Beautiful Cities, Ugly Cities:
Urban Form as Convention

In M. Benedikt, (ed.), Center: Architecture and Design in America Volume 10: Value. University of Texas Press, pp. 106-123.

Imagine a land, spacious and relatively empty, where a civilization creates itself in a short time. Waves of settlers, from the coast and from a variety of different lands abroad, clear the forests and settle the plains, wiping out the native population, most of which had no urban settlement pattern. Natural resources are extremely abundant. It is a vigorously commercial population, whose official reigning ideology is strongly libertarian, both economic (liberalism) and civil (procedural). It constructs a built environment. Its earliest settlements, clinging to the coasts, become its seaports. Initially, they are dense frontier ports, windows on a rough continent. Farms develop in the "interior," and there are the usual farming towns, central places for their agricultural hinterlands.

This may sound like any settlement pattern in the Western world. But early on, certain peculiarities emerge. For one, the cities develop with a spatial order which is distinctively modern, such that the connections between buildings are "looser" than those of older civilizations. Urban land is divided up into modern, big, sizes and shapes, facilitating changes in land uses, and the transportation infrastructure permits a wide range of spatial connections. In addition, the residential population of the city expands rapidly outward, and the population of the country is on the move, from city-region to city-region, both of which generate a very high demand for land-use change.

Meanwhile, the settlement of the land is not based on manor houses+ peasants, whether on the

demesne or in dense agricultural hamlets or villages, but on the independent farm -- frequently with very few persons present (a family grouping and, at best, a few workers) with only occasional connections to the nearby agricultural central place. The rural landscape is characterized by relatively low densities and long-distance -- if relatively infrequent spatial interconnection.

All in all, the functional organization of this built environment, whether urban or rural, comes to incorporate three distinctive features: a high degree of *spatial selectivity* in contacts (facilitated by a modern transportation grid from the beginning); a *lower intensity and frequency* of contact with the external environment than in corresponding environments in other countries; and a tendency, for a given level of density of proximity, to maximize the *internalization* of functions within individual units, whether residential, commercial, industrial or agricultural, in the built environment. "Spatial selectivity" refers to the degree to which proximity is a constraint in the choice of interactions in the built environment. Low selectivity is usually a consequence of strong constraints to choose the most proximate possible interaction for a given need; high selectivity exists where these constraints are weaker. "Internalization" refers to the degree to which functions are carried out inside a given unit of the built environment; where internalization is high, many things happen inside such a unit; where it is low, services and functions tend to be procured from the external environment, and are thus provided by other units, involving interaction.

But function isn't the end of this story, for aesthetics and values develop apace. On the land, farms and towns develop without the structure and weight of either noble domains nor traditional village architecture. In the early years, a certain economic and natural determinism (availability of materials; building skills) is at work in determining the look of architecture, but with greater wealth, these

constraints are removed, making all kinds of experimentation possible. In addition, the more rapid turnover of population and functions leads to less durable building, and in turn facilitates building and rebuilding rather than adding-on of maintaining/restoring existing buildings. In the cities, vast modern grids are constantly expanded, giving rise to a rate of change -- building, moving on, abandonment, land use transformation -- which is very high by historical standards. There is a complex aesthetic pattern, with large-scale development permitting a certain degree of internal, neighborhood homogeneity, but between neighborhoods, there is a wide variety of styles. With greater wealth and bigger plots, commercial architecture becomes increasingly heterogeneous and there is an increasing diversity of residential architecture styles between neighborhoods or developments. A wide variety of styles becomes the norm, and everything from extraordinary examples of modernism and innovation to extraordinary kitsch and banality, are the result. There are also increasing gaps, empty spaces and bad spaces, between these heterogeneous constructed spaces, the counterparts of rapid land use change in a context of expansion, with relatively low building costs. The overall impression is of low levels of coherence, especially when compared to classical norms of city building. Nonetheless, aesthetically this is celebrated as the outcome of popular and individual expression, while the gaps are the necessary outcomes of the mobility permitted by the modernist grid laid down on the nation's landscape, the ideologies and routines of individual expression, and the incentive structure associated with speculative investment and easy credit[1]. Sometimes beautiful, often sumptuous, private and public buildings can be found in great profusion in this landscape. Yet the connecting tissue is almost universally admitted to be dangerous or ugly, except within very strictly demarcated spaces (often privatized).

Viewed in an evolutionary perspective, it can be seen that there is functional rationality to the

routines -- big spaces, separability, need for self-containment, efficient interconnection, mobility and turnover -- which lead to both the bits of aesthetic excellence and the overall lack of "tight" coherence: both are outcomes of ways that builders and consumers of the built environment evaluate what it is possible (physically and economically) to do, and how they form their expectations of what others in that same built environment will do (since the actions of others impact them directly through locational externalities and interdependencies).

There is also an aesthetic *value* system at work, in concert with the economic-functional action system described above. The historically-developed, geographically-situated routines we have described underpin the ways architects, builders and consumers are socialized, i.e. the ways the set of choices around them become normative for them. These actors are not mere passive recipients of socialization, however. The heights of excellence found in such an environment are, in many ways, potentiated by the chaos and seeming disorder of the "whole," understood as a spatial grid in which radical expressions of individual experimentation are possible, and facilitated by the habit of building self-contained projects. These circumstances exist in relatively few urbanized built environments around the world. But when it comes to the architectures of mass lodging and consumption, this same possibility set leads to radical experimentation involving frequent cheapness, ugliness and vulgarity, and there are neither physical constraints nor aesthetic authority constraints to hold it back. Still, even in these spaces, the individual initiative which is possible leads sometimes to reinvention of beauty. Aesthetics, in other words, are intimately related to functional routines and the possibility sets of the two evolve together through strong mutual influence.

