

My Lifeboat #5: Richard Saul Wurman

Rick Wurman and I have been friends a long time. It's been growing on us; we care about many of the same things. I've wanted to interview him for a long time, and now I have a good reason, though he keeps telling me that he's in communications and I keep telling him that he's in space. Of course we are both talking about the same thing. Technically, Richard Saul is an architect, a partner in the Philadelphia firm of Murphy, Levy, Wurman. But actually, he's an architect, a city planner, a human designer, a writer, a communicator, an educator, and a whole lot of other things that it would be tough to put a label on. He was once a protege of Lou Kahn. Now I guess he's his own protege.

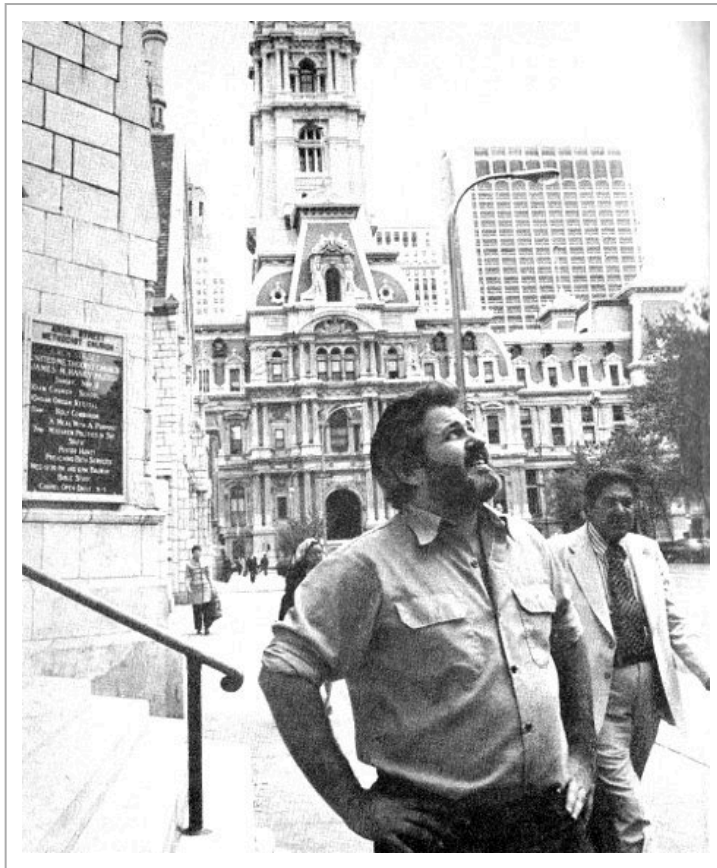
Nine in the evening. Sunday. Richard Saul has spent the weekend at home with the family on a small farm about twenty - five miles from Philadelphia. We are meeting at his apartment in town, where he generally spends the rest of the week alone. When he's not off lecturing or conferring somewhere else in the world, a great deal of his work is done in and frequently for the city of Philadelphia. He works hard, long hours. He gets a lot done.

The apartment is in an old warehouse district near the Delaware River, several blocks from the elegantly reconstructed Society Hill section, down but not out. I ring the bell, no name under it, and the door buzzes open. Standing at the top of two steep flights with a grin distorts the perspective and makes his short rotundness rotunder. Dungarees, a work shirt, and hiking boots. His uniform. Twinkling blue eyes, a full head of hair but not long, a neatly trimmed beard, two streaks of white at the chin. The apartment is one long narrow room, maybe forty by ten, lined on one side with windows that look out on another building but more importantly provide light for an enormous assortment of plants of every size and description, the other side an alcove perhaps six feet deep and twelve feet long, foam rubbered with sheets and a dozen or so pillows. Two long, narrow conference tables end to end run the length of the windows and are crammed with plants. More plants are hanging, chairs around the tables, a stereo, bookshelves on the wall, the wall forming one side of a small partitioned kitchen. And a smaller bathroom. With a shower.

We'll have two sessions. One tonight until we get tired, another tomorrow afternoon in his office. He stretches out on the bed; I sit on one of the chairs with my feet on another. Soybeans and beer. And we talk, about communications and about space and about getting there from here.

I think I have a tangential relationship to what you're looking into. and I think we can talk about it for a little while, and I think you might find that it's so tangential that it really is a separate thing, you could make a tangential connection between what I'm doing and any subject you bring up, whether it's food or whether it's energy.

But I see you working in the city and trying to make the city usable. And who do you want to make it usable by? People. And cities are becoming very congested and dehumanized pieces of space. You're trying in your own way to decongest it and to humanize it and to deal with what Soleri wants to deal with ... psychosomatic man. There are those who feel that change will only come about if man has a spiritual rebirth. Others feel that spiritual rebirth will only come about if there is change. Does it matter which comes first?



At this moment I don't see any performance that we want out of our daily lives - either in the urban environment or in the world - I don't see any performance, whether it is learning how to move around a city or accessing something in the city or whether it is an understanding of the performance of just eating - getting enough to eat and nourishment - or whether it's the performance of lighting a city or energy or learning ... there's none of the performances that we would sort of trip off our tongue as basic, as the most simple - minded performances, things that you are involved with every day of your life, that either lay people or professionals have a lucid ability to demand or communicate or describe what they want.

Aside from absolute needs, which really get down to a certain amount of food and shelter for your body, there's no way of saying we want a quality

of education, there's no way of communicating "learning," there's no way of communicating "movement," there's no way of asking for that. And the only thing that we are able to ask for in a very primitive way is some predetermined product which we identify with that performance. So you can ask for better schools, not knowing what "better" means or what "schools" means; you can ask for more policemen, not knowing what "safety" means or what makes up being "safe." You can ask for brighter stations and new vehicles, and you don't even know what a movement system is or what it really means to move or why you want to move or how movement affects your life or could affect your life or how interesting it is when you are moving or whether it is good to have a certain period of time ... whether it should be longer each day that you are in movement or it should be less, and why it should be either.

