

# Cite

The Architecture and Design  
Review of Houston

## Subscription

One year, 2 issues: \$8  
Two years: \$15

Name

Address

City/State Zip

Check for \$ \_\_\_\_\_ enclosed.

Gift Subscription  Bill me

## The Rice Design Alliance

The Rice Design Alliance, established in 1973, is an educational organization dedicated to increasing general awareness of architecture, design, and the environment. RDA sponsors lectures, exhibitions, tours, and symposiums and publishes *Cite*, a biannual review of architecture and design. Membership in RDA is open to the general public.

## Membership Benefits

### Individual Membership \$35

- Ticket discounts for RDA programs
- Free subscription to *Cite: The Architecture and Design Review of Houston*
- Invitations to "members only" events and Farish Gallery openings
- Discounts on selected titles from the Brazos Bookstore
- Participation in the annual membership meeting and event

### Family Membership \$50

- All of the above benefits for your family

### Student Membership \$15

- All of the above benefits

### Sponsor Membership \$125

- All of the benefits accorded to Individual Members
- Courtesy tickets to two selected RDA programs with reservations in advance

### Patron Membership \$250

- All of the benefits accorded to Individual Members
- Courtesy tickets to three selected RDA programs with reservations in advance

### Sustaining Membership \$500

- All of the benefits accorded to Individual Members
- Courtesy tickets to all RDA programs

### Corporate Membership \$1000

- All of the benefits accorded to Sustaining Members
- Recognition in the RDA journal *Cite* and at special events

## Membership Application

Name

Address

City/State Zip

Telephone

Occupation

Membership Category

Amount enclosed

Checks should be sent to:  
Rice Design Alliance, P.O. Box 1892,  
Houston, Texas 77251.

# T H E F U T U R E

In the past, streets and public places were stages where social classes and social uses mixed, stages of solemn ceremony and improvised spectacle, of people-watching, of recreation. In their changing architecture, their slow shifts and adjustments, they were also time channels – the safeguard of the continuities of culture and place that made us, as actors in the public realm, older than our age and wiser than our own natural gifts. This public realm of the past was an untidy place, physically and morally, but it was also both school and stage of urbanity, which in the end means nothing less than the belief that “people can live together in proximity and interdependence,” as Gerald Allen put it.

## Spiro Kostof

The public realm was all those things, not because of the container, but because of what we were willing to put inside it. I see little point to reviving the container now if we are not ready to reinvest it with true urbanity. As long as we would rather keep our own counsel, avoid social tension, schedule encounters with our friends, and travel on our own in climate-controlled and music-injected metal boxes, the resurrected public realm will be a place we like to visit every so often but not inhabit, a fun place and a museum – but also the burial place of our hopes to exorcise poverty and prejudice by confronting them daily; the burial place of our chances to learn from one another; the burial place of spontaneous excitement, of the cumulative knowledge of human ways, and of the residual benefits of a public life.

We seem ready to take our losses. In the eighties the momentum to re-create the public realm has been lost. Some see a fundamental change of society in the works, and there is much evidence to prove them right. At the turn of the century a revolution culminated that shifted us from a nation of farms to a nation of factories and moved us from country to city. Now we have started as momentous a revolution, it would seem, a shift from factory to service and information, and from city back to country. I am talking about megacenters – the landscape of postindustrial America, of the new information economy – those gigantic pseudo-cities in which hundreds of thousands work and live without any need of or love for the traditional city: Tech Center in Denver, Ben Carpenter's Las Colinas and the Golden Triangle in Dallas, Cumberland and Galleria malls north of Atlanta, the Princeton Forrestal Center on the Route 1 corridor, and in my own Bay Area, Bishop Ranch in San Ramón. One suburban Bay Area developer is quoted as saying, “We can offer a self-contained city, and that's a hell of a selling point.”

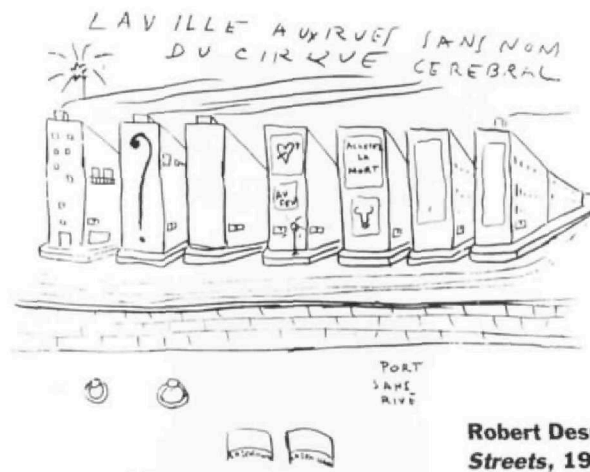
These instant cities of the countryside have little to do with the dormitory

communities that resulted from the earlier abandonment of the old downtown. After the residential component left, and the factories and industrial establishments followed suit, the heart of the metropolis was still held together, at least in the daytime, by offices, banks, and administrative buildings symbolically grounding the city in the manner of the old guildhall, the Rathaus, the *palazzo di podestà*. Now they too are beginning to leave. The worker pool needed by the information economy is already out there in the suburbs – upscale, white, professional. So you take the plant to them. You give them shopping malls and parks, movie theaters, restaurants, conference centers, and luxury “townhouses” or apartments. But you do not confuse the alternative city environment with schools or churches, with poor people or ethnic concentrations. There are no streets in the traditional sense and, of course, no history.

