Mark Gilbert

observing, understanding, intervening: *a gentle manifesto*

Essay, 2009

First published in After the Storm *(Schlebrugge.Editor, Wien, 2009)*

I. prologue: two films

I once saw a double feature of road movies.

The main attraction was Monte Hellman's 1971 cult-classic *Two-Lane Blacktop.* With minimal plot, and even less dialog, the film follows two young men, who are known only as the Driver and the Mechanic. They travel the American West in a souped-up '55 Chevy, and earn their money by duping locals in impromptu drag races. Along the way, they pick up a comely, yet nameless young hitch-hiker and cross paths with an aging playboy and his GTO muscle car. Ultimately, a bet is made and a race across America begins; the winner will receive the opponent's car as prize. But what begins as spirited competition soon evolves into existentialistic cooperation. The cars trade hands and are given back; the Girl jumps back and forth as well. In the end, all lose interest in the race and go their separate ways, seemingly none the wiser from the journey they have shared.

While the film's images of both the land and people of the American west are powerful and moving, the film exudes a palatable dissonance, even discomfort; this feeling arises out of the characters' disconcerting inability to connect with the world around them. The everyday life that exists outside their cars is distant and often threatening; people – even their travelling companions – seem isolated and estranged. The Playboy is constantly bantering; but it is simply the chatter of an egocentric dreamer, talking to himself[i]. Meanwhile, the Driver, the Mechanic and the Girl display a social reticence that takes the meaning of taciturn to a whole new level. Sitting for miles on end in the cramped cabin of their Chevy, they cannot sustain any meaningful conversation. Despite moments of visible yearning, the only subject that holds their abiding attention is the car itself. They discuss its behavior and its whims; its every sound and its every gesture are contemplated in terse, heartfelt words. The car not only carries them physically, it supports them emotionally as well. The '55 Chevy propels them across an indifferent and dangerous America, nurturing them and giving purpose to their lives. It is often suggested that the car is the true star of the movie. Certainly, without their machine built of Detroit iron, the protagonists would be lost: devoid of all place in the world, and without any means for navigating themselves through it.

The short film in the double feature was an early, 13-minute long work from Wim Wenders titled *3 Amerikanische LP's*. Produced together with the writer and poet Peter Handke for German TV in 1969, the film revolves around a discussion between the two filmmakers about emotional expression in American rock music. The soundtrack's three songs – one each from Van Morrison, Harvey Mandel and Creedence Clearwater Revival – provide the musical substantiation for their words. As the visual accompaniment to this aural essay, Wenders' camera wanders across late 60's Munich, building three separate cinematic montages, one for each of the musical pieces. The first sequence pans across the view looking out from the balcony of an apartment tower; the other two sequences observe the passing city from the window of a moving car. Carried along from housing estates to inner-city boulevards and through suburban tristess, the viewer is finally chauffeured into an abandoned drive-in theatre at the edge of town. In the end, we look through the windshield of the parked car onto a screen of empty of concrete, while John Fogerty's last chords dwindle into silence.

As a visual essay of the German city anno 1969, *3 American LP's* has often been honored as a cinematic form of the Situationist *derive*. Not burdened by a conventional narrative of any sort, this short film is a perfect road movie; despite its missing plot, it generates deep feelings of longing and desire. Laying customary forms of exposition aside, Wenders relies upon the film's ability to fashion emotions and meanings directly from the visual and acoustic impressions it contains. His world – here Munich and its suburbs – is immediately present and intensely experienced by the viewer. Although the images that the film offers are not conventionally beautiful, Wenders succeeds in imbuing the European cityscape with the sort of emotional intensity that both he and Handke perceive in American music. Seeking to liberate the images of this all too familiar world, the filmmaker takes in what the city has to offer, samples and savors it. He seems to be searching for new flavors and feelings that might lie submerged within this otherwise prosaic terrain, and, in doing so, regards the city as if it were a strangely wonderful, if not tragically dilapidated garden of human endeavor.