You could make a case - I think you could - that everybody should commute at least one hour each way in a kind of controlled capsule, and that one hour going and coming back is a great spiritual time, informational time to find out about what's happening in the world, communicating time, a meeting - your - neighbor time, a getting - together time with different people than who you work with. You could make a case that that would be a valid experience, but it wouldn't occur to people to think of commuting time as anything but a negative. Except for the few people who play cards on the Long Island Railroad.

I don't know how to ask for these things myself. A major thing happened to me in my life when I realized I didn't know anything, and I don't mean to be corny with that. I just suddenly realized that I could read a newspaper, read the headlines and those articles that had to do with the city in which I lived - and I'm not abstracting it to national policy or war in Cambodia or anything outside of my immediate environment - that the things it talked about, like a four-point-eight-million-dollar bond issue for the sewers, I didn't know what it means. First of all, I have no idea what four-point-eight million dollars is. If I could get past that and work that out, then I really don't understand bond issues, exactly what they mean and how they affect me. And never is it explained about the sewers, whether it's because if sewers take away shit, then probably you think it's good to have sewers, we should have more. But it's nothing that I can really understand.

I can't turn to somebody and talk for fifteen minutes about it and describe the sewer system, why we have it, how it should be improved, where it's lacking, what eventually as a technology. it will amount to, what we do with sewage, how much sewage there is, how do we reduce it, how can we make use of it. I mean, I just have the vaguest ideas, as most people would, that you could use it, that it could be fertilizer, that it could be landfill. You have these

touches – that you know there's something not right with the system, that it isn't a good system.

Anyway, the realization that I didn't know about these things, instead of being discomfoting ... I guess it was about six or seven years ago – why didn't it happen to me sooner! Actually, it started with that little book I gave you (*Cities: Comparison of Form and Scale*). That was the first book I did. It happened by accident.

I was teaching a class in North Carolina. It was my first teaching job, I was twenty – six, it was 1962, and I was teaching a class in second – year architecture. The project we were doing had to do with a group of buildings – it was a housing project – and I wanted them to understand that there are many ways that groups of things can relate, not just in the grid system that they were familiar with. That there are many reasons and ways that buildings might relate to things, and in fact, what's more important than the buildings is the space between the buildings. I wanted to use the problem so they would think about designing the space between things rather than the things themselves.

Simultaneously with that, just in conversation in the class, I would be mentioning words like some architect's name or a country or a place or a town, and I remember mentioning Helsinki. And three people in the class wanted to know what a helsinki was. I decided the hell with this; we're gonna take three weeks out and study a bunch of cities in the world and everybody's gonna come back and we're gonna just make a little plan of them and see what they look like. And I said oh, let's even make a model instead of a plan. And we started researching things as a kind of a side project, and I said all right, let's make 'em to this scale – by accident, really – let's make them to this one scale. Then I realized two weeks into the problem what I'd done: that by making the models all to the same scale ... like Archimedes in the bathtub saying, "Eureka!" I realized that you really truly can understand something only relative to something you can understand. That unless the thing you do, the way you describe it, what you're talking about, is relative to some experience that you already know about, you fool yourself into thinking you understand it.

And we did the book, and the book surprised me in that so many people thought the book was incredible because nobody had ever bothered making the plans of cities in the world to the same scale up to that point, which I thought was extraordinary. That started to grow in me from that point.

I think now would be a good time to get some background in here. Okay?

Okay. I was born here in Philadelphia, lived in North Philadelphia until I was five or six, then moved with the family out to the suburbs, Melrose Park, and went through that school system...to Cheltenham and Elkins Park Junior High School and that stuff. Then went to the University of Pennsylvania and went there for undergraduate in architecture and through a series of strange happenings, I took more courses than anybody'd ever taken in five years and they had skipped me, and at the same time I took off and went to Guatemala for six months on the archaeological dig at Tikal the first season there - Tikal is the largest and the oldest of the Mayan cities in the jungle of Guatemala. The three things I always wanted to be were artist, architect, and archaeologist. I still have more than a passing interest in all three.

The School of Architecture at Penn was considered the best in the United States at that time. Certainly not now - there is no best now - but at that time it was clearly the best. I painted a lot, I took archeology courses, history of art courses, and I was a very good student. I was first in the class. I came back and they gave me a fellowship in graduate school, but I hadn't done my undergraduate thesis yet. So I did my undergraduate thesis and my master degree in the same year and got both my degrees in fifty - nine. Then I got a fellowship to travel in Europe for a year.

You just get them from Penn. I mean, when you're a good student there - and I was a good student - you get a traveling fellowship that allows you to go to Europe for x number of months. Dorothy (his wife) also had one. I was first in the class; Dorothy was second. I had a fellowship for graduate school; she had one to travel. She held hers for one year while I got my master's, and then I got another one. We pooled them and went to Europe and just spent about three months in France and a couple months in Italy and a month in England - the classic tour. Then I came back and started working for Lou.

What was Lou Kahn like as a teacher?

I can't conceive of anyone being a better teacher. He was an extraordinary teacher. What made him an extraordinary person for people was that he was teaching twenty - four hours a day. And what he was trying to do was to teach himself, and he did that so very, very well that everyone around him was learning. If I could sum up in one sentence what made Lou a great teacher is that for many people - not for all people; it depended on their strength of character - his teaching allowed them to be more of themselves, and I don't know what more you could do to be a good teacher.

I know that I am only able to live my life because of Lou, and yet what I do Lou was always interested in, but it has nothing to do with Lou stylistically. I had a great realization of that when I did that big fancy hundred - dollar atlas.

Very complicated technocratic book, and I got a big press sheet – because it was done on a big press. I was so proud, so happy. I brought it over to Lou, as I had to do, you know, to show it to Lou. Lou thought it was just marvelous and pinned it up in his office and it was up there for six months. And I went in there one day shortly after it was up and I was hoping it was there and at the same moment I realized that I was only able to do that book because of Lou and yet it had absolutely nothing to do with Lou. It wasn't anything that he was interested in, it wasn't that he ever taught me any technical parts about it, there was no stylistic relationship between it and anything Lou was working on, it was nothing Lou would ever work on... it was totally removed and totally connected, all at the same time. What Lou had allowed me to do was my own thing.

