

## Recycling the Margins

Re-Thinking the Role of Architecture in Everyday Urban Places

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*The ordinary reveals a network of space and time of complex social habits.*

—Margaret Crawford  
*Everyday Urbanism*

Architectural education can provide space for investigations and new lines of communication; this essay reveals the efforts of many students and myself to make sense of the role that architecture might play in everyday urban places. Through an encounter with a Kansas City, Kansas planner, my students and I became involved with a group of residents who recently had started the Boulevard Neighborhood Association. They began this effort in order to bring about positive change and recognize the potential of their place in the city—a place considered on the edge of nowhere, yet ironically, close to the center. I think that for those that live there, this involved process has encouraged them to become more familiar with one another and to move towards a new imagination for this place. For my students and me, there are lessons learned here about possible formal solutions and insight gained into how marginal spaces can be repossessed. I believe that within this transitional neighborhood there lie instructions for what we should pay attention to as architects and planners, but that it requires an approach that can only be learned in the place.

In a fifteen-block area neighborhood, initiated in the late 1800s as a result



of local industry, this place grew to include mostly individual houses with some commerce and light industry nearby. Due to the common urban flight to suburban places in the 1960s, many lost interest in the neighborhood, houses deteriorated and it has yet to fully recover.<sup>1</sup> Recently though, Hispanic families are in search of settlement and finding this landscape ripe with affordable housing and the local government eager to transform this place, politically, culturally, and economically.

In this setting there is a source of deep possibilities, but how to approach it is not immediately obvious. So, what approach should be taken? Can archi-

ture (either as a provider of form or as a strategic process) contribute anything of real value? What does this place tell us about everyday life in this tough, urban context? What are the existing *authentic* uses here and how do they inform new interventions?

I see this landscape as a repository of valuable information on the ways that people live their everyday lives and find meaning there. These interventions vary from the ordinary to extraordinary, all within seemingly ordinary ways. This place offers ways to reconnect human and social meanings through form and strategy. I think we have to reconsider our approach as architects and planners, from one of being of an officially



designated, abstract approach to one that melds the everyday landscape. There are traces of formal, urban governance which adhere to top-down policies to the ones that offer informal, bottom-up process of self-regulation. If we are to be relevant we must “demand a radical repositioning of the designer, a shifting of power from the professional expert to the ordinary person.”<sup>2</sup>

So often, we architects and planners are isolated and disengaged, creating abstract “solutions.” In many instances, architects focus purely on form and planners focus on policy. Both are operating independently from each other and the *fabric of the physical place*, missing the need to operate from



the middle. By embedding ourselves in the physical and being strategically responsive in the ways that we intervene in neighborhoods, we may learn *how to build* in this “everyday”<sup>3</sup> landscape.

Our role can be about changing the way a neighborhood functions through more innovative and smarter design, informed by patterns that exist and function already (even truly sustainable patterns are lurking there if we can only notice them.) Cities contain conflicting and overlapping meanings in their aesthetic contributions and in the ways that they relate socially, politically or economically. Cities cannot be understood from one singular view; they are multidimensional. It is the human experience that fundamentally provides an understanding of urbanism. The banal and ordinary routines we experience daily, define the lived experience shared by diverse, urban residents. This ordinary landscape reveals a rich network of spatial and temporal, complex social habits.

Understanding this everyday space can reveal the connective tissue that binds lives together. This space is not a result of a carefully-defined, officially-designated urban planning. As designers, we are immersed within the place and people rather than superior to it. We are forced to confront differences and contradictions of social spaces from within.

Older neighborhoods, like these that are aged and in transition, have open lots that are ill-defined for whom they serve. They are just there. In this abandoned, in-between space, the landscape is ambiguous, not strictly defined private nor public. Because of the ambiguity there lie possibilities for new social arrangements and subtle rights to “ownership” for those who choose to take them. By proclaiming the use of land, even lightly, the message changes from one that communicates abandonment to one that proclaims connection. Fragmentation and incompleteness are inevitable conditions of older urban landscapes. They provide opportunities for impromptu uses.

**Securing and Claiming Place**

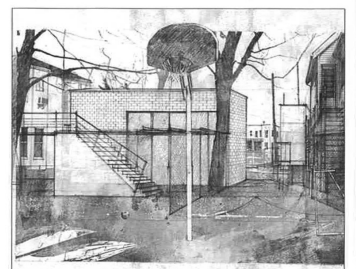
The public realm is informed by ways in which the private realm is secured. Where property is ill-defined or has suffered from intrusions, homes reveal a basic attempt to claim their ground and establish security, sometimes a seemingly almost desperate attempt to fortress the house against intruders. Where property has had time to

mature and be established, instead of a thin, threatening threshold, definition is maintained through a more inviting series of thresholds: a fence layered with flowers, displayed domestic objects, a porch that displays recent human presence. Boundaries remain but more gracefully negotiate the public and private realms of the property. This attention to the “buffer zone” by the home-owner “stitches” the realms

together. Human presence is felt by these insertions, and those that choose to frequently sit upon the porch or garden, become the “guardians” of the neighborhood.

