

# REFLECTIONS

## EXPERIENCING PLACES—I

**J**UST walking through the vast main concourse of Grand Central Terminal, in New York—something that over half a million people do every working day—almost always triggers in me a spontaneous and quiet change in perception. It alters what I know about my surroundings and about whatever is going on around me, and at the same time modifies my sense of what all these things mean to me. The change—one that is reasonably well known to all of us, or is at least lodged somewhere in our memories—lets me gently refocus my attention, and allows a more general awareness of a great many different things at once: sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of touch and balance as well as thoughts and feelings. When this general kind of awareness occurs, I feel relaxed and alert at the same time. In addition, I notice a sort of unhurried feeling—a feeling that there's time enough to savor all the sights and sounds and other sensations coming in. Our habitual style of thinking, it is often said, is a stream of consciousness; but this feeling—I call it simultaneous perception—seems calmer, more like a clear and reflective lake. While our normal waking consciousness works to simplify perception, and so allows us to act quickly and flexibly by helping us to stay oblivious of almost everything around us, simultaneous perception broadens and diffuses the beam of attention across all the senses, so we can take in whatever is there to be received. Using simultaneous perception, we can experience our surroundings and our reactions to them, and not just our own thoughts and desires.

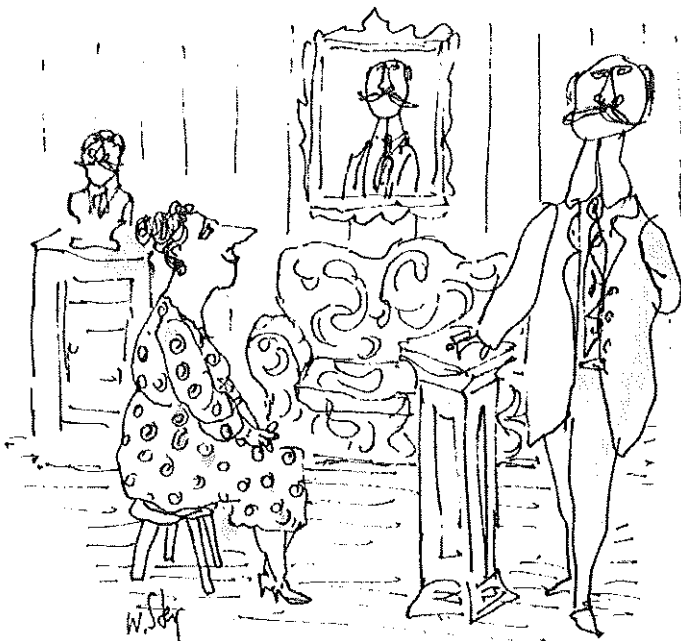
The main concourse of Grand Central—an enormous room, with fourteen entrances—is only one part of an intricate structure that was opened to the public in February of 1913 and is justly famous as a crossroads, a noble building, an essential part of midtown Manhattan, and an ingenious piece of engineering that can handle large numbers of trains, cars, and people at once. You can buy a ticket and get train information in the concourse—and these days you can also buy a flower or a drink or a meal—but the main purpose of the room is to move people through it. It was designed to handle huge crowds, and to impress people with the immensity and the

dignity of enclosed public places in a modern city. From the accounts left by its builders, however, it was not designed to provide the experience actually available there today. That experience is one of the unplanned treasures of New York.

The concourse is four hundred and seventy feet long and a hundred and sixty feet wide, and it is a hundred and fifty feet—fifteen stories, perhaps—from the floor to the peak of the vaulted ceiling. The room has arched windows thirty-three feet wide and sixty feet high that are deep enough to have corridors running through them—a series of walkways built between the outer glass and the inner glass in each window—and it has constellations painted on the ceiling, with sixty of the stars really glowing, because they are small light bulbs. A balcony thirty feet wide and twenty feet above the floor runs along every wall except the south one. From the west balcony a marble staircase pours down and then divides in two to flow around steps that lead from the concourse to a lower concourse for suburban trains. The main concourse is bigger than the

nave of Notre-Dame, and it is sometimes called awe-inspiring or referred to as an American cathedral, but the experience it offers has to do with day-to-day urban living: it's a sort of introductory course (or, for old-timers, a refresher course) in how to join the choreography of New York City.

The experience of the concourse seems to have changed very little in the last seventy-four years. At least, what I find there now is substantially true to what I found there forty years ago, when I was six and a newcomer to the city. Two major attention-grabbing additions to this huge room since the late nineteen-forties—a big illuminated clock and stock ticker on the south wall and a gigantic illuminated Kodak photograph on the east wall—have not changed the nature of the continuing experience, but by claiming your eyes when you approach the room from the west, the north, or the south they can distract you from what has always been there and make it seem less available. There are also much sadder sights in the concourse than there used to be: last winter, Grand Central became a principal



*Him*

hangout for large numbers of homeless people, as well as for some of those who prey on the homeless.

One recent weekday afternoon around three-thirty, I entered the concourse from the east, through one of the two long, nearly straight passageways that lead in from Lexington Avenue. I came out of the East Side I.R.T. subway into the more southerly of the two straightaways and immediately found myself part of a stream of people, four and five abreast, all of them looking straight ahead and moving at a fast New York clip toward the concourse along the right-hand side of a tunnel only twice the width of the stream itself. Toward me along the left-hand side of the corridor—which is well lighted, has a low white ceiling and a beige marble floor, and is lined with convenience stores—came a second stream of people, just as wide, and moving at the same speed and with the same look. Though I could hear my own footsteps, nearby footfalls and normal tones of voice registered as loud but blurred, indeterminate noises, and although no one was touching me, or even brushing past, I kept feeling that I was about to be bumped into. People sounded closer than they looked, and they seemed closer still, because my eyes and ears couldn't determine whether the people I was looking at were the people making the sounds I could hear. I felt hurried along. My breathing was shallow and slightly constricted; my neck and shoulders were tight. I could smell cookies and pizza baking in the shops around me, but it seemed difficult to look to either side. I could see maybe twelve feet ahead of me—a view consisting entirely of backs of heads and oncoming faces. There was nothing in any of the faces to suggest that they had just come from a different kind of place. The only alternative to hurrying forward seemed to be to swerve right at random and come to rest in front of a shop.

Then these two streams of people crossed a second pair of streams, running at a right angle to them. The stream I was in entered a space with a slightly higher, cross-vaulted ceiling, and I had a second to feel alarmed in retrospect, wondering why no one had bumped into anyone else during the crossing. The whole journey so far had taken something like fifteen seconds. Crossing this new space in the next five or six seconds, I was aware of a slight diminution in the noise around me, felt a slight lighten-

ing in my shoulders, noticed that the stores on either side were a vitamin shop and a snack bar, and saw in front of me a different light: grayer, clearer, brighter, less intense. I felt that something in me and near me was about to change.

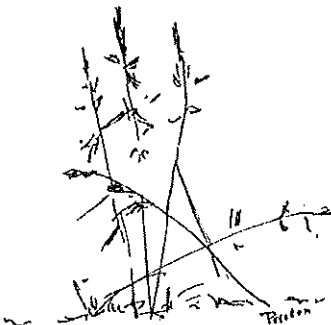
In another step, I was in the concourse. I knew this first not by sight but by body sensation, sounds, the absence of a smell, and breathing. I felt as if some small weight suspended several feet above my head that I had not been aware of until then had just shot fifteen stories into the air. I straightened up, my breathing slowed down, and I noticed that the scentless air around me was warm. I was walking at the same fast clip, and on the same kind of marble floor, but now, and for the rest of the minute it took me to walk the length of the concourse, I could no longer distinguish the sounds of my own footsteps. All the sounds that reached me seemed to have been fused into a single sound. Vast and quiet, it seemed to be evenly distributed throughout the great room. This sound, pleasant in all its parts, regular in all its rhythms, and humorous and good-natured, seemed also to have buttoned me into some small, silent bubble of space. I felt that I wasn't quite walking but was paddling—or somehow propelling—this bubble across the floor. I became aware that my pace had slowed.

This sound was produced by five hundred or more people talking and walking on marble through the bottom part of eleven million cubic feet of air. Within two or three feet of where I stood, I could hear separate voices: "Take care, now," and "Yep, see you tomorrow," and "All 'board!" And quite often, and from quite far away, I could hear laughing. The rest of what I heard was just the single commingled sound. I could see, quite clearly, two things: an unmoving framework made up of marble floor, tall piers,

arched windows, high barrel vault, daylight, and faint electric stars; and the swirling, living motion of five hundred people walking, two and three abreast, from and toward the fourteen entrances and exits of the concourse. Moving silently, as it seemed, within that sound, I noticed once again that no one was bumping into anyone else—that every time I thought I myself might be about to bump into people near me both I and they were already accelerating slightly, or decelerating, or making a little sidestep, so that nobody ever collided. On top of this, the weightless sensation in my head gave me the feeling that I could look down on all this movement, in addition to looking out at it. I had a sense that the cooperation I was a part of kept on repeating itself throughout the vast room around me and the vaster city beyond it.

I thought, as I have many times in the concourse, that if I were a stranger to this overwhelming city it would be helpful to me to know that something in me and in everyone around me already knew how to fit in with all the people circulating through the city and going about their business. After emerging onto Vanderbilt Avenue, I found that when I crossed over and walked along the south side of Forty-third Street I could for a while keep with me this awareness of the cooperation that makes a city possible. It lasted about a block and a half—until, as I was standing at a stoplight at Fifth Avenue, a screaming ambulance and the rest of the traffic brought me back to a more ordinary sense of separateness and disjointedness. At the same time, waiting for the light to change, I could see that even though I could no longer feel it, some form of cooperation was continuing to govern the movements of people near me on the sidewalk. People moving in four different directions passed one another without colliding, and in each minute hundreds of accidents never occurred. Still, the over-all level of cooperation seemed diminished, because there was no sense of connectedness between the people on foot and the people in vehicles.

