

## Iconography and the Transect

**While the Urban Transect promotes the city's coherence with respect to density and massing quite well, it does not promote a coherence with respect to the appearance of buildings. Dino Marcantonio presents a Transect which describes status, which he calls the Iconographic Transect.**

By Dino Marcantonio  
May 19, 2003



The Urban Transect (Fig. 1), as developed by Andres Duany, is an excellent tool: it is a superior alternative to the failed model of mono-functional zoning, and it promotes a city's coherence with respect to density and massing. The historical record of cities that are both practical and beautiful confirms it as a viable model.

The historical record, however, shows us still more than can be accounted for in the Urban Transect. For the cities that we love so much today--Rome, Venice, Prague, St. Petersburg, Charleston--also evince a coherence with respect to the appearance of buildings. What is needed is a tool that allows us to analyze and prescribe this coherence.

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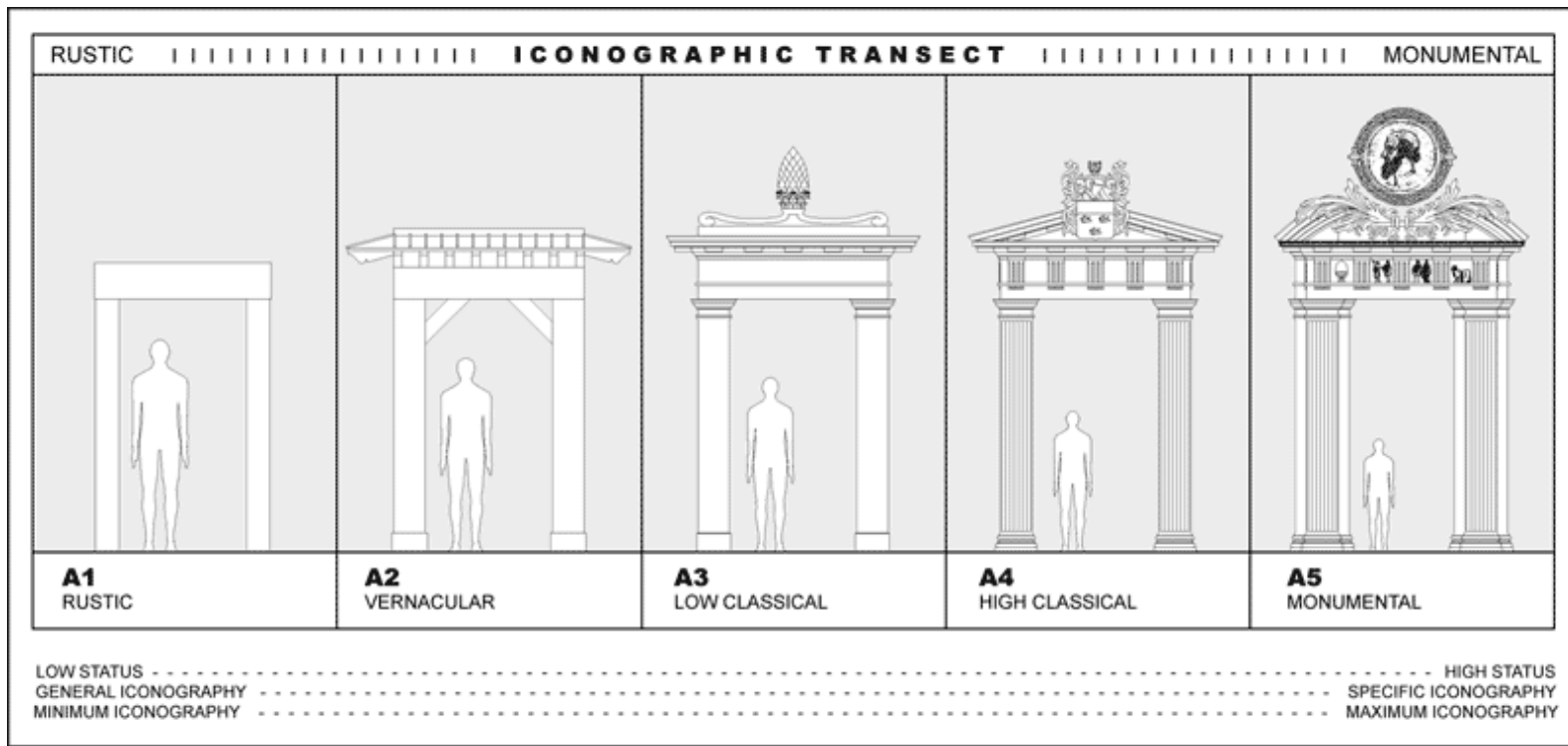


Fig. 2 – The Iconographic Transect

Here I should add that I define the terms "vernacular" and "classical" in a particular way. Vernacular architecture is architecture which makes use of the architectural forms which have been handed down for generations in a particular culture of a particular place, and construction techniques which have been handed down.

Classical architecture is that segment of the body of traditional architecture of a people which has achieved the highest, most articulate, and most refined expression. (Despite Fig 2, I am not using the term "classical" here to suggest exclusively the more refined forms of the Greco-roman tradition.) We can define "rustic" for our purposes here as construction which is entirely pragmatic and utterly devoid of iconography.

The Iconographic Transect can be applied to all cultures and all places that have developed an intelligible iconographic corpus that is harnessed in the building of cities. Thus, to some extent, any place can be diagrammed to define roughly the character of that place. South Bend and Venice each have a very different set of traditions which set up expectations and render certain conventions intelligible. What is understood in South Bend may not be understood in Venice, and vice versa. Thus, each has a unique diagram. Fig. 3 shows an Iconographic Transect for South Bend, Indiana.

these estimates and the misleading story of decline that has been spun around them is the fact that cities no longer have to grow big to grow wealthy. For the first time, according to research from CEOs for Cities, a city's population is no longer tied to its economic success.

[From NIMBYs To DUDEs: The Wacky World Of Plannerese](#)

By Ric Stephens

Jul 26, 2005

Ric Stephens has compiled a list of some of the wackiest -- yet at times quite realistic -- urban planning words, in a vocabulary he has dubbed 'Plannerese.' This week's Planetizen Op-Ed includes a selected glossary of the terms, in addition to 'A Modern Fairy Tale in Plannerese,' which looks at a typical planning issue through the humorous lens of planning jargon.



Fig. 3 – The Iconographic Transect of South Bend

When one brings the Iconographic Transect and the Urban Transect together on X and Y axes to form a chart, one can begin to diagram a place more completely. Plan and elevation are both accounted for. Building types can also be located in a way which more fully describes their meaning for a community. A government building will be centrally located (according to the Urban Transect), and will be more fully ornamented than a single family house (according to the Iconographic Transect), for example. The Transect Chart (Fig. 4) might describe a typical American city today.

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it was still predominantly pagan, Christian churches were placed on the outskirts of the city and very modestly decorated: in A2/T3 or A3/T3. Pagan temples, in contrast, were situated in A4/T5 and A4/T6. As centuries passed and Christianity became dominant, church buildings moved into the center of the city, and were decorated more lavishly, slowly coming to occupy the A4/T5 and A4/T6 slots.

The chart, like the architecture and urbanism which it represents, reveals what a people value. Here is an aspect of traditional urbanism which the New Urbanism is well placed to recover. We ought to be able to look at our cities and see who we are carved in wood and stone, for our own edification, and for that of our children.

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