



Touching the City

Thoughts on
Urban Scale

TIMOTHY MAKOWER

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Foreword

Scaling the XXL

The essence of scale is that it is simultaneously finite and infinite. When we observe a building from the perspective of scale, we observe it as it is, embedded in its localised context. But we are also aware of the fact that at the lower end of the scale its details do not end with the doorknob, and that at the upper end of the scale it is part of a neighbourhood, a city, a country and a greater economic and political region.

In architecture and urbanism, scale thus oscillates between the tangible and the material on the one hand and the abstract and the conceptual on the other. Good design reflects this parallel (in-)finite quality, the relation between the scale of observation and the universe, and the relation between the detail and the overarching concept. Bad design is merely S, M, L, XL or even XXL!

Proportion plays a key role in this reciprocal reflection. When, as a continental European, I first saw English and American early 20th-century architecture, I asked myself why is it mediated by such a strong feeling of scale, until I realised that it was designed in feet and inches, whereas continental modernist buildings were designed using millimetres, centimetres and metres, which in its minutiae is proportionally dead. I then understood Le Corbusier's urge to conceive the Modulor.



Billboard in Chelsea, New York, 2013

Manhattan vacillates successfully between scales like no other city in the world, with its urban grid providing an essential touchstone. Chelsea – once an industrial area of wharfs, distilleries and factories – is now an ‘upscale’ residential, retail and gallery district.

The awareness of this parallel (in-)finity may also be the reason that most successful urban design projects are designed by architects and not by planners. Urban designers tend to grow out of architects, as their projects become larger and more complex, constantly calibrating their work with multiple scale-levels, from the strategic or tactical and the material to the abstract and conceptual. In this way they can even make their XXL project become tangible at a giant scale, or, as Tim Makower asserts here

in his Conclusion, have the potential to bring together ‘the notion of the child and the giant in us all’.

Kees Christiaanse

Kees Christiaanse is Chair of Architecture and Urban Design at ETH Zurich and Programme Leader of the Future Cities Laboratory Singapore ETH Centre for Sustainable Development. Previously a Partner at OMA in Rotterdam, Christiaanse founded KCAP Architects&Planners in 1989. KCAP is based in Rotterdam and has two branch offices in Zurich and Shanghai.

Introduction

‘No pattern is an isolated entity. Each pattern can exist in the world, only to the extent that it is supported by other patterns: the larger patterns in which it is embedded, the patterns of the same size that surround it, and the smaller patterns which are embedded in it.’

Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language*, 1977^{[1](#)}



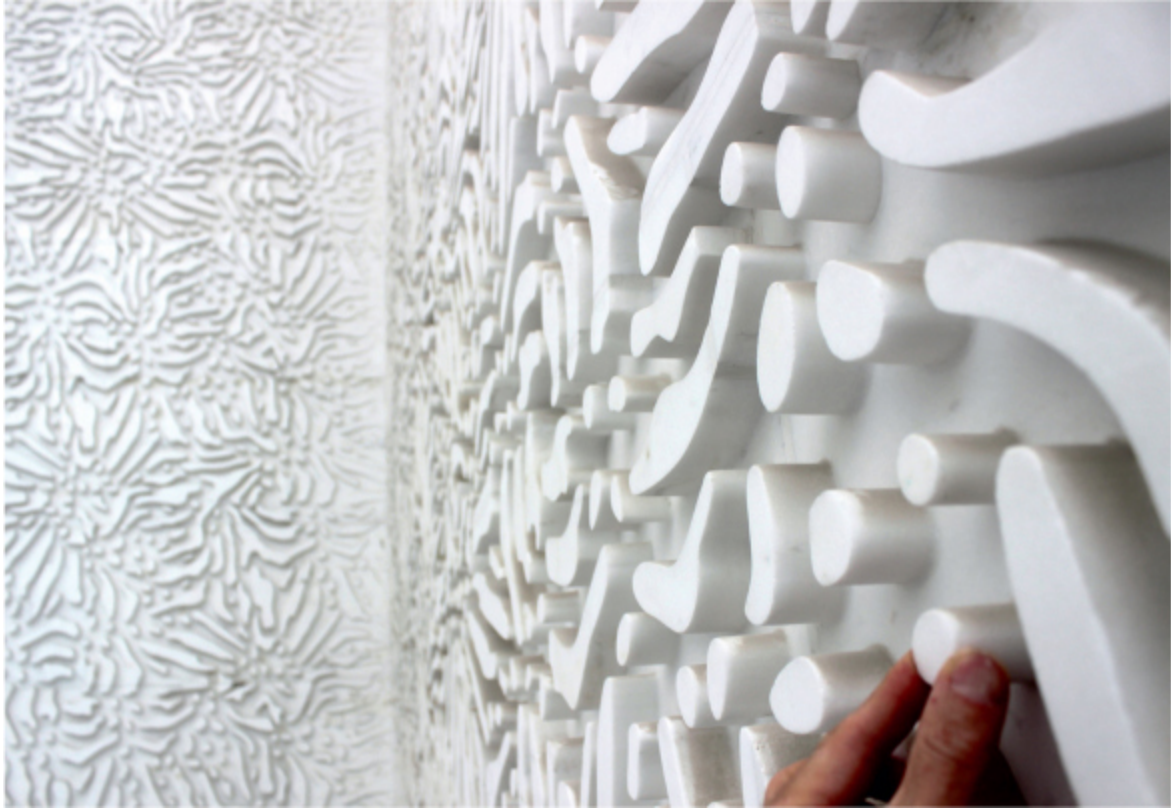
London from the air, 2012

Big shapes: river, Roman roads and parks.



Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano, Centre Pompidou and Place Beaubourg, Paris, 1977 (photographed in 2012)

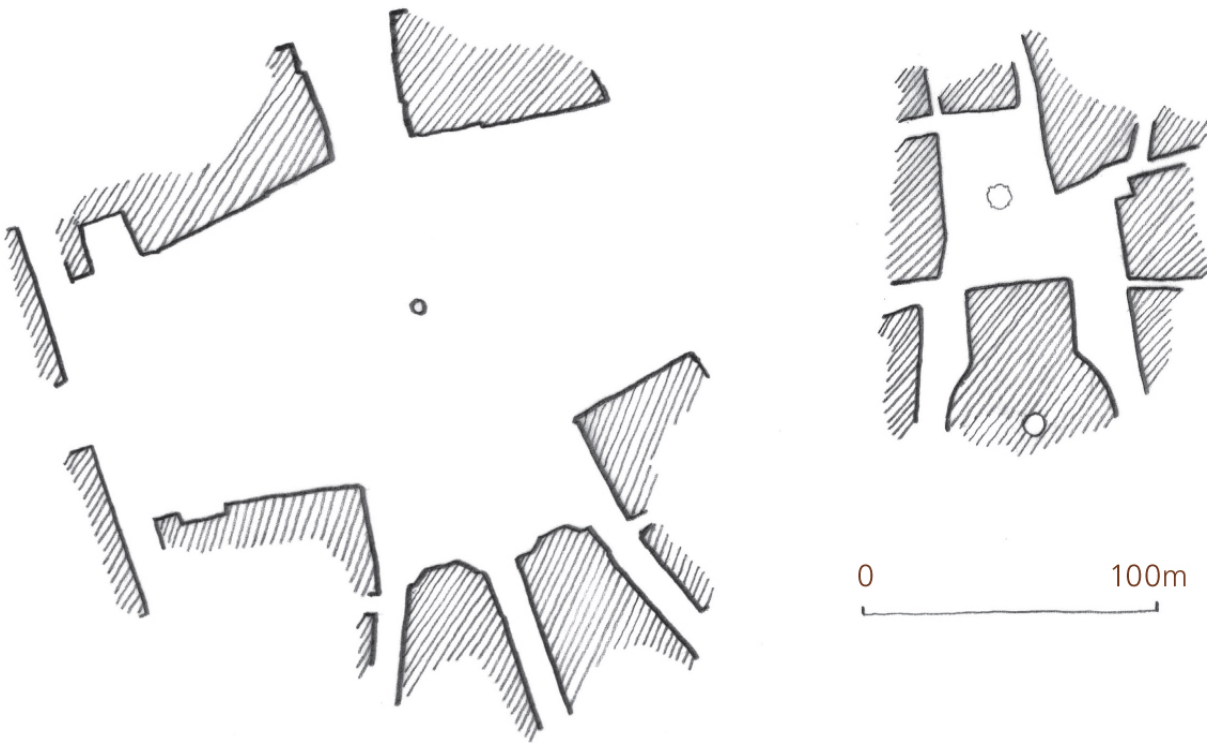
Super-scaled machine meets fine-grain city: a fertile combination.



