Streets and the Urban Process

A Tribute to Spiro Kostof

Streets are a primary ingredient of urban existence. They provide the structure on which to weave the complex interactions of the architectural fabric with human organization. At once the product of design and the locus of social practice, streets propose rich questions to historians. Their conception ranges from the most incremental and spontaneous interventions, such as leftover space between buildings, to superbly contrived public works, detailed in plan and section, involving sophisticated engineering and landscaping. The unique characteristics of any street derive from what Spiro Kostof often referred to as "the urban process," that intriguing conflation of social, political, technical, and artistic forces that generates a city's form. The urban process is both proactive and reactive; sometimes the result of a collective mandate, at others a private prerogative; sometimes issuing from a coordinated single campaign, at others completely piecemeal; sometimes having the authority of law, at others created without sanction.[1] One thing is certain: although historical moments in the life of a city can be isolated, the urban process never stops. Unlike works of art—or even certain buildings, which have a more determinate existence— streets are as mutable as life itself and are subject to constant alterations through design or use that foil the historian's desire to give them categorical finitude.

Streets: Critical Perspectives on Public Space takes its impetus from the work of Spiro Kostof and is dedicated to his memory. Initially trained as a connoisseur in the traditional methods of art history, Kostof experienced an intellectual catharsis sparked by the social movements of the 1960s, and he refocused his work almost exclusively on architecture as an urban phenomenon. Already in 1967, before the tide of contextualism had swept over architectural theory, he proposed that historians analyze buildings in their "total context."[2] This desire for a more inclusive method was charted in a lecture course at the University of California, Berkeley, devoted to the urban history of Rome through the ages; it resituated the history of architecture within social and cultural discourse. By shifting the subject of inquiry from architecture or buildings to urban fabric, he made a relatively safe field dangerous: no longer limited to privileged protagonists, fixed chronologies, established technologies, and finite artifacts, the discipline was forced to comprehend the multitude of users, their cultures, and the conflicting interests of any urban situation.

For Kostof, physical form could only be studied through process. Parts of a city can by some extraordinary means be designed as unified artifacts, but more commonly a city's fabric evolves through a complex series of circumstances. The study of architecture as the

transcending signifier of urban history allowed for two earth-shattering revelations (at least for the narrow domain of architectural history): first, that all buildings, like all people, are worthy of interest and need to be considered historically; and second, that all cultures are valid and can be meaningfully compared through their urban development. This overture both to the vernacular landscape and to multiculturalism will no doubt prove to be Kostof's most enduring achievement. He was in effect priming the field of architectural history for entry into the territory of "new cultural history," recently defined by Lynn Hunt as "the deciphering of meaning," rather than the "inference of causal laws of explanation."[3] As Kostof put it: "Every building represents a social artifact of specific impulse, energy, and commitment. That is its meaning, and this meaning resides in its physical form." His doubts about positivist conceptions of history were expressed as early as 1967, when he wrote: "Architecture does not reflect the prevalent *Zeitgeist*, it is one of the factors that defines and informs it."[4]

As demonstrated in his essay "His Majesty the Pick," which we have selected to open this compendium of case studies of the urban process, Kostof pursued a panoramic conception of history, with a nearly compulsive desire to narrate the entire scope of the human adventure in a single sitting. His masterful 1985 work,

A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals, brought the bicycle shed within sight of the cathedral and restored cultural parity between places such as Cairo and Florence in the thirteenth century. In his final works, *The City Shaped*, 1991, and *The City Assembled*, 1992 (the latter with the collaboration of Greg Castillo), Kostof rejected conventional chronological method and investigated the great themes of urban form in a categorical manner based on formal characteristics such as the grid, organic patterns, and grand diagrams. These are open works, meant to stimulate design theory as well as historical analysis, and they offer an inclusive repertoire of topics and examples, ranging from magnificent boulevards to humble back alleys.

Kostof expanded the cultural and geographical boundaries of the field by introducing a multiplicity of centers and by demystifying the "exoticism" of non-Western buildings. In his efforts to revoke the prejudices of the canons of architectural history he pursued an intuitive multiculturalism, a position that has been best outlined by Michael Geyer as "a set of ideas and concepts that explores the diversity and difference of cultural articulation and their uneasy, embattled interactions."[5] Instead of confining the discourse of architectural history to comparative and descriptive tasks, Kostof's desire to investigate the profession, clients, and general mode of production of buildings across cul-

tures affirmed the subjectivity of all building cultures. In an uncharacteristically political statement, he argued for the revision of ethnocentric models in his assessment of American architectural education. American students, he wrote, "are engaged in a reflective process against the authenticated roll call of their own Western traditions, its seeming determinism; and so they expiate the stealthy knowledge that the imperialist urge breeds as readily at drafting tables as . . . in the workings of regimes and the uncharted regions of ill-educated minds. In the end, we are what we know."[6]

Kostof's agenda for an architectural history inspired by differences infuses the essays gathered in this volume, all written by his former students and colleagues. We have attempted to present a great diversity of streets—geographically, chronologically, and socially. Each contribution is a detailed investigation of a single street in a particular city with unique historical conditions, offering focused explorations of the urban process to support Kostof's broader historical sweep and help account for the morphological peculiarities that every city generates through its exceptional situation in time and space.