Very often, working for somebody – at least in the arts ... painting, sculpture, architecture – the lineage that is always drawn with somebody is a stylistic lineage, and the important lineage is not stylistic but attitudinal. What you get from somebody is an attitude. And the worst thing you can get from somebody is a style. A style is like last year's clothes.

So I started working for Lou – I'll never forget it, of course – on a Friday. I had another job 'cause Lou didn't have any room in his office. Lou called me up right before New Year's and he said, Ricky, I have a couple – one in particular – funny projects in my office. I really want to talk to you about it, he said, and would you work with me and talk with me about it? I mean, that was so flattering! Sure, terrific, when? He said every night and weekend 'cause I had another job. I used to come home, bolt down dinner, and go over to Lou's and then work at Lou's until about eleven o'clock, eleven – thirty, twelve, come home, sleep, go to my other job and do that, and then all day Saturday and all day Sunday. Of course, Lou was there seven days a week, night and day.

The story continues. Kahn was commissioned to design an entertainment barge for a man in Pittsburgh who wanted it for a series of concerts in England. Kahn dumped the job in Wurman's lap and sent him off to England with a bunch of rough sketches only, where he had to do all the working drawings and have the thing built in time for the first concert in London in something like ten weeks. At twenty – four and “wet behind the ears.” But he did it, the workers getting off the barge in London as the orchestra was getting on for the concert.

It was an extremely maturing experience, but it wasn't enjoyable at all. Anyway, I got back and I didn't want to talk to Lou ever again and I stayed away from the office a few days. He didn't pay me and I had to scrounge around for money over there and it was really... everything about it was in bad taste. I'm not even giving you ... the iceberg is still underneath, you know? So I finally got to his office one day and Louise was there, his

secretary, and I said, Hi, Louise, and I was trying to straighten out some accounts or something. And all of a sudden in the door comes Lou, who I just didn't want to see. He spots me - makes believe he doesn't spot me for a moment, you know, and goes about his business - and then in an off - handed way he says, Oh, Ricky, what are you working on now? And I haven't seen him in four or five months, and he knew I was about ready to go through the ceiling. In about ten minutes I was sitting down at a desk and working on the Fisher house. He said, Why don't you work on this; I need some help on this. And I melted. In ten seconds I forgot a tremendous amount of built - up hostility, sat down, and started working.

How long were you with him?

Two years.

Is that when you worked out your Two Years with a Great Man theory?

Oh, no, I laid out my life quite rigorously when I was eighteen. Laid out what I was to do in three twelve - year incremental periods until I was fifty - four. There are certain things I do in each twelve - year period. I'm in the second period now. I hold to it fairly well ... very well. And the two - year thing is a two - year increment of doing any job as an employee - whether it's teaching or anything, it will never last more than two years. That's why I've taught at so many different places but never for more than two years. When I take a job - when I started teaching at Princeton or when I taught at North Carolina or C.C.N.Y. - I give two years' notice, a nonrefutable notice, because I will not stay any place more than two years.

Why?

Just seemed to me the proper thing to do. It seemed to be, and it's worked out, it still works out, it just happens to be fortuitous that it's worked out all right. I mean, I also don't have to do what I've written. One of the rules that I wrote is that if I have to not do it I don't do it. What it gives me is a good deal of freedom. The freedom is that I don't have to think about what I'm going to do. And I feel very comfortable, I don't feel anxious about my life. Twelve - year Increments, two - year increments, six - year increments, are different things I do in my life.

Are they recognizable changes, hundred - and - eighty - degree changes? Are you like a twelve - year locust?

No, but there's a hundred - and - eighty - degree change in this one though. Not the last one; it wasn't supposed to be. It was the beginning of becoming

an architect. I was supposed to become an architect at the beginning of my second twelve - year period. And I know this sounds spooky. but my certificate of architectural registration came the day that I had prepared it should twelve years before. came on that day in the mail. There are some funny things like that, odd things, that have come through like on the exact day.

I don't think these things are very mystical, just coincidence. But it has to do with me doing books, it has to do with me being in the office, it has to do with me eventually leaving the office, it has to do with various places I've taught, jobs, different things like that. What happens at the end of this twelve - year period? I'll tell you what the plan is. I don't know if I'll have enough guts to do it, although we've had several serious discussions about it in the office because I've given notice to my partners about it, it's that serious a thing. I'm supposed to leave architecture for six years the day after my forty - second birthday. I'm thirty-nine now.

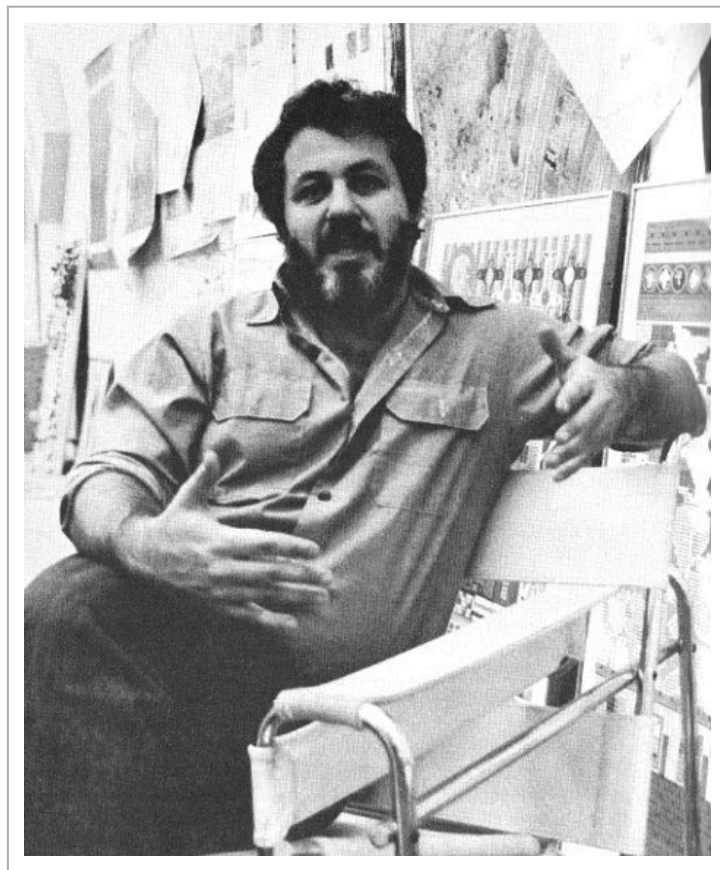
To do what?

