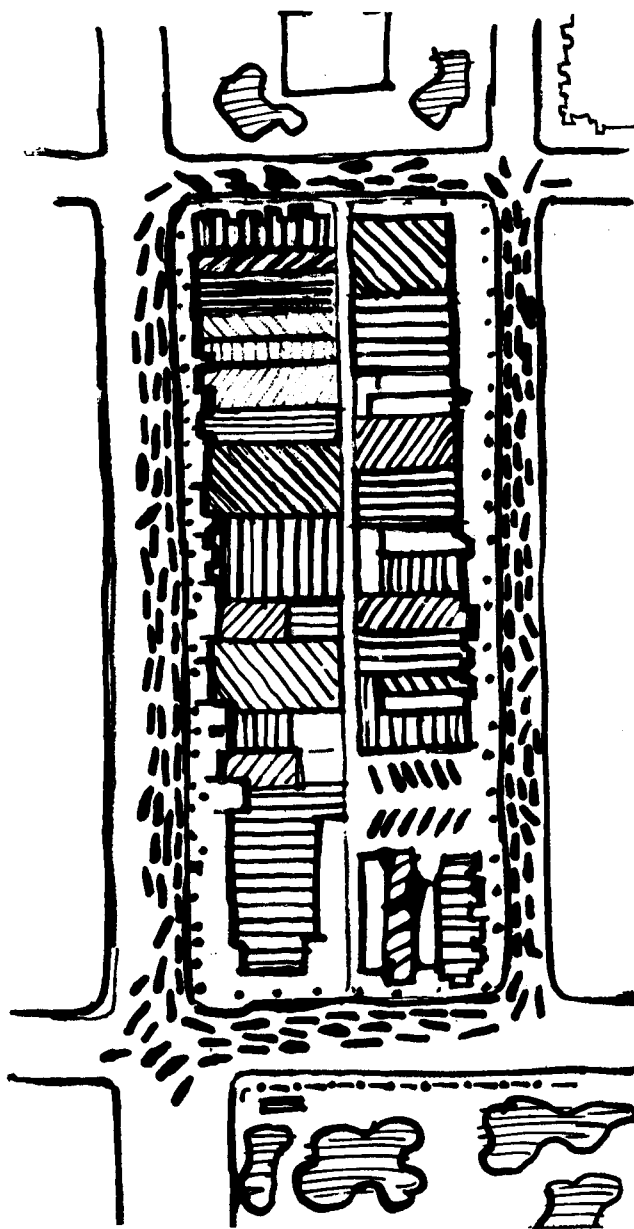
#### The need for order

But how were these perceptions fitted together? This was a fundamental point. Take the way in which our particular block was mentally organized. It is interesting to note that interviewees did not hesitate to try to discover whether the area possessed any sense of order for them. Some broke it down into many sub-areas, and others felt it was all one thing. In the "average" case, it was organized somewhat as follows: the three fundamental parts were Boylston Street, Newbury Street and the Public Gardens. Arlington and Berkeley Streets were considered as parts of one or the other of these. The alley was a puzzle, since it didn't "fit" well; usually it was considered either as a separate area or as something which occupied the "backs" of Boylston and Newbury and thus either sewed them together or belonged ambiguously to one or the other. In some cases it was simply forgotten; in one case even explicitly ignored as a part that was rarely seen and thus in a sense didn't exist. Here is a typical example from a foreign viewer:

"I could make out three distinct, different impressions. There was the semi-gaudiness of Boylston Street and the sounds associated with that. There was the relative quiet, possibly even quaintness of the Gardens. Newbury Street was very distinctly on a different level than Boylston. . . . Then there was the alley, of course. . . . These areas stand off from each other, they don't go together. . . . Let's say, with any one of two impressions, Newbury or Boylston, the alley must be along with it; it's just necessary. So perhaps: the alley and Boylston; the alley and Newbury; and the Gardens."

This same agreement as to the organization of certain parts of the environment, coupled with indecision and disagreement as to other parts, could be detected in earlier exploratory studies. For example, the upper end of a certain street, with its large colonial houses, was easily organized as a distinct entity. This was contrasted to the lower end, a busy shopping district, by all observers. Between these two regions, lies another piece of the street

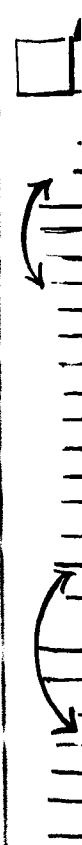
which corresponds neither in use nor in physical form to either end. On the other hand, it has no sharp character of its own, being a mixture of apartments, offices, houses and irregular spaces. The observers found this to be a section that they could not easily attach to either the upper or the lower end, yet they were unwilling to give it a life of its own. Feeling compelled to organize their walk, and unable to leave their organization incomplete or to "forget" this section (as some were able to do with the Boylston alley), they responded by attaching it, half-heartedly, to one or the other of the strong "ends." The result was agreement on two classes into which the walk fell, separated by a weak, oscillating boundary.



