

CNU XV Conference
New Urbanism and the Old City
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Urban Laboratory

5. Creating Living Urban Spaces: Christopher Alexander's Hands-On Techniques *

Urban Laboratory

Wednesday, May 16, 2007 8:30 AM - 5:00 PM

The intention of this session is to show how the life and order of urban spaces can be pulled out from the wholeness of the site, and the life of the people who inhabit it. We will use techniques developed by Christopher Alexander, his students and collaborators such as: mapping feeling, poetic visioning, creating a language of centers, sketching and full-scale mock-ups, to create a vision of neighborhood spaces in Francisville and design one of them in some detail. All the facilitators are members of Building Process Alliance: an international organization of architects, designers, builders, planners, researchers and educators committed to building places of enduring comfort, joy and human value. Requires registration and a separate fee. Cost: \$120

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Creating Living Urban Space – Christopher Alexander’s Hands-On Techniques

Lab Leaders: Yodan Rofè, Kyriakos Pontikis, Chris Andrews, Susan Ingham, Eileen Tumlin, Seth Wachtel, Michael Mehaffy (morning only)

Aims:

The aims of the lab are:

1. To expose CNU attendees taking the lab to concepts, methods and practices used by members of the building process alliance to achieve wholeness in the built environment.
2. To work together with local participants on improving the wholeness and livability of open spaces in the neighborhood
3. To evolve the Building Process Alliance as a group. Develop new capacities for working together, evolve our skills and develop our methods further.

Concepts:

The concepts that we would like to make real to the lab's participants are the following: Wholeness and its structural and personal aspects, Feelings and the mirror of the self, Structure preserving transformations, patterns and their connection to form a language of place. Non-Separateness.

Methods:

The methods we will use will be the following: mapping feeling, diagramming the structure of place, poetic visioning of centers, visioning in place, site planning in real dimensions, mockups

Number of participants: Estimated at 30-40 professionals (CNU attendess) and a similar number of locals.

Schedule:

7:45 Meet at Loews Lobby to go up to the neighborhood (optional)

8:30 At Baptist Church (with other labs) for an introduction to the neighborhood

9:15 Lecture on basic concepts of building process: wholeness, centers, life and feeling, structure preserving transformations (Michael?), pattern languages, generative sequences.

10:00 Mapping Feeling – in groups of twos throughout the neighborhood each person surveys an area of roughly a quarter of the neighborhood. Afterwards people transfer their observations to a general map using color stickers. Two maps will be prepared: one by the locals, and one by professionals/visitors.

Personal exercise: on a blank sheet of paper drawing a diagram of the "major centers structure" of the neighborhood, and a diagnosis of its wholeness.

Noon Lunch at Recreation Center (all Labs)

13:00 Discussion of the main centers of the neighborhood (in groups for 40 minutes and summary of 20 minutes in plenary). Division into groups to develop projects.

14:00 Work in groups:

1 group – Civic Open space language for Francisville

1 group – Compile the personal diagnosis maps and prepare a map of the structure of the neighborhoods and its "state of wholeness"

3 groups – Visioning and design of three major centers

2 groups – Open space details and things that everyone can do

16:00 All labs meet in church to report on progress and recommendations

17:00 End of labs

Francisville - Creating Living Urban Space – List of Centers (draft)

Streets are the Major Resource of Public Space

In a city the major resource of public space are its streets. They are the source of social interaction, economic benefit, and safety. A neighborhood where the streets are safe and lively, is a good neighborhood to live in. Where the streets deteriorate, the neighborhood will deteriorate no matter how much open space it has.

Streets have a dual function, they connect the local neighborhood to the larger framework of the city, and thus allow for its economic life. They serve as the home ground of the people who live, work and enjoy the neighborhood. Both functions should be present in each street, although in different degrees. A main street will have more through movement, a side street mostly local movement and local interaction. However, as Jane Jacobs has taught us, the social and economic health of the street is dependent on the presence of people moving along it. Most movement in streets is through movement, without it a street dies. The movement that matters most however is pedestrian movement, and therefore its space has to be protected and enhanced.

Thus most of the effort of public space renovation should go towards making streets that are alive and working, this means mainly protecting and enhancing the *Pedestrian Realm*

The Pedestrian Realm

In streets that are alive, at least 50% of the cross section is scaled, safe and comfortable for pedestrians (often it is as much as 60 or 70%). The boundary between the areas used for through car movement and the pedestrian areas is strongly demarcated and thick (usually by a dense row of trees and/or a parking lane). This rule applies to all the streets in the city – major thoroughfares as well as local streets.

Major question: the transformation of vacant land to useful activities (?)

The major question in Francisville is what to do with all the vacant land. It seems to me that in order to move forward and not disperse the projects should be concentrated on places where there is already activity and movement. This means the bounding major streets (especially Broad, Girard and Fairmount) and the major crossing streets: Ridge Ave. 19th, Poplar and 16th. These should be the focus of both private activity as well as public improvements.

However, thought should also be given to what to do with all the rest of the land, what can be some temporary uses that will not block positive change in the future?