We have told a stylized story for the case of the USA, which is very likely an historical-

geographical exception, not a pattern-setter. In other countries, with other historical- and geographical- evolutionary pathways, there will be different combinations of beauty and ugliness, linked to different functional routines.

The "Value" of the City

In the USA, journalists, social scientists, and politicians avoid discussing the "value of the city." It is largely taboo to say that Americans just don't care about cities while, for example, Europeans do. This doesn't seem scientific, and it doesn't seem "possible," given that the USA is an urban civilization. And it tends to represent Europeans mere products of their history, negating the role of human action and reflexivity in society and economy..

Beauty or ugliness in the urban, i.e. built, environment, used to be dealt with via a sort of unquestioned aesthetic hierarchy, handed down from that class of persons -- architects, urbanists, philosophers -- who were listened to as definers of the aesthetic hierarchy. The notion of striving for such a consensus about what is beautiful or valuable has been strongly criticized, most especially in the United States, but elsewhere as well, for two reasons. The populists claim that vernacular architecture and city environments are interesting, and they extend this to claim that because they are expressions of the tastes of ordinary, non-elite people, we should celebrate them, i.e we should "learn from Las Vegas."[2] Others are less demagogic, noting simply that occasionally, vernacular architecture and urbanism are the real equals of what has been created by self-conscious crafters of the beautiful.[3] The populists -- who run the gamut from politically Right to politically Left -- have mostly won out,

however, and it is widely considered to be elitist to say that something is beautiful or ugly, especially if it concerns the spaces reserved for the middle classes. And there remains a surprising lack of aesthetic criticism of the rampant kitsch built by the armies of America's wealthy to live in. This is the "normative" dimension of our fall from aesthetics.

The second reason we have become reluctant to return to hierarchical aesthetic values is "positive:"[4] quite simply, most of what we produce in the built environment has very little to do with the hierarchy defined by the authorities. In many countries, this distancing assumes overwhelming proportions, where the vast majority of what is built and lived in is decidedly "low brow" or "middle brow." These are established functional routines of building and consuming, and "high architecture" is in a rarified specialized circuit. In certain European countries, the routines are split into center city versus the rest and high versus low, which are consciously acknowledged not just by architects and critics, but by the general public. Though both societies produce mostly low- and middle-brow architecture, the roles which low and high occupy in the public imaginary are quite different.

Thus, in the USA, though many people deplore the obviously ugly dimensions of our landscapes, large numbers of people appear to like much of what is produced, at least when it comes to individual objects such as buildings, while they are more reserved about the effect when it is all put together into cities, neighborhoods, or regions. In "Europe"[5] on the other hand, there are more people who deplore the character of individual buildings, but fewer who dislike the ensemble: there is frequent pride in and pleasure taken in architecture and the overall built environment of cities. Moreover, in Europe there is a well-developed culture of both historical and high-modern architecture (even though they have proportionately less of the latter than the USA), and of public space. There is a hint, in these

mirror-image circumstances, that there is a strong relationship between "positive" forces -- i.e. real social practices by which the built environment is produced -- and norms, i.e. the valuation of what is produced.

Social Theory: Value(s) as Action(s)

Social theory lurches from one extreme to another when it comes to the positive explanation of value, with some theories seeking value as an objective outcome of social forces, others seeking values as what is felt, experienced, or believed. Economics, of all stripes, "under socializes" the actor, while sociology and other human sciences tend to "over socialize." Neoclassical economics has a fairly good mechanics for understanding prices: there is the form of a good or service, i.e. its intrinsic physical or intangible characteristics, and these characteristics drive conditions of production. Neoclassical economists like most goods to be what they call "rival goods" -- they can be easily reproduced, permitting many producers to exist -- because this permits competitive price formation to take place. Then the consumer enters in: neoclassical economics, as is well known, derives price -- equal to value, in a state of equilibrium -- from the aggregation of individual utility functions, which in turn are the expressions of the buyer's precise ranking of different desires ("choice"), under a given income constraint.

For classical economics, by contrast, value is the expression of producer prices as they add up through the input chain; the Marxist theory is a variation on this theme, with producer prices now divided into labor values and surplus, the former determined by labor time, and the division between the

two fixed by the "historically-determined" standard of living. The actor has little agency in these approaches, for the weight of historical-structural forces is what determines value. Moreover, in Marxist and Smithian economics, it is assumed that "superstructural" elements of social life -- such as beliefs and political subjectivities -- are largely constrained by the structural, objective, interests of the parties, something which has turned out to be only partially true, if that. The actor is "over socialized."

Much of sociology does the same. In both the socialization tradition coming from Max Weber or the functionalist American tradition, the actor is "produced" by forces that are much bigger than s/he is. Yet these traditions have little to say about where a given set of values, now imparted via socialization or rationally reproduced via functionalism, came from in the first place. Neither position shows much interest in the problem of action: the former carries a belief in universal, rational utilitarianism; the latter a belief in the power of external norms. Modern social theory is peopled by calculating machines or bearers of structures. The notion that action exists, by contrast, implies that we conceive of people as capable of doing things which are not mere products of structures or socialization, and in which the nature of their calculation or rationality cannot be known perfectly.

