URBAN CODE

100 Lessons for Understanding the City

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Cities speak, and this little book helps us understand their language. Considering the urban environment not from the abstract perspective of an urban planner but from the viewpoint of an engaged pedestrian, *Urban Code* offers 100 "lessons"– maxims, observations, and bite-size truths, followed by short essays that teach us how to read the city. This is a user's guide to the city, a primer of urban literacy, a key for anyone who is in love with urban life at the street and sidewalk level.

Each lesson is accompanied by an icon-like image; in addition to these 100 drawings, photographs and film stills shot in the Manhattan neighborhood of SoHo illustrate the text. The observations originate in SoHo, but the lessons hold true for any cityscape.

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Street map of lower and upper Manhattan,
Source: Collier's World Atlas and Gazetteer, 1935

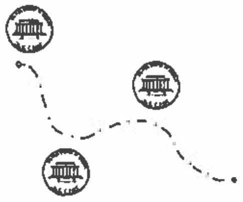
Preface

Cities are made of scenes. Those scenes have a syntax. This book decodes that syntax by explaining what is literally behind the scenes–the hidden interdependencies, invisible forces, and unwritten laws that determine why people move, congregate, pause, and adopt the behaviors and positions they do in the urban environment. These scenes are not new to us; they are what we have come to think of as normative ways of being and familiar patterns of life in the cityscape. By uncovering the syntax of 100 scenes, we hope to have revealed the inherent logic of the city–its urban code.

Urban Code consists of brief observations on the New York City neighborhood of SoHo. Here, people of all cultures and origins conduct their lives. Shopping, dining, making pretzels, hailing taxis, waiting for traffic lights, meeting friends in coffee shops, entering subways, walking dogs in parks ... these are just a few among the many scenes that contribute to the vibrant urban experience that is SoHo. But what is it exactly that gives the place its quality?

Presenting 100 lessons drawn from direct observation and analyis, *Urban Code* tries to move beyond passively looking at these scenes and to encourage a way of "seeing" into them–to understand the forces that shape a place, and how these forces lead to the creation of its special atmosphere. The 100 lessons gained from this phenomenological investigation of SoHo can be tested and validated by undertaking similar investigations of other cities. Or they can be understood as confirmations of your own urban instincts when, on your next walk, you find yourself unconsciously crossing over to the sunny side of the street!

08 Salespeople possess analytical knowledge of the district.

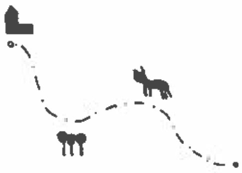


It is clearly in the interest of all businesses to maximize turnover, and the interaction between consumer and seller is crucial to the success of a business. Serving as the direct contact with the customer, a good salesperson employs not only artfully crafted advice to draw them into conversation, but analytical knowledge acquired through observation of their clients in the urban realm.

> *"They come in like a tide," the New York Times quoted a saleswoman in a clothing store. "I always know when it's a few minutes after noon." "The first group floods the store from noon to just before 1 P.M.," the Times reporter went on to explain. "Then there is a short breathing spell. A few minutes after 1 P.M. a second group spills in." And then, although the paper did not say so, a few minutes before 2 P.M. the store goes dead.*
>
> (Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, p. 155)

Salespeople are analysts. To survive in the dense jungle of competing businesses, they must constantly appeal to the wishes of their customers—or, better still, preempt them. As subtly as possible, they elicit the consumer's most urgent desires, only to project them in the next moment onto store design, product layout, price, and hours of operation. But on a much more subtle level, shops try to motivate their clients to make purchases as directly a possible. An outstanding example of this is a much-frequented shop in the center of SoHo. The level, open-plan room is connected to the sidewalk in such a way that the threshold between public street realm and private shopping area can no longer be identified. All disturbing visual and physical barriers are suppressed for the purpose of direct communication between consumer and goods. The degree to which these interventions produce the desired result can be measured by the turnover generated by the shop owners. These figures are the factual evidence of their understanding of how to market to their city.

09 Passersby have an intuitive knowledge of the district.



Whenever passersby enter a new district, they intuitively draw a mental image of their environment. Although only a fraction of the context is familiar, it allows them to orient themselves, to reduce reality and thereby airbrush out unimportant contexts and structures.