So, to merely insert “affordable housing” without inserting the seeds of these boundaries, we may fall short of providing a useful architecture. Our bigger challenge is to focus our efforts realistically on the elements and tasks of everyday life allowing simple, almost seemingly inconsequential, interventions to transform the mundane. Seeing the implicit meaning and value of human situations is most basic to good design, contributing to a sense of identity and possession. A simple example of inserting an outbuilding that provides toy and garden supply storage for many neighbors establishes useful synergies.

Alleyways and backyards in this neighborhood are not maintained by the city—there’s little will to provide money for that. Without attention and human presence, they become conduits for



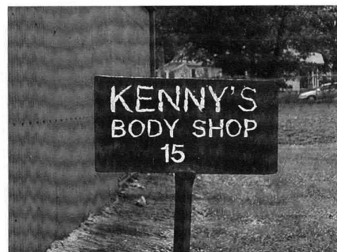
illicit behavior and a reinforced sense of abandonment by the city. Counter to that, micro-communities can exist, between groups of houses that reveal close associations between residents, by familial and cultural ties. By repeated use, these spaces serve to establish relationships among neighbors and again, establish a deep threshold between the public realm of the alleyway and the private domestic space of the resident. Architecture exists within these out-buildings, designed and strategically placed to enhance and enliven social relationships. Architecture exists within the design of screen-walls and fire-stairs to provide privacy to the homeowner.

### Signs of Life Transform Perceptions

Neglected properties convey attitudes about the place. Signs of life bring about new attitudes about the potential of the place through individual action. The neighborhood is transformed in little ways and by personal investment. Even small steps of installing insulation and new siding reveals commitment to the place and signifies change.

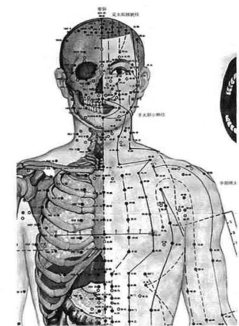
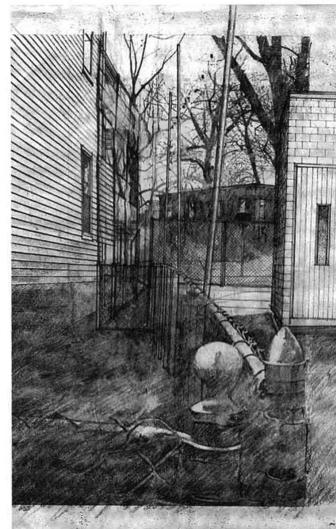
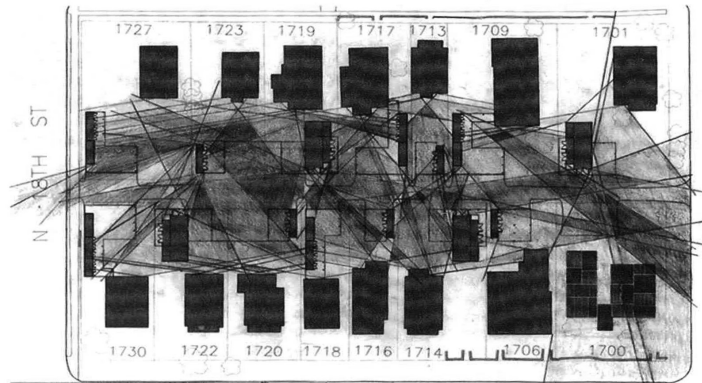
Businesses are revealed through advertisement signs and signs of life in the off hours. Unexpected uses and activities are found in home-made ways, such as a metal shop, a lawn mower business, day care, seamstress, hair salons and home offices. Building in opportunities for extending incomes via home-made businesses within the boundaries of the legal limits of the site may be the only way that some families can make it. As an increasing number of people find themselves underemployed at low wages, the struggle for supplemental income asks for alternative means such as those found in garage sales, street vending, flea markets, and home businesses. The traditional ways in which residential districts were understood are blurred by new uses established in the marginal and overlooked sites. Economic necessities and cultural values redefine the neighborhood and

contribute positive signs of life and activity. These unexpected intersections may liberate potential that exists within urban life.



### New Forms Emerge

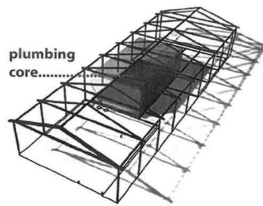
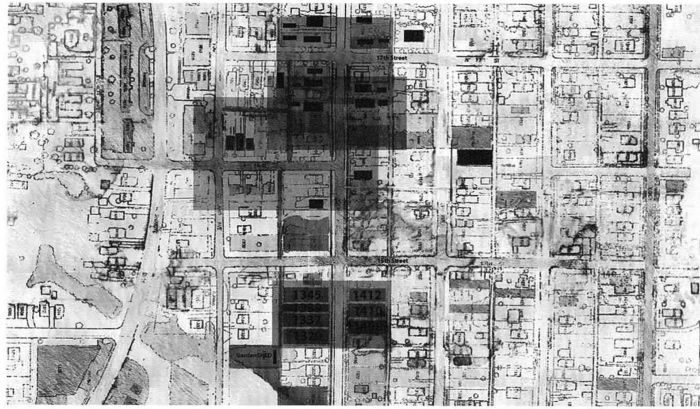
Out of these observations, new forms emerge. Unfamiliar and perhaps even "strange" these new interpretations are real and potent. If we make highly customized interventions, it may be impossible for the homeowners and renters to maintain. So, we must introduce ready-made elements (that may be obtained from the local hardware store or cast-offs from other sites) and provide space for the home-made. I would argue that this is where architecture gets interesting—we must work with limited means and create space for others to inhabit



and make their own. Residents most easily modify this place at the local scale of fences, porches, carports and house additions. Can architecture be an armature for such elements to link to? Can *architecture* be strategic and specific?

As I continue to find ways to introduce change through architectural interventions, there are opportunities to introduce infill housing (most desirably in clusters) and elements that involve participation from many. Like acupuncture enhances the blood supply to our organs, architectural

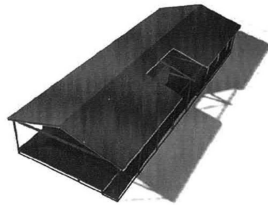
interventions should enhance and encourage better relationships. Our best contributions are strategically placed and invent new possibilities for the ready-made and the home-made. What we design and insert should permit and encourage adaptation so the resident is empowered to transform, on an as-needed basis. Our skills are needed in making new imagined relationships, deep-seeded opportunities, supportive to *real* ways that people live their everyday lives. Can we help a community imagine investments that chart a path, that are flexible and adaptive?



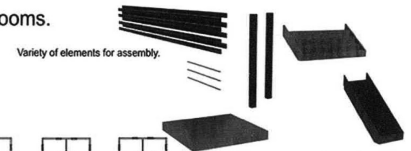
plumbing core.....

### SELFhelp

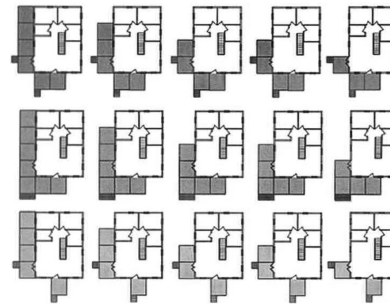
typical stick built 'shell' allows for free placement of interior partitions, doors and finishes



### Kit-of-parts for outdoor rooms.



Variety of elements for assembly.



Allow owners to determine the form of their outdoor spaces adds personalization and variety to the neighborhood.

And, ultimately, our role may be in providing instructions that could be applied by the non-skilled volunteer or the homeowner. By seeking out and understanding ways in which change occurs in these landscapes, one helps to communicate with and engage others in ways that aren't at all conventional in architectural practice. Beyond imagining physical interventions, we need to imagine our role as one that creates interaction among residents, connects to resources and agencies (building partnerships and understanding the means for action, working in indigenous ways that involve

local youth and emerging Hispanic skills rather than through private development with groups that don't engage the everyday life of neighborhoods). It seems that the role of the architect is emerging as a source to discover how to insert that will promote authentic engagement through material form and social use. Our role is to provide the grounding for resident investment, leading to enduring, sustainable everyday life.

### Notes

1. The only recent development is by a chapter of Habitat for Humanity. Unfortunately, they have only brought about hard feelings with the residents, for two reasons. Their formal response stigmatizes poverty through stingy, inflexible form and ignores existing relational patterns of the neighborhood. Beyond the physical response, the agency never communicated with the local neighborhood as they merely purchased property and built the structure. Ultimately, this approach is not contributing to a sustainable model of neighborhood development; in fact it may be contributing to further deterioration.
2. Margaret Crawford, *Everyday Urbanism*, (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999), 12.
3. Margaret Crawford refers to an "everyday urbanism" as "an approach to urbanism that finds its meaning in everyday life."