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Alleys in the American Landscape

Comment

I find myself at the end of another semester again, with the last grain of sand about to slip off the inside curve in the hourglass. I write this knowing that my topic is yet only half covered and that I could have written much more, talked to more people, looked at more aspects. At the same time, I realize all the more that the end of the semester is not necessarily the end of the journey, merely a breaking point before you set out anew. To frame it in as a metaphor, perhaps now the alley is pausing at a street, but it still stretches out into the distance on the other side.

Abstract

The following paper is a non-linear account of some of the main features of alleys, their structure and inhabitants, and an investigation of the ways that alleys have changed over time in America. As much as possible, the paper attempts to look at the alley through the eyes of those who have experienced it, and offers several rather philosophical tangents on alleys and landscape features in general. The paper is not a direct history of the origins and uses of the alley in America; that project has yet to be done by any author, Arth 201 or otherwise. Instead, the paper is somewhat arbitrarily divided into three "alleys": the alley of the poor, of the children, and of tomorrow. Interspersed are "alley aspects": short commentaries on specific alley features.

Introduction

Alley: A passage between buildings; hence, a narrow street, a lane; usually only wide enough for foot-passengers. -Oxford English Dictionary. (1)

The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of an alley is truly only a description of a certain type of alley. Furthermore, it is a description of only the physical entity of an alley- "passage, a lane, a narrow street"; it does not encompass the meanings that alleys have come to have for the thousands of people whose daily lives brought or bring them in contact with alleys. The alley in the landscape is truly both of these; a physical structure and a place for people that has come to have associations, memories, and mythologies coupled with it. In this paper, it is my mission to explore the alley in the landscape, to try to peer through the eyes of some alley or near-alley dwellers, to share some of my own peerings, and throughout, to set the alley in the context of the larger landscape, both spatially and temporally.

Not very much has been written about alleys; they are not a topic that has been written about nearly as much as their most related landscape feature, the streets, or even such possibly esoteric landscape features as outhouses. Since some might wonder why I

have chosen the topic of alleys then, I thought I would explain briefly. My impetus in choosing this subject was my family's move from the urban area of Davenport, Iowa (with a population approaching one hundred thousand) to a suburban, almost rural, area of Iowa City, IA. Comparing the two neighborhoods when I was home in early June, one thing that struck me was the absence of alleys or smaller connecting streets between areas in the development where our new home is located. In contrast, our old neighborhood was built in a grid pattern with interconnecting alleys running through each block. Having spent much of my time as a child variously playing in and traveling through alleys, I began to wonder if alleys were destined to disappear in America, and if so, why that might be.



Dubuque, Iowa 1940

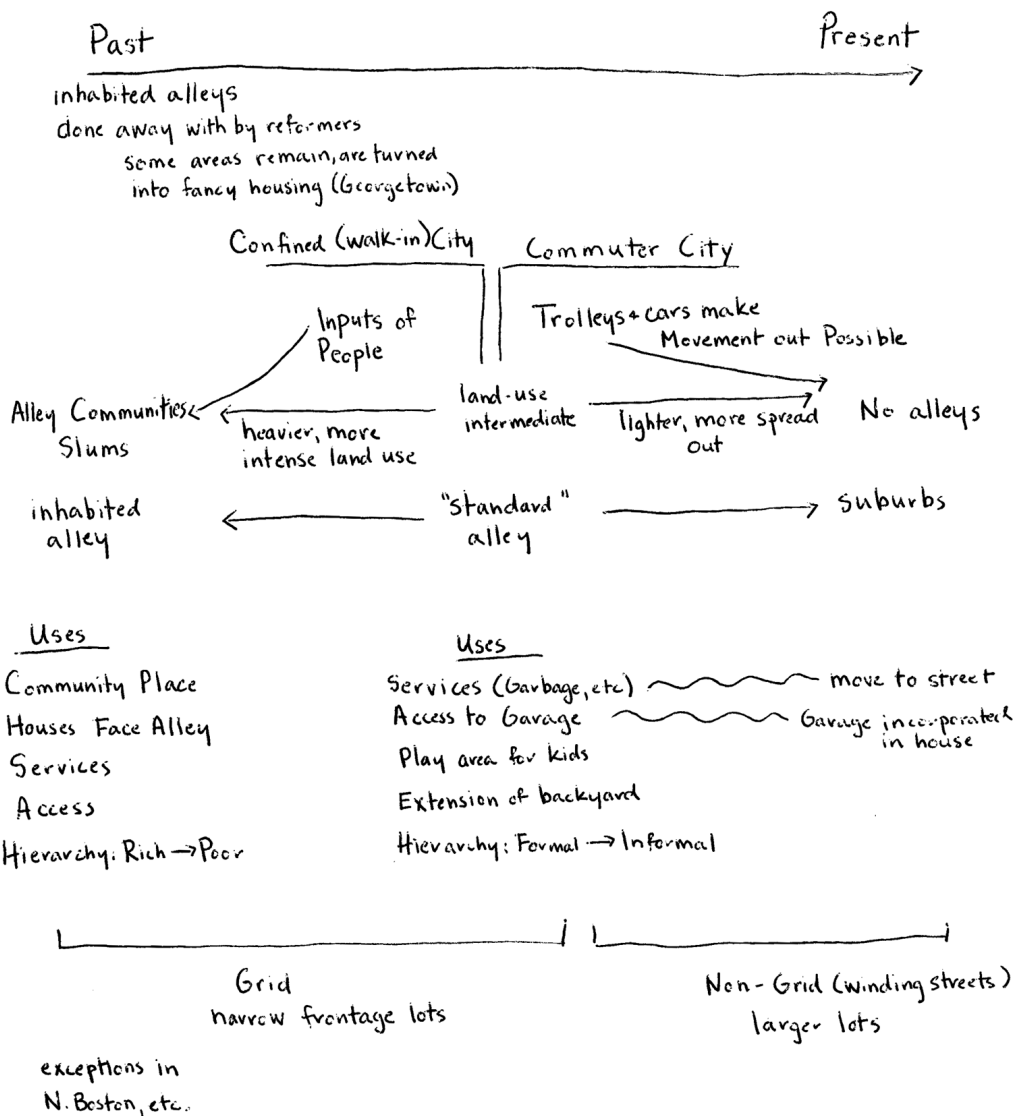
As my search for alley information began, I found that my idea of what exactly an alley was still unclear. As I searched through old pictures and read, I began to get a grasp on the most basic, common physical alley features. The physical alley at heart is a utilitarian place. The alley is typically less wide than the street (hierarchically subordinate), and often reflects older types of paving materials since expensive re-paving jobs will sometimes bypass alleys altogether. They occur in areas with at least a certain density of people, usually in cities or towns built on the grid pattern, although non-grid alleys are not uncommon. It is a utilitarian feature of the landscape for many reasons. Splitting the middle of blocks, tucked out back behind the houses (the house most often faces the street, not the alley; it is fronted by the rear of the houses), the alley's primary purpose is access; a way to reach both the front and back of a lot. The alley often has other uses as well: a place for the carriage house, the garage or other car-parking place, a place for garbage pick-up, and a place for utilities such as electricity, sewer, water, telephone lines. Photographs reveal certain objects that are typical of alleys: trash or trash cans, fire escapes, bad drainage or paving, places for deliveries, storage of firewood, fences, back entrances, parked cars and/or garages, fences, gardens, and clotheslines. Beyond that, the alley can be many things depending on the community around it, the

time, the place, and a thousand other factors that subtly combine to make an alley what it is.

