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Residual Meaning: Assembling Thick Urbanism

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Abstract

The preservation and promotion of rich urban environments demands more than logical and functional understandings alone. Although these types of understanding are important to the life of vital cities, what is often overlooked in these views is the role that the incomplete, the messy, and the complex play in constituting the wholeness and viscerality of real urbanity. Aided by perspectives from philosophy and film this article promotes the "residual" aspects of the urban experience and suggests why these aspects might be of even greater importance than more controlled elements of urban life to the continuation of thick, whole, urban settings.

Introduction

> It is time to repudiate the present layout of our cities in which apartment buildings pile up, all crammed together; and narrow streets interweave, full of noise, gasoline stench, and dust, and where the floors are completely open to inhaling this filth.
>
> Le Corbusier *Toward an Architecture, 125*

The move toward more systematic understandings of cities has been helpful in the discussion, development, and deployment of the concrete elements that form the basis of healthy urban environments. However, the Western penchant for analytical codification has tended to cloud phenomenological perception and existential connection: fixations on intellectual understandings, planning, and categorization have tended to encourage freezing and sanitizing the shifting flow of experience. Richard Sennett has pointed out that this manner of relating has a particular *modus operandi* in urban design: "urban planning, like other technical practices, often zeroes in on needless complexity, trying to strip away tangles in a street system or a public space" (Sennet 2008, 225). This practice, as Sennett goes on to explain, is detrimental to the life of cities. He warns, "functional simplicity carries a price; urbanites tend to react neutrally to stripped down spaces, not caring much about where they are" (Sennet 2008, 225). In other words, when systematic methodologies become the primary means by which we seek to engage

and develop our cities, then entire realms of significance are overlooked and ultimately lost. Thinkers like Kevin Lynch, Christopher Alexander, Jane Jacobs, and Robert Venturi have done their share to temper these tendencies (Lynch 1960; Alexander 1965, 1977; Jacobs 1961; Venturi 1977; see also Rowe & Koetter 1978). Each reminded us in their own way that there is experiential depth, cognitive imagability, and, at times, oddity that characterize real cities. Because of responses like these the rationalist dream of tower cities where, "cafés, places of relaxation, etc. were no longer a fungus eating into the sidewalk…" and dirty and congested streets were replaced by the "indispensible calm" of "efficiency," have been largely abandoned (Le Corbusier 2008, 127). However, rationalist motivations are still seen in the vestiges of the high modernist "urban renewal" projects that, even now, continue to disrupt the continuity of numerous American cities. More importantly there is a proto-rationalist drive that underlies the Garden City-esque hamlets dreamed up by developers, planners, and New Urbanists across the country. So although urban design is less threatened by the cool functionalism that once called to reinvent the city, it is still saddled with desires to create micro-utopias; perfect environments without dirt, crime, varied socio-economic groups, or anything that might be considered "disturbing." Aside from representing a task that is nothing short of impossible, the thing that is common to all of the gated communities, mixed use eco-villages, neo-bungalow retreats, and hipster main streets is that they lack exactly what gives urban places their reality: that is, visceral layers of diversity, grit, and the ambiguities that signal interconnectedness to a greater whole.

Habits of Complexity

Better urban environments start with better practices. As Jane Jacobs advocated, it is particularly important that designers and planners pay close attention to the ways in which people *actually* interact and participate in the city and how certain environments facilitate this interaction (Jacobs 1961). Following Sennett, it seems that one thing designers must acknowledge is the importance of the messy, the indefinite, and the atypical. As an example of an urban intervention that recognizes this dimension of the city, Sennett endorses Aldo van Eyck's Amsterdam playgrounds (Sennet 2008, 232-235). These playgrounds are paradigms for successful urbanism, Sennett thinks, because they are both accommodating and challenging at the same time. This sort of design, where things are not fully clear or totally easy, provides critical resistance. The challenge represented in such an environment embraces analytic, intuitive, *and* emotional processes and this accommodation creates the type of density that allows individuals to participate in a more invested manner.

When desirable and undesirable co-exist, the complexity of a place is allowed to reverberate. In order to facilitate this unity urban designers must drop the idea that they are either *planning* (as this does provide the intimacy of real inhabitation), or *creating* (as this implies a locale's lack of affect and presumes the designer to be sovereign subject). Instead designers would be advised to take up a more humble attitude of *response*. Response suggests that what already exists makes demands on the designer. Contrary to *tabula rasa* approaches, response has inclusive potentialities perhaps akin to the Situationists' "unitary urbanism," where significance and urban dynamics are revealed by certain ambiances through inhabitation and participation (Sadler 1998, 117-122) This type of approach reveals that the heart of a place emanates from its details and idiosyncrasies and one's capacity to be touched by them; yet paradoxically, it also shows that environments cannot be reduced to mere elemental pieces that simply add up into something whole. Wholeness is the elusive phenomenon that drives one toward the clarity of rational strategies, yet wholeness is not reductive, it is rich — it is thick.

