

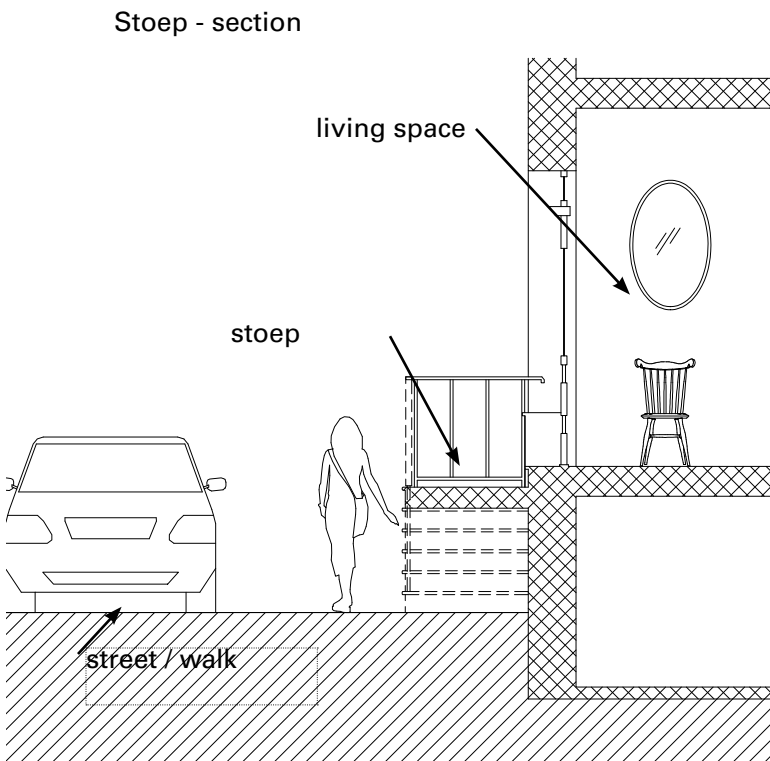
Micro-Monumentality: The Stoop
Russell Mahoney
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Recently I have been exploring a concept I created called "Micro-Monumentality". It is based on the idea of a monument; more specifically, a "municipal monument," which is a monument built to commemorate a special person, event, or place. A micro-monument by my definition is a smaller more manageable version of a municipal monument. Micro-monumentality, then, is the introduction of a micro-monument into a neighborhood lacking civic attachment, and neighborhood kinship, for the purpose of engendering civic pride and identity, and accruing their benefits in the form

of growth, stability, and community interdependence. The concept is based on what we know specifically as a municipal monument. They are usually located in cities or towns and have good exposure from many vistas. Some of the earliest examples of a municipal monument are the spires of churches, chapels, and city halls of the Renaissance period. The Dutch used



Stoep - classic dutch iteration



spires in cities like Zaltbommel as "major focal points" from the market-place bringing attention to the primary institutions of the city: church, and government (Bacon 1976). Monuments are often highly prized by their residents; in some cases they are maintained and protected by the residents, out of feelings of pride and ownership, as much as they are by the municipal employees who are paid to care for them.

This concept is a work in progress, and my expectation is that the research will



Stoop - Brooklyn iteration

help produce a design challenge. The design portion seems a great distance away, but the research I have been accruing will prove to be indelible, when the design element is introduced.

Imagine for a moment exploring a residential street in any US urban environment. All around you notice some of the familiar characteristics that are synonymous with the street you are imagining. What do you see, smell, or hear that gives away where you are: big city as opposed to suburban? America rather than England or Italy? Perhaps the street has brownstones, or maybe “Philadelphia Red Bricks” homes, and a corner grocery. Each façade, although very different, compliments its neighbor naturally.

The sidewalk is soft on your feet; made of bricks in a herringbone layout it reveals contours of the earth. There are many landmarks or features that distinguish that street as being located in an American urban setting, but what stand out more than others? One thing that stands out the most is the stoop. The stoop is usually a small platform located just below, or sometimes on the same level as a building’s entrance door. The word stoop comes from the Dutch word *stoep*, and they share the same meaning. However, over time and continents, their applied uses have been adapted to fit different needs.