It does not imply that people are free to do whatever they want to do, but rather that they have a real, non-trivial margin of maneuver under constraint. This problem, of reconciling true structure with true agency, giving real weight to both terms, has been the subject of some recent work, notably by Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, and others, but rather little of this has reached economics. As one sociologist put it recently:

> At the top of the agenda is the requirement to circumvent the perennial dualisms that split social scientific thought and mutilate our grasp of reality: those between subject and object, choice and constraint, consent and coercion, or between purposive and meaningful activity through which

> agents construct their world on the one hand, and the impersonal compulsion and limits that the gravity of social structures impose on them on the other.[6]

This is directly pertinent to the question of values, for true values are only of interest if they are the outcomes of action; if they are outcomes of automatic calculations or structures which themselves do not incorporate values (but only, for example, interests), then values have no independent effectivity and thus exist only as unimportant reflections of deeper forces.

Action in the Economy

The way to reject the dualism mentioned above is to reconstruct our definition of human action in the economy. There is little point in attempting to isolate human actions analytically, and either seeking the universal intentions and rationalities behind them or seeking the structures (norms, interests, etc.) which generate specific intentions and rationalities. It is more fruitful to approach to problem by imagining the fundamental dilemmas which are faced by persons as they try to carry out pragmatic activity. In any given pragmatic situation, each actor is subject to *uncertainty* with respect to what others, upon whom his/her own actions are dependent, will do. Interdependency is referred to here in the sense that in most situations of pragmatic action, we need others to respond to what we do in a way which is coherent with the action we take in order for our initial intentions to be realized. The particular form and nature of that uncertainty vary according to the contours of the particular situation (in this case, the production of the built environment), as do the sets of ways to resolve it so as to go forward and succeed in the collective activity of the economy. This makes the central problem of action one of producing *coordination* among interdependent actors. Such coordination is neither the product of

atomism nor of norms and structures.

This coordination can only come about when actors come to a sort of "agreement" about what is to be done -- in the sense that what each person does meets the expectations of the others on whom he or she depends. Such agreement -- specific to the pragmatic situation at hand -- is required between, say, buyers and sellers of a commodity, between input-supplier and purchaser, between one worker and another on the shop floor, between manager and worker; without it, the collective, mutually interdependent activity cannot go forward.

Of course, this is not an "agreement" in the sense of a formal contract or explicit rule, but rather in the sense of a *common context;* a set of points of reference which goes beyond the actors as individuals but which they nonetheless build and understand in the course of their actions (and which they may or may not like; and over which they may or may not experience conflict). These points of reference for evaluating a situation and coordinating with other actors are essentially established by *conventions* between persons. Conventions emerge both as responses to and as definitions of uncertainty; they are attempts to order economic actions in a way that allows production and exchange to take place according to a set of known expectations.

The formal notion of convention as elaborated by David Lewis[7] is as follows:

> A regularity, R, in the behavior of members of a population P, when they act in a recurrent situation, S, is a convention, if and only if, for each example of S, for the members of P:
>
> Each conforms to R;
>
> Each anticipates that all others will conform to R;
>
> Each prefers to conform to R on the condition that others do so. Since S is a problem of coordination, the general conformity to R results in a coordination equilibrium.[8]

Lewis' definition supposes that each person identifies, at least for herself or himself, R as a regularity, as

well as the nature of the situations S, their recurrent character, and the relationship between S and R.

Conventions resemble "hypotheses" formulated by persons with respect to the relationship between their actions and the actions of those on whom they must depend to realize a goal. When interactions are reproduced time and again in similar situations, and when particular courses of action have proved successful, they become incorporated in routines and we then tend to forget their initially hypothetical character. Conventions thus become an intimate part of the history incorporated in behaviors.

The word "convention" is commonly understood to suggest at one and the same time: a rule which is taken for granted and to which everybody submits without reflection, the result of an agreement (a contract), or even a founding moment (such as the Constitutional Convention). Thus convention refers to the simultaneous presence of these three dimensions: (a) rules of spontaneous individual action, (b) constructing agreements between persons, and © institutions in situations of collective action; each has a different spatio-temporal extent, and they overlap in complex ways at any given moment in any given situation. In practice, it is only by initially *assuming* the existence of a common context and by formulating expectations with respect to the actions of others that it is possible to engage in coordinated collective action: these are the dimensions of inherited, *longue durée* conventions, some of which take the form of formal institutions and rules. But at any given moment, the context is evaluated and re-evaluated, re-interpreted, by the individual who must choose to practice or not practice according to a given convention. Common contexts are therefore not the same things as norms or structures, and the points of reference therefore do not appear as results of the encompassing social order, but rather through the built-up coordination of situations and the ongoing resolution of differences of interpretation

into new or modified common contexts of action.

In this process of establishing a common context, there is no reason to suppose that the actor separates the positive from the normative. On the contrary, when coordination is successful, it generally incorporates both mutually coherent expectations and a faith that the actions undertaken are consistent with our principles of the fair and the good or, at least, the satisfactory, in such a way that we can justify our actions to ourselves and others.[9] In other words, conventionally-coordinated actions incorporate values.

The actor is no longer over socialized or under socialized in this analysis. S/he is responsible for understanding and interpreting the circumstances which surround her, and this means understanding what the margin of maneuver is, with respect to the conventional expectations which s/he understands to exist with another actor. At the limit, certain actors can reason strategically enough to know when the margin of maneuver is, such that a new pattern of conventional interactions can be established when they break with the existing convention. At the same time, such an understanding is a realization of limitation and constraint, the weight of existing conventions.

We are now going to see how conventions, and their incorporated notions of value, coordinate action in the production of the built environment.

Action in Producing the Built Environment: Spatial and Temporal Interdependencies

There are strong interdependencies between actors which frame the production of a built environment. The spatial nature of the built environment imposes these interdependencies among

producers (builders, investors), between producers and consumers, and among consumers. The interdependencies are both spatial and temporal.