SEVERAL overlapping kinds of evidence—principally, research findings by public-safety and public-health investigators; discoveries about how the human mind and the human brain function; and a host of personal experiences in a wide range of settings—have in recent years been opening



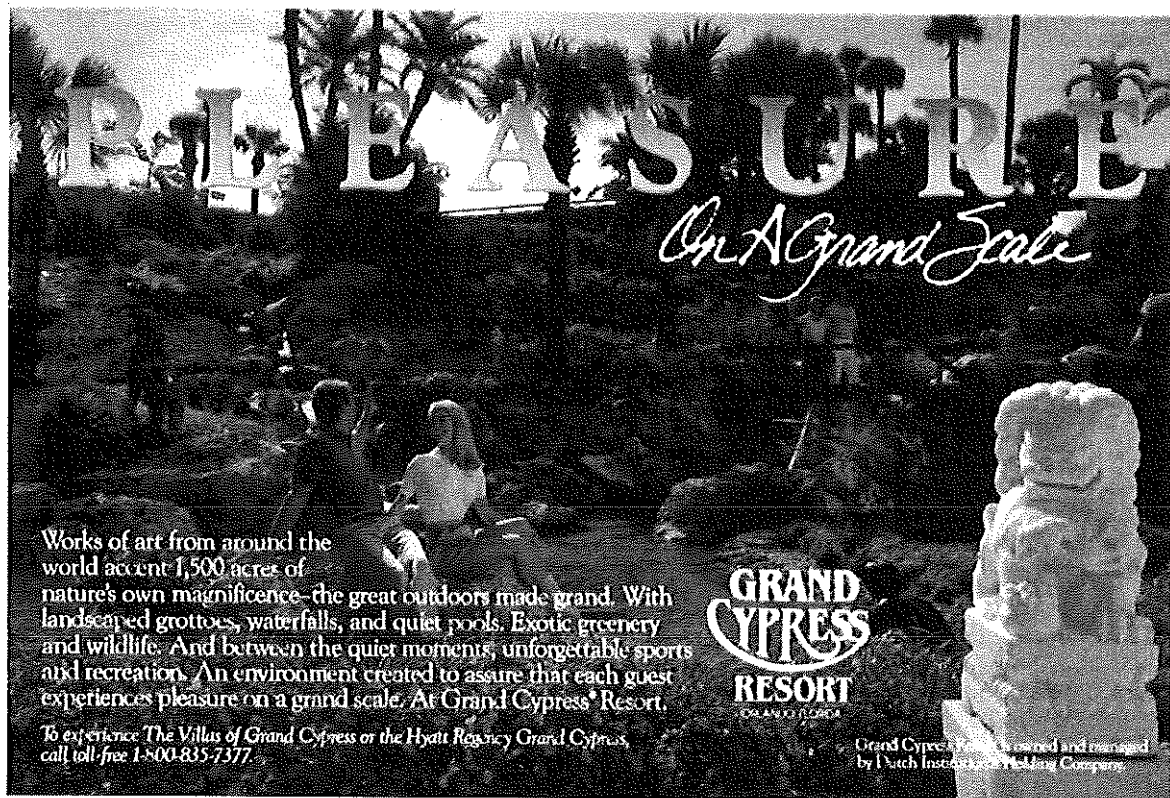
up our understanding of many of the complex and subtle ways in which we commonly interact with our everyday surroundings: train stations and parks and offices and all the other places, man-made and natural, that we live in, move through, and work and play in. Far from being simply a kind of backdrop that we can ignore at will—as long as it permits us to see and breathe adequately—such things as the kind of light around us, the chemical composition of the air, and colors, spaces, materials, shapes, scents, sounds, and views affect our physical health; our mental grasp and agility; our ability to work productively; our sense of self; the ways we interact with other people; our ability to function as citizens in a democracy; even our sense of humanity and our sense of humanity's pressing problems and unfinished business.

An example: Dr. Gary E. Schwartz, a Yale professor of psychology and psychiatry, has found that some scents produce changes in blood pressure comparable to those achieved through meditation; the smell of spiced apple is particularly effective in reducing blood pressure. Another example: Experiments by a bacteriologist and public-

health biometeorologist have shown that unscented air, if it contains a certain quantity of small-air ions—clusters of molecules with a negative electrical charge—can lower the amount of serotonin in the midbrain; serotonin is a hormone whose presence is associated with anxiety. The structure of another brain-body system we use for responding to the environment has been traced in some detail: a research psychiatrist has found that some of the light that enters our eyes when we're outdoors in bright sunlight bypasses the cortex and finds its way, in sequence, to the hypothalamus, the spinal cord, a nerve center in the neck, and, finally, the pineal gland, where it suppresses the production of a hormone called melatonin, which may affect mood and also fertility and many other body functions. And preliminary research in the new field of photobiology, or color therapy, indicates that a bubble-gum color called passive pink may have an almost immediate effect on aggressive behavior. When a berserk sixteen-year-old is placed in a four-by-eight-foot passive-pink cell at the San Bernardino County Probation Department, he is calmer within a few minutes. After ten minutes or so, he's

sometimes lying on the floor, nearly asleep.

Some people may wonder why, if we've always been responding to light and air and colors and smells, we're only now beginning to notice these things often enough to have suddenly acquired a lot of information on the subject. It is probable, I think, that such investigations have taken place in the postwar period because it has been during the past forty years or so that almost everyone in the Western world has for the first time moved indoors—away from bright sunshine, sealed off from the mountains, forests, and streams that, for instance, naturally have an abundance of small-air ions. In the words of Dr. Richard J. Wurtman, a professor of brain and cognitive science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "we are all unwitting subjects of a long-term experiment on the effects of artificial lighting on our health." Speaking solely about the brain-body systems that respond to light, he has made this interim recommendation: "Until much more is known, we should design indoor lighting to resemble as closely as possible what the sun provides." In all the millennia since our human ances-



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tors descended from the trees of the forest and learned to stand upright on the savannas of East Africa, we have never before made changes capable of impairing the workings of our particular internal systems that rely on light or scent or aspects of the environment. Now, all of a sudden, it has happened: In America today, almost all of us spend almost all of our time inside, breathing recycled air and absorbing artificial light. And as our internal systems begin to react—badly, more often than not—to this new environment we become aware of their existence. All the time they were unknown, they functioned beautifully, but now that we do know about them we have to take conscious responsibility for creating man-made environments that won't further diminish the healthy performance of these systems.

Brain-body systems have thus become a public-health matter—a health need that whole communities have to think about collectively, because the health of individual people will be determined by the workings of large-scale environments. Modern public-health knowledge got started when nineteenth-century doctors, studying urban diseases, realized that as more and more people lived closer together in cities local springs and wells would no longer automatically flow clean and pure. People got sick more often in these new cities than they did in villages; that was the first fact. Then it was noticed that people took sick in certain areas within the new cities. Eventually, investigators discovered that bacteria that had entered specific wells could cause cholera in everyone who drank the water from the wells. Discoveries like these led to today's extensive systems of reservoirs and legal watershed protection; we try to protect from development the land whose streams feed a city's reservoirs.

Nineteenth-century public-health officials were modern pioneers of the inadvertent, after-the-fact research method that is still being used to uncover various brain-body systems. The basic tool is an ability to be alert to correlations between two different kinds of unintended changes: fluctuations in people's health or mental functioning that point back to specific alterations of the environment. And what makes the search possible is a realization that changing the environment—whether carelessly or in good faith—can disastrously change the in-

formation that our surroundings feed to some unsuspected internal mechanism. Now that the universal need for clean water has been so clearly demonstrated as to seem almost self-evident, we have to remind ourselves that it took almost a hundred years to make the point. Decades followed the doublings and triplings in size of English cities and the subsequent alarming increases in the death rates in those cities before it was possible, through the use of maps that showed both the sites of wells and water pumps and the block-by-block spreading of various diseases, to prove the connection between communicable disease and filth in the environment. And forty years more went by before bacteriologists, working in the last decades of the century, began to be able to identify the specific micro-organisms that could cause specific diseases.



But that wasn't the end of it. Public-health researchers have discovered in just the last few years that a twentieth-century use of water—in the systems that cool centrally air-conditioned buildings—has helped cause infections and may contribute to a set of symptoms known as the sick-building syndrome (the symptoms range from headache to sore throat, wheezing, and shortness of breath). Both can be transmitted to occupants of modern high-rise buildings through a process that is simultaneously waterborne and airborne.

Many modern office and residential buildings are tightly sealed structures, their windows permanently closed. Such buildings were at first widely applauded as energy savers, because their integrated heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning (or HVAC) systems reduced heating and cooling expenses by using the same air over and over. The stale air that accumulates in sealed buildings can contribute to outbreaks of sick-building syndrome, in part because it contains contaminants—fungi, bacteria, and gases produced by many of the man-made materials found inside sealed buildings. Fabrics for rugs and upholstery, for instance, are increasingly made from man-made materials. These materials and the adhesives used to apply them can release what Dr. Jan A. J. Stolwijk, an epidemiologist and public-health specialist at the Yale School of Medicine, calls "a variety of volatile organic compounds," which can cause

eye and upper-respiratory irritation.

Sometimes the problems of sealed buildings are compounded by the presence in the air of cooling-tower drift—water droplets so fine they can penetrate unnoticed deep into a person's lungs. In an HVAC system, excess heat is vented through cooling towers, and the water in the towers can be invaded by microorganisms, just like the water in a well. Often the fresh-air intake for one sealed building is close to the cooling tower of another sealed building. Drift transmits any bacteria that may be growing in cooling-tower water, and transmits them so efficiently that the possibilities of infection are considerably greater from breathing the drift-laden air than from breathing outdoor air. One of the serious infections brought about by drift is already well known: Legionnaires' disease.

Stolwijk estimates that most sealed buildings are in a sick condition at least part of the time. All this information is changing professional attitudes toward the value of the sealed modern tower. According to a paper that was read at the Third International Conference on Indoor Air Quality and Climate, in Stockholm last year, these buildings may have to

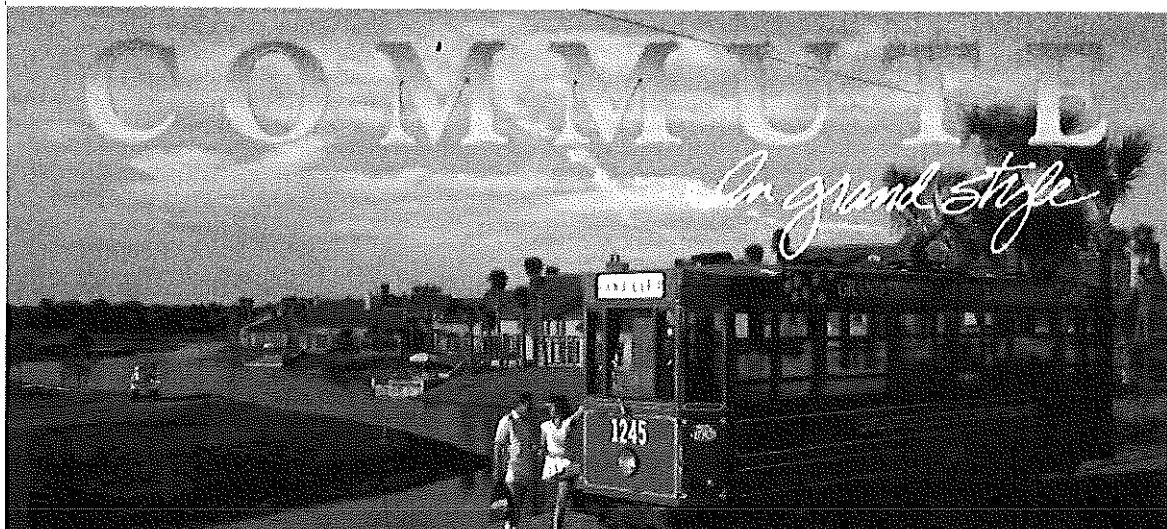
be regarded as "a failure." The study of how contaminated water affects human health, it seems, has not yet been completed.