I don't want to discuss it in detail, but the idea as it was written was to do something which does not depend on my visual facility as a clearer kind of test of my abilities independent of a facility. I have historically never trusted facility, although one's ability is just a different facility. And - I'm telling you this in just the grossest terms - after that, the next six years after that, was coming back into architecture in an altered position. And then my plans ended at fifty - four, that was all I ever wrote out. I just sat down and wrote it all out one day. And there were a lot of eighteen - year - old things, like I had to be first in my class at Penn, and I had to take more courses than anybody had taken.

It has some funny things about it. I remember I predicted that a certain year I was going to be asked to teach at Cambridge, and I actually did nothing to push my being asked to teach there - I mean, I didn't know the head of the school or anything like that; it just seemed an exotic thing to me. I didn't even know if Cambridge had a school of architecture. It's just that Cambridge seemed the ultimate school in the world to me at eighteen. I was asked a year before I had put down. Things like that - all ambitious things like that, hokey, kind of ambitious . . . it was like a striving chart, like a Boy Scout chart of all his goals, his little tags he was gonna get on his suit ... for life (laughs) ... up to fifty-four. For me, it's been very helpful. I've had so many opportunities for what I look back on as mindless diversions; this kept me clear and on course and happy with myself.

With the exception that I don't have to do it if I don't want to. Always

the out. Not really an out, a happy escape hatch. But it sort of makes me think that there is some strange sensibility about actually doing what I said I should do, a strange sensibility that in two and a half years I should begin again at something else. And the idea was a beginning again, the idea was really to begin again at something else. Not to start off in something else, parlaying whatever position I was at at that moment, but to start again and have another look at things. Certainly I'd make use of whatever maturity I had and whatever sensibilities I had, but not by saying I was a good architect or had made a name for myself in the community and so I could hop over to another field at a high level. It wasn't to hop at a high level; it was to begin again.



So I started in North Carolina in Raleigh, two years. Princeton, two years. C.C.N.Y., two years. Cambridge, two terms, not two years. New York City program at Cornell, two years. I taught at Washington University in St. Louis for a short time when I did the atlas. And then I've lectured, you know, a hundred places. I started this firm in sixty - four. A great deal of the work it does now is urban planning. Doing a master plan for SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority), master plan for the University of Cincinnati. We did the urban design plan for Penn's Landing, and then

we completed the architectural work for the public improvements. We're doing the remodeling of the Second Street subway station. And then we do graphics: the high - speed line to the airport, Patterson Avenue, SEPTA, their mapping. We also do all the graphics design for all the books we do, and our books are very visual.

The other thing I do is conventions ... did the Aspen thing (International Design Conference), the first Federal Design Assembly I was co - chairman, head of the Working Group/Learning for the International Congress of Societies of Industrial Designers in Brussels, on the board of Aspen, and national chairman of the A.I.A. convention here in seventy - six. The other big project that we've spent time on has to do with the books, has to do with the theme which influences my life, the theme of making the city observable, being able to access the urban environment, being able to make use of it, being able to get professional people to assume the responsibility for making it understandable, trying to influence political people to try to make it understandable.

The one project that I think is very interesting and is also part of my life plan - in the potential success that it might be - is the series of career guides that I'm working on. I think that it's a very interesting knot that I'm trying to tie with that, and that has to do with the fact that education about the Man - Made Environment is not legitimate to the school system. There's no niche, there's no place ... whether it's social studies, art, history, math; ... there's no place in the school system, as it is classically set up, that it fits.

Education about the natural environment becomes biology and works into the sciences, but the Man - Made Environment really doesn't fit. Nobody really wants to teach about it except a certain group of premotivated teachers whom we know about because they buy our materials, but I dare say we've never motivated any teacher to do it. They were motivated, and that's why they looked us up and found our materials. And so in a certain way, although we are probably as prominent as anybody in the United States in developing materials about the Man - Made Environment, we've failed. And we failed because all we're doing is giving materials to people who are already motivated.

The only book we ever did that crossed over that was that little Yellow Pages of Learning Resources, and that crossed over because it wasn't education about the Man - Made Environment. It fooled people; it was really just saying hey, you can go out and learn from anything around you. It was catalog, and it wasn't a commitment when you bought it; there was no commitment to a course of study. In that thing one of the first sentences is: "The resources of a city are its people, places, and processes, what you can

learn from a person at a place about a process.”

And I looked at that and the success it had, and I said oh, my god, what you can learn about a person at a place about a process is really accessing the urban environment, the Man - Made Environment. But if you take them out separately and you just say what can you learn about a person, and you did books about people ... it's career education! And what is the most legitimate thing in the school system today? Career education! So my long - range plan is to do a hundred books on a hundred people, a hundred books on a hundred places, a hundred books on a hundred processes ... as one way of getting into one part of the Man - Made Environment education without people knowing I'm doing it.

That's a big project. It's the first jump I've made into really trying to popularize what I'm doing. Everything has been kind of thumb in the navel, very exclusive, elitist kind of material whether I liked it or not. Even though they were for young kids, they were elitist in the sense of the group that I knew would like them. But this is the first thing that is not elitist at all, and I'm very anxious to see if I fail or not.â€”

We won't editorialize, but we won't glorify a job either. If it's a dull job, for example, it comes right out how dull it is. In the middle section of the book we take four people in each of these occupations - four real people - and we photograph them every half hour of the day. Man, you see that some of them are pretty deadly. You don't have to editorialize then; you just see what somebody does all day, and that to me is a clearer way to make a decision of what that job is like all day than almost anything. Other career materials make every job sound like the best ever invented.

But when you make the city more observable, you also expose its flaws. When you see its flaws, what do you do about it? You, Richard Saul Wurman.

