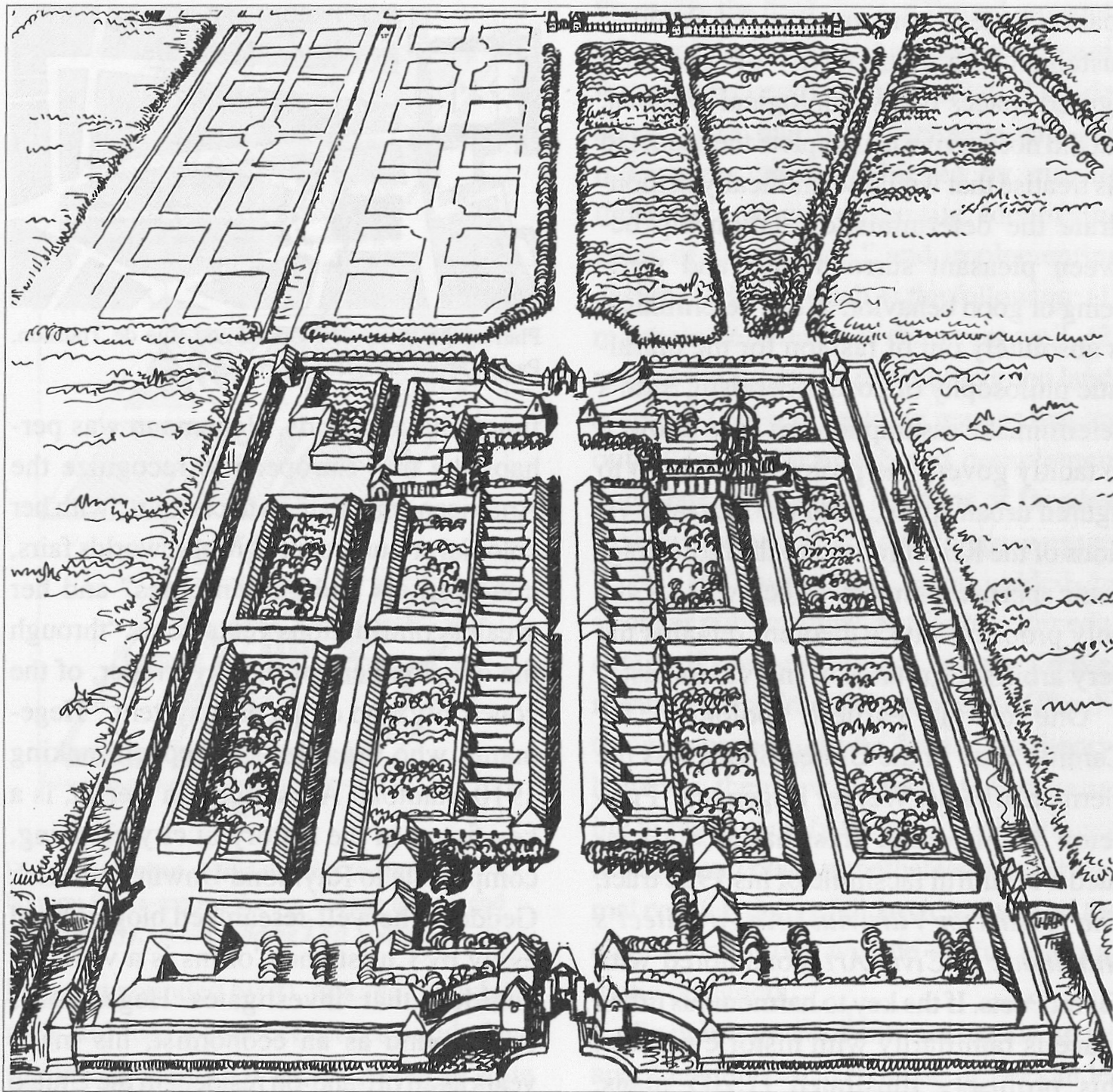


Richard Ingersoll

## Postmodern Urbanism: Forward into the Past

Once upon a time people built “traditional” cities with lovely streets and squares suited for public life. The myth of those happy days before trains, automobiles, and modernist architecture tore apart urban space has become indispensable to many current theories of urban design, yet is rarely given sufficient historical grounding to make it any more comprehensible than an air-brushed postcard. It is as if *urbs*, the bound city form of the past, could be considered without *civitas*, the social agreement to share that lost urban promised land. The charm of the medieval piazza and the drama of the Baroque axis have been triumphantly rediscovered by vacationing architects, who, armed with color slides, can demonstrate with precision the aesthetic merits of figured urban space. But whether this is sufficient knowledge to reconstitute a genuine city is another matter. During the past fifteen years, the disenchantment with the modern city of progress, expressed from such differing camps as those of Colin Rowe and Manfredo Tafuri, has coalesced into a mandate issued from the *illud tempus* of good city form to charge forward into the past. Such a nostalgic crusade for a human-based city, one that respects human scale and promises interesting social interaction, is anathema to the functionalist precepts of modernist urbanism. While the objective of walkable streets and harmonious surroundings might appear to be universal, at the heart of this postmodern alternative lies a troubling paradox that is rarely taken into account and indeed calls into doubt the wisdom of what are essentially formal solutions: preindustrial forms and spaces are not necessarily suited to postindustrial ways of life. To project a return to a “traditional” city and with it a future of “neo-villagers” may be more of a fantasy than any science-fiction vision of a society dominated by robots. If the urban process is confined to aesthetic criteria alone, the social conse-



Chateau and town of Richelieu, France; drawing by Elbert Peets (1921). (From *American Vitruvius*.)

