SPECIAL PLACES in cities carry huge layers of symbols that have the capacity to pack up emotions, energy, or history into a small space. I call them epitome districts. Here one can see the bigger place in compression or in miniature; here one can say, “If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all.” But no two are ever exactly alike.

In linguistics, an epitome is a brief statement expressing the essence of something, a short presentation of a large topic. A city’s epitome districts are crammed with clues that trigger our awareness to the larger scene—things around the corner, processes out of sight, history all but covered up. They stand for other things; they generate metaphors; they are the sort of places that, ideally, help us get it all together.

The thing about epitome districts is that they seldom stand still. The symbolic load is forever shifting. One generation’s epitome district may become the next generation’s candidate for oblivion. Only a trace may survive—a persistent street pattern, a local accent, a cluster of intermeshed businesses. But do not picture epitome districts as remnants or mere reminders. They offer, I think, the most compelling evidence of present and future change, providing we know where to look, and how.
The term "epitome district" was first coined by a team of bright graduate students at the Medill School of Journalism of Northwestern University in 1966.\textsuperscript{1} We were looking together for ways to grasp those changes that were convulsing Chicago. The students tracked through the stockyards, then disintegrating like so many other old stockyards—in Denver, Kansas City, Phoenix, and elsewhere—because of the pressure of rising big-city expenses and the increased value of stockyard land for other, better-paying activities. They looked at port-of-entry neighborhoods crammed with newcomers, at a North Shore suburb with streets almost wholly deserted at 10 A.M.; they uncovered an indicator of doubling-up by tenants in old apartments (by counting makeshift mailboxes in the beat-up lobby), a way to measure neighborhood density (by getting out early in the morning after the first snow and counting footprints), a way to check on family overcrowding (by looking for beat-up back stoops and bare yards trampled by too many kids); and they observed the awkward fit between old-timers in village houses amid giant new suburban warehouses in Elk Grove Village and Wheeling, Illinois. And in doing all this they came to see how the traditional fix on downtowns, traditional information sources, and traditional city images are no longer dependable. At first they found it hard to look. All their training had taught them to track down key persons to interview—mayors, city engineers, county political chairman, et al. They were accustomed to trust a quote, but not a sight. Only after many weeks were they able to use what they saw as skillfully as what they had been told.

Let us look, then, for our own epitome districts; places where one may observe formal and informal rituals, symbolic activities: the organization of folk festivals ranging from parades to inaugurations, from unveilings to auctions to rallies to funerals and swearings-in. Places where such activities begin are key places to all the other activities that feed into and out of those places—especially caravans, parades, motorcades, and a host of proliferating processions that jam up traffic in every city. The beginning point—historically and at the moment—is a special sort of epitome district.

In many cities, one can pick out such ceremonial places easily. In the South there is a modest old Confederate monument as one's guide; in the North a monument is similarly located but two or three times as big (losers generally cannot afford big monuments to lost wars). In older gridiron-type cities, it is likely to be at the City Hall grand staircase. In suburban towns, celebrations begin at a major shopping center. (The 1972 political campaigns offered scores of examples of candidates hustling for suburban votes by helicoptering in and out of shopping-center parking lots.)

Once we become sensitized to origins, to beginning-places, to places of
19, 20, 21. Giant-sized breaks in landscape patterns occur where the old national grid took over, generally west of Ohio and Mississippi rivers, with many historical and geographic variations beyond those shown on the United States map here. One of the clearest sets of breaks within one state is the old Virginia Military District within Ohio, subdivided after the Revolution. By far the larger part of the nation, however, falls into a predictable township system.
transition, we are then in a heightened state of awareness, not only to the processes of a city, but to those places especially rich in these directional and functional clues.

**Breaks**

A city’s energies falter or shift gears in predictable ways and places. During a century and a half of rapid expansion, American cities have shown the results of change more clearly than have those of Europe, and these breakpoints—or gear-shifting zones—tell us a great deal about the larger scene. As special, geometric epitome districts, they offer quick insights into the larger dimensions of the city.

A “break,” as I am using the term, occurs where there is an abrupt, visible switch in the direction and/or the design of streets—especially where the pattern shifts diagonally. It occurs usually where one gridiron of streets laid across flat land encounters a steep hill or a valley; or else where the original gridiron of one settlement, or one early surveyor, clashes with an adjoining street network. From this clash, there usually emerges a series of awkward, irregular, and angular street junctions along the fracture zone where the grids encounter each other (figs. 19, 20, and 21). No matter how long ago the clash took place (thousands of them occurred in the nineteenth century), the results are usually visible and influential today. Thus, to watch for breaks is to find clues to history as well as to current events.

