

Chance Encounters: Public Attachments in the City of Private Parts

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*"Chance is first, Law is second."*¹

INTRODUCTION

The American grid city, if considered purely as an artifact of design, represents a paradox. On the one hand, the incorporation of the gridiron achieves total order; all of the parts of the city are consumed within a subdivision of identical blocks, suggesting uniformity and control. On the other hand, the development of the city through the speculative nature of individual initiatives over periods of time, only marginally guided by zoning parameters, has produced physical settings which defy fundamental notions of order and control. Each parcel within the grid constitutes an independent setting for infilling varying individual agenda, and fulfilling private desires. The city has thus evolved into a container of "spare parts,"² freely autonomous, dissociative components of varying size, style, function, etc., having little sense of interaction or dependency to establish intermediary levels of order between the individual part and the collective whole.

It is clear that the modern grid city, largely through uncoordinated, and often insensitive redevelopment, has failed to produce ordering strategies that can differentiate particular conditions of greater perceptual and cognitive order. The organizational tools for structuring the city, largely based in zoning techniques, at most establishes general massing, locational and functional guidelines which lack the specific directives to make the parts "behave" in a certain way. As a result, individual buildings, developed over time, are built next to other buildings, without a larger plan in mind, but by purely circumstantial factors based in land availability, favorable economics, and "right" location, which in the non-hierarchical, accessible grid, provides any number of reasonable alternatives. The result is a city of relatively randomly placed parts arranged by *chance*, or, unpredictably, without intention or observable cause, whose many open variables leads to a complexity

which resists traditional notions of order based in cause and effect, determinism, or compositional logic.³

The problem of the modern "indeterminant city" is further exacerbated by the reduction of public open space and institutions (the traditional "glue" of the city) due to the increasing "privatization" of space; in other words, the transformation of the city from a rich mix of public institutions and private living and work spaces to largely private, single-use, speculative commercial development. The gridiron doesn't provide much help here, given its inherent characteristics of redundancy, non-hierarchy, and lack of closure, which mitigates possibilities to produce significant degrees of differentiation, identity, and a sense of place.

If one examines the grid city of the 19th and early 20th century, these forms of associative order did exist, typically based on the formation of cohesive, well defined public streets and squares. While there was still a somewhat varied scene through private initiatives, there also existed a limited range of building typologies, functions, materials, as well as a still primitive technology in terms of vertical access and mechanical requirements. All of these constraints placed clear limits on the height and configuration of structures, and helped to produce higher degrees of physical cohesion and architectural relationships than exists today. In addition, earlier planning principles influenced by European cities and theory, such as the use of axial devices, cohesive streetwalls, and monumental settings of public buildings related to public plazas and malls provided strategies for developing hierarchical order within the uniform grid iron, established interrelationships between buildings, and produced highly memorable public settings.⁴ One suspects, however, that these strategies are inappropriate in the modern age of speed, electronic communications, and physical dislocation, and at any rate, given patterns of development over the last half century, are now difficult, if not impossible to reestablish.

THE ROLE OF CHANCE

Given this crises of modern city form, it is still critical to search for methods of order and control. I would suggest that one method might be found precisely within its inherent qualities of functional/physical disassociation, random, non-deterministic patterns of development, and the vast, three-dimensional discrepancies between low (historic) and highrise (modern) building development. These massing variations allow visual connections across the city from multiple viewpoints, allowing particular perceptual linkages to be formed between related, although disparate parts, sometimes over great distances. In fact there are an almost infinite array of *possible* associations that can be perceived from different locals within an extended field of random elements. Such associations are typically not planned, but are encountered, by chance, through normal experience, and once discovered, become part of a cognitive map that restructures one's understanding of the city. It is the space perceived *between* significant events that might constitute another form of "structure," or system of connections within the city which if recognized and documented, might be as significant an ordering mechanism as the definition of blocks (as solids) and streets (as voids) that typically describe the orthogonal grid. The intention here is to search for a new, hierarchical order of relationships within the random, non-hierarchical scattering of unrelated parts, where such higher orders were perhaps never intended, but once recognized, become real, inextricable, and an enduring realization of city form.⁵

The issue is not to subvert the grid's organizational powers; rather, it is proposed to simply overlay the neutral grid with another, more specific and highly "charged" construct based on explicit human perceptions and cultural understandings. Such a construct does not necessarily "behave" along the orthogonal alignments of the open streets; unexpected oblique vistas occur almost randomly in the American city of incrementally built, market-based development, dispersed over an infinitely extended gridded field. A new order arises out of the confrontation of the abstracted, conceptual "muteness" of the grid, with the narrative of associations relationships and perceptions that crisscross its boundaries. The inherent power of this order is based on a series of dialectical oppositions between the given gridiron system and differently perceived visual patterns, which can be described as follows:

- The chance encounter vs. the planned event
- The discovered vs. the preconceived
- The human experience vs. the intellectual abstraction
- The subjective, fragmented association vs. the objective, total organization

These "chance encounters," or visual associations constantly come into view and disappear and shift into

new alignments as one moves through space, and given a city of a reasonable number of interesting events, the "density," or number of visual linkages might be so great and pervasive as to lose real perceptual importance. It is suggested that one might reduce these encounters to those which are most highly "significant," and can be inhabited by the public and be defined as public *places*, existing either as external urban space, major public buildings/monuments, or memorable private edifices residing within the public consciousness.⁶ The notion of urban organization as the structuring of public space is surely not new; but what is being suggested here is a public structure that also meets the following criteria:

- a. there must be actual visual contact between events; and while contacts can be formed within close proximity, the varied placement of high and low forms dispersed throughout the city allows relationships to be extended over vast distances, with little loss of visual impact.
- b. the events are related through actual human experience of space vs. merely graphic intent (as is found



Fig. 1. Overlay of multiple public linkages

in traditional city planning models conceived mainly in plan);

- c. events are related through a discovered sense of reciprocity between one another, expressing either a specific cognitive, or formal desire for mutual dependance.

The forming of these chance, discovered relationships can be compared to roaming through the aural

static of infinite radio frequencies of imperceptibly weak signals. At a certain point, one hones in, hits it, and "locks on" to a stronger signal, and the music is heard with perfect clarity. The act of locking on, once achieved, becomes an understood union, an established "ressonance" between the receiver and the received message, and once achieved, can be rediscovered by other participants.

ORGANIZATIONAL TYPES

Chance relationships in the city can be described by different types of formal organizations through mapping the space between visually related events. Different configurations are generated by the connection of points (particular spaces or buildings), lines (streets) and fields (multiple points of reference within a district). Such a palette can be greatly extended through a variety of different types of associations in all combinations, such as points to other points, points to lines, lines to lines, lines to fields, fields to points, fields to fields, etc. The perceptions of these relationships take on additional variations when certain places establish many concurrent connections, and others, very few, or none; some connections might closely parallel the grid, while others are obliquely superimposed at odd, unexpected angles. In some cases, certain connections might overlap others, creating points of multiple, superimposed references; and in other cases, the message, or content of a particular point may vary depending on the type of association, or dependency that is being established to other points or lines. These new configurations will sometimes make little aesthetic sense, or logic, at least in terms of traditional principles of design order. Their order is as arbitrary, yet as real and authentic as actual human cognition itself, and establishes order on its own terms.

But if the form of the public linkage becomes clear, what constitutes the *message*, or content that makes such linkage desirable? Why should some relations be established, and not others? What are the particular types of significant linkages of this new public order? One can only propose meaningful answers based on the physical resources of particular contexts, meaning that the nature of associations will vary, to some extent, on the quality, density, and characteristics of the city in question. For the purposes of this investigation the paper will utilize the southern portion of Manhattan, from the Battery to Central Park (Fig. 1), largely due to the exceptional number and potency of these relationships and their general familiarity (with the understanding that similar criteria can be established and a graphic mapping be applied to other cities as well.) I would suggest the following types of linkages that are based on the nature of their particular perceptual and cognitive interdependencies:

