

URBN.

Edited and Designed by Ava Schully



FROM THE DEPARTMENT

Letter from the Director

Dear concentrators, alumni, and friends,

There is much to celebrate this spring semester. Our campus and the City of Providence have fully returned to in-person operation following two years of prudent accommodation due to the pandemic. A full-range of in-person activities await our 20 graduating concentrators during commencement week. On May 6, we will celebrate their completion of Honors and Capstone projects. We will also welcome back our Class of 2020 for a special ceremony during commencement weekend. Across the College, our newly admitted students can fully enjoy their ADOCH experience on campus.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to our newly declared Concentrators and to congratulate our graduating seniors for their accomplishments! I am honored to serve as interim director of the Urban Studies Program this semester, as Professor Sandy Zipp, the program director, takes his well-deserved sabbatical to conduct his research in Germany. We are able to maintain a vibrant Concentration because of our dedicated faculty, their rigorous research, and aspiring teaching. Our faculty are conducting innovative research in urban architecture, community stability and change, cultural diversity, globalization, arts and literature, and economic, social and political institutions. Our field-based projects remain the focal points of growth, equity, and expression. Further, the work of our students offers diverse approaches to understanding progress, justice, and opportunity in urban culture, people, and spatial arrangement. Clearly, graduates of Urban Studies will continue to cherish their rich learning experience in our multidisciplinary Concentration.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge our Director of Undergraduate Studies, Professor Lauren Yapp. Even though Lauren started her DUS role in the fall, she has met with many new Concentrators, piloted a series of workshops to support juniors who are interested in developing honors thesis, and mentored our graduating seniors.

Further, Jeff Cabral, our academic department manager, has ably managed our operation as the university emerges from its COVID-driven policy. Matt Roth has recently joined us as program coordinator and has strengthened our support for DUG leaders, editors of our journal and newsletter, and our Concentrators. He sits in our front office and will greet everyone who wants to know about our Concentration.

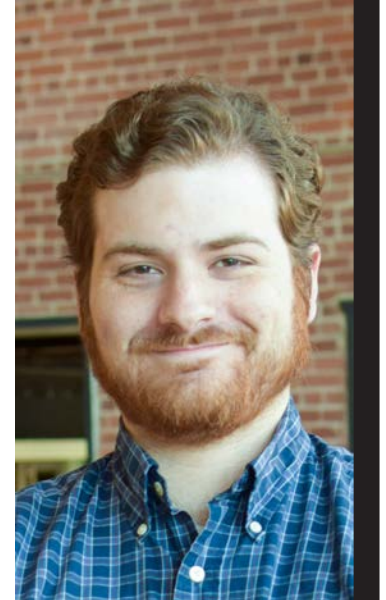
Finally, I would like to thank Ava Schully, the newsletter editor, for putting together this great issue in a timely manner! Have a joyful commencement weekend and a relaxing summer!

Best,

Kenneth Wong
Interim Director and Professor
Urban Studies Program

Introducing Matthew Roth

A new face has arrived, representing the Urban Studies Department. Matthew Roth, the new Administrative Coordinator, is a Brown Alumni (Class of '17) with over seven years working in higher education. From 2019-2021, he worked in the Office of the Vice President of Research (OVPR) assisting in fundraising efforts for a huge variety of projects and initiatives from across Brown. He organized and processed hundreds of Material Transfer Agreements (MTAs) just as the COVID-19 Pandemic first hit the United States. From there, he worked to transition all of the office's functions to a safe, home environment all while keeping in touch with the many faculty and staff members over email and Zoom to maintain an efficient MTA process, which did not slow down despite the world shutting down because of COVID. In 2021, he transitioned to organizing the day-to-day operations of the RISD Illustration Department, running dozens of separate special-events, speaker summits, and managing multiple art galleries. Matthew loves D&D, Star Wars, and working at Brown, especially having the opportunity to give back to the University that provided him with his education.