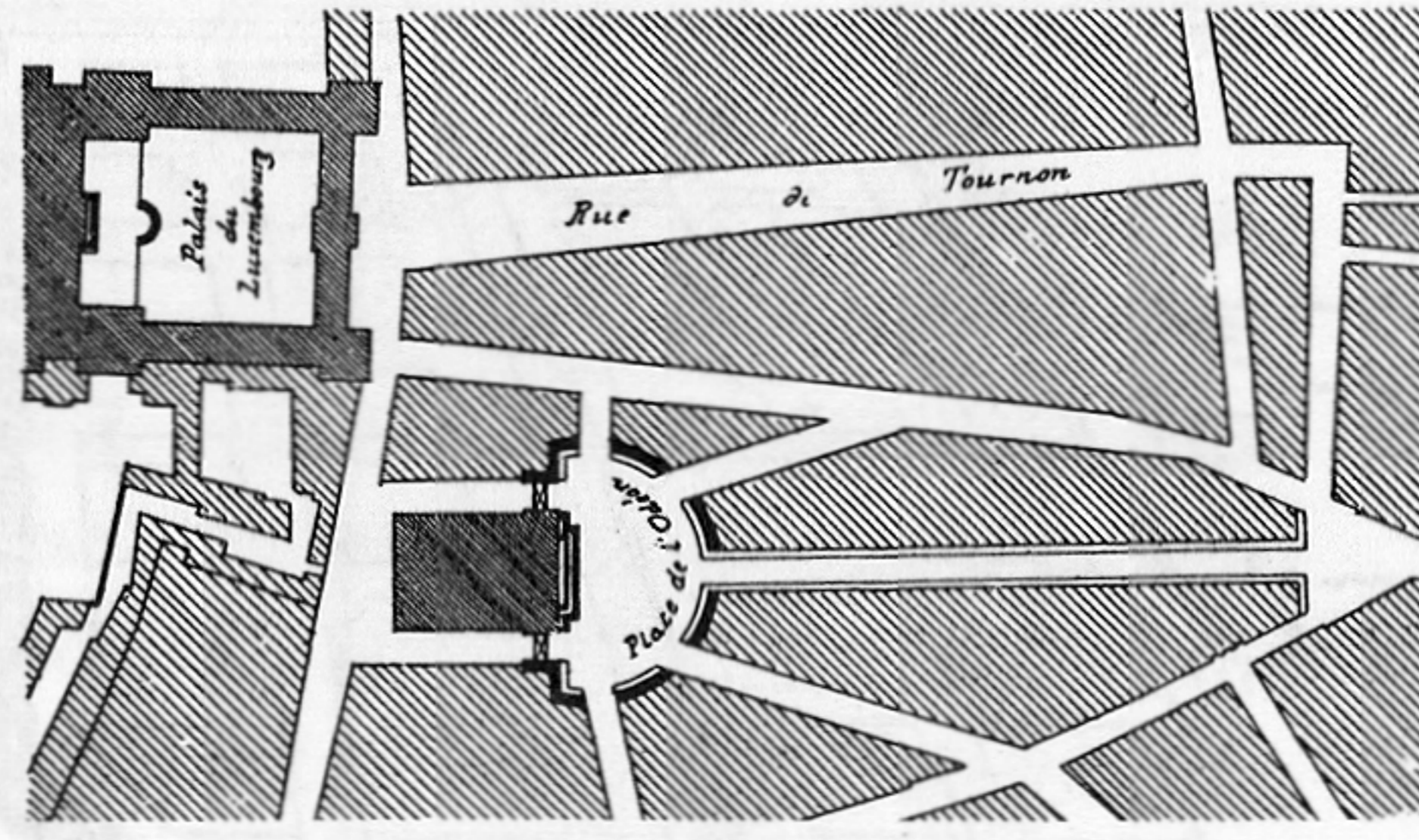
quences, such as the elimination of emancipatory demands from the urban program, may be as unpleasant as those wrought by the functionalist fallacies of the postwar period.

The tragic flaw of the Modern Movement, to which is generally attributed the paternity of the ugly modern city, was not its formal solutions per se, but its inability to accept the preexisting truth of the built environment in simultaneity with the utopian program it proposed. Two recent treatises, Roger Trancik's *Finding Lost Space* and Christopher Alexander and colleagues' *A New Theory of Urban Design* attempt to atone for this flaw by supplying a theoretical framework to restore urban equilibrium between parts. Though rhetorically quite divergent, both books advocate a similar goal of healing the modern city through incrementalism, contextualism, human scale, and architectural integration. A third book, Michael Dennis's *Court and Garden*,

offers a typological disquisition on the French *hôtel* as a historical analogue to be used in pursuit of the same palliative goal. Trancik and Dennis have both been heavily influenced by Colin Rowe and Leon Krier in their search for formal answers. Alexander, on the other hand, prefers an oracular position that eschews sources—unfortunately this revelatory tone detracts greatly from the credibility of the commonsense principles he advocates. The current cohort of post-modern urbanists might be tagged the great grandchildren of Viennese planner and architect Camillo Sitte, whose 1889 treatise, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles* (reedited by George and Christiane Collins, 1986, see *DBR* 14), established a paradigm for challenging the brutal eviscerations of the city by insensitive engineers. His method was to present formal descriptions and geometric analyses of urban spaces from the European past that for his taste were better than modern non-

spaces. Sitte, a contemporary of Freud's, sustained the superiority of enclosed figured spaces on psychological grounds, but did not survive to complete the sequel to his treatise that would scientifically demonstrate the deterministic relationship between pleasant surroundings and well-being or good behavior. While determinism is absolutely out of fashion for the pluralistic philosophy of postmodernism, Sitte's deterministic assumption has been allowed to tacitly govern the postmodern return to figured urban space, from the romantic visions of the Krier brothers to the more pragmatic approaches reviewed below. Alas, the only proof of Sitte's theorem remains the very arbitrary grounds of individual taste.

