

REVIEW

Urban Planning and Architecture Annual 2005
Critical Mass?



Parentheses, Amplifiers, and Other Useful Devices

(An Elwood Dot)

This discussion is part of an ongoing dialogue that merges the concerns of an artist with that of an architecture firm. Following new lines of thought that arose out of our discussion about parking lots printed in this publication last year, it is a continuation, concentrating on processes of collaboration, communication, and understanding.

Within the Large Frame (Introductions)

The framing of this discussion around tools and devices is simply a “tool” to get our heads around certain issues, with the hope of developing ways of seeing that continually propel us outward into broader arenas within an infinitely complex world. We have found it useful to develop a basic toolkit for collaboratively thinking about a site. These framing tools help us to see what is there and provide a method for communicating between two particular sets of interests and concerns.

Independently, both sides of our collaboration often use the concept of “tools” or a “toolbox” as a means of understanding our processes. As an artist, I have used the concept to push the location of communication into a broader context. By seeing the art as a tool, meaning gets shifted into the relationship between viewer and tool. This relationship exists within a larger set of relationships, within the community, and so on. Cultures in relationship to other cultures. A recursive structure.

As we work, we push our interventions to dissolve into the environment. We work to achieve a situation where these interventions start a chain reaction of SEEING. Secondary efforts are necessary to kick the flywheel once in a while after it is turning. How far have we gone? To what scale have we re-aligned the perception of the site? How can we use to our advantage the site as it is, along with other interventions, in order to increase this scale? And can we increase this scale exponentially simply by pointing in the right direction?

Flashbacks (Adaptive Re-use)

As we continue the writing process (it is ongoing, with emails, notes, and journals, not only by the two of us, but also others at el dorado and beyond), discussions, conversations, and so on, we find ourselves backtracking a lot. It is important to REMEMBER. Or, more precisely, it is important to NOT FORGET. So we go over it again.

“We build our images of the world with data from our senses. By presenting these data in novel patterns, artistic inventions alter our sensibilities – change what we see and therefore how we conceive the world and again how we look at it. We argue a particular aspect of this general case: that there are novel temporal manipulations of environment that will not only delight us but also vivify our image of time – help us to heal the breach between the abstract intellectual concept and our emotional sense of it.”

—Kevin Lynch, *What Time is This Place*

“Cities are the biggest and most complex things that we make as a society, and each city is unique with its own character, strengths, and potential. Consequently, there is no one instant solution (a stadium, an entertainment zone, a pedestrian mall) [to revitalization] that can be applied universally and uncritically. We must not replace one orthodoxy with another regarding the city plan, nor reduce our thinking to issues of style or taste. In a rush for a believable urban center, a city cannot make itself into a vision of the last century but must value historical buildings and spaces of all periods while also encouraging innovative new building solutions.”
—Mark Robbins, Former Director of the National Endowment for the Arts in The Mayors’ Institute, “Excellence in City Design”

Without succumbing to the critique, “What is wrong with this picture?” we prefer to ask “What is this picture?”

The grid itself is a neutral organizing principle, other than the fact that it springs from the Enlightenment belief that order can be rationally ascribed with beneficial results to a chaotic or undefined situation. The way in which the components that make up the grid are articulated communicates something about the skill and intentions of the planners, architects, developers and property owners of any particular city. Grid components include streets, sidewalks, the block itself, subdivided plots within the block, the use of the plots (built or unbuilt), alleyways, and infrastructure. It is in the articulation of these components, both individually and as a whole, that place specificity has the potential to be realized.

Dots (Core issues)

A discussion of an article by Douglas Hofstadter, “Analogy as the Core of Cognition,” is helpful in trying to understand a process of connection building. He argues that analogy is at the core of our cognition. Hofstadter feels that **the ability to connect is how we think.**

In a section of this article entitled “The Mental Lexicon: A Vast Storehouse of Triggerable Analogies,” he states:

We Humans begin life as rather austere analogy-makers — our set of categories is terribly sparse, and each category itself is hardly well-honed. Categories grow sharper and sharper and even more flexible and subtle as we age, and of course fantastically more numerous. Many of our categories, though by no means all, are named for words or standard phrases shared with other people, and for the time being I will concentrate on those categories — categories that are named by so-called “lexical items.”