FROM PROVIDENCE



(2021 Digital Painting)

Waterfire by Bree Zhang

Strings of fires ripple over their reflections, illuminating almost a passageway that connects the flames with street passerbys like a series of fishing lines. Flecks of ash sting my eyes when the wind picks up, when silhouettes of fire tenders and drifting boats become murky in haze.



I taste cedar and pine in the air, mixed with the faint sweet-salty kettle popcorn flavors from the nearby confectionery stand, overlaid by the muted chatter of families, lovers, and college student friend groups. It's like hearing a melody that doesn't know precisely where it's headed, but a melody content to be in the moment, pulled forward by a gentle tide that bridges sunset with midnight.

Waterfire is a tradition that has been essential to my Brown experience because it brings me outside the college bubble into the heart of the Providence community. It reminds me to be present. Exist in the moment. Don't worry about where the boats are headed. Or whether the fire will burn out soon. Or how I will brave my thigh-burning lactic-acid inducing climb back up our ~lovingly~ steep hill. Just sit, breathe, and get lost in the scenery as if I'm drifting into a dream.

Editor's Note:

More of Bree's art can be found on her art account @breez_art_ and prints are available for sale on her website www.breez-world.com

City lead pipe replacement complaint alleges Civil Rights Act Violation

Charlie Clines, originally published in the Herald on February 22, 2022

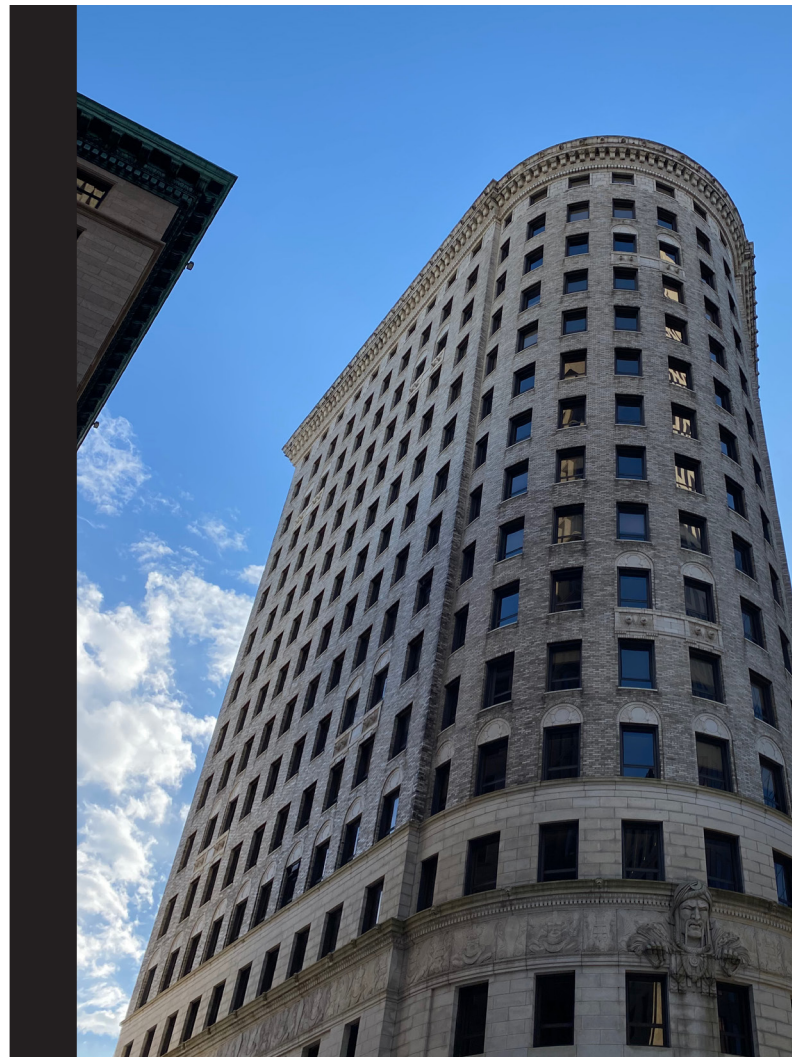
The Environmental Protection Agency is set to rule on a first-of-its-kind complaint filed last month, which alleges that a Providence lead pipe replacement program violated the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Written and submitted by a coalition of nonprofits led by the Childhood Lead Action Project and assisted by the Environmental Defense Fund, the complaint could set a precedent for similar actions in cities across the country, according to advocates in the coalition.