II. the machine and the garden

The opposition of the machine and the garden is one of America's most time-honored cultural tropes. Leo Marx once described how – when confronted by immensity of its continental expanse – early 19th century American found it necessary to develop two conflicting intellectual traditions; each of these intended to define how the young nation would go about digesting this vast wilderness. One tradition was that of the pastoral ideal, which saw this land as an untouched and bountiful nature awaiting human civilization. The cultivation of this Edenic garden would bring man and nature in harmony. The human hand would be steward to the land, and a classless society of free-holding citizens would harvest the abundant earth for the benefit of all. The other intellectual tradition was the progressive ideal of technological advancement. Here, the almost limitless resources of the North American continent were to be rationally exploited, producing wealth in previously unimaginable magnitudes for the nascent industrial society. This progressive tradition imagined the machine as the tool that would release the land's treasure from the shackles of an inhospitable wilderness. Only with the aid of mechanical power could the immense distances be pragmatically traversed; only through the use of industrial methods could the continent's immeasurable resources be economically extracted. [ii]

While Leo Marx saw this juxtaposition as an intellectual conflict within the young American society, Henry Nash Smith described how both traditions appropriated trans-Appalachia as symbol: it was the mythical place where the democratic future of the young republic could unfold. The function of myth is to influence cultural consciousness and motivate collective action. Both traditions labored in service of this goal, offering scintillating yet competing visions of a near and attainable future, full of freedom and plenty. Yet, as Nash describes it, these intrinsically contradictory visions were less incompatible than it might first seem. Certainly, they appealed to different clienteles –the pastoral vision strove to mobilize the masses to migrate out west, the progressive ideal sought to motivate capital to invest in technology and develop the land – but in practice they worked together symbiotically. Harvesting the bounty of America's natural landscape required the tools of technology. There could be no pastoral for the growing masses without railroads to bring settlers to the land, or steamboats to move their products to market. Leo Marx draws attention to Ralph Waldo Emerson's curious ability to heap praise upon both nature and technology: even the father of transcendentalism saw technical progress as the means to harness nature for the betterment of man. [iii] The machine was necessary, in order to create the garden. [iv]

One thing that both Smith and Marx make painfully clear is that these competing, yet complementary conceptions of the world profoundly affect how we see, how we understand and how we act upon the material environment. Yet, even if they were capable of working well together, these two traditions were still based upon distinctly different expectations about how society should use its resources. More than

simply material practices, these two worldviews were based upon conceptual understandings about the relationship between the individual, society and the material world; they framed the collective understanding of *how things should work*. Leo Marx notes how Thoreau considered the clock to be the epitome of the capitalist system; by tying production to a temporal schedule, the timepiece linked the industrial apparatus to the individual consciousness. [v] The rational imperatives of progressive industrialism transformed the ancient rhythms of time into an abstract machine; the clock's precise division of the day did to time what Descartes did to space, making human perception subservient to an absolute and mathematical scheme. The pastoral ideal, on the other hand, may have exaggerated the beneficence and harmony of the natural world, but its understanding of nature, while highly idealized, was not intangible. The free-holding farmer worked the land in close accord with the eternal rhythms of the seasons, not with those of an abstract system. The contrast between these two conceptions of time draws attention to the traditions' inherently dissimilar worldviews, and illuminates the disparities between their different constructions of social and economic behavior.

Yet, while they may have understood and interpreted the world differently, these two traditions have conspired together to transform the landscape of America. Even today, these intellectual positions still influence how we conceive of our cities – and, therefore, how we will (re)develop them. From urban renewal and cross-town highways, to city branding and the "Bilbao Effect", public investment is always on the on prowl for magic bullets that will solve the problems facing our cities; and private developers are always trying to exploit urban real estate in order to maximize returns. Conversely, processes of public participation promote intensely parochial strains of local politics, while the historical preservation movement pursues the maintenance of the aesthetic status quo. Let us try to put an overarching vision of urbanity in our mind's eye: each city is a unique matrix of social, economic and physical facts. These facts are the urban system's material and geographical inventory, its evolved social conventions and its legislated norms of operation. Taken together, the specificity of these local facts defines the particularities of any urban ecosystem. Applying this image to the metaphor of the machine and the garden, then current urban development practices might be seen as a modern expression of progressive thinking that uses capital and economic power to transform the factual relations of the ecosystem, while community planning processes, and urban preservation groups, might be understood to be contemporary and urban forms of the pastoral ideal which seek to preserve the factual contours of existing social and spatial conditions. Confronted with the irresistible socio-economic dynamic of the city, these two approaches to the city must work together to insure a dynamic, urban equilibrium. Without community, there is no identity. Without development, economic vitality shrivels and dies. Ultimately, the question is: how can we fuse these intrinsically antagonistic processes into one socially sustainable city?