Wholeness is addressed in German philosopher Martin Heidegger's idea of "world." World is the pervasive "nothing" of a given situation that is experienced first as a mood and something one is always already in by "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger 1962, 125). World allows us to "…see what shows itself in 'entities'…" (Heidegger 1962, 91). In other words, world suggests that the affect of particular situations reveals specific environments that are structured by inter-related people and things. World shows certain things to be meaningful in specific ways and discloses a wholeness that announces what is appropriate in a given situation; tennis courts are for tennis, not for picnics, restaurants are for conversation and sustenance but not for sleeping.

The effect of urban environments understood as "world" can be witnessed in much of filmmaker Jim Jarmusch's work. Speaking of the film *Night on Earth* (Jarmusch 1991), which is set in Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Rome, and Helsinki respectively, Jarmusch says, "the cities become characters… the atmosphere, the color, the quality of light in each city is very different and has a very different effect on the people who live there and on your emotions when you are there" (Hertzberg 2001, 183). In Jarmusch's work one is reminded that context is, in fact, effectual, and not just a neutral backdrop or obligatory element one uses to ground a figure. In fact, *Night on Earth* shows how a person *is* their world of involvement. Of this phenomenon, Heidegger has suggested that the coupling of a world's possibilities with an individual's potentialities is activated by one's ability to respond and this faculty for response forms the foundation for authentic existence. Hearing the call to respond to a particular situation is facilitated by a receptive gap that Heidegger

terms "anxiety;" and one's capacity for anxiety is the basis for being affected and acting authentically within an ever-shifting "world" (Heidegger, 1962).

World and anxiety are notions that are important to the city for two reasons. First, because they suggest that we are literally an extension of our environment, and second that without moments of not-knowing (anxiety), one is unable to *really* experience a situation. For example, the relationship between anxiety and world is played out at the beginning of Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers,* as the viewer is transported from the world of a ebullient family home into a modern, and seemingly expensive house, the house is dimly lit and actor Bill Murray sits passively watching television in a 1980's sweat suit. As this transition occurs we must wait for the world of Bill Murray's character to come into focus (Jarmusch 2005). Here world is first experienced as a strange ambiance and the gap of not knowing allows it to announce itself specifically coalescing as a unique place and moment in time. The gap of anxiety helps situations become more than mere stereotypes. However, in life the discomfort that is part of anxiety often provokes one to cover this "…nothing of the world" with the mindless routines and easy categorizations of everyday life (Heidegger 1962, 393). And certainly, this adaptation would seem quite reasonable, if there were not a benefit in doing otherwise. Anxiety's benefit is that it affords genuine response by bringing back astonishment with things as they are, releasing one from habitual perceptions. In attempting to make films that "feel like real life" (Jarmusch 2006), Jarmusch effectively attenuates the coming together of his worlds, asking one to find pleasure in their languid becomings. In this way, the ambiguous, curious, strange, help draw us into the reciprocal process of inhabitation.

Play Room

The embrace of the uncanny was transformed into urban theory by the Situationists through the practice of *dérive* or "drift." For the Situationists, drift was a kind of attunement to the emotional and ambient intensities that affect a person as they move through the city (Sadler 1998, 90). Now although Situationist theory tended to be more interested in anarchy and unproductive (sometimes chemically altered) means of experiencing the city, their revelations about the shortcomings of rational analysis and city planning are instructive, as are their critiques of object-oriented and form-based views of urbanism (Sadler 1998, 110). Along these lines Guy Debord claimed that "architecture must advance by taking emotionally moving situations rather than emotionally moving forms, as the material it works with" (Sadler 1998, 107). Certainly form plays a role in these "emotionally moving situations" but according to Debord the object

should not be the starting point. This idea about the city is compatible with notions outlined in the previous section where, for Heidegger, thing, person, and world all intertwine to form specific situations. In this way the thick affecting urbanism that the Situationists endorse has similarities to Heidegger's existential phenomenology. In addition to the ideas already described, the importance of mood to situation (which I will return to) and the notion of *spielraum,* literally playroom, extend this comparison (Heidegger 1962, 419). *Spielraum* suggests that one always finds oneself within definite possibilities, yet the onus remains on the individual to negotiate their ambiguities. In other words, *spielraum* presents a field of possibility that solicits an individual to act in definite ways. One important difference between *spielraum* and Situationist drift is that *spielraum* depends on use and activity, whereas drift was promoted as a wandering non-productive state. In thinking about vital urban environments it would seem that the role of productive activity is important: specifically, it seems ridiculous to try to understand cities and attain a more facile grip of urban design without addressing function since function is at the heart of the city's existence. Without function, such things as mood, emotion, thickness, etc. are all relegated to a fantasy environment. In their bias toward the unproductive a fundamental shortcoming of the Situationists was exposed — their inability to ever construct a situation (Sadler 1998, 106).