The program in question provides free replacement of lead pipes extending up to a home's property line while requiring homeowners to cover the cost of replacing pipes that lie on the property itself. According to Providence Water, the average replacement cost has been \$3,800, though costs vary significantly depending on each house's circumstances. The coalition of nonprofits argues that the costs of replacement, which a CLAP analysis found to be up to \$4,500, may be difficult for people in low-income communities — which are often also communities of color — to afford.

The coalition also includes the South Providence Neighborhood Association, Direct Action for Rights and Equality and the National Center for Healthy Housing.

There are “approximately 26,600 private side lead services” in Providence Water’s distribution, Greg Giasson, deputy general manager at Providence Water, previously told The Herald. The city created the partial replacement program to address this need, and homeowners can also opt into a 10-year loan to alleviate the financial burden of fully replacing their lead service lines, said Devra Levy ’19, community organizer at CLAP.

The complaint alleges that requiring



homeowners to pay the remaining cost of a full replacement directly contributes to racial and class inequality, since wealthier, majority-white neighborhoods are more able to afford full replacements, while poorer communities may continue to face lead contamination.

While the Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank has provided Providence Water with \$3 million for 10-year 0% interest loans to help homeowners pay for their pipe replacements, Levy said that many low-income residents are unable to take out or pay back loans.

“We show in the complaint that, in the Providence Water service area, low-income folks and renters are more likely to be people of color,” Levy added. “This isn’t only class discrimination; it’s also race discrimination.”

“Providence Water takes the issue of lead at our customers’ taps extremely seriously,” Christopher Hunter, a spokesperson for Advocacy Solutions LLC, a consulting firm which represents Providence

Water, wrote in an email to The Herald.

“That is why for the past 10 years we have been working closely with the Environmental Protection Agency and a panel of nationally recognized drinking water experts to develop and implement strategies to reduce lead in drinking water.”

Hunter wrote that Providence Water has implemented a “five-pronged strategy” to address lead contamination in the water system, which includes the loan program, “aggressive water main rehabilitation within our distribution system” and “an extensive public education and outreach program.”

Hunter also noted that as of December, Providence Water was in compliance with the EPA’s Lead and Copper Rule, which requires water systems to have less than 15 parts per billion of lead in at least 90% of customer taps sampled.

“We understand and appreciate community advocacy regarding this public health issue,” Hunter wrote. “Providence Water will continue to follow the recommendations of the EPA and our expert panel regarding lead service line replacements.”

The complaint cites a study led by Karen Baehler, professor of public administration and policy at American University, which examined a similar lead service line replacement program in Washington, D.C. After analyzing the effects of neighborhood income disparity on the likelihood of getting



a full or partial pipe replacement, the study found that “household income is a major predictor of full replacement prevalence, with race also showing significance in some analyses.”

The study found that partial replacements — in which some of the lead pipes servicing a property are not replaced — present problems of their own. The disruption caused by partial replacements can heighten lead levels for up to six months after the replacement, and there is evidence to suggest that they do not lead to significant long-term reductions in lead levels, according to the study.

“This is dangerous ... because it still leaves half of a lead pipe in the ground,” Levy said. “It’s not actually fully removing the source of potential lead contamination.”

CLAP filed the complaint through a provision in the Civil Rights Act which prohibits the use of federal funds in discriminatory programs.

“Providence Water gets a lot of money from the EPA through grants,” Levy said. “The EPA is funding discriminatory practices — and that’s illegal under the Civil Rights Act.”

If the EPA rules in favor of the non-profit coalition, the complaint could have implications for replacement programs across the country, according to Levy.