Urban critics, particularly those hung up in the perspectivist tradition, insist that the American city is unvarying and monotonous in its addiction to the grid. But it is not enough to echo this stale lament; for to understand an American city on first contact, one must look beyond the individual grid to its interface or fracture zone with the next, and to variations within the grid (fig. 22). One need not swallow the line that all grids are alike, nor accept whole hog the assertion that one break is as good as another. Some breaks exert a positive effect on the development around them; others biff things up on all sides. Few breaks exist with no apparent side effects; at least I have never found one in looking at dozens of cities and their street systems.

For example, I have gone back several times since 1963 to observe the modest dog-leg break between the older grid of Austin, Texas, and the slightly shifted and skewed grid to the north, where the University of Texas neighborhood begins at West Nineteenth Street (fig. 23). The north-south streets miss joining at Nineteenth Street by half a block. Consequently, anyone approaching Nineteenth Street looks directly at the backsides and hindquarters of the properties opposite. This particu-
23. Between town and gown at Austin, Texas, Nineteenth Street forms a distinct geographic separation where two street patterns meet at the break, forming a series of irregular dog-leg intersections. These have influenced land uses and set up a zone of transition signals for motorists.
larly uninviting break has been very slow to develop commercially, compared with most diagonal breaks which offer better visibility. The reason is not altogether aesthetic. Motorists are so preoccupied with negotiating the dog-leg junctions they pay little attention to the roadsides and what they might offer.

Sharp breaks tend to occur at the edge of central business districts, as though the energies which produced the first city have now exhausted themselves. Time and again, as one travels outward from old downtowns—as in Denver, San Francisco, New Orleans, Seattle, Fresno, Las Vegas, or Minneapolis—one confronts confusion: the grid turns angular and odd-cornered; it slopes off in a new direction (fig. 24). And along this zone of fractured intersections one encounters a new framework with different densities, architectural styles, building setbacks (fig. 25).

The most confusing break I have encountered is the remarkable razzle-dazzle no-man's-land area in downtown Denver where two disparate grids come together at Broadway, Twentieth, and Welton: the original diagonal grid that was based on the South Platte River and early railroads parallel to the river, and a subsequent grid that follows the compass directions: north-south, east-west. This lash-up occurs with devastating impact where the blocks are cut up into triangles. So confusing is this melange at first that there is no visible identity left. Most buildings in the vicinity have been razed, the multiple junction is surrounded by parking lots, few pedestrians are to be seen, and one-way traffic speeds through this man-made mini-desert.

Yet this apparent confusion reveals several patterns to a patient observer standing at the break. First, the older flatland grid to the west contains the bulk of old Denver's businesses. Secondly, east of this break you begin walking uphill—an exercise most downtowners have avoided, thus making the break a prime location for parking lots. Thirdly, the University Club and other remnants of the old mansion district along Capitol Hill to the east were obstacles to big-business development until the late 1960's. Now the slope is hot property, being filled with giant office buildings, a transition observable at the breaks of many other cities.

Austin and Denver illustrate the most familiar location for breaks—along the edges of the first settlement or original city plan. Most original plans consisted of rectangular lots formed into blocks, and these, in turn, formed into a rectangular gridiron. Almost inevitably, the first grid followed the alignment of an early bridge or was staked out at right angles to the first town landing or to the water's edge (fig. 26).

Original grids were seldom big enough for growth. Usually by the mid-nineteenth century, another set of speculating settlers laid out a new townsite just upriver or downriver from the original settlement. Seldom
24. Predictably, breaks in the gridiron pattern tell you where the original settlement ended and another, with a competing pattern, grew up next door. Most often the original gridiron was at right angles to a water landing. New Orleans' many grids follow the beds in the Mississippi River. Such breaks are handy navigation zones for getting one's bearings in a strange city.
25. Confusing to strangers is the competition set up between two old settlement patterns, as here along state road 29 (Massachusetts Avenue) northeast of Indianapolis, Indiana. Parking lot lines in foreground follow the north-south dictates of the national grid, while Route 29 was laid out diagonally athwart the grid. Thus property lines, lot lines, and painted lines do a continual flipflop, shifting from grid to diagonal.

did the latecoming grid merge easily with the original. In New Orleans, each new wave of settlers appeared to spawn its own grid, anchored to a different loop or meander of the Mississippi River.

