

Building Places Nobody Wants to Be

by Ann Sussman, from www.geneticsofdesign.com



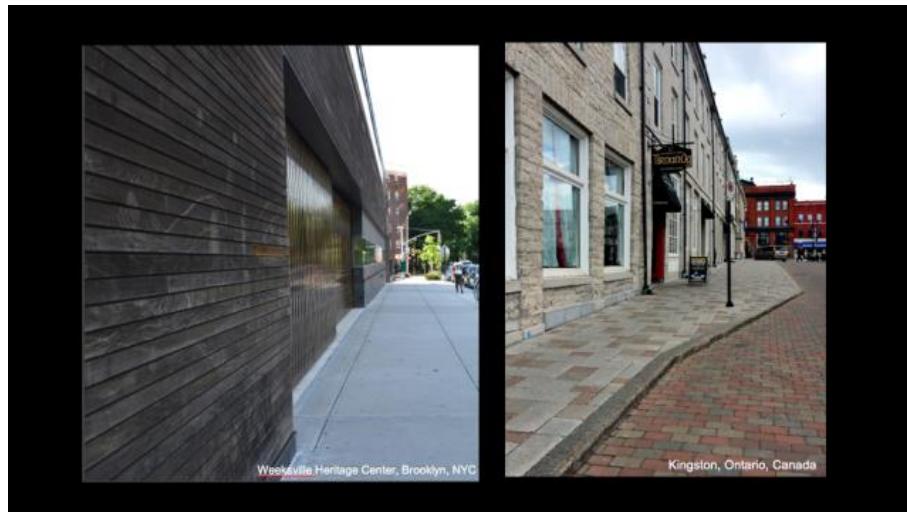
Here's a question. In the photos above of two urban arcades, which one would you rather be in?

The image at left or the one at right? Don't think too much – just choose!

In the last 24 months, I've had the chance to pose that same question to more than 1000 people while giving talks around the country.

And both the responses and response rates astonish. Quickly, without collaboration, everyone picks the image at right: *the arcade in central Paris along the Rue de Rivoli*, designed by Napoleon's architects more than two centuries ago. (My hunch is you'd pick that too.) No one wants to be in the covered walkway in central Boston, built as part of a city court house about twenty years ago.

Here's another preference test:



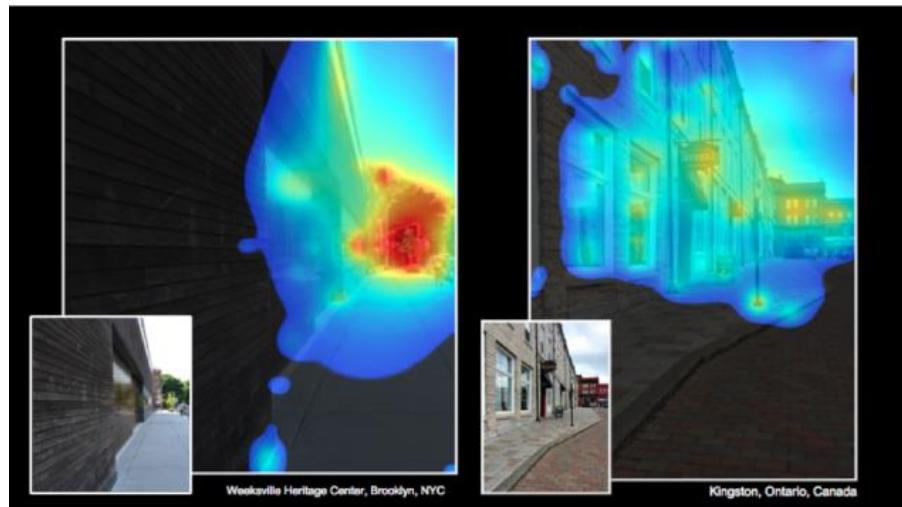
Which street would you rather walk down? Both form part of historic centers, the one on the left in Brooklyn, NYC, the other, at right, in Ontario, Canada?

I've shown this slide to more than 500 people. And again both responses and response rates astonish. Quickly, without collaboration, everyone picks the image at right: Market Street in the [colonial port city of Kingston](#), Ontario. Given the choice, nobody wants to walk past recently refurbished [Weeksville Heritage Center](#) in Brooklyn, New York, an educational venue surrounding 19th-century historic homes.

How can this be? How do 500 or 1000 people so quickly make a decision about where to go, and all end up in the same place – without even speaking with each other?

The simple answer is our primate brains, hardwired to keep us safe, continuously and *unconsciously* scan the environment for survival. *The images chosen instantly feed the brain the stimuli needed to feel secure; the ones rejected don't.* Rue de Rivoli and Market Street give our brain what's needed to move forward feeling at our best. The Boston Courthouse and Heritage Center in Brooklyn *can't*.

Of course how our brains select stimuli without conscious input is a larger question as is what our brains are pre-set to look for (some of this taken up [elsewhere in this blog](#)). Biometric studies add insight here; below is an eye-tracked version of the above street scenes created with [3M's Visual Attention Software](#) which indicates what gets people's attention in pre-attentive processing (the first 3-5 seconds) taking in a scene.



The ‘heat maps’ above glow brightest where people look most fading to black in areas ignored. The results suggest one reason the Brooklyn streetscape isn’t favoured is our unconscious brain won’t let us look at it. And that’s huge because unconscious brain activity always lays the foundation for conscious behaviour. It guides it. *We can’t move towards a place our pre-attentive processing has determined is to be ignored.*

There are larger takeaways too, and here’s a key one: to build a sustainable future we need to build places people want to be, not places they don’t.

And this means we need to perennially pose one salient question: are we making places people will want to be – or not?

Ann Sussman is, an architect, author and researcher is passionate about understanding how buildings influence people emotionally. Her book, Cognitive Architecture, written with Justin B. Hollander, reveals the unconscious tendencies at work when we navigate the world around us. This article originally appeared on her blog at www.geneticsofdesign.com