

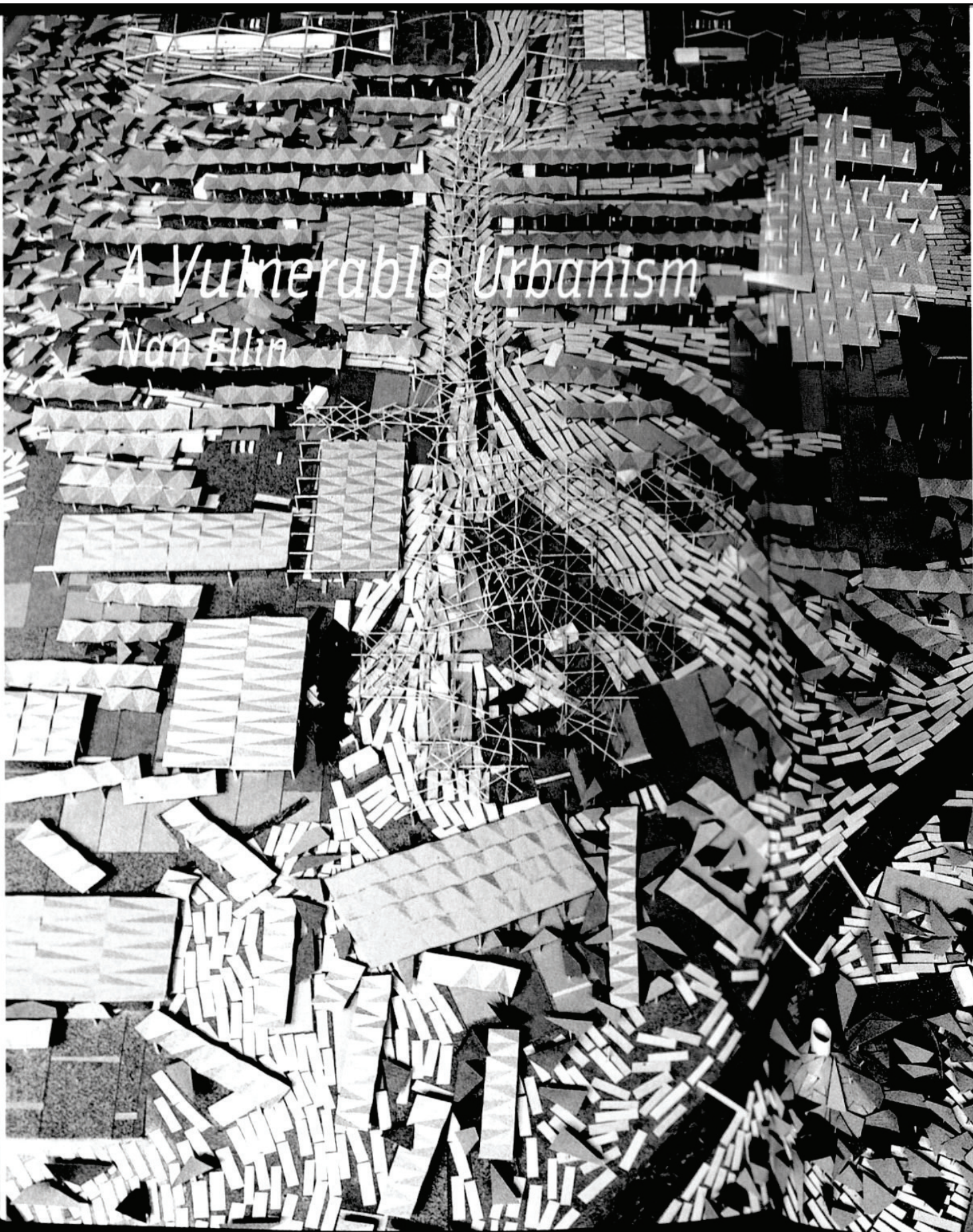
Re-envisioning Landscape / Architecture

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Actar

A Vulnerable Urbanism

Nan Ellin



Grim
is the expression on our faces
Grim
are our cities and landscapes
Grim
are our lives
When soul is purged.

Prometheus was bound to a rock for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to people. Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden for eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. And the Babylonians were forced to speak mutually unintelligible languages and scattered across the earth for attempting to build a tower to heaven and to achieve notoriety. These cautionary tales describe punishments inflicted and suffered for the crime of wanting to know, to explain, to create, and to obtain recognition. As allegories about our desire for control and self-determination, they advocate against rationality and for wonder, awe, mystery, and sanctity. They advocate against hubris and for humility. They serve as reminders to acknowledge and celebrate our human qualities in contrast to the dual temptation to become god-like or machine-like.