In Milwaukee in the 1840’s, Juneautown settlers on the east side of the Milwaukee River settled on one gridiron, while the Kilbourn town folk on the west side had their streets following a different alignment. It took decades of legal skirmishes, bridge-burnings, and fistfights before the geopolitical break was mended.\(^2\) Today, four downtown streets—Kilbourn, Wells, St. Paul, and East Buffalo—cross the narrow Milwaukee River on oddly-diagonal bridges as reminders of that historic break.

In the Midwest and Great Plains, the original grid offers an instant fix on the town’s origins—usually anchored to the main railroad through town. Go to the point where the main street crosses the main track and that is where it all began. The grid determined early growth, and if the tracks ran northeast-southwest, so did the town. Eventually, as such
towns expanded, their diagonal grids encountered the one-mile-apart range or section roads, which followed the north-south–east-west compass. At that point, the old railroad grid was abandoned, and beyond the one-mile roads, new streets shifted to follow the national grid, as at Norman, Oklahoma; Hays, Kansas (fig. 27); and Fresno, California.

Not quite so easy to observe is the original grid in Atlanta, which began as a railroad-grid town called Terminus. Today, that original grid and its small, almost-square blocks make up the heart of Atlanta's financial district, north of the old railroad gulch, and surrounded by breaks (fig. 28). "Underground Atlanta's" streets, with their huge granite-block sidewalks, follow the original pattern next to the railroad.

In Macon, Georgia, the breaks around the old downtown area go back to the Civil War. The town was left bankrupt, and its citizens were concerned more with survival than with perpetuating the original rectangular street plan of 1823. Postwar poverty led to the abandonment of the 180-foot right-of-way of the original numbered streets, and today one can

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26. Typical evolution of a Midwest or western city with original landing place and first street gridiron at top. Later, land developers set up their own grid until finally, in Phase III, new streets joined the national grid and followed its N-S-E-W directions.

**BREAK EVOLUTION**

PHASE I

PHASE II

PHASE III
27. Early railroad towns show their beginnings along the tracks with their rectangular patterns tightly anchored to, and determined by, the direction of the tracks. Here at Hays, Kansas, the tracks ran diagonally. As soon as the city’s expansion reached the old mile-square section or range line roads, the gridiron “straightened up” into the national gridiron based on points of the compass.
trace that war’s influence by the sudden narrowing, bending, or twisting of many streets at the edges of the original grid.³

City dwellers have responded to breaks in remarkably uniform ways: as investors, settlers, and travelers they have resisted crossing the break either in home-seeking or investing. Breaks form psychological, as well as geographic, barriers; they set up relationships that confuse, so that territory on the other side seems strange and unreliable. Land beyond the break has an uneasy look about it; development is spotty and irregular.

28. Atlanta’s original gridiron of rectangular blocks was based on the early railroad, here running northwest-southeast across downtown. As city boomed, it set its streets on a new alignment, generally north-south. The old grid marks the heart of financial district.
With a speculator’s nose for locations, one can learn to look at civic centers, fairgrounds, and other large-scale enterprises for clues to the locations of old breaks. For example, the site of Seattle’s “Century 21” World’s Fair of 1962 was located just beyond, and north of, a major break in that city’s two downtown grids. Land beyond the break, north of Denny Regrade, was still comparatively underdeveloped in the 1950’s when the city sought, with a municipal bond issue, the 72-acre site that has now become a major cluster of civic buildings called Seattle Center. Thus, a location that was once beyond the pale, moved into center stage.

**Mobility at the Breaks**

High prices have always been paid for highly accessible sites, and the junction of two diagonal streets has been exploited for its accessibility for thousands of years. Edmund N. Bacon’s exposition of the Sixtus V plan for Rome in *Design of Cities* shows a sophisticated effort to create a movement system for that complex city, with a number of easy-access sites created at the nodes of traffic.\(^4\) Bacon’s account, in the perspectivist tradition, emphasizes the high visibility of these junctions; but the way traffic moves in Rome is proof, even today, that the key element was access rather than visibility alone. In a sense, Sixtus was an early breakmaker, using the power of the Church to do what later and more mundane planners have done, often by default, with the simple geometry of disjointed grids. Break sites—if they are not altogether awkward, as in Austin, Texas—are valued for their unique accessibility in hundreds of cities.