As I went along, I found out that these factors have combined in ways that have produced wildly divergent alley forms, and that as a result, the alley has come to have something of a perceptual split personality. On the one hand, the alley is seen as a detriment, a frightening, dark place full of society's degenerates. The place in the movies, said one 201er, that the hero always gets trapped by the bad guys. The place, I bet, that many Americans would vote as "most likely place to get mugged." On the other hand, many Americans, myself included, have a fondness for alleys as places in which to grow up: a community place, a safer paved playground than the street. The more I read, the more interested I became in the historical reasons and significance of these two views; why are two such divergent paradigms apparent in American society?

Map

This map is a generalized one for the history of the alley in the American landscape. It is not necessarily a perfect summary of this paper, but is instead included as a sort of aerial view of the paper though not, perhaps, what will actually be seen from the ground. In some ways, this map may serve as the thesis for the paper.



Alley Aspect: The Language of Alley Space

The alley is by no means an American invention; it has been around since the earliest towns and cities--areas with some density- were being built. In fact, the origin of the alley is one of the more difficult questions to answer, and one for which I have not found any information at all. It is not even a question that occurred to me until recently; alleys have such a defined utilitarian function that I never thought to wonder why alleys came about, only why they would be disappearing. Alleys have been different in different countries and time periods, just as in America today there are many sorts of alleys, and a walk down an alley in Boston's North End (where alleys are likely to be windy) will be much different than a walk down an alley in Davenport, Iowa. Alleys are used because they are useful, and they are most useful in areas of intensive land use such as cities, where they give access to both the front and back of a lot, rather than areas of extensive land use, where this is generally not a problem. Alleys work well in the grid pattern, where they are typically the in-between ways, the minor streets that bisect the blocks, running parallel to the street; they are not truly meant for as great a load of vehicular traffic as the streets. To use the language of mass and void, it could be said that alleys, along with streets, are the void to the block's mass. If the grid pattern divides the landscape into cells, the alleys are the intracellular pathways. If the overall grid pattern or street pattern is placed on the landscape as a controlling or ordering element over the natural topography, it is not uncommon for the alley to side with the topography and either become absent or curve, or end midway through a block.



Goodwin's Alley, London (2)

The alley can have many different looks, can be pleasing or ugly. Alleys fronted by large buildings with little or no setback can be claustrophobic, as the buildings around them block the light and passage of air and afford no view other than walls of brick or concrete within close proximity. Other alleys in more residential areas may be quite pleasant: bordered by lawns or gardens, open to the sunlight and free passage of air, with ample space between it and the garages, sheds or house-backs that are its fronting structures. In truth though, to generalize alleys into only these two groups is to

oversimplify. There are pleasing, interesting, and safe alleys in the heart of the largest cities, and residential alleys that are decrepit and uncared-for and rather menacing in more residential areas as well. It may be that what an alley is (beautiful or ugly, safe or unsafe) depends upon the care given to it by the community immediately around it.

Alley 1: The Alley of the Poor

"Undeniably, the history of Galveston alleys and back buildings is a history partly motivated by prejudice against the black population and the poor, the very poor, both black and white. That was not confined to Galveston, nor was it limited to southern cities, as documented by the histories of such places as Washington, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Detroit." -Ellen Beasley, p. 133 (3)



Washington, DC 1941



Washington alleys, 1941



In July, 1941, in Washington, D.C., a photographer named Edwin Rosskam captured the images on the previous pages. Working for Farm Security Administration (FSA), Rosskam took these photographs and many other photographs throughout the nation much as other Farm Security Administration employees, such as 201 icon Walker Evans, were doing. Today, the photographs appear in the Library of Congresses' American Memory collection, and in James Borchert's book "Alley Life in Washington, D.C." (4) Who were these people? What were they like? How did they live?

Turn 1: the Alleys of Washington and Galveston

The alley of the poor is mostly gone today, or perhaps I should say, the alley of the poor community. There is little evidence left except a few books, one of which is James Borchert's book (mentioned above), and the other a book on Galveston, TX alleys by Ellen Beasley. For these two cities it is possible to reconstruct alley communities, and from these reconstructions, to imagine what alley communities in other cities might have been like. I feel that I would not be doing the subject of alleys justice if I did not include the alley of the poor; while there may be few alley dwellers (and communities oriented to the alley) left today, residence in them was at one time an important use of alleys.

To walk down the alleys in Washington, D.C. in the late eighteen hundreds was to walk in a community of the poor--many blacks, but also many white immigrants. More often than not, the blacks had come as part of a 30,000-member tide of runaway slaves and freedmen heading north after the Civil War. The alley had become a community as the original land owners cut up the large blocks created by L'Enfant's plan and profited on the housing shortage by leasing, renting, or selling the back of the lot to those who could not afford anything better. The houses, or shacks, were often in disrepair, for the owners out in front didn't concern themselves much with what happened out back. These houses faced the alley; the alley had become the main thoroughfare for the alley dweller. It was through the alleys that the men walked off to work, the women--often domestics and laundresses--walked off to their work too, and in the alley that the children played. The alley was a focal point, the chairs outside the front doors faced the alley, and people talked to each other as they walked in or out. At night the alley could become the locus for a group of singers, or a place for a group of young people to pass the time. All the essentials of life were located out back, and things were often shared in common; laundry was done on "on the common," water sources, privies, and even cook-stoves were sometimes shared as well. (4) The alley dwellers lived there because they could not afford anything better, or because they had to be within walking distance of their employer, or because of the deficiency of available homes. Despite the nature of the alley, though, it became a home, and the people in the alley constituted a community.

The situation in Galveston was similar. After the Civil War, a huge influx of people severely strained the city's housing capacity, and land owners capitalized on the rear of lots by renting or leasing them. A walk down Galveston's alleys would have revealed both back or "service" buildings for such things as carriages, horses, or tools, as well as alley dwellings; homes either constructed for the newly arrived poor or carryovers from the not-long-departed day when slaves lived on the back of the property. In Galveston's alleys too, communities developed that were independent of the street-oriented communities outside; as Bill Millican,

a former alley resident, said of his Galveston alley community: "I can remember people within the alley dying and the whole alley would get together and everybody would make food and take it to the particular house where the deceased was. Everybody watched everybody's house. I can remember in the summertime going to bed with the screen door wide open. And I can remember almost everybody that came in the alley, in the neighborhood. We knew who was and who was not a stranger...the alleys as I remember as a boy, there were just as many houses in the rear as there were on the curb." (3)

(The following image is of two types of alley structures in Galveston, TX, from Beasley's book.)