This dual temptation is endemic to architects and planners. The last century particularly was dominated by attempts to plan cities and design buildings that would be "machines for living" (*machines à habiter*, Le Corbusier) through the omnipotent application of master planning and zoning and by adhering to Louis Sullivan's tenet of "form follows function."¹ Master planning and modern urbanism failed, however,

"Cool Connectors," Dan Hoffman
with the Integral Studio at ASU.

because they are too inclusive and utopian to be realized fully. And realized only partially, they produce fragments of cities that do not congeal into an urban fabric. In addition, the segregation and rigidity of master planning and modern urbanism run counter to the integration and dynamism of the life lived in them. Widespread dissatisfaction with these efforts has been inspiring alternative approaches that do not forgo technological advances but relinquish nonetheless some of the control that twentieth-century planning and architecture presupposed. Emphasizing process rather than product, relationships (or context) rather than isolated objects, and complementarity rather than opposition, these approaches and the landscapes they generate might be considered a vulnerable urbanism.

From Pretense of Permanence to Permeability (Process)

With the acceleration of change, we can no longer sustain our pretense of permanence. With time more integral to space than ever before, the process becomes as important as the product. In fact, it becomes part of a product that is never completed. As novelist John Barth declared in his ode to minimalist literature *Tidewater Tales*, "The key to the treasure may be the treasure itself" (1986). The journey and the destination become inseparable. As do the means and the ends. Therefore, it can no longer even be a question of the end justifying the means, itself a modernist notion.

This has implications for how we think about design, what we design, the role of clients/users, and how we teach design. Regarding process as paramount, rather than the finished product, a vulnerable urbanism veers away from master planning's focus on inclusivity and control, aiming to master everything including nature.² Instead, it proposes more punctual interventions that contribute to activating places through the creation of thresholds or places of intensity.³ It emphasizes infrastructures and flows as opposed to typologies and formal concerns (Wall 1999).

A vulnerable urbanism allows things to happen, things that may be unforeseen. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari might describe this process as liberating the natural flows of desire (which perpetually seek connections and syntheses) from the repressive and hierarchical modern city (1988). This approach might also be regarded as a form of "urban acupuncture" that liberates chi, or the life

force.⁴ Applied to existing built environments as well as new development, these interventions may have a tentacular (Wiscombe) or domino effect by catalyzing other transformations. A vulnerable urbanism highlights the role of users since the process of building continues with inhabitation and appropriation. Users become collaborators rather than passive recipients as design becomes more interactive. This emphasis on process rather than product suggests that education for environmental design be context-based and self-reflective rather than object-centered.⁵

From Objects to Context (Relationships)

Connections missed

Connections made

Connections illusive

Longed for and imagined.

Connections lost

Found

Severed

Invented

Disconnected

And secured.

Nothing exists in isolation, only in relation (or context), whether it is a building, a city, or a person. It is only in the ideal realm of mathematics that things may exist in isolation. The twentieth century is characterized, however, by numerous struggles to achieve this ideal. The western notion of the self as autonomous and free-willed, reflected and reinforced by the notion of "ego boundaries" in psychology, has contributed to numbing our empathy with others and with the rest of nature (Spretnak 1977). Countering the alienation aroused by this understanding of self, more recent understandings of self recognize more permeable boundaries between self, others, and the rest of nature. Cultural anthropology has undergone similar transformations from its earlier interpretation of cultures as monolithic and functioning like machines to current views that regard cultures as inextricably intertwined and leading to studies of "multiple subjectivities,"

"hybrid cultures," and "border cultures."⁶ Parallel transformations have been occurring in the sciences over the last several decades. As Arthur Erickson contends, "By ceaselessly bombarding particles of matter to get at the core of things, science has found that, as Einstein inferred, relationship is the only reality" (1980, 23). The concurrent shift in architecture and urban planning has been from the earlier emphasis on objects and the separation of functions to context and programmatic hybridity. In sum, the essentialism and purism characterizing earlier twentieth-century pursuits is being supplanted by an acknowledgment of diversity, complexity, embeddedness, and unpredictability.