Undiscovered and unexploited breaks, however, are easy targets for contemporary highway and urban-renewal scouts and for tidy-minded city planners anxious to regularize traffic flow. Thus many nineteenth-century breaks are getting buried beneath new expressways, superblocks, civic centers, and other large-scale ventures. Most breaks remain intact, however, and a casual inspection of any city will uncover a consistent pattern of break locations for prominent buildings such as nineteenth-century railroad stations.

Since railroad tracks often followed rivers, valleys, and other topographical breaks, the depot or union station generally occupies a strategic break site, often at the end of a major city street, as in Macon, Georgia; Portland, Oregon (fig. 29); and Kansas City, Missouri. Before they all disappear in the reorganization of passenger service brought on by Amtrak in the 1970’s, they should be treasured as clues to the onetime “most accessible place in town.” Their presence or disappearance is a clue to what is happening beyond their walls and tracks.
29. Scores of nineteenth-century union stations are quick and easy reference points, being at the edges of the old cities or along geographical breaks such as rivers. Portland's Union Station, its main axis paralleling the Willamette River, offers a quick fix at the north end of Sixth Street.

30. Spotting a break in street patterns at Kansas City, between old Missouri River-oriented grid and later gridiron to the south, highway planners chose this confusion zone as a location for Interstate 70-U.S. 24/40 east-west. Thus, highways and urban renewal have wiped out many breaks.
31. While expressways and urban renewal wipe out breaks in one part of the city, architects and institutions go to extreme lengths to overcome the monotony of the breakless gridiron pattern, as here at Columbus, Ohio, where the Grant Hospital School of Nursing on East Town Street has been set askew, on the diagonal. It thereby acquires some of the high visibility that normally accrues to buildings located on breaks.

Since breaks offer such incomparable building sites and planning opportunities, one would expect them all to become preserve-and-dramatize zones on city plans. Yet far too many planners and downtown business groups simply try to wipe out the break, shove it under an expressway (fig. 30), or destroy it with a renewal project. Thus, many a city’s future can be previewed in what is happening today, in either the destruction or enhancement of these old breaks (fig. 31).

**The Political Venturi**

Quite by accident, mixed into a long search, I stumbled upon one of the more important epitome districts to be found in any city that is still linked together by an establishment, power elite, or power structure. This is the distinct pathway or network of paths along streets, sidewalks, and corridors followed by central-city movers and shakers, influentials, wheelers and dealers, and hangers-on.
Despite the rise of electronic communications, much important person-to-person business is still transacted out in the open, between office and lunch, courtroom and conference, bench and bar, desk and drinks.

The process of my own discovery is worth looking into, for it tells something about the ways in which downtown epitome districts work, and suggests clues to their futures. In writing about my own city, Louisville, I found it essential to move about on foot, to pay personal calls on as many political, financial, and other key figures as possible, to see them in their own haunts and lairs, to probe their attitudes and experience, and, as a journalist, to move in public places, observing who was with whom for clues to future alliances, deals, and consortia.

After repeated exposure, I discovered that one particular stretch of sidewalks, doors, and corridors in the financial-civic district was extraordinarily productive in contacts, tips, suggestions, reactions, observations, and gossip.

My discovery, it happened, took place on a Monday. My Mondays were highly pressured and competitive; days on which it was vital to catch up on potential news after a weekend. I found that by stationing myself at noon on the crowded public sidewalk outside the largest bank and office building, keeping in view the doors of the County Court House and the second-largest bank, plus the route from nearby City Hall, I was likely to meet at least two dozen news sources, men in public life or business, headed for lunch at restaurant or club, willing and sometimes eager to exchange rumor, gossip, and hard information. (One never approaches these encounters empty-handed or vacant-minded.) It became clear that here was an unavoidable “Indian path” between the offices of the downtown elite and their noonday drinking/lunching/negotiating places. This walkway carried a high information load, a mixture of rumor, gossip, facts, and near-truths having varying capacity to shock, inform, placate, and cause repercussions. It was, for my purposes, a highly volatile and explosive mixture to be handled carefully, professionally, and with due regard for the libel laws.