“Both partial replacements and cost-sharing are very, very widespread,”

Baehler told The Herald. Of the approximately 11,000 water systems that still rely on lead pipes, about 90% of them employ one of these practices, Baehler said. “It’s going to take a long, long time for all of those systems to adopt what really is considered to be best practice now — a ban on partial replacements and a move away from the cost-sharing approach.”

Lead poisoning can cause problems that range from fatigue and trouble concentrating to insomnia, developmental delays and death, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It is especially harmful to children, though lead is unsafe at any age.

“Even at low levels, especially when consistent over time, lead poisoning can cause long term and permanent brain damage,” Levy said. “Once someone has been exposed to lead, the damage has been done.”

Issues with lead contamination in municipal water supplies came to light with the Flint water crisis, which made international headlines. The state of Michigan banned partial replacement programs in the wake of the crisis in Flint, Baehler said. She hopes that other states and cities will follow suit.

“What we’re hoping for and expecting is that the EPA will do some investigation of their own and maybe hold some meetings, moderated by the EPA, between Provi-

dence Water and the folks who submitted the complaint — including us and the other organizations — to talk about a way forward,” Levy said.

“We were really clear in the complaint that what we wanted was not just for the replacements to stop, but for Providence Water to do full replacements instead of partial replacements,” she added.

The recent Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act will provide Rhode Island an influx of money for lead pipe replacement. Levy said she hopes additional infrastructure funding will allow the state to cover the cost of full replacements.

“Providence Water is working closely with the Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank to maximize federal infrastructure bill funding to remove lead service lines,” Hunter wrote. “This program will be designed to prioritize lead service line replacements in disadvantaged areas throughout our service area.”

Update to Superman Building’s Kryptonite From Fall 2021

Thomas Wilson

Last semester, I wrote a piece for the Newsletter that focused on Providence’s Superman Building problem; two weeks ago, the outlook for the building changed significantly. As reported by the Providence Journal, there is now a 220-million-dollar plan in place, with

over 40-million in funding from state and local sources. The proposal will turn the building into luxury apartments, with 20% of them qualifying as affordable housing.

Mayor Jorge Elorza said it best when he reflected on the plans moving forward, “The Superman Building is a building that we all have a connection to; we all feel attached to it. In no small way, it is a symbol of our entire state.” Because the building is so reflective of Providence’s history, including both its early 20th century optimism and its 21st-century industrial decline, I was adamant that the building remains as part of the city skyline, even suggesting that we leave it as a monument and nothing more. Though it likely means more in terms of economic signaling to have its most prominent downtown building un-abandoned, Providence should ensure that the legacy of the Superman Building stays intact through its revival.





FROM ABROAD



Study Abroad Reflection: Sophie Blumenstein

This semester, I've been studying sustainable development and urban planning in Copenhagen. It's fascinating to live and study in a place so often celebrated for successful urban infrastructure: independent traffic lights for raised and separated bicycle lanes, regional train lines that anticipated urban sprawl and attracted development toward transit corridors, and sunken playscapes that protect from flooding while allowing for outdoor play.

I am inspired (and have gotten a bit too used to) this exciting and deeply sensible landscape—particularly in terms of transportation. Through both normal pedestrian life and

in my frequent transfers from the regional train to metro, bicycle, and bus, I often fixate on the intense order with which transit modes intersect.

Jaywalking incurs a large fine in Denmark, and is also considered disrespectful. To me, this order feels at once calm and frustrating. Why should my movements be dictated by a little neon man, particularly when there is no one coming? At the same time, my mind is freed from concern over safety or decision-making and I simply watch and wait as my mind wanders.

Cars, cyclists, and pedestrians all have their own clearly designated and distinctly separated space, separating use in order to promote safety, calmness, and order. When various

modes do intersect, the right of way is simply demarcated by continuity of pavement style. This order feels calm and highly functional; I trust that it will be clear how to find my way, which grants me the mental space to socialize, work, or zone out on the train.

On a recent trip to visit an Italian friend from high school, she questioned why I hesitated so intently at stoplights. We sprinted between trains, up and down stairs, to and from



stations. Discombobulated, sweaty, and unsure where to be, we got on the wrong train twice and subsequently incurred large fines. It was stressful and expensive, but also hilarious, lively, and bonding.