One of the earliest apologists for Camillo Sitte in the United States was the German urbanist Werner Hegemann. Princeton Architectural Press has recently issued a beautiful facsimile of his 1922 tract, *The American Vitruvius: An Architect's Handbook of Civic Art*, coauthored with Elbert Peets. If the key to harmonious urban space is familiarity with historic models, this profusely illustrated (1,203 plans, views, and photographs) and historically erudite work will be of much more value than any of the current offerings. To leave no doubts that this rediscovered treasure belongs to the sensibilities of postmodernism, it has a snappy preface by that paladin of pomo, Leon Krier. Noting the irony of the Nazi regime's consensus of Hegemann's ideas on civic art, even though Hegemann, an unrepentant socialist, was forced to flee Germany in 1933, Krier concludes with the homily: "As long as city building achieves the quality of Civic Art, it will transcend the often parochial purposes of its builders." This sort of sophism would indirectly justify the atrocities of history in the name of good architecture, and is precisely why more accurate knowledge of the historical processes of urban form is necessary. Alan Plattus, the book's editor, gives a more reasonable gloss on the text, explaining it as the epitaph of the City Beautiful Movement, a last-ditch effort to convince the rising profession of city planning to defend artistic quality in the face of



Plan of the Place de l'Odeon and Rue de Tournon, Paris. (From *American Vitruvius*.)

functional demands. Hegemann was perhaps the first European to recognize the American contribution to civic art "with her colonial art, university groups, worlds fairs, civic centers and garden cities" and her greater contributions yet to come "through the development of the skyscraper, of the zoned city, and of the park system." Hegemann, who organized the epoch-making 1910 *Städtbau Ausstellung* in Berlin, is a key figure in the history of city planning, comparable to Raymond Unwin or Patrick Geddes. The well-researched biographical essay by Christiane Collins is a valuable addition that investigates Hegemann's background as an economist, his many years as an off-and-on resident in the United States starting in 1909, and his practice with Elbert Peets in Milwaukee from 1916–1922, which is the source of this treatise. Peets, a landscape architect trained at Harvard, was responsible for much of the illustrating (Hegemann could not draw) and for much of the final chapter on Washington, D.C.

The variety and originality of the illustrations in *Civic Art* will no doubt be the greatest attraction of this reedition. It is not only the most complete single-volume survey of the canonical cases of urbanism from ancient Greco-Roman colonnades to the medieval spaces of Siena and Bruges, to the more formal squares such as Pienza or the French *Places Royales*, to Haussmann's Paris and Burnham's Chicago, but is also inclusive of a scintillating collection of uncommon and forgotten designs, such as Ludwigslust, Rastatt, or Carlshafen, bypassed cases, such as Madrid's Plaza de Oriente, Paris's Place de l'Odeon, or Zurich's civic center, and exceptional American examples, such as Ronada Court in

Berkeley, Roland Park in Baltimore, and Bertram Goodhue's American Pienza in Tyrone, New Mexico. Also thrilling are the photographs of pre-blitz European cities.

Yet it would be a shame to forgo Hegemann's text in pursuit of the pictures, because it is full of astute historical and formal observations. The message that he meant to impress on his engineer-minded peers would still burn true for the contextualists of today: "The fundamental unit of design ... is not the separate building but the whole city." In the first chapter he makes a clever conversion of the medical metaphor, usually used by engineers to justify surgical-like demolitions, by asking, "Was there ever a more deadly plague than the ugliness of the modern city?" In his tribute to Sitte he reminds the reader that Sitte should not be considered a romantic connoisseur of irregular medieval spaces, because his real message was that space must be designed rather than left over. Hegemann often makes original use of familiar models, leading to conclusions that do not demand a simulation of the past. He shows Place de la Concorde, for instance, in various phases, and what is usually not noticed is that it originally achieved more closure when it was surrounded by moats, but under Napoleon III was opened to maximum exposure. "The American architect," adds Hegemann, "has of course the possibility of mastering such large plazas as Concorde or larger ones by use of skyscrapers to frame the plaza." Hegemann's knowledge of urbanism is less myth-bound than the current generation that speaks of the "traditional" city; on the medieval city, for instance, he notes, "wherever the medieval designer had an unhampered opportunity to lay out streets he used straight lines." The compendium is loosely organized as an "atlas of imaginary travelling" and presents essays on public squares, monumental groupings (such as campuses and fairs), the street as an artistic unit, lessons from garden design, and unified city plans. One glaring, perhaps willful, omission is any consideration of the automobile, the single most destructive factor for enclosed urban spaces, then or now. As if to rebut Krier's convenient de-ideolo-

gization of civic art, in the concluding chapter on America's contribution to Baroque planning in Washington, D.C., the authors admonish, "Too great an emphasis on the national scale, the impersonally monumental, is more likely to produce dullness than grandeur."

The beauty of Hegemann's *Civic Art* was ineffectual in dissuading either the popular enthusiasm for modern technology or the numerical crush of mass society from shredding the urban fabric in the postwar period. More complicit automobile-based visions, such as Norman Bel Geddes's GM Futurama at the 1939 World's Fair, were better geared to the impending consumerization of the environment. The ascendance of Bel Geddes's gratifications of technocracy over Hegemann's virtuous defense of the urban spaces of the past should be a lesson to current champions of the past: the demand for automobiles and the dependence on technology for the reproduction of everyday life show no signs of subsiding. This is not a rejoinder to submit to consumer reality, but rather a suggestion that viable alternatives in urban design will *only* come from a confrontation with this reality, not an avoidance of it. Roger Trancik's *Finding Lost Space*, for instance, is a well-intentioned defense of "traditional" urban space against the inhumane spaces of postwar architecture, but rather than seeking confrontational solutions to the technological and economic factors identified as the source of the ugly city, the author relies on a priori Sittesque conclusions.