By analogy, I then compared it with the Venturi tube of an automobile carburetor, that narrow aperture or nozzle through which a stream of gasoline was forced under pressure. Once through the nozzle, it expands quickly, mixing with air and vaporizing into an explosive mix to be compressed by the cylinder head, ready for the spark plug to force it to life. Thus the “venturi” is a gatherer, an accumulator, and accelerator of traffic, movement, and information.

The typical venturi of this sort seldom stretches longer than a fifteen-minute walk, although it is clear that executives will walk several times as far to lunch—especially in pairs or threesomes—as they will walk from their cars to their offices. The “throat” of the venturi may be only a few
yards long and a sidewalk wide; it may split, disappear, and suddenly reappear. It has its popular corners, its Peacock Alleys, and its cargo of information which varies with the seasons and with demolition or new construction along its route. The formation of new men's clubs, the merger of new and old, and pressure to open all-white, male clubs to women and minorities indicate a situation that is far from static. Many a club withers on the downtown vine, while new ones sprout in the prospectuses of proposed new downtown skyscrapers. Atlanta's penthouse Commerce Club is so successful it has opened a branch some blocks away.

Although financial and court districts are the most immovable and traditional parts of the nineteenth-century American downtown, few of them are static. Competition is keen and transforming. Thus venturi and their appurtenances—the clubs, courts, banks, offices, bars, and restaurants—are epitomes of the larger city; they offer indicators of its power structure, strengths, and challenges. They are carriers of information, conveyors to be used, planned, controlled, and manipulated.

There is nothing more calculated to inspire the cupidity of speculators (and of more prudent investors) than a chance to create, and then monopolize, a local venturi—whether it is a single street that seems to be "the only way through town," or a town or city occupying a large-scale venturi location or geographic bottleneck of the sort described here.

This opportunity fascinated the banker on whose doorstep I had first discovered the process—so much so that in the new Citizens' Fidelity Bank tower in Louisville the ground-floor arcade has been consciously designed as a small-scale venturi to attract low-level customers, and the Jefferson Club added on the top floor to magnetize high-level decision-makers. Bank president Maurice D. S. Johnson plans, during the 1970's, to extend his bank's venturi diagonally southeastward into the heart of the city's shopping district—barely in the nick of time, for his competitor, the First National Bank, has attempted to create its own venturi two blocks north, with a forty-story office tower and a handsome plaza facing south toward the traditional venturi. No doubt the bankers' grapevine has been at work, for one may observe similar maneuvers elsewhere: the design of the new First National Bank in Chicago's Loop was carefully manipulated to pull customers through its giant arcade and off its own plaza on the sunny south side, and influencers to its Mid-Day Club on the fifty-sixth floor.

No venturi is immutable; some disappear as the information capacity of a downtown district shrivels. The "yield" of a political venturi changes with the seasons in varying degrees depending on latitude: few people hang around Chicago's sidewalks in midwinter, and I will be surprised if the grandiose South Mall at Albany, New York—built at a cost now
approaching $1 billion—will be anything but a vast windswept wilderness. It is a truism among journalists that the level of interchange and gossip drops drastically around state capitol when the state legislatures adjourn; and similar changes occur when any population shift drains a local pathway system (figs. 32, 33, 34, and 35).

In order to grasp the dynamic forces at work, let us look into several venturi districts, beginning with Jacksonville, Florida: In ten years the old lunchtime venturi has been fragmented by the openings of the River Club (1955) and the University Club (1965), each one atop a new office tower a mile from old downtown on the opposite bank of the St. Johns River. By 1972, all but one major central hotel had closed, few top-flight restaurants remained, and an early venturi northward from the financial district to the old Seminole Club had thinned out. Whether a new insurance headquarters and proposed "skywalk" system might reverse the trend remains to be seen.

Columbus, Ohio: The junction of Third and East Broad streets provides the action scene, much of it still revolving around the State Capitol in mid-city. The University Club is just behind the Capitol on South Third, the Athletic Club at 130 East Broad, and the august Columbus Club a short walk east on Broad, where, in the early 1970's, it faced a major building boom across Broad where the new State Office Building, and Borden Company headquarters were high-rising. Close by an alley called Lynn Street blossomed out with the Pewter Mug and other dimly lit restaurants to reinforce the old Ringside restaurant.

