

Sennett, Richard. *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990, 163-168.

Fourteenth Street

Fourteenth Street cuts across Manhattan from the East River to the Hudson River. The street, part of Manhattan's grid, is perfectly straight and very long, and punctuated in the center by a large park called Union Square. The recent history of this square and its buildings is an attempt to draw directly on the visual heritage of Sixtus V and his Rome. The designers working on the square and its surroundings have sought to draw people from the street into the square by the same sort of magnetic movement, a worthy effort to attract people by use of beacons and markers so that the poor and the rich will mix together. Yet these visual means have failed to realize their social intentions.

The park of Union Square itself was recently redesigned. The interior of the old park was opened up, bushes on its perimeter cut, so that drug dealing did not take place in shelter, hidden from surveillance. An attempt has been made to organize it in perspective from its Fourteenth Street side. Standing on Fourteenth Street in front of what used to be Mays Department Store looking into the park, the eye is taken up a set of rounded platforms rising to the level of the park grade, which is four feet above road level; paths are cut through the park to reveal a colonnade at the back, and here, in this piece of quasi-sculpture attached to nothing, the eye stops. The gesture of leading the eye up and back in perspective to a monument used in itself as a horizon can be traced back to the making of the Campidoglio. The formal invitation to the eye, however, cannot be acted upon by a New Yorker's body. Access to these sloping platforms is virtually impossible from across the road as car traffic cuts the steps

off on Fourteenth Street as on the side streets of the square; to get into Union Square most people must use rather modest side entrances. Few people, in any event, accept the invitation; the park is thinly populated by day and empty by night.

Next to the renovated park, on its southeast side, an enormous new project has gone up. This is the Zeckendorf Towers, four towers of apartments set on a box of offices and shops fronting on Fourteenth Street as well as the park. The Zeckendorf development organization has given each of the towers the look of a giant obelisk by installing obelisk tips in metal on top of the brick towers (the commercial-office base is meant to serve as a common plinth). The obelisk as an invitation to approach is contravened, however, by the way the Zeckendorf Towers have been designed to be used. The residences are entered secretly, by a hidden entrance on Fifteenth Street. The building has an enormous supermarket hidden within it as well, so that residents can shop without inviting shoppers from the street. Fronting the square is a giant atrium lobby for the office plinth, faced in granite, with guards who evict people without business within.

Fourteenth Street is unusual in containing so many quotations from the late Renaissance and early baroque traditions of street planning. In one way, these references in both the square and the towers illustrate a simple point: you don't recover the spirit of the past by quoting its forms. But the Humanist lessons of the street are to be found here, in more modern forms.

At the eastern end of Fourteenth Street, there is a giant electricity plant, a place of desolation with its own austere beauty, the sun glinting in odd angles off the exposed, curving pipes ten stories high. There is a band of elderly regulars who haunt nearby coffee shops. These are men who used to work in the plant and now are tending it in memory and gossip. As one moves inward, on the south side of the street the Lower East Side of the immigrants begins. A generation ago this side of the street was lined with Polish butchers and Russian bakeries. On the opposite north side is Stuyvesant Town, a confection of artificial hills and valleys and apartments inserted into the city in the late 1940s, a talisman of what the good life looks like for those who could escape the slums. On Fourteenth Street this housing project raised a wall fourteen feet high to the Lower East Side, the few

buildings of the "town" entrance. The separation of Manhattan—a parking lot—it served as a further barrier.

In time this border has been broken down. Bakeries have been replaced by stores that serve Hispanic customers. The walls of Stuyvesant contain a hospital service. Residents see from their windows the sunset in good weather. Ethnic and racial groups have not been broken down but have been given a privileged position between the parked cars, against the cars, drinking evenings. The past continues to make do. No one will let it; it is not a political event as it was designed.

The street becomes more toward the center. The very elderly people still live in shops that sell sheets, and used sewing machines; Fourteenth Street, Rico, Colombia, and Poland smelling of talc. Cubicles, are the offices that service the Hispanic community.

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buildings of the "town" that touched the street offering no inviting entrance. The separation is reinforced by something quite rare in Manhattan—a parking strip; the lines of parked cars on both sides of it served as a further barrier between old and new life.