In the environmental design fields, this recent shift in attitude must contend with the longstanding privileging of objects and the "ideal" that still predominate our professions, our academic curricula, and our landscape. Just as the modern city separated functions in its quest for machine-like efficiency, so modern practice divided and subdivided over the last century into architecture, planning, landscape architecture, interior design, industrial design, and graphic design, each with its circumscribed responsibilities, professional organizations, journals, and academic departments. Productive collaborations among them have been all too rare and the precious talents and energy wasted over turf skirmishes is a tragedy and embarrassment, going a long way toward explaining the sorry state of our built environment as well as the crises suffered by the design professions.⁷

Our current task, then, becomes that of mending the seams in our disciplines, professions, and urban fabrics that have been torn asunder. Rather than presume an opposition between people and nature, buildings and landscape, and architecture and landscape architecture, a vulnerable urbanism regards these as complementary or contiguous. Rather than generate perfect objects and separate programs and functions, a vulnerable urbanism aims to build relationships. Our attention thus shifts from objects and centers to the border, boundary, edge, periphery, margin, interstices, and in-between space.

In contrast to the modern attempt to eliminate boundaries and the postmodern tendency to ignore or alternatively fortify them, a vulnerable urbanism seeks to generate porous membranes or thresholds. By allowing for diversity (of people, programs, construction technologies, and so on) to thrive, this approach seeks to reintegrate (or integrate anew) without obliterating differences, in fact, preserving and celebrating them. This approach and the landscape it generates reflect the complementary human urges to merge (connect) and to separate

(distinction, individuation) with the resultant ongoing tension and dynamism. It recalls Martin Heidegger's contention that "a boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its essential unfolding. That is why the concept is of *horismos*, that is, the horizon, the boundary" (1954, 356).

Paralleling the shift from "ego boundaries" in understanding ourselves, this concept of the urban boundary as connector rather than divider, as the place where relationships take place, is variously articulated. As James Corner explains, "rather than separating boundaries, borders are dynamic membranes through which interactions and diverse transformations occur. In ecological terms, the edge is always the most lively and rich place because it is where the occupants and forces of one system meet and interact with those from another" (1999a, 54). Corner's method of "field operations," his alternative to the master plan, provides "ways in which borders (and differences) may be respected and sustained, while potentially productive forces on either side may be brought together into newly created relationships. Thus, we shift from a world of stable geometric boundaries and distinctions to one of multidimensional transference and network effects" (1999a, 54).

According to Linda Pollak, the boundary should be understood "as a space of communication rather than a line of sharp division" (1999, 54). Demonstrating this in her work (e.g., Petrosino Park project for New York City), Pollak bridges layers of "infrastructural relationships," natural layers, transportation infrastructures, and virtual layers. She also points out that projects can operate "at a theoretically unlimited number of scales" if the designer can construct such interdependencies (1999, 51). Pollak maintains: "Conceiving of landscape as layers rather than an unbroken surface supports the construction of an urban landscape as an overlay of scales, that is understood in section as well as plan and in time as well as space. Cutting through multiple layers of urban information supports a project whose formal result is not a stylistic signature, but an intersection of concerns, intensities and modes of inhabitation." (1999, 51). Alex Wall suggests that the designer's role become that of providing "flexible, multifunctional surfaces," creating connective tissue between city fragments and programs to support the diversity of uses and users over time (1999, 234). In contrast to the distillation implied by modern urbanism, Marc Angélil and Anna Klingmann advocate a "hybrid morphology [that] unfolds a system of relations

between different, sometimes contradictory forces, no longer as an absolute but in reference to other structures," in a process that is "unceasingly renegotiated" (1999, 24). [See also Darren Petrucci's project for Seventh Avenue in Phoenix "Stripscape," this volume.]

Not only are the various components of urbanism reintegrated, so are design practices and professions.⁸ Rem Koolhaas suggests the term "SCAPE®" to encompass town-scape and land-scape, echoing midcentury sentiments of Hans Scharoun who spoke of "urban-land-scape" comprised of natural forms, built forms, and communities of people (Angélil and Klingmann 1999, 21-22) and Victor Gruen (1955) who called upon architects to design landscape as well as "cityscape" (Wall 1999, 235). While these earlier critiques were lone voices that went largely unheeded, the current one falls upon much more sympathetic ears prepared to challenge distinctions between figure and ground, inside and outside, and center and periphery, as well as between architecture, landscape, and infrastructure.