In Hartford, Connecticut, the traditional venturi is anchored to the marble entry of the Hartford Club, an imposing red brick building with its rear quarters extensively rebuilt and a handy parking lot on the south side. Across Prospect Street is the huge Travelers' Tower Plaza (1960) and the Wadsworth Athenaeum, the nation's first free art museum. The more modest University Club, tucked away on narrow old Lewis Street a few minutes' walk to the west, is less big-business oriented. Members of the State Legislature and other politicians are magnetized, by good food and a staff that memorizes their names, to Carbone's, a bleak-looking but popular drive-in restaurant on Franklin Avenue a mile south of the business district and considered too far away to walk (fig. 36).

Cincinnati, Ohio: The south side of Fourth, between Walnut and Main, is considered "on the way" from important downtown offices to both the Queen City Club and the University Club. Major banks provide generators along the route, and a number of garages have helped to anchor offices in the area.

Providence, Rhode Island: The corner of Westminster Mall and Dor-
32, 33, 34, 35. Upon closer examination, it turns out that the venturi principle offers a way of looking, not only at small traffic flows, but at regional and metropolitan concentrations of traffic. The tremendous flow of air traffic through Atlanta, of vehicular traffic through downtown El Paso, St. Petersburg, and Chicago, is partly an accident of geography, but reinforced by bridge and highway locations.
36. Open since 1935 at this location, Carbone’s Restaurant pulls drive-in trade from the Connecticut State Capitol, seats 85 with a 150 per cent turnover at midday, and is typical of many clubs and restaurants which pull downtown men away from old downtown sidewalk venturis.

trićian mall, is an important venturi. Local men’s clubs occupy top positions in nearby office buildings, although the prestigious University Club is several blocks away up College Hill on Benefit Street.

Savannah, Georgia: The vicinity of Johnson, Wright, and Chippewa squares provides this city’s greatest mixture of hotels and clubs along Bull Street, the main north-south street, which connects the central core of old Savannah squares. The southern anchor of the Bull Street venturi is the Oglethorpe Club (“Members Only” sign), Union Army occupation headquarters after the Civil War.

Portland, Oregon, has an identifiable venturi around its central park blocks, partly because of the downtown location of the University, Arlington, and Multnomah clubs and the splendiferous Benson Hotel, all within easy walk of the Sixth and Broadway “heart.” Downtown itself remains at relative high density.

Albany, New York: For nearly a decade, this capital city’s downtown pathways have been disrupted by the removal of more than 3,000 dwellings to make way for the supercolossal South Mall, by the enforced suburbanization of state employees until the Mall is finished in the middle 1970’s, and by giant renewal and highway projects. But the Fort Orange Club stands fast at 110 Washington Street, a block from the Capitol. As New York banks move onto State Street, as 16,000 displaced state em-
ployees move back downtown, and as new hotels arise on the Chapel Street–Maiden Lane axis, some of the old foot traffic will resume. It appears likely that State and Eagle, at the lower crest of Capitol Hill, will continue to be the major crossing for shoppers after political, financial, and other goods.

The cargo value or informational load carried by each of these pathways is affected by the magnets, generators, and feeders that contribute to it; by the presence or absence of large office buildings and activity centers (fig. 37); by the variety of public and private goings on in the neighborhood; and by easy access and pleasures along the way—and especially by competition from new media. There is no guarantee that future cities will support traditional venturis as actively as in the past, since the flow of electronic information via computers, private television nets, conference calls, Confravision (the British television version of the telephone conference call) is expanding by geometric leaps.

Today, many venturis carry lighter message-loads; those who walk

37. Atlanta's prestigious Commerce Club, with its tiny promenade around the top of the Commerce Building (foreground) near downtown Five Points is an important watering place along the financial district's venturi. Peachtree Center at top right. This view is northwest.
these pathways are no longer seen as the real heavyweights (especially if you listen to old-timers “tell it like it used to be”). Country club living and spending habits have taken over, and many old-style downtown clubmen can no longer afford both. And new magnets arise in the suburbs. Clayton, Missouri, a bustling suburban county seat, with its restaurants and clubs, has become a noontime mecca for hundreds of St. Louis influentials who live around Clayton and pay high rents for office space. In the 1960’s, they were paying higher rents for new offices in Clayton than they were for comparable space downtown. And they seldom hit their old haunts in downtown St. Louis. Power structures wax and wane, and thus it goes with their venturis.

No doubt there are many unmapped but well-known venturis in every city, awaiting discovery by outsiders. I would hope it will someday be as easy to get these maps as those at filling stations. Sidewalk action—like most beats—is visible, mappable, repeatable, and open to study by us all.