Allies and Morrison, Diwan Annex, Doha, 2013

Irresistible to touch: drawn by hand, cut by machine.

This book is about scale as it is manifested in cities. The word 'scale' can be defined as the 'experience of size'. The book explores scale in cities, in the spaces between buildings, in buildings themselves and in their details. It seeks to ask how scale in the cities we inhabit can make us feel at home in the world or alien from it; connected or disconnected. Scale in cities is both relative and absolute. 'Getting the scale right' – although it is impossible to define such a thing – is a fundamental part of the magic of architecture and urban design. There are over-sized places, which make people feel small, and there are well-sized places, which can make people feel comfortable, and sometimes larger than life.



Scale comparison between Piazza della Rotonda and Piazza del Popolo, Rome: drawing by the author, 2014
Rome: a city of intimacy and grandeur.

Christopher Alexander, in his seminal manifesto on scale and touch, *A Pattern Language*, identifies a problem: 'the languages which people have today are so brutal, and so fragmented, that most people no longer have any language to speak of at all – and what they do have is not based on human or natural considerations'.² The beauty of his book, which seeks to address this problem by considering the connection between people and their built environment – the joining together of the fragmented world of experience – is that it connects not just from one thing to another, from outer to inner, but also from macro to micro; it zooms in.

Zooming In

So in what way does scale make a difference? There are the dangers of lumpiness and laziness in design which can

arise from working too fast, and there is an economic paradox in the fact that developments which seek to cover too great an area in too little time – notionally benefiting from ‘economies of scale’ – can destroy their own value by ending up monotonous or characterless. As with cuisine, fast food has its limitations; slow food is more nutritious and generally more delicious. The same is true of urbanism. These conundrums are worthy of discussion. Of the many aspects of scale to be discussed in this book, two main points stand out. Firstly that scale matters, and is essential to good design and the understanding of cities. Secondly that both big and small are beautiful; both are right, neither is wrong; it all depends on their relationships.



Fast food, London

Not nourishing the body.

The book travels from Detroit via Paris, Doha, New York and other places to London, looking at cities both with the analytical eye of a designer and with the experiential eye of

the 'nine- or ninety-year-old'; the person on the street. It looks at old cities and asks what is good about them; what can we learn from the old to inform the new? Like Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, the book zooms in from the macro scale of surfing Google Earth to micro moments such as finding fossils in a weathered wall. It examines the dynamics and movement patterns of cities, the making of streets and skylines, the formation of facades, and the honing of thresholds. It also touches on the process of design and the importance of drawing.

