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**Rethinking Urban Gateways**

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## Rethinking Urban Gateways

By Michael F. Barrette

Imagine driving into downtown Cincinnati from the south on Interstate 75. Green Kentucky hills fill your field of vision as you negotiate the meandering highway and converging traffic at 55 miles an hour. The hills that line the Ohio River Valley part momentarily and offer a fleeting glimpse of the skyline beyond. The greenbelt both truncates and screens your view, offering teasing glimpses until the highway abruptly straightens and the hills part to reveal the expanse of the Ohio River.

Before you have time to take in the scene, your view is obscured as you enter the bridge over the river. When the steel canopy of the bridge passes away, the green is gone. A dense urban landscape fills your field of vision. The city appears to grow beyond the frame of your windshield as you rapidly close in on your destination. Your awareness is heightened. You scan the roadway for your exit, change lanes, and decelerate. When you roll to a stop at the top of the exit ramp, the transition is complete; you have arrived downtown.

Not all gateways are as spectacular as this one, but they are by nature a dramatic element of the natural and built environment. For planners, a gateway is the proverbial brass ring. Corridor, scenic view, and streetscape plans often refer to gateways in positive terms or suggest the development of a gateway. The problem with gateway planning is that the

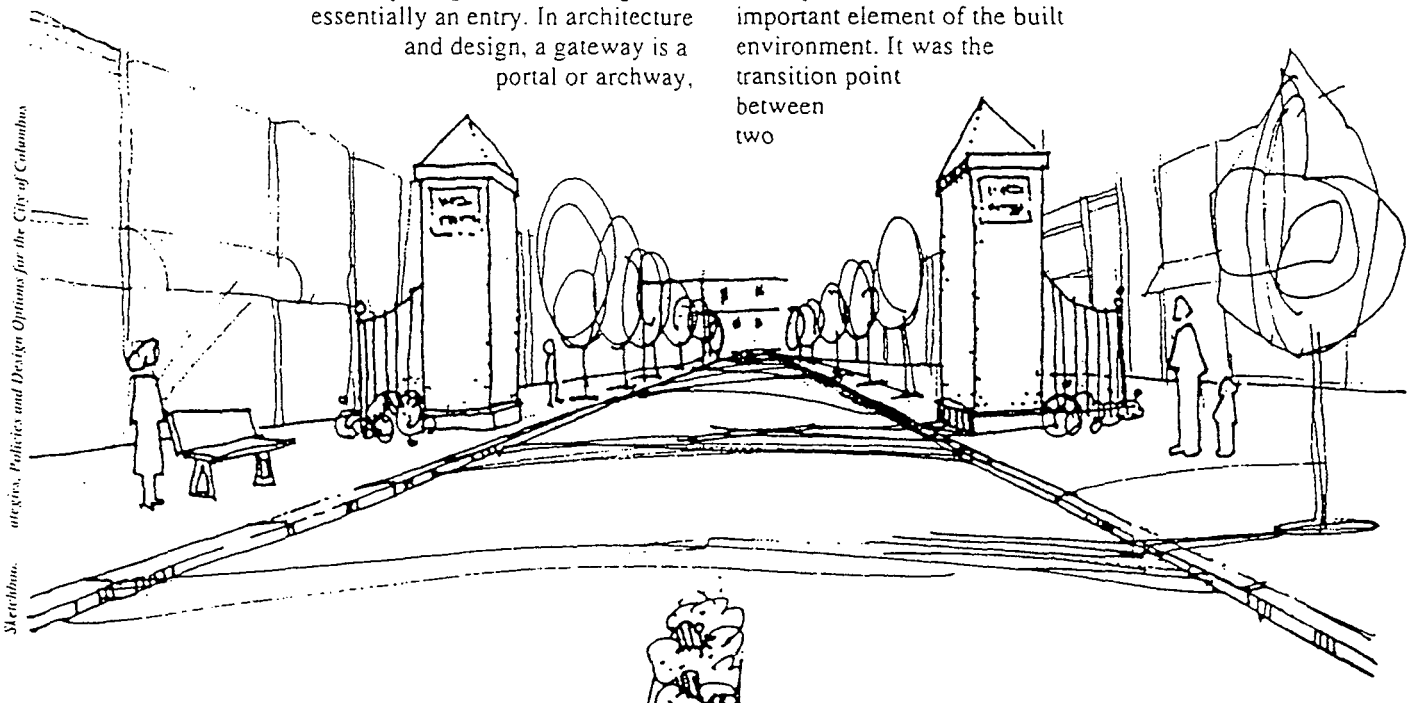
term *gateway* is ambiguous. In the literal sense, a gateway is an opening that frames a gate,

essentially an entry. In architecture and design, a gateway is a portal or archway,

but these definitions are not specific. The gate may be as large as the gate to the Taj Mahal or as small as the gate to your backyard.

Planners' use of the term varies. The *Grand/Main Corridor Study*, prepared for the City of Kansas City, Missouri, by Howard Needles Tammen & Bergendoff, identifies 15 locations for "gateway" treatments, ranging from parks and plazas to distinctive freeway overpasses. In Denver, the highway and adjacent land that will link the new airport to the city is being developed under the Gateway Concept Plan. In *Planning Principles for Chicago's Central Area*, more than 15 miles of expressway, from O'Hare Airport to the Loop, is identified as one of five major gateways to the central area. Some gateway plans are entirely concerned with community identity and economic development. Others are used to create a sense of place, build community pride, stake out territory, or preserve local character. City neighborhoods, suburbs, and small towns often create signs and landscaped entries in an effort to define local character and set their community apart from other places. Despite the disparate uses of the term, the premise is that a gateway is a boundary marker that can create a unique destination even if the place is part of a homogeneous landscape.

Historically, the meaning of gateway has been clear. The forms and functions are well documented throughout history, beginning with the ancient citadel cities of Egypt and Mesopotamia. These cities were surrounded by walls designed to protect their inhabitants. The gateways offered the only means of passage and were carefully monitored control points for field workers as they traveled to and from the farms that supported the city. The gateway, as a complement to the barrier wall, was an important element of the built environment. It was the transition point between two



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ways of life. The gateway marked the boundary between the safety of the city and the wildness of the unprotected fields.

When a city grew large enough to become a regional destination, the gate also became a dam to stem the tide of urban growth. When throngs of people clogged the entries, the gateways became the merchants' quarters of the city; inns, stables, and warehouses were commonly located nearby. It evolved from a point of transition to a passage that linked the rural land with the walled city.

A modern gateway is more than a ceremonial arch or a sign marking the entry into a new jurisdiction. It is a passage that identifies a transition between landscapes, land uses, and populations. When a gateway fails to define the transition, there is no sense of anticipation or arrival, and an important part of the urban experience is lost.

### Vision and Perception

What does a transitional passage look like? What attracts the eye? What evokes a sense of arrival? Spatial theorists have studied how we perceive space and form to answer these questions. Their findings may be applied to the principles of gateway planning.

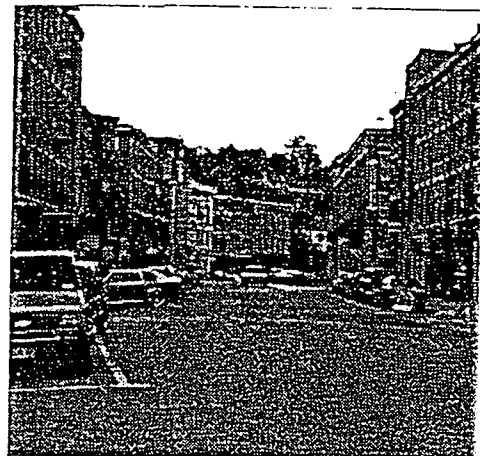
Many of our impressions of the landscape are subconscious. Prospect-refuge theory says that humans instinctively scan their surroundings, constantly evaluating the landscape in terms of vantage points and hiding places. The *prospect* is an unobstructed view, an overlook from which a hunter can see his or her quarry. The *refuge* is a place where the hunted can hide. The search for prospect and refuge satisfies the primal desire to see without being seen. Some theorists propose that, when we find aesthetic satisfaction with the built environment, it is the result of our prospect and refuge needs being met.

The scanning process creates a whole image by assembling a composite based on multiple images. The eye scans the landscape in increments, focusing on small areas of the field of vision, examining each for a fraction of a second. You may be conscious of this process when studying a static view, such as a painting or a scenic vista. Passage through a gateway is much more complex because it is not limited to a static view. As we move through our three-dimensional world, the elements of the landscape appear to move around us. Scanning becomes a dynamic process in which the quality of perception is related to time. The faster we travel, the less time we have to scan the landscape and assemble a composite that conveys a distinct sense of place. Landscape elements that enhance the experience of transition must be in the observer's field of vision, and they must be at a scale appropriate to the observer's speed.

In *The Visual Elements of Landscape*, John Jakle says, "landscapes are inherently spatio-temporal in their organization. Their conceptualization requires a dynamic orientation. Streets, even buildings, unfold to view over time, cuing space-meaning temporally as subjects come into view and disappear." Jakle describes movement along a path as a series of images in "linear progression following an obvious trajectory of travel." Each image is like a single frame in a reel of film. This concept of space and time is called *serial vision*. James J. Gibson prefers to define serial vision as "a continuous visual sensation." In *The Ecological Approach to*

*Examples of three vista concepts important to the urban designer: an enframed vista in Paris (right), a deflected vista in Galena, Illinois (below), and a terminated vista, also in Paris (below right).*

*Visual Perception*, he writes, "A path does not have to be treated as an infinite set of successive instants; it can be thought of as a unitary movement, an excursion, a trip, a voyage." Urban designers can employ this concept by arranging the landscape to evoke the sensations of approach, anticipation, and climax.



Spatial theorists and observers such as Grady Clay, Jay Appleton, Tahdahiko Higuchi, and Jakle have analyzed and categorized vistas according to their physical composition and the responses they evoke. Five types of vistas—terminated, framed, deflected, truncated, and screened—all of which heighten the attention of the observer and create a sense of transition—are strongly associated with gateways.

A terminated vista can create a sense of arrival. If the field of vision is divided into foreground, middle ground, and background, a terminated vista is a scene that is blocked in the middle ground. A good example of a terminated vista is a "T" intersection with a large building at the end of the street. The object in the middle ground—the building—blocks the view of the horizon and forces the focal point toward the viewer. The exaggerated presence of the building dominates the field of vision and creates a sense of closure and arrival by elevating the building to the status of a destination.

A framed vista occurs when the field of vision is partially blocked by an object in the foreground. The blocking object sets boundaries on the view and focuses attention forward through the "frame." The natural progression from focal points in the foreground to focal points in the background is less gradual than it would be without framing. This can be an important gateway element when used to direct or cue the eye toward a transition.

A deflected vista occurs when the line of vision is redirected beyond the sight of the observer, creating the anticipation that accompanies the promise of a new prospect. Imagine that you are walking along a street that curves out of sight beyond the buildings lining the sidewalk. The buildings block your view of the horizon and encourage your eyes to pursue an identified focal point beyond the blocked middle ground. The view is not terminated; it is directed toward the unseen end of the curve. The deflected vista heightens awareness and evokes a sense of anticipation for what lies ahead.

When the middle ground is completely obscured and the horizon remains visible, a truncated vista occurs. Imagine

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you are nearing the top of a hill. The hilltop occupies your foreground, blocking the view of the middle ground. Other hilltops may be visible in the background, but the destination just beyond the immediate hilltop is hidden from view. When climbing a hill, your sense of awareness and approach is heightened because your immediate destination remains unseen. Once you have

reached the peak, a new prospect is realized; the destination comes into view and a sense of arrival is experienced.

A screened vista occurs when an opaque object in the foreground obscures the focal point. Trees in the foreground can

mask the view of the middle ground and background to make a destination appear more distant than it actually is. When you are moving, the screened vista is very dramatic. Once the trees pass out of view, the destination commands your attention because it suddenly appears larger, dominating the scene. The emphasis on motion enhances the experience of transition necessary for a gateway.

### Gateway Form

An urban gateway has a definable space. A feeling of anticipation on approach and an awareness of entering "inside" accompanies passage through a gateway. The effect is enhanced when the "other side" exhibits a readily identifiable character. This is often the result of distinct architecture or land uses. A historic district, for example, displays a high degree of homogeneity in building materials, facades, uniform heights, and ornamentation. The continuity of form and style creates a clear sense of place. Observers know when they are inside or outside of a homogeneous district.

Dramatically contrasting landforms or uses may also give a sense of change. In the Cincinnati gateway, an urban skyline packed with office towers is a profound contrast to the hilly greenbelt along Interstate 75. The transition is clearly defined by difference in height, texture, color, density, use, and the defining boundary of the Ohio River.

Kevin Lynch provided terminology that describes two major gateway elements. While he did not specifically examine gateways, Lynch was well known for his analysis of

city form. He grouped the elements of the cityscape into five major categories: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. Paths and nodes have influence on gateway form.

Gateways are located on paths, which are the linear elements of the landscape along which an observer moves. Sidewalks, streets, highways, transit lines, and canals are among the most common paths from which we do our viewing. Many observers use a system of paths to organize their perception of the environment. The details observed on the pathway provide lasting images of the cityscape. Local landmarks, such as building facades, signs, landscaping, and street furniture, combine with linear form and path-oriented activity to create a sensory image of place. These concerns are reflected in the focus of corridor plans, streetscape programs, and aesthetic regulation of street details. Mental maps of the street grid are the pattern upon which other elements of the cityscape are arranged. Lynch found, "Where major paths lacked identity, or were easily confused one for the other, the entire city image was in difficulty."

Nodes frequently correspond with the location of gateways. They are focal points of activity with a strong link to the transitional aspect of gateways. Nodes are highly recognizable places that exhibit an identifiable interior and exterior. This is often the result of thematic concentration; however, the sense of entrance may also be attributed to the fact that most nodes are located at junctions or breaks in the transportation path. Grady Clay thoroughly analyzed breaks in his study of nodes or "epitome districts." Clay and Lynch both found that junctions and "break-points" command attention because they require the observer to make decisions while negotiating traffic, changing direction, and watching traffic signals. The heightened attention causes the observer to see the place with greater clarity, so the place image is enhanced. Lynch found that most people identified arrival with break-points of transportation.

Nodes can also result from concentration of similar activities, such as a cluster of retailers forming a commercial center. Others may be attributed to groupings of architecturally or historically significant buildings. Activity concentrated on a public square can also form a node. Stephansplatz is a major node in the heart of Vienna's first district. Thousands arrive daily to view the eclectic splendor of the cathedral that stands in the center of the square. The surrounding pedestrian zone bustles with tourists, shoppers, and the residents and employees of the district. As a node, it is both a thematic concentration and a transportation break-point. It features a major subway stop and a grouping of historic buildings that contain street-level retail and commercial or premium residential space above.

### Gateway Guidelines

Gateway designers can take a lesson from history. In the days of walled cities, the gateway was more than a boundary marker. It was a well-defined edge, apparent to the most casual observer. On either side of the threshold were merchants, inns, and warehouses that served the traffic between the landscapes. These businesses were visual cues that were part of the transitional experience of passing through the gateway. Modern gateways are not very different. The transition between landscapes is more than a boundary marker or a physical gate, it is a sequence of vistas.

The goal of gateway planning is to enhance the experience of a landscape by creating a transitional passage that



announces arrival in a new place. In this context, a transitional passage is a sequence of visual cues arranged along a transportation path. The sequence heightens the awareness of the moving observer nearing a well-defined activity center or district. Thus, the gateway is not a destination; it simply defines the point of arrival.

The strategies for planning a gateway vary depending on the character of the adjacent landscapes. Abrupt changes in land use and architecture often make a harsh landscape. Gateways aligned with a path that links disparate landscapes can serve as a buffer. A well-designed transition creates a visual experience that separates the uses and presents both in a positive way. The landscape unfolds before the viewer, offering visual cues to what lies ahead. The result is a classical sequence: approach, anticipation, and finally, the climax—arrival.

A gateway that links different landscapes has few requirements. In this case, the visual elements of the gateway composition must be arranged in a sequence that can be easily perceived by the observer. Street details should be scaled to fit the observer's needs and transportation mode. Design policies should reflect the differences between landscapes and maintain the spatial order and the distinctness of the destination.

Gateways are frequently placed between homogeneous landscapes in an attempt to lend distinctness to a mundane place. This rarely works. A gateway in a monotonous environment must be more than an archway or a landscaped buffer at the edge of a suburb. The more homogeneous the place, the grander the gateway must be for the observer to experience a sense of arrival after passage. The solution may require monumental scale: open space, a tree-lined boulevard, a curvilinear entrance, landmark-size public art. With space and money usually at a premium, it may be more practical to concentrate on the source of the problem: the homogeneous arrival point. Define the destination through sign control, urban design requirements, and streetscaping. Corridor planning, facade renovation, historic preservation, overlay zoning, open space preservation, streetscaping, and design policy are all useful tools for creating a successful gateway.

The first step in gateway planning is to identify the goal. If the gateway already exists, the goal may be to define it and reinforce it through preservation and regulation. If it does not exist, the goal may be to identify a likely location for a gateway to define an entrance, enhance community character, or ease a transition between uses.

Once the goal has been established, the primary users, or observers, should be identified. The needs of the primary observer will establish the design priorities. Tourists will perceive a gateway very differently than existing residents because these two groups have contrasting expectations and place images.

After the user has been identified and the goal of the gateway plan clarified, the site should be inventoried. Vacant land, natural resources, historic structures, mature vegetation, and other landmark elements of the appropriate scale should be preserved when possible. A short list of key features should be made and these should be considered as focal points for the design. If the gateway is being designed in an undeveloped area, the community should create policies to regulate the design elements of the gateway and at the arrival point. Open space should be set aside to create rhythm and

contrast with the density of the development. The roadway itself can be composed to heighten the attention of the user and set up the transition by incorporating deflected, truncated, and screened vistas.

When the gateway reaches the design stage, planners need to envision the plan in three dimensions. A gateway is largely defined by the act of passage and the perception of the relative motion of the elements in the surrounding landscape. It may help to prepare sequential drawings of the proposed gateway, like frames on a reel of film. The successful gateway sequence will heighten the attention of its users, convey a sense of transition and arrival, and ultimately leave the user with a positive place image.

During design, keep in mind the general sense of the prospect-refuge theory. At the pedestrian scale, this means designing refuges, such as small courtyards, pedestrian zones, and public squares. Deflection and undulation are excellent techniques for creating rhythm and enclosing space. Vantage points that are well protected from traffic serve as prospects. Neutral ground that promises neither prospect nor refuge should be avoided. At the motorists' scale, this means framing longer views, relative to the speed of traffic, to achieve a sense of enclosure. Gentle curves with deflected and truncated vistas heighten awareness and evoke a sense of approach by promising new prospects beyond the line of vision.

Motorists have additional needs. The composition of an auto gateway will be concerned with gross visual elements, such as color, height, and massing. Open space preservation along the roadway and around key elements can help define landmarks. The strategic placement of trees heightens the sense of approach by screening vistas and creating motion on secondary horizons. Appropriate building scale can be determined by looking at the visual obstructions and carefully considering the perceptual limitations imposed by vehicle speed.

Design that promotes a transition to a place with distinct character is the foundation of a successful gateway. As with any streetscape plan, the color, texture, rhythm of spacing, massing, bulk of the buildings, landscaping, and street furniture all contribute to the sense of place. Remember that a gateway is not merely a beautification plan. Special attention must be paid to how the street details on the "inside" compare with those of the "outside." If there is no change, there will be no transition and no gateway.

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