"Lost space" is that unresolved no man's land between the freeways, garages, and high rises of the modern city. According to Trancik these uncomfortable gaps in the urban fabric have five causes: the automobile, the Modern Movement, urban renewal and zoning, the favoring of private over public interests, and the change of land use in the inner city. It would thus seem logical that the ensuing theory would try to reform this list of culprits. Instead his remedy for stitching up the lacerated city is incumbent on three compositional strategies misdefined as "theories": figure-ground (where buildings form space rather than

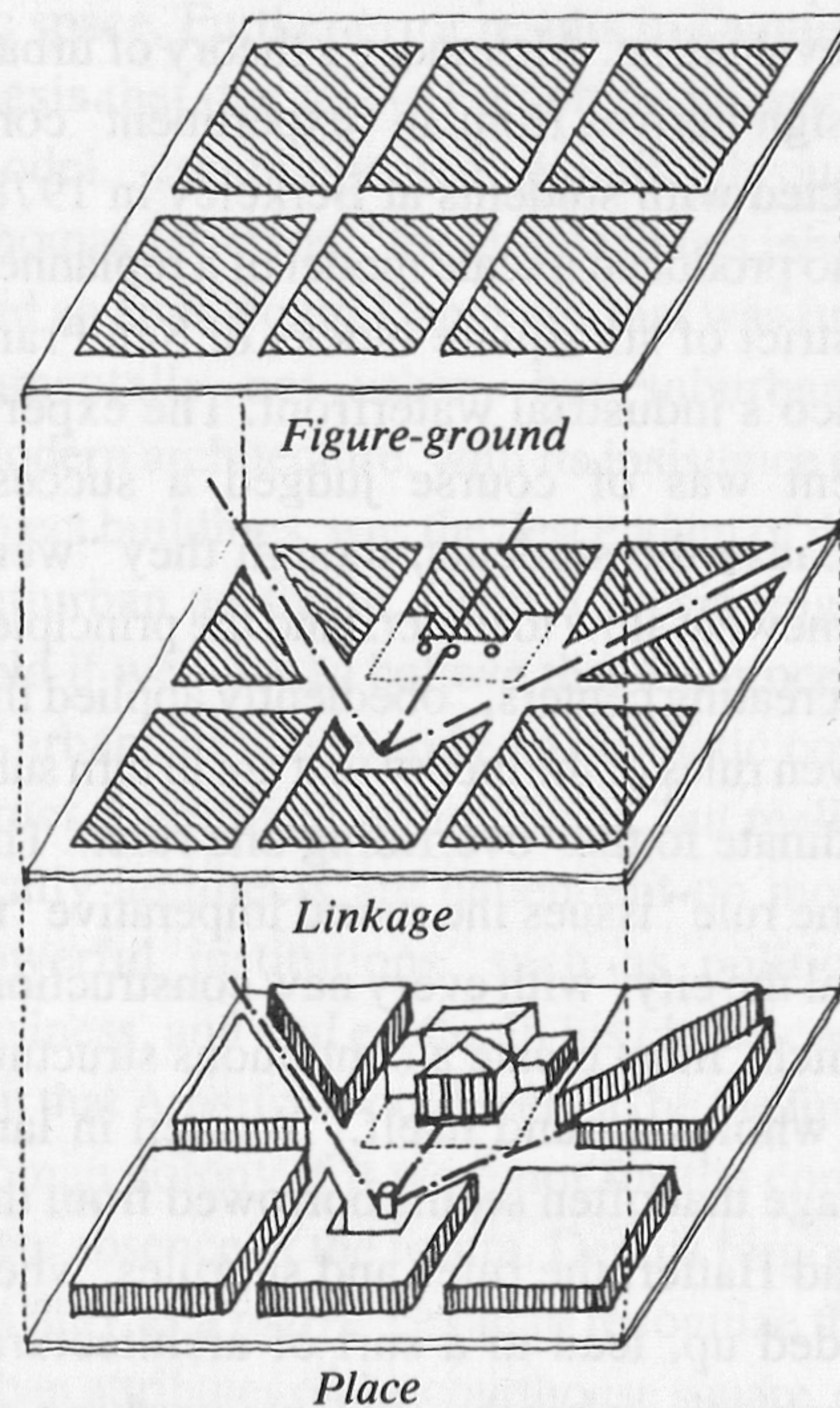


Diagram of urban design theories (from top to bottom: figure-ground theory, linkage theory, and place theory). (From *Finding Lost Space*.)

being surrounded by it), linkage (by which axes and forms connect spaces), and place (by which identity is created through style and details). To demonstrate their application he refers to four case studies of varying scale and social complexity in Boston, Washington, D.C., Göttenborg, Sweden, and Byker, England. What to do with the automobile or how to convert private interests to the public cause are only superficially stuck onto the design of "found" space. The illustrations and diagrams are at times more effective than the text, which is often specious or ill-informed—to rely on Tom Wolfe as the principal informant against the Modern Movement is frankly slothful. Trancik's method of investigation derives from Ed Bacon's *Design of Cities*, tempered with Kevin Lynch's categories of spatial analysis (paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks—which are mislabeled in the illustration) and the Krier brothers' nostalgic style. The more complex social criteria of Lynch's "good city form," however, are not acknowledged; the occasional "people make the difference" statement is not sufficient to deal with issues of justice and

fitness. In the final chapter Trancik presents what might be termed a "mellow" manifesto for successful urban design. The ideals of contextualism, incrementalism, and integration can be achieved by making thorough analyses of the site, identifying areas of "lost space," and implementing design guidelines such as the following: (1) maintain continuity of the street wall, (2) respect the silhouette of buildings and landscape, (3) prevent building masses that are out of scale, (4) match and complement materials, (5) respect rhythms of façades, (6) enhance patterns of public-space usage. If private investment were guided by stronger public policy, if clients better educated, if design review boards implemented, then Trancik's concept of "traditional" space might be found. As theory, however, there are too many factors missing to really qualify as one. Figure-ground, linkage, and place nonetheless present formal codifications of didactic value, and the clear illustrations will be useful to pragmatic designers.