He goes on to describe these lexical items as “simple words: *chair, clock, cork...* compound words: *armchair, alarm clock, corkscrew...* short phrases: *musical chairs, out of order, Christmas tree ornament...* longer phrases: *stranded on a desert island; damned if you do, damned if you don’t; praise the Lord and pass the ammunition...*”

Hofstadter writes:

I now make an observation that, though banal and obvious, needs to be made explicitly nonetheless — namely, things “out there” (objects, situations, whatever) that are labeled by the same lexical items have something, some core, in common; also whatever it is that those things “out there” share is shared with the abstract mental structure that lurks behind the label used for them. **Getting to the core of things is, after all, what categories are for. In fact, I would go somewhat further and claim that getting to the core of things is what thinking itself is for...**

If we are truly “built” to find connections as Hofstadter contends, how do we start? The obvious approach is to look for similar things. Often, the first stab at “fitting” a new building into an existing environment is to find ways for it to “look” similar to the older buildings — to mimic details and offer a visual continuity of form. There is comfort in the lack of provocation with this strategy. It is easy on everyone. But there is no equivalence in the two statements. This strategy offers a nostalgic connection with the past, one that glazes over the pertinence of the architect’s communication with their culture. This type of connection ignores an enormous amount of information relating to how the buildings functioned in the times that they were built.

If we look for core issues in the environment, we will find something more fundamental than what a building “looks” like. If we look at the architect’s intent, we can examine the relationship between the details of a building and what those details meant to the public at that time. The equivalence might be located in this relationship, rather than in appearance. If a new building contrasts sharply with the old, we are forced to look deeper into the relationships to find connections between new and old.

“Kansas City, Missouri, is the preeminent city on the longest river in America, but you would never know it from talking to the inhabitants, not because of their usual modesty but rather their forgetfulness of the Missouri. In the self-proclaimed City of Fountains there is no spiritual link between them and it and only a distant awareness of its connection with their iced tea, potted geraniums and baptized babies.”

—William Least Heat-Moon, *River Horse*

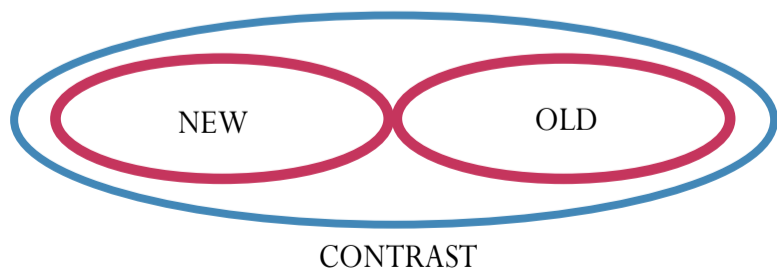
Any thinking about the future vitality of the River Market has to include strategies for allowing the Missouri River to play a more visible, integrated role in our daily lives. This starts by increasing access to the banks of the river and by affording multiple views.

The new pedestrian foot bridge, starting just north of 2nd Street and Main and projecting out to the river’s edge, offers a new connection with the river. It does this in several, nicely contracted ways. Its location not only offers a clear approach to the river for pedestrians, but also offers spectacular views of the other bridges crossing the river downtown. If we think of the foot bridge as a connecting device, as an **amplifier** of site, does this then prod an ensuing view of the river and the bridges that span it? Does this prompt us to ask questions that might help us understand our environment in broader terms? How have the connections made by the bridges at different points in history driven development on both sides of the river? What is the sum of the environment that contains both sides? How has the crossing of the river helped facilitate the functional aspects of each side? There are enormous stories about development on both sides, including the airport, the industrial areas of North Kansas City, and the suburban sprawl that has moved northward.

Diagrams

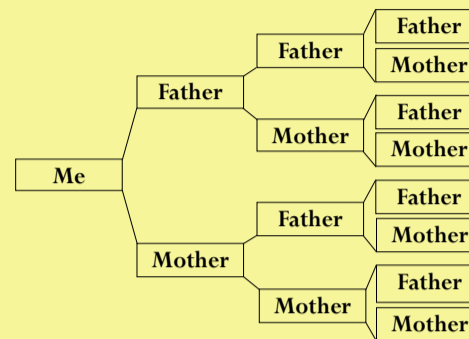
Sets

The contrast between new and old can be viewed as a singularity, a “lexical item.” So considered, this leads to a search for another contrasting situation, another set of circumstances that offers a contrast between new and old, thus pushing our perception into the realm of understanding how the environment has progressed through time. Now we have been provoked into an attempt to understand how we’ve gotten where we are and where we might go from here.