#### THE STRANGER ORGANIZES HIS ENVIRONMENT

*He sees no overall uniformity in the buildings or the types of business; signs and street furniture break the block up into small confused areas; heavy traffic isolates him from the other side of streets.*

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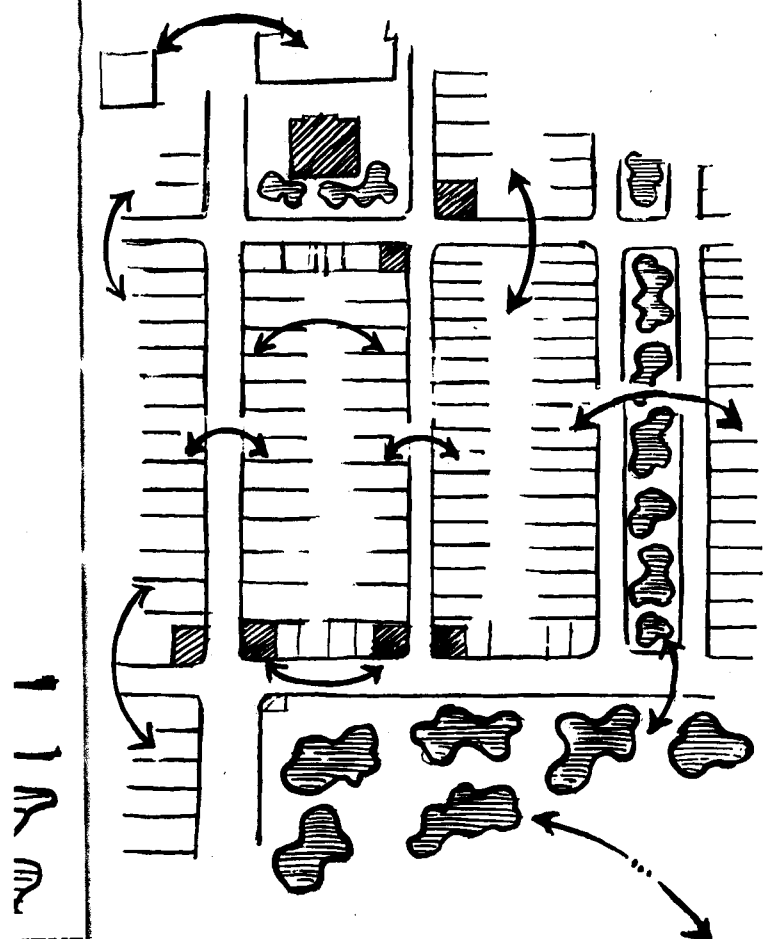


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Thus we have organizational consensus at one point, due to suggestions inherent in the physical form itself, coupled with disagreement in regard to the rest, where the unit into which a part is put depends primarily on past experience. Where this organizational indecision was strongest we found hints of feelings, not only of puzzlement, but of discomfort.

There was apparently a drive to organize the environmental impressions into meaningful patterns, which could be handled with economy. Since the city environment is complex and fluid, this is a difficult operation. Since the present environment so often does not suggest links by its physical shape, the process becomes all the more difficult. Yet it persists, and the resulting mental organization, while apparently quite loose, ambiguous and even contradictory at points, is nevertheless clung to firmly. Certain elements seem particularly important in furnishing distinctions for area classifications in the city, such as people and activity; land use; and general physical form, spatial form in particular.

Native and newcomer agree surprisingly well as to what is worth their notice, but significant differences appear between them in the way they organize these things. The



**THE NATIVE ORGANIZES HIS ENVIRONMENT:**  
*Familiarity with the area enables him to see similarities (often imaginary) between streets, blocks, buildings and open spaces.*

more familiar observer tends to establish more connections, and not to break his environment down into as many isolated parts. Thus a stranger might divide the walk into six parts: the four sides of the block, the alley, and the Gardens. For an old hand, however:

“Brooks Bros. rounds the corner and Charles Antell rounds the other corner, and the Arlington Street Church rounds the third corner, and well, the fourth corner is a little bit broken up; there’s two places there, but you sort of get this feeling like you never come to the end of the street and then make a sharp corner, you just sort of make a round corner there. This whole block therefore seems to be a very complete continuous compact tightly set-in block, and the stores such as Bonwit’s, Peck and Peck, Schraffts, and so forth, which are on the outer periphery of this square belong to the square, definitely.”

Not only is the block considered as one, but the façades facing the block are also drawn into the unit. Even the rectangular shape with its sharp corners cannot be allowed, and the form is distorted towards the seamless circle. (Compare the previous quotation from a stranger: “these areas stand off from each other, they don’t go together.”) Note also in this quotation that the corner of Boylston and Berkeley is resistant to the neat organization, which puts a key use to mark each corner from both directions; but that the resistant material is forced into place anyhow.