Trancik's goals of eliminating lost space are almost identical to those of Alexander and colleagues in *A New Theory of Urban Design*, but the means are nowhere as catholic or amenable. Alexander's theory is imagined like a game, a sort of jigsaw puzzle, in which built parts must satisfy several criteria to fit into an urban whole. The fascination is to install a system for city building that is as true and self-regulating as systems of growth in the natural environment. If modernists could be criticized for their totalitarian utopias, this postmodern utopia would put them to shame. As a sort of ayatollah of Berkeley, Alexander in his series of books beginning with *A Pattern Language* (1977), of which *A New Theory* is the sixth, has issued a set of commandments for the composition of buildings that requires more faith than reason to follow. The latest book is no exception, and amid the noble goals and commonsense suggestions one finds the most preposterous claims on logic since the virgin birth. Clearly in a world dominated by faith, history has no purpose, and thus, in this case, the normal apparatus of references

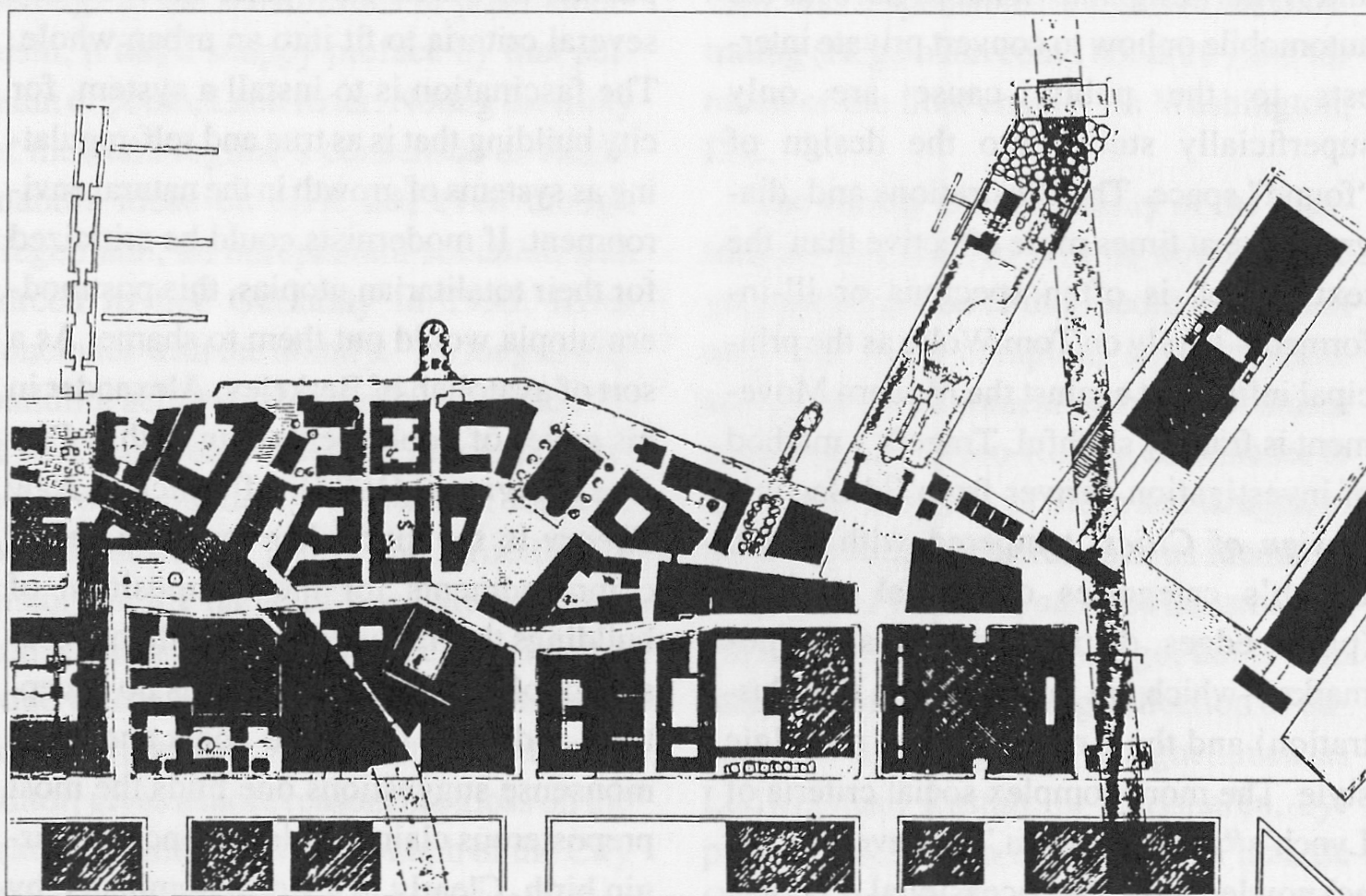
and consideration of the collective knowledge of the discipline can be dispensed with. Despite the well-documented existence of Hippodamus, Vitruvius, Alberti, Filarete, Laugier, Ebenezer Howard, Le Corbusier, and countless others, Alexander and company can confidently claim that there has never been a theory for an "organic" city plan. While this may be a semantic problem of how one defines "organic" (for instance, the grid can be extremely organic), it is more likely due to a method of working in a historical vacuum where knowledge is "discovered" (revealed) rather than transmitted and interpreted. Thus this parthenogenetic "new" theory can easily contain unacknowledged paraphrases of Sitte, such as, "Every building must create coherent and well-shaped public space next to it," and affirmations of Hegemann, such as, "The structure of the city comes from the individual building projects and the life they contain, rather than being imposed from above" in righteous insulation.

