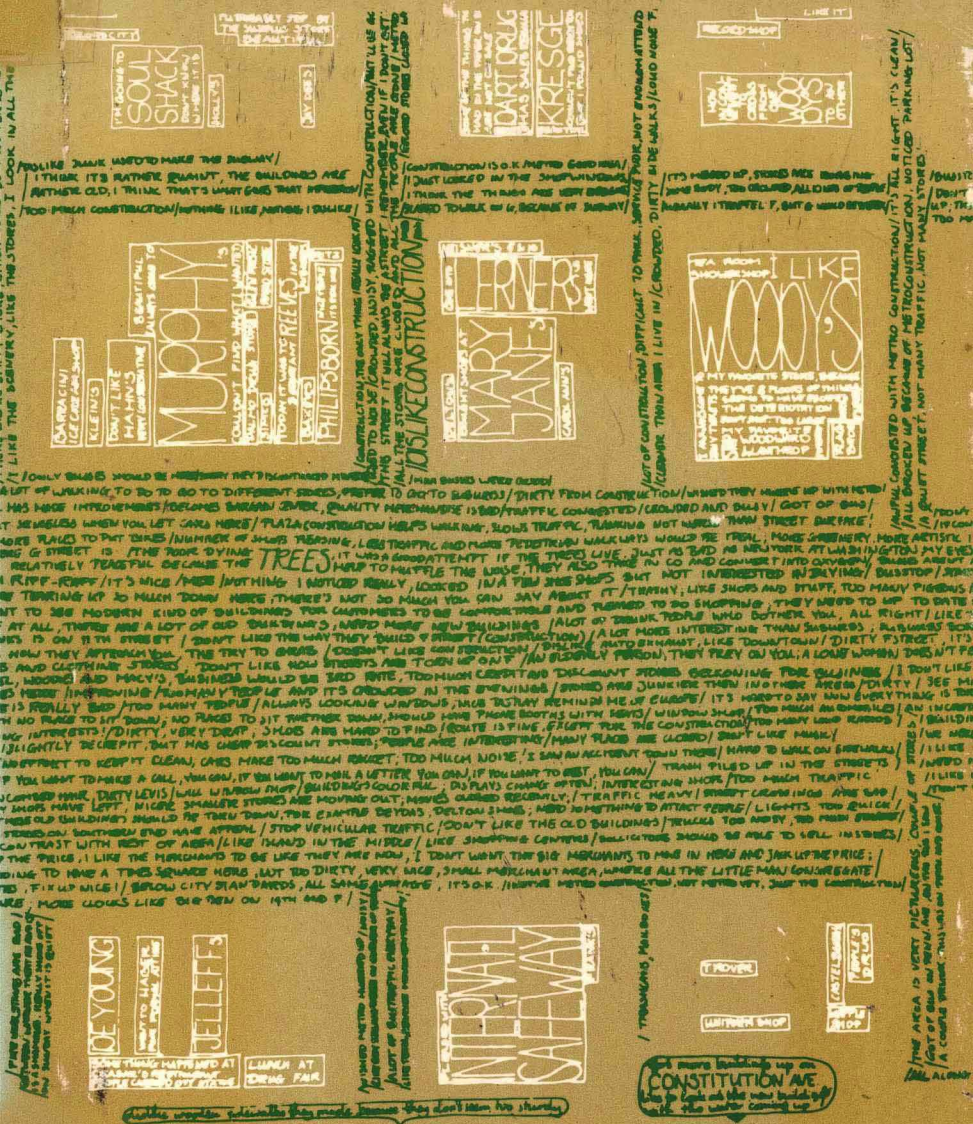

anaging the Sense of a Region

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Kevin Lynch

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Twenty years ago Mission Valley was open countryside, passing through the city of San Diego like a broad green river in that arid urban landscape. Houses looked over the high bluffs on either side. On the valley floor there were dairy farms, strung along the line of trees that marked the little stream.

