

## The Space Between

*Jan Wampler*

A city can be measured by its public spaces. They mirror our culture and time; they cast reflections that tell us of the well-being of our inhabitants.

Presently our cities are primarily a place for commerce. Traditionally, they have also served as settings for a broad range of cultural activities and as arenas for the meeting of ideas. For the city to sustain its important role as a center for commerce, the arts and intellectual discourse, a new sensitivity towards the amount and quality of the public space — the space between buildings — is needed. Increased emphasis must be placed on developing space between that is aesthetically attractive and conducive to these interactions.

The space between buildings, what I call “frozen space,” also is becoming more important as our population increases and resources decrease. We no longer live in a world of unlimited land resources. Buildings without a relationship to the land or each other cannot continue to be the norm.

Unfortunately, the placement of buildings in cities has been neither physically successful nor socially acceptable. Buildings have been designed with little concern for their relationships to each other or for the larger idea of the city. Spaces left between them have become undesirable and unlivable — dangerous wastelands.

*Buildings have become individual monuments to their owners and their architects competing for individual attention and creating unusable space between.*

To change this, we must develop a sensitivity to public space, not only in central civic and business districts but also, and more importantly, in urban and suburban neighborhoods, where the space between is becoming more important as densities increase. Our neighborhoods have become unhealthy places to live and work, islands of life isolated in wastelands of space. They need squares, parks, walkways, and spaces for children that encourage human interaction, communication, and the happy sharing of pleasant experiences — places integral to community life. These places must also be enjoyed for their visual appeal and for their utility as passageways within the neighborhood, to other neighborhoods, and to commercial enterprises.

To create an analogy with the landscape, it might be useful to think of a city as a location of joyful spaces made of paths and places. A woods in the landscape is only enjoyed when a series of paths and places are made to experience it. Paths enable movement through the land and at the same time provide a way to view it. Paths and places allow for sunlight to penetrate and flowers to grow.

The city's paths and places are its squares, parks, and walkways, which thoughtful planners and architects can create. The paths and places should enable positive and delightful walking, viewing and soul-enriching experiences. They should provide aesthetically pleasing vistas and visually enhanced frames of passage. The flowers and plantings are integral components of the architecture and its design.

Paths and places must be regarded as the most essential architectural components of land, houses, neighborhoods, and cities — of both rural and urban landscapes. Cities can have the same accessible, aesthetically satisfying, and intimate quality as a landscape when the public spaces, their paths and places, become the focus of design.

A city of public spaces made up of places and paths inside and outside our buildings could transform our concept of the city. The city could become a place for community action affecting the well being of the individual inhabitants and providing new resources of needed public space.

Examples of positive space between exist in our cities now, most of them from past times. They include places like small squares, streets, and lanes where people know each other and gather together and where the surrounding neighborhood is healthy.



Children can play in the small streets, where automobiles are not welcome. In cities that have strong space between areas there are corner stores, shops, and offices mixed with different kinds of housing that enable families, young couples, and single people to live in the same area. Uses are mixed in positive ways, producing a texture of spaces for different activities.

Most examples of places like this would be difficult to build today within present zoning and codes, yet they represent the more livable areas of the city. They are places that reflect the city as a social ideal, not just a place for commerce. We must look to these positive examples of path and place for the future of our neighborhoods.

### **Siena, Italy**

In Siena, Italy, the space between, or "frozen space," is part of the city's character and history. In Siena, space becomes an object; the buildings are used to define the form and reinforce the presence of spaces. The narrow streets have a special, interdependent relationship with the buildings. In the

hot summer the sun shines on the buildings above and is often reflected on the buildings' windows in the cool streets below. One passes shopkeepers and people conveying greetings from their doorways. In the evening, at dinner time, the clinking of plates might be heard behind the walls and the murmur of voices in conversation gives the feeling of life close by. The streets and buildings become one, yet the street remains public space. It is a playground, conversation place, and watching place; walking in the streets is a joyous experience.

The paths are complemented by the Campo, perhaps the most formed frozen space in the world. In the Campo, the space is the solid; it is the living room of the city. It is many things to many people: children play there, friends converse, lovers touch, people watch performances. All the other activities that make a city a healthy, joyful place can happen there. The Campo changes as time, light and activities change, but it is always vibrant and full of life. Although it is used throughout the year, twice each year at the time of the Palio, the great horse race, the

Campo and the streets of Siena take on a special meaning.

*Children, adults, and tourists become part of a tradition and the city becomes alive with space.*

The perimeter of the Campo is used as the race course for the Palio. People watch the race from the center of the Campo and from the buildings around it. Balconies with awnings become platforms and extensions of the buildings. There is a horse representing each of Siena's *contradas* or neighborhoods, where preparations are made for days before the race. The night before the race, dinners are held in the streets of each *contrada*. Long tables are stretched down the streets and the neighborhood feeds its guests. The street suddenly becomes a dining room, an outside space for eating. Toasts are made and the jockey and horse are wished luck for the next day's race. The street then becomes special, full of life and space, a meeting place for the entire city. The space between is of an appropriate size for these activities. After the Palio, the city returns to its normal activity with the Campo the center stage of ever changing life.

Opposite page: A path  
with steps.

Right: The Campo, a living  
room for Siena.

All photos by Jan Wampler  
unless otherwise noted.