The greatest demand on the reader's faith comes early on when the key to the theory, the "centering process," is revealed, but its explanation is deferred to an unpublished text, "The Nature of Order." As in a mystery cult, one must accept the "center-

ing process" as deep truth without recourse to evaluation. Alexander's theory of urban design derives from an "experiment" conducted with students at Berkeley in 1978, who produced a scale model of a replanned district of six square blocks of San Francisco's industrial waterfront. The experiment was of course judged a success because the students, though they "were somewhat slow to understand the principles of creating centers," obediently applied the seven rules of the theory that are in turn subordinate to the "overriding one rule." The "one rule" issues the moral imperative "to heal the city" with every new construction, which "must create a continuous structure of wholes around itself." Written in language that often seems borrowed from the Mad Hatter, the rules and subrules, when added up, lead to a sort of architectural symbiosis, whereby students working on different sites are able to coordinate and create coherent ensembles without the benefit of an overall plan. The seven rules are: Piecemeal growth, Growth of larger wholes, Visions, Positive urban space, Layout of large buildings, Construction, and Formation of centers. If there is any doubt about the charismatic nature of this system of rules, the third rule for Visions makes it clear, as the designer is expected to respond

to the "inner shouting of the site" and receive an oneiric inspiration. Most of the illustrated designs for the resulting buildings, however, are awkward and eclectic and seem more the product of inner whimpering. Based on preindustrial models of courtyard buildings, a tight fabric of narrow streets (no scale is given, but many appear to be less than ten feet wide) is structured around a major street (still not as wide as an average San Francisco street) and a quaint Sittesque piazza. The "typical" Italian hill town is illustrated (without name) in the introduction as a sort of ideal of urban wholeness, and thus it is not surprising to find the resulting pattern reminiscent of this ideal, so much so that rather than going through all the cumbersome rules one might just as well copy the historical model and do as well or better. Alexander's vision falls into the category of apocalyptic utopianism, according to which the realities of everyday life must return to a smaller-scale, labor-intensive, community-oriented basis in order to produce an environment that is as "whole"some as cities of the ahistoric past. That there is much doubt that the pluralistic realities of postindustrial society are hospitable to the "one rule" is indicated in the concluding remarks, worthy of a prophet in the wilderness: "The process we have outlined is incompatible with present day city planning, zoning, urban real estate, urban economy, and urban law." One could also add it is not compatible with the underlying demands for mobility and privacy found in technocratic nations, which will not easily be traded for the aesthetic benefits of the new, "traditional" city.

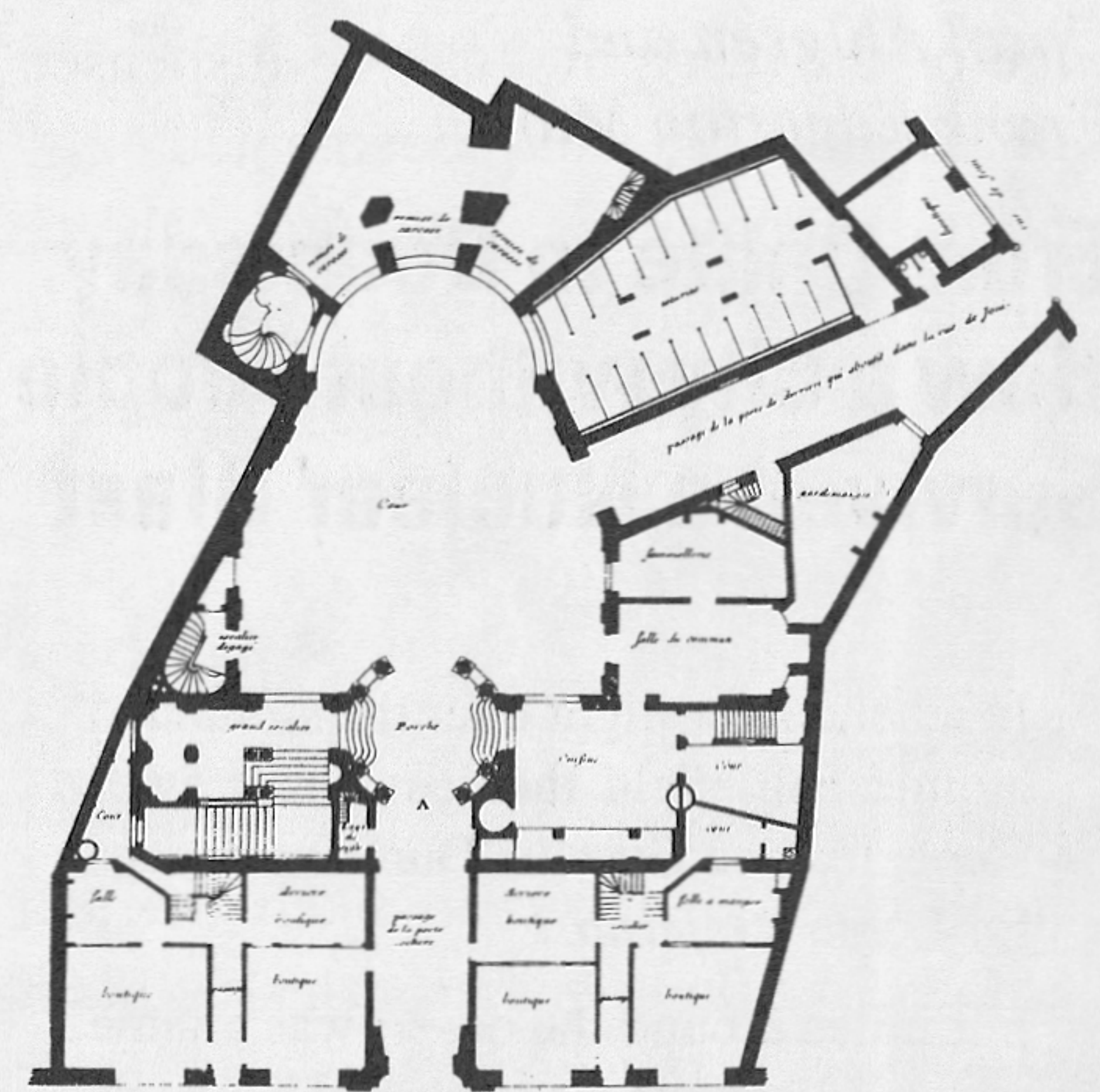
The final book under review, Michael Dennis's *Court and Garden, From the French Hôtel to the City of Modern Architecture*, will certainly have a greater impact than either Trancik's or Alexander's, and in fact was already a significant source as a xeroxed reader before its first publication in 1986. Known colloquially as *The French Hôtel*, it is principally devoted to the formal analysis of the plans of Parisian *hôtels particuliers* from 1500 to 1800. The author insists that the appreciation of this aristocratic building type offers a vital lesson for