From Opposition to Synergy (Complementarity)

This movement toward re-envisioning practice as well as product suggests a paradigm shift (or return) away from binary logic and towards the principle of complementarity. Complementarity presumes that light requires darkness and shadows. That there would be no sound or music without silence. No fullness without emptiness. No slowness without velocity. No self without other. No exaltation without lamentation. No inhaling without exhaling. No harvest without cultivation. No pleasure without pain and suffering. No strength without weakness. No ease without difficulty. No health without illness. No life without death. Complementarity departs from modernist binary logic, because it does not regard the pair as oppositional nor does it seek a synthesis or resolution. Rather, it understands each as not only allowing the other but embracing or embodying the other. Prometheus's punishment of having his liver eaten each day by vultures and healed each night suggests the importance of the darkness for becoming whole or healing, even if the harm will inevitably come again. Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden allowed for agriculture and childbearing, not to mention the first fashion design. And although the Tower of Babel faltered, it allowed for the diaspora and cultural diversity. While these risks may

have opened the door to suffering, they were also acts of heroism that permitted creative opportunities otherwise denied.

The goal of intervention, then, is not to resolve conflict or to produce clearly intelligible landscapes but to generate places of intensity with the lovely tensions they embody. The goal is not to produce cities that are entirely in flow or places that are consistently in flow over time. This is because, as the principle of complementarity maintains, flows require ebbs. From the designer's perspective, these interventions may resist analysis, recalling Isadora Duncan's remark to a reporter: "If I could tell you what it meant, I wouldn't have to dance it." Form follows function once again, but function is defined more holistically now to include emotional, symbolic, and spiritual "functions." As a result, the users' experience may not be merely instrumental but also interesting, surprising, luminous, even sublime.

This approach brings our subjective, transactive, qualitative, and intuitive ways of knowing back to complement the objective, autonomous, quantitative, and rational ways of knowing valued by the modern project. Produced by people for people, these interventions are inspired by the physical context (site) as well as social, historical, and virtual contexts. Accordingly, they may not be developed or represented primarily in plan and section. For example, Dan Hoffman's abstract imagery for Cool Connectors in Phoenix suggests the latent experiential quality that these interventions could activate (chapter frontispiece). In another instance, Paul Lewis, Marc Tsurumaki, and David Lewis's hybrid drawing forms (combining hand drawing with computer rendering) "produce multiple and simultaneous readings not available in typical drawing formats" (12-13).

The shift from the machine and utopia as models to ecological models (webs, networks, thresholds, ecotones, tentacles, and rhizomes) is indicative of this paradigm shift. In contrast to the earlier models that bespoke aspirations for control and perfection, these current models suggest connectedness and dynamism as well as the principle of complementarity. On the ecological threshold, for instance, there is competition and conflict (Corner 1999a, 54) but also synergy and harmony. There is fear but also adventure and excitement. It is not about good or bad, safety or danger, pleasure or pain, winners or losers. All of these occur on the threshold if it is thriving.

In psychology, the notion of the "integrated personality" was applied by Carl Jung to suggest the blending of both light and dark components of personality.

If we suppress our shadows, rather than acknowledge and accept them, they may emerge deviously in other guises such as projection and self-sabotage. The same might apply to the city. Rather than neglect or abandon "in-between" and peripheral spaces ("no-man's lands"), then, we turn our attention toward them, care for and nurture them. In contrast to the modern fear of change, we surrender to it. Rather than ignore or seek to overcome fear, we embrace it. (Perhaps this principle is illustrated by the vaccine that protects us from contracting an illness by introducing it into our system. Or by relaxation, which is best achieved through prior tension.) In contrast to the modern clean-it up, fix-it-up mentality, we accept the dirt, the broken, the imperfect. Such integration of the urban shadow might be described as an "integrated" or "integral" urbanism.⁹ This paradigm shift is not limited to the world of design. Charlene Spretnak explains:

Just as modern scientists discounted and ignored perturbations observed outside of the accepted model, so modern economists ignored the effects of unqualified economic growth on the "fragment" of the whole that is nature. Modern statesmanship proceeded by ignoring the sovereignty of native people, a "fragment" that was clearly outside the accepted model, and modern rationalists denied any spiritual perceptions as anomalous quirks not to be mentioned. [Now], however, scientists engaged in chaos research . . . try to absorb into their conclusions everything they observe through their measurements; ecological economists consider the total costs of production, including the depletion of our primary "capital," the biosphere; advocates of a postmodern world order defend the precious diversity of cultures that comprise the planetary whole; and people no longer boxed in by the tight constraints of highly selective modern rationalism now allow themselves subtle perceptions of the grand unity, the ground of the sacred (1997, 19-20).

