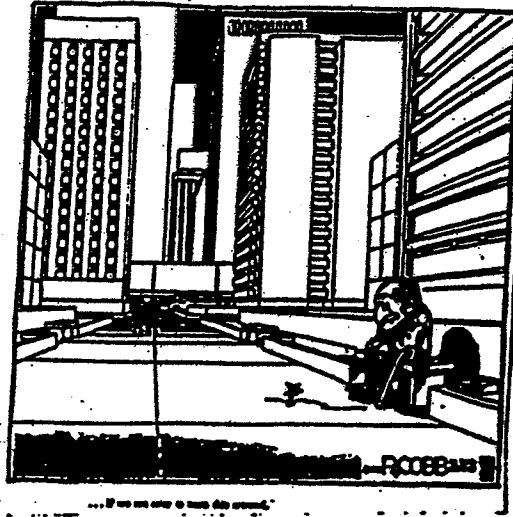# Investigating
Urban
Places

When we experience either new or familiar places it is helpful to anchor the immediate observations and experiences that are filtered by each person's .... cultural and experiential "lenses and filters" that shade what they see and do not see to a conceptual framework. As a member of the Colloquium class you have developed your own personal knowledge and experience base and most of you have committed to a major field of study all of which will shape how you see a "downtown" or urban system in ways different from your classmates. You are asked to investigate an urban setting with a keen eye and recording your insights, data, and information in a journal entry or series of entries. Keep the information in this handout as a guide for your observations and the context in which you observe the urban system. Use your journal to take notes, record data, make reflections on your observations and feelings, make maps and sketches, gluestick in pictures, brochures, city information documents, and commercial maps and other information pieces. Your task is to take a fresh look at a nearby urban space preferably within the city nearest you. We have provided a series of guide questions to stimulate your thinking to a more sophisticated scholarly set of observations and to help you break through some of the "filters"that shade how you might typically see the urban system. You do not have to try to answer all of the questions on this sheet. Read them all and then choose the cluster that is most meaningful to you to investigate..... THINK of the city as complex integrated system..... even metaphorically as a complex living system. Does this urban place foster a strong "sense of place" in residents and visitors? Is the urban system a "sustainable" system?

First, an ecologist would tend to view living systems in a hierarchy of complexity that ranges from the broad biosphere to the niche of an individual species. A urban planner uses a very similar hierarchy that ranges from nation/state to individual address.

The comparative hierarchy might be seen as:

Biosphere	-	Global/National /State
Bioregion	-	Metropolitan region or SMSA
Ecosystem	-	City
Community	-	Community
Niche	-	Address - business or home

There are many ways to view a city or urban place.... think of the eagles eye birds view from high above or the subterranean view such as architect-author David Macauley provides in his book Underground which examines the complex of pipes, cables and subground structures in a city. You can also examine a city or urban space from a single system viewpoint such as the transportation system, the parks and open space system, the human services systems, the public recreation system, the utilities systems, the financial systems and a wide variety of other component systems. Are these systems sustainable?

★ When you look at an urban area you are asked to think about how the urban area is <u>like</u> or <u>different</u> from the systems you observed as you experienced Corkscrew Swamp   or Estero Bay. How does energy that originates from the Sun flow through the system to be converted by producers in ways that consumers can use it (remember Leopold's insights)?

Typically cities and urban systems had their historic roots linked to high energy transportation access such as bays, rivers, or stage and railroad lines, traditional trade routes or unique natural features.

★ What are the historic roots that nurtured the development of the urban place your observing that caused it to exist where it is today? What is the birth and life story of the urban place?