An equally long-running environmental experiment on people has to do with simultaneous perception—the system we use to experience our surroundings. Since simultaneous perception is the only internal mechanism we know about that can combine the responses of all our senses, any change in our surroundings which our senses can register—in the light, in colors, in sounds, in smells, in anything else we can detect—alters the information that this mechanism receives. But what kinds of changes, large or small, or what combinations of changes will actually alter its workings? Beginning with the nineteenth-century cities and continuing through our postwar reshaping of cities, suburbs, and countryside, we have been making changes in the environment at an unprecedented rate. Today's world not only looks very different from the eighteenth-century world but also sounds very different and smells very different. Whatever else these changes have brought us in the way of human benefits or environmental degradation, they

have offered us an unparalleled chance to look at how our health and well-being are affected by changing what we can experience in a place.

Surprisingly, this particular inquiry is turning out to be both more extended and more compressed than the long investigation into the need for clean water. Even in the mid-nineteenth century, public-health advocates could present a strong empirical case for clean water—that, for some reason still unknown, it's dangerous not to have it. And they were able to convert this insight into public policy within only a few years; in New York, for example, the old Croton reservoir, a multimillion-dollar project, began sending pure upstate drinking water to the city as early as 1842. In some cases, the more comprehensive understanding of water contamination that was finally provided by late-nineteenth-century researchers only confirmed the validity of major actions taken years before.

While many of the links that connect places and experiences and health have yet to be traced, some people have started treating their own experiences of places in a mid-nineteenth-century-clean-water fashion, by taking action



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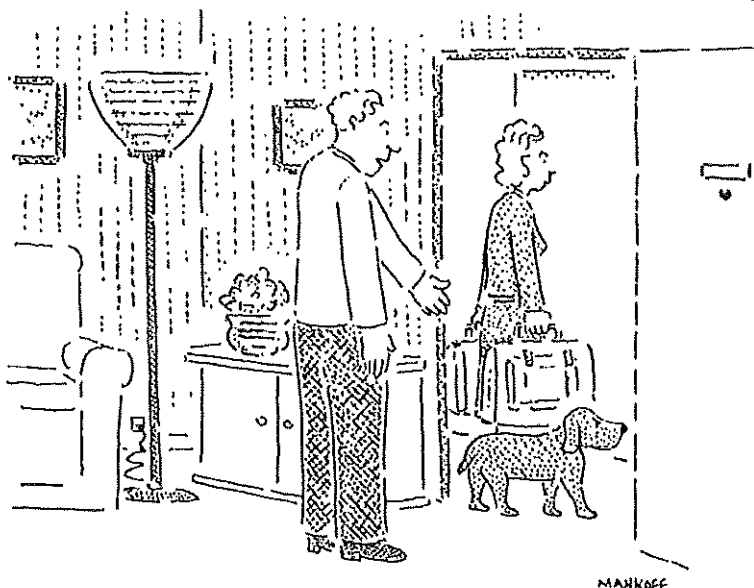


*I'm giving you this gold pin because of the way you make me feel. No... too serious. Because every moment I spend with you is golden. Nah, too corny. Something... silly. Because you always smell so good. Yes... that's it. Mmmm... now when are you going to come out of that shower!*

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to protect experiences that are important to them—for example, fighting to prevent the demolition of places like Grand Central Terminal. Over the past two decades or so, organized citizen efforts like these have resulted in the creation of official municipal-landmarks-preservation commissions in hundreds of American cities. The people involved in this work speak, often, not just of architectural beauty but of the character of a place, or its essential spirit, or the quality of life there, or of its livability, genius, flavor, feeling, ambience, essence, resonance, presence, aura, harmony, grace, charm, or seamlessness. These are probably allusions to an actual direct experience of some place. And mention of "people places," or of the individuality of a specific place, or the urban quality there, or its scale, or human scale, or visual charm, or beauty, or scenic quality will most likely be an attempt to convey some specific component of an experience. The language of the laws that set up landmarks-preservation agencies sometimes makes it clear that such experiential considerations are at work. It's part of the job of the eleven commissioners of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, for instance, to make experiential judgments whenever they have to weigh the merits of a proposal to set up a possible historic district in the city. New York City's Local Law No. 46 of 1965, the Landmarks Preservation and Historic Districts Law, defines for the commissioners the criteria that an area of the city must meet in order to be eligible for designation as a historic district. Historic districts, the law says, "have a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value."

In a similar spirit, Christopher Alexander, an architect in Berkeley, California, and five associates spent eight years studying their own and other people's reactions to buildings and cities in order to find out why certain places "make people feel alive and human." In their 1977 book "A Pattern Language," they identify two hundred and fifty-three elements, or aspects



"Et tu, Baxter?"

(they call them patterns), of rooms, streets, and districts which seem somehow to have definite links with joyful experiences. Eighty-four patterns, or just over a third of those discussed, get two asterisks in the book—the equivalent of three stars in a *Guide Michelin*—to denote connections between place and experience so strong and so consistent as to form what the authors call an "invariant" and also a "deep and inescapable property of a well-formed environment." Some two-asterisk patterns are Identifiable Neighborhood, Sunny Place, Pedestrian Street, Warm Colors, Old People Everywhere, and Four-Story Limit to the height of buildings. ("There is abundant evidence to show that high buildings . . . can actually damage people's minds and feelings.") One two-asterisk pattern, Accessible Green, derives from research by the authors in a Berkeley park which showed that although people get great benefit from a neighborhood park, they tend not to use it if it is more than about seven hundred and fifty feet—about three blocks, that is, or about three minutes' walk—from their doors. "Apparently, there is a threshold . . . where the distance prevents them from meeting their need," the authors report.

In three years of careful observations of how people use or avoid public

plazas in New York City, the writer and urban expert William H. Whyte found such precise and demonstrable correlations between what he called "amiable" design, "the quality of experience" available in a plaza, and the fullness or emptiness of that plaza that in 1975 the city redrafted its open-space zoning provisions to incorporate his discoveries. Two interconnected elements of amiable design, Whyte learned from standing outside Paley Park, are shallow steps and low flights of steps. Paley Park is a vest-pocket park on East Fifty-third Street that occupies the site of the old Stork Club, and there are four steps up from street level to park level. In "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces," Whyte writes:

Many people will do a double take as they pass by, pause, move a few steps, then, with a slight acceleration, go up the steps. . . Watch these flows and you will appreciate how very important steps can be. The steps at Paley are so low and easy that one is almost pulled to them. . . You can stand and watch, move up a foot, another, and, then, without having made a conscious decision, find yourself in the park. . . A slight elevation, then, can be beckoning. Go a foot or so higher, however, and usage will fall off sharply. There is no set cut-off level—it is as much psychological as physical—but it does seem bound up with how much of a choice the steps require. One plaza that people could be expected to use, but don't, is only a foot

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or so higher than two comparable ones nearby. It seems much higher.

The New York City zoning code now specifies, "The level of an urban plaza shall not at any point be more than 3 feet above nor 3 feet below the curb level of the nearest adjoining street."

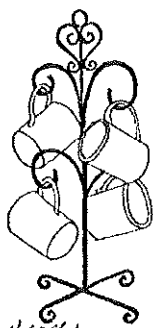
Studies by BOSTI, the Buffalo Organization for Social and Technological Innovation—one of the first firms in a new field called workplace-design research—are also making it clear that there is a relationship between how people experience the offices they work in and their productivity level on the job. "The environment seems to act in non-trivial ways," says Michael Brill, an architect who's BOSTI's president. A seven-year examination by BOSTI of the conditions in some seventy offices around the country strongly suggests, Brill says, that there are at least seventeen different aspects of office design—ranging from how enclosed an office is to how noisy it is—that can affect job performance, job satisfaction, people's abilities to communicate with other workers in an office, or their satisfaction with their surroundings. Job satisfaction (an index that has to do with turnover, absenteeism, tardiness, and grievances) has always been important to workers, but, unlike job performance (a measure of things like rates of error and the meeting of deadlines), it was until recently not a factor that many employers paid much attention to—largely because there was no way it could be translated into monetary terms. Now, however, a new discipline known as human-resources accounting can calculate job satisfaction as a cost of doing business. It's a real cost: according to BOSTI, in a well-designed office workers will get from five to nine per cent more work done in a year's time. And, says Michael Brill, "the economic benefit could go as high as fifteen per cent if the office were planned and designed to be a perfect fit for the work."

No one has yet made a compilation of all the reliable empirical findings now available about experiences of places—or of how widely the findings have been acted upon. But already, as even a small sampling can show, the information is so extensive that just by putting it together we can start to see in detail some otherwise shadowy features of the way people relate to their

surroundings. One such feature has to do with how close different types of surroundings need to be for people to take advantage of them. Alexander's discovery that Berkeley residents will walk about three blocks to reach a park is closely paralleled, it turns out, by a finding of Whyte's about how far New York City office workers will walk to sit in a public plaza at lunchtime. "Commuter distances" to and from plazas, Whyte says, "are usually short; for most plazas, the effective market radius is about three blocks." This suggests that office neighborhoods function much as residential neighborhoods do, and that the two have much the same size: if people will walk three minutes to reach a central gathering point, then a neighborhood is, in effect, about six minutes' walking time wide—or, in linear terms, five or six blocks, which is between fifteen and sixteen hundred feet.