The organization of this volume is intended as a challenge to hierarchical structures of knowledge. Rather than imposing an arbitrary thematic order, or reverting to chronological or typological categories, we chose to arrange the book according to a neutral geographic itinerary. Starting from the San Francisco Bay area, Kostof's home for over twenty years, the sequence moves west. This new latitudinal strategy eliminates the established order of an architectural history grounded in the evolutionary progress implied by chronological sequences and conditioned by fixed centers, favored periods, and cultural preconceptions. The unusual propinquities of Athens to Tripoli, London to Rabat, or Cairo to Moscow reinforce a broadened, multivalent vision of the world. In violation of this principle, Rome has been granted a unique prominence in this collection, as the only city for which we have allowed more than one essay. We might, perhaps, justify this by noting Rome's particular function in the collective unconscious of the West and the influence of its architectural and urbanistic traditions on the entire global culture. However, the issue is not Rome as the ineluctable center of Western civilization, but how this privileged subject is treated, as Kostof in his multifaceted studies on medieval and Fascist Rome has shown. Furthermore, one case study using a diachronic strategy reveals the strata of meanings one site embodies over time—another theme he pursued.

Several important themes emerge and intertwine in the essays. They concern the anthropological, political, and technical aspects of street

making and coalesce into what may be called the discourse of the street. The topics of ritual, ideology, and negotiation merit special attention.

The street as the space for rituals—be they the triumphal processions of ancient Rome, the public drinking ceremonies of the Incas in Cuzco, or the executions at the bridge in papal Rome—is essential to a cultural process that the anthropologist Clifford Geertz suggests is the fulfillment of every society's need to narrate a story to itself about itself.[7] Ritual uses have a peculiar way of adapting to existing spaces and then subsequently determining the character of those spaces. Triumphal arches were first built to mark the traditional path of the victory procession that wound through Rome. In like manner, the plaza space of Hawkaypata in Cuzco had to exist before it could be altered with a layer of sand for storing ritual items. The trident of streets at Piazza di Ponte in Renaissance Rome was apparently designed with military concerns in mind, but soon was adapted to the great spectacle of public punishments because of its advantageous sight lines. The ritual use of a city is evanescent, yet lodged in the collective memory of its streets.

If ritual helps to represent the mythological reasons for a community's existence, ideology conversely gives reason to the myth of order that is promulgated by power in the city. The naming, siting, and form of streets, and the iconography of the buildings and street furniture that help shape them are a means of communicating ideological messages to the public domain. Street making often attempts literally to signify order: the straight axes of Sixtus V's Rome and Stalin's vision of a new well-being under socialism, as expressed in a grand but epidermal package in the design of Gorki Street, are such attempts. The restructuring of colonial capitals by the French in Rabat and the Italians in Tripoli are cases where urbanism was used as an expression of domination. The ideological message of these streets was forged in their form and emphasized in the subtexts of their architectural details. Its aim was to communicate the ability of a regime to provide and control. The presumed semiological control of power over space, however, is at best transitory. Messages of authority can easily be read in an ironic manner or subverted by successive regimes and practices: the automobile, for instance, has usurped the identity of the grand boulevard; the names of the colonial streets in Rabat and Tripoli have been changed and endowed with new symbolism after independence. Any street conceived to convey a message of authority can quickly convert to an "empty signified," as Roland Barthes termed it—a form for which the meaning, despite its precise historical intentions, becomes arbitrary.[8] The ideological aspirations for the new boulevards of nineteenth-century Athens were subjected to similar disjunctions of sym-

bols and meaning; there, Neoclassical monuments were inserted to restore a sense of national identity that drew on the greatness of antiquity but ultimately had little correspondence with the vicissitudes of modern life in a city on the edge of Europe.

Ideology is always present in plans for streets, but authority is often forced to compromise because of the multiplicity of actors in the urban process, and the desired ideological program can easily be muffled. The design of most streets is determined by a series of negotiations involving patrons, technical experts, and governmental agents. The irregular patterns of the streets of Trastevere in medieval Rome, where each building helped reconfigure a previous urban space inherited from antiquity, resulted from a long process of architectural arbitrations and piecemeal changes. During roughly the same period, the even more complex patterns of Palace Street in Cairo, or the market streets in Chinese cities, were incrementally altered in different directions by changing political, religious, and commercial demands over several centuries. A more specific depiction of the negotiation that shapes urban fabric can be found on the levee in nineteenth-century New Orleans, the traditional space of leisure for a city that was trapped in its watery surroundings. The legal contests for development along the levee highlight the contest of competing ideas

of status, conflicting interpretations of public space, and the argument of commercial versus community interests. The design consequences of negotiations are not always irregular or disharmonious: Chicago's Wacker Drive, a two-level street along the Loop, appears to be a unified piece of Beaux-Arts planning but actually involved much compromise by at least five conflicting civic authorities. Commercial interests drive the production of almost every city, since property is one of the most important items of exchange, and negotiation involves many levels, from those in real estate to those of governance, to those of welfare.