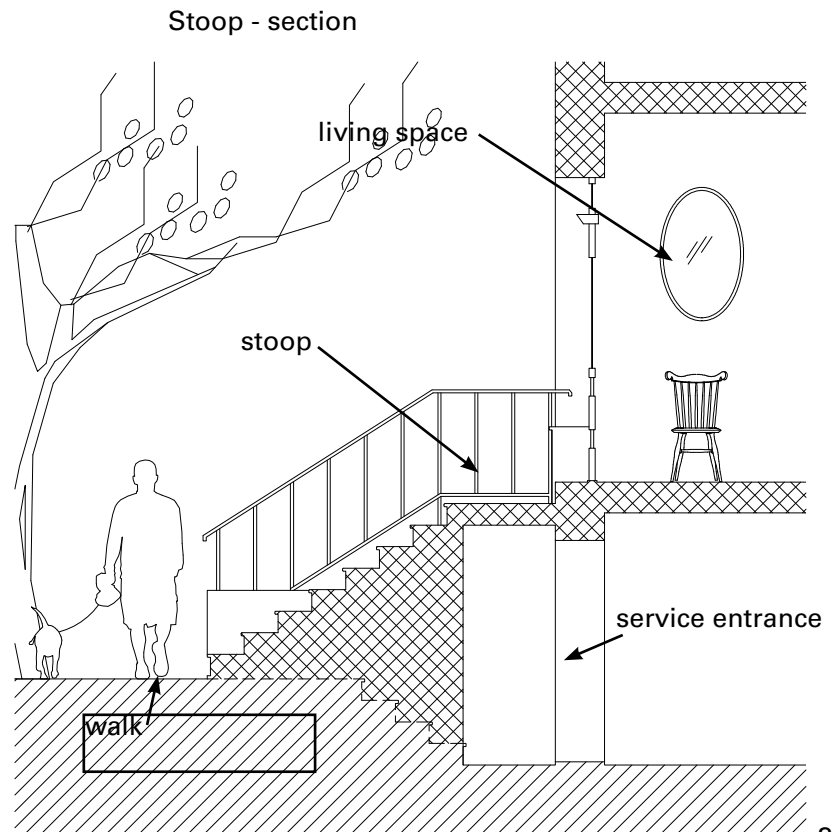
In this essay I will explore the history of the stoop, in particular the adaptations and innovations that have occurred in the United States. I would also like to show how I categorize the stoop as a theater of social interactions. The theater analogy will segue into how the stoop is instrumental in the foundation research of my concept of micro-monumentality, and I will use the writings of Jane Jacobs and an interview I conducted to help support my theories.

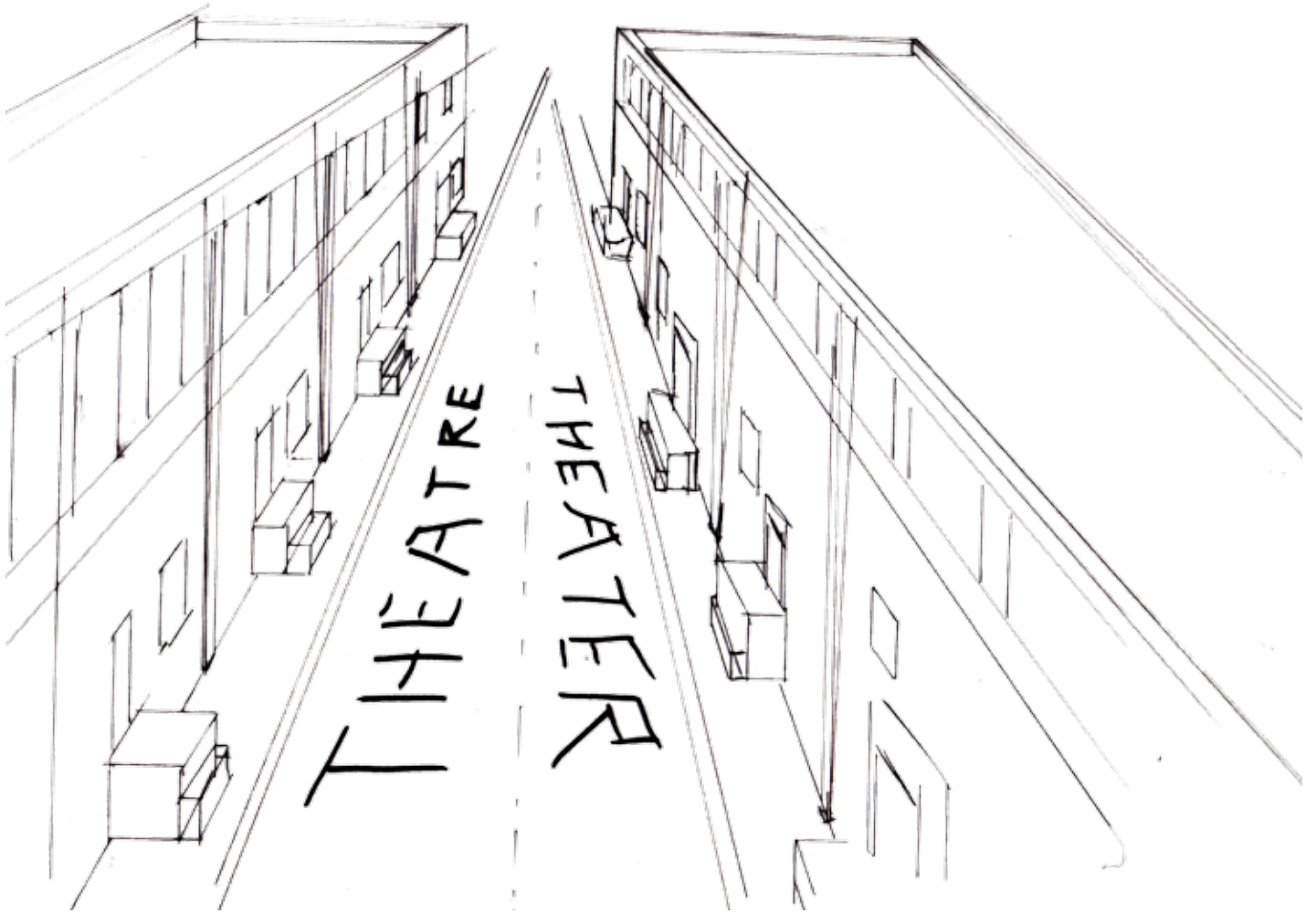
The history of the stoep begins in Holland, because of the persistent bombardment of storms coming in off the North Sea, and frequent flooding; the Dutch elevated their living quarters above the street level. The stoep was a place to gather (elevated off of the wet sidewalks and