Corning Glass Works, a few years ago, according to Philip Langdon, writing in *Metropolis*, a design magazine, had two goals: a new engineering building in Corning, New York, and increased productivity from its engineering and support staff, eight hundred strong. Dr. Thomas J. Allen, a professor at the Sloan School of Management, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who was hired as Corning's consultant, found that more than eighty per cent of an engineer's ideas come from face-to-face contact with colleagues, but also that engineers won't walk more than about a hundred feet from their own desks to exchange thoughts with anyone. The cutoff point in this case is a walk that takes more than half a minute, so conversation has to be available almost next door. Engineers attend conventions reluctantly, he found, and they completely reject

any of the technological substitutes for personal encounter. They hate asking for information on the phone, and they get even less out of reading technical journals. Accordingly, the William C. Decker Engineering Building, in Corning, is equipped with twelve separate discussion areas (each one with a coffee machine and wall-size blackboards), and the building's three floors are connected by seven sets of open stairs, two escalators, a double bank of elevators, and several ramps. Corning Glass says it is satis-



Chisholm





"Hold it, sweetie. It's not for us."

fied with the increase in productivity that has resulted.

**L**ANDMARKS-PRESERVATION commissions, zoning-code changes, productivity programs are having their effect, but there's something else at work here as well. Even while we're still opening up the empirical, or mid-nineteenth-century, phase of examining our experiences of places, we're starting to realize that scattered all around us—in places, books, and people—is more than enough information to begin putting together a twentieth-century body of knowledge of simultaneous perception which can in some ways resemble the late nineteenth century's understanding of clean water. In part, this knowledge stems from all our empirical research on the brain and the various internal systems, but we can expand the empirical discoveries about our reactions to places by reading about such subjects as aesthetics, art appreciation, wilderness and nature, the design of Imperial Japanese gardens, and the history of the city and the countryside. And, beyond this, we can expand our knowledge by the most powerful means of all—our own observation of local places worth looking at.

We can detect cross-sensory patterns like the cooperation in a moving crowd because of three other processes in simultaneous perception—processes that have been the object of research. According to Anton Ehrenzweig, an

art historian at the University of London, his work with artists shows that people have an innate capacity that he calls "utter watchfulness": we can pay equal attention to everything at once, omitting nothing and at the same time emphasizing nothing. Ehrenzweig also considered the speed with which we can put together and respond to the information made available by "utter watchfulness," and concluded that people's thinking then shows "split-second reaction to innumerable variables." A third process that assists this kind of cooperation is gaining a relaxed sense of our own outside edge—the place where we stop and everything else begins. Dr. Arthur Deikman, a California research psychiatrist who has looked into this aspect of our thinking, calls this border a "fluid body boundary," which can lead to "diminished self-object differentiation"—that is, a point at which we divide our attention equally between ourselves and things outside ourselves. The diminished differentiation makes it easier to move in concert with other people: fluid body boundaries can turn what might amount to getting through an obstacle course into something as easy as dancing across a ballroom.

Thus, simultaneous perception, putting at our disposal an evenhanded, instantaneous, and outward-looking flow of attention, can act like a sixth sense organ. Without one of the more familiar senses, touch, we couldn't

register things like heat and cold; if I scalded my finger in hot water, I might find it out afterward by seeing my finger turning pink, but in the meantime the heat would be imperceptible to me, and I wouldn't react to it. Without the help of simultaneous perception, multisensory patterns would be hidden from us, and we might bump into everyone in Grand Central Terminal. And when simultaneous perception shows us a pattern like cooperation in a moving crowd something else appears that's normally invisible: a different sense of who, or what, we are. Ordinarily, we seem to be completely separate from everything and everyone in our surroundings, and our sense of external things (if not of other people) is that they are waiting around until we can find something for them to do. At moments when the boundaries flow together, perhaps even disappear, a different sense emerges. Walking through a landscape, we have the sense that the plants and animals around us have purposes of their own. At the same time, our sense of ourselves now has more to do with noticing how we are connected to the people and things around us—as part of a family, a crowd, a community, a species, the biosphere. Since the quantum revolution in physics, sixty years ago, it has become relatively easy to think that at the submicroscopic level an electron or a photon of light can be both a particle and a wave. In the last couple of years, researchers have found

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that peptides in the human immune system—substances large enough to be seen through a microscope—can also show both particle behavior and wave-like behavior. And now we're finding that the same thing is true of our perceptions of ourselves. Through one system of perception we see ourselves as observers of an environment composed of separated objects, but, at the same time, through another system of perception, equally active, we look for ways in which we are connected to or are a part of our surroundings.

We seem to use simultaneous perception constantly to monitor our surroundings on a subconscious level for information that helps us maintain ourselves and go about our business. According to William M. C. Lam, an architect and writer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who investigated one aspect of this activity—our "fundamental and universally shared human needs" for visual information—we are always, "regardless of the specific activity which holds our attention at any one time," on the lookout for information that has to do with "orientation, defense, sustenance, stimulation, and survival." Lam, who specializes in lighting design and is perhaps best known for designing ceiling lights with a cathedral-like glow for the stations of the Washington Metro subway system, has worked for years to establish a comprehensive biological and psychological basis for the lighting codes that are used as industry standards by American builders. It's Lam's discovery that what satisfies people usually is not the quantity of light present but whether they can see things they must know about in order to fill needs that are "essentials of human nature." If we can see those things, we then "judge an environment to be cheerful . . . attractive . . . sparkling . . . comfortable and reassuring." This is the link between "a good luminous environment" and "physical, intellectual, and emotional well-being."

What kinds of things enable us to meet our biological needs for visual information? Many of them are conveyed by daylight. Outdoors, the position of the sun in the sky helps us orient ourselves to the time of day, and works to set a series of internal clocks. That is not the simple act it seems, because information about the sun's position comes to us in several ways. If we're standing out in the sun, the sense of touch is involved; we react to

the strength of sunlight falling on our skin. But even when the sun isn't directly on us we're still dealing with complex information, because when we look at where the sun is in the sky we're also looking at the brilliance of the light coming from it, which varies during the day. And we're looking at the color of the sunlight; it's bluer in the middle of the day and more orange-red in the morning and evening. How much of this information can we do without before we no longer have access to our daytime sense of orientation? Some two-foot-by-four-foot openings designed by Lam give us a first answer to this question. The openings are high up in the walls that separate bedrooms from dressing rooms at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Cambridge. (Lam designed the hotel's lighting.) The openings convey natural light to the windowless dressing rooms. You can't actually look through the openings—they're too high up—but they do bring in to an inner room the color and some of the brilliance of the daylight outside. The result, as I found out staying at the Hyatt Regency, is that a perfectly ordinary little nook becomes a friendly place that has, if only faintly, the relaxed and spacious feeling of a room in a resort.

So we don't always need to feel the sun or to look at it in order to stay oriented, which means we can, if we have to, get by, at least for a while, on about half the information that natural environments provide about orientation. It does seem that the experiences of a place may have a certain amount of give to them, but we're also learning that there are real limits to the amount of experiential diminution we can tolerate. If the Cambridge Hyatt Regency decided to install heavily tinted glass in its bedroom windows, for example, that would distort both the brilliance and the color of the light coming in and might do real damage to the experience available there. The design principle here is that any change made to our surroundings has the potential to affect the way we experience a place, and that the cumulative effect of a number of changes may be at some point to alter the experience entirely.

People are often drawn to places that offer rich experiences: beautiful landscapes, glittering theatre districts, tranquil neighborhoods. But changes made over the years to such places which fail to consider the experiential



impact produced by physical alterations can, like the camel's nose under the nomad's tent, convert the real into a mirage. In Gertrude Stein's celebrated remark about Oakland, California, when you get there, there isn't any "there" there—no richness of experience. If we're ever to reach the goal of a man-made environment that nurtures human beings, we need to proceed with caution; otherwise, the act of getting there may take away any "there" there.

Orientation is just one component of our everyday subconscious use of simultaneous perception. According to some West German research, when we approach or move through a street or a park or a railroad station we are alert for information that has to do both with our immediate physical safety and with a general sense of how welcoming these new surroundings will prove to be. We let the layout of a place give us an advance reading on such things as whether we can linger there or need to keep on moving, how relaxed we'll be if we stay, and even whether we'll feel comfortable about talking to people already there. Though we may not notice it, we're taking in so much information through simultaneous perception that it's almost as if we were receiving two different messages from our surroundings at all times. Normally, preoccupied by some thought or action, we notice very little about our surroundings, and seem to be getting only one message: no immediate danger here, everything's in its usual place. Something we don't realize is how much energy it may take for us to maintain this routine ignoring of our surroundings, depending on the contents of the second message. Sometimes the second message may be telling us that something's missing. At other times, the second message may actively contradict the first. The overt message of a Manhattan courtroom, say, is that here is a place where justice may be obtained. If we're not too intent on a case in progress, we may even notice that emblazoned on one wall are the words "In God We Trust." But on a second wall there may be a clock that stopped a long time ago, and the paint may be peeling off a third wall, and maybe a chunk of plaster is gone, too. Or, say, an outdoor public plaza in Manhattan may have a low ledge along one wall that might make a comfortable sitting area. But the ledge may be covered by two rows of

metal spikes, which say "Move on."

Sometimes the words "Move on" appear almost by accident. Last year, while I was waiting for a friend in the enclosed garden court of I.B.M.'s midtown Manhattan skyscraper—a space added to the building as a public amenity—I found myself feeling increasingly uncomfortable and ill at ease, for no reason I could pin down. There was no one around who seemed menacing, and nothing seemed out of place: the court was a broad expanse filled with light, plants, and movable chairs. Then I began to pay more attention to everything around me, and I noticed that the entire floor was built on a slight slant, leading down to one corner—apparently for drainage purposes. To the eye, the floor seemed level, but my internal senses and the muscles in my ankles were telling me I was off balance. The sensation was as if gravity had shifted slightly to one side.