Two friends of mine in Copenhagen, expats from the Czech Republic and India, describe the calmness of the city as lovely, but missing an “essential chaos,” a particular “spark” that makes cities feel alive. Perhaps this is what it means to live in a culture that is not your own. Perhaps it is diversity that I miss. We question whether this thought is crazy—why are we dissatisfied with this seeming utopia? The most essential needs—food, clean water, safety, healthcare, and more—are fulfilled in

a way that they are not for many at home. Please do not mistake me for complaining; I feel truly happy and lucky to be here, and I love living in Copenhagen.

There are always tradeoffs, pros and cons to every city. But I hope that as we better our cities, we hold on tightly to chaotic and beautiful urban life: street music, train cars filled with loud laughter, wildflowers nestled between sidewalk squares, and the dance of our intersecting pathways.



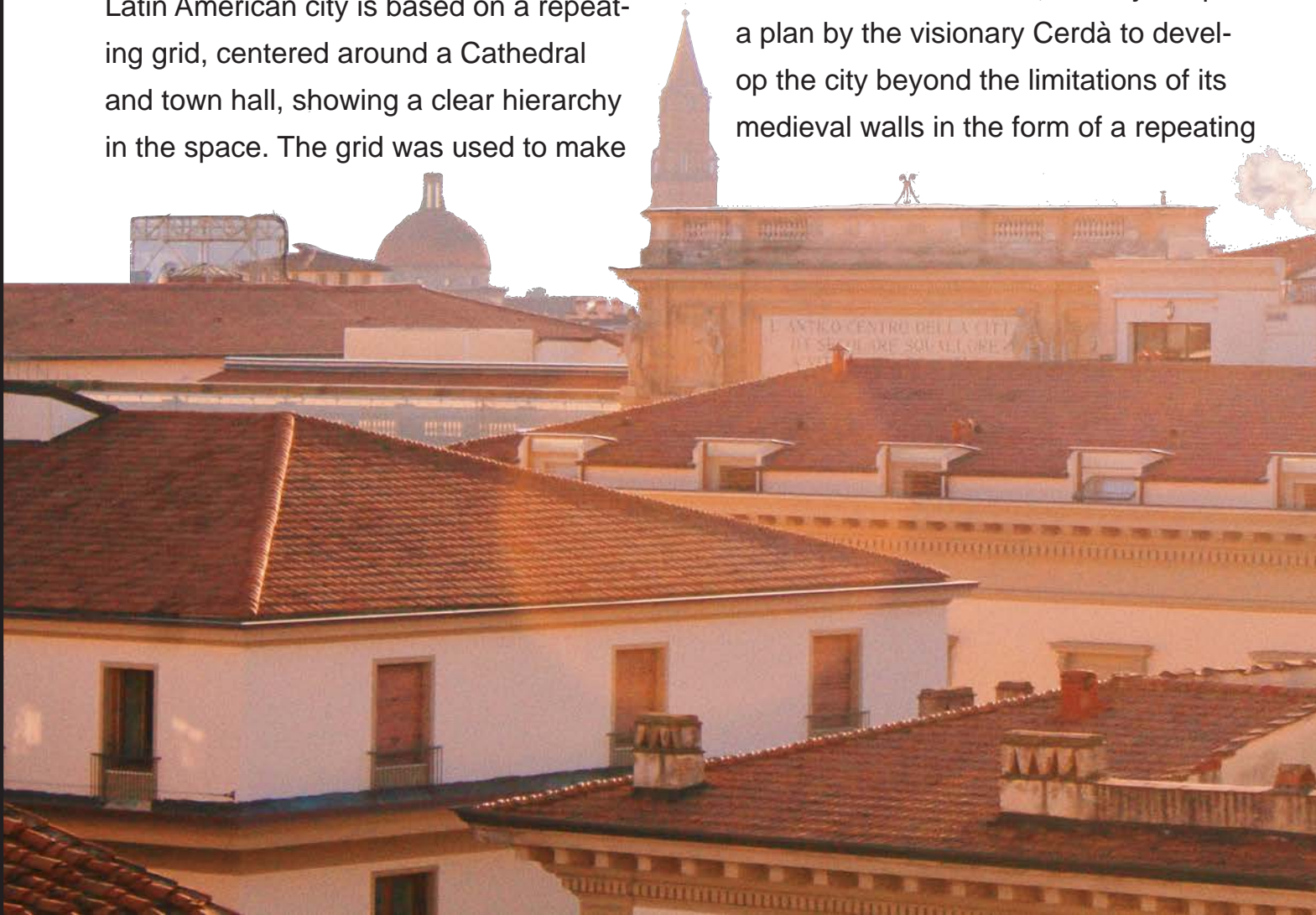
Study Abroad Reflection: Toby Arment

Through living in Spain for the semester, I have gained many insights into how we design our cities. Today I will detail some of my takeaways on how we should approach shaping the urban fabric.

A very common and innocuous urban form is a rectilinear grid, but it's important to understand the deep history and twisted motives of the form. Spain, though not a widespread user of the grid, exported the model to Latin America through a uniform guide on how to build colonial cities. Almost every major Latin American city is based on a repeating grid, centered around a Cathedral and town hall, showing a clear hierarchy in the space. The grid was used to make

the colonies legible to the Spaniards, make the land easy to develop and exploit, and eliminate hiding holes where rebellion could fester. Centuries later, the grid was spread by US railroad companies who admired its ability to uniformly package land, allowing speculators out east to know what they were buying without ever seeing the plot. Though not always bad, the grid is a highly non-organic city form often used to exercise power.

The first lesson of cities, then, is to reject uniformity. For this lesson, we visit Barcelona. In 1855, the city adopted a plan by the visionary Cerdà to develop the city beyond the limitations of its medieval walls in the form of a repeating