Most cities have an existence previous to their major moments of design; that is, they are subject to redesign. Occasionally the design of a street can be followed from its initial formulation to its fulfillment, and the preconceived model encounters the geographical and social contradictions of an existing urban culture. The conventions of Greco-Roman urbanism were inserted into the unique topography and thriving commerce of second-century C.E. Ephesus to create a legible, imperial environment. The eighteenth-century refounding of the Sicilian town of Noto, in the course of which the entire population was moved to a new location after a devastating earthquake, offers a unique opportunity to observe the creation of a Baroque environment designed according to contemporary

criteria of seismic safety. The inadequacy of the model and the conflicting interests of local aristocrats, however, led to ineffectual aestheticizing solutions that have proved difficult to maintain. The interventions of even a public-minded patron were often only partly successful, as can be seen in Bute Street, Cardiff. Similarly, an emphasis on aesthetic aspects minimized more urgent issues of infrastructure in the model for the hygienic street at the London World Health Exposition of 1884.

In some parts of the world the street no longer seems to be a viable social and cultural space. On one hand, there has been a disengagement from the city because it is a place of uncontrollable diversity, where skid rows such as the Tenderloin in San Francisco threaten middle-class norms. On the other hand, the street has been treated as a nostalgic artifact, to be restored to an ideal state or simulated according to an imaginary historic model. With both the abandonment of the public realm and the recreation of a pseudopublic realm, civic values, such as the street as a space for community, have disappeared. The chief actor in encouraging the demise of the street has been the automobile, which has overemphasized the function of the street for the circulation and storage of vehicles, to the detriment of the social uses of its space. The development of the Silver Spring area of suburban Washington, D.C., for example, dem-

onstrates that the qualities of enclosure and spatial coherence once inherent in street design may lose their immediacy under pressure of the new demands of automobile-bound suburbanites. Expediency of production and marketability of the contiguous private environment become the major factors in the design of streets, and genuine civic functions are no longer associated with the production of the city. The subsequent proliferation of architectural typologies that are not connected to streets, such as the enclosed shopping mall, both in the suburbs and in center cities, have prevailed as internalized, privately managed surrogates for the public street. In Osaka, a multilayered underground shopping concourse is connected to train stations and served by parking lots, but is cut off from the pre-existing network of streets. In this controlled subterranean realm, attempts have been made to reproduce some of the experiences of the traditional street, despite its suspended spatial position. The choice of many cities to conserve or mystify the traditional form of the street according to a preferred historical aesthetic, in order to gratify the expectations of tourists, is another indication that the street as the locus for daily life, including commerce and spectacles, can be subsumed by a purely commercial spectacle. As seen in the renovation of Istanbul's Soğukçeşme Street, daily

life becomes a reproduction of itself in such circumstances.

While the death of the street may seem worth struggling against, the historian can neither change the future nor predict further decline; at best, one may change the way the present considers the past. The value of Kostof's work, seen transmuted in these essays, has been to provide a new discourse of the street that comprehends diversity as a biological necessity and otherness as the unique condition imparted by the urban process. If the discussion of the city is free of ethnocentrism and embraces more than aesthetic concerns, then the fear of street life and the superficial desire for a fictional past may have less influence on the production and use of public space.

Notes

1 S. Kostof, *The City Assembled* (Boston, 1992), 280.

2 Idem, "Architectural History and the Student Architect: A Symposium," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 26, no. 3 (October 1967): 189–91. Kostof recommended four methods to approach the total context: to study each building in its entirety because of the "oneness" of architecture; to look at buildings in a broader physical context, later called "setting"; to understand that all buildings of the past are worthy of study because they form a community; and to recognize the nonphysical aspects that are indispensable to understanding a building.

3 L. Hunt, "Introduction: History, Culture and Text," *The New Cultural History*, ed. L. Hunt (Berkeley, 1989), 12.

4 S. Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York, 1985), 7; idem, "Architectural History and the Student Architect," 190.

5 M. Geyer, "Multiculturalism and the Politics of General Education," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Spring 1993): 501.

6 S. Kostof, "The Education of a Muslim Architect," in *Architectural Education in the Islamic World*, The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Proceedings of a seminar held in Granada, Spain, April 21–25 (Singapore, 1986), 2.

7 C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 448.

8 R. Barthes, "Semiology and Urbanism," 1967, trans. R. Howard, in *The Semiotic Challenge* (New York, 1988), 191–201.