The Spaces Between

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Since I came to America 40 years ago, I have been wondering: Why do people accept the built environment they experience as destiny? I have often asked myself "Is it fate or our doing?" Everything can become something else, can adapt, adjust to fulfill a bigger role, to respond to a higher aspiration. Our urban fabric is no different. It is not fate. It is our doing.

After collaborating at Penn for a few projects, Dan Kelley invited me as a guest to his class about architecture, urbanism, and communication. That day, he proposed: "Architecture is like music and each building is a note. The spaces between buildings are as important to our experience as the spaces between notes are in listening to music."

Music and design are both about dynamics: soft and loud, fast and slow. Separation gives individual notes meaning; a scream has force, but it is not a song. In other words, the role of each building is critical in assembling an urban experience that reflects, reinforces, and elevates the norms and cultures of its citizens. Urban design can transform societies but I believe it begins with people who are receptive to its possibilities.

Let us start one building, one street, one park, at a time.

My entire life, I have inhabited the in-between spaces. I was born in Cairo and grew up in Lebanon but have lived in Philadelphia for decades, so I will always be between nationalities. I can see evidence of this pattern looking back into my early years. I spent my youth in a middle-class

neighborhood, but attended a school for elite students. Growing up, I adhered to a strict religious practice that taught me empathy, humility, and solidarity, yet I also saw where unfettered religiosity falls short. I began my formal training in engineering but later transitioned into management, before founding my own advisory firm more than twenty years ago.

Some may find these various states of in-between to be unsettling. I believe they have allowed me to thrive, and have enabled me to live and grow unattached to any definitive dogma or received wisdom. My outsider status gives me a fresh perspective and a unique perspective. It allows me to ask: "Is it our fate or our doing?"

I'm reminded of my friend Richard Baron, the wonderfully talented and highly venerated community developer, telling me about his childhood in Detroit. When he was a small boy, his grandfather was a tailor with a modest storefront. Richard would play in the street with his friends while his grandfather worked. When he was old enough to help out, he would often make deliveries on foot to customers who lived nearby.

Richard's idyllic example may sound like nostalgia of an America that no longer exists, but I don't believe in nostalgia, at least not as it pertains to cities. This way of building places was transformed—some might say malformed—by the car. For myriad environmental, social, and economic reasons, we can and must return people to the center of this work. Doing so in practice will require us to see potential in overlooked places, and for this, an outsider's perspective is invaluable.

An example: the Memphis Medical District is a 2.6 square mile area just east of the city's downtown core, anchored by nine major healthcare and educational institutions. Slicing diagonally through the district is an abandoned rail spur, a bit longer than a city block. The area's unusual topography means that much of this spur is a full story below grade, accessible only by steep stairs. the "Ravine," as it was known for years, was considered an unfortunate and inconvenient scar, forcefully separating parts of the district that needed to be knit together.

That is, it was—until it wasn't.

Purposeful landscape design, investment from several MMDC partners, and one beloved local brewery transformed the Ravine into a verdant linear park and event space. Naturally shaded by the sun, this liminal space has become one of the city's most intriguing and inviting destinations. The new usefulness of The Ravine was actually rooted in recognition. Many people saw what it was and ignored it; a few outsiders saw what it could become. They took action at a critical "in between" moment for Memphis and the institutional district to transform it.

To an American eye, the Ravine's transformation may feel like an innovation. In many ways, however, it's simply an example of aligning place with purpose, which has been the tradition in the old world for millennia. During a recent trip to Madrid, for example, I noticed small playgrounds everywhere throughout the urban core: walkable—and therefore heavily utilized—by grandmothers caring for children while their parents went (mostly on foot!) to their jobs. This is a society that values the health benefits of being outdoors, as well as the ways that

multiple generations of a family can support each other. Their culture is manifested through design and development choices. In this case, wonderfully walkable pocket parks were part of the recipe.

As city builders, we are culture-shapers, so we need to be more intentional about the changes we are designing, accelerating, and sustaining. We know how to leverage market trends to transform a building so that it turns a profit, but will that lead to a higher public good? We finance buildings based on a 30-year cash flow projection, so should we build buildings that only last 30 years?

In fact, what is our role in developing cities for people? To make money? To make things beautiful? To unify a community? To meet the bare minimum needs of a neighborhood?

What if our role is to change the world and advance humanity, one place at a time?

The shape of a place—a park, a city block, a street—can divide us or it can bring us together. It can condition us to distrust one another or it can invite us to celebrate our differences. It can uplift our lives or it can leave us in loneliness. Placemaking itself is a composite of many different choices: design, finance, construction and engineering, even marketing and leasing. Each of these choices is an indication of our culture and a direct reflection of the future we want for ourselves and for each other.

If we do not design and build the right places for people to meet, connect, and build relationships, they will live isolated and forgo social interaction. They will remain trapped in bubbles of their own prior

belief, fed by algorithms of their own biases and fears. To the degree that this is already tragically occurring in our country, the invigoration of personal and communal live takes on even more urgency.

To this point, we outsiders and in-betweeners offer another unique value. We have less deference to the past and so tend to see a broader array of possible futures for ourselves and the places around us. That means we can push people beyond their comfort zones, which is the only way that real transformation can occur at any level.

Over the years, I have been asked to offer my advice on how to restore the vitality of places that have been declining for many years. This may be a building, a park, a neighborhood, or an anchor institution; quite commonly it is a combination of all these place-types. Often we find that local leaders, no matter how dedicated, creative, or industrious, are overlooking some catalytic assets in their very midst.

The small parks in Madrid I mentioned are examples of this. Another example, from my early days of leadership at Penn, is our decision to move the university's Facilities & Real Estate Services (FRES) department into the former Pennsylvania Railroad Freight Warehouse Building—a project in which Dan Kelley and his firm played a monumental role.

At the time, this vast, abandoned, and historic structure was an opportunity to re-occupy a block of the city with multi-purpose uses at the margin of campus. Today, it's known as the Left Bank—and I could think of no better place for our offices as we went about transforming the role of FRES into a more dynamic, forward-thinking, and outward-looking enterprise.

My vision for FRES was for it to play a role in linking the future growth of Penn's campus with the campus edges and surrounding neighborhood. To do so, we needed to locate ourselves at a crucial "in between" place that would keep us from getting too comfortable and allow us to see new possibilities all around us. This relocation of the department over twenty years ago, and other Penn facilities following, anchored an area that has now developed acres of backwater space at the industrial edge of the Schuylkill River into an active precinct of the university and an asset to the city. The new location also organically brought people together within the department, which in turn changed the way we thought about and carried out our work.

These departmental transformations also transformed me. Like the architectural "music" Dan mentioned to me, my early choices continue to resonate throughout my life and career—and focus my recommendations to our institutional clients.

We are always in relationship with places: the places of our birth and the places where we make our lives; the places where we learned a craft and the places where we make our living. Life's journey takes us through and between these places and the experiences we have there. It is forward momentum to and through these places between—and the transformation of those places—that help shape us. In the best cases, this momentum propels to us create more good places for others.

We are alive, and so are the places we make. We are always becoming something else.