I guess what I'm trying to do is make more and more people see it. I have this faith that if people could only understand how little they know, if I could get a group of people â€” “group” meaning millions â€” to make constructive demands, I would have achieved something. It's not meaningful to me to hear people at conferences say gee, everybody should have better housing. That's absolutely of no use, and people have been saying that for twenty years. They talk about it, and nothing ever happens with that statement because information is never presented relative to yourself and relative to your gut or relative to mass understanding of what people mean and mass possibility of touching that piece of information. And so I guess I'm just trying to get people really to understand something, but really understand it, and I have a certain amount of faith - perhaps it will prove to be misplaced

- that when people really understand it in their gut, some action will take place.

There were other times in our history that action took place when all of a sudden something became understandable and became a gut issue. I feel there are very few gut issues. It took two years for Watergate to become a gut issue. At a certain point it became understandable; it really did get into the stomachs of everybody. I'd like to figure out how to do that in a more regularized way with many other things all the time, and I didn't know how to do it. I think there's a lot of power in being able to do that. I'm incredibly amazed that a group of politicians or several politicians haven't really seen the power of this. I mean, I'm just floored because it would be so obvious if I were a politician that if you could make some of these things understandable in a massive way, that would be worth a lot of power.

Many critics of the urban environment say that the city is beyond redemption. You are living in it, working in it, trying to make it more observable. Are you trying to make a cancer more observable? Is that enough?

Well, I thought about that many times. I don't know how bad the cancer is. Henry Kissinger was quoted as saying that every civilization eventually destroyed itself. And yet he goes on and everybody goes on trying, and I'm sure in Rome many went on trying as Rome was destroyed. It certainly could be that we rose up very quickly and are now destroying ourselves. The city - maybe this whole civilization - may have run its course and, though we can't see it now, we are going downhill at a certain rate and we will continue to do that for x number of years until someplace else comes up maybe in a hundred years or maybe fifty years or maybe even ten years; who knows? But I'm right in the middle of it now, so it doesn't matter.

What matters to me is the possibility of improving people's lives in the city. I can't conceive of living any other place but in a place that has an intensive number of human beings. It's the possibility of personal interchange with lots of people, being able to access those people, being able to walk around two or three blocks or four blocks to see those people and talk to them, being in the middle between Washington and New York, get to see another group of people who are all in one place. What the city means to me is this ability to interchange ideas, ideas and talents that interest me, in a rapid one - to - one way.

But the cities of the world are getting very crowded; many are running out of space. A million and a half live on the streets of Bombay, almost one hundred thousand per square mile in Hong Kong. How much space does somebody need in order to live?

I think it's very dangerous to speak of space in terms of numbers. What you have to talk about is the quality of space, and one of the unfortunate things that has happened is that people program buildings, like a school, for instance - that an architect is given a program for a school which really tells him how to build it. I mean, you're gonna have a corridor with rooms one two three four of various sizes off of that corridor, and the corridor is going to be so wide with lockers on it ... and then within that you're supposed to design.

It doesn't talk to you about the quality of learning or the quality of a school or the quality of space, that maybe it shouldn't have a hall at all but maybe that is the most important place in the school, maybe the hallway is really the classroom. I know Lou always talked about a great ... it should be a gallery with great fireplaces on either end and niches to sit in ... just talking about the quality of a space, and I think that has to do with living. This place is very small that we're in now, but the quality of this tiny room is probably far above that which you could find in other rooms of this size, and so I can be reasonably happy here.

Well, for example, what would you have to do in the city of Philadelphia to handle six million people living here instead of two million?

Oh, I think if you had to handle tremendous numbers of people - not knowing about the sewage or power problems that would cause, but as far as the space - any of these cities have an enormous amount of space that isn't being used. In this area we're in now which is called the Old City area, which is quite large, sixty - some percent of the buildings are vacant above the first floor, and of course, there's a lot of six - and seven - story buildings. That's a large area we're talking about! And probably eighty percent have nothing above the second floor.

There's a tremendous amount of found space in a city, not only for living but for learning, for a lot of things. It's a crime that we continue to build, use up the money and the resources and the energy and the spreading effect of building, when there is this potential of found space all over a city. There's also the fact that there are certain buildings with a potential for double usage: supermarkets that have large parking lots around, and there's the possibility of putting things above supermarkets, on the second floor of supermarkets, like schools. Because supermarkets are always one - story space.

Everything comes from a one - shot deal. Everything comes from the fact that the only way we can draw a map showing the usage of land is to show the usage of the ground floor. For instance, if you draw a map of this whole area, it would come out to be commercial because the map would just be the ground - floor use, whereas maybe the dominant use of this area could

become residential. Our inability to draw the complex fabric of the way a city really gets to be means that all new planning in a city is totally ghettoized by land use. For instance, you get an area like Society Hill, and they made that residential because they didn't know how to make some commercial in there. So the commercial only happens in a little enclave, and all that first - floor commercial which gave vitality to a place - like corner stores and things like that - that all got wiped out because the planners didn't know how to draw the plan! .

We have in schools a tremendous amount of space that is used nine months, eight and a half months, of the year, five days of the week, and only during the daytime. Space that's heated, good - quality space with stage facilities, parking lots, ground. They could be used every night, every weekend, all summer ... and they're not. We don't do that because we don't have the drawings or the maps or the dynamic way of showing how the city is used. All we can show is ground floor use. That square of the map is filled with a color that represents educational facility, that's filled, and you can't conceive of other use of that area because our minds can't go past that map. I use the term "map" because I don't know what other word to use.

In a book we're doing called *Something More You Can Learn from Your Schoolhouse* we photograph not only what a teacher, a student, a custodian, and a principal do every hour of the day, but we then photograph the corridor, the auditorium, the lunchroom, and a classroom every hour of the day. It's really funny! The cafeteria is empty, it's empty, it's empty, it's filled, it's empty, then it's totally empty - all the chairs and tables are put up against the wall and the place is totally empty because they mop the floor - then the chairs and tables are back and it's empty, it's empty. And the auditorium is empty, empty, a little band practice on the stage, empty, empty, a couple students in it, empty, empty. It's a day in the life of space, and you realize that these two spaces are the biggest spaces in the whole school!