★ Can you locate the oldest community in the urban space.... what is it's relationship to the city today? How have things changed? Where is the city's growth energy and capital being applied today? What can you discern and describe about the use of building materials and architectural design in this area vs. more recently developed areas of the city? Are the oldest areas of the city in decay and disrepair or are they being restored or upgraded?
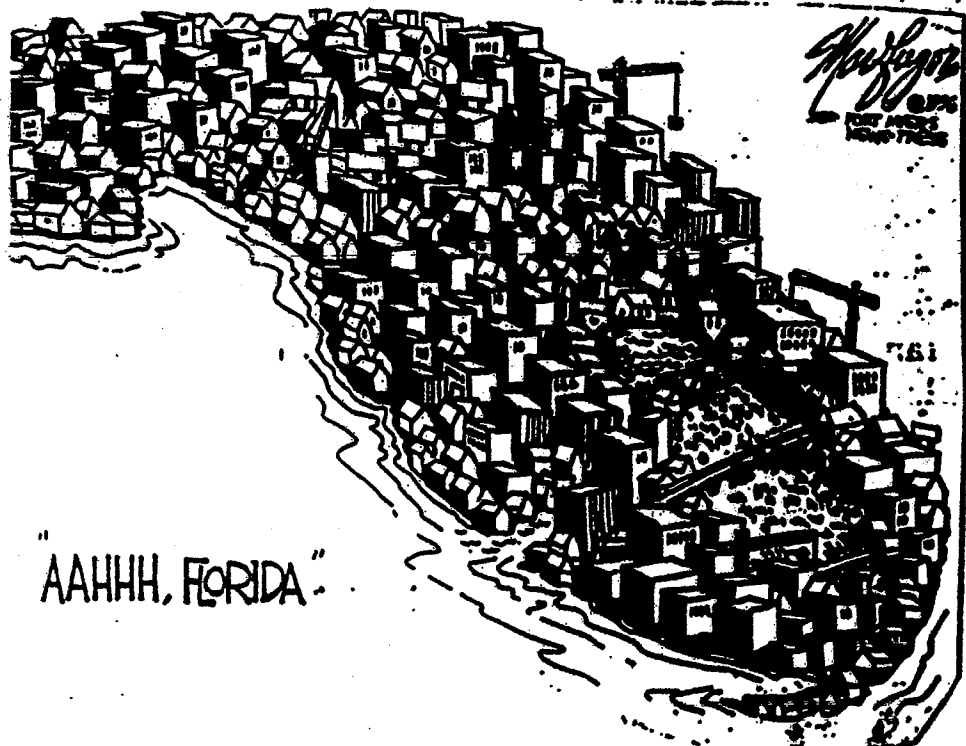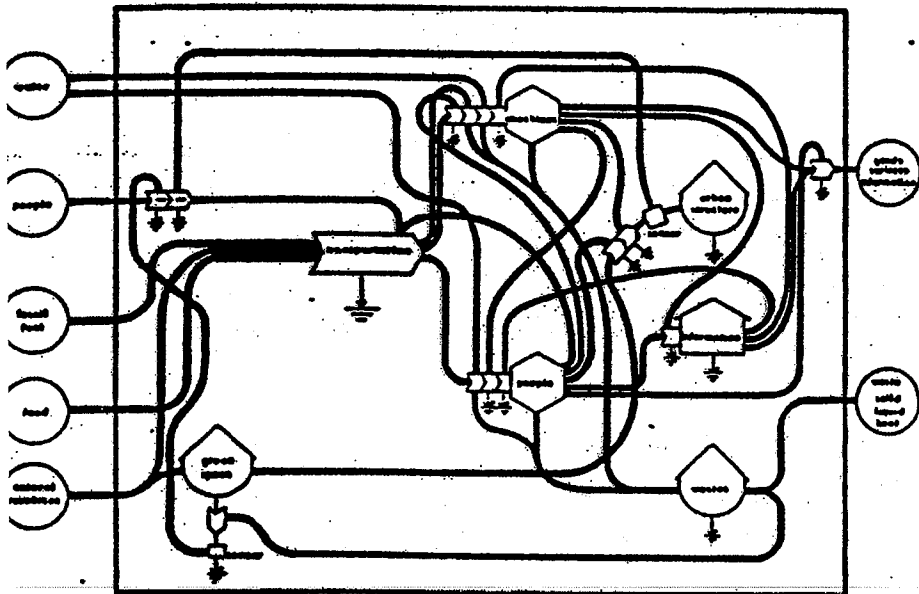
* Where is the place in the city or urban space that makes you feel most comfortable and energized? How does the urban landscape make you feel? Does the presence plants and trees in the city landscape provide you with a different feeling than those areas without any plants? Did you see evidence of wildlife in the city or urban space? Are there abundant urban parks and green spaces? Are you emotionally moved by the space in this place in a way that you feel a "sense of place" or connection to this community or place?

* How much of the city space is devoted to vehicles....traffic, parking, service of vehicles compared to space for people to enjoy the city? How much does parking cost? Where is it most expensive? Least expensive? What is the biggest generator of parking need e.g. retailing businesses, service business, or government centers? Is there evidence of shared or cooperative parking arrangements e.g. between churches and businesses or government entities that use parking at different times? Is there convenient mass transit? Would you use it?

* What is the current economic lifeblood of the city? How have shopping malls and strip developments along non-core city highways had an effect on the city? Is most of the cities tax base going toward growth or toward maintenance of the city? Is there vibrant well used residential living space in the inner core of the city? Where do people who live in the city shop for groceries? What fuels the finances for the cities tax base and growth?

* Are there signs of homelessness, graffiti, and crime in the urban spaces? If so, what indicators provide your evidence? Do you feel comfortable traveling in all parts of the city day or night? Are tourists safe in this urban area? Would you consider living in this urban space?

* What did you learn from your observations and thinking? What was the most surprising thing you learned? Where is your favorite place in the city or urban landscape? Where is your least favorite place? What makes these places desirable or unpleasant? What are the advantages of living in the city or urban landscape rather in the country? What are the down sides to living in the city? Is this a sustainable city or urban system? Do people here feel very connected to the city exhibiting a "sense of place"?

★   What recommendations for change and improvement would you like to see implemented in the urban system you observed?   Are there specific places you recommend be changed on a priority basis? What suggestions would you make to the city or town council?

EXTRA JOURNAL .....DATA - NOTES ON THE URBAN INVESTIGATION:

city system

"AAHHH, FLORIDA"

WH: 3/98