Spatial interdependencies fall into two main groups: the effects of proximity and the effects of position. What is built in the environment is extremely sensitive to what is around it: in cities, there are positive externalities ("non-excludabilities") and negative externality effects from what surrounds a building or plot. If our lawn is trimmed but the neighbor's is strewn with garbage, there is an aesthetic, psychological and pecuniary negative externality of the neighbor's action. Vice-versa: in a clump of "noble" buildings, each will have positive spillover effects and the whole has a super-additive(non-linear) pecuniary dynamic.

Spatial proximity is tricky in economics, because it refers to the built environment as an effect of technology: when things are proximate, it is -- probably -- because something about the technology of relations between activities (or their cost-price characteristics) do not permit them to be pulled apart. They are, therefore, in a situation of indivisibility. A given configuration of proximity can be altered by technological change or market forces, and this is the ongoing locational dynamic of the economy.

Position is the other dimension of spatial interdependence and is implicit in what we have already said (and what real estate agents tell us: "location, location, location"). In a system of interdependent locations, there is a fixed stock of a given location or like locations. Unlike many goods, the supply is not infinitely expandable. Location or space are "positional goods,"[10] (a form of "non-rival"goods) whose price is directly dependent on the position defined by its relations of proximity and degree of indivisibility with other land uses, such that one location cannot be exactly substituted for another, and where sometimes there is no functionally equivalent location at all. Position almost always

makes certain goods (locations) "scarce" precisely by opening up supplies of new locations which do not have the positionally-unique attributes of old locations.[11] This is a deep paradox for economic thought.

Temporal interdependence in the development of the built environment stems from the fact that the effects of proximity at one moment alter the choice set for those who come after, perhaps irrevocably. Space economies do not develop like a "normal" economy, via the smooth substitution of goods, temporal reversibility, and flexibility of outcomes. Brian Arthur's[12] parable for evolutionary economics shows why this is the case. Take an island where cars are introduced, all of them at more or less the same time. Drivers are free to choose between the left-hand and right-hand sides of the road and have no in-built preference toward either. Each side possesses increasing returns: as a higher proportion of drivers chooses one side, the returns to that side rise quickly. If one side gets sufficiently ahead, drivers will "fall in" on that side, so that eventually all cars will drive on that side of the road. The side that wins, i.e. comes to dominate, cannot be predicted in advance.

Several aspects of these outcomes are worth of note. First, in contrast to the usual situation of diminishing returns, the outcome need possess *no superior efficiency properties*; the side that wins need not be the better of the two. Second, driving is now *locked-in* to the chosen side. The outcome is *structurally rigid*, in that marginal inducements to drivers to change sides will be ineffective. Third, even though we know drivers' preferences and possibilities, ex ante the outcome is *not predictable*. "Small events" outside the model -- perhaps some drivers' reactions, perhaps a dog running into the road, perhaps the timing and positioning of traffic lights, may be crucial in deciding the long run outcome. Finally, *it is hard to assign causality,* even in retrospect, and it would be a mistake to read into it

some innate superiority of the outcome. One might think of the recent victory of DOS-based computer systems over Macintosh systems as an example of these issues.

The built environment shares some of these characteristics, more in its overall form than in the particular nature of each of its components, i.e. buildings. The overall structure of the built environment -- the size and shape of parcels, their interrelations to each other, the arrangement of functions -- are strongly subject to the kinds of scale-induced path-dependency dynamics described. Though it may be possible to change what is done on a given parcel, it is extremely difficult to alter the overall patterning of the spatial system. This patterning, through proximity and indivisibility effects, strongly affects what is practical on given parcels, though does not determine it. The feedbacks are of great interest, since there is an increasing return to scale to the *overall choice set of spatial proximities and interdependencies*, a consequence of the developmental pathway of the built environment as a whole, over time.

Spatial and temporal interdependence in the built environment-- and in-between the "whole" and its individual parts" -- make it behave very differently, in developmental terms, from the ways standard economic models represent productive economic activity : instead of constant returns to scale, severability, and substitutability, hence the possibility of change *à la carte,* the built environment is characterized by spatial and temporal path dependency, the "wholeness" of a system of actions, reactions, and outcomes, and hence, the difficulty of change.

Interdependency and Convention in the Making of Built Environments

Built environments, therefore, involve actors and actions which are hugely interdependent, in the spatial and temporal ways we have suggested. Yet the dependence on others which this necessitates

for each action taken with regard to the built environment also implies uncertainty. In order to proceed with the practical activity of building or creating a built environment, actors must therefore find a way to abate their uncertainty. For the producers and consumers of the built environment, this uncertainty is abated by understanding the reigning practices and habits of others, i.e. by having correct expectations of what others will do in a given situation of action which affects the built environment. Conventions are not evidence of stasis, of actors blindly following roles. Instead, given the historically- and geographically-established parameters of the built environment at hand, particular cumulative learning dynamics are set into motion.

As we noted earlier, there is no reason to assume that convention is solely about a "positive" explanation of why a given built environment becomes what the way it is. Conventions also incorporate the development of collective judgements about what is produced and consumed: mutually coherent notions about what is good or bad, ugly or beautiful, and at what price."Value" simultaneously has positive roots, in that it reflects the particular, conventionally-constructed ways that groups of actors coordinate in order to produce goods of given qualities; and normative roots, in that it reflects the ways those actors justify[13] their actions in production and consumption of the built environment. The two sides of convention, positive and normative, are locked into a temporal dialectic which makes their effects mutually reinforcing.

This is also why different mixtures of high and low are produced and justified and hence why American so-called "anti-elitist" populism has not taken hold in European tastes about cities.

