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Grady Clay, The Reading of the American City, 1973, *CSISS Classics*

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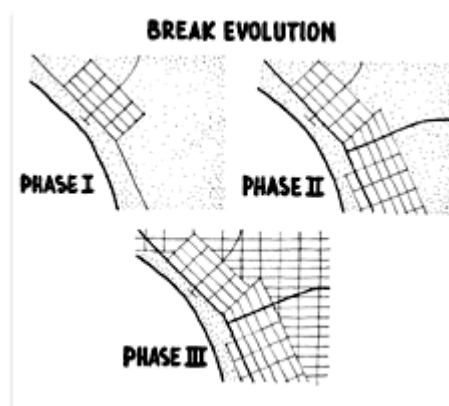


## Grady Clay: The Reading of the American City, 1973. By John Corbett

### *Background*

Louisville may seem like an odd place for fomenting revolutions in spatial thought. The city along the Ohio is home to journalist Grady Clay, longtime urban affairs correspondent for the *Louisville Courier-Journal*.

Known for his books on urban design, Clay is also a radio commentator. Clay has been president of such organizations as the American Society of Planning Officials and the National Association of Real Estate Editors. He has also been on numerous planning commissions and juries over the years, including one for the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C.



### *Innovation*

By the early 1970s, the suburban trend that had started in the 1940s and 1950s with Levittown and the Interstate Highway system was in full swing. New freeways, tract houses, and strip malls were rapidly swallowing up the rural farmland and pastoral settings of the American imagination. Vocal critics of the expansion of suburbia complained that the traditional American city was being replaced by a diffuse web of settlement and urban decay.

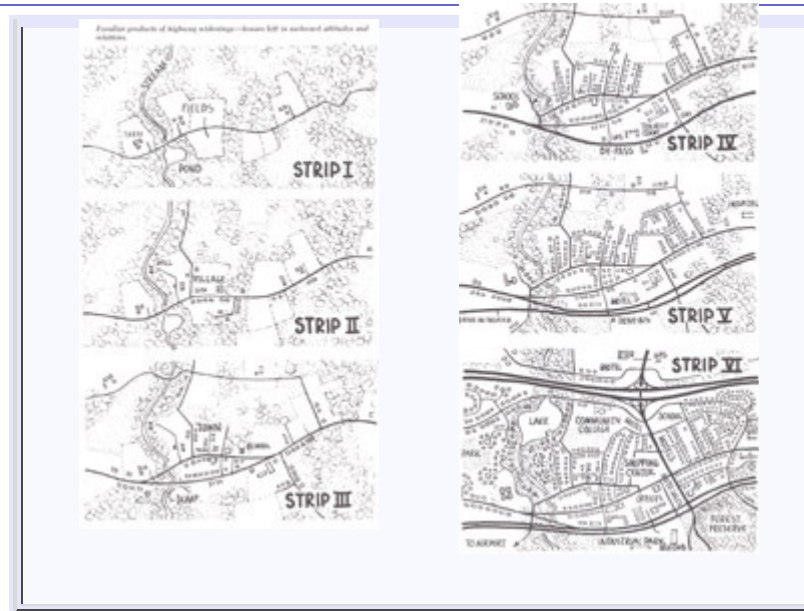
Grady Clay believed that such changes were best understood through a new perspective. In his 1973 book, *Close-Up: How To Read the American City*, he proposed abandoning the cherished but misguided notion that the traditional American city was a bastion of stability, and that it was under threat from sinister new forces of decentralization and decay. Instead, he proposed that cities are by their very nature fluid in design and function. Rather than looking for

ideal settings, Americans should instead see the underlying patterns of activity and settlement over time. "The shifty relationship between people and landscape is not yet fully understood," Clay observed, "[and] their wheelings and dealings do not stand still for such methodological examination as befits the laboratory." As a result, he chose to "link direct observations in a personal way, which may incite others to more rigorous procedures."

Clay's redefinition of spatial thinking in an urban environment led to some novel terms and concepts. "Wordplay" meant using metaphors to capture the dynamic interrelationships of things and places ("prime-time" lots), rather than merely defining location. Clay was critical of architects who divided cities into atomized lists of individual buildings, rather than seeing places as existing in combination with each other. "Fixes" were, in Clay's lingo, standardized perspectives that people used to interpret and judge the environment around them. Anything that deviated from this static perspective was traditionally seen as somehow inferior—cities should avoid "messy" strip-malls or drive-ins, and look toward the downtown as the center of development. Clay felt that these "fixes" deprived people of objectively coming to terms with the ongoing development of the city. "Epitome districts" were special places at the heart of the city which not only represented the initial focal point of development, but also demonstrated how we have changed over time. Hence, we look to breaks in street grid patterns, or changing movements of the cultural elite (the "venturi") to tell us how we have changed over time. Clay was critical of intellectuals who have claimed that the American frontier had been closed since the 1890s; he devised the term "fronts" to describe the continual interfacing between urban, suburban, and rural areas. Strip malls were nothing new to Clay—"strips" had been in existence in various forms for years, depending on the fluctuating "beats" (or travel patterns) of the average person. There were "stacks" of excess raw material and "sinks" of waste that tended to be located in places with varying levels of economic and political clout.

Throughout all of this, Clay remained focused on the need to interpret the urban environment on its own terms, through its own spatial clues, not through the narrow lens through which it has traditionally been viewed. "Experts may help assemble data, specialists may organize it, professionals may offer theories to explain it," said Clay. "But none of these can substitute for each person's own leap into the dark, jumping in to draw his or her own conclusions."





### *Publications*

*Close-up: How to read the American city.* New York: Praeger, 1973.

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*prospects*. New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1961.

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