> *In the process of way-finding, the strategic link is the environmental image, the generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by an individual. This image is the product both of immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience, and it is used to interpret information and to guide action.*
>
> (Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, p. 4)

All passersby develop their own personal image of a district. Yet fundamental similarities exist between the different images. Urban planners should therefore not concern themselves with the individual differences between images, but should focus instead on the general perception: the common mental images of a large number of passersby. Here they will find the interactions between physical reality and its general impact. Here they will recognize the intuitively perceived markers of a district, as well as what it lacks.

> *Subjects, when asked which city they felt to be a well-oriented one, mentioned several, but New York (meaning Manhattan) was unanimously cited. And this city was cited not so much for its grid, which Los Angeles has as well, but because it has a number of well-defined characteristic districts, set in an ordered frame of rivers and streets.*
>
> (Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, p. 67)

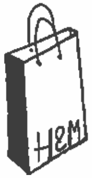
How is it that one can build up such a clear picture of one's environment so quickly in SoHo? Perpendicular street grids determine patterns of movement within the space and set the basis for a mental image. The concentration of commerce and activity within the space, the particularly high pedestrian density, and the catchy combi-

The street realm has always been, and will continue to be, a form of advertisement. From small entrance signs, through large display windows and billboards to plastic and paper bags, a broad spectrum of efficient marketing strategies has developed. Shopping bags are becoming more and more popular as objects of advertisement, since they are constantly present in the public realm, catching the eye of potential customers. They are used with the same conviction by global brands and local bakeries alike. Shopping bags are not the most important opportunity to win emotional access to consumers, but they are one of the most personal. By handing over the bag–as advertising philosophy suggests–the anonymous advertising object quickly becomes "my bag"–which can then be reused. This explains why bags contribute to brand recognition and image-strengthening, and why they enjoy wide acceptance among consumers. The carrier bag–the superlative of bags–enriches the shopping experience and fits into the modern world of shopping as the world of adventure. Bags increase the fun of shopping and they are a trigger for impulse purchases. Full bags create positive associations and guide tourists intuitively across long distances, and right into the center of their desires. The presence of the bag should therefore not be underestimated as a means of orientation in the streetscape. At the same time, the bag reveals the habits of its carrier. It unmasks tourists, casts anonymous companions along the way in a trustworthy light, and contributes to a higher sense of security in the public realm.

13 Tourists carry bags.

The effectiveness of advertising, and its positive impact on the public realm, endorses marketing strategists' efforts further to strengthen the sustainable distribution of their bags through unusual design, sustainable, waterproof materials, and well-considered closing mechanisms. From global brand labels to the local baker and

14 Shops give away bags.



Shoppers in front of a market at the intersection of Prince Street and Greene Street

18 People attract people.

What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people.

(William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, p. 19)

William H. Whyte has described the power of attraction that people exert upon other people. Through his capacity to analyze urban configurations, Whyte attempted to explain the growing popularity of public squares. The phenomenon of peoples' attraction to other people, however, does not manifest itself only in public squares; it is a fundamental feature of urban life–it is the reason that social communities are formed in villages and towns. The attraction does not begin with individuals themselves, but with the many economic, social, strategic, and cultural dependencies that they create and on which they depend. The appearance of "global cities" is an excellent example of these economic dependencies. International headquarters–which stand for actual people–converge in a highly compressed space. They evoke a row of dependencies that create new dependencies of their own. Therefore, a network of dense economic relationships develops that constantly attracts new companies–and therefore new people. But also, on a much smaller scale, people attract people. Thus pedestrians walking through the darkness intuitively choose the most popular of all possible routes, because the presence of other people affords them a sense of security. By day, a gathered mass of people arouses curiosity.

... that the sight of people attracts still other people, is something that city planners and city architectural designers seem to find incomprehensible. They operate on the premise that city people seek the sight of emptiness, obvious order and quiet. Nothing could be less true. People's love of watching activity and other people is constantly evident in cities everywhere.

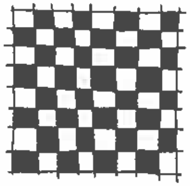
(Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, p. 37)

The attraction of people to people can be described as a self-organizing cycle that comes into being as soon as a place seems attractive because people have begun to congregate.

One of the greatest problems in existing communities is the fact that the available public life in them is spread so thin that it has no impact on the community.

(Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language*, p. 164)

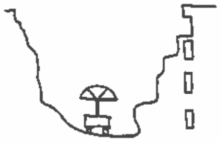
19 Places of concentration depend on places of emptiness.