With the exception of the corridor. If you add up the square footage of the corridor, it's the biggest space in the whole school. But that's what a city is like, and the streets take up about twenty - five to thirty percent of the entire city. And yet nobody thinks about the use of the street. It's a negative space. That's what I meant about designing the space between things because really they're more important than the things themselves. And I think that the corridor and the street are more important than the things that about them.

If you were the mayor or city council of a city, would you hire B.F. Skinner as a consultant?

I don't know. I don't know if I'd hire him'; maybe I'd hire him and some

other people. We really don't know what we have already. But the answer to your question about accommodating six million people in Philadelphia is yes, it appears that if we just look around, there's a great deal of unused and under - utilized space, without spending any mote money.

What about some of the new cities going up, the ones being built from scratch. Are they improvements in the use of space?

I don't even think they're towns. I really think they're just subdivisions. I've just been to Columbia and Reston, and they happen to be a suburban community with a shopping center. They don't have any quality of a city to me; there's no quality of even town to me. They are so conspicuously one level of person there. There's no mixture there. Everybody there is the same. Everybody who moves there is the same temperament, the same economic status - it's like a Levittown. The focus of the whole place is a shopping center. I guess my classic image of a town is one that does have diversity, does have the possibility of interchange and discovery and the freedom to open up a corner store if you want to instead of having to rent space in a shopping center. There isn't even freedom within the system to develop there!

Do you see any awareness among the people who run the cities - this city, for instance - that not only is there a need to make the city observable but also, once observed, improved?

Not at all. None whatsoever. It would seem to me that if I was the mayor of a city or anyone of the people around the top power of a city, that if you had to think up an issue at this moment in history that would be more popular, that would give you a better profile than simply to make the statement to the press that what you vow to do over the next year or two years or four years is to make public information public about the urban environment, to tell one at a time how each department is running or what they're doing or about the quality of life or anything to really make an effort or at least symbolically do something like set up an Urban Observatory where information was accessible and understandable, you'd think that would occur to everyone of these politicians! But I don't see anybody doing it anyplace.

The Committee of Seventy in Philadelphia, which had that as its initial impetus, never had the fantasy in their mind of making any information really public. What they could do was make a statement to the press that there was voter fraud, but that's not really making information public to anybody; that's like a newspaper headline. The limit of their communication abilities was to do a newspaper headline, and newspaper headlines are good for a day, that's all. I don't think they make for revolution or revolutionary change.

You know of Paolo Soleri's vision of the city of the future, and you know as well as anyone the condition of the city of the present. How do we get there from here?

You can't. I don't think Paolo gives us an achievable model. What Paolo gives us, which is, I think, important, is an artful and potentially exciting way of understanding an extreme alternative which might help influence some direction or some decision that falls far short of that but which would never even go that direction if his work did not exist ...in that he is a very creative and artful man and does what he does with great seriousness.

Let me give you another image. When I do a book for kids, we do it very, very fancy, very, very nice. We try to make it like we really care. Now you could make the argument that instead of making it so expensive, we should really produce it on newsprint and sell it for ten cents apiece if we really cared about getting it around to enough people. The fact is if we produced it for ten cents and it didn't look that nice, it wouldn't get around to ten people because it wouldn't look like we really cared enough, and it's not a legitimate subject anyway. .. it would have no credentials, it would look like Third World, it would look like anything but saying we cared. Our idea is to do it our way and hope that second editions would be put out on newsprint when the thing has credentials. I think there is a parallel to what Paolo is doing.

I think Paolo is doing things beautifully, with great care, with great artfulness. That idea does not need his great architectural touch. The ideas that he is trying to push and propagate are completely apart from his artistry, a separate issue. He's really saying some simple things: You can get a lot of people together in one spot, and if you work out these kinds of mathematical things, they can do all these things ... you can take advantage of some built things like domes and some other things, and as long as you're building them and there's money involved in them, you could build places where masses of people could be located immediately by a power source like a dam, or you could build a very intense tall thing where you could just step out and be in the country. I mean it doesn't need all the incredible artistry that he puts in them. But that artistry has made him more believable to more people because they say ah, but he's a great artist and a very talented man and he's also pushing this idea.

I'm certain that none of those is going to get built, but in that he has described in a fairly careful manner - not in a manner in which he really communicates; that's what I have always been after him to do is really to annotate what he has done and really communicate these things, that's what I was always going to do for him - then people say gee, I was never able to visualize what that would be. Because you can't just have reports over the

radio saying somebody has proposed a one - mile - high building that houses five hundred thousand people with a circumference of so - and - so feet and a diameter of so - and - so feet out in the Jersey meadow. Meaningless, absolutely meaningless. Doesn't mean anything to anybody.

Now what he has done doesn't mean anything to too many more people, but the potential is there to have it as a meaningful alternative, as a possible way that you might want to develop a very intensive living thing - that it isn't a no - no, that it isn't altogether bad, that it isn't an inhuman thing, that you could as an alternative either spread buildings like this or put them all together and have a shorter distance to go out into untouched land. I think that's a very important thing for him to have done.

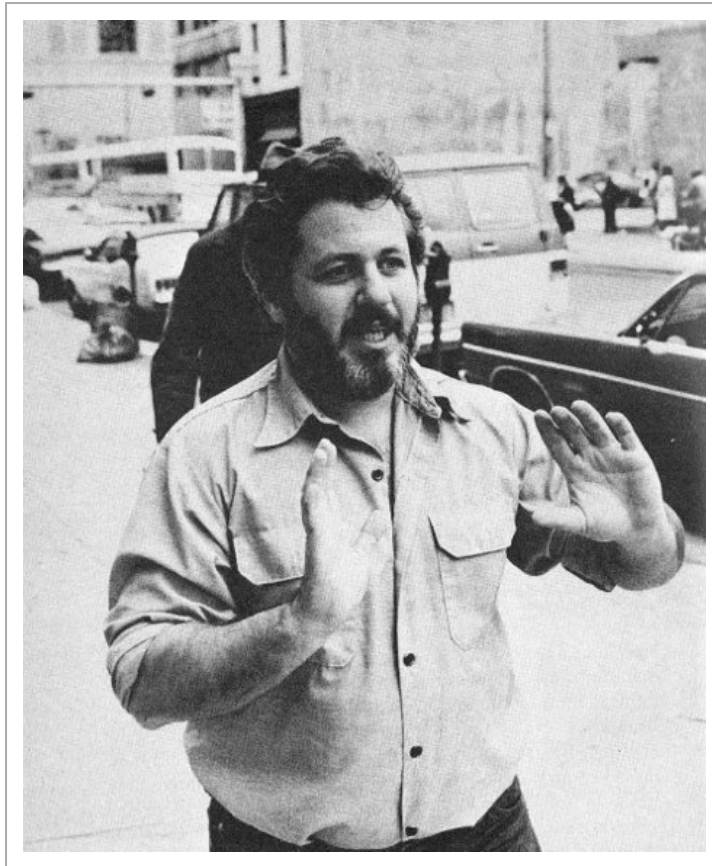
Has your approach been to try to get the message to the kids, more than to the adults?