A similar dense flexibility to that of *spielraum* is a nearly universal characteristic of successful urban environments. In a place like downtown Portland, Oregon, for example, there is this kind of excess, where many different activities and uses are occurring all within close proximity of one another. The ease of travel between several different areas of the city and the layering of shopping, eating, working, and living demonstrate this play of possibilities, accommodating many different people in many different ways. Further, this urban thickness is typically a-heroic: that is to say, its vitality cannot be explained in broad bold strokes; these environments are much too intricate, pervasive, and multifarious to be captured in any formula. Now certainly one could drift through all of these different locales and appreciate their varied affects, but according to Heidegger one does not really understand a concrete situation until one takes it up through action. We are what we do (Heidegger 1962, 182-188; Aristotle 2002, 21-23). And the full profundity of the encounter is not realized until one goes deep into it by way of activity. Activity is the catalyst that fuses the possibilities of a situation with the potentialities of the individual. In the city this plays out as one attains richer perspectives on a neighborhood by, say, working there, or eating in a café, or even buying a pair of shoes in one of its stores. Here place is inscribed on one's body by way of one's partaking. Situated action is very different than merely drifting through: it allows the general to become specific.

The logic provided by the ordering tendencies of traditional planning offer an organizing structure which is frequently taken to be an end in itself. This formulaic treatment leads to a result that is necessarily thin because it takes good to be analogous with, and limited to, order. In effective urban design, as opposed to the decorative proclivities of a historicist quasi-village or the expected contemporary-generica of a Gap-Starbucks-Pottery-Barn-ified shopping district, form is discovered by working through the complexities of a real situation (i.e., client, site, contractor, budget, program, climate, etc.). Embracing all the parameters of a design problem as such allows an opening for the messiness of everyday life to enter into the equation and acknowledges 21st century society and culture as a valid milieu. So, for example, instead of repudiating all corporate business as detrimental to real cities, perhaps better answers might lie in asking questions like "why is Calgary's 17th Street a thicker commercial environment than, say, Fourth Street in Berkeley?" In such comparisons, one often finds that the impurities of real urbanity are absent in the "stage-set" counterpart. This is a point Jarmusch's films make so well: lived environments require the familiar for orientation, yet it is the strange that makes places truly human.

Place / Displace / Re-Place

Jim Jarmusch is a person who understands the power of the odd, proclaiming that cities are "almost like lovers," and that he is a man who is attracted to "cities other people don't like at all" (Hertzberg 2001, 183). This attraction is seen in his employment of such places as Wayne, New Jersey, Grants Pass, Oregon, Peoria, Arizona, and Virginia City, Nevada. Further, even in those more romantic cities like those used in *Night on Earth,* Jarmusch tends to find moments that are beyond the reach of our romantic vision of them. For example, in *Down by Law,* which is mostly set in New Orleans, instead being shown the French Market or St. Charles Avenue, the viewer gets the dimly lit back streets where shady characters roam and dirty deals are done (Jarmusch 1986). These peculiar portraits help to illuminate Louis Mumford's observation that "…all those tensions and struggles that made actual life in the city stirring and significant…" were erased by the sanitizing drive of the early suburbs (Mumford 1961, 492). Mumford's statement suggests that when hygiene and progress get conflated, the peculiarities of place are usually their first victims.

The imperfect, the less efficient, the odd, are hallmarks of an alternate view of progress, one which does work by way of a leveling sameness. In this alternate view, one sees that it is the *almost* familiar that really serves the life of the city. For example reusing an old structure in a

meaningful and appropriate way almost always provides those little idiosyncrasies that would be impossible to introduce in any type of new construction. Places like Pike Street Market or Pioneer Square in Seattle are what they are today because their current use is layered upon their past. Here, the inhabitation of an existing, perhaps less than (rationally) ideal framework provides a depth and identity that newly constructed environments invariably struggle to offer.

Although time is addressed by most urban pundits, it is often the historical time of urban growth and decline instead of a more dynamic time that is always becoming and dissipating; a time understood to have multiple scales; a time that is immanent; a time that *is* the built environment. In the city, real life and real memories are frequently found in seemingly mundane things: the layers of paint on the door of a house, the dematerialization of a decaying industrial ruin, the patinas of aged materials revealed by a grazing light. A thick city assembles accretions and absences. Constructions from different eras stand alongside one another, former building uses have been transformed into new uses, dates and names of former inhabitants are marked on street signs, institutions, urban cemeteries, and memorials, and the dynamic interplay of local ecology and climate with buildings is a constant reminder of the dynamic nature of the city. Here is an occasion where the Situationist notion of non-functional appears appropriate, as many traces of time no longer serve a functional purpose. For instance in Eugene, Oregon, there are several locations where the old street car tracks have been left in place and absorbed into the concrete of newer streets, adding depth to the experience of this place.

While embracing the layers of time, though, one must also be wary of nostalgia. Architecture is particularly susceptible to nostalgia's distractions, with beauty frequently sought through the deployment of historic appliqué. Of this kind of re-placing Karsten Harries says, "the very effort to idealize and try to return to what has been lost only emphasizes the distance separating the individual from what they seek" (Harries 1979, 109). