

Corpus Urbanis

City as Human Body: A Phenomenological Reappraisal of Urban Geography and Systems

Kris Hartley

“Odi profanum vulgus et arceo.” (I hate the profane masses and avoid them). – Horace, Odes III

To conceive a more informed notion of The Urban, one not only malleable enough to fit the unique specificities of individual cities but also modular enough to explain similar phenomena across urban types, it is necessary to develop a metaphor that utilizes that most universally familiar of all possessions, that most comfortably understood item, that most intimate thing: one’s own body. Any visitation of The Urban through this lens owes mention of Janine Benyus, pontificator of *The Natural* and its potential influence on the design of the built environment. According to Ms. Benyus, and to *Biomimicry*, natural organisms and systems have already solved many problems faced by cities, in the course of solving their own. The challenge, therefore, is to learn *from* the natural world, not merely *about* it. Furthermore, Biomimicry recognizes constituent natural elements as part of a larger system, and applies this logic to societal challenges. The Natural is not a series of discreet, independent actors, but rather an integrated system of mutually-reliant, symbiotic agents of evolution and resource optimization. So is the city.

I am attracted to the body as comparative device, first, because I am attracted to bodies. We understand them not only as complex and dynamic “miracles” of nature, but also as deeply personal sensory conduits through which we interpret our surroundings. I argue that it is appropriate to regard the city as equally stimulating. This approach not only provides a meta-cognitive structural paradigm by which to evaluate cities as a personal embodiment, but also efficiently assigns roles to specific elements and reveals their significance as part of a functional whole.

In this model, I have used a human body as the physical layout of a city. It is already a familiar metaphor to describe parks and green spaces as the “lungs” of a city. However, I extend this metaphor, because an examination only of lungs would be a failure to recognize the value of integrated biological systems. First, there is the heart, both a literal and figurative notion, serving as the cultural/historical center of a city, and from which the lifeblood is pumped (Times Square). It may also be seen as the “soul” of a city, an iconic element that embodies a city’s unique identity. Secondly, the organs play a no less necessary, if less glamorous, role in sustaining life. The lungs, liver and stomach all have as integral a part in biological function as industrial, governmental and commercial facilities do in a city, although the latter may be the more mundane, unsung places. Such functional districts might not be the first visited by a tourist, nor, as organs, the subject of polite symphony intermission chatter. But they exist nonetheless, and in New York the Financial District is an economic center, with Midtown and the Lower East Side commercial centers in their own ways. “Blighted” cities, on the other hand, may have poorly functioning “organs,” such as a corroded liver, emphesematic lungs, or an oversized, unattractive stomach. Thirdly, the transport infrastructure is the bloodstream of *Corpus Urbanis*. As an indispensable conveyance of nutrients, the bloodstream churns incessantly, day and night, as may the subways and

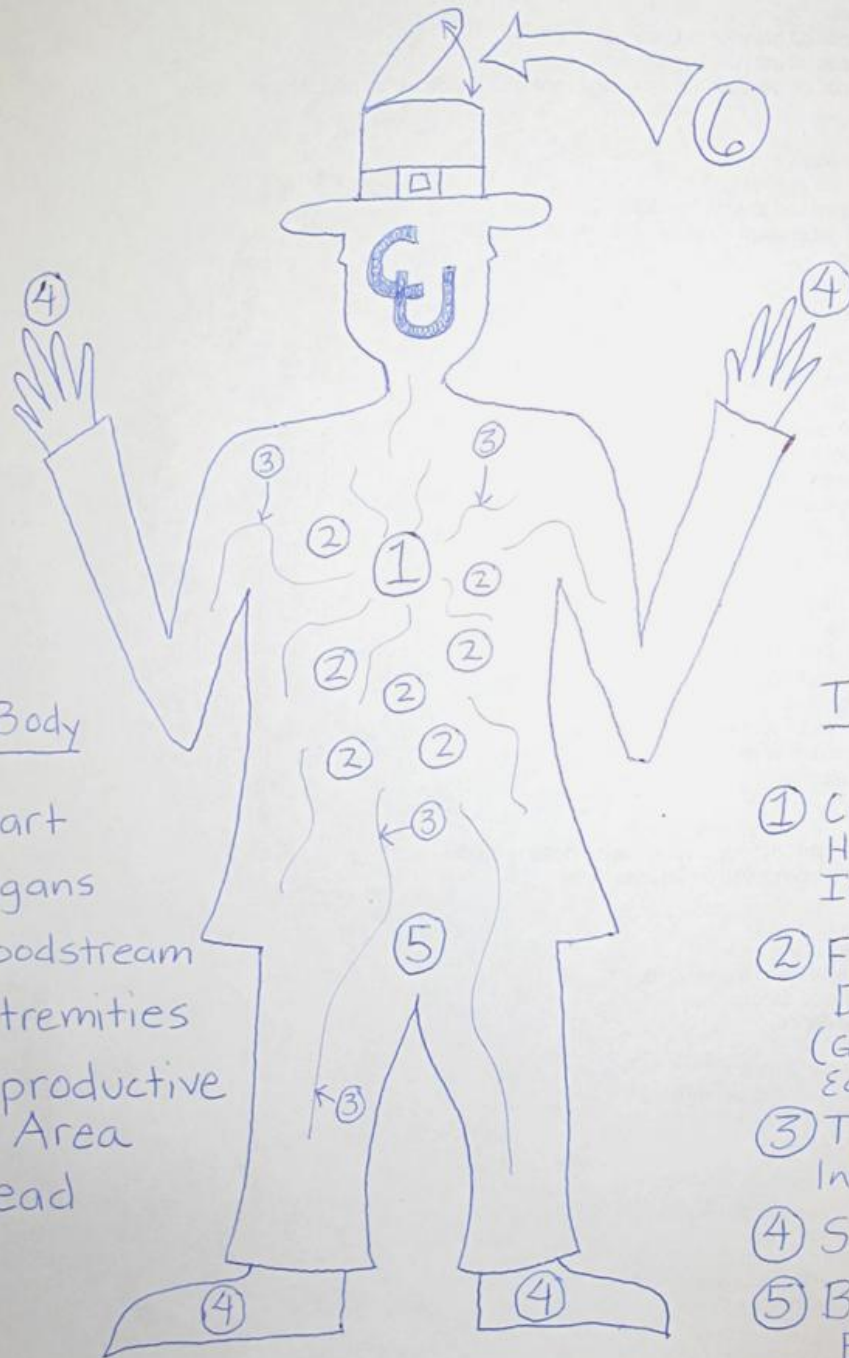
taxis of New York. A night flight arrival at JFK Airport reveals throbbing arteries of transit that know no subsidence.

Fourthly, the extremities of the body play important roles. The hands are valuable in their dexterous utility, always extending outward and interfacing with the “frontier.” These may be seen as the wealthy suburbs: an industrious but somewhat commoditized landscape (most fingers look like each other) that pushes ever forward; they reach out, often without invitation, to what may be rudely and illegitimately claimed from nature (Westchester and Rockland Counties). We ourselves, perhaps in a judgmentally compromised state induced by alcohol, might also extend our hands rudely where they are unwelcome. Feet are another matter. As a system they play an important role, but individual toes are of little note. The same may be said of industrial or middle class suburbs, which as a monolithic whole provide a (theoretically) stable labor force and tax base (large swaths of the New York boroughs). However, their physical structure is often repetitive and nondescript when examined on a microcosmic (house) level, as may be an individual toe. Fifthly, I mention the reproductive area, at the risk of being gratuitously controversial, because it too may shed light on the urban form (although in the interest of decency it is investigated here more as phenomenon than physical form). As the generative elements of the body (and the city), reproductive facilities may elicit giggles in an 8th grade classroom, but they are important to both life maintenance and pleasure. In this vein, I describe the up-and-coming bohemian enclaves as the reproductive parts of a city. Within these places radical ideas are generated and thoughts expressed in a way that may not conform to generally accepted customs. Greenwich Village, Soho and Williamsburg Brooklyn are these types of places, unpredictable and often irreverent, but well worth exploration and full of pleasurable potential. Finally, to slip the surly bonds of physical existence and touch the face of the metaphysical (with apologies to Peggy Noonan), it is necessary to examine the head. There may be many answers to what constitutes the “head” of a city: government facilities, economic centers, perhaps even a university. However, this model refuses to fall into that trap, in the interest of modularity, and here I depart from standard physical comparisons. The “head” of the city is its human capital, the people, without whom the physical structure of the city (or body) would be limp and lifeless. Bodies, like cities, depend on coordination in their system-oriented nature. The rich diversity of New Yorkers is often considered the driving force behind its success and dynamism.

New York reveals much when examined using the body metaphor because it is still more “concentric” than “rhisomic” (like Los Angeles), and this more or less reflects the nature of bodily structure. Beyond this, however, I believe the body metaphor is successful because we can use it to make cities “our own.” Where does the boundary between our body end and the city begin? May I propose an alternative view of the city, one as personal extension of ourselves. If this view were to prevail, perhaps citizens would take as much “ownership” of their city as they do their bodies, by participating, building and caring. Ms. Benyus maintains that organisms figure out how to do what they need to do, while taking care of the place that will take care of their offspring. This is the biggest design challenge. The city must function as a body that nourishes itself and its residents sustainably, but appreciates its role in the larger global system.

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The Body

- ① Heart
- ② Organs
- ③ Bloodstream
- ④ Extremities
- ⑤ Reproductive Area
- ⑥ Head

The City

- ① Cultural, Historic, Identity Hub
- ② Functional Districts (Governmental, Economic, Commercial)
- ③ Transport Infrastructure
- ④ Suburbs
- ⑤ Bohemian Enclaves
- ⑥ Human Capital