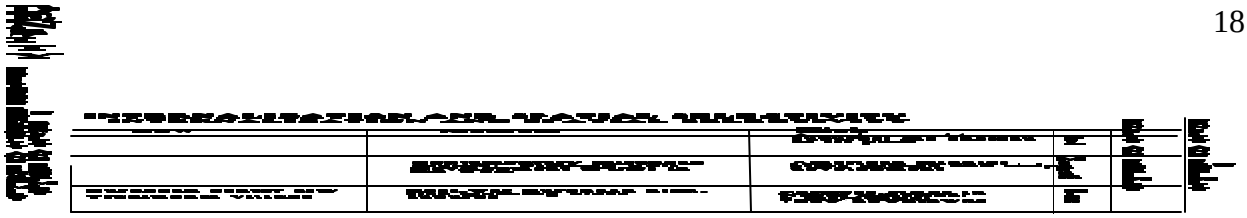
This is, of course, just a theoretical retelling of the story we presented in the opening section of this paper. Now we shall try to turn it into a more general model and compare the stylized facts of the

American and European built environments, and the relationship of this to different "values" in cities.

Pathways of Conventions in the Built Environment

Since we're going to build a "model," let there be two axes and a bunch of boxes which different positions along these axes will define, as in Figure 1. And let's put on these axes two aspects of the built environment which are fairly standard in such exercises. On the vertical axis, density and its correlate, proximity. On the horizontal axis, the spatio-temporal interactions of the built environment, i.e. between individual buildings or land parcels and their environments (in traditional models, this axis is usually called "transport" or "transport costs"). In the approach defined by standard urban economics, there is a set of never-ending negative feedbacks between these two factors: density reaches a point where it bids up land prices so high that it either makes possible the use of transportation modes hitherto economically unfeasible, or it induces technological change in transport so that density can be reduced by increasing the supply of available land. Cities develop via a back and forth movement between density levels and land supply, through the development of transport, such that the downward-sloping density gradient from center to periphery, and the functional allocation of land to land uses, is determined.

There are two problems with this reasoning. One is that while increasing pressure on existing land does drive up prices and induce decentralization as cities grow, it does not do so necessarily via a decreasing density gradient: this is just the American model. The other is that the model sheds no light on what may be the most important factor, in terms of the look and feel of the city: the qualities and nature of interactions between a given building or site and their immediate environments, which do not seem to



be entirely driven by density or "transport."

The spatio-temporal interactions between parts of a built environment mean everything in terms of look and feel. Do we interact many times a day, or few, with what it around us? Do we do so via large-scale or small-scale transactions (e.g. purchases?). Do we do so in a planned or -- at least partly -- unplanned manner? What modes of transacting are used (foot, voice, car, metro, etc). *A given pattern of such spatio-temporal interactions is likely to be associated with specific dimensions of built form, such as the extent to which functions are internalized within a given unit (household, business) or "externalized" into the local environment* (this latter is known as "scope" in contemporary economics, in the sense of the range of activities/functions, narrow to wide, carried out in a given firm or, in this analogy, in a given unit of the built environment)[14].

Standard approaches would suggest that for a given transport cost "function," we could derive the nature and degree of such spatio-temporal interactions: thus, cheap car transport leads to low density leads to big-scale infrequent contacts with the external environment, and "loose" connections, in the sense of spatial selectivity due to cheap car transport (sounds like an American suburb, no?). But this story which seems so economistically perfect for the American suburb does not hold everywhere else: even cheap car transport does not always lead to a taste for spatial selectivity, looseness, and internalization of functions, nor is low density necessarily associated with these characteristics. For example, in the contemporary suburbs of some big European cities, though dependence on the car is

much greater than in old central cities, the notion of strong economies of proximity is conventional. There is a preference for density and localness, through localities are now vastly more open to interaction at the metropolitan scale for the journey to work. Thus, the pattern of spatio-temporal interactions, and its correlate in terms of the qualities of built units in the built environment, does not seem to be deterministically related to the density-transport dialectic so preferred by urban economics (although nothing in this argument denies that a dialectic of density-transport-urban expansion does exist).

I would construct the argument differently. To do so, we can draw from industrial economics, an argument which is owed to W. Lazonick,[15] and ask the reader's indulgence for this excursion into the world of industry. Lazonick argues that British and American industrialization followed fundamentally different evolutionary pathways. Britain inherited a dense, highly interconnected tissue of small firms, America started from scratch. With industrialization, British entrepreneurs could adopt a gradualist strategy, drawing on dense networks of external suppliers for their needs, building up capacity gradually. This had the advantage of sparing them high up-front investments, reducing their exposure. He calls this the "low-fixed cost"(LFC) strategy, made possible by a high degree of externalization. In America, lacking such tissues, the only way to industrialize rapidly and well was to internalize, to provide for oneself what one could not find externally. This required "high fixed costs,"(HFC) with the attendant problem of amortizing them. The only way to get around this was to undertake extraordinary reorganizations of the enterprise so as to make it extremely efficient, and this American producers did in building the modern, vertically-integrated corporation which was considered to be the pinnacle of capitalist economic organization until about fifteen years ago.[16] In both cases, Lazonick shows, once on

a given pathway, learning was cumulative: the British going the LFC route increasingly, the Americans the HFC route and eventually triumphing over the British in many markets. In both cases, the respective logics became self-reproducing, a kind of conventional wisdom.