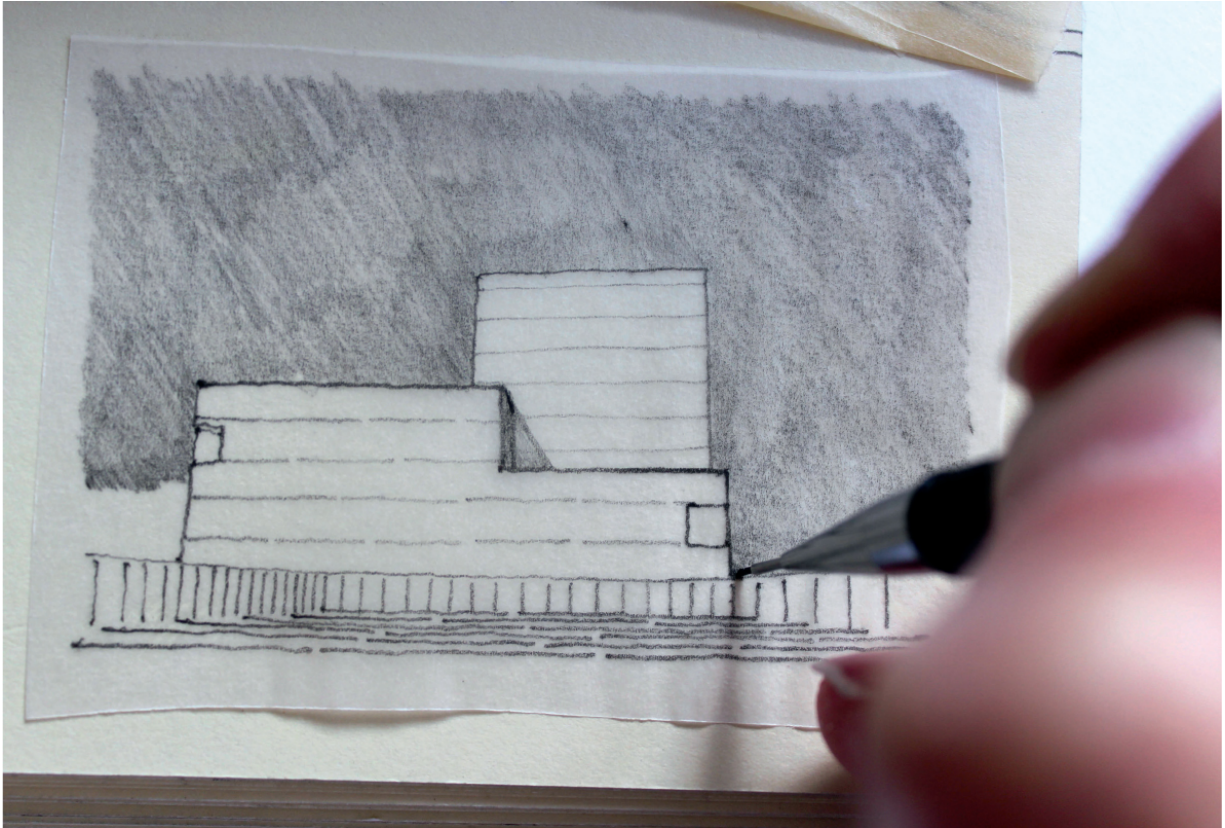


Fast urbanism, Doha
Not nourishing the community.



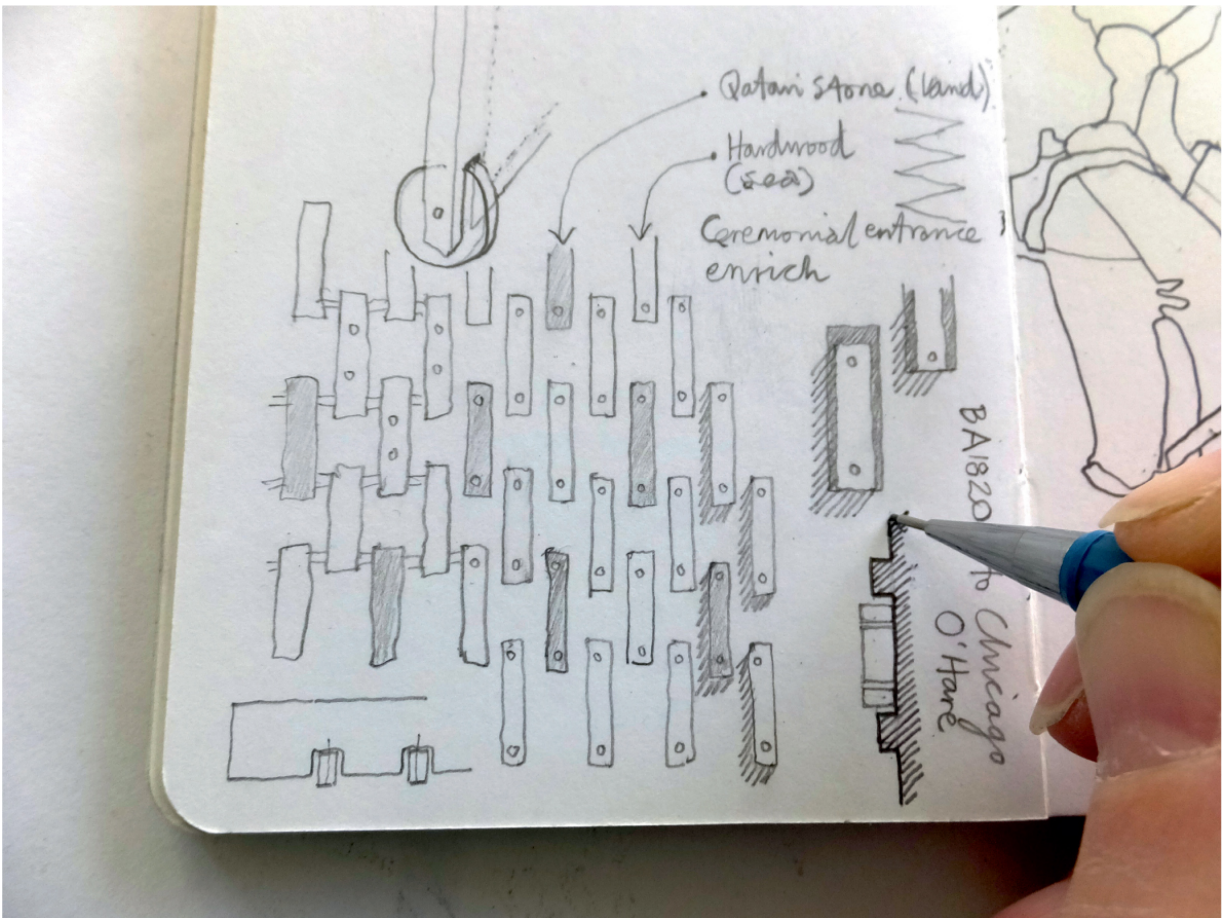
Makower Architects, Al Asmakh, Doha, 2014