I don't think so. I think that if you test yourself to put your ideas down as simply as possible - and a good rigor for doing that is to say you're trying to appeal to eighth grade or ninth grade or something like that - then everybody understands what you're doing. It's my nonthreatening approach. Our Man - Made Environment was done for seventh graders and used in universities in freshman architecture. I think the test is to get an idea down in as simple a form as I am able. Now, sometimes an idea can only be put down in a form that only a professional understands, but sometimes an idea is such that even a seventh grader or a fifth grader can understand it. If a fifth grader can understand the idea, then it just happens that that's the level it hits. I think the test is not in writing for an age level; the test is writing for an idea level. But I know if I do it for kids, then I have the biggest audience possible. I also know that I'm not the first one to say that the only hope is in the kids.

One in the morning. We call it quits. About eight Rick leaves for his office. He has a ten o'clock meeting with the city manager and a lunch date to discuss the Bicentennial. We arrange to meet in his office after lunch. I leave for the university for my date with Ian McHarg, following which I walk Philadelphia for an hour or two before my meeting with Wurman. Watching the traffic, the people, the buildings, the noise, the confusion of a big city - an intense living thing, Wurman calls it - and all I can see is the decay. Wurman and McHarg buzzing in my head, and Reines and Todd and Soleri still, and I'm trying to put it together, to simplify it all somehow into some sort of positivistic approach. By the time I arrive at Wurman's office, I have a headache.

Second floor of a long narrow building on Arch Street, a short walk from City Hall. The office is long, narrow, and open. High ceilings. A number of people working at desks and drawing tables. Almost a block long, windows at either end. On another less finished floor more workers are putting together the latest book, galley proofs laid out on long tables. Many of Wurman's books are published by M.I.T. Press, projects are sometimes funded by the National

Endowment for the Arts, and the umbrella organization for putting these books and materials together is GEE! (Group for Environmental Education, Inc.). We sit in his conference room/office, partitioned off from the rest of the office at the Arch Street end, the windows open because the heat has been turned on in the building in spite of the balmy day, the result of that automatic calendar that office buildings have for turning off the air conditioning and turning on the heat regardless of the temperature, the street noises punctuating our conversation with jackhammers, horns, and sirens.



Is man so inherently urban that he needs cities?

I think there's no doubt in my mind that man is one of those animals that collects together, and he collects together more so now than ever before because the more man specializes, the more he needs to be with different specialists. When man could do everything for himself, there was less of an excuse to live together. Now he does less and less for himself. I mean, there is no man who on his own can make a lightbulb, and yet everybody uses lightbulbs.

There's hardly anything that you use in your daily life that you can make yourself, and yet we pride ourselves in making things. Like you're up there

in Maine, and you feel like you're doing a few things on your own, but actually you're doing not very many things on your own. Every piece of clothing you have on somebody else made. Everything we have now is from somebody else, and when you depend on a lot of other people and you depend on those things, then you group together to get it.

The desire on the part of many young people to get back to that condition of independence, to grow their own food and make their own clothes and to be more self-sufficient ... is that an aberration, a transition, or an avant-garde?

I don't think it's an avant-garde. I think it's a very healthy but temporary desire to touch something again. I think that one thing that's going on, and I'm involved in it, is the idea of people liking plants. There's an unbelievable number of people who never grew a plant ten years ago who have a plant now. I think that's a massive psychological thing that's been laid on us, that we have to touch something real, have to touch something that's growing, have to have some identity that as best we know about it isn't artificial, although of course we're growing it in an artificial climate in artificial ways, and it's a plant that isn't natural to the inside of anybody's house.

Now, I think that's a very real outgrowth of this society, of wanting to touch something, but I think that's a fairly permanent thing. I think that'll become part of your life as part of your furnishings, part of something you can touch. I think hippies and communes will continue, but I don't think there will be a permanent moving out of people doing their own weaving, growing all their own food, and doing all that kind of thing. I think a real dropout situation will be a minor alternative. I do not think the city is in good shape, but I think there is a potential for the city to be a nonhostile place.

No city is successful in a perfect sense. You can't measure a city based on a...give it a mark and believe that it will attain some sort of perfection ... a city is too complicated to be thought of in terms of success ... but there are places that I believe have encouraged marvelous creative activity, created marvelous thoughts in people's minds, have been part and parcel of people's lives, the agglomeration of people's lives that have enjoyed their lives in and around the city. For example, my family lives in Wayne. If you ask them where they live, they'll say Philadelphia. Suburban people belong to the city.

If we are to serve as the model for the rest of the world, as seems the case unfortunately, why can't we have real model cities? Why don't you design efficient cities instead of trying to make inefficient ones more observable?

A city is something ... well, certainly a new one can be born at a certain moment ... but there is such incredible beauty ... you know, the book I'm

doing on Lou Kahn is called *What Will Be Has Always Been*. There's a whole part of the Bible that tells about that. And the idea of the continuum, of the slow transformation of a place and not the making of a new place, to me has such roots in it. And I know the feeling that I've gotten in places of the world which have had this long - term slow build - up and change, and they're still such wonderful places.

Romantic, though, for these times of such enormous human urgency, isn't it?

Yes, but wouldn't it be marvelous to figure out how to take what we have and make it operative?

Is that still possible? Is there still time to do that?