In time this border has crumbled. The Polish butchers and Russian bakeries have been partially replaced by bodegas and small chain stores that serve Hispanics who have moved into the housing project. The walls of Stuyvesant Town have been hollowed out—literally; they contain a hospital service facility beneath the knoll of grass that residents see from their windows. The parking strip is now choked at sunset in good weather by families who use it as a promenade, families from the tenements below Fourteenth Street and families of all ethnic and racial groups from the housing project. The street-border was not broken down by protest of the slum poor against the relatively privileged petit bourgeois. One year tough kids played between the parked cars, the next year little knots of family leaned against the cars, drinking beer and gossiping in the muggy summer evenings. The past crumbled into the present in little fragments of making do. No one willed the mixture to occur or now much discusses it; it is not a political event such as Arendt might have conceived, nor was it designed.

The street becomes more markedly mixed in this way as one moves toward the center. The remaining Eastern European stores sell to very elderly people still living in the nearby slums, but the Hispanic people, in shops that sell rolls of fabric for dresses and shirts, discount sheets, and used sewing-machines, have come here from all over the city; Fourteenth Street is a major stop on all subway lines. Puerto Rico, Colombia, and Haiti are bright young bodies among a gray Poland smelling of talc. And above these shops, in improvised little cubicles, are the offices of professionals, the doctors and lawyers who service the Hispanic community as well as the elderly Europeans.

At the point where Fourteenth Street intersects Third Avenue, one has a good glimpse of what makes this street so different from the street leading to the French restaurants in midtown. In a way, looking back to the power station, one sees less dramatic differences than one does looking up Third Avenue. There are simply varieties of poor people. But the differences along Third Avenue are segments on a

line; here, differences are overlaid in the same space. While few Russians are consulting Spanish lawyers in the dingy upper reaches of the buildings on Fourteenth Street, their own lawyers and doctors share the same corridors of dust, Spanish and Russian mingling through the thin partitions. The power of simultaneous perception is aroused, rather than the linear perceptions of my restaurant walk. This is a street of overlays.

Overlays of difference create the true human center of Fourteenth Street, the blocks between Fourth and Sixth avenues. Here discount and "gray market" electronics, luggage, jewelry, and clothes are sold mostly to blacks, Hispanics, and poor whites. This part of the street has a curious quirk. In New York it is legal for a merchant to extend a display case eighteen inches out from the front of his store on to the sidewalk. Some merchants rent the eighteen-inch strips to peddlers whose goods are shaded from gray to black market. And again, on the farther edge of the sidewalk, next to the street itself, peddlers pay to spread down blankets on which there are "nearly new" goods, which means, for instance, a radio smudged with the fingerprints of some child to whom the radio was recently "mine."

The precariousness of Fourteenth Street may make for uncomfortable viewing: the clients for services above the shops are dying out, or being pushed farther and farther away by the real-estate economics of the city. The shops themselves remain lucrative only through cut-throat competition, and, even so, commerce is constantly breaking down in patches: the plate-glass fronts of the street are like bad teeth, blackened windows gaping between fluorescent whiteness. Most attempts to provide the street with social amenities not related to consumption have failed; the several churches lining the street at either end of Fourteenth Street have not successfully engaged the community. There is a military recruiting center, designed to attract young kids off the street, but it has few takers. Because it is a center for goods acquired by theft or "gray" trade (the peddlers acquire these goods legally from wholesalers a little farther uptown who are silent partners and specialize in merchandise smuggled through customs), the street is filled with small-time hustlers who don't look tough enough to deal in drugs.