Something similar can be said about the American built environment: it has followed something equivalent to a high internalization pattern, with both positive and negative consequences, functionally and aesthetically. It is quite probable that, at certain formative moments, there were strong interactions between land availability, transport, and density. In our stylized story at the beginning of this paper, it was argued that extensive settlement patterns coupled to long distance transportation probably induced Americans to develop internalization strategies in the built environment, i.e. strategies of low spatio-temporal interconnection. In American cities, a different process occurred: the modern and relatively efficient transport grid of those cities enabled bigger plots than in European cities and much greater spatio-temporal selectivity, leading around to a similar result, i.e. greater internalization than would be found in the Old World cities. *Once set in motion, the system of spatial interdependencies thus constructed became conventional and cumulative, because collective learning dynamics were oriented toward this strategy of spatio-temporal selectivity and internalization.* Moreover, such learning reinforced itself via its effects on the technical aspects of the built environment, i.e. technologies permitting greater and greater spatio-temporal selectivity. Beyond this, *such learning reinforced itself through the negative consequences which it requires builders and consumers to avoid, namely the gaps, dead spots, and abandoned places which are an inherent part of this way of building.* In addition, these conventions of building became associated with *aesthetic conventions, with beauty*

attached to building for internalization and spatio-temporal selectivity, and toward subjectivistic expressions of individuality: thus the potential to create great built objects, surrounded by lots of banality, and an overall appearance which is less coherent than in Old World cities, this latter a direct correlate of spatio-temporal selectivity. And these behaviors and outcomes are conventional by now; they are not driven exclusively by cost-density gradients and transport choices; rather, *these conventions also drive cost-density gradients and transport choices.*

If we take a stylized "European" case, the results are quite different. At most levels of density and proximity, there is a preference for less spatio-temporal selectivity, and -- all other things being equal -- less internalization of functions in a given site (this is changing somewhat, but remains, grosso modo, a good generalization). There are undoubtedly complex historical-geographical roots to this; if we go back to late middle age settlement patterns, transport constraints were definitely guiding forces in producing density, and income levels required externalization, at least in cities. In rural operations, things were more complex, of course, involving high internalization for certain things, and high externalization for others. But the spatial selectivity was low. This was true even for the *châteaux* which dotted the landscapes of certain regions. With the development of modern transport infrastructures and the high spatial selectivity they should permit, and with rising incomes and the higher internalization they should permit, European city and region-building has continued to be based, to a much greater extent, on the principles of lower spatial selectivity and lower internalization than in the USA. In part this is reflected in the non-abandonment of city centers, which are something like prisons for these kinds of relations. But that is not the end of the story, because these *conventions for*

building and consuming space are reflected in the rebuilding of center cities and the building of their contemporary extensions. They have mutually reinforcing conventional existence which has little to do with their initial "causes." And, very importantly, they are reinforced through aesthetic conventions, judgements about what is good and bad in the environment, notably a preference for highly organized, well-taken care of public space and a willingness to pay for it. There are consequences, of course: smaller dwelling spaces, and frequently a certain mediocrity of comfort. And it is not as if this environment is all one of splendor; far from it. The paradox is that many of the buildings making up European urban landscapes are themselves quite ordinary in terms of architectural value. Moreover, the quasi-fixed nature of the building stock in certain places creates extreme constraints on the ability to reconfigurate individual spaces. To re-do an apartment is likely to be extremely expensive and there will be absolute limits on what can be done. As a result, middle class spaces inside these ensembles are often characterized by aesthetic bricolage, which rubs shoulders with the splendors of restored city centers and the showcase chateaux. The difference between the two environments is that in the "European" (our stylized facts version of it) the mediocrity is more internally contained, hence more discreet, while in the American it is flamboyant and obvious owing to the possibility of constructing it externally from the bottom up. Still, these are aesthetic and political values, not just outcomes of conventional-functional interactions, in the sense that in one, the flamboyance of the other would be regarded as simply impossible, while in the other, the constraints of achieving coherence would be regarded as impossible limitations on liberty and comfort. In other words, these patterns become part of the way we conventionally interpret and justify the world around us.

Figure I illustrates what is meant by the tendency for the spatio-temporal relations in the

American built environment, *whatever the level of density and pure physical proximity,* to be characterized by looseness and spatial selectivity and for buildings to tend toward internalization. These are tendencies that apply to the low-density "noble" suburb; the medium-density middle-class suburb, traditional downtowns, or the new "fortress" downtowns. The European pattern, suggests the Figure, is of a more differentiated and hierarchical organization of the environment. High-density town and city centers reflect the spatial tightness, openness to the immediate environment, extremely frequent and extremely local transactional structures to which we have referred above, and building styles are oriented to lower degrees of internalization than in the equivalent American space. Part of this, as we have noted, is the simple inheritance of the past. But that is not the end of the story, for such building styles -- upgraded, modernized, and with somewhat greater internalization -- are being re-created in today's European cities.

With increasing metropolitanization, Europe is developing "family" suburbs. These are not the post-war high-rise environments by which Europe tried (unsuccessfully) to solve its housing problem, but true residential suburbs with strong affinities to their American counterparts. Medium-density and a fairly high proportion of single-family homes can be found in these places. But the relationship to the immediate external environment is not the same as that which can be found in the American suburb. In some cases this is because such suburbs are constructed around old town centers (reminiscent of early post-war suburbs in certain parts of the Northeastern USA). Even where they are not, however, the degree of openness to the immediate environment is higher and the level of spatial selectivity of contacts, and the level of internalization within the household are lower than in the USA.

It is also here that we can see one of the great successes of the American built environment.