Experimental development scheme, San Francisco Bay Bridge area; map of completed project; Alexander et al. (From *A New Theory of Urban Design*.)

postmodern urbanism. "If anything is in a positive sense postmodern," says Dennis, "it might be the city rather than architecture," and his book is meant to serve the retreat into the past for sources. As such, the book has great appeal for its well-chosen selection of plans, its collection of maps of Paris from 1550 to 1808, and its clever juxtapositions of images, such as Le Corbusier's "City for Three Million Inhabitants" grafted onto the garden of Versailles. Sandwiched between an introduction and three concluding chapters that pick up the polemic against modernist urbanism is a conventional, at times boring, description and formal analysis of the most representative Parisian *hôtels* and their classification into strict categories of Baroque, Rococo, and Neo-Classical. In the early *hôtels* of the Baroque, such as the Hôtel de Beauvais, Dennis picks out that peculiar, recurrent trait of public symmetry for the elevations and forecourts and private asymmetry for the interiors. This strategy could be applied by analogy for the benefit of the modern streetscape. His evolutionary scheme of the French *hôtel* slows the progress of the Baroque balance of local symmetries within an irregular whole to the neoclassical pure volume, such as Ledoux's Hotel Guimard, freestanding in space. The reversal of the figure-ground from the building surrounding space to the building surrounded by space, is singled out as the fatal and inarrestable fault of formalist culture. The change in private architecture is shown to have corresponded in public projects: from the closure of the early 16th-century Place Royale (now Place des Vosges) to the overexposed Place Louis XV (now Place de la Concorde). His evolutionary scheme is derived from the art historical methods of Woefflin and is an old-fashioned way of keeping score, but it often leads to fudging when things do not fit the formalist sequence. For instance, the neoclassical Place de l'Odéon (remembered by Hegemann), which was built around the theater in 1782 as a hemicycle, one of the best enclosed spaces in Paris, is conveniently overlooked because it might compromise the conclusion about the neoclassical erosion of pub-

lic space. Further error results in Dennis's thesis that due to the French neoclassical model, communicated mostly through Thomas Jefferson, "the United States inherited an architectural language that was fundamentally not urban, but suburban." Modern architecture, with its insistence on object buildings, was the descendant of this antiurban aesthetic. Such a thesis might hold if we were to believe that the process of urbanism was merely an aesthetic construct determined by architects, but realistically architects are dependent on more powerful institutions, such as politics, business, and real estate. In his clever conceit that America would seem to be the final Roman colony if it were not for the complete absence of the forum, Dennis forgoes his duty as a native Texan to recognize the urban attributes of the courthouse square, or to acknowledge the considerable tradition of public squares from Philadelphia, Savannah, New Orleans, and almost everywhere else! To see the villas of 18th-century French neo-classicism as the key to American urbanism would be unfair to the much stronger tradition of the Georgian row house, which continued in Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and elsewhere long after the Revolution. A much greater French influence was 19th-century Beaux Arts, which fostered the one truly grand movement for figured public space in the City Beautiful. Dennis's gripe is with the "rational determinism" of the CIAM's campaign against urban space, but his remedy does not seem any less free of determinism—in this case aesthetic: "if ... the revival of public life is possible any form of rebirth must be accompanied by the reconstitution of the formal setting public life requires." The events of last May and June in Beijing's one-hundred-acre Tiananmen Square, one of the ugliest and most mercilessly unenclosed public spaces in the world, would seem to tragically prove the converse, that public life is more a product of social and political needs than a windfall of form. As a sourcebook for compositional strategies, Dennis's work is indispensable and inspirational. His sincere, plaintive appeal: "We want a city to be what it has



Ground floor plan, Hôtel de Beauvais; Antoine Le Pautre (1652-55). (From *Court and Garden*.)

always been, a combination of new and old, an accumulation," will no doubt be shared by many architects. But the underlying thesis about the desirability of past urban forms deserves much more debate: there is no guarantee that citizens who participate fully in the despatializing technologies of the postindustrial technoburb will have any other use for the new "traditional" postmodern spaces than for touristic purposes (the "piazza" of Las Colinas, Texas, or the vacation "village" of Seaside, Florida, could be used as evidence). To imagine that such a postcard world might generate genuine public life flagrantly evades the basic political and technological realities of the late 20th century, which will not be easily altered.

THE AMERICAN VITRUVIUS: AN ARCHITECT'S HANDBOOK OF CIVIC ART, Werner Hegemann & Elbert Peets (Alan Plattus, editor), Princeton Architectural Press, 1989 (first published 1922), 293 pp., illus., \$60.00.

COURT AND GARDEN: FROM THE FRENCH HOTEL TO THE CITY OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE, Michael Dennis, MIT Press, 1986, 284 pp., illus., \$50.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

FINDING LOST SPACE: THEORIES OF URBAN DESIGN, Roger Trancik, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986, 246 pp., illus., \$37.95 paper.

A NEW THEORY OF URBAN DESIGN, Christopher Alexander et al., Oxford University Press, 1987, 276 pp., illus., \$39.95.