The macro-strategy for Al Asmakh is to make the central spine - 'Triple-A Street' - into a linear public space, connecting into the heart of Msheireb, to the north.



Allies and Morrison, Qatar National Archive, Doha, 2011

The carved forms of the project were drawn over by hand, as if being sculpted by the pencil.



The title - *Touching the City* - reminds us that the city is indeed something physical, and it is alive. We can touch it and it can touch us. Rather than just being in it, we can be of it. To be able to touch a burnished brass door handle at one moment, to enjoy the crank of a wall or the bristling of chimneypots in the next, and to close our eyes, zoom right out and understand the entire shape of a city, both in time and space, is not only essential for a designer; it is valuable for all of us who experience the tactile nature of cities, both actually and metaphorically. The aim of this book is to talk about these things, which are formative in the making and re-making of cities over time, and so to push forward the debate: what place does scale have in the making of good cities for people?

In the early 1970s, when I was six or seven, in the days leading up to Christmas, when we were staying with my grandparents and I was sharing an attic room with my sister, before going to sleep I would describe out loud, into the darkness, models of towns from my imagination, impossibly detailed, all in motion; lights, cars, people; all crystal clear. These were the Christmas presents of my dreams. One of these models was a great city with tall buildings, a huge park and a railway station; another was a harbour town with a long jetty, a marketplace and a domed church; a third was a village on a hill with a castle and a manor house and a bridge across a small river valley. My sister would join in with the descriptions. In the darkness, we felt we could reach out and touch these models but we held off, because they were so fragile. Once I remember thinking I saw an aeroplane fly over one of the models, far below me.



Eliel Saarinen, Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 1942

The door handle is part of a solid bronze casting. It brings together the functional, aesthetic and tactile language of the building.



Flying over a town, somewhere between Chicago and Kansas City, 2010

The Jefferson Ordnance rides regardless over a landscape of hills, rivers and historic paths; the irregular informs the regular.

Under the Table

'There is a kind of play common to nearly every child; it is to get under a piece of furniture or some extemporized shelter of his or her own and exclaim that he or she is in a "house".' John Summerson, 'Heavenly Mansions', 1949³

John Summerson in his seminal essay 'Heavenly Mansions' describes the child's activity of playing with a doll's house as a 'strict analogy' between the world of the child and that of adulthood. Nothing could be a truer example of this than

my own experience with imaginary cities, towns and villages in my grandparents' attic, although seen through the other end of the telescope. Summerson writes of the child playing under a table or with dolls and doll's houses as follows: 'he is placing either himself or the doll (a projection of himself) in a sheltered setting [...] the pleasure he derives from it is a pleasure in the relationship between himself (or the doll) and the setting.'⁴



The table used by the author as a 'house' when he was a child

Sometimes its walls were made of linen sheets, and sometimes of adult legs.

