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What is lost space?

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The problem of urban design today

In today's cities, designers are faced with the challenge of creating outdoor environments as collective, unifying frameworks for new development. Too often the designer's contribution becomes an after-the-fact cosmetic treatment of spaces that are ill-shaped and ill-planned for public use in the first place. The usual process of urban development treats buildings as isolated objects sited in the landscape, not as part of the larger fabric of streets, squares, and viable open space. Decisions about growth patterns are made from two-dimensional land-use plans, without considering the three-dimensional relationships between buildings and spaces and without a real understanding of human behavior. In this all too common process, urban space is seldom even thought of as an exterior volume with properties of shape and scale and with connections to other spaces. Therefore what emerges in most environmental settings today is unshaped antispaces.

The approach proposed in this text falls between the design of site-specific buildings and that of the urban land-use plan. It is centered on the concept of *urbanism* as an essential attitude in urban design, favoring the spatially connected public environment over the mere *master planning* of objects on the landscape. This approach calls for making figurative space out of the lost landscape. As professionals who permanently influence the urban environment, architects, urban planners, and landscape architects have a major responsibility to meet the challenge of redesigning lost spaces that have emerged over the last five decades or so in most major American and European cities. Understanding the concept of

antispaces as a predominant spatial typology is essential in contemporary urban design practice.

Every modern city has an amazing amount of vacant, unused land in its downtown core—hundreds of acres in most major American cities. For instance in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, there are 4,930 acres of industrial land, 260 acres of underutilized railroad land, and 17.5 miles of riverfront available for redevelopment today within the city boundaries.¹ As the movement to suburbia during the fifties and sixties drew industry and people to the periphery, previously viable downtown land became desert. Over the past few years, radically changing economic, industrial, and employment patterns have further exacerbated the problem of lost space in the urban core. This is especially true along highways, railroad lines, and waterfronts, where major gaps disrupt the overall continuity of the city form. Pedestrian links between important destinations are often broken, and walking is frequently a disjointed, disorienting experience. It is important first to identify these gaps in spatial continuity, then to fill them with a framework of buildings and interconnected open-space opportunities that will generate new investment. Identification of the gaps and overall patterns of development opportunities should be done before any site-specific architecture or landscape architecture is designed and as a key element in urban land-use planning.

Designers of the physical environment have the unique training to address these critical problems of our day, and we can contribute significantly toward restructuring the outdoor spaces of the urban core. Lost spaces, underused and deteriorating, provide exceptional opportunities to reshape an urban center, so that it attracts people back downtown and counteracts sprawl and suburbanization.