

Dimensions of Urbanism: Urban Blocks

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AN INCREMENT OF URBAN GROWTH + REPAIR

At the intersection of architecture, urban design and master planning, the urban block forms the most useful increment of urban growth and simultaneously urban repair. The urban block is flexible and resilient, one of the oldest and most important elements of city building. In a city plan the urban block is a semi-private domain that defines the quality, shape and character of urban public space on all sides. For this reason, the dialogue between the design of the private realm and the public realm is of critical importance to the future of cities, and the design of the urban block sets the rules, boundaries, and parameters for this exchange. The urban block creates a formal and spatial system which is complex and dynamic. The urban block is architectural in scale and solution, and is one of the twenty-first century's great design challenges. Understanding urban blocks is a key to unlocking the puzzle of the responsible design, development, construction, and operation of cities.

COMMUNITY STRUCTURE

Urban blocks express a formal approach to structuring community and society. From the English garden cities to the German *seidlungs*. From the Standard blocks extracted from the National Land Ordinance of 1785's Continental Grid to the courthouse squares of Texas, to the California mission towns that followed the Laws of the Indies. Urban blocks provide

a framework for design expression while limiting the extent of any single expression, as lamented by Rem Koolhaas in *Delirious New York*.

THIS TYPOLOGICAL STUDY

This is hardly a collection of city planning's greatest hits, comforting standards, and one-hit wonders. Rather, this comparative study of precedent is a working tool for understanding existing places and designing new ones. It forms an open set of questions, a graphic introduction to the built environment's response to the potent contemporary issues of density, housing, floor area ratios, open space access, and mobility choices. How has land planning contributed to the housing crisis? What building types work well with on-site parking? Can common open space be safe and secure?

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

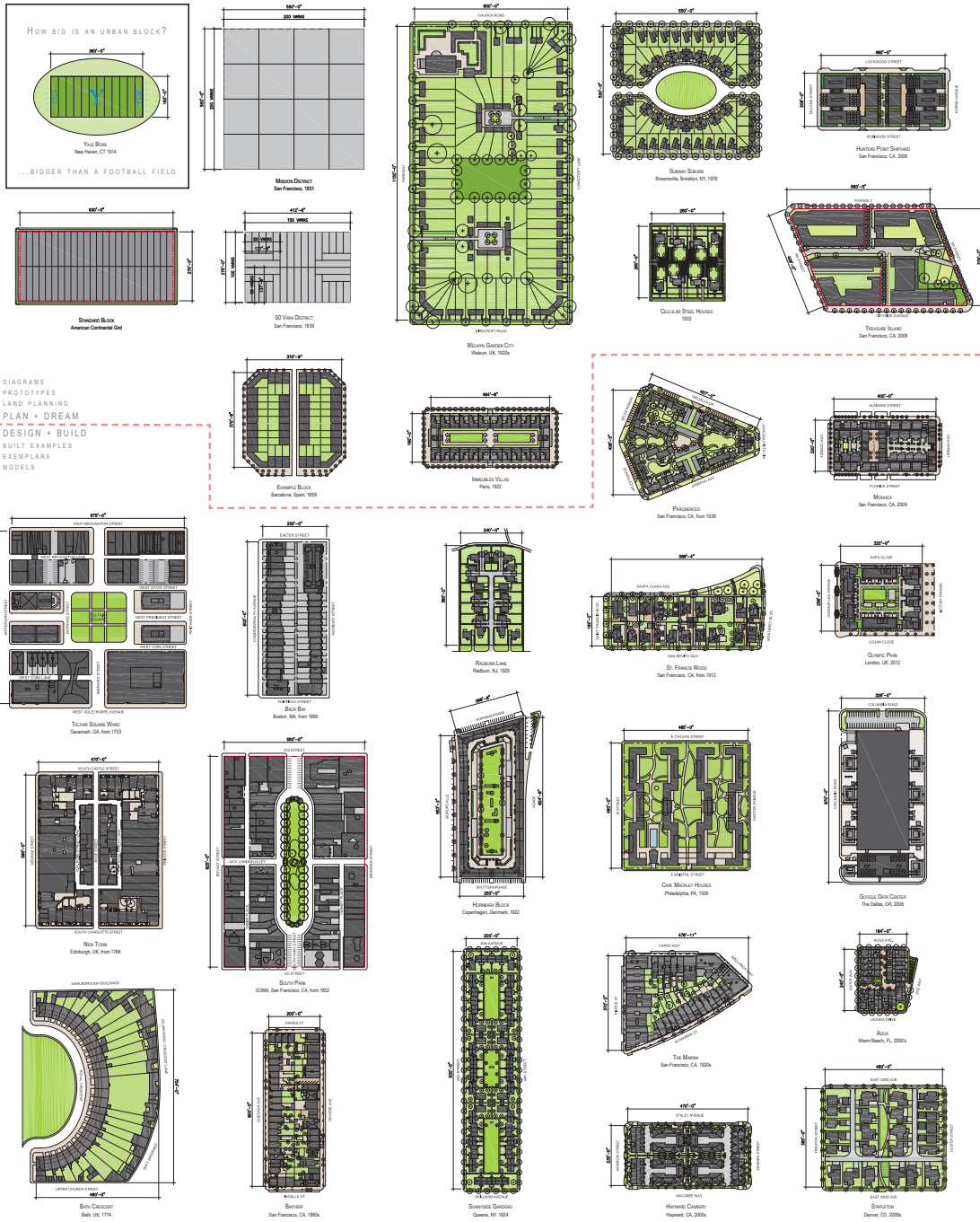
What lessons can we learn from an assessment of the typical and the idiosyncratic? Here are some observations:

- Land platting can determine building type, neighborhood scale, and changeability rate for centuries.
- Almost 200 years of arranging single-family dwelling units, unstacked, on blocks has proved that they will never be dense enough to properly support public transit. Conversely, high rise buildings aren't needed to achieve dense urbanity, either.

- Blocks should be at least 260' deep if a rear alley is desired for servicing or parking access.
- While larger blocks are more efficient from a property-to-street net-to-gross ratio, they usually need a sub-network of alleys dividing them.
- Open space can be aggregated across a block to be common, shared, safe, secure, and big enough to be practical and usable.

And observations of particular block-scale designs:

- Le Corbusier's *Immeubles Villas*, his early urban design work, was extremely rational and innovated within the existing European perimeter block typology.
- Micro-climate can generate urban form, as seen in SOM's parallelogram block design for *Treasure Island*.
- Robert A.M. Stern has been trying to bring a redeeming formal rigor to the suburb - as seen in his *Subway Suburb* - for half a century.



18 C 19 C 20 C 21 C

←----- DIMENSIONS OF URBANISM: URBAN BLOCKS -----→

1"=200'/61m

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Preliminary Findings
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