He makes a connection between the 'cosiness' of the little house and the value of 'ceremony', as a signal for inner comfort in a world full of challenges; 'for us the ceremonial idea is more important – the idea of neatness and serenity within, contrasting with wildness and confusion without'. He even refers to camping and sailing as 'adult forms of play analogous to the "my house" pretences of a child. In both there is the fascination of the miniature shelter which excludes the elements by only a narrow margin and intensifies the sense of security in a hostile world.'⁵ However he does not mention that the child is seeking to be 'larger than life' (the child wants to grow up). The child in us all, however old we are, is seeking to transcend the everyday tangible world and, as with the large-scale model in the attic, to gain a perspective on life.

My main interest in writing this book is to think about, and to address, people who have not been educated or brainwashed in the subject of architecture or urban design but who are attuned to their environment and who know what they like. The universal relevance of Summerson's point to our relationship with the city is that in all of us there is both a child and a giant. The child, aspiring to adulthood, aggrandises the world through imagination, while the giant, harbouring the infant within, miniaturises in order to gain a 'touch' on the city. The child empathises with the doll who is in turn within the child's realm, but it is not so much a sense of possession or ownership we are concerned with as a sense of belonging.



Michelangelo, aedicule of St Peter's Basilica, Rome, 1590

The aedicule brings intermediary scale, catering for the giant in us all.

Intermediary Scale

Summerson goes on to discuss 'aedicules' – the use of miniature structures in the architecture of buildings to break down the scale of the whole into a set of interconnected elements, the entirety of which will amount to something greater, and perhaps grander, than the sum of the parts: 'the aedicule has been used to harmonize architecture of strictly human scale with architecture of a diminutive scale, so that a building may at the same time serve the purposes of men and of a race of imaginary beings smaller than men. It has also been used to preserve the human scale in a building, deliberately enlarged to express the superhuman character of a god [...] enlarged to human scale and then beyond.'⁶ I am not alone in feeling the resonance of Summerson's analogy. Gerald Adler in his chapter on 'Little Boxes' in his book *Scale: Imagination, Perception and Practice in Architecture*⁷ quotes the same opening passage and uses it to examine carefully scaled sequences of space and detail in architecture.

Although Summerson was talking about architecture, a similar point applies to the urban realm. In his thinking, we find that the subject and the object of consideration – both the viewer and the detail, building, space or city which is being viewed – are benefiting from 'intermediary scale': the possibility for mind and body to empathise with things outside themselves and to achieve a state of intimacy or grandeur, beyond what is normal. Intermediary scale in terms of perception is enabling us to experience the largest and smallest of scales in parallel. In terms of our built

environment, it is what connects the large and the small in a series of graded and tangible steps.

Leon Battista Alberti, in the first book of his mid-15th-century treatise on architecture, relates the scale of the house to the scale of the city: 'as the philosophers maintain, the city is like some large house and the house is in turn like some small city'.⁸ The domestic analogy between the house and the city is relevant in our aim to answer the questions 'What aspects of scale in a city are good for people?' and 'What makes people feel "at home"?' The blurring of boundaries and acknowledgement of overlaps between inner and outer worlds, between private rooms and urban rooms, between large and small scales; this is all part of scaling cities to suit ourselves, who are both the makers and users of the metropolis.

In the book *Powers of Ten: About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe* (1982) by Philip and Phylis Morrison and the Office of Charles and Ray Eames, the notion of approximate absolutes is suggested as a way for us to 'gauge' our environment: 'The world at arm's length - roughly one meter in scale - is the world of most artifacts [...] six orders of magnitude cover the entire domain of familiarity'.⁹ The book is a systematic examination of a series of images taken at 42 decreasing powers of ten; zooming in from the Cosmos to the atom. With an emphasis on approximation it suggests that there are normative scales to which all things in the world around us relate and, with our own normative dimensions of average height, arm's length, span and pace, it examines how we relate to them. This becomes a framework of approximate norms which enables us to discern, or at least to discuss, how scale-ratios - a journey through a city, the width or unbroken length of a street, the height-to-breadth ratio of a public space, the articulation of the facade of a building - can work for us practically, socially, aesthetically and

emotionally. It is useful, if not to set absolutes for ourselves (since everything is relative) then at least to believe in norms to which we can point or gravitate.