Yes, I believe so. I believe there is still the possibility of looking at what we have and trying to figure how to make something else out of it. I mean, look at this space. This space was for wholesale underwear, and yet I really do love it as an architect's office. I really like this space. I like being in it, and I kinda like the fact that it was a wholesale underwear place and is now serving another purpose and that when this office dies, maybe something else will go on here. Not that it's a great space, but that continuum goes on, and I would rather have it than build an architect's office.

I think we only have two abilities. We can say more, and we can say no. And the ability to say no is an amazing ability that has only become legitimate in the past five or six years. We could do a great book called *No*, a book which describes the coming of age of the ability to say no, the many ways people in the last five years have been able to say no. For instance, the obvious way of marching down the street was a way of saying no, smoking a cigar in the office of the president of Columbia University was a way of saying no, leaving the country to go to Canada instead of Vietnam was a way of saying no, women marching, hardhats marching, voting ... the incredible number of ways we now take for granted of saying no. It's part of the planning process now, and it wasn't six or seven years ago.

Now anything you do - environmental impact studies - all the potential ways of saying no are explored as part of the planning process. This whole idea of saying no may turn out to be one of the two or three most important events of the sixties. The other thing, in addition to saying no, is the ability to say more. The only other thing we can do is ask for more of what we already know. That's a perfectly believable thing, to say that. People have actually said to me that the schools are really terrible; what we need is more schools. There's an absurdity about that statement, but you can really hear somebody say that. - And you could say that the city is not safe; what we need is more

policemen. And yet there is no body of knowledge that says more policemen make a place safer. And in everyone of the things that have to do with a city, people ask for more of what they already have that doesn't work.

So here we are. We're in two positions. The professionals and the lay people are doing two things: They're saying no, stop it, we don't want it; or they're saying I want more of it, a better version of it. No proof or no idea that the better version or the acceleration in number or size of something, greater magnitude of what we already have, would work better. But we ask for it. And why do we do that? We do that because we don't know what the fuck else to ask for. I'll give you an image that I use all the time. If we had five light poles up there, we could vote for which light pole we like the best, and we could maybe come to some conclusion. But then I say to the audience: Can anybody stand up here, after we've now chosen this light pole, and tell me the quality of artificial illumination they would like to have in their city? because that's what it's all about.

What we want to ask for, what we want to demand, is the quality of artificial illumination, not how pretty the light pole is. And yet all the city fathers are able to do is give us ten more light poles. They hire consultants to pick out which ones. And nobody is standing up and saying this is the quality of artificial light we want in thy city. Now, what are we talking about? On the one hand we're talking about a product - more of a product, a better version of a product - and on the other hand we're talking about a performance, the quality of some performance in the city.

And that same image goes for the difference between people asking for schools and not being able to ask for learning, being able to ask for policemen and not being able to ask for safety, being able to ask for nice vehicles and not being able to ask for a movement system, being able to ask for more highways and not being able to ask for speed or interest. Part of the reason for this is that we really don't have a language that describes performance, we don't have a visual language that describes visual things, we don't know how to get at it in any kind of precision that people can understand.

We talk about housing by the number of houses; we talk about standards by how many square feet a room has. The book we did on the nature of recreation really is about the performance of recreation rather than saying: I want a park. A park is a product, and it might be proper, but it might be totally improper. In a certain area it might be the most unsafe, unsound, ill - used, ill - conceived thing to have; it might actually be a detriment. And there might be many other ways of having recreation. What is recreation? What is the relationship between the desire for recreation and the performance of various kinds of recreation for different kinds of people and a

physical space? Instead of saying in an advocacy way: Give 'em a park.

All right, I understand what you are saying. Now let's apply the grease to the squeak. If you were czar of Bombay today, what would you do?

Um! So helpless ... that's a terrific question; thanks a lot. Uh ... god! I would take the job. That's where I'd start. I mean, I could not take the job, right? And that would be a big decision. I would make it rapidly; I would take the job. I guess then that one of the first things I would do is catalog and describe every bit of public space in the city.

You'd better do it fast. There's a million and a half people living in the streets, and they're having hundreds, maybe thousands, of new kids - every day. And they're hungry. So are the people that are wandering in from the country in search of food and work.

Yeah. I know I don't have all the answers. I just know some of the first things I would do. I would look at whatever public space there is because I know the immediate problem. The immediate problem is million and a half on the street and more every day. I would try - at least within the context of what is possible immediately - to find the best public spaces that people in the street could live in so I could just improve that. And I would feed them - I guess that would be the first - and ...

I was hoping that you would say that you would improve the quality of their space because then I was going to ask you how you would do that. Is it possible to improve the quality of someone else's space, or must he do that for himself?

This may not give you the answer to either question, but it tells you something. If I was czar of Philadelphia - which is quite a different thing - or if I was head of zoning in Philadelphia, for instance, one of the things I would have said to do would be that every new building in the core of the city, I would tell them that the second floor of the building on two facades should be built out to the street line so that automatically you would have an arcade through the city. That way people could walk through the city under cover or under the sky, whichever facade they preferred.

What I'm trying to say is that's not a way to solve the world's problems, but it's another look at a certain space so that within the structure of something that's ongoing you could make changes that might make the quality of space better and take care of a very simple performance. Now, that doesn't keep the people fed. What I'm trying to do is one step at a time...how can I at least understand things? I mean, I don't believe that what I have to say is applicable to the story that you're doing, but I wanted to tell you anyway. I'm glad to have the opportunity to tell you where my head is at. It's a very modest thing;

it's just trying to say that we can't do anything to improve a situation until we can understand that situation. And we can't understand a situation until we can communicate to each other.

Can't argue with that. Haven't any of us been communicating worth a damn in a long, long time. It all got too complex, too technical, too many middlemen. And middle machines. Jet travel and satellite television brought the world closer together and drove its people further apart. Funny thing, though, we're not so different after all. We all need the same things to survive, and we all die without them. Kind of gives us a common interest. Richard Saul Wurman thinks that he may bear only a tangential relationship to these things because he is in "communications." I disagree. I think his may be the most important lifeboat of all.

I wanted to know how do we get there from here? The answer is that we cannot know where we are going until we know where we are. Richard Saul Wurman provides us with a compass.

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