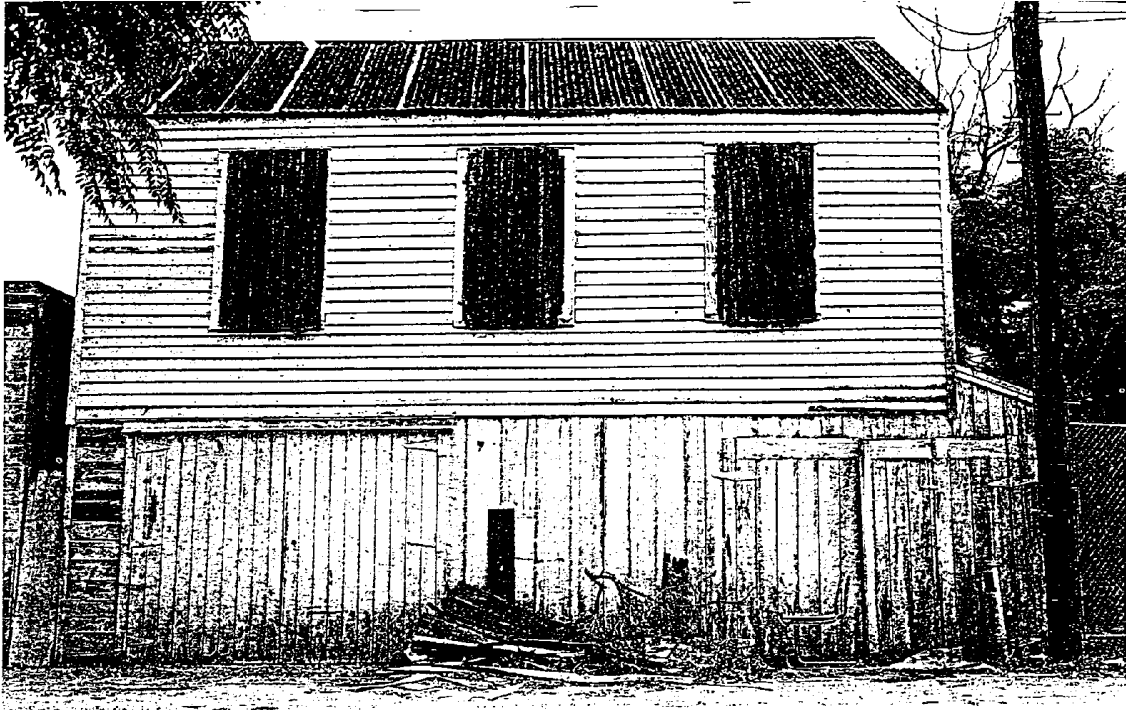


Fig. 2. 2020 Avenue J, back building. Alley side of secondary or support structure oriented to the backyard. Photographed 1990.



Fig. 3. 2621 Avenue K rear. Alley side of alley house with entrance oriented to the alley. Photographed circa 1977.

While alley dwellers in both Washington and Galveston were separated from street dwellers by income level and orientation system (streets or alleys), and the lots were divided in a sort of hierarchy of wealth (rich facing street, poor facing alley), the alley could also be a force that linked the socioeconomic classes together. For one thing, the simple proximity of the inhabitants meant that there was at least some degree of interaction, and sometimes the front and back inhabitants shared facilities such as a cistern. For another, the alley, at least in Galveston, served as a sort of common playground for kids of many backgrounds. One Galveston inhabitant, George P. Mitchell, said: "We played in the alley. In my neighborhood, we used to call it the League of Nations. It was such a diverse group: Scandinavian, English, German, Greeks, Italians, everything you could think of. It was all one group," and "the alleys were where the integration of the city was, not only because the children, black and white, played together in the alleys, but also because it was where the black people had their little houses next to the main houses all over town. (3) Another Galveston alley dweller, Danny Lasell, had a similar comment: "I don't know what they are today, but every kid in Galveston played in the alley at some point, and frequently, black and white together. I don't recall Galveston being especially segregated because of that and because many blacks did live throughout the city." (3) In this respect, Washington may have been different--neither memories nor photos give evidence of a diverse set of children playing--which may indicate a more separate and inward-turned alley community, and a greater divide between classes and races.

At first, the alley community--the first urbanized environment many newly-freed slaves experienced after slavery--was largely ignored in both cities. If the newspapers wrote about the alley, it was generally a condescending type of human interest story. Things began to slowly change as the street-dwellers felt that the alley dwellers were a little too close for comfort and began to be suspicious of the poor-controlled communities within the blocks (especially Washington's H-shaped alley set-up which made it difficult for police to monitor what went on inside). Newspaper's soon came to focus on the poor living conditions, alley crime, gambling and prostitution, and the alley became the place where "seclusion breeding crime and disease to kill the alley inmates and infect the street residents" were to be found. (4) In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a national urban reform movement appeared, and the alley became one of its targets. Alleys were written about extensively by reformers, including Jacob Riis, the influential author of How the Other Half Lives¹. (5) Alley literature identified and illustrated alleys and alley housing as a national, not just local, problem. (3) In Washington, senators and representatives on Capitol Hill were shocked to see the living conditions within sight of their gold domes and even more shocked to discover that their laundry was sent to these alley dwellers to be washed. The alley's demise began

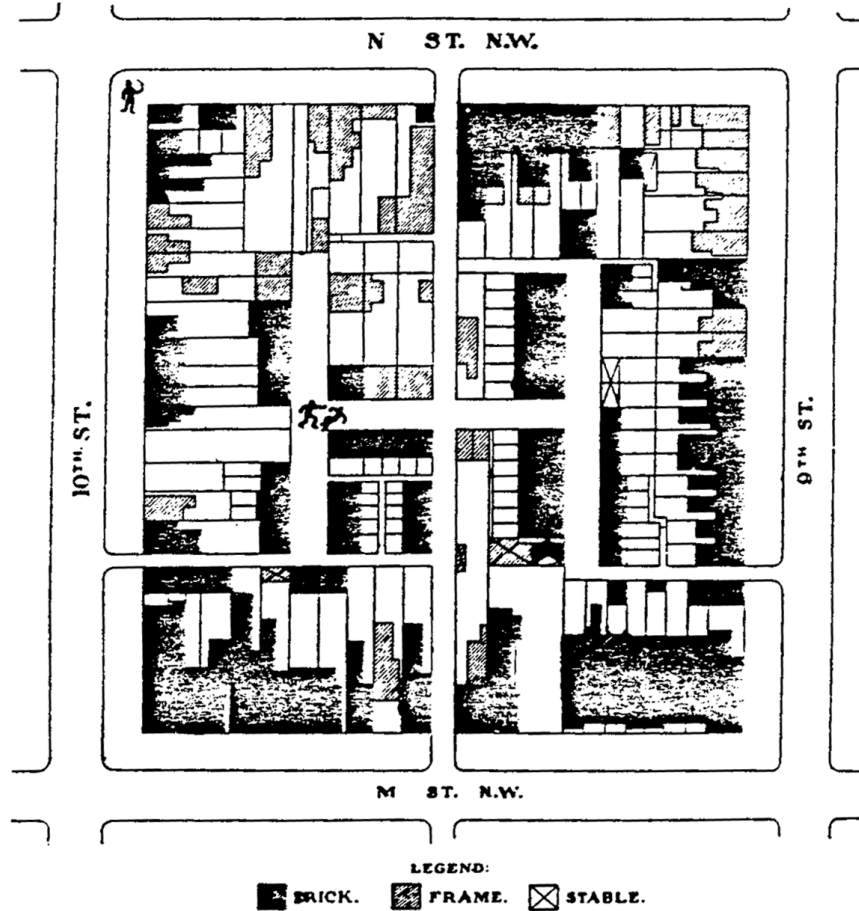
¹. Riis wrote of the alleys in New York, although there are apparently none now. A typical, grim, passage from Chapter 4. "The Down Town Back-Alleys" in "How the Other Half Lives" is: "The arched gateway leads no longer to a shady bower on the banks of the rushing stream, inviting to day-dreams with its gentle repose, but to a dark and nameless alley, shut in by high brick walls, cheerless as the lives of those they shelter. The wolf knocks loudly at the gate in the troubled dreams that come to this alley, echoes of the day's cares. A horde of dirty children play about the dripping hydrant, the only thing in this alley that thinks enough of its chance to make the most of it: it is the best it can do. These are the children of the tenements, the growing generations of the slums; this their home. From the great highway overhead, along which throbs the life-tide of two great cities, one might drop a pebble into half a dozen such alleys."

soon after in both Washington and Galveston. In Washington, the government took an active stance.