III. new orleans and tulane/gravier

By any measure, New Orleans is one of the great manifestations of the progressive program. The city's location at the mouth of the Mississippi controlled the access to the trans-Appalachian basin, but the strategic potential of the city's situation stood in stark contrast to the physical unattractiveness of its site: a swampy, deltaic plain, exposed to storms and vulnerable to the flooding of the river. The city's fate was linked early on to the machine: only with the invention of the paddlewheel river boat did the city assume economic importance on a continental scale. By taming the river's currents, the steamboat brought the resources of the great valley to port; Ari Kelman describes how the black smokestacks and arcaded decks of the riverboats docked along New Orleans' wharf was one of ante-bellum America's iconic images of technology[vi]. While steam-powered transport drove the city's economy, other sorts of machines made the city habitable. Levees contained the Mississippi and, later, Lake Pontchatrain; mechanical pumps drained the swamps and marshes and laid the groundwork for city's 20th century expansion.

While the city's material and economic foundations may have been literally built by machine, the division of its property and the organization of its cultural space were more ambivalent, and socially complex. The French Quarter is famously orthogonal (although its street grid is the product of absolutist principals for fortress planning, rather than any new world predispositions towards enlightenment ideals), but the rest of the lower Mississippi Valley was laid out in accordance with the more archaic *arpent* system for surveying land. This narrow-lot pattern of property division provided each allotment with logistically invaluable river frontage. In order to fit the survey's long, thin parcels into the curves of the Mississippi's meanders, *arpent* landholdings took on the form of conically-shaped plots. As the city expanded, new urban development filled in these rural parcels, but these new properties were apportioned according to another, more Jeffersonian logic: the ground was divided up into an orthogonal grid of streets, which – not entirely coincidentally – provided the spatial clarity that the real estate market demands.

The persistence of these conical, agrarian patterns within the urban structure of New Orleans is more than simply a cultural palimpsest. Instead, it points to one of the central realities of the city: regardless of the means through which a city comes into being, once the traces of "civilized" human habitation are established – the division of land into private and communal spaces, the spatial separation of different programs and usages – they are almost impossible to erase. Human habitation produces an interlocking set of real facts. Some facts are physically material, such as built houses, streets, and, in the case on New Orleans, levees; others are intensively abstract yet ultimately more enduring facts such as the principles and legal codifications of private property, urban finance as well as the social regulation for what is perceived to be the public good. These facts become the deep landscape of human settlement, and New Orleans – a cultural jambalaya and the home of jazz – is endowed with one of the most unique socio-spatial landscapes in the world.

Even if time and urban development cannot easily erase these historic spatial patterns, there are still many ways it can wring them of life. First, there is neglect and abandonment, where segments of the population decide that there is neither social benefit nor economic advantage in maintaining a neighborhood. Then there is the long and cataclysmic tradition of scorched-earth urban renewal in America; in New Orleans, this process has erased all traces of Storyville and covered Claiborne Avenue over with an interstate highway. And there are other, often well-meant, yet inexorably effective methods for extinguishing struggling urbanity, such as fast-food restaurants, big-box shopping centers, introverted institutions and thoughtlessly-themed leisure complexes unable to respond to the rhythms of the streets that surround them. All of these consume great volumes of capital as well as often valuable tracts of fine-grained, historically- formed urban fabric. While this is not to say that urban fabric is inviolable – the city is a living entity and must always grow and develop – but if development provides no tangible local benefits and simply forces existing social groups out of the area, it will not promote any neighborhood's continued vitality. Neighborhoods, like cities, develop over generations, and must be carefully cultivated and cared for.