Conclusion

Listening to the minute differences noticed by my six-year-old daughter Theodora between her Star Wars Legos® and the characters from the movie, I remarked that she remembered many more details from the movie than I did. Theodora responded, "Children who found the beauty of being a child when they were a

child remember these things. I guess you didn't find the beauty of being a child when you were a child. Or you lost it." Struck by the painful recognition of my innocence lost, I asked, "Is there any way I could get it back?" She thought for a moment and replied, "If you lose the beauty of the child, it's very hard to get it back. You get it by playing a lot. Maybe if you have lots of fun as a grown-up, you can get it back. Once you've got your child back, there's nothing that can stop you from doing anything" (Theodora Ellin Ballew 1/4/00).

Just as the "beauty of the child" (vitality, awareness, and spontaneous joy) can get buried beneath the responsibilities of adulthood, so the vitality of a city—its soul and character—can disappear if squeezed into a rational and overly prescribed master plan. Rather than throw any discipline or planning to the wind, perhaps we might rethink how and when to apply them. Keeping a place's "child" alive, or bringing it back to life, would not mean zero intervention but instead a gentle guidance that is responsive, flexible, playful, and nurturing, permitting self-realization.

A vulnerable urbanism, then, combines system with serendipity.¹⁰ It also combines intellect (spirit) with qualities of soul such as "subtlety, complexity, ripening, worldliness, incompleteness, ambiguity, wonder" (Moore 1992, 247). Psychologist Thomas Moore describes intellect and soul:

The intellect wants a summary meaning . . . but the soul craves depth of reflection, many layers of meaning, nuances without end, references and allusions and prefigurations. (235) The intellect often demands proof that it is on solid ground. The thought of the soul finds its grounding in a different way. It likes persuasion, subtle analysis, an inner logic, and elegance. It enjoys the kind of discussion that is never complete, that ends with a desire for further talk or reading. It is content with uncertainty and wonder. Especially in ethical matters, it probes and questions and continues to reflect even after decisions have been made. (246–47) Soul yearns for attachment, for variety in personality, for intimacy and particularity. So it is these qualities in community that the soul seeks out, and not likemindedness and uniformity. (92) Relatedness is a signal of soul. By allowing the sometimes vulnerable feelings of relatedness, soul pours into life. (94) Truth is not really a soul word; soul is after insight more than truth. Truth is a stopping point asking for commitment and defense. Insight is a fragment of awareness that invites further exploration. Intellect tends to enshrine its truth, while soul

hopes that insights will keep coming until some degree of wisdom is achieved. Wisdom is the marriage of intellect's longing for truth and soul's acceptance of the labyrinthine nature of the human condition. (246-47)

In sum, the approaches and products of a vulnerable urbanism emphasize reintegration (functional, social, disciplinary, and professional), porous membranes or permeable boundaries (rather than the modernist attempt to dismantle them or postmodernist fortification), and design with movement in mind, both movement through space (circulation) and through time (access to the past as well as dynamism and flexibility). From attempting to deny or control change, an attitude characterizing most of the twentieth century, we are now witnessing an acceptance or even embracing of change. A vulnerable urbanism is about:

Networks not boundaries

Relationships and connections not isolated objects

Interdependence not independence or dependence

Natural and social communities not just individuals

Transparency or translucency not opacity

Flux or flow not stasis

Permeability not walls

Mobility not permanence

Relinquishing control, not dominating nature

Catalysts, armatures, frameworks, punctuation marks,

Not final products, master plans, or utopias.

We are passing through a rare moment when environmental design theory is not bucking political, economic, and social trends. Many of the qualities described above that designers are embracing are being realized only because concurrent developments fortuitously support them. In other cases, these qualities are being realized without the input of designers at all. The political trends that support a vulnerable urbanism include widespread opposition to urban sprawl, interest in conserving the environment and preserving historic urban fabrics, the rise of regional governments, the renaissance of central cities, the exponential growth of neighborhood associations and community gardens, and the establishment of community land trusts. Our political philosophy of universalism (or abstract

rights) has been yielding to a politics of difference or recognition (Charles Taylor, cited by Jencks 1993, 10) whereby decision making depends on context rather than on modernist binary logic. Economic trends include mixed-use development and transformations brought on by the new economy (e-commerce, partnering, and technological convergences). Social trends reflect and coincide with these, expressing a frustration with the fragmented landscapes produced by conventional urban development and a craving for the excitement, spontaneity, and sense of flow characteristic of truly urban places. Some implications of these trends for urban design include the building of transit-oriented developments, the creation of quality public spaces and transit systems, urban infill, and alternative typologies and morphologies that respond to current needs and tastes. In the best-case scenarios, the efficiencies allowed by these trends conserve energy and other resources while decreasing social isolation thereby empowering people to envision and implement their own community designs.