In 1870, Congress set up the D.C. Board of Health with power to condemn and demolish; twenty years later District Commissioners got the power to convert alleys into "minor thirty feet wide without water or sewers; in 1914 Congress forbade the use of alley dwellings after 1918. In 1934, the New Deal Congress gave the power to condemn land to an Alley Dwelling Authority which by 1944 had been expanded to become the National Capital Housing authority...it eliminated 532 alley dwellings, 43 alleys, and 20 alley squares or blocks. -Clay Grady, p. 7 (6)

It is less clear how the alley dwellings in Galveston were eliminated. It seems that fewer alleys were actually eliminated actively, and that the exodus from the alleys was partially caused by the reform movement, but also by natural economic and technological changes that affected the city as a whole--the development of different modes of transportation and shifts in patterns of employment.

**THE
BLIND ALLEY OF WASHINGTON, D.C.
SECLUSION BREEDING CRIME AND DISEASE
to kill the alley inmates and infect the street residents.**



Conversion into minor streets is the effective remedy for the larger alleys.

Complete elimination of dwelling houses is the cure for the smaller alleys.

DRAWING 1.

"The Blind Alley of Washington, D.C. Seclusion Breeding Crime and Disease . . ." From the Monday Evening Club, Directory of Inhabited Alleys of Washington, D.C. (Washington, 1912), p. 1.

from Borchert's Alley Life in Washington DC

On the whole, the story of the alley-dwelling community is somewhat ironic. Heavily segregated by class and race from street-front to rear of lot, the alley in some senses was a desegregator on the overall spatial scale of the city. As alley dwellers increasingly became the inhabitants of projects and low-income housing, they were segregated much more completely from the homes and consciousness of the middle and upper classes. Did the largely successful eradication of the alley dwellers destroy a viable and dynamic back-community, or did it simply destroy a disease- and crime-infested interior slum? There were probably some cases of both. The final irony, as Borchert notes in his book, is that "older alleys in Georgetown and on Capital Hill have become posh home sites for well-off Washingtonians. In 1970, two U.S. Senators and three Representatives were residents of the same alleys Jacob Riis warned Congress of in 1904." (4) In Galveston, the alleys lost their stigma in the 1930s when medical students started renting the newly-vacated back buildings. The physical structure remains, its inhabitants change, and the alley acquires a new meaning. However, the alley communities of the nineteenth century, and the popular perceptions they created as places of vice and crime, may remain with us today and color the national perception of alleys.

To attribute the demise of the alley dweller entirely to urban reform is not entirely accurate. Where the reformer wasn't entirely successful, the automobile and the newly developing trolley systems stepped in and hastened the process. Trolleys meant that there was an inexpensive and efficient means of transportation from the city limits, and as such, the trolley helped release the concentrated population of the pedestrian city. "As the trolley began to permit population dispersal, the pressure that had helped to create alley housing diminished. At the same time, housing became available on the street, as former street residents moved to homes in the suburbs." (4) The automobile hastened this process, and the process of urban succession became complete. It is difficult to say to what extent the story of the alley-dwelling communities can be generalized to other cities and towns; there is simply not much written on the subject. However, the phenomenon of back lots being built on and rented out in times of housing shortages (perhaps especially in the period after the Civil War) would seem to be a logical one, and probably repeated in other cities such as Chicago and Detroit, as Beasley suggests in the quote at the beginning of this section. This last topic might be a good area for future research.

Turn 2: The forgotten alley

"Often, oral history is a primary, if not the only, source to bridge the gaps between past and present, fact and feeling, especially for such subjects as the alley dwellers and back buildings...there is little chance of locating a detailed account written by someone who resided in an alley house or service building, because they would have considered it of little interest or value. Pictorial records...are also difficult to uncover. Most people who lived along the alleys could not afford to buy a camera."

-Ellen Beasley, p. 9 (3)

The images that Edwin Rosskam captured in 1941 are some of the few known that document alley life (while I have seen a fair number of photographs of alleys, there are not very many that include humans in the landscape). Since poor alley dwellers generally did not

write about themselves and did not own cameras, we are destined to forever see them through the eyes of outsiders such as Rosskam or the few reformers who ventured into the alleys of Washington or Galveston. Beasley looks back through the eyes of those who were children in alleys, and reconstructs the past using Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of Galveston's blocks. In general though, the alley community is a forgotten one, the alley dwelling forgotten; few people know that alleys were once actually inhabited. The places of the poor throughout history have often passed away with little notice, or at least less than the out-front world of the respected citizens. One notable exception to this general pattern is the work of James Agee, who lived with and wrote about Alabama sharecropper families; Mr. Agee was in a sense their biographer, but his type of work was not often repeated. (8) Rosskam may have been a little like Agee in terms of his subject matter, but he didn't record what these people were talking about, didn't record who they were or how they lived. Rosskam captured an image and left, but at least the pictorial story remains for these people; for millions of others, their story has simply disappeared.

Alley Aspect: Alleys as "Sinks"

Many of the current problems with alleys are a result of the fact that they are a sort of commons, a public place in a private location, a place open to all, for whom no one is responsible. As a result, the alley has in many cases turned into what Grady Clay calls a "sink": "fragments, slivers, leftovers, and oddments of city space immediately are turned into wastebaskets by the public, which correctly assumes that nobody gives a damn about such places so why not trash them up." (9) Writing about the alleys of Louisville, Clay states "Most of the problems associated with the alley were caused by its in between status: it was public space in a private location. As public space it was open to everybody. Everybody's problem and nobody's child, it was near enough to see but not close enough to supervise." (9) The alley-as-commons turned into a sink can be the result of not enough town or city maintenance for alleys (as in Troy, where troubled finances have probably contributed to the poor state of some of the alleys), and perhaps further exacerbated by the fact that garbage (for trash pick-up) has historically already been present in an alley: why not just add a little more trash? If homeowners with backyards bordering on an alley don't care about and take care of the alley, the alley can turn on them and become more of a headache and eyesore than a useful landscape feature. The very invisibility or hiddenness of an alley that makes it a part of the block community can result in a sometimes menacing, often uncared-for problem. The secret to keeping the commons from becoming trashed up or generally unkempt is for someone or everyone involved to take responsibility for it and make sure that no one is taking advantage of the commons. The alley, like most other commons, benefits from the responsibility and care of homeowners around it.