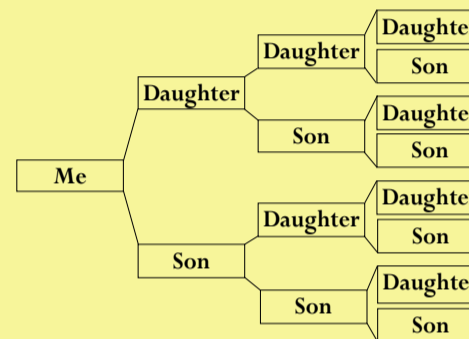
Bifurcation-Unpacking

Hofstadter goes on to describe the workings of “lexical items.” The categories that make up these items reside in long-term memory. They carry a variety of connections and sub-connections, depending on the situation. Hofstadter refers to this process as **unpacking**. Each category contains a multitude of information and detail, some useful and some not in relation to any given situation. The immediate relational problem will determine what we “unpack” and what we don’t.



History diagram

Let’s look at another diagram.



Future diagram

Shifting the orientation in time, we arrive at a similar structure. Let’s think of this as changing the FRAME OF REFERENCE.

As with so many neighborhoods in Kansas City, the River Market is filled with great brick boxes. There is a series of warehouse buildings along Walnut, between 2nd and 3rd Streets, that are an illustration of changing building technologies between the late 1800s and 1950s. Starting with the building closest to the river, heavy timber innards speak of a time when trees were large and plentiful. Moving south, the next building is cast iron, then board-formed with cast-in-place concrete columns, joists, and floors. The fourth and final building, filling out the west side of Walnut, is a modular panel-formed, cast-in-place concrete structure where the brick is merely a single with skin. What would come next if the block allowed it?

Open lots across the street, as they are developed, might allow for continued dialogue about how we build — spanning from some of the oldest standing buildings in Kansas City to now. This sequence of buildings, which few could argue are not of the River Market, offers direction for how we might think about architectural appropriateness for the River Market. Building a new building to look like an old building in this particular place would surely reveal the inappropriateness of such thinking and actions.



Pack it up

These diagrams become a useful way to see singular situations. Multi-layered diagrams allow us to unpack them in different directions and at different scales. We look for equivalents in sets and subsets, and we start to think about a site with rhythms and patterns, looking for ways to re-align conditions that allow a place to be perceived in multiple ways. The point of all of this is to be able to re-pack the issues into a singular, contracted site.



Collaboration

The Site as Content

Since last year's article for Review, I have come to understand more clearly the difference between what I do and what el dorado does. As an artist, I understand the process of seeing in a particular way. Value judgments are not necessary. A place that doesn't work very well is, for me, a good example of a "place that doesn't work very well." It holds an immense ability to communicate. A desolate area has its unique ability to evoke a sense of desperation or sorrow, and it can provide an experience that offers contrast to a better place and possibly a sense of potential. A poorly designed highway, with its traffic jams and backups, offers a great understanding of the folly of bad planning. There is a chance to better understand the human condition through looking at problems and trying to understand how they happened. I see beauty in this understanding. I see poetry in folly. As an artist, this is enough. My goal is not to "fix" the situation but to first "see" it, and then possibly to respond to it — but to respond to it "correctly" without obliterating the basic essence of what is there.

The Problem as Content

In this way, what I do as an artist becomes a tool for ELWOOD to work with. The collaborative process becomes essential in using this tool as a means to explore and intervene with a site in order to make it work better.

Before architecture can be created, there must be some problem to solve (function). Architecture without function doesn't exist. There is a range of problem solving, from the most mundane (how to keep animals out of trash cans), to the most poetic (how to express the beauty of the human mind). The best examples of architecture often blur these extremes. The way in which animals are kept out of the trash cans reminds us of the beauty of the human mind. Clients bring us projects that contain a series of problems. The work of architects is first understanding the nature of the problem, then crafting an appropriate strategy for solving the problem.

It would seem sensible that architects seek to make the world a better functioning place. We set out to solve problems on multiple levels — those of our clients, those that our peers and colleagues believe worthy of contemplation, and even problems that hold a special, very personal interest. But what exactly is successful problem solving? Upon what basis are the results judged? Are there certain core problems that demand solving with every project, no matter the scale? How do we know when we've articulated a correct understanding of the problem(s) at hand?

Our collaboration offers an attempt to broaden a strictly architectural understanding of problem solving. Architects often couch value judgments in problem-solving questions such as, "What is wrong with this situation?" or "How can the situation be made better?" We often inject these qualifiers into the way we look at our work. This collaborative process allows the question, "What IS the situation?" to stand on equal footing with the former, and actually provides a broader, more open entrance into the process of problem solving.

This process also demands that an artist consider the function of art. Framing art as a problem to be solved leads me to attempt to locate its function. Once located, the problem to be solved is simply one of allowing it to function properly. Often, if not always, this function has to do with communication.