grid. Repeating urban forms have a certain appeal to them from a planner's eye--they are easy to replicate as the city grows and they create a city that is clearly legible on maps from a bird's eye view. Unfortunately, they bring with them a confusing monotony from the street level. Cities that are built in perfectly repeating patterns on leveled ground are hard to navigate for pedestrians as every intersection looks the same. Slightly off-kilter intersections and striking architecture or monuments can create noticeable features to navigate around. Better still is treating the city's natural landscape as an urban boon, not as an obstacle. Providence, with its hills and rivers, is much easier for me to navigate as a pedestrian than Barcelona and its uniform streets and architecture--save the occasional Gaudí masterpiece.

The second Spanish lesson for cities

is to balance uses. Coming to my city of Granada for a moment, we can see lesson that an urban sense of safety is largely a product of people and light. Lighting can be bought, but getting people out into the streets is a more challenging task. With a later dinner hour than the US, Spaniards stay out later, but that isn't the only key to its success. Rather than concentrating all residential activity around a sky-scraping center, many Spanish cities have relatively uniform heights across the urban landscape. With first-floor commercial almost everywhere, people walk to and from dinner, bars, shopping, and home in many different directions, constantly filling all parts of the city with people, rather than just the downtown. This flow makes walking feel safer much later into the evening. Beyond safety, balancing uses helps create an egalitarian city. Having





a sky-scraping downtown and single-family homes radiating around it creates a visceral spatial hierarchy that simultaneously dictates quality of life based upon geographic location.

Lastly, we return to Barcelona to see that it is crucial for communities to have a center.

This is the case as it is important to know where you can have chance encounters with your neighbors or where you would go to demand political change. There's a reason so many campuses are centered around a green space where friends constantly collide and chances are you'll find the latest protest buzzing around

the Main Green, too. Grids can be good, but communities need a center, and repeating patterns can often remove that possibility, leading to endlessly extended lines that draw us out in all directions. Barcelona, however, shows us how it is possible. In their superblock plan, every group of 9 blocks is combined to one by eliminating through-traffic inside the superblock and creating a community center in the quietest streets. In this way, Barcelona is a powerful and unique example of how a repeating grid can be balanced with centered communities.

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