- Parking lots? There seem to be already too many of those.
- Community Gardens? May answer a need for fresh produce in the community.
- Urban Agriculture? Allowing allotments that people can grow their own food and flowers on
- Adventure Playgrounds? Lots that do not much investment and where kids can build stuff. There is a need for play leaders and staff to run it (could be a local NGO)
- Colonization by homeless? Provide low cost services and allow people to improve with time. Creates sub-standard housing, but resolves problem of low cost housing in the community. Visibility may be a problem for other efforts
- Urban forestation?

1. Francisville's Main Street – Ridge Ave.

Ridge Ave. is the neighborhood's main street, part of a traditional path leading from Philadelphia outwards. It is the most well integrated street in the area, and its renovation will have a great impact

on the surroundings. Two seemingly contrasting things need to be done. On one hand an overall unity of section which will accommodate pedestrians well, and privilege their movement and crossing of the street. On the other hand variety: real variety in different stores and functions along it, and utilizing the odd shaped corners that it creates with the cross streets to create small public squares surrounded by activities.

2. Boundaries as Living Areas

2.1 Broad St. – Major connection to downtown, main line transit, possibly high density, very urban, commercial, office, high-rise residential. Part of a larger corridor development. Major point of entry to the neighborhood's main street.

2.2 Girard Ave. – Institutional (hospital and college), Secondary point of entry to the neighborhood's main street. Mixed residential, need for some commercial. Part of a larger corridor development.

2.3 Fairmount Ave. – Main connection to Fairmount Park, not a major traffic artery, potential for a residential avenue with some commercial, bike route. Part of a larger corridor development. Crossing is important as two of the schools serving the neighborhood are located beyond it

2.4 Corinthian Ave. – Quiet Back? Continuity of residential neighborhood, weak boundary? Easy crossing is important for access to schools.

3. The Major Street Structure

The major streets crossing the neighborhood are first and foremost 19th St. in the N-S (3.1) direction, and Poplar Ave. in the E-W direction (3.2). They form the counterpoint to Ridge Ave. which crosses the neighborhood from Southeast to Northwest. Other strong connectors are 16th (3.3) and 15th (3.4) streets in the N-S direction. It may be a good idea to block 15th direct route so as to make it more local in character.

4. Minor Streets

Minor streets are distinguished not so much by a difference in their cross-section as by their being shorter and not continuing on both sides of the neighborhood. It may be a good idea to reduce the pavement width for driving, increasing sidewalk area, and allowing private gardening and tree placement in a broad band between the sidewalk and the carriageway (see also: things that anyone can do).

5. Alleys

The typical Philadelphia urban block is 480'x480'. This block is often cut in two by a minor street allowing access to its interior, and sometimes by another alley. Sometimes a block is cut by three alleys. The disposition of the alleys is irregular, however most of them are running in East-West direction. The abandonment of some of the houses allowed some of these alleys to develop wildly. This may be a resource of open space at the local scale.

6. Main Gateways to the Neighborhood

At the corner of Broad and Ridge (6.1). Location of Subway station, new development, and opportunity to develop as a square activity node and form a visible gateway to the neighborhood that will reinforce its identity, and invite people to enter Ridge.

At the corner of Ridge and Girard (6.2) an opportunity exists for another small square that will also connect the neighborhood better with the college across the street.

7. Three Triangles at Poplar and Ridge Or Triangle at Ridge and 16th

The Western one is MLK Park (7.1) already developed the middle one has temporary housing on it (7.2) (a place for a kiosk with live in above?) the Eastern one is along ridge forming another small

square with Poplar (7.3). Ideas are welcome the place is the most important intersection inside the neighborhood

Another key location which already has activity around it needs to be developed as an activity node. The problem is what to do with the large triangle lying to its North all vacant land (7.4). Is it reasonable to clear the few houses left there and create a major urban square? Parish St. could be stopped at 16th, thus allowing these two triangles to become one space. Probably though it would be difficult to bring life to two such large entities, and a choice should be made between them.

8. A Public Park at 15th and Poplar

The triangle area doesn't have a public park of the size that exists in the Southern part with the playground. The vacant land at the corner of 15th and Poplar may be an opportunity for such a large park. It will serve the community as it grows, and as development occurs along Broad, it can also serve for lunchtime for office workers on Broad. For the moment however it will be better to green the area and reserve it for the future, as the top priorities in this area is rehabilitation of the built fabric.

9. Corner of 19th and Poplar

Another important corner in the overall structure of the neighborhood. It is already fairly well-formed by buildings, including an institutional building. Some vacant land allows the development of a small square.

10. Making beautiful spaces around the Francisville Playground

The Francisville playground is already a fixture much loved and used. However its connection to its surroundings leaves much to be desired. It's layout diagonally to the grid creates many awkward spaces, that however could be used to create nice spots around it.

11. Things that anyone can do

We need to come up with small things that anyone can do to improve the streets and the local spaces. They can become part of the language for each of the centers above. Some of the structure is given from above, and some of it is built up from below by people.