Alley Aspect: The Alleys of Troy

A class trip to Troy on the second of November was a unique opportunity for me to examine a set of alleys in a city different in many ways from my native Davenport, and an opportunity to share my topic with other class members. We were fortunate enough to be able to examine the alley behind the Hart-Cluett house, as well as a few alleys on our trek cross-town. The city of Troy, based as it is on a grid plan, has an abundance of alleys both in

the business areas such as downtown, and the residential areas in the "drug zone" we walked through.

The day we visited the alley behind the Hart-Cluett house, the alley was quiet and devoid of people. The entrance to the alley had once been flanked by houses, but now one side is a Russell Sage College dorm. The alley is a traditional one in many ways, its features including utility lines, drains emptying into the alley, drainage grates, old carriage houses and garages (some of them converted carriage houses), some trash cans, and a big blue "BFI" trash dumpster. In other ways this alley is slightly unconventional: it is amply lighted, had relatively recently been paved (the alley had been redone 10 years ago) and has some curbing, and perhaps most noticeably, the alley has a small row of parking spots which orient the car perpendicular to the spot-widened alley. The old Hart-Cluett carriage house is to the east, a one-and-a-half or nearly two-story building with a hayloft and a carriage-room below where the hired coachman probably stepped out into this very alley every day more than a hundred years ago. Down the block, the fire-escapes of the old livery stable rise above alley, breaking the line of alley-fronting buildings.

As we walked through the downtown, I was able to peek into a few alleys quickly, and spotted one that especially interested me. It was a nicely paved alley, and the alley had a sidewalk; it was probably the only alley I have ever seen with this feature. Manholes dotted the pavement. Further down the alley, we saw a truck making a delivery to the loading dock of a commercial establishment; two men were busy unloading boxes from the back of the truck.

We walked along the residential areas of Troy for a great length of the city, and took several detours to actually walk in the alleys. The first alley we walked through was what Clay probably would have called a sink; it was designated a street, but was in such poor condition that no one could drive through it. The cobblestone paving indicated that the alley hadn't been repaved in years, and the absence of paving at all in some places made the going difficult. The buildings to either side were in general disrepair, trash and overgrown vegetation had accumulated in the alley--it didn't look as though garbage pick-up was one of the functions of the alley. Chain link fences separated the alley from some properties, and graffiti added a final note to this alley that had become more of an eyesore and scene of abandonment than useful or community-building landscape facet. Some of the other alleys in the residential section were much better taken care of. Most seemed to serve as the place for garbage pick-up, as evidenced by blue plastic recycling containers. Most were paved and in decent shape, with utility lines and garages or old carriage houses, some with chimneys. Interestingly, many homes had vehicles parked in the backyards, even when a garage was present on the alley, and others had alleys and garages, but driveways along the side of the house from the street in front as well. Perhaps these patterns were the result of the modern need for more cars than can fit in a single garage, or the ownership of cars too large to fit in the older-style garages. As we walked along, blocks switched from having alleys to not having alleys and back again, although there did not seem to be any reason for either pattern. That day, we saw no one in the alleys, but children's toys, grills, chairs, and other objects indicated the use of the backyards, garages, and alleyways.

The alleys of Troy are good examples of the diversity of alley types and functions that exist, and the diversity of uses to which they are put. Each alley we saw was unique, and provided an insightful look into the rear yards of human life.

Alley 2: The Alley of the Child

"Children (as they grow up) become more aware of the external environment, with all its opportunities, and the freedom to use these opportunities gives them a sense of responsibility which is an important facet of their social stability. Simply roaming around can be an adventure enabling friendships to be made...The outside world, which forms an essential part of the learning environment, provides the stimulation for a variety of activities and experiences not found at home, at school or in a safe playground. Indeed, children often prefer to play in streets or other accessible and interesting places which provide opportunities for fantasy, imitation, adventure, physical exercise and making friends. Most children like to wander around, explore and exploit the play potential of these places...Yet because of the need for safety, they are very dependent on activities and friends which they can reach without crossing main streets."

-Mayer Hillman et al, Personal Mobility and Transport Policy p. 3-4 (10)

Turn 1: My Sort of Alley

The following are a collection of memories and remembrances from at least two generations--my own, and my mother's and Bob Behr's. They are by no means comprehensive, only giving a glimpse into the type of alley that I grew up in. Anna's story is included precisely because Newton does not have alleys; I was interested in the differences between her childhood experiences and the experiences of those who grew up with alleys.

Ellen: Davenport IA.

I believe my neighborhood was built in the 1920's. The neighborhood is structured in blocks, with straight streets forming a grid pattern. Most of the houses are of similar design: "cookie cutter" houses. Like my own home, most houses have two full stories, an attic, and a finished basement suitable toolrooms and play-places. There are generally about 20 ft between houses, with narrow side lawns, small front lawns, and longer back lawns. Garages are detached and are located to the rear of the house, accessible only through the alley. Garbage cans are located in the rear yards as well. Utility and phone lines run through the alley, and there are several alley-lights located in the alley which turn on at night. The alley in my block is ell-shaped--perhaps because the block was built on a slight hill, which is at its steepest where the short part of the "L" turns down to avoid it--with the long part of the L corresponding to the long axis of the block. Most back yards run directly up to the alley; few yards are fenced.² The alley is made of rough, pebbly concrete. There is no drainage, and water runs down the sloped short end of the "L" in sheets when it rains hard.

² This situation has been changing within the past five years or so. Many of the people that moved into the neighborhood have fenced in their property, effectively cutting themselves off from the alley and diminishing the alley's role as a diffusion point into and through surrounding yards. This situation is probably occasioned by the feeling that more privacy is needed; perhaps a way to simulate the separation of suburban lots.

As kids, the alley was our playground, our turf; a place where adults rarely bothered us. Our neighborhood included about fifteen kids, with more or less at any given time. We played games in the alley, including kick ball, baseball (mostly just playing catch) and radio-controlled cars. The alley was part of our larger games that ranged through abutting yards. These included hide-and-go-seek, ghosts-in-the-graveyard, tag, freeze-tag, and other games that we made up. These games generally included yards belonging to the kid's houses, but intervening yards were usually included if they were between two kid-owned yards. We also used the alleys for exploring. The alleys formed a perfect network for traveling to other blocks and neighborhoods; an ideal pathway for bikes or for kids on foot. The alleys were generally free of traffic and filled with exciting glimpses into neighbor's yards. They were somehow a little "secret," a little more ours than the street. We also used them extensively in our daily travels to school or friends' houses. The alley was our meeting place, the thread that tied our kid-community together.

Adults rarely used the alley. For them, the alley was the place you drove through to park the car, or take the trash out to. Adults rarely talked to each other in the alley; neighborhood talk was done over side-yard fences or on the street. One major exception was the practice of walking dogs in the alley; this is still a common alley occupation. Another exception were the residents, usually men, who had workshops in their garages; in this case, the garage door opening onto the alley was often ajar as resident worked on some project.

One of the most memorable aspects of our alley was the old man who sold fruit and vegetables from his car. He drove an old beat-up brown station wagon and came in the summer time every few weeks or so. His selection changed depending on what was ripe, and included most typical garden produce. He would drive through the alley and stop behind each house, get out of his car and come to the end of the sidewalk, yelling "Anyone home?" My parents would always go out to look at what he had, even though we had a garden of our own. He would often look at our garden and give my father advice. When he came, all the kids in the neighborhood would gather to look at what he had, and sometimes he'd give us grapes to eat while our parents looked at his wares. I remember my mom buying gooseberries and currants from him, which we'd use to make jelly. I have no idea how many people he sold to, or where else he went, but for us, he always came through the alley. Other than the fruit and vegetable man, few outsiders used the alley; although people would sometimes travel the alleys going through garbage cans.