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EVIEW

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REM KOOLHAAS:  
Toward the Contemporary City

LIANE LEFAIVRE:  
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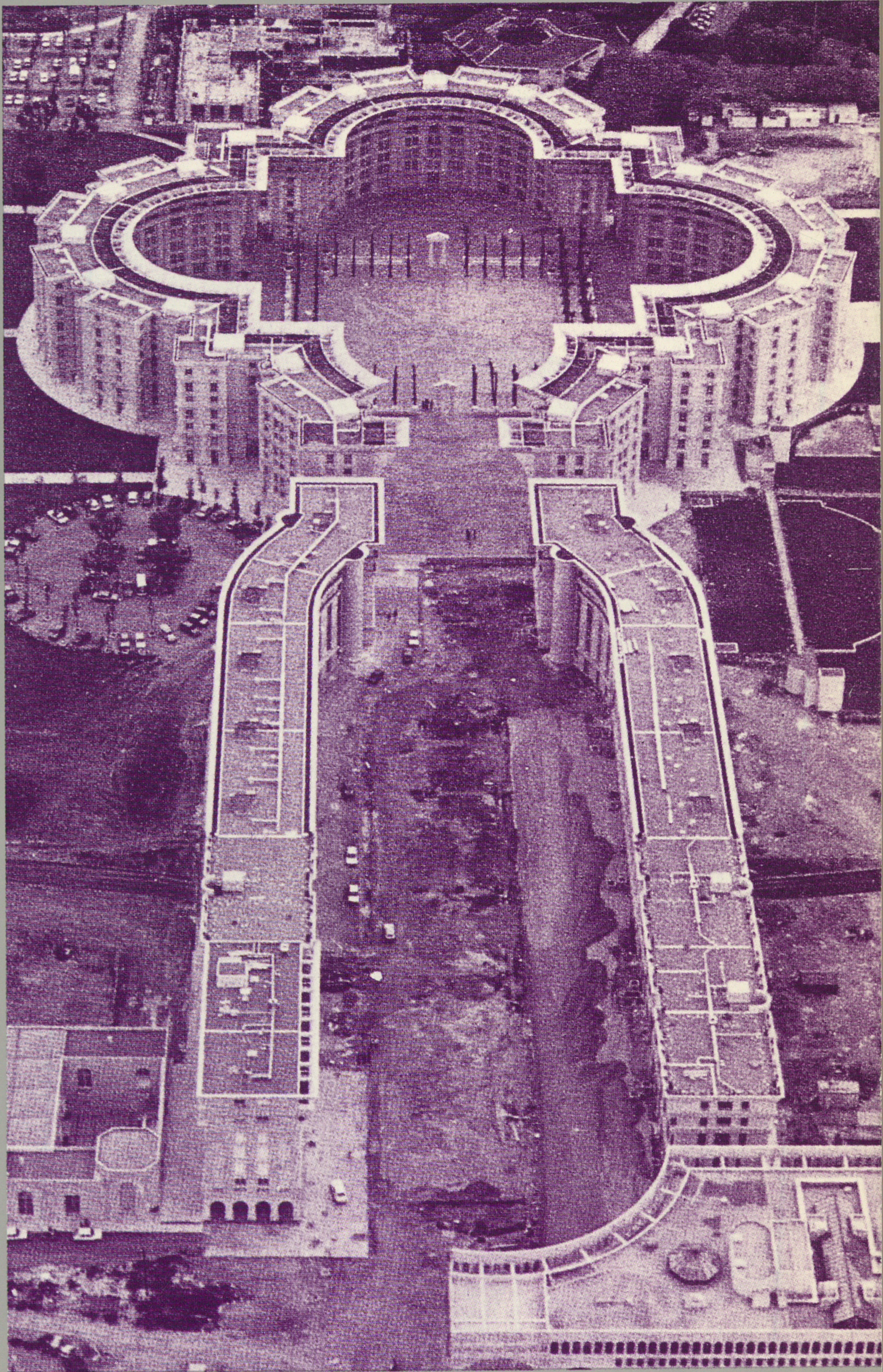
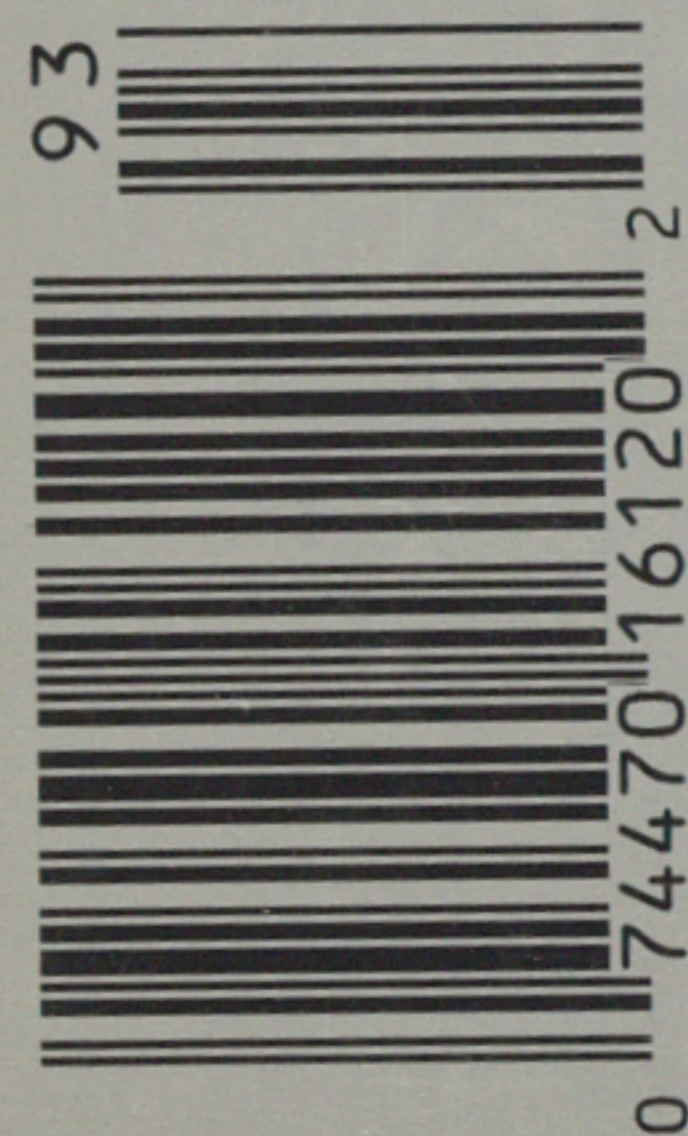
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POSTMODERN URBANISM

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