It is therefore up to the urban planner to instigate this process. In order that gatherings of people can develop, concentration points must be deliberately created to establish the public life that is lacking in so many places. To this end, existing intersections of urban life must be analyzed and fortified. Yet it is impossible to conceive a homogenous archipelago of neatly lined-up places of compressed activity without its counterpart: quality spaces, empty of humans. Places of concentration always presuppose places of emptiness. This phenomenon presents itself over and over in urban planning–in the fundamental difference between town and country, center and periphery, main street and side street. New York City offers particularly contrasting oppositions on all of these scales. The urban center, Manhattan, is spatially separated from the rest of the city because it is an island. Although it occupies only a fraction of the city's total area, it pools almost all of the functions that have brought global meaning to New York City: finance, culture, and business. Nevertheless, Manhattan in its current incarnation would not be able to exist without its surrounding area. Favorable living space, large industrial areas, and important infrastructural intersections all balance out the dense core of the city. The polarization of centers and periphery also takes place on a smaller scale. A busy street can be experienced as busy only if it attracts people

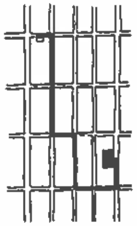
Mercer Street, diverse architectures evolving on uniform building lots

22 Street vendors follow wrecking balls.



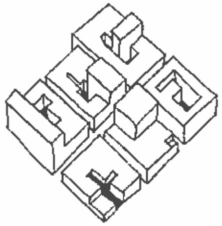
But it is not only undeveloped niches that are quickly assigned a use (formal or informal) in an active district–the same is true of newly born demolition sites. Thus, a Chinese fabric trader establishes himself in a freshly cleared gap on Wooster Street, while the real estate sign shining above him indicates that buyers are still being sought for the property. The urban wasteland example shows clearly how formal and informal processes intertwine and depend chronologically on one another.

23 Constant grids afford manifold patterns of movement.



Similar to the window of time that permits flexible integration, the monotonous grid structure can also promote flexibility and variety that contrast with its description. It not only offers clear and simple orientation, but also allows pedestrians immense freedom, by giving them a choice of broadly varied paths from A to B. This permits improved perception of the city, and therefore autonomous action within it. This repeats the impact on the image of the city. It can be experienced afresh from new angles by an active participant, and therefore finds itself in flux.

24 Equal grids provoke unequal blocks.



> *The Grid's two-dimensional discipline also creates undreamed of freedom for three dimensional anarchy. The grid defines a new balance between control and de-control in which the city can be at the same time ordered and fluid, a metropolis of rigid chaos.... It follows that one form of human occupancy can only be established at the expense of another. The city becomes a mosaic of episodes, each with it's own particular life span, that contest with each other through the medium of the Grid.*
>
> (Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, p. 20f.)

Koolhaas argues that the strict unity of the street grid is reverse-mirrored by the immense variety of different building heights and uses.

When Manhattan was expanded into 1,860 gridded areas in 1790, the foundation was laid for the distinctive expression of the commercial energies sprouting up. The setting of the ground plans in a fixed framework increased the desire for individual expansion in the third dimension. In spite of its homogeneous appearance, the grid has prompted not monotony, but heterogeneity. The construction of the street grid was followed by a three-year building boom, which shattered the uniform blocks into intricately divided buildings.

25 Buildings outlive uses.

During this time Manhattan's upscale middle class began to be drawn to SoHo's boutiques, grocery stores, and cultural institutions. But as industrialization took hold, the middle classes moved on to other districts, and the basic urban fabric deteriorated rapidly. The steep drop in rental prices lured poor immigrant workers to the area. A range of business tycoons and developers saw in these new residents the potential for a cheap workforce, and they began replacing the ramshackle townhouses with multistory factory buildings. During this process, the fragmented structure of the former elements continued to persist within the new shape of the district. Thus, the typical urban layout of SoHo, consisting of small, gridded parcels and their correspondingly diverse ownerships, has stubbornly survived changes of use and function. In 1958, when the crime rate shot up in the districts of poorly paid immigrant workers, Manhattan politicians called for a tax on industry-produced goods, thus forcing the entire textile industry to move out of SoHo. Subsequently, countless entrepreneurs colonized the abandoned spaces; artists illegally occupied the industrial wasteland and, with great energy and commitment, established a vital, urban quality of life there.

1879, "Illustration of the City of New York" by Will L. Taylor, fragment showing SoHo

Morning rush hour, Broadway