Andrew: Minneapolis, MN. (11)

In my neighborhood (built in the 1920s), all the kids in the neighborhood, often thirty or more, hung out in the alleys. The neighborhood was laid out in a block-pattern grid. There was an alley behind my house, but there was an interstate behind that, so most of the time we hung out in the alley behind the houses across the street. We played games such as hide-and-go seek and ball, got fruit from backyards and climbed trees along the alley. We also tended to do things that we wouldn't want adults to see, like lighting things on fire. Adults didn't usually spend any time in the alley. You might not even know the people across the alley from you. The only time adults would talk to people in the alley was when there was a big snowfall and the alleys and streets weren't plowed. All the garages were accessible only from the alley, and our garbage was picked up there as well. When I go back

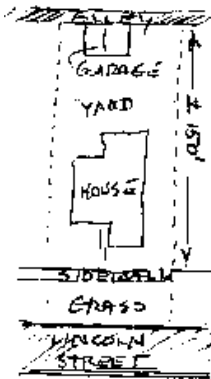
home now, I don't see kids in the alleys. Our neighborhood has become a fashionable place for young yuppies to live, and most of them don't have kids. I was the last generation of alley kids.

Bob: Evanston, Illinois. (12)

BOB BETH
X 4011
ORANGE

ALLEYS in EVANSTON

Growing up in ^{Evanston,} the first suburb north of Chicago, I accepted alleys* as the norm. My three residences in that city of 75,000 all had alleys to the rear, all part of the grid plan which dominated the layout of Evanston.



House lots (probably set up in the later 19th century) tended to be rectangular, with the ^{largely} middle class homes facing a named street. But bisecting each square block ^{of homes} was an * alley: most of the house lots backed up to the alley, giving access for automobiles and their garaging. Garbage pickup was also accomplished through the alley, thus keeping the

residential street free of unsightly trash cans - and overnight parking.

For a child growing up in the 1930's and 1940's, the alley was also a playground. Basketball backboards were commonly placed ^(hung) on garages, with the concrete alley paving providing a true bounce.

Bicycles would race up and down the alleys, sometimes in pursuit of "Jap planes" after roaring out of their U.S. Army hangars (garages). Games of kick-the-car or capture the flag also found ~~the~~ ^{the} traffic-free environment welcoming.

House design did not include a garage. The back yard provided a buffer between home and garage. Attractive, yes. Convenient on a rainy day, no.

Anna: Newton, MA (13)

I grew up in a neighborhood without alleys. Newton is a suburb of Boston, built in the mid-1800s. Most of the land around my house used to belong to a farm. My neighborhood isn't a grid; the streets meander through. Parking is generally on the street--not too many people have garages. We put our trash out front to get it picked up. As kids, we usually played in someone's back yard, often mine. I don't recall how I met the other kids in the neighborhood, but I think I knew most of them.

Rosanne: Davenport, IA (14)

"I didn't really have any knowledge of alleys until I moved to Lawrence, KS in the 60's, where I lived in several houses in Lawrence that had alleys behind them. I thought they were fascinating and liked to walk in them -- they gave such an interesting glimpse of people's lives. They meant you could see the same house from the front and the back, and there was often an interesting difference between the two. It often seemed that the front of the house would be nicely kept up, but the back would tell a different story. Here's where you could see last year's Christmas tree (in June), broken furniture, old paint cans, etc. etc. Garages vary a lot also -- some were really run down -- paint peeling or virtually no paint left -- down to the bare wood -- while others were nicely painted and might even be decorated.

"I don't really have any specific memories of alleys until we lived at 502 E. Rusholme in Davenport, where we moved in 1978. Although there were neighbors who talked over the fence, so to speak, I don't associate them with alleys, but I did have a couple of unusual "friends" who came into my life largely because of alleys. One was an old man named Mr. Wagner who at the time I knew him was probably in his late 70's or 80's and who had for many years driven the alleys of Davenport selling produce out of the back of his car. When I knew him he had an ancient station wagon and his produce was not especially good. He also did not seem to have many customers -- I'm sure many of his original customers had died or moved away, or people just had more access to fresh produce in grocery stores or even at the weekly Farmer's Market. I know I felt sorry for him, so I usually bought something from him -- he would pull up in the alley behind the house and call in a rather mournful voice, "Anybody home?" If I didn't hear him, he would usually come up to the back door then. Actually he did have a couple of things that I enjoyed getting from him--fresh raspberries and currants--both of which were very hard to buy in the stores and were very expensive--especially the currants.

"Anyway, he was the remnant of an earlier alley culture--and part of his service was advice -- advice about how to cook the squash or beets or turnips, advice about our own garden (which he would always inspect when he came by), and advice about things in general. He may also just have been a kind of lonely guy, and his wife was elderly and not very well, so he would often talk about her or tell some story about his own crops--these were usually complaints about bugs or birds or blights that had damaged his garden."

The alleys that Andrew and Bob grew up in were my sort of alleys: the alley of the child. These alleys are fairly similar in their descriptions, but the alley of the child can occur even in the heart of the city, or a much lower-income area, and is still generally a place that is remembered fondly. The middle-class alleys described above were used by adults occasionally, but were primarily the domain of the child. In these alleys--a comfortable, informal place--children could explore the block or the neighborhood without having to contend with traffic. Children could walk to school or walk to meet their friends, often making new friends along the way. The low traffic load and paved surface make the alley a good place to play; a place for Bob to play basketball or for Andrew and me to play hide-and-go-seek. Moreover, the alley is a place full of interesting things, a place where the backyard life of neighbors is visible, where fruit trees and grape arbors are accessible, where dogs and cats roam, and where mini-rivers are created after a heavy rain. In other words, a good

place for Hillman's "fantasy and adventure" necessary for kids. While adults were typically not a dominant presence, alleys did allow for some interaction between children and adults; in my neighborhood we knew the produce man, and my mother would cut flowers from our garden for children.

It may be that my type of alley is disappearing: not the physical structures, but the communities of children that used them. In his statement, Andrew documents the successional process that changed his neighborhood from a family-dominated to a yuppy-ized one, and I see children less often in the alleys in my home town as well. For those who can afford it, the suburbs or new developments have become the place to raise a family; as one 201er said at our class dinner, there are few inhabitants of suburbs that are not families. The results of the shift may be stratified by class as well; middle and upper class children may not even know what an alley is, but alleys may still play a role in the childhood of lower class children whose families can't afford to move out of older, or more central-city, areas. Whether there is actually a trend might be an area for further research; with only a limited number of alley-stories, my speculations are decidedly limited in scope.

Turn 2: The Echo Alley

"I knew about alleys long before I moved to Galveston. I grew up in Waterloo, Illinois, a small German community founded in the nineteenth century. Waterloo had alleys. It was where our milkman, Mr. Goeddel, and our grocer, Mr. Hencke, made deliveries; where we burned our trash, even some of our garbage (in a barrel); where my brother James and I played, jumped the open ditch--especially inviting after a hard rain--and fought our neighborhood wars with Dizzy Rosenmeyer, who lived across the alley. It was how my Grandma McAllister kept a watchful eye on the neighbors on both sides of the block."