How does a stranger spot a venturi when he sees one? Not easily, for some indicators, such as clubs, are tucked out of sight; and the influential lawyer’s office building may look like any other. One clue lies within the venturi itself—in the highly visible nature of conversations taking place along the sidewalk. Venturi operators group at doorways and corners, using the sidewalks as their stomping grounds. Old pols—the perennial knowledgeable, cynical, and affable politicians—tend to stand up against the nearest building, one leg thrust forward so they may pivot to right or left, depending on who is approaching, their heads and eyes sweeping the crowd. In flowing threesomes, and eddies of quartets, papers and briefcases at the ready, lawyers, executives, and such upper-level activists furnish the sidewalk action, contribute to its flow, and thus reveal its location to others.

Wherever men and women make important transactions, they require face-to-face gathering places where body English speaks and leads to consequences words alone can never generate. The venturi is the place where grouping, paper passing, arm twisting, lapel tugging, elbow grabbing, and physical threats or enticements—open or veiled—take place. And they work. Not even the clearest of electronic images, not even the fabulous holographic presences foreseen by Professor Dennis Gabor and projected electronically around a conference table, can match the live and active physical presence that speaks so strongly in essential transactions.

Although some people insist they can learn to trust or distrust another person on television, I would argue that quite another, and more dependable, level of trust or avoidance is generated through repeated physical, visual, and verbal contacts of the sort that occur in the corridors, on the corners, across the new plazas, and through a city’s Indian paths and informal meeting grounds. Table hopping at a luncheon club is no sub-
stitute for the more democratic mixing that occurs on the sidewalks. In one physical form or another, large and small versions of these essential venturis are likely to survive.

Made by Victor Gruen

To manufacture an image larger than life—a successful man-made epitome district—is a rare achievement, and we can learn much from the Fort Worth plan proposed in 1956 by the architect Victor Gruen.⁹

So successful was Gruen in selecting, simplifying, and then exaggerating the symptoms and solutions for a “dying downtown” that his plan captured the imaginations of central-city saviors across the land. His posture was defensive. The old city needed to be defended against its newest enemy, the automobile. Later, in his book, The Heart of Our Cities, he grew more explicit; it was necessary to set up “an inner defense line” plus “two further fortifications systems—to repel the invasion of mechanical hordes onto those areas where they create havoc.”⁹

In the book, as in his public speeches, Gruen exhibited plans of medieval cities, including his native Vienna, bristling with walled forts, bounded by moats and fields of fire for defense. This was eloquent and powerful stuff to which downtowners responded in droves. Commissions for redoing downtowns poured in to the Gruen firm from all over: Fresno, Stamford, Paterson, Cincinnati, Manhattan, Rochester, Norfolk, Santa Monica, Vancouver, et al.

What Gruen had proposed at Fort Worth was a pedestrian-free core with beautiful malls, and around them an enclave of huge building blocks, reinforced by great parking garages at the corners, and the whole surrounded by a giant freeway system giving easy access to and from the heart (figs. 38 and 39). It was dramatic, grandiose, efficient—and expensive. Gruen’s originality and verve, his ironic eloquence, put him into the national spotlight. His proposals were widely published; they became official doctrine in hundreds of city plans of the 1960’s (fig. 40), and were built into the townscapes of the 1970’s. If anything had become a major new epitome district of the American city by 1972, it was Gruen’s.

Gruen thus came to stand for twentieth-century rational solutions to large-scale urban problems. His solutions were made up of large units, managed by large organizations, executed by big-scale finance and construction tactics—epitomizing the way twentieth-century American cities were heading. In contrast, the breaks we examined earlier represented the nineteenth-century mode of city expansion by means of a simplistic, repetitive gridiron pattern into which small operators, single-lot buyers, individual homeowners, and builders could fit. In a comparatively short time, from grid to Gruen, a major shift in scale had taken place.
38, 39. How many versions of the 1956 Victor Cruen plan for downtown Fort Worth have been applied to American and other cities is unknown, but the dramatic simplicity of its elements has been widely copied: ring expressway, ramp garages to absorb incoming cars, and a pedestrian-free core.
40. Using defensive language from Gruen, who was using medieval images from Vienna, Atlanta planners set up an "intercept strategy" to soak up automobiles in parking facilities (dots) before they inundated the city core.

The Identity-Makers

It became apparent to mayors, chambers of commerce, and local development promoters during the 1960's that local identity is capable of being converted into a money-maker in the new age of universal mobility.