Yet the very difficulty of surviving has prompted people to organize

certain boundaries, boundaries though the sibyls of prayer moved to the suburbs. To make more money in on the street are protected a fairly well-organized and of the police for protection one store is likely to be a while one sees how casual view—the child sort of nooks and secret and trucks; a street of adjustments these children signal to others that the kids who look like trouble they must stay in the where one walks on the It is a street in which limits—with their eyes only because it is not spoken and the unspoken not a matter of a single, ing, in who takes care others, as when the rented to a peddler is tri are the mundance signs term "otherness." If one younger John Wood in Fourteenth Street are in crowd, here is an inter

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certain boundaries, boundaries that attach people to the street even though the sibyls of profit, usually brothers or nephews who have moved to the suburbs, may patiently explain to those left behind how to make more money in a less demanding environment. Competitors on the street are protective of each other in some ways; there is now a fairly well-organized effort to resist the demands both of the Mafia and of the police for protection money. A shoplifter running out of one store is likely to be chased on the street by other owners. After a while one sees how many children there are here, hidden from casual view—the children of shopkeepers or shoppers who have all sort of nooks and secret corners, who are playing between parked cars and trucks; a street of children who are constantly moving. The adjustments these children learn to make with their eyes is how to signal to others that they are friendly, and with their bodies to avoid kids who look like trouble. This can't be done by moving away, since they must stay in the vicinity of their parents; it has to be done by where one walks on the pavement, and how one manages one's arms. It is a street in which people are constantly adjusting their mutual limits—with their eyes and their bodies. Much of this life is possible only because it is not talked about, which is another overlay—the spoken and the unspoken. Moreover, the life on Fourteenth Street is not a matter of a single, equilibrating moment. It is constantly shifting, in who takes care of whom, in when people take advantage of others, as when the price of the eighteen inches of sidewalk illegally rented to a peddler is tripled when the peddler has a good day. These are the mundance signs of the kind of complexity suggested by the term "otherness." If one summons to mind the streets planned by the younger John Wood in Bath, the peculiar qualities of otherness on Fourteenth Street are immediately apparent. Instead of a dispersing crowd, here is an interacting crowd.

The otherness on Fourteenth Street recreates the value Serlio sought for in his *Tragic Scene*. The experience of the street establishes human limits. However, the humanism of Sixtus V, Serlio, Palladio, and Scamozzi was enacted by the design. The experience of overlays on Fourteenth Street has no designer. Moreover, the street is indubitably full of life, but it is life bent on survival; its exchanges, curbs, and negotiations occur without much reflection.

Despite this, there is a design principle at work on Fourteenth Street: it is the disruption of linear sequence. This street is what Baldwin's story looks like. The errors of invention such as appear in and around Union Square prompt in many observers the opposite conviction that "life" is synonymous with spontaneity, that street life cannot be planned. The fact that the civilities of a working-class street have no architect might seem to reinforce this conviction. Yet it is here that the ethical journey depicted in Baldwin's essay might be taken in space. Baldwin's journey was one in which the protagonist's impulses of assertion and definition were curbed; when they were curbed, a new consciousness of others came into being, a story very much like that depicted in Serlio's *Tragic Scene*. This journey is in its form much more than a neutral report of events; it is a highly crafted work of art, and the art, through the device of thwarted narrative catharsis, makes the journey an event the reader also experiences.

Today, the principle of disrupted linear sequence, the street of overlaid differences, is an elusive reality in urban design. It has proved elusive because of a second principle of design, again suggested by Baldwin's story. The invention which designers are seeking, in order to prompt the discovery of others on a street, has something to do with *time*. Sigfried Giedion argued the experience of time could be designed architecturally and urbanistically—this experience was to him about free and coherent movement. Baldwin's essay works because of the subversions of narrative coherence. If overlays of difference are the necessary condition for enacting a sense of connection between people on the street, is the subversion of coherent time a sufficient, complementary condition? And is it precisely this subversion of coherent time which a designer could draw? These may seem abstract questions, but there is something to be learned from the humanist past, again, about their present reality.

IN AN ACCOUNT OF
When the Cathedrals Were Built
 Americans in general and New Yorkers in particular, which is more than one another, which are machines, street-grinders, we are clean, empty, and other and the mind is like Times Square, and the revealing the manners and all, only Americans. But

The title Le Corbusier's jackhammer, even when faith equivalent to the natural perfection. But Le substance: people can't at this point in his life, Le chrome-and-leather chairs as elevators that ran so

¹ Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were Built* (New York: Bantam & Hitchcock, 1947), p. 47