-Ellen Beasley, p.viii. (3)

"The vendors used to go in and out of alleys and then, the sounds of the alleys, you know, like a fish man. If he were walking, he'd have a burlap sack with fish in it or crabs and he would have a funny way he would intone. You'd know that's the fish man and you could hear him a block away. The junk man had another call and you'd know that's the junk man. Several junk men come through and this wasn't just blacks. The garbage, the city sanitation people (were in the alleys). There was the driver, one horse, a single-horse, two-wheeled wagon, and he'd get down and pitchfork, throw it up on that wagon, get back up there, and go to the next one."

-Ernest Clouser, in "The Alleys and Back Buildings of Galveston." p. 118 (3)
(Brackets added by Beasley)

If you listen closely to the stories and descriptions of alley or near-alley dwellers, or the quiet whispers of the inhabitants of alley photographs, you can discern a distinct echo that bounces off the walls of alley-fronting buildings and reverberates in the silence after the children's shouts have died and the sing-song calls of the fish man have faded. The alley is a place of echoed memories, memories echoed from different times, from different places, among the poor, the relatively well-off, among immigrants, among blacks, among children of

every type. There are echoed memories of the games that have been played, the people who travel through, the things that have been seen in alleys. These memories are not perfect echoes (and many echoes are stifled at the beginning; for those whose memories are not recorded or cared about, often the poor), for sometimes they come back with more nostalgia, or more unhappiness, and their content changes depending on the speaker and the time. But the alley is a place of echoes because it has had similar uses, similar meanings, and has produced similar experiences for many people. It is probably true that many landscape features are the same way; ask those who have had experience in mines to tell you about them, and their experiences will be echoed throughout the ages, and across countries. Ask about street experiences, or front porches, or dairy farms, and you are likely to hear echoes in the stories you will receive.

Alley memories are special in some ways because their echoes may be dying out. If children all grow up in developments without alleys, if delivery-men or women no longer make the rounds (who needs deliveries when supermarkets and malls are within close driving range?), many alley echoes will become fainter and fainter and the alley as a vibrant, voiced landscape feature will fade back into the concrete and cobblestones.

Alley Aspect: Animals in Alleys

Interviews of alley dwellers often make mention of animals in the alleys. At one time, many domestic animals were kept out back--goats, pigs, chickens in coops or running free. Horses were prominent alley inhabitants as well; they were carriage house dwellers on the rear of the property, or inhabitants of alley-oriented livery stables, both of which are in evidence in the alley behind the Hart-Cluett house in Troy. The abundance of animals often contributed to the disorder, and sometimes dangerously poor conditions for human health that urban reformers often pointed out. Animals probably began to disappear with stricter health codes in many cities and the outlawing of domestic animals within cities. Horse's homes were, of course, replaced by the distinctly inanimate automobile (sentient or not depending on the views of different 201ers). Today, alleys are sometimes used as a safe (relative to the street) promenade for dog-walkers, and cats use the alley to slip through backyards.

Alley Aspect: A Glimpse in the Backyard of Human Life

"More often than not, I would prefer to walk in the rear alley precisely for all those little hints of life, activity, transition which the placid visual arts of suburbia did their best to suppress or politely disguise.

-Grady Clay, in Alleys: A Hidden Resource (6)

"...suburbs are frequently criticized as being monotonous, experiential deserts."

-Rowe, Making the Middle Landscape, p. 101 (15)

What we see from an alley is not something that someone has prepared for us, something the home-owner wishes to present. It is an informal enclosure, a family place, not a front of propriety facing outward toward the street. If the hierarchy in the alley of the poor was decreasing wealth along the lot, the hierarchy today is often one of formality to

informality from front to back. It is a generally quiet world nowadays, at least in my neighborhood. It is a place of humble human interest, a place for gardens, small beauties, a gathering place, and even a sanctuary of sorts. "(Alleys)...offer one of the few urban, rather than suburban or rural "retreats," and enclave just off the busy street, a step away from the hurly-burly." (6) Home, sometimes, to the oddities that never make it past the side-yard gate. A walk down an alley is almost a walk through someone's home; a walk through the garden extension of the living room, an experience rarely repeated in modern suburbia. What a walk down an alley offers is not found as often today: a true glimpse into the backyard of human life.



A Philadelphia alley, 1998 (Courtesy David Cooperman '01)

Alley 3: The Alley of Tomorrow

"We looked at what made communities great in our past, added what we've learned from the best practices today, and combined that with a vision and hope for strong communities in the future. We believe the result will be a very special community."

-Michael Eisner, Disney CEO, on the Disney-built town of Celebration, FL (16)

"The houses are close together, most with front porches to promote neighborhood interaction. Garages are tucked away at the rear and entered from alleys."

-Douglas Frantz, article on Celebration, FL, The New York Times, 10/4/98 (17)

Turn 1: The Non-Alley

"In the '20s, thousands of lots were laid out around cities in the cheapest, most easily platted form--with minimum utilities and minimum access. The Federal Housing Administration

carried the new spartan layouts into the housing boom after WWII. The new suburban pattern was fixed and the single family house was imbedded along waving green lines on maps, with no more than a utility easement out back. Every object and activity that required access--garbage, car repairs, storage of boats and trailers--began moving off the back of the lot." -Grady, Alleys: a Hidden Resource p. 8 (6)

What is a non-alley? If we use Clay's quote as reference, perhaps the non-alley is really a utility easement. I think of a non-alley as more of a ghost of an alley in new developments and suburbs without them. The non-alley is the result--like many of the landscape features we have talked about in class--of technology, of economics, of changing times and living patterns, of different styles taking root, and perhaps just a little bit of happenstance or luck. It is fairly clear that alleys are disappearing in new communities. The following section looks at a few of the factors that have helped to shape the role and place of alleys in America.

As was mentioned at the end of the first section, the advent of technology had a large affect on the communities of alley dwellers, and an impact on the overall system of which alley are a part. Several developments helped change the city in fundamental ways. The technologies most relevant were the development of the traction industry, which progressed from omnibus (horse-drawn vehicles not on tracks), to horsecars (on tracks), to streetcars (either electric or mechanical) which became known as trolleys, elevated rail-lines and finally the automobile. These technologies had a profound impact on the city because they allowed the city to expand larger than the walking city had been; as a result, it released pressure on land inside the city. Since alley communities had primarily developed because of housing shortages and intense pressure on in-city land caused by population influxes, the new technologies changed the need for very intensive land use. As a result of the new modes of transportation, some people living in the houses on the streets vacated them for areas further out, which meant that more housing was available for alley dwellers. Alternatively, alley dwellers could also move out, since they could not commute to their places of work. As a result of the expansion of the city made possible by the new transportation systems, the conditions that in many cases had caused the development of alley communities were primarily a thing of the past.

