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# The rise of the private city

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"The street is a room by agreement," the architect Louis Kahn wrote, and this line, with Kahn's characteristically gentle, poetic tone to it, tells all. The street is the building block of urban design and, by extension, of urban life; the city with vibrant street life is the city that works as a viable urban environment. It is the street, not the individual building, that is the key to making a city work as a piece of design, for the street is, as Kahn put it, the true room of the city—more even than its ceremonial plazas and squares. Indeed, if plazas, to paraphrase Napoleon's famous remark about St. Mark's Square, are the drawing rooms of cities, then streets are the kitchens, the places where the real life goes on.

Or so conventional urban theory would have it. Urbanists are trained to believe that a collection of buildings, however distinguished, does not a city make—witness Houston, say, or Minneapolis—but add a few great streets and you have something far more potent: New Orleans, perhaps, or San Francisco.

Even if there is no reason to believe this theory wrong—and who could question the intuitive sense that there is more urban energy to a city like San Francisco than to one like Phoenix?—it is increasingly inadequate as a way of discussing American cities at the end of the twentieth century. The traditional, dense city for which streets are the measure of success is less and less a design paradigm. It is increasingly being replaced by a model that values automobile access more than pedestrian accommodation, a model that seems designed to offer the ease and convenience of the suburbs. Yet this new model seems determined to demonstrate that it can offer many of the benefits of traditional cities: a variety of shops, restaurants, and public gathering places; facilities for the performing and visual arts,

and the general level of excitement and stimulation associated with older, street-oriented cities.

It is worth noting that both Dallas and Seattle, as well as Charlotte, Minneapolis, and numerous other successful examples of the new urbanism, provide middle-class residents with close-in neighborhoods of detached houses with ample, and private, yards, allowing them to live what is essentially a suburban life within city limits.

The desire is clearly to have certain benefits of an urban place—energy, variety, visual stimulation, cultural opportunities, the fruits of a consumerist culture—without exposure to the problems that have always come along with urban life: specifically, crime and poverty. It seems inherently clear that achieving a quasiurban environment that is free of these problems results in places that are not only primarily middle class but also primarily white. Indeed, while segregation may not be the goal, it is surely the result of the new urbanism—though, given the ample presence of middle-class blacks and Hispanics in many of the areas that can be called examples of the new urbanism, it must be said that this segregation is generally more class-driven than race-driven. But it is no exaggeration to say that the new urban paradigm can be defined, in part, by the desire to provide some measure of urban experience without encouraging the mixing of different classes of people: making the city safe for the middle class.

This represents a sea change in attitude from the premise on which traditional cities have always been based. It is not that they do not value safety (though they have not always been successful in providing it), but rather that they emerge from the premise that both security and more uplifting values such as visual and intellectual stimulation emerge naturally