streets) while waiting for entry into the house [section drawing]. The Dutch brought their construction techniques to New Amsterdam (a Dutch colony in North America on what is now Manhattan Island) in 1624 when they made the island a center for fur trading. The British took control in 1647 and renamed the island New York. The settlement's name may have changed, but the Dutch building style persisted. The stoop's original function (high and dry) was not as important in New York (the Hudson River is less tempestuous than the North Sea), but it was put to a new and important use: as a gathering place to facilitate and encourage social interactions.

If the street is theatre, than the stoop is orchestra seating. I gauge the vitality of a neighborhood by the kind of activities I find on the street. The activities can vary from one extreme to the other. Jane Jacobs gives great examples of the activities on her street in her book *Death and Life of the Great American City*. In one case she tells the story of her neighbors ready to stop a possible abduction between a man and a young girl. In this case the man was her father, and the nature was not malicious. However the activity in this case was the act of observing the street from each of their respective "spots": The entrance to the laundry mat, window of their apartment, window of the grocery. Of course the activities are not all of this nature. Ball playing, "chit chatting" (Nogle 2008), and hopscotch are some of the childhood memories that Charles Nogle has of his street in

Pittsburgh, PA. I had the privilege of interviewing Nogle at his office in June of 2008. Nogle has been a resident on 14th Street on the "South Side" of Pittsburgh for 70 years (his entire life). I found his interview relevant to this study because of Charles being a first person witness of his neighborhood changing through the decades. Nogle liked the openness the street provided for small-scale child games. When higher impact activities required more room the children moved





to the park. Since there was only one car on his block the street was always open for a variety of child games. Nogle added that the stoop became the place "after dinner [when] everyone would come out and sit on their stoops to talk". The stoops on Charles Street were kept "spotless" regardless of the amount of black dust finding its way to Charles Street. Pittsburgh, PA has been referred to as "the black city" because of the amount of coal that was burned to produce the city's main product, steel.

In popular culture, the stoop is perhaps best known to be the focus of such games as stoop ball, a game similar to wall-ball or hand-ball. In cinema the stoop has been used as an instrument of social interaction. In a scene from the Godfather Part II, Vito (a fictional character played by Robert Di Nero) after defeating one of his foes figuratively assumes the role of "Godfather" he then rendezvous back on the stoop with the rest of his family and kisses his son Michael. Michael later succeeds Vito as the "Godfather," and the kiss is giving us a view to that occurrence. Francis Ford Coppola recognized the stoop as function of the home where "official" family business could be transacted.

Can the stoop be considered a part of Americana? We know the origin of the stoop, and have seen examples of how it is can be used in social affairs and in cinema, but is the stoop an Institution (Jacobs 1961)? I agree with Jacobs that many articles of street fabric are needed to encourage interaction between residents, and that the stoop is an institution capable of encouraging these interactions. Nogle recalls interactions throughout the daily cycle are similar to Jacob's recollections of the daily activities on her block. I interpret Nogle's account of his street as being recorded from the stoop of his home: he describes the activities in the first person, but as a witness, and occasionally as a participant. Nogle was then, and continues today to be a contributor in his neighborhood, but over the past years he has many times where he just sat on the stoop and watched, much as Jacobs was watching when she described the daily activities on her street. The social interactions, community involvement and interdependence become the institution Jacobs writes about, and over time these institutions create a tightly woven web that creates the establishment of the neighborhood.

The topic of this paper is the stoop first and micro-monumentality second. These two separate topics are intertwined, and when described together they act as a literary catalyst. The stoop is an example of how an adaptation has become a staple of social interaction in an urban setting, but can the stoop be introduced into a neighborhood "lacking civic attachment and neighborhood kinship"? The stoop was designed by someone, but its use was ultimately decided by its user. Herman Hertzberger called this act "the balance between what we ought to make for them (the user) and what we should leave up to them" (Hertberger 2005). This essay has given examples of how the stoop can engender civic pride and identity, but does that mean it can be transplanted onto a street in Anytown, USA, and succeed as a micro-monument? This essay cannot answer questions about which micro-monuments can succeed, but it can identify what has worked at some point in time. The Dutch had a need for an elevated entry to the home, and the stoop made its way to Manhattan. From Manhattan to many cities across the Northeast region of the United States we can see iterations of the stoop. Why is it so difficult to find the institution of social interactions today? Charles Nogle's answer: "they all stay inside" – referring to his younger neighbors.

Bibliography

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