Tulane/Gravier is a historical part of Mid-City New Orleans. A neighborhood of modest, wood-framed shotgun houses, it sits astride several cultural and topographical boundaries that have historically shaped the urban landscape. The area straddles the line between the backswamp wetlands and the relatively solid levee, and is intersected by Canal Street, the once-traditional division between the catholic Creole and protestant Anglo sections of the city. It was long inhabited by both blacks and whites, and there were long-standing rules about how the races were – or weren't – allowed to mix. The neighborhood lay between industrial zones which once lined the city's two historic shipping canals, so its economy was ravaged by the deindustrialization of the post-war years. Flooded in 2005, but with less catastrophic damage than many other parts of the city, Tulane/Gravier is located just a stone's throw from the French Quarter and the Central Business District, and therefore represents a rather attractive site for urban redevelopment. The district may presently be blighted and its commercial streets desolate, yet its

residential streets remain vital and retain the fine-grained spatial structure that makes shotgun residential neighborhoods so appealing. Despite its troubles, Tulane/Gravier remains a living part of New Orleans' singular urban ecology.

IV. system and contingency

Tulane/Gravier's present state can't be blamed upon hurricane surges and inadequate levees alone. Most of the neighborhood's problems predate Katrina; although the storm disastrously exacerbated urban decay, the area's depopulation, material decay and its loss of jobs and services are the result of socio-economic trends which began in the 50's. Whether due to a deficiency of resources, a lack of creativity or even malignant neglect, these processes of decline have proven to be persistent and stubbornly intransigent. Seen in this light, the disaster of Katrina may yet prove to be a tragic opportunity; it means there is at least a possibility that capital investment and economic improvement will finally come to long-neglected parts of the city.

However, the opportunity born of tragedy must not bring new tragedies in its wake. Big-ticket development can be a powerful motor for transforming dilapidated urban landscapes, but history has given us ample reason to be suspicious of institutional initiatives and developer-driven projects. Large capital investments are notoriously tone deaf to local communities struggling for their continued existence (as is the present plan for the VA/LSU Hospital Campus, which will raze great swaths of Tulane/Gravier to the ground) or unfortunately irrelevant to neighborhoods' immediate needs (as are the grand projects for the Mississippi River Front, which concentrate development into previously revitalized and already affluent parts of the city); only when aims of capital are fused with the interests of existing communities, can such schemes spawn socially sustainable neighborhoods. Economic development is desperately needed for the revival of run-down urban ecosystems, but it must be systematically organized and socially integrated into local community networks: it needs to work to sustain the strange and dilapidated gardens of human endeavor that make up our cities today.

Urban neighborhoods operate on various economic scales. In order to be sustainable, neighborhood development must integrate local networks into super-ordinate economic systems, while insuring that the wealth and human resources produced through these interconnections will be equitably distributed throughout the community. Of course, this is an admirable goal in theory; the question is: what tools do we posses for achieving this in practice? If urban development is a process that transforms financial resources into built space, then architecture is the medium through which these resources take on real-world form. However, architecture is more than just a question of form. It is also an issue of program and usage: architecture provides space for social and economic activity to unfold. Human needs, desires and potentials provide the socio-economic content that animates architecture; the expression of this content as spatial intentions constitutes *program*. Architecture is the material housing of programmatic intentions, and is a tool which directs specific economic resources towards specific socio-economic usages in specific spaces within the city.

All tools have specific configurations for performing particular tasks. This is also so for architecture. *After the Storm* proposes specialized configurations of programmatic intention: *urban-programmatic use forms*.[vii] These do not incorporate functions in the traditional sense. Rather, they are object-oriented configurations of program, embodied in open systems of architectural composition, which facilitate the socio-economic activities necessary for sustaining and/or expanding neighborhood communities. The specific typologies presented in the following pages – mixed-use *urban densifiers,* social-infrastructural *urban attractors,* community specific *urban infiltrators* – are architectural-programmatic formulations of the socio-economic improvements required to maintain, revive and rebuild Tulane/Gravier. While this list certainly doesn't cover all possible formulations, it does give an idea of how the programs embodied

within architecture can operate as *conceptual machines* which organize and activate social systems and economic processes across a diverse array of urban scales.