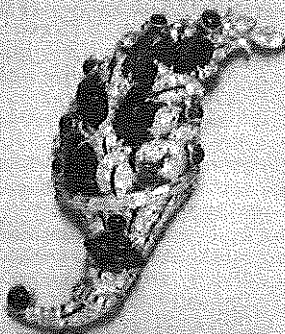
Small, unnoticed changes in level play a larger organizing role in our activities than we suspect: in Manhattan, the right-angle street grid, which keeps people's eyes focussed straight ahead, and the uniform paving of streets and sidewalks, together with the solid blocks of buildings on both sides, tend to keep New Yorkers from noticing the natural contours—or what's left of the natural contours—beneath their feet. The nineteenth-century Manhattan developers who covered midtown fields and meadows with brownstones did such a good job of lopping off the tops of hills and filling in valleys that a hundred years or so later, as Christopher Gray, a New York historian and preservationist, has pointed out, no one really knows what the original topography was. Descriptive names still exist—Murray Hill, Lenox Hill, Carnegie Hill, Mt. Morris—but we don't often associate them with climbing or



descending. Nevertheless, almost every block has some rise or dip to it, and these hints of elevation do help people define certain districts. The upper part of Fifth Avenue as a shopping street, for instance, stretches from Forty-second Street to Central Park, but the part of this expanse that people tend to identify in their minds as the historic heart of this district runs up-town from about Forty-sixth. If you look up the Avenue from Forty-second Street, say, you can see that Forty-sixth is at the bottom of a small hill that has St. Patrick's Cathedral,

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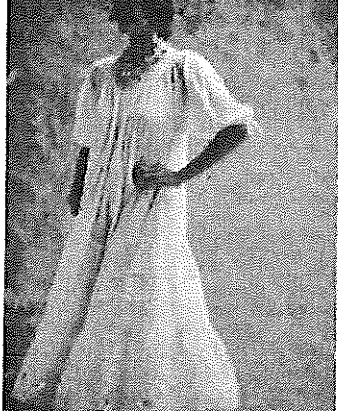


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**S**IMULTANEOUS perception takes on another aspect when it becomes conscious. Some places, like Grand Central, seem to help us become aware of our own experiencing. How do they do this? Normal waking consciousness and our sense of separateness from the world protect us from harm by allowing us to focus instantly on any source of danger. And we're alerted to sources of danger by sudden and rapid movement or loud noises or strong smells. So for simultaneous perception to emerge we need a place that seems safe and where the information presented to each sense is complex but not overpowering. If louder signals appear, they will tend to drive simultaneous perception underground. That is why we lose touch with it when we leave Grand Central and walk over to Fifth Avenue.

Grand Central not only is easy to experience but also offers a special kind of experience—one that seems to amplify our perceptive reach, allowing us to notice aspects of our mental activity which are normally veiled. Of all the ideas that may form part of a twentieth-century understanding of simultaneous perception, this one is probably the most startling—that particular places around us, if we're wide open to perceive them, can sometimes give us a mental lift. It's one thing to find out that a railroad station could be converted into a school and another thing to realize that a mere room can function as a teacher.

Since just glancing at a building or a room, or knowing what its ordinary function is, can't tell you what its subtler experiential capacities may be, it will obviously take some time to do extensive experiential mapping of the places we've already made for ourselves, and, from it, to decide what experiences, at a minimum, any place needs to provide. Still, we do already have a couple of yardsticks we can apply to the experiences of any place: whether it provides richness of information reaching all the senses, and whether there is an absence of alarm signals. We also have an obvious place to look at first—our own national experiential heritage, shaped for us and bequeathed to us by America's nineteenth-century park designers, and still largely intact, even when our parks are no longer cared for on an experiential basis.

There's one place in New York—a small part of a major city park—that's almost a physical analogue of the rearranging of one's expectations that occurs whenever one wants to experience an area. This place—a short path just inside Prospect Park, in Brooklyn—also seems to be able to trigger something in people who walk down it into the park which makes many of them begin almost automatically to experience everything around them, whether they've come there with that intention or not. Since this path, which was built a hundred and twenty years ago, was designed—by the landscape architects Calvert Vaux and his more famous partner, Frederick Law Olmsted—to produce just such an effect, a walk down it is probably the best sort of introduction to our country's experiential heritage.

The path, which is about eighteen feet wide, is paved with hexagonal asphalt blocks—a familiar sight in New York City parks. It leads south into the park from Grand Army Plaza, an enormous oval traffic intersection that is fed by two busy streets and a roadway through the park and is dominated by a huge classical arch built as a memorial to the Union dead of the Civil War. There are more classical ornaments immediately in front of the park itself: two little temples and four fifty-foot columns topped by eagles. The plaza is not a place for simultaneous perception: the traffic noise is a constant you need to tune out, and in order to reach the beginning of the path you have to keep an eye out for cars turning onto the park drive. But once you're inside the park you can give your full attention to the path.

Even at a slow pace, a pedestrian can walk the length of this path in three or four minutes. It's not a strenuous walk; the path runs straight for a bit, goes through a few gentle curves, and then straightens out again, and after about five hundred feet it's all over. When you first step onto the path, you may feel that there isn't very much to see—just a small, self-contained scene that is pretty and, after the monuments and the traffic of the plaza, certainly relaxing. And, in a sense, there actually isn't a great deal to see here, for this is the one narrow part of the park. Directly ahead of you as you start down the path is a small grassy hillock with a few trees on top. The path curves right to avoid it, and at the turn there's a cast-iron lamp-post. To the right and the left are pine trees and other evergreens, a beech

## THE NEW YORKER

tree, shrubs, and more grass, and behind them are hills that seem to be rising to run parallel with the path. Also on the right is a statue of James Stranahan, a Brooklyn man who worked for twenty-two years to get the park built. The only things that tug at your attention or seem likely to lead beyond the immediate are two things that can't quite be seen: it looks as though there might be a large tree and some sort of stonework behind the little hill, and you can't be sure where the path is heading, for the hill conceals the next stretch.

The last time I was there—it was a weekday afternoon in the fall, and there were very few people in the park—I noticed after my first few steps how quiet everything was in front of me. There were, though, small sounds in that quiet. Even while fire engines roared across the plaza behind me, up ahead I could hear a blue jay. I realized, too, that the city had already become almost invisible. Unless I turned around, I could see no sign of buildings or streets or construction or demolition. A few more steps and I had a much clearer view of what was behind the little hill. The biggest thing was a taller and more rugged hill—a continuation of the hill already rising on my right. There was a large beech tree, and what had looked like stonework of some kind was in fact several different things—some boulders near the beech and, behind them, a large opening into what looked like a good-sized cave. I could now see a little farther along the path, too: after its first right turn to skirt the little hill, it made a left to go behind it. But where it went next, and whether it would take me anywhere near the mysterious-looking cave—that I couldn't make out.

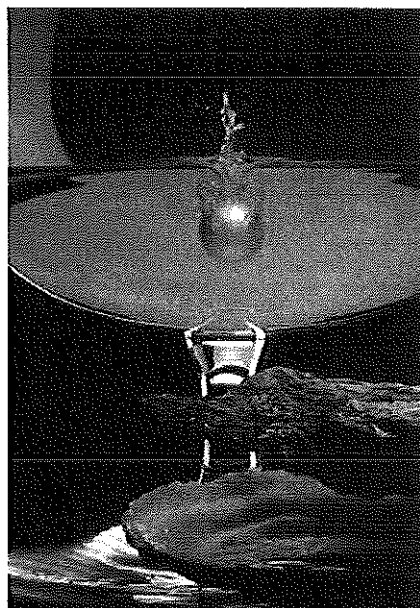
I found I was walking a little faster, and as I followed the first curve of the path at this new pace the scenery on either side of me seemed to be swinging slowly around itself and around me in an orderly sequence, like the moons and planets in a model of the solar system. The cave—which I now thought might possibly be man-made—disappeared as the beech tree moved in front of me to eclipse it, slowed to a stop, and then gradually reversed course. Shortly after the path turned left, I could begin to see the cave again, and when I caught sight of it I turned to look behind me and realized that the small hill now blocked my

view of the park entrance and the plaza beyond. Almost all there was to see was parkland and sky. A few more steps and I could see that the path did lead to the cave—and that it led also to another path, which wound its way up a long hill to the left and vanished into some trees at the top. Then I drew abreast of the great beech, and in that moment became aware that the cave was not a cave after all but a straight, dark tunnel with bright daylight at the far end. And while I was looking at this patch of light I found that the path had turned right again to bring me closer to it.



When I got near the tunnel, I could see that the tunnel also led to more parkland, with a path winding through it. The tunnel entrance was a wide Gothic arch of big stone blocks, some of them carved to show leaves and flowers. When I was closer still, I thought there might be a small meadow just on the other side of the tunnel. And then I was inside the tunnel, and realized that it was vaulted and was as wide as the path had been. The air in there was cooler, and I could feel a breeze on my face and hear the echo of my steps and the brush of leaves blowing toward me along the tunnel floor. The tunnel was more than a hundred feet long, and the only light was what came into it from either end. Before the light from behind me faded, I could see that the tunnel was lined with brick and had niches in its sides which might once have held benches for waiting out a sudden shower. As I got closer to the light up ahead, I began to think that the small meadow outside might lead off to the right for a short distance. Around me I could now see bits of wood panelling still fastened to the tunnel walls. I felt that in this restricted setting, where only diminished information was available to me, I had become alert to all small changes around me: I could see the grain in the battered old slabs of wood; I could hear my footsteps getting fainter as I walked through the last few yards of the tunnel.

When people emerge from the tunnel—its official name is Endale Arch—and walk straight ahead, they cross a small paved area that serves as the end of the original entrance path and the beginning of two winding paths that branch off left and right. If you were to come with me along the entrance path, through Endale Arch, and a dozen steps beyond it, you would



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find the surroundings changing dramatically in those final few paces, and what you experienced of these surroundings might change in an even more spectacular fashion. We would have just reached the north end of the beautiful, undulating Long Meadow—one of Prospect Park's three major features. (The two others are a sixty-acre lake and a wooded ravine which originally resembled a portion of the Adirondack Wilderness.) The Long Meadow covers seventy-five acres—it is six times the size of the more famous Sheep Meadow, in Manhattan's Central Park—and is thought to be the longest continuous open space in any urban park in the United States. On the entrance path and in the tunnel, all views are foreshortened, extending no farther than a couple of hundred feet. The edge of the meadow, by contrast, is one of the very few places in the park—in the city—where someone can look straight ahead for almost a mile and all there is to see is grass and the sky above it. To either side are the long, curving lines of two wooded hills that approach each other half a mile away and almost enclose the meadow. A paved walk heads up the hill to the left; a second walk wanders away to the right. Straight ahead, there is only the grass.

Remarkably, no buildings are to be seen in this whole expanse; even the horizon, which seems a long way off, beyond the far end of the meadow, shows only trees. Just as remarkably, on almost any day of the year the whole area is flooded with light. The light seems almost to be converging on the meadow from all directions—tumbling onto the grass nearby and also glowing through the trees beyond the meadow. At the other end of the meadow, where the two hills move toward each other, the hill on the left bends to the right and forms a point. A line of trees marches out from the hill on the right to approach this point but stops short, leaving a gap. A patch of meadow grass fills this gap and spreads beyond it; and above this line of trees a far crescent of meadow makes a looping swing to the right and is lost to sight. It looks very much as if the meadow might extend around a bend and continue for some unknown distance in that direction. Back near the entrance of the park, just inside Grand Army Plaza, where the path disappeared off to the right in less than two hundred feet, one got an impression, just strong enough to draw one on, that it probably kept going, left or



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right, for at least two hundred feet more. Now, standing up at the north end of the Long Meadow, a stroller may feel that a much vaster scene perhaps repeats itself many times over, distance upon distance.