Are these megacenters the final challenge to the traditional public realm and to the city itself? It is clear that the developers are doing their best to ignore the public realm, and by so doing they are depriving the metropolis of its remaining mystique, which emanates from the downtown towers that are supposed to be the seat of corporate might, political muscle, the managing world of entertainment and design. It is entirely possible that the institution of megacenters will erode the much-celebrated renaissance of the downtown and lead to yet another major exodus, leaving these worn-out artifacts to the poor, who cannot escape them, and to the incorrigible romantics, who would rather run their rat race down corridor-streets and live in Victorians yanked from the jaws of bulldozers.

The real revolution – perhaps not surprisingly, after all the inflationary rhetoric of modernism, the technocratic totalitarianism, the alienating scale of housing structures and of the much-lauded open spaces – was not still another futurist adventure, but rather a search for the long-suppressed traditional experiences of the street. This search started around 1960, spread fairly far both in Europe and in this country, and was doubtless related to the general ferment of the sixties. The new mood was reflected in a number of influential books, Jane Jacobs's *Death and Life of Great American Cities* being the most popular. More for the professional crowd, there were books like the Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour treatise *Learning From Las Vegas*, Edmund Bacon's *Design of Cities*, and Rob Krier's *Urban Space*, which was a more accessible account of the kinds of concerns brought up in an opaque and mystifying manner by Aldo Rossi in his writings and in such buildings as the Gallarate housing block outside Milan.

These books sought to analyze the qualities of the traditional street in order to stimulate its revival and emulation. This meant defining the street's practi-



Robert Desnos, *The City of Nameless Streets*, 1922.

## O F T H E S T R E E T

cal and socioeconomic functions – determining how it served the city. The traditional street provided lots for buildings, accommodated traffic, had representational and symbolic content, facilitated social interaction, gave direct access to buildings. Modernism had stressed traffic and ignored the other uses; the time had come to reconsider them. These lost functions had been associated with specific forms: the continuous edge of street walls, important height-width relationships, fronting devices such as stoops and sidewalks, the extension of public space inside the blocks and of private space out into the street. Once you had defined these things, you were on the way to understanding how they could be reinforced or resurrected.

Now there is a European side of the issue and an American one. The Ameri-

can penchant is for endowing ordinary streetscapes with new approval: Main Street is almost all right. We have never quite found out what we are supposed to do to it to make it *really* all right, but we have been encouraged to be ashamed of our intolerance for the landscape of average Americans, gambling, cruising, doing their thing, and to be ashamed of the elitism of City Beautiful boulevards and the bloodless elegance of corporate plazas.

"There is . . . nothing to be 'learned from Las Vegas,' except that it constitutes a widespread operation of trivialization," responds Europe in the person of Léon Krier.<sup>1</sup> Turning to the ordinary in Continental terms is a different story. "The European city," says Krier, "is a creation of the intelligence; the very trace of this intelligence embarrasses 'the builders of today,' who are all too happy

to find in Venturi and the other consorts of postmodernism unexpected intellectual allies." Krier is speaking of preindustrial Europe – the stone cities of multilayered tradition that have been savaged by "unbridled industrialization with no aim but consumption" and by the cult of mobility, which contributed to social fragmentation. Their physical disintegration was aided and abetted by modern architecture and urbanism and the myths attendant thereon – "the separation of functions, the myth of prefabrication, the useless typological works undertaken for themselves in the name of sacrosanct 'creativity.'" For Krier, the only option is to resurrect the preindustrial city, which means reviving two critical constituent features: first, its elements – the quarter, the street, the square – which "must form the basis for any reconstruction of cities destroyed by 'modern' urbanism"; and second, its techniques –

preindustrial building technology, artisanry, manual work.

And how do we proceed with this agenda? By studying carefully what is left of historical cities, and applying this language to today's projects. As Berthold Brecht put it in 1925, "In civilized countries there are no fashions: it is an honor to resemble the models." Housing must stem only from the urban fabric and be completely subject to the constraints of urban morphology. The same logic applies to urban configurations – they reflect patterns of city living that have evolved over the course of centuries. "A street is a street," writes Léon Krier, "and one lives there in a certain way not because architects have imagined streets in certain ways." ■

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All quotations are from "The Consumption of Culture," *Oppositions*, no.14 (Fall 1978), pp. 54-59.



Joel Sternfeld, *Fourth of July, Canyon County, California*, 1983.