But architecture, and its programs, cannot stand alone. They exist within urban fabrics; these are the socio-spatial landscapes which arise out the historical and generative facts of the city. These facts take many forms and can be both objectively or subjectively experienced; what they do is correlate spatial order and human behavior. For example, front-yard porches, so amenable to the hot, humid climate of the South, both provide for and promote the informal habits of sidewalk socializing seen everywhere in New Orleans' streets; the spatial rhythms of theses porches are not only part and parcel of the shotgun housing type, but also a product of the platting system used for subdividing the blocks of a neighborhood. These spatial patterns constitute a language that connects everyday human practice to urban and architectural form. Yet, unlike natural language, these patterns are intrinsically *morphic* and transmit no conventionally understood symbolic meaning; all meaning resides in the way which architectural forms and urban spaces perform in everyday use. Observing and understanding the city requires a carefully-tuned sensitivity for underlying grammar of structural relations. In a sense, an urban pastoral mentality: the ability to see the world as contingent relations, not just as logical causalities.

How we plan is a function of how we interpret the world, and is a question of what we expect from our cities: is urban space as a commodity to be exploited, or a resource to be stewarded and sustained? Urban stewardship and sustainability do not necessarily imply the maintenance of the status quo or the reproduction of comfortably familiar forms. The process, proposals and projects presented here in this book neither kowtow to the inescapable traditions of New Orleans, nor break with the city's historical patterns of inhabitation. Instead, suggests a way of seeing and understanding the urban environment in relation to the tools that we have for transforming it. Armed with this understanding, we can develop the city for the benefit of all.

---

[i] Jones, Kent: "Two-Lane Blacktop: Slow Ride". *The Criterion Collection / Online Cinemateque,* 10. December 2007. http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/621

[ii] Marx, Leo: *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York; Oxford University Press, 1964.

[iii] Marx, Leo: *ibid.* 227-242.

[iv] Smith; Henry Nash: *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth.* Cambridge and London; Harvard University Press, 1950.

[v] Marx, Leo: *ibid.* 248.

[vi] Kelman, Ari: *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans*. Berkley and Los Angeles; University of California Press; 2006. 60-61.

[vii] These use-forms have almost archetypical qualities; one might even say here that they should be categorized as *urban-programmatic Archetypes.*

Clearly, the idea of the Archetype, in that it is so strongly identified with Jung and psychology, would in many ways represent a difficult formulation for describing these urban-programmatic interventions. However, the categorization of these types of interventions seems in many ways to exceed the realm of influence which would generally be ascribed to the idea of type and typologies; they encompass a series of highly general, yet clearly definable, socio-economic effects that can be integrated into the city through the agency of development.

What might also seem problematic about using the idea of Archetype in this context is that in generally implies something archaic, the "ur-type" of a particular entity, and all of the projects shown here are modern reactions to contemporary needs. However, the modernity of the particular formulation does not exclude the universality of the general category. The archetype of "the mother"necessarily harks back to the origins of humanity, yet the present-day formulations of motherhood, such as the "soccer mom", the "working mother" the "single mother" can only be understood in reference to the meanings that the archetype contains. It is in this context that urban programmatic archetypes should be understood.

For example, the program of a university hospital is a particular, modern form of socio-economic activity within the city, yet the idea of an urban impulse goes back to the origins of the city, where many sorts of economic stimuli, such as markets, noble castles, and manufactures have served to stimulate urban development. It seems reasonable to maintain that this is also true for the other archetypes listed here; for example, over the years urban attractors have taken such varied forms as the agora, the forum and the opera house, all of which serve to bring people together to trade ideas, and build out social networks, and otherwise enjoy themselves.