Now the valley is a breathtaking giant shopping strip, with its freeway, parking lots, offices, stadium, two major shopping centers, and a yard for old car bodies. The stream itself is no longer visible (but given a flood, it may show to better advantage). The bluffs are scraped bare. There is a new smell to the air. The sounds have changed, and the asphalt surfaces reflect the heat. This is a walk we can take in the valley today:

a

b

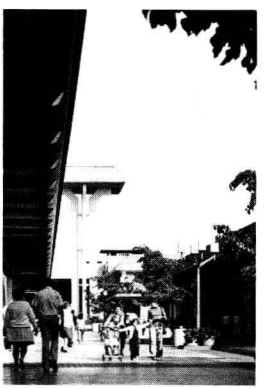
2a-f In the valley among the cars.

c

d

2 *(continued)*

e



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San Diegans have not forgotten the way the valley was, nor do they lack for feelings about the way it is. But they use the shops frequently, and thousands of commuters, from inland and the north, drive through the valley every day. The story of this change is not unusual for any North American city. It is a tale of locating a new freeway, of a shift in the central business district to meet parking demands and urban growth, of large land profits, tax windfalls, a zoning battle, and a brief, belated, isolated, "unreasonable" resistance.

Judging this event by hindsight, planners will discuss the role of the automobile, the future of shopping and of the central business district, the issues of urban growth, the economics of land speculation, and municipal reliance on the real estate tax. They are important issues, though a touch abstract, as is usual in planning talk. But in the end, these issues reduce to the quality of life, at least for someone, since without that quality there is no need for economics, taxation, cities, and all the rest.

It is surprising, then, that in a technical discussion of Mission Valley very little time will be devoted to analyzing how the new environment affects the everyday lives of the people who use it—that is, how it affects them in an immediate sense, through their eyes, ears, nose, and skin. Many planners will consider this analysis too obvious to dally over or, if not obvious, then trivial—too unpredictable and too personal to be part of any public discussion. But those who sense the place do not agree, and their complaints are stable, specific, and consistent. Moreover, the issue is not as simple or as obvious as it may seem.

Even when carried out according to careful planning, such transformations as the Mission Valley gala are evaluated and determined on the grounds of economics, transportation, politics, space requirements, landownership, and ecology. Once a location decision is made, an enlightened city government or a developer may then turn to some professional to make the thing beautiful. But

the human experience of the landscape is as fundamental as any of those other factors and should be considered from the first.

I mean to take the peculiar position that the experiential quality of the environment must be planned for at a regional scale, since Mission Valleys occur for regional reasons, and people now live their lives at that scale. But to talk of deliberately planning or managing the sensory quality of a large region raises three immediate questions:

What do we mean by sensory quality?

Does it have any real social importance?

Can it actually be managed at a regional scale?

Sensuous (or sensory) quality refers to the look, sound, smell, and feel of a place. Despite the popular overtones of the term, it does not refer to any sinful or voluptuous dimension.

The social importance of these qualities is frequently overlooked or denied. I shall argue that they are of vital concern to sensing beings. Plans that ignore them make disheartening cities.

The last question is the most difficult one. Sensory quality is infrequently considered at a city or regional scale and rarely with success. It is thought to be something one cares for only in designing plazas or important buildings. On the contrary, I think it must be considered in planning for an entire inhabited region, and for the everyday environment experienced in the whole range of daily action. This essay will attempt to substantiate that conviction. But since this is a possibility more than an actual achievement, there will be room for denial.

Even so, *should* sensory quality be so managed? Design of the large-scale environment and concern for its esthetic or sensuous form have in the past usually been the act of a dominating power. Centralized governments built Peking, baroque Rome, and Haussmann's Paris. The American "city beautiful" movement flourished at a time when upper-class citizens still had some control of city

politics, and it reflected their tastes. Designing the physical setting of a large institution has often been a matter of imposing a monumental form on a multitude of unwilling users.

The linkage between design and centralized power, however, is not inevitable. I shall assume that a public agency should be committed not only to fitting the environment to the needs of its users but also to giving them control of it wherever possible. This assumption leads to choices of strategy and technique not usually associated with large-scale environmental design.