After centuries of technological innovations serving as prosthetic devices that have combated the natural environment while alienating us from it, we have reached a point where technology is corroborating and elaborating upon holistic world views. Computer technology is providing a means of representing the "higher level order" that has long been integral to the divergent world views of Buddhism, Taoism, and the Romantics, as well as to cosmologies proposed by Albert Einstein (quantum mechanics, 1905), Arthur Koestler (the holonic), Alfred North Whitehead, and others. This may itself illustrate the proposition that our universe is self-organizing on ever higher levels. Perhaps we have reached a place where the question of whether to continue or abandon the modern project has become moot.¹¹ Our hyperrational embrace of computer technologies along with the simultaneous revalorization of process, relationships, and complementarity may be conspiring to eradicate the either/or proposition of continuing or abandoning. We are now doing both simultaneously, each providing feedback for and adjusting the other accordingly, holding potential for achieving integration at another level.

Vulnerability does not denote weakness, indifference, or anarchy. Rather, it bespeaks an openness toward and acceptance of our human qualities along with a certain relinquishing of control, an embracing of our shadows (personal, collective, and urban), and recognizing change as the only constant. For designers, it translates into an enhanced receptivity towards conditions

such as site, client, budget, culture, and political considerations. Rather than constraints, these become opportunities and sources of inspiration. The stories of Prometheus, Genesis, and the Tower of Babel all tell about an initiation into complementarity: good and evil, joy and suffering, success and defeat, pride and shame, harmony and conflict, knowledge and ignorance, as well as vulnerability and control. If we truly wish to heal our landscapes and the design professions while improving our quality of life, to forge proactive solutions to contemporary problems, we must not forsake our vulnerability.

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Notes

¹ There were exceptions such as the work of Aldo Van Eyck, Constantinos Doxiadis, Shadrach Woods, and the Situationists. See for instance, Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, Aldo Van Eyck, *Humanist Rebel: Inbetweening in a Postwar World*, Lefaivre and Tzonis; "Beyond Monuments, Beyond Zip-a-ton" in *Le Carré Bleu* no.3-4, 1999: 4-44, Alex Tzonis "Pikionis and the Transvisibility" in *Thresholds* 19, 1999: 15-21.

² Earlier rejections of the master plan include Cedric Price's "Non-Plan" (1969) and Christopher Alexander's "pattern language" (1977 and 1987).

³ The ecological threshold as metaphor for urban interventions has been suggested by Sennett (1994, 69), Berrizbeitia and Pollak, and Corner, among others.

⁴ Ignasi de Solà-Morales defined "urban acupuncture" as catalytic small-scale interventions that are realizable within a relatively short period of time and capable of achieving maximum impact on immediate surroundings (Frampton 1999).

⁵ There have been earlier versions of this discussion. Paul Klee maintained that art should be experienced as a process of creation, not just a product (1944). Hans Scharoun considered open systems or the "unfinished" essential in designing cities that should be responsive to prevalent tendencies (Angélil and Klingmann, 21-22). Charles Eames' asserted that "Art is not a product. It is a quality" (1977). Millenia prior, Heraclitus contended that reality is ever-changing while Parmenades argued that all change is illusory.

⁶ See Ellin 1999, Chapter 8, Nestor Garcia Canclini and Silvia Lopez, "Hybrid Cultures" (1995). Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995). Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon, eds. *Women Writing Culture* (1995). and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (1992).

⁷ See Ellin 1999 Chapter 7 "Crisis in the Architectural Profession."

⁸ This holistic approach has been described as "designing without boundaries" (Benzel 1997). The widely hailed Carnegie Foundation report on architecture education (Mitgang and Boyer, 1996) supports such an approach, calling for more interdisciplinarity as well a greater symbiosis between school curricula and professional practice.

⁹ I am currently developing this theme in my book *Integral Urbanism* (forthcoming), which describes four other qualities in addition to vulnerability: hybridity, connectivity, porosity, and authenticity.

¹⁰ This distinction resembles those made by Deleuze and Guattari between "striated" and "smooth" or "molar" and "molecular" lines (1988).

¹¹ See Ellin 1999, Chapter 6 "The Modern Project: Continued or Abandoned?"