The Problem as Site

Let's think of using language as a tool to communicate. Or to solve problems. Here is a fundamental issue in our collaborations. Give an artist a problem to solve — say, building a staircase to an upper level. An artist who takes normal studio considerations to the problem might very well decide that a more potent and appropriate communication would be to simply put a window in the floor so that you can see up there, but are not able to get there. Problem solved! While this is an extreme example, many subtler situations of this sort occur constantly in the collaborative process. With both sides pushing, the ultimate resolutions lean toward the situation at hand. If you have to use the upper level (architectural problem), then a staircase is built. If public art is the mandate, then the window gets installed. If integration of the two has to happen, then discussions begin.

Parentheses

As a topic for discussion, there is no more viable example of folly than the downtown loop. There is great consensus about how the highway system has dissected our city and facilitated suburban flight from its core. But what is it now? This dissection has defined the two distinct areas upon which we are focused. To the south, the Crossroads is bordered by the downtown loop on its north edge, by the rail yards on its southern edge, and by highways to the east and west. This set of parentheses has facilitated the concentration of a certain type of district. It has given us a way to KNOW where the Crossroads IS. This concentration has been organic in nature, responding to the scar of the highway. The River Market area has a similar set of boundaries: the highways on its west, east, and south sides, and the river to the north.

Thinking about these bounded areas as subsets, we can then look at their relationship with the downtown core and focus on the rhythm of change that has grown out of the situation. This forces looks in other directions, which begin to reveal the structure of the city as it has grown, declined, and repaired itself.

How we look at interventions within these boundaries is important. Have existing constraints, such as the highway system, played a significant role in defining the distinct nature of places as we know them today? Would we recognize the Crossroads as such without the clearly defined separation from the downtown loop? Without the highways around three sides of the River Market, how would we know it as a distinct place? Ongoing exploration of the nature of these boundaries would seem prudent as we rebuild our urban core. Erasing them, realigning them, covering them up without first fully understanding what they have allowed would seem to be foolish. Are there examples of porous boundaries in Kansas City that we might look to as an alternative strategy? Can a hybrid condition establish a new way of understanding River Market-ness without erasing the highway system?

The river and railroad tracks offer another kind of boundary condition that is especially interesting. Both are expressions of topography, representing the low point in a given landscape. As such, they are always connected to water issues. Does the organic growth of these places offer information about what and where new development should go?

How can the downtown loop be reinvented as a place where people not only work, but also live and play? How can it become a place that people are once again in love with? As we brace ourselves for the sudden appearance of Kansas City Live! — a downtown entertainment district (including a new, state of the art arena) on the south banks of the loop — a number of fundamental urban design issues demand more public discussion. How will this district appear physically? Will everything look alike? Are all buildings and streetscapes designed by one firm? What problem is to be solved with this design? How do we know when we're in a distinct district? Is it important for designers to establish the boundaries, or is it okay if boundaries are porous? How will the designers of this district create an authentic sense of place? What will they draw from or look to as reference? Is it important to establish a sense of place in the first place? If so, is it self-contained, self-referential, or does it connect with what is already there? What will people do here? Will there be a single property owner or opportunities for many to own? These are just some of the relevant questions one might ask when considering "districts."

Filing system

By focusing on the structural boundaries of the Crossroads and River Market areas, we are prodded to look at the organization within these boundaries. Might the physical nature of the Crossroads have played a significant role in allowing it to become what it is? What problems do new infill projects solve? Must all vacant lots be filled in with buildings, or is there a valuable function provided by leaving the lots as they are? What is the function of adaptive re-use? How do new structures such as the Kansas City Star Printing Facility, with its largeness of scale and double block occupancy, expand upon the organization of the Crossroads? What does the building add to our conceptions of Crossroads-ness?

Containers (Dots)

The Crossroads is a collecting device, a filing system. It is the fruit of many people's efforts to actualize the kind of idealized urban neighborhood that exists primarily in our minds. For me, it is also an opportunity to know what a vibrant, urban, culturally aware neighborhood in Kansas City is. Not was or will be, but IS. It is an aspiration, a living dream. Artists see it as a place where they can live, work, and commune with little distraction. Their presence is essential and, to put it simply, must remain for the Crossroads to retain its unique civic offering. This is the most crucial challenge facing the neighborhood. Artists need to assert themselves as the spiritual caretakers of the Crossroads.

Developers see the Crossroads as a good investment that isn't strictly about maximum returns. Urban development in Kansas City doesn't currently offer the kind of return on investment that suburban greenfield developments promise. Plus, this kind of urban re-use or re-definition has little track record in Kansas City. (Results nationally are very positive.) Many developers put their hearts into their Crossroads projects and believe they're doing good; some don't, or think they're doing good but actually do harm. For example, if broad participation is viewed as an essentially positive characteristic of civic discourse, then more property owners owning fewer buildings and parcels in the Crossroads would be preferable to fewer property owners owning most buildings and parcels. This can't, and shouldn't, be legislated in a free market, capitalist society, but the ramifications are no less worthy of consideration.