The experience that this striking transition can offer is of being overtaken by a sense that in the midst of a crowded and confining city you can be present in and a part of a serene and endless world. People feel that they are being pulled forward into the meadow, and, sometimes, that everything around them has become more vivid. There can also be feelings of welcome, of safety, of wonder, of exhilaration. I find that what stays with me after I leave Prospect Park is a sense that our two ways of responding to the world—ordinary perception and simultaneous perception—are both within easy reach, and that moving from one to the other is simple.

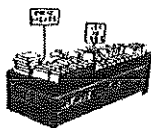
Although there is no formula for experiencing places, the landscape changes along the entrance path provide a rough analogy of the changes involved in any shift of perceptive state. One part of experiencing places, for instance, has to do with changing the way we look at things, diffusing our attention and also relaxing its intensity—a change that lets us start to see all the things around us at once and yet also look calmly and steadily at each one of them. The scenery right at the beginning of the entrance path undergoes this sort of change: streaming traffic and fifty-foot-high columns give way to a short stretch of rather ordinary-looking countryside. No single object in this setting seems either threatening or thrilling, but I notice that something in me is already responding to my new surroundings, slowing down my pace and realigning the focus of my sight. The shape of the entrance path and of the land around it are certainly part of this process. The hills that rise on either side quickly blot out the traffic noise. The continuing noises of the park, softer and much more varied—wind rustling the leaves of a tree, a squirrel chattering at another squirrel—can now be detected. These little sounds come from all directions, and being able to take in sounds from all over, even in this narrow neck of the park, immediately contributes to one's sense of openness and of distance—a feeling that the horizon is pulling back. A quiet place that offers no threat seems

to invite people to redistribute their attention, and any number of subtle perceptual cues can then come into play. For instance, the winding course of the entrance path makes people lean very slightly first to one side and then to the other, and this bit of a tilt and small shift of weight can in this quiet place prompt an awareness of the inner-body senses that register equilibrium and momentum—information that seldom reaches full awareness.

Like Grand Central Terminal, Prospect Park is a place that seems to welcome experiencing. Like Central Park, New York's other large Olmsted and Vaux park—they thought of Central Park as only a semi-successful prelude to their work in

Brooklyn—Prospect Park is in the middle of an ambitious restoration program. It is now, once again, a secure place, as well as a quiet place, and a place with a rich variety of things to look at, listen to, and otherwise interact with. Such places offer simultaneous perception an enriched kind of stimulation, and offer us a chance to intensify such perception by making it conscious. But then we have to choose what to do: whether to keep our attention on our own thoughts and plans or accept whatever our surroundings have to give us—whether to experience ourselves or what's around us. That choice—made once or made many times—determines in the long run how well we get to know a place and whether we ever get the full benefit of the experiences it makes available.

A third part of experiencing a place, then, involves taking our attention away from the conversation that so much of the time goes on inside our heads. Some routine assumptions and expectations—that we know all we need to know about what's going on around us and what's likely to happen next—are disrupted by a walk through Endale Arch. This may be because such ideas operate to a large extent on visual information. Sight has been our most important sense ever since our hominid ancestors stood upright, away from the abundance of scents along the ground, and found that they could see for long distances. Many of the perceptions of ordinary consciousness evolved in this visually dominant world. The tunnel that the entrance path leads through is not an alarming place—everyone sees the other end of it for a minute or so before entering—but once inside there is a sudden



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and drastic diminution of visual information. Whenever I've walked through the tunnel, my thoughts have trailed off, so that as I emerge I no longer have the ordinary feeling of certainty about what's happening or what will happen.

In this situation, I find that all my senses are wide open to absorb whatever information they can get. This sensory alertness and the very pronounced contrast between the gloom of the tunnel, where there's no view at all, and the bright, bright light and endless view in the meadow certainly help to explain why the change of scene between tunnel and meadow has such a strong initial impact on people. But how do we account for the sustained power of the experience that people receive on that four-minute stroll down a path, through a tunnel, and out into a meadow? Why does it seem so complex? How is it that people can take a succession of meanings from it? Two different kinds of information, put together, may help us answer these questions. We can look at the design techniques that Olmsted and Vaux evolved for large city parks

and at some comments that Olmsted made on how parks affect people and why city people need them. And we can also look at current research into people's innate responses to such things as grass, the sky, winding paths, caves and vistas, beautiful and ugly surroundings, and an enriched environment. It may be more enlightening to consider this research first.

Dr. John H. Falk, an ecologist and special science assistant at the Smithsonian Institution, is the expert on how human beings respond to grass. Early in his career, Falk became fascinated by the fact that Americans have consistently had such a liking for lawns that there are now twenty-five to thirty million acres of cultivated lawn in the country—an area the size of Indiana. This vast reshaping of the environment and the time and money needed to achieve it seemed far enough removed from earning a living and raising a family to require some kind of explanation. Falk, who holds a joint doctorate from Berkeley in biology and education, spent fifteen years researching landscape preferences, working first with Americans of all

ages and later with people from Africa, India, and other countries whose backgrounds represented every kind of human habitat, from rain forest to desert.

Falk's subjects looked at photographs of different landscapes and told him which ones they liked best. He discovered, not surprisingly, that they liked the environments they were used to—a response that could be explained as a purely cultural phenomenon. Less predictably, Falk also found a "deep, innate preference for a grass landscape," even among people who had never been in a grassland setting in their lives. Among the most extensive grasslands in the world are the savannas of East Africa, where human beings first evolved, and it is Falk's conclusion that human beings may have a genetically transmitted predisposition for the surroundings of the species' birth and early development.

"The logic of it seems pretty strong," Dr. Falk told me not long ago. "So much of what defines humanness relates to that savanna—bipedalism, and advances that walking upright made possible, like the opposable thumb and the use of the hands for carrying and as tools. Habitat preference may be tied into our basic anatomy. It would explain why, although we've developed the technology to design any kind of floor covering, we continue to put carpets—a turf analogue—on our floors. We evolved to ambulate across grass, so a spongy sort of footing is easiest to navigate. Every vertebrate has a genetically transmitted habitat preference: knowing what constitutes home has good survival value, so it's hard-wired—that means the animal doesn't have to think about it. We may no longer need this sense for day-to-day survival, but since it remains as a guide to behavior, we can still turn it to our advantage; once we know that there are environments where people from all cultural backgrounds can come together and feel comfortable and relaxed, we are in a better position to address stress in modern life. This innate preference



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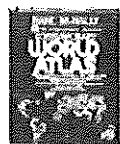


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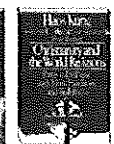
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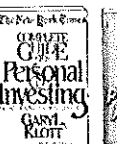
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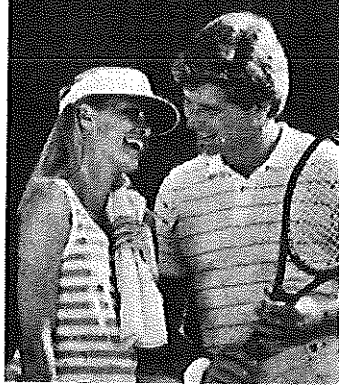
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for grass may protect us in another way as well: by giving us a built-in reading of our optimal level of environmental stimulation, which is to say, of the kind of complexity we need—in the things to look at, listen to, sniff, and otherwise interact with—in order to be at our best. Any reduced or raised level of stimulus may impair our functioning."

This last idea of Falk's ties in with two other research areas: one that connects the development of the mammalian brain—in shape, size, structure, and function—with sensory experience, and one that links the beauty of human surroundings to our behavior and job performance. Some of the best-known work having to do with environmental influences on the brains of mammals has been carried out at the University of California at Berkeley by the neuroanatomist Dr. Marian Diamond and her colleagues. They showed that when a young rat is placed in what they called an enriched environment—one that has more toys and playmates—its cortex begins to thicken in just a few days, while the cortex of a young rat confined to an impoverished environment actually diminishes in size. "The brain," as Drs. Robert Ornstein and David Sobel put it in their new book, "The Healing Brain," like a muscle "shrinks and grows in response to certain experiences."

Even old rats—rats that are the age equivalent of people seventy-five to ninety years old—grow bigger brains when they are transferred to an enriched environment. Yet greater increases in brain size occur when rats are placed in a "super-enriched environment"—two large cages connected by a bridge. The brains of rats raised in a "semi-natural outdoor environment" get bigger still. Outdoors, one researcher notes, "the ambient lighting, noise and odors... all appear to influence the observed behavior." And Dr. Diamond reports that an enriched environment does more than make brains bigger: it also increases a rat's intelligence; rats raised in such an environment are more adept at running mazes. "The main factor is stimulation," she says. "Nerve cells are designed to receive stimulation."

In the nineteen-fifties, Dr. Abraham H. Maslow, who is celebrated as one of the fathers of humanistic psychology, and Dr. Norbett L. Mintz, a

colleague of his at Brandeis University, conducted one of the first known experiments on the effect that beautiful surroundings have on human mental functioning. In this experiment, the two researchers, assisted by Mrs. Maslow, rigged up three rooms—a "beautiful" room, an "average" one, and an "ugly" one. The ugly room was fitted out to look something like a janitor's room and storage closet, with a hanging light bulb, torn window shades, battleship-gray walls, and a profusion of boxes, trash cans, mops, brooms, and dust, along with an old box spring. The beautiful room had large windows, indirect light, a Navajo rug, paintings, sculpture, beige walls, a bookcase, a soft armchair, and a mahogany desk. The average room, according to the experimenters, "gave the appearance of a clean, neat, 'worked-in' office in no way outstanding enough to elicit any comments."



Volunteers were told that they were studying photographs of people to see whether the faces displayed "energy" and "well-being." The volunteers were supervised by three examiners, two of whom were themselves unaware that the real purpose of the exercise was to look at people's reactions to their surroundings. The results showed that people found energy and well-being in faces when they looked at them in the beautiful room and found fatigue and sickness in the same faces when they looked at them in the ugly room; setting had a real impact on judgment. The behavior of the two examiners unaware of the project's intent also varied from room to room: they consistently rushed through interviews conducted in the ugly room, and also showed "gross behavioral changes" when they worked there, and complained of "monotony, fatigue, headache, sleepiness, discontent, irritability, hostility, and avoidance." Surprisingly, although their job performance and their job satisfaction were over and over again affected by where they were, neither of the examiners noticed this fact even once. The experimenters reported, "They evidenced surprise at the whole procedure... They were not aware that their activities were in such close relationship to the room conditions, though they both realized that they did not prefer to test in the downstairs [ugly] room." Reactions to the aver-



age room more closely resembled the reactions to the ugly room than they did the reactions to the beautiful room.