The new technologies had an impact on alleys beyond changing alley dwelling patterns. In particular, the advent of the automobile had a large effect on the look and eventually the function of alleys. The automobile has probably had more impact on the alley and its existence than any other form of technology, although its effect is tied up in the economic conditions and styles it accompanied. When automobiles appeared, horse carriage houses (often located in the rear, on alleys) were generally not needed anymore. Many former carriage houses were converted into garages, and many garages were placed along alleys where they had not been before³. As cars grew larger, they often no longer fit into the older garages situated on alleys; as families acquired more than one car, they had a problem of where to park the car(s) that wouldn't fit in the single alley-fronting garage. At the same time, newly built homes were starting to incorporate garages--which once were a prime alley

³. This phenomena was most common in areas with very narrow frontage lots, where a driveway or simple parking space was not available for the automobile on the front or to the side of the house.

feature--into the house itself. In his book, Making the Middle Landscape, Peter Rowe chronicles the inclusion of the garage into the home. Says Rowe, "At first the automobiles were accommodated at the home site in a direct and pragmatic manner. In many cases the car was parked on the street next to the house or in a driveway by the side of it. In others it was parked in a detached garage, usually located to the side and rear of the dwelling...From the 1930's on, a gradual transition took place toward including and articulating the garage as a fundamental spatial and formal component of the house...By the 1950's the garage was also used as a multipurpose space for recreation and other leisure-time purposes" (15) Accompanying the switch to an incorporated--rather than separate and often alley-located garage--was a shift to widening lot sizes, and space to the side or in front of the house often became a driveway; this provided a larger amount of access to the front of the lot.

The transition from alley garages to incorporated garages was part of the larger pattern of new development. The technologies that allowed the expansion of the city paved the way for suburbs and new housing patterns. There does not seem to be a single precise breaking point between housing patterns with blocks and those without. In this book Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston 1870-1900, Sam Warner describes new developments on the outskirts of the city and points out that even at that time, there was a push for housing patterns that did not have alleys. Warner states "Since middle-class Bostonians demanded more or less equal access to a full street, developers were barred from using the more land-conserving technique of widely separated main streets with interior lots served by small alleys." (18) Another influence of the development of suburbia was the rural ideal, and the more garden or park-like designs for suburbs such as the ones Olmsted designed, which were copied in many places. These also generally lacked alleys; streets in these suburbs were not uniformly gridded and alleys did not fit in well with the overall plan. Finally, as the Clay quotation that begins this section suggests, housing developments in the '20s (and in the housing boom after WWII) were based on plans that--though sometimes gridded or laid out in a linear fashion--were designed with convenience and cost in mind, and in this case, it meant the elimination of alleys whose extra pavement must have been viewed as expensive. While housing developments were still built with alleys in the early nineteenth century, the predominant move--on almost all housing development fronts--was away from alleys. Access problems were solved by widening lots and by attaching the garage to the house. Garbage was picked up from the curb in front, utilities might have an easement in back or run down the street. Some sheds might be out in the backyard, but larger items now tend to be stored on a driveway or somewhere near the front of the house. Houses were often built farther apart, and the home now sat, surrounded by green, on its winding street. The alley had become a non-alley, a utility easement in the rear.

Turn 2: The Alley of the Future

"The literature on alleys is rudimentary, to say the least, and it is now time to consider what the alley is, and what it might become- a hidden resource waiting to be recognized."

-Grady Clay, Alleys: A Hidden Resource p. 7 (6)

The alley of the future is an uncertain thing. The alley has declined in popularity and virtually disappeared from newer housing developments and suburbs, but there are still some people who think alleys are a good idea. One of them is Clay Grady, who wrote a book on the alleys of Louisville, KY, in an attempt to spur improvements of alleys in that city. He points out the benefits of alleys as a convenience, a community builder--if the alley is taken care of rather than neglected--in many areas of the city, as a way to make it possible to close off certain streets, and as a possible place for interior-block parks if residents donate easements along the alley. Grady looks at alleys that are already in place as a resource for improvements in older neighborhoods.

While alleys in older residential areas could be improved to make them more useful and beneficial, there is also the possibility that new developments and suburbs could eventually shift away from the patterns that are currently favored. One example is Celebration, FL, a Disney-build development that was created with the vision of a special community in mind. The houses and streets were built to promote interaction, the houses are closer together and have porches...and the blocks have alleys. If Celebration residents are satisfied with the community, it is possible that new developments will follow Disney's lead and create more traditional patterns--which could mean more alleys. In thinking about the re-emergence of the alley and a possible shift in housing development patterns, I thought one thing that might also be an influence in the future is the push toward "sustainable development"⁴ and a new emphasis on building communities that maximize open space by building houses closer together. Perhaps trends propelled by the ideas of sustainable development and open space preservation will someday result in communities that are more compact, and a result, more likely to incorporate alleys.

Conclusion: Alleys in the Landscape

The topic of alleys is a rich one, and much more could be done with it. My own forays into the subject have been hampered by my own limited experiences and the general lack of historical information on alleys, although I suspect that this is a common situation for 201ers working on somewhat obscure topics. One of the most important realizations that I had while writing this paper was that it is important to know about physical structures first, but that the most interesting part is the link between humans and the landscape. While at first I searched alley pictures to see what objects they had in common (garbage-cans, drains, etc.), I quickly stopped searching exclusively for objects and started searching for people. I think that the experience of this course was instrumental in that shift; the realization that landscape features are important, but that they can not truly be understood outside of their human context and linked history⁵.

4. Sustainable development has been a frequent topic of discussion in environmental studies classes. Sustainable development has been defined as: meeting the needs of the present generation while not compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs as well. The idea has resulted in a push for more environmentally sensitive and sensible developments and ways of thinking about how we live.

5. My thoughts return again and again to the farmer we visited on his one acre in Vermont, although his name continues to escape me. I learned more about human nature, wishes, and motivations in that one afternoon than I think psychology majors learn in their four years of surveying here at Williams. When I think of that farmer, I think of his new devices for tilling the soil and spreading the seed, his extensive knowledge of the plants and farming, and his setting--one acre--beneath

Writing this paper has allowed me to see how alley use has changed with time and place. While I still have no firm conclusions, it seems that the shift away from alleys has been caused by changes in technology, shifting residential desires (more privacy), and shifts away from the "old-fashioned" lifestyle that alleys might represent. Today's communities are different in many ways from the one I grew up in, and building codes and zoning laws may not even permit alleys anymore. In any case, it is certain that zoning laws would no longer allow communities to develop in alleys. The day of the alley community, then, is almost certainly forever gone, but I think that the fate of the alley in the future is still open to question. The perceptual split personality of the alley--most likely the outdated perception of the alleys as a place for slums--is the result of lags in cultural perception. Despite this, I believe it is possible for the perception of alleys to change, and for them to again be recognized as what Clay terms them: a hidden resource.

the mountains. He also makes me think of the idea of investment, not necessarily monetary investment, but personal investment in the landscape. He was certainly invested in the landscape in both ways. I myself, and many of the people I talked to for this paper, are invested in alleys, in the sense that we care about them and have a certain nostalgia for them. As a class, our paper topics also represent a great degree of investment. Many of us chose topics that affect us or affect where we live. The lesson I have drawn from this is that the landscape is not something that is separate from us; we are a part of it as well. Our hopes and thoughts and memories lie in the landscape; we change as it changes and vice versa.

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10. Mayer Hillman et al. 1973. Personal Mobility and Transport Policy. (London: Political and Economic Planning)

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Note: All images (not photographs taken by my mother) unless otherwise noted come from the American Memories section on the Library of Congress homepage:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ammemhome.html>

One of the best websites ever, a treasure trove of information on all topics.