In the United States, concern with the sensory quality of regions has grown from two roots, from which in turn sprang two separate trees of professional knowledge and activity. The older one began with architecture and landscape architecture in the service of kings, and this art was then employed by public bodies or large corporations that were building parks or monumental places, as in the "city beautiful" movement. Lately, this professional effort has spread to other, more ordinary locations: housing projects, new towns, and urban renewal areas. However, these are projects that still require a large-scale change managed by some powerful agent. The emphasis of the tradition is on urban sites, on the detailed control of form, on an intuitive assessment by experts, on creative design, on submission to the "realities of development" (that is, to the motives and means of those who have the power to decide), on an extension of the principles and working methods of architecture, and very often on a predilection for bigness *(61, 146).** Yet the experience of work in urban places has also in time brought some awareness of the plurality of clients and of the conflicts of politics. The recent "urban design plans" for some of our large cities are new branches of this same tree *(13, 20, 23, 29, 33, 35, 39, 45).*

The younger plant is rooted in land management, particularly within the national forests, where emphasis is shifting from tim-

*Italicized numbers correspond to item numbers in the bibliographies.

bering to recreation on a mass scale. Here the professionals are concerned with rural—not urban—land, with the preservation of natural beauty rather than the creation of something, and with management more than design. The managing agency is stable and completely controls a large area. The professional emphasis has been correspondingly technical and systematic. It carries over from timber management a strong reliance on quantitative technique, rational optima, and well-defined, explicit measures of "goodness," such as the number of users or the visibility of water *(18, 19, 36, 38, 41, 44, 47, 49)*. This forest viewpoint has very naturally allied itself with the concern over pollution of the air, the water, and the land. The attitudes are similarly clustered around nature, conservation, scientific analysis, and technical rationality. The drive to preserve fine historic man-made settings and the growing interest in maintaining traditional rural scenery add other voices to this same chorus. While the criteria of historic and scenic preservation may seem less "scientific," they strive in the same way to move toward what is firm and universal.

Each tradition can learn from the other. (The author comes from the first of these traditions and is trying to reform.) Design and management are not incompatible or even clearly separable. Similarly, systematic rationality and creative intuition are not irreconcilable. Whether a site is urban or rural, and whether its management is single or plural, rich or poor, will affect the techniques and criteria to be used. But there are common underlying principles and methods of design and analysis. We can deal with problems other than forests, parks, historic areas, or central business districts. These two traditions should be fused and so gain the competence to deal with a more inclusive range of issues. The unifying theme should be the way that the sense of a region affects the lives of its people. Later, perhaps, we may even grow to the point where we can think of its influence on other lives—of animals and perhaps even plants. For the present, an effective, broad, human concern would be a giant step.

Appendix 1 contains a brief review of recent U.S. experience in planning for the sensory quality of large areas, making reference to actual studies and to review articles. At the city scale, where the problem is most acute, the list of studies is not long, and the list of achievements is even shorter. Indeed, the quality of the urban environment is patently poor throughout most of the world. Places generally thought desirable are usually the remnants of a process of slow development, which occurred within sharp constraints of natural condition and cultural limitation and since then have been enriched by continuous habitation and reformation (old farming areas, historic cities). Or, if not, they are those places less frequently encountered, where the design was closely fitted to the requirements of the persons who were to use them and who had some power to affect the outcome (private gardens, some upper-middle-class housing areas, some shopping centers).

Our lack of achievement in environmental design is not inevitable, but it is not due to some easily exorcised cause, such as a lack of money, public apathy, errors in administrative structure, or political intrigue. One root difficulty is the divorce of the users of a place from control over its shape and management, which leads to inappropriate form and the imposition of alien purposes. Another is our inability to control real estate development, due above all to the chaos of local government and to the private exploitation of land. These are not simple problems: they go to the heart of our political, economic, and social structure. This essay can only allude to them, while discussing the positions that a regional planning staff can realistically take in the United States today.

A further difficulty is our lack of understanding of the direct effects of the environment on human beings and of how to control those effects to suit our rather vague, and certainly complex, purposes. We are inexperienced and burdened with outworn attitudes. This essay deals primarily with these latter problems, although it cannot ignore the others. While trying to specify how we can use what we already know about environmental quality, it will also