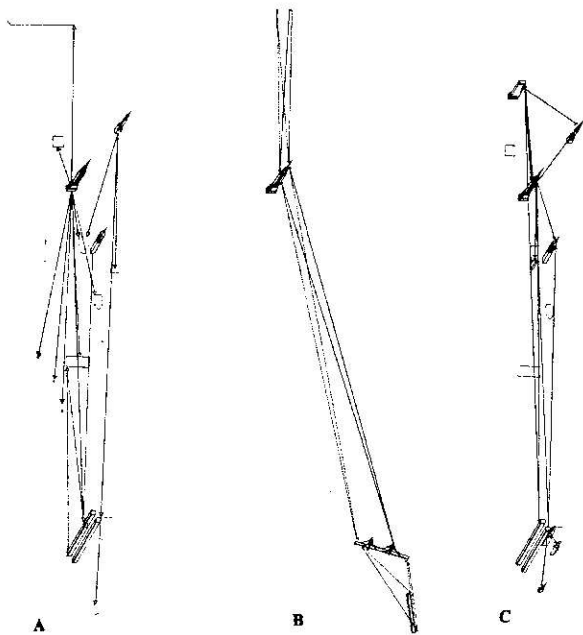


Fig. 2. Chance encounters: A-Displacement B-Punctuation C-Urban Narrative

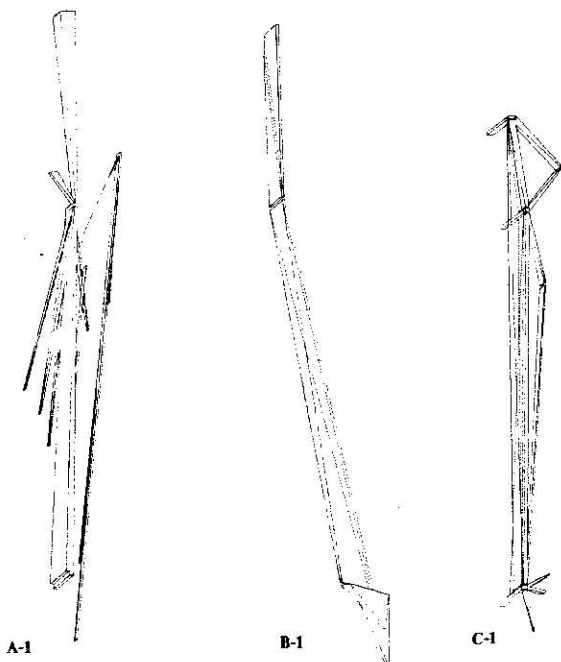


Fig. 3. Chance encounters described as 3-dimensional limits: A-1: Displacement B-1: Punctuation C-1: Urban Narrative

PERCEPTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

1. Displacement

The reading of a public space or building tends to be qualified, or adjusted by visual encounters with other, unique architectural statements, perceptually tying it to another, possibly distant form dominating one's field of vision. Most public buildings, especially of recent vintage, have little such iconographic power, or ability to perceptually remove itself from the surrounding visual competition. New York possesses many examples, however, of skyscrapers and monuments of unique visual power and identity, the most ubiquitous and distinctive of which would include the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings, and less successfully, the World Trade Center, all of which stand out from their local surroundings, can be seen from great distances, and can be observed from a number of significant locations. Thus, the chance view of the Empire State from a series of small, undistinguished public parks along 6th Avenue, or from Madison Square joins the distant landmark within one's immediate perceptual frame, and confers a new identity upon these spaces (Fig. 4).

There also exists a series of cross-references between major parks (Washington Square, Union Square, Madison Square) and reciprocal relationships with the Empire State Building and World Trade Center, acting as sort of "displaced campanile," that seem to imply a shifting perceptual spine down the center of Manhattan, terminating in Central Park (Fig. 2-A). While each of these spatial and architectural events are memorable through their singular qualities unto themselves, it is the perceived cross-referencing in unpredictable, com-

plex visual arrangements that establishes a dynamically *experienced* order far more dominant than implied in plan.

2. Punctuation

One of the generic characteristics of gridiron systems is the infinite street vista, which defies any sense of closure except when the gridded field shifts its orientation, or buildings are built within or over the street easement. In Manhattan, these vistas are sometimes closed by significant public events, such as the New York Public Library/Bryant Park closure of 41st Street, or Park Avenue's termination by Grand Central Station, but more often, are infinitely extended.

Another possibility for definition can be achieved by a visual attraction to significant objects that compete with, and shift one's point of view. Through extended alignments between portions of a street and various landmarks either centered or peripheral to one's vision, the infinite street vista becomes punctuated, or broken down into a series of perceptual units, and acquire thematic identity without being subjected to total closure. Because the visual connections occur over an extended series of locations and is not limited to a single point of contact, there is defined a kind of "field of influence" between the street fragment and its aligned object. These fields can be interpreted as another form of cognitive space having perhaps more in common with mental limits, or the perceived limits of wave, or sound transmission rather than traditional territories defined by physical edges.⁷

Examples of these types of association could include the portion of 5th Avenue's wall along Central Park



Fig. 4. View from Madison Square to Empire State Building



Fig. 5. View from Broadway to the Municipal Building

connected to the dominant vista of the Empire State Building (before the unfortunate imposition of 712 Fifth Avenue), or, the portion of Broadway in contact with the Municipal Building, as opposed to other portions of Broadway in contact with the Flatiron, Metropolitan Life, Consolidated Edison, and One Times Square Buildings (Fig. 5). Other forms of punctuation occur between the pedestrian walkway on the Brooklyn Bridge, and its visual extensions to both the Empire State Building and the Brooklyn Esplanade (Fig. 2-B).