Dr. Falk, the grass expert, thinks that we may have inborn responses to several other parts of the natural landscape. "I'd be amazed if the preference for water in the landscape doesn't prove to be innate," he told me. "We've learned that we have to avoid having water in any of the pictures we show subjects. It's so highly preferred that its very presence will raise preference by an order of magnitude."

Drs. Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, a husband-and-wife team of research psychologists at the University of Michigan, think that we may have an inborn preference for winding paths, which provide what they call "mystery": landscapes exhibit "mystery" when they "give the impression that one could acquire new information if one were to travel deeper into the scene." According to the Kaplans, who have looked at how people respond to a diversity of environments, "mystery . . . is a factor of great power in predicting preference for scenes of the outdoor environment."

In a recent book, "Cognition and Environment: Functioning in an Un-

certain World," the Kaplans relate the power of mystery to early man's life on the savanna, where human beings ranged over territories of up to a hundred square miles and had to be able to decide quickly whether a place they were seeing for the first time deserved further exploration:

Although [mystery] is a familiar concept in the context of landscape architecture and has long been used in the designs of Japanese gardens, it is somewhat unexpected in the context of psychology. Perhaps for this reason there has been an inclination to translate it into some more familiar concept, such as "surprise." A critical difference between mystery and surprise, however, is that in a surprise the new information is present and it is sudden. In the case of mystery, the new information is not present; it is only suggested or implied. Rather than being sudden, there is a strong element of continuity. The bend in the road, the brightly lighted field seen through a screen of foliage—these settings imply that the new information will be continuous with, and related to, that which has gone before. Given this continuity one can usually think of several alternative hypotheses as to what one might discover. The mind-filling . . . experiences of entertaining a few fairly strong alternatives at once should yield a high level of preference; research . . . suggests that this is in fact the case.

The Kaplans think that we also

have an innate preference for open spaces, which provide what they call "legibility." "Just as one can imagine oneself somewhere in a scene acquiring new information, one can imagine oneself somewhere in a scene getting lost," they write in "Cognition and Environment." "Legibility . . . is characteristic of an environment that looks as if one could explore extensively *without* getting lost. Environments high in legibility are those that look as if they would be easy to make sense of as one wandered farther and farther into them. Enough openness to see where one is going, as well as distinctive enough elements to serve as landmarks, are important here."

And Jay Appleton, a geographer at the University of Hull, in northeast England, has identified two more human preferences in landscapes: "prospect" and "refuge." Both, he says, are aspects of the environment that support human functioning and make survival more likely. "Prospect" means a long, sweeping vista—a place where viewing is unhindered and we can take in information from miles around. "Refuge" means a hiding place where, from concealment, we can see without being seen, and gain information



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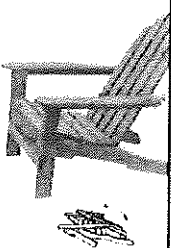
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ALL these factors that modern research has shown to be part of the human response to landscapes are present along the entrance path to Prospect Park: the Long Meadow provides savanna, prospect, and legibility; the path itself affords mystery; the tunnel gives refuge; there is plenty of sky, natural light, and information we can use to orient ourselves. Were these factors incorporated deliberately? Scholars of the work of Olmsted and Vaux tell us they were. But how could Olmsted and Vaux have known what we're just finding out about? There appear to be two answers to this question. One is that they were transmitting ideas discovered by much older cultures. The other is that Olmsted had a clear understanding of the need for simultaneous perception, even if he lacked a late-twentieth-century vocabulary with which to describe it.

There is now a large-scale revival of interest in Olmsted and his works. He is widely acknowledged to be the father of landscape architecture in this country, and of regional planning as well, and he has become the subject of scholarly biographies. Many of his works survive, including—besides Central and Prospect Parks—major city parks in Chicago, Louisville, and Montreal, landscaping around the Capitol, in Washington, D.C., park systems in Buffalo and Boston, estates, campuses, planned communities, cemeteries, and hospital grounds. Having founded the firm of Frederick Law Olmsted in 1858, a full forty-five years before his death, in 1903, he left a son and a stepson who carried on his work, as Olmsted Brothers; a successor firm, the Olmsted Office, is still in business in Fremont, New Hampshire, and the extant works by Olmsted and his family and other successors—landscapes that are now collectively identified by park officials as "Olmsted legacy parks"—number in the thousands. New York State alone has more than a hundred Olmsted legacy parks and public spaces; Connecticut has identified two hundred and fifty; Massachusetts claims three hundred. Prospect Park and Central Park have been designated as both New York City and National Historic Landmarks, and Olmsted's home and office in Brookline, Massachusetts, are a National Historic Site. He and Vaux are jointly credited with establishing a number of important park-design principles: these

were sketched out in Central Park in the eighteen-fifties and perfected in Prospect Park in the eighteen-sixties. They include:

1. The use of natural forms—lakes, streams, woods, winding paths, turf meadows dotted with trees—whether the area already provided them or the materials for providing them had to be brought to the park site. The Long Meadow of Prospect Park had no antecedents in that part of Brooklyn, and is pure Olmsted and Vaux. It was created, according to one book, "on a low swampy plain bisected by a ridge."

2. The separation of parks from the city. This is done by planting the edges of the park thickly and by forming berms, or hills, just inside the edges of a park and planting the berms with trees. A berm to the left of the Prospect Park entrance path sets it apart from Flatbush Avenue and shuts out the Flatbush Avenue traffic noise.

3. The separation of different pathways within a park, keeping pedestrian paths apart from both bridle paths and roads for vehicles. The hill that Endale Arch passes through carries the principal road in Prospect Park.

4. The efficient use of space to create the maximum amount of open space and light within a park. When you walk out of Endale Arch, you can see farther than you can along any open-space vista in Central Park, even though Prospect Park is less than two-thirds the size of the Manhattan park; this view is possible because the Long Meadow runs down the axis of a triangle that constitutes the top half of the park, and the view out beyond the bend in the meadow encourages the eye to look straight through the triangle and on down the longer diagonal in a squashed rectangle that forms the rest of the park, below the triangle. This line of sight has also been so oriented that it faces almost due south. In our hemisphere, south is where the sun sits, and where the sky is brightest. The result, as two Olmsted scholars, Jeffrey Simpson and Mary Ellen W. Hern, have noted in a 1981 book, "Art of the Olmsted Landscapes," is that when you leave the arch you walk straight into "as dramatic a flash of light as the nineteenth century—lacking electricity—ever saw, the golden white sun of the meadow."

Olmsted's supporters, who cherish his writing about parks, celebrate him chiefly for creating natural environments, for creating works of art, for enhancing cities, and for providing recreational opportunities. Their prin-

cial interest is in preserving and restoring his works, yet although their aim is to be faithful to his original choices of what trees and shrubs to plant, many restoration plans have not so far incorporated Olmsted's fundamental discovery about park design—that parks exist in order to be experienced. In an 1870 address to a group of Boston social scientists who had met to consider what sort of park that city needed, Olmsted spoke about how the word "park" is really just an abbreviation for the phrase "the park experience." "We want a ground to which people may easily go after their day's work is done," he said, "... where they may stroll for an hour, seeing, hearing, and feeling nothing of the bustle and jar of the streets, where they shall ... find ... the greatest possible contrast with the restraining and confining conditions of the town, those conditions which compel us to walk circumspectly, watchfully, jealously, which compel us to look closely upon others without sympathy."

Olmsted was convinced that access to simultaneous perception was nowhere available in the heart of nineteenth-century cities. "Whenever we walk through the dense part of a town,

to merely avoid collision with those we meet and pass upon the sidewalks, we have constantly to watch, to foresee, and to guard against their movements," he told the Bostonians. "This involves a consideration of their intentions, a calculation of their strength and weakness, which is not so much for their benefit as our own. Our minds are thus brought into close dealings with other minds without any friendly flowing toward them, but rather a drawing from them. ... If we had no relief from it at all during our waking hours, we should all be conscious of suffering from it. It is upon our opportunities of relief from it, therefore, that not only our comfort in town life, but our ability to maintain a temperate, good-natured, and healthy state of mind, depends. ... Men who have been brought up, as the saying is, in the streets ... generally show, along with a remarkable quickness of apprehension, a peculiarly hard sort of selfishness. Every day of their lives they have seen thousands of their fellow men, have met them face to face, have brushed against them, and yet have had no experience of anything in common with them."

To counteract this, Olmsted said,

"what we most want is a simple, broad, open space ... the beauty of the fields, the meadow, the prairie, of the green pastures, and the still waters ... to gain ... tranquillity and rest to the mind." And this space should be surrounded by "depth of wood enough ... not only for comfort in hot weather, but to completely shut out the city from our landscapes." He concluded, "The word *park*, in town nomenclature, should, I think, be reserved for grounds of the character and purpose thus described."

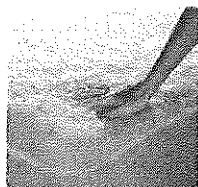
Olmsted was equally specific in his speech about the social benefits and the health benefits that are conferred by the park experience. "There are certain forms of recreation," he said, citing the promenade, or walking about in company, "the attraction of which must, I think, lie in the gratification of the gregarious inclination, and which ... are so popular as to establish the importance of the requirement." He continued:

I have never been long in any locality, south or north, east or west, without observing a *custom* of gregarious out-of-door recreation in some miserably imperfect form, usually covered by a wretched pretext of a wholly different purpose, as per-

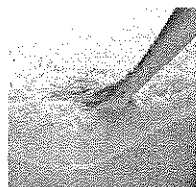
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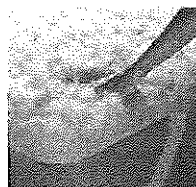
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Regular



Deluxe



Imperial

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### 100% Merino Wool Mattress Pads

Color: Natural

Size	Reg./Deluxe Dimensions	Regular Style # MS28	Deluxe Style # MS11	Imperial Dimensions	Imperial Style # MS10
Crib	28" x 52"	\$29	\$39	28" x 52"	\$49
Twin	39" x 75"	\$49	\$69	39" x 75"	\$99
Long Twin	39" x 80"		\$79		
Full	54" x 75"	\$69	\$89	54" x 75"	\$129
Queen	60" x 80"	\$89	\$109	60" x 80"	\$159
King	76" x 80"	\$109	\$139	76" x 80"	\$199
Calif. King	72" x 84"	\$115	\$145	72" x 84"	\$209
Waterbed King				72" x 84"	\$209

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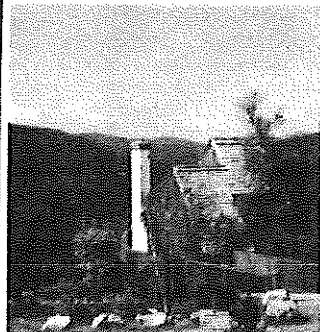
Acct # \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. Dt. \_\_\_\_\_  
 STYLE # \_\_\_\_\_ SIZE \_\_\_\_\_ QTY \_\_\_\_\_ x PRICE \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 STYLE # \_\_\_\_\_ SIZE \_\_\_\_\_ QTY \_\_\_\_\_ x PRICE \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Delivery in MN 6% Tax, IL 5% Tax = \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Ship. Hdg. & Ins. \$5 pad/\$2.50 crib = \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Federal Express Service = \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 TOTAL = \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 For delivery in WI 5% Tax = \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Total for delivery in WI = \$ \_\_\_\_\_

\* (1) We ship UPS Ground Service unless you request otherwise here. Federal Express Service add \$8.50.