The internalization strategy applies to what is now called the PUD (planned unit development), the development which internalizes and spreads infrastructure costs and imposes uniformity on the individual units. Some of the more attractive US suburbs and commercial developments, as well as many of our college campuses, are results of this quasi-internalization strategy (there are also aesthetic horrors imposed on whole PUDs). Such developments are much less known in Europe and they are usually not as nice as American versions. In virtually every European version (e.g. technopolis parks, or industrial/commercial "activity zones," such as the French ZACs), the quasi-internalization is not carried through to the extent known in America. Instead, the deeply-rooted convention of opening out to the world, connecting with the urban, generates a syncretic version of the PUD, one which -- perhaps paradoxically -- is usually uglier than the American PUD, precisely because it has not excluded heterogeneity to a sufficient extent, yet is not "tightly" structured as is a real city. It is an unsatisfactory syncretism of two different principles. On the other hand, the problem of inserting these PUDs into a functioning urban or regional environment is much less dramatic there than in the USA, where the landscape is a collection of these poorly connected bits of development, with dead and dangerous spaces in-between.

In one sense, the European *château dans son parc* resembles the American noble suburb. In the better areas of Brentwood or Beverly Hills, Westport, Princeton, Hillsborough, and the like, the emphasis is on self-containment and scale, a managed and manicured environment. The comparison is probably even stronger when we come to "gentry in the country" environments such as can be found in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, Palm Springs, West Palm Beach, the Hamptons, Aspen, etc. The limitations of the Figure are revealed by this functional modeling, however, for there is ultimately little

resemblance between these environments. In the American upper-class subdivision and in the country-gentry settlements, internalization is reflected in big houses and big lots, but these were never constructed to be as internally-coherent as a chateau property, whether of the military-fortified type or the later, productive type. On the other hand, both these American examples -- true to the overall pattern we have been describing -- have little coherent aesthetic link to a regional aesthetic tradition, as does the chateau-style European building. We might just put this down to history, but this seems inadequate, for in most continental European countries, the bourgeoisie today abstains (except for beach houses) from constructing American-style country estates, preferring to renovate the old. Perhaps this is simply because there is a good old stock of buildings to renovate.

Whatever the reason may be, there are very different functional and aesthetic standards. In the American case, in spite of class, lot size, and infrastructure uniformity in the noble suburb, there are wild extremes of aesthetic heterogeneity (and not just in Southern California). The American gentry-in-the-country try to express themselves flamboyantly by choosing their architecture à la carte, and they admire each other's flamboyant individual creations. Some of these creations are excellent in architectural terms. The European bourgeois (and their hefty quotient of middle-class imitators, reflecting the social and aesthetic hierarchy still in place there) emphasize the genuine: the traditional is the peak of the aesthetic hierarchy. One of the implications of this system is that the room for experimentation with noble domestic architecture is, in general, considerably more limited in continental Europe than in the USA (perhaps the Côte d'Azur is an exception). Traditional means conformity with the environment, in the aesthetic sense, and in the functional sense this frequently implies preserving some of the old functional links with the immediate environment, albeit updated via radical transformations in technology,

the decline of agriculture, and the total refashioning of the class system, i.e. of who inhabits these places. Still, the upper right-hand box of the Figure conceals very important differences which, I am arguing, are not mere residues of history, but creations and re-creations of today's actors, via their conventions about functions and aesthetics of the built environment.

In the end, the built environments produced by these systems -- both overlain by modern technology and mobility and modern class structures and all that today -- are quite different, functionally and aesthetically.

One of the points that should emerge from this analytical framework is that there are strong tendencies to the evolutionary, path-dependent reproduction of each of these patterns, i.e. low-internalization, low spatial selectivity or high-internalization, high spatial selectivity. There are positive feedbacks for those actors who follow the conventions in existence, and big barriers and risks for those who do not, *quite independently of whether they like the result or not*. The American who tries to break with existing conventions will run risks of absorbing all the negative locational externalities from which s/he will not be protected by virtue of unconventional locational and architectural choices. The public goods which are necessary to assure the functionality and economic value of his/her investment are likely to not be present, or to risk being withdrawn or degraded at any time. S/he will encounter architects who do not know how to design to another pattern, and builders who know little about the little things which make a different kind of building work in functional and aesthetic terms. Quite an opposite set of consequences will result for the European who tries an American strategy. In the end, then, the American who may deplore the state of things, or the European who deplores the state of things, tends to understand what others expect him/her to do, that others will mobilize resources for this

and not that, and hence, the actor will *justify* what they do according to these understood conventions and, for the most part, will consider the action taken to be *of value*. The production and use of these different built environments, then, are the results of comprehensive *worlds of action,* i.e. frameworks by which actors conventionally evaluate what is possible and what is good within what is possible.

These worlds of action are not, however, locked-in -- once and for all -- to an evolutionary pathway, as some of the comments above might be interpreted as suggesting. As we noted earlier in outlining the evolutionary way of thinking in economics, there are branching points, junctures at which the pathway can be altered, and it is impossible to predict, from a point of departure, where things will end up. This is especially the case because conventions are not iron-clad rules or routines, but frameworks of evaluation and expectation, within which there is always a degree of indeterminacy with respect to the action a given actor will decide to take.

In certain parts of Europe today, for example, there are experiments in the invasion of highly-internalized and spatially-selective built environments in the existing hierarchical tissue, with the development of a larger upper middle-class and the relaxation of certain traditional cultural norms. How this will develop is impossible to say. In country areas, there is strong cultural resistance; it is difficult to find builders; and it is difficult to maintain the property with the existing supply structure of contractors. But it is happening, to some extent.

In the USA, much has been said about the need to return to "neo-traditional" building styles, to get away from suburban sprawl and alienation, and all that. This would involve, as we have seen, the "invasion" of the existing built environment with structures characterized by lower internalization and less possibility of spatial selectivity in their external relations and higher levels of those relations. But the

forces which discourage this, both from investor's and user's standpoint, are enormous: there are simply prohibitive negative externalities at the present time, ways in which the conventional pattern cannot be broken in an incremental way. It might be broken in a dramatic way, but dramatic change is very difficult to bring about because of the scale and coordination it requires.

More importantly, we cannot discuss the built environment as if it were a mere container for society and politics. In analyzing the built environment as a result of conventional patterns of social interaction, I have tried to show that the values which are realized through this environment are much more than about aesthetics: they are tied to social practices involving forms of personal expression, ideologies of freedom, standards of comfort, and levels of mobility, *as realized through the built characteristics of internalization, spatial selectivity, and levels of contact.* These are big parts of the American political culture and collective psychological make-up. These "values are strongly intertwined with the economic values of the built environment and are mutually reinforcing. The built space of any society is a container for an expression of political, economic and social forces; not in the trivial metaphorical sense often claimed by the experts on the subject, but in the literal and analytical sense that these forces exist as spatial practices in the form of conventions of building and using the environment, and they exist simultaneously and inextricably as values. This is why mere appeals to borrow what is obviously good from elsewhere fall as flat as appeals, in economic policy, to borrow German or Japanese forms of economic organization or institutions. Their indivisibilities, contextuality, and justifications or value contents cannot be changed à la carte.

Beautiful Cities, Ugly Cities:

Urban Form as Convention[1]

Michael Storper
Professor of Regional and International Development
Dept. of Urban Planning
School of Public Policy and Social Research
UCLA
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1565 USA

Tel: 310-825-2718
Fax: 310-206-5566
Email: storper@ucla.edu

Revised: February 1996

[1] This paper was prepared for presentation to the symposium on "The Question of Economic Value" sponsored by the Center for American Architecture and Design, University of Texas at Austin, October 21-22, 1995. Thanks are due to Michael Benedikt for organizing the symposium and for his critical comments on an earlier draft. Any errors are, of course, the responsibility of the author.

Notes

1.Michael Benedikt suggested this point, in writing: "It seems to me that one reason there are holds -- empty lots -- dotted about the landscape has to do with the use of land as speculative investment vehicle by banks, real estate consortia, and even individuals, with deep enough pockets to wait for more favorable (for them) market conditions. There are also large transaction costs when it comes to land, which means that 'favorable conditions' cannot be only marginally so. The 'deepness' of investors' pockets has to do with American genius at free-forming financial associations that effectively spread risk. If transaction costs were small, and pockets shallow, almost all land would quickly be traded to the point of profitable use/development and there would be rather little left fallow." (Personal communication to author, February 15, 1996).

It may also be that transaction costs are an outcome of deep or shallow pockets. In many European cities, pockets are very deep because indebtedness is held to a lesser degree than in the USA through more restricted credit. Those who own, therefore, do not own as much on credit and can afford to wait. As a result, they trade less, and they keep transactions costs institutionally high. This means that land has to be developed to profitability and that empty spaces are not easily permitted in such a system.

2.Venturi, R. and Scott-Brown D. 1972. *Learning from Las Vegas*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

3.Reyner Banham, in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, (1971, Harmondsworth: Penguin) makes this argument for certain elements of the Los Angeles environment.

4."Positive" is in quotation marks because it is the term commonly used in social science, but I want to signal my skepticism with respect to the notion of "positive" knowledge in social science.

5.When I use the term "Europe," I mean a stylized facts version of urbanism in France, Italy, and Scandinavia, with all apologies which such exercises in generalization do to the richness of historical, geographical and architectural diversity, and in full awareness that Europe has its abundance of architectural mediocrity, more concentrated in some countries than others, and particularly in the urban fringes and suburbs of that continent.

6.Wacquant, L. 1993. "On the Tracks of Symbolic Power: Prefatory Notes to Bourdieu's 'State Nobility.'" *Theory, Culture, Society* 10: 1-19.

7.D. Lewis, 1969, *Convention: A Philosophical Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

8. Ibid

9.Boltanski, L and Thèvenot, L, 1991, *De la Justification; les Economies de Grandeur*. Paris: Gallimard.

10.Hirsch, F. 1976, *The Social Limits to Growth*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; and Scitovsky, T. 1976, *The Joyless Economy; An Inquiry into Human Satisfaction and Consumer Dissatisfaction*, New York: Oxford University Press.

11.This does not mean that a given consumer of land/buildings does not substitute. Indeed, positionality means that they are often denied access to certain locations by the high price and extremely limited supplies of those locations and, hence, must substitute, in order to go elsewhere. But this gives rise to a spatial patterning, not to standard increasing supply effects.

12.Arthur,W.B. 1994. *Increasing Returns and Path Dependence in the Economy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; and, Nelson, R., and Winter, S, 1982, *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

13.Boltanski and Thevenot 1991, op. cit.

14.Scope economies are central to the New Institutional Economics (also known as "transactions costs economics"). See Williamson, O, 1985, *The Economic Institutions of Capitalism*, New York: Free Press.

15.W. Lazonick, "Learning and the Dynamics of Competitive Advantage." in R. Thompson, ed, 1994, *Learning and Technological Change*, New York: St. Martin's, 172-197; and Lazonick, W. 1992, *Organization and Technology in Capitalist Development*, Aldershot, Hants: Edward Elgar.

16.Chandler, A. 1962, *Strategy and Structure; Chapters in the History of American Enterprise*, Cam bridge, MA: MIT Press; and Chandler, A., 1977, *The Visible Hand*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.