Entrepreneurs see the Crossroads as a loosely defined activist community in various stages of evolution. It is a small-scale, graspable city within a sprawling, identity-challenged city, the former filled with war stories, innovation, and passion, the latter with famously good schools, disposable income, and room to stretch. Politicians and civic leaders see the Crossroads as a point of pride, even if they don't know how it happened or had little to do with its success. I suspect many of them are trying diligently to figure it out. It isn't, however, a model that can be invented in abstraction, then implemented in a singular swoop. I fear the Entertainment District proposed as our northern neighbor will illustrate why genuine places have to be allowed to evolve over time, in complex and uncontrollable ways that drive smart economic developers crazy. It isn't the product of committee work and there are no rules. Rather, it is a cultivated process that has taken time and engages a large network of people with distinct and sometimes opposing visions of the future.

David Dowell, Principal, el dorado inc. architects, and artist James Woodfill are part of a broad collaborative effort between artist and architect. Formalized in 2001 as ELWOOD LLC, this group looks for ways to re-orient the relationship of art and architecture in projects ranging from public art to urban planning. Past examples include *Pulse*, an installation commissioned by Kansas City's One Percent for Art Program for the new 11th and Oak parking structure. Currently, ELWOOD is engaged in several projects involving public spaces in conjunction with the Heritage River Trail system, numerous interventions with private development, and an ongoing discourse involving lectures, exhibitions, and design.

Amplifiers

The transparency of the new Kansas City Star Printing Facility opens the workings of the building to the public. With the north façade slightly canted away from the building mass, reflections of vehicles passing on the highway below are repositioned above the ground plane. When seen approaching from the north, it seems as if the cars and trucks passing by at 70 miles per hour have been folded into the face of the building. Rather than comment on the highway cut as a negative condition, the façade of the building compresses Crossroads, highway, Downtown Loop, and public in a single moment. It offers a way to view existing conditions in a new way while allowing them to remain as they are.

The Kansas City Star Printing Facility has introduced a new way of weaving buildings into the fabric of Kansas City. In its north/south orientation, the building simply reconfigures the grid structure into a two-block module. Complaints about the circulation blockage caused by this approach may be mollified when construction is completed and traffic flow around the area can be studied comprehensively. That said, the building doesn't purposefully comment on what it means to block the grid in the middle of a burgeoning urban district. The building does introduce the possibility of expanding upon the block grid system, a prompt to further consider how this might be done while employing the useful constraint of maintaining the full grid system.

Within the Large Frame (conclusions)

Re-framing

If we think of the process of defining "tools" as a process of re-framing issues, then we start to see how the perception of a place may encompass an infinite number of variations. Let's look at the new Star building, for example. Seen as a contrasting device, it offers a connection with situations that are more obvious within the loop. It also points out histories within the Crossroads area. Buildings such as the TWA building and the UMB Bank building on Grand Boulevard start to take on meaning as markers of the times in which they were built, as do all of the older buildings in the area. We can see the entire place as a singular record of adaptation and change.

If we see the Star building as an equivalence device, then we can draw a connection with the scale of buildings within the loop. This glance again points out the highway system as a boundary, now being spanned by scale. The reflection of the highway in the glass façade amplifies this condition.

By trying to understand the provocative inclusion of a building like the new Star building in as many ways as possible, we are getting a much deeper picture of the environment as a whole. We are able to see harmony and dissonance that help us understand what this place is. The realities present might not suit us, but we are unable to fix something that we don't fully understand.

Starting point

This discussion is reflective of our ongoing process — navigating through time and decisions, histories and progress, problems and solutions. At each new understanding we find ourselves at a new starting point. Our tools become more complex and more compacted.

By unpacking the information contained in a site and surrounding areas, we are looking for core issues that can be re-aligned, edited, and massaged. Through this process, a broader, more meaningful understanding might be packed back up into a unique and authentic sense of place. The singularities are fleeting, and the process is ongoing. Others intervene and the place changes course. Again, a new start. What we hope is to be able to find ways of SEEING a place, and then intervening if the opportunity is there, that can set us on a course of broadening and contracting our views of where we are.

As we slice this discussion off, the collaboration once again frames itself: David asks, "Are the visual aspects of this work good tools to make the information useful?" and I ask, "Is the information here a good tool to make this work visually useful?"