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haps, for instance, visiting a grave-yard. I am sure that it would be much better, less expensive, less harmful in all ways, more health-giving to body, mind, and soul, if it were admitted to be a distinct requirement of all human beings, and appropriately provided for.

At another point in his speech, Olmsted said:

Consider that the New York Park [Central Park] and the Brooklyn Park are the only places in those associated cities [Brooklyn was then a separate city] where, in this eighteen hundred and seventieth year after Christ, you will find a body of Christians coming together, and with an evident glee in the prospect of coming together, all classes largely represented, with a common purpose, not at all intellectual, competitive with none, disposing to jealousy and spiritual or intellectual pride toward none, each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others, all helping to the greater happiness of each. You may thus often see vast numbers of persons brought closely together, poor and rich, young and old, Jew and Gentile. I have seen a hundred thousand thus congregated, and... I have looked studiously but vainly among them for a single face completely unsympathetic with the prevailing expression of good nature and light-heartedness.

Is it doubtful that it does men good to come together in this way in pure air and under the light of heaven, or that it must have an influence directly counteractive to that of the ordinary hard, hustling working hours of town life?

Another idea of Olmsted's that has not yet been championed by many of his followers is that even a park that fits his own definition in every way is not a place that can completely serve people's need to have access to simultaneous perception unless it forms part of a connected citywide—or even regionwide—park system. "It is a common error to regard a park as something... complete in itself," he said. On the contrary, "it should... be planned... with constant consideration of exterior objects, some of them quite at a distance." The linking system he proposed was a network of what he called "parkways"—and he was quite specific about how they should be designed: "narrow informal elongations of the park," he called them, "varying say from two to five hundred feet in width, and radiating irregularly from it." And "they should be so planned and constructed as never to be noisy." And "they should be branched or reticulated with other ways of a similar class, so that no part of the town should finally be many minutes' walk from some one of them." In proposing these parkways, Olmsted seems to have remarkably anticipated Christopher Alexander's re-

cent finding that people will not make regular use of a city park if it is more than about seven hundred and fifty feet, or three minutes' walk, from their doors. And Olmsted also seems to have anticipated an even more recent conclusion by the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors—that the country needs a national system of "greenways," linear parks and scenic highways that provide a direct physical link between downtown city centers and existing national parks.

Olmsted and Vaux took their major design elements for city parks—meadows, groves, lakes—from the country parks maintained by eighteenth-century English gentlemen, park designs that were adapted for city use by nineteenth-century English landscape architects. These country parks have an ancient design history: they derive from medieval deer parks—fenced-in meadows and groves where deer were allowed to roam—and those parks, in turn, were continuations of Roman deer parks that were designed to be both beautiful and useful and were placed, throughout the empire, where their owners could see them from their homes. The Roman parks are thought to have carried forward traditions of beautiful landscapes which date back at least twenty-five hundred years, to Achaemenid Persia—"if not," as one scholar says, to "the Garden of Eden itself." And there are scholars who equate the Garden of Eden with the savannas of East Africa.

Since we have not yet constructed an Olmsted system of parks, we have so far inherited only half the experiential legacy he bequeathed us. But Olmsted himself stopped short of reintroducing to Western culture the ancient idea of designing whole cities so that every place in them offers a full measure of experiencing, and therefore we are probably working with, at best, only a quarter of the experiential heritage that could be ours. "Openness is the one thing you cannot get in buildings," Olmsted said once. And "tranquillity and rest to the mind," he added a second later. We are only just now beginning to realize that a building—even a skyscraper—may be able to exert an Olmstedian influence on our thinking, by helping us to sense what it is we have in common with all of the life around us. But it turns out that a new perspective on our planet is now continuously available in lower Manhattan.

A number of American astronauts report that the experience of looking

back at the earth from the black vastness of space changes their lives: it shows them, for the first time in their lives, that being human means being connected to a small and beautiful planet that is both vulnerable and precious, a "blue pearl in space" that needs our care and understanding. Some of the astronauts have said—wistfully, of course—that they wished great numbers of people could be boosted into space to be filled with this vivid sense of environmental awareness, so that back on earth they might then start to pay attention to urgent warnings from leading ecologists and biologists, among others, that the planet's basic life-support systems are in trouble. I can recommend one alternative to such a massive airlifting of humanity, an experience now accessible in New York at street level right next to the base of the two giant, one-hundred-and-ten-story towers of the World Trade Center, in downtown Manhattan.

The flat-topped identical twin towers, currently co-holders of the runner-up distinction of being the second-tallest buildings in the world, are square-shaped and rise straight up without ornament to a height of thir-

teen hundred and fifty feet. Although in good weather they can be seen from up to fifty miles away, standing on the horizon like chimneys or milk cartons or salt and pepper shakers, depending on the distance, the towers are more tolerated than admired by New Yorkers, and the large plaza at the base of the towers is generally avoided in any weather. The two buildings create strong winds that buffet passersby, and when you get close to them they seem to loom over you in a way that sometimes makes me think of the colossal ruined statue encountered in the middle of a trackless desert in Shelley's poem "Ozymandias": "two vast and trunkless legs of stone" somehow survived where "nothing beside remains."

When you come near to the two towers, you can see that although, at a distance, they look as square as four-by-four fence posts, each one is in fact eight-sided. Every corner edge, on top as well as on the sides, has been flattened or blunted or trimmed—if the buildings were blocks of wood, you might think that someone had been sandpapering the sharpness off the edges. The result is that on each tower the four huge walls, each one just

under two hundred feet wide, don't meet directly, but instead are connected by tiny corners that are a full thirteen hundred and fifty feet high but only about ten feet wide. It's these little corner walls (which were added solely for structural reasons, the building's designer, Minoru Yamasaki, assured me) that provide an equivalent for an experience only available in outer space.

Because most people mind their own business in New York, you can walk straight up to one of these corner walls—let's say one of the ones on Liberty Street, down at the southern end of the Trade Center—and stand there facing it from a distance of about one or two feet for five or ten minutes or more, without attracting even a glance. If you put yourself in this position, you'll find that, because of the angles of the walls, this narrow strip is all you can see of the tower; the main walls on either side are now hidden from your view. The wall in front of you has a shape something like a one-lane country road. That is to say, there are two parallel grooves or ruts in the aluminum panels that run straight up the wall like cart tracks or tire tracks on a dirt road. And near each edge of the



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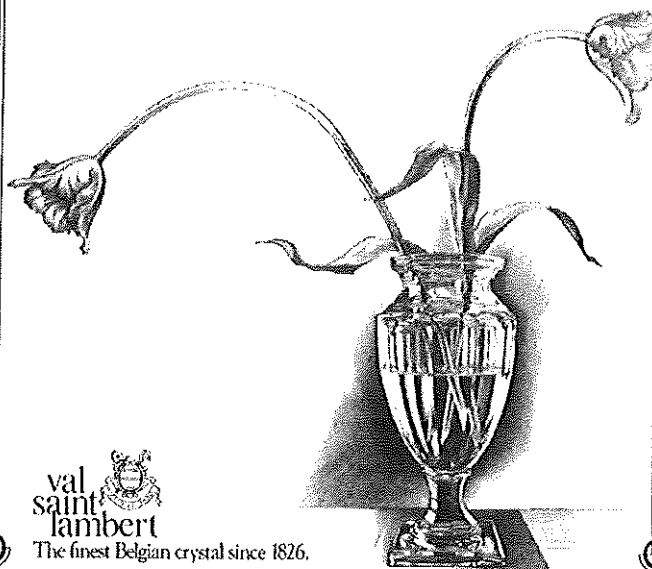
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little wall there's a sort of hump in the aluminum that seems to suggest a shoulder by the side of a road. If you lean your head back, you'll find that you're looking straight up the entire length of this piece of empty, gray metal road.

Now, by some strange perception that I haven't seen described in textbooks, if you let your head stay tilted back for a minute or so, in a short while you start to feel curiously weightless, and, suddenly, instead of feeling that you're standing on the ground looking up at a stretch of road, you feel that you're standing on the road looking down it, or along it. And then the funny thing is that all you can see at the other end of the road is sky or clouds—or stars, if it's a clear night. The feeling that this produces is unique—you have the sense that you've somehow wandered onto one end of a road that crosses the sky and doesn't stop until it reaches the very top.

After that, there's another realization—now, if I can see clear across the sky, then the other end of the atmosphere isn't so very far away. I always thought of the world as vast, but really it's paper-thin. There's some sort of life—a kind of mollusk—down at the bottom of the ocean, five and a half miles below the surface of the water. And there's some sort of life—a kind of red alga—up near the summit of Mt. Everest, five and a half miles above sea level. When we think of the difficulties involved in our getting to the ocean floor or all the way to the top of the world's highest mountain, they both can seem worlds away. But when we are given a chance to measure the depth of the sky the same picture comes together to form a different pattern. And what we see then is that all the organisms we know about—meaning five billion of us added to the total numbers of individuals from all the other thirty or more million species of living beings—plus all the air, water, and earth that sustain all of us are wedged inside a single long, low room with the strangest of shapes. It stretches almost twenty-five thousand miles from front to back or side to side in this room, but only runs about eleven miles at the most between its floor and its ceiling—and that's shorter than the length of Broadway. Looking up this narrow wall, you can experience the biosphere around us.

—TONY HISS

*(This is the first part of a two-part article.)*