

modern cities is devoted to the storage and movement of automobiles—in Los Angeles and Detroit as much as 75 to 80 percent. Partly because of this, buildings are separated, encompassed by vast open areas without social purpose. Streets, no longer essential urban spaces for pedestrian use, function as the fastest automobile link, regardless of social cost. At the outskirts of the city the street has become the ‘strip,’ the square a parking lot framed by unrelated buildings.

Modern Movement in design

Also contributing to lost outdoor space was the Modern Movement in architectural design. At its zenith from 1930 to about 1960, this movement was founded on abstract ideals for the design of free-standing buildings; in the process it ignored or denied the importance of street space, urban squares and gardens, and other important outdoor rooms.

In the Piazza Navona District of Rome, streets and square are carved out of the building mass, giving direction and continuity to urban life and creating physical connections, meaningful places. In Houston, Texas, on the other hand, the urban form consists of separate buildings floating among parking lots and roadways. An identifiable ring of lost space encircles the urban core and spatially segregates surrounding residential areas—a typical pattern of most American cities (fig. 7.3).

How did this happen? Designers and builders influenced by the Modern Movement abandoned principles of urbanism and the human dimension of outdoor space established in the urban design of cities of the past. The profile of the Medieval or Renaissance city, our most important historic urban design models, is generally low and horizontal, and there is usually a close connection between life inside the buildings and activity on the street. With the advent of the mechanical elevator and new technologies of construction, the modern city has become an environment of high-rise towers removed from street life. Activities on the streets of Manhattan have little to do with the functions of the high-rises above.

The social and commercial role of the traditional street has been further undermined by such Modern Movement design features as enclosed malls, mid-block arcades, and sunken or raised plazas. These have siphoned shopping and entertainment off the street, which no longer functions as a gathering place. The modern city dweller is forced to create a social life on personal, controllable territory instead of engaging in a communal existence centered around the street. As a consequence, individual attitudes toward the use of urban space have been radically altered.

With the loss of a collective sense of the meaning of public space, we have also lost the sense that there are rules for connecting parts through the design of outdoor space. In the traditional city, the

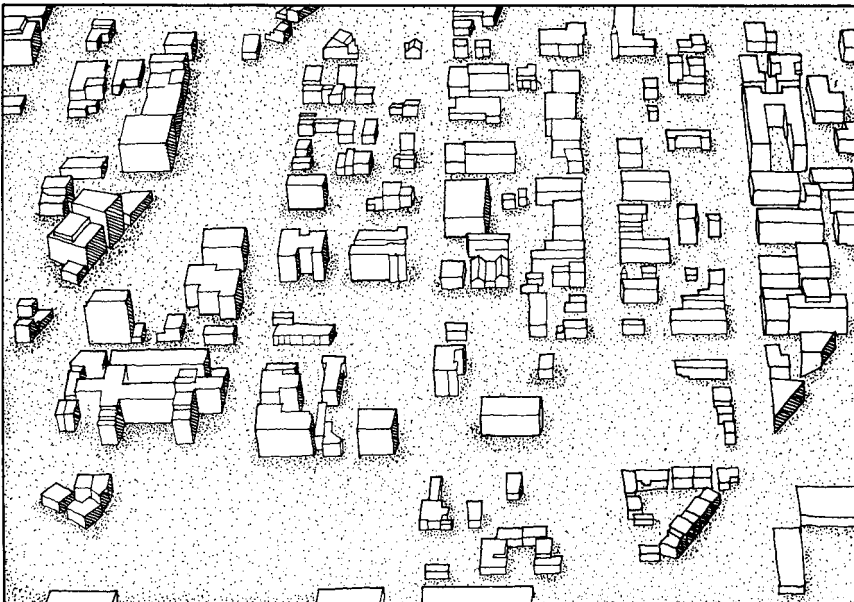


FIGURE 7.2
Washington, D.C.
Diagram of the same site as fig 7.1, showing how roadways and parking lots have destroyed the consistency of the urban fabric. Without the paved surfaces buildings have little if any relationship to one another.