3. Framing

There occurs times when two or more significant public forms, when seen from a particular vantage point seem to involve themselves with one another in a particularly focused way, forming a linked visual dialogue that resists separation. The space between these elements is significant in its tendency to describe a perceptual plane, or edge condition, suggesting either a sense of visual closure that limits the infinite extension of space, or, the articulation of a configuration of elements lying beyond the perceptual plane. Framing thus becomes a kind of "cropping" of the urban scene, setting up preferred points of view, and turning the free, multi-directional perception of an urban setting into a more control "scene" of directed perception, thus, entering the realm of theater, or staged event.

The other notion of the frame is to articulate a specific opening into or from the city, either as a kind of window (to observe), or a door (to pass through). Of course, the frame itself can only be read when there is a strong sense of reciprocity between the two defining

forms, either in terms of redundant, or complementary relationships, a condition which rarely occurs in the random development patterns of the grid city.

An exceptional example of this form of framing can be observed through the perception of the Holland Tunnel air vent towers as perceived from the Battery Park City Esplanade, in which two precisely identical forms are situated on either side of the Hudson, tending to define a pictorial plane which succeeds in articulating the river at a particular point in the grid, and forms a window to the river and Hoboken, New Jersey beyond (Fig. 6). An effective framing device of a completely different nature is the relationship of the Municipal Building at City Hall Park and the Woolworth Building as seen from the approach along the Brooklyn Bridge, in which the towers act as two markers of heroic magnitude to define a point of entry to the city.

4. Superimposition

There are occasions when one's vista of an immediate scene is read against, or superimposes itself over a more distant element. This often occurs when shifts in the street grid allow one's vista to be culminated in built form rather than extended in an infinite street perspective; in other cases, combinations of images are perceived when smaller building forms are read in front of larger, or higher ones. Most of the time, the overlapped image is simply that, which results in a distortion, or a partial screening out of other forms, to little meaningful effect. But in some cases, this combination of imagery is especially significant, in which one achieves a new, although perhaps unintended reading of superimposed

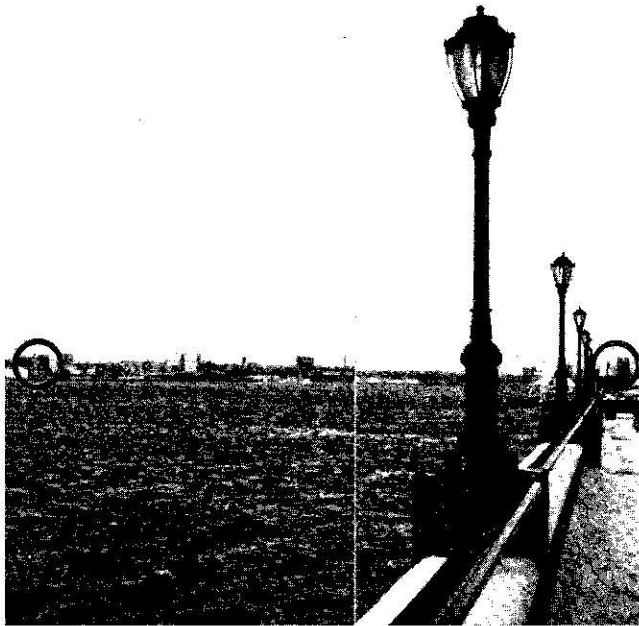


Fig. 6. View from Battery Park City esplanade framed by Holland Tunnel air vent towers



Fig. 7. Superimposition of St. Paul's Church and office tower.

elements, resulting in a different, unexpectedly rich synthesis of forms.

This is certainly the case when looking uptown on Broadway towards the Grace Church, where for a length of about 8 blocks, the church steeple is almost directly in line with, and perspectively about the same size as the higher crown of the Chrysler Building some two miles beyond, offering an interesting commentary on the shift of institutional power. A similar commentary occurs from the World Trade Center looking towards St Paul's Church that happens to be precisely centered upon an undistinguished 1950's tower, polarizing a figural shaft latent with meaning against a residual ground, both neutral and utterly mute (Fig. 7). Glancing towards a southerly direction from almost the same location, the gothic Trinity Building (Francis Kimball, 1905) seems to extend (not so inappropriately) into the Art Deco tower of the Irving Trust Building (Voorhees, Gmelin & Walker, 1931), forming an unexpectedly harmonious dialogue between two buildings of otherwise dissimilar roots.

COGNITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

1. Urban Narratives

Cities, and their constituent artifacts are carriers of narrative content. The messages vary widely: buildings can be read as enduring repositories of historic events, or aspirations and hopes for a future yet to take place; illusive, symbolic carriers of cultural and social evolution, or highly literal accounts of developmental priorities; private, idiosyncratic statements of particular inhabitants, or public affirmations of the collective spirit of the age. Each building and district has its story, which communicates on its own terms. But the larger narrative, in the city of random, displaced events scattered throughout the extended grid can be less than clear, if not often garbled beyond legibility.

Sometimes, however, such a dialogue between two or more events related through thematic content, begins to emerge. Their visual, or physical linkage are drawn together purely by some chance association, which can easily be left undiscovered, or be blocked by some other non-conforming occurrence. But when the linkage is discovered, a new order arises, based not so much in obvious visual associations, but the knowledge of a shared thematic content that draws the parts together into a comprehensive narrative, generating a new system of relationships and allegiances between the parts through their running commentary. Such relationships may not possess compositional logic, being conceived over an extended period of development, and be dispersed over great distances, but still, articulate themselves from their surroundings, are aligned to memorable points of reference and exert cognitive power.

Typically, the narrative is tied to events which took place in particular places, whose memory is revived through literal or symbolic association to the previous event. Or, there may exist especially focused associations to broader cultural or social traits of a particular period which are manifested through various architectural characteristics. In New York, there can still be read in certain projects the powerful confidence in the emerging technology and corporate dominance of the Modern Age, fueled by the explosion of the capitalist city and its worldwide influence through new communications systems. This apex of this narration of the 20th century metropolis is most clearly represented in the high-rise, Art Deco monuments of the 1930's which march along a small stretch of 42nd street, including the Daily News, Chanin, Chrysler, and McGraw-Hill Buildings, cross-axially aligned with the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center (particularly the former RCA building), which still read quite convincingly against the more cynical and blandly functionalist backdrop of later development.

Related to the narrative of the future Metropolis is the reach for the sky, seen through the development of a succession of the highest buildings in the world which can all be read from the observation decks of the Empire State Building, including the Park Row (1899, Flatiron (1896), Metropolitan Life (1904) Woolworth (1914), Empire (1931), Chrysler (1932) and World Trade Center (1972) Buildings, and the particularly compelling story of the competition between the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings in the quest to be the highest building in the world (Figs. 2-C, 8).⁸ As the critical point of



Fig. 8. Alignment between the Park Row (far right) and Woolworth Buildings

reference, the observation deck of the Empire State affords the viewer with specific devices, such as telescopes, visual templates, etc. so that the specific narrative can be directed and illustrated, with little possibility of error, or misinterpretation.

2. Operational Dependencies

One can argue that the gridiron mitigates the necessity of grouping buildings based on common functions, given the grid's relatively equal level of accessibility, not to mention the utilization of modern communications that allow physical separation. However, one can also argue that there still exists a psychological, unifying power of association that can be achieved by maintaining visual linkages, perhaps even more so as institutions grow and expand into other parts of the city.

Particular public urban institutions, such as law and government, tend to greatly benefit through visual contacts, in which the multiple associations between individual facilities enrich the overall identity of the institution, and allow each to gain in power and importance. Such associations occur either by implication, in terms of being visually or stylistically cross-referenced; by actual spatial connections, in terms of sharing an adjacency to a common center, or through a direct circulatory linkage. Foley Square in Manhattan, for example, exemplifies this notion of both a local and displaced centrality through a shift within the gridiron, allowing both the earlier courts as well as more distant modern additions to be visually interlinked (Fig. 9). This occurs primarily through a traditional formal association between public monuments, such as the



Fig. 9. View from Foley Square towards New York County Courthouse and the United States Courthouse.

axial relationships of the New York County Courthouse (Guy Lowell, 1926) and the United States Courthouse (Cass Gilbert, 1936) to the central square, but in other cases, through unexpected visual linkages established between an implied center and more removed facilities.