As a result, epitome districts of a special sort have become a cliché, a gimmick whereby old identities may be refurbished and new ones fabricated as a device to promote the migration of industry and select population groups, especially tourists. Scores of cities now engage in fabrication—the art of fable-making—by assembling new versions of their former selves, spending fortunes on advertising to proclaim a new identity, and building structures and events to make that identity believable.

Seizing on old and well-known epitome districts, they balloon these into greater-than-life size and advertise them in national magazines. Atlanta proclaims itself to be "A New Kind of City," and capitalizes on its own blend of "Gone with the Wind" history and swinging in "Underground Atlanta." Indianapolis shortens its name on billboards to "Indy" to fit the racing image and newspaper headlines. There are dozens of self-styled "Cities on the Move" advertising their wares in business magazines and other media. Lacking other virtues to attract new growth, smaller cities brag about "Plenty of Room."
In this new age of myth-making, toponymy—the study of place names and their origins—has become a widespread obsession. Historical commissions get more power as cities seek to whip up their own historic districts. The Vieux Carre Commission of New Orleans, one of the oldest, uses its legal powers to coerce property owners into conforming to the proper architectural image. These powers have been firmly anchored to the Constitution by proving that the tourist-getting French Quarter image is important to the financial health and general welfare of the city.

No city considers itself sufficiently armed to entice foot-loose tourists or industrialists without a new sort of epitome district called Six Flags Over Ourtown, or Vacation Village, Frontierland, Pioneerland, Butcher-town, German Village, Old(e) Town(e), or local imitations of Vieux Carre, Williamsburg, Sturbridge Village, Bavarian Alpine Village, and Old Salem.

These new epitome districts usually have most if not all the following indicators: a name; well-defined boundaries or a boundary zone; local history made evident in maps, pamphlets, etc.; a mythology; a central zone of action; gatekeepers or at least symbolic entrances; and a variety of signs and symbols. A significant indicator is an increase in neighborhood celebrations. New York City in three years increased the number of street-closing permits from some 700 to over 5,000 in 1972—mostly for neighborhood festivals. There is no limit to size: Disney World’s 56,000 acres combined with its promoters’ political power to collect highway interchanges and dominate the source of much of Florida’s underground waters forecast a whole new scale of epitome districts which, under single managements, may become world meccas for tourism.

Travelers may discover themselves in a yet-to-be-defined epitome district through the presence of old place names, ethnic foods, religious carnival preparations; and become amateur historians by that simple device of trying to follow the old shore line in a waterfront city. (“There is Dock Street, we must be getting close.”)

Surrounded by this mixture of newly emerging identity and old-style puffery, we need constant vigilance so as to match what we see happening against what is being artificially manufactured for us. Windbaggery—an airy form of packaging dear to chambers of commerce and tourism promoters—can easily blind us to the true nature of what is going on around us.

The “success” of any of these environments depends on a very special sort of exchange between it and us. The environment I call an epitome district must be information rich, and packed with visible evidence of complexities beyond itself. Each environment can be explained for and to us by signs, symbols, architectural manipulation, lighting, and other devices—explored with great ingenuity by Richard Wurman in *Making the*
City Observable\textsuperscript{10} and his other publications. But our survival depends on us, on our ability to see into any environment whether it is signed, lighted, mapped, explained or not (fig. 41). It is the unmapped, the unadmitted that we must cope with on our own. In all these shifty scenes, our survival depends on our ability to sense, and then to grasp, the environment’s carrying capacity for existential meanings—meanings that only we can penetrate by participation in that scene, by our physical presence in, and movement through, it. Such scenes convey much; they imply even more. They have a high absorption capacity for receiving information, for projecting existential meanings, and for generating myths.\textsuperscript{11}

Which means that we must bring something into these dealings with environments. It is we who can assign meanings to environments by using them and taking part in them, as Sister Annette Buttimer of the Clark University Graduate School of Geography has suggested.\textsuperscript{12}

Thus epitome districts have the capacity to stir up responses in us. Such meanings get built up over time, and seldom flow to us all at once; it is the repeated coming back to a scene or place, perhaps over a lifetime, which adds to the layers of experience that we share with an environment. Thus when we find an epitome district we should treasure it, return whenever possible, and deliberately use it as a special indicator, not only of changes in the scene, but of changes in ourselves.