### **Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard**

The town of Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard also has some of these positive characteristics of space between. Cottage City, as it is called, was built in the nineteenth century as a Methodist camp retreat for people along the New England coast. At first it was composed of small family tents with a large tent in the center for religious meetings. Gradually the family tents were replaced by cottages that were usually the same size as the tents, about 22 feet wide, and in the same locations. The main tent was replaced by a large structure, which is not so much an object as it is a shelter capturing space, floating above the ground and connected to the sky.

The tents and buildings were located around places and paths that represented cities from which the people came. Each of the small places became a collection place for people from that area, and a common bond was made. The paths and places became positive, full of life, and since they were pedes-

trian, they had a scale conducive to human interaction. They are still free of automobiles.

Like Siena, Cottage City has an annual celebration. Each year, one night in July, the Celebration of the Lanterns is held. Candle-lit lanterns are displayed in front of each house, then carried by the people to the meeting structure, making the space alive with light.

*On a warm summer night the space for a time becomes full of light and people, transforming the ordinary into the joyful.*

### **San Juan, Puerto Rico**

San Juan, Puerto Rico, is also made up of paths and places. The city is based on the Law of the Indies, a set of rules Spanish *conquistadors* used to organize new cities in the Americas. Such cities usually were laid out on a grid with a plaza in the center block. Usually the main church, public buildings, and commercial buildings surrounded the plaza, and the remaining blocks were residential. As more residential space

was needed, the pattern was repeated with more blocks of the same size and public spaces. This simple framework was used for most Spanish cities in the Americas and was affected only by topography and size.

Old San Juan is almost completely surrounded by a wall that has only two openings. The effect within the city is one of closure and intimacy. The streets or paths, the plazas or places, and the buildings all become one fabric with the space between acting as a positive framework.

Behind the doors of the houses are the most public rooms, behind them are courtyards onto which the more private areas of the house face. This provides a transition from the most public spaces to the most private. As one walks the streets, one has a glimpse through the open doors of the life inside, blurring the distinction between the public and the private. Balconies overhang the streets, making the effect even more intense.

*The young collect on the corners and the old still stroll to the plaza.*



**Oak Bluffs, meeting place of space in the landscape.**

## Learning from References

These positive-space cities provide clues about how the space between often becomes the catalyst for a joyful experience in cities.

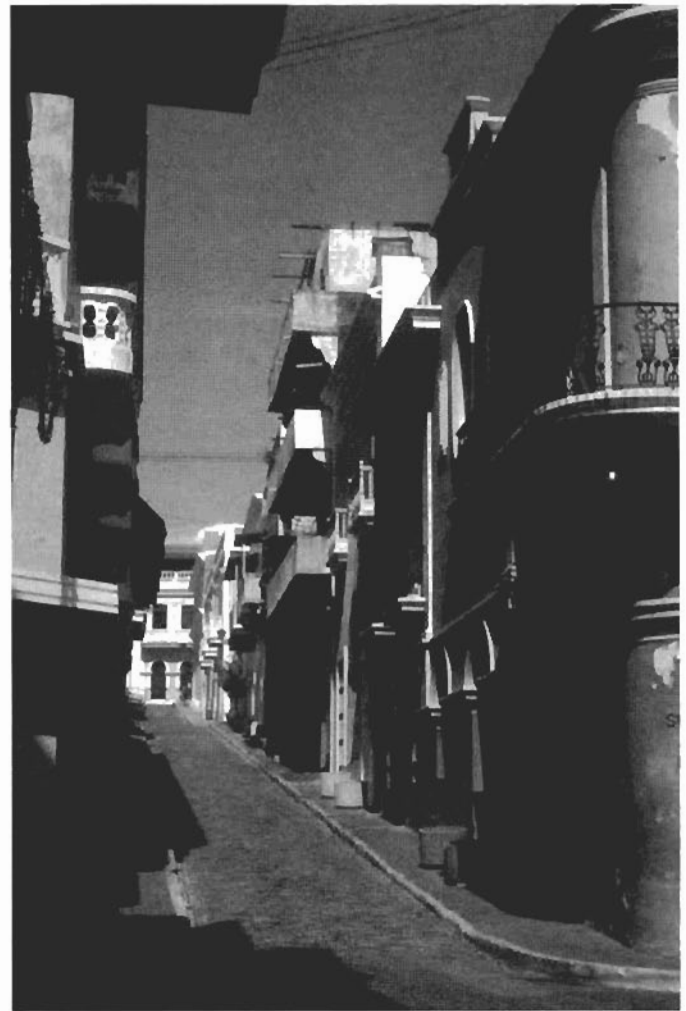
Neighborhoods could be composed of a number of squares, places, and paths. Each element might have a use of its own but at the same time contribute to the total. The neighborhood can become more pedestrian. People have more chance for casual contacts; cooperatives might form as residents become more connected by the space between. The neighborhood might become safer and more human as more activity fills the space between.

*The space we use becomes the stage of our lives, the buildings are only the sets.*

Entrances to houses become places off the path where people might linger and meet. Doorways become transitions from the inside private space to the outside world; they welcome interaction. The materials of the steps, fences, gates, and curbstones — all part of the space between — become the architecture of the city, the flowers of the space between.

When emphasis is placed on a commitment to neighborhood public space and the space between, managing these spaces becomes important. In the neighborhood of the future these paths and places might be managed by residents who would take responsibility for the main small public spaces near them.

*In the neighborhood of the future we are all custodians of public space — the space between.*



Above: Old San Juan, typical path/street.

Below: Back Bay, Boston, transition between public and private.

Photo by Nancy Angney.