IMPLICATIONS

The grouping of these different forms of linkages are significant in that it suggests that while the grid city functionally operates as a totality, it can be broken down into more discrete perceptual constructs, or fragments of specified order within a multivalent whole.⁹ These fragments are not the elegant plan orders of the 19th century, but must be conceived in 3 dimensions, are dynamically transformed as one's position shifts in space, and tend to be complex, sometimes to a degree that challenges normal design relationships. The implied volumes that are evolved out of the perceptual linkages (Fig. 3, A-1, B-1, C-1) are formally meaningful, possessing a graphic power similar to familiar descriptions of urban streets, or blocks delineated as 3-dimensional solids. In this case, however, the volume represents not actual space, but the perceived limits of a mental construct, which only becomes defined *over time* through a collectively agreed upon significance, that is both understood and remembered.

The limitations of any graphic diagram are obvious: while defined space can be represented, it is most difficult to concretely describe a notion of mental space, changing points of reference, degrees of dominant vs. secondary focus, partial and total views, and varied types of content/signification. It is felt, however, that the attempt to document these encounters is significant in the search for discovering a more complete depiction of the city in terms of the possibility of interrelating physical, perceptual and cognitive information.

The other implication of this graphic mapping of visual perception is self evident: if one can discover meaningful relationships in the city as a result of the *chance* meeting of various public situations, could one not plan new development so that certain visual relationships of the type described above are *intentional*? In other words, the location and massing of critical new development relative to distant, as well as local design relationships could take into account new design criteria, which is documented and mapped, and can be utilized as a tool used to guide the future evolution of the city.

One of the most significant design controls involves the protection of *existing* chance relationships, which once discovered, can be preserved by not allowing new development to weaken, or destroy visual alignments. Through the establishment of new perceptual "easements," new construction might actually be conceived

to redefine an existing easement, or create a more focused reading of reciprocity between public events. The nature of such an easement in terms of complexity, its shifting 3-dimensional limits, and the varied priorities of contact from different viewpoints presents a new challenge relative to urban design controls and graphic representation.¹⁰

All of which is to suggest that as we become more sophisticated about the qualities that make up the formation of successful urban environments, we need to be as adept in developing sophisticated tools that might orchestrate the evolution of existing cities while keeping their critical perceptual structure intact. Equally important is the potential to design new physical settings which offer rich visual qualities comparable to existing historical contexts, and allow the implications of chance and circumstance to perform as agents of confrontation, visual insight, and cognitive awareness.

NOTES

- ¹ Charles S. Peirce, *Chance, Love and Logic*, (Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1923).
- ² This description of the city occurs in the writings and lectures of Jacquelin Robertson; see "The Current Crises of Disorder," *Education for Urban Design*, (Institute for Urban Design, Purchase, 1982), p. 44.
- ³ There are certain parallels in the sciences, mainly in the area of logic and set theory, relative to the chance distribution of urban elements. One example is found in the theory of cellular automata discussed in Authur Burks, "Causes and Chance in Space-Time Systems," *Chance*,

Cause, Reason (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1977), pp. 549-568. Another proponent is Charles Peirce (op. cit.), whose theory of "Tychism" was based on the notion that absolute chance is at the root of all natural phenomenon.

- ⁴ These strategies are well summarized in Sitte's seminal study, documented in: George R. and Christine C. Collins, *Camillo Sitte: The Birth of Modern City Planning* (Rizzoli, New York, 1986).
- ⁵ This discussion is indebted to the pioneering work of Kevin Lynch, most notably found in: *The Image of the City* (M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, 1960). Lynch's work, however, tends to stress overall imageability and legibility through the perception of patterns, overall frameworks, and integrated settings; the current study focuses only on particular relationships, and questions the ability to achieve more comprehensive perceptual organizations in the modern, randomly developed American gridiron city.
- ⁶ Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, 1986).
- ⁷ There are other examples of contexts which exhibit a psychological implication of spatial limits without possessing a specifically defined edge; this was clearly understood in the development of the frontier courthouse, which tended to be the highest structure on the flat prairie, exerting the presence of the law for miles around; or, the church bells in cities throughout history, defining the limits of an urban district through sound.
- ⁸ Stern, Gilmartin and Mellins, *New York 1930* (Rizzoli, New York, 1987), pp. 603-15.
- ⁹ This notion of urban order based on cohesive fragments within larger random fields is an extension of Colin Rowe's seminal work in the development of "set piece" theory, explored in Fred Koetter, *Colin Rowe, Collage City* (M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, 1978).
- ¹⁰ Given the difficulties of accurate documentation, and the large number of potential variables, this is an area where computer applications could surely play a critical role, suggesting new directions for further research.