“No, this is definitely all a piece of one material as far as I am concerned. There is a distinction between Boylston and Newbury. . . . But the whole area has always been very much one grouping, one place.”

It is also true that these were the people who were less able to distinguish this block from its context in the larger Back Bay district. The streets are not boundaries for them. For the unfamiliar, however, this block seems to have no particular relation to the rest of the city.

These findings might be generalized in the following hypothesis: the individual must perceive his environment as an ordered pattern, and is constantly trying to inject order into his surroundings, so that all the relevant perceptions are jointed one to the other. Certain physical complexes facilitate this process through their own form, and are seen as ordered wholes by native and newcomer alike. Subsequent use and association simply strengthen this structure. Other complexes, however, do not encourage this fitting together, and they are seen as fundamentally disordered by the newcomer. For the native, this “disordered” complex may also seem to be an organized one, since habitual use and perception have allowed him to put the collection together by means of associated meanings, or by selection, simplification, distortion or even suppression of his perceptions. This progressive imputation of order is often alluded to, implicitly or explicitly:

“I don’t feel any sense of real order and yet I didn’t feel that everything was jumbled and I suppose that is because I am familiar with the area. To me it didn’t seem confused, it seemed right.”

"I've always liked this section, ever since I first became familiar with it about fourteen years ago. Although it has undergone some change, I feel the change has been a progressive one toward blending and uniformity of buildings rather than of strange contrasts and conflicts of colors, sizes and shapes."

Thus this sense of order can finally be achieved by familiarity despite physical chaos. Yet there is evidence that this organization is achieved only by real effort and by distortion of the pattern of reality, and that even after it is accomplished it is attended by emotions of insecurity where the required organization is particularly ruthless. Certainly it lacks the conviction and depth of a relationship which is backed up by physical pattern.

An "old hand" may recognize a shopping district as an organized entity where strangers say it is chaotic. Intensive use and association have satisfactorily overcome physical confusion, even if the satisfaction would be deeper were the spatial form more continuous. At least the physical continuities of land use and activity are there to back up the mental category.

But, even for the native, there is no satisfaction in the "fringe" of that shopping district. He can tell that it is more commercial than residential, and thus ought to go with the shopping, and he can hold it there in his mind when it is necessary for practical purposes, but the reality keeps wandering off, keeps contradicting him. It is like a restless animal which one must constantly correct. For the newcomer, moreover, the fringe makes no particular

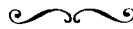
sense at all, and he is likely to recognize the fact, with some discomfort.

Some newcomers may ask for a very sweeping and rigid kind of physical organization:

"I had no idea that the town would be built up as it is, just on cow paths and up little hills. . . . I just supposed that the city would be beautiful, quite modern, that the stores would be in order, the dress shops together and the bridal shop with it and not off in a corner all by itself; the antiques would be together and the big business areas would be business areas."

Very possibly this observer might change her mind about such a "neat" city were she to live in it long, but the wish is indicative of the troubles she is facing. The native may be able to handle, and indeed find more pleasure in, a more intricate and complexly organized environment, but organized it must be, whether by city dwellers or by the sweat of his own brow.

Our study suggests one further remark. The method used may not only be useful for research purposes, but may be an educational tool as well. Such a recorded walk in itself tends to heighten the perception of the city. When combined with a discussion in the field of general interview results, along with the critique of the surrounding forms, it might prove to be an excellent way of awakening the citizen's interest in the form of his city, sharpening his critical abilities, and heightening his ultimate pleasure in a well-shaped environment.



## COMMUNICATION

### THE DISPOSABLE CITY

To the Editor of LANDSCAPE:

My remarks about the "disposable city," quoted in abbreviated form by the AP in American papers in November, were made in the course of discussions of last summer's International Seminar on Urban Renewal, held in The Hague. The thought of building less permanent cities was also reflected in a talk prepared for the meeting. Actually, the fundamental idea that I wished to get across was that with increased technology, new and improved ways of doing things, new and better materials, better and faster means of transportation, changes in residential, commercial and industrial activities, it is imperative that we try to compose a physical urban environment which recognizes this change and is more susceptible to modification without the tremendous cost which is now necessary. Everywhere we have evidence that man tends to build "monuments." These monuments are often "symbols" of what one person (or a small group of people) thinks is the proper type of structure to erect at the moment. All too many

people feel they have the "answer" to what or how a house (or city) should look. Our fathers and grandfathers also thought this. The work of our children will be just as difficult, perhaps more so, than our work or our forefathers. Unfortunately the "monument builders" of today too often saddle the costs of their folly to the next generation—particularly is this so when public monies are being spent.

I suggest, therefore, that our cities be built with the idea not to last forever, but perhaps for a generation. Should we not give our children the right, the pleasure, the responsibility, the fun of building their own environment? Should we have to live in the "monuments" of past generations which in many cases were obsolete when they were built? I believe more thought must be given to the design and construction of more livable, workable, flexible structures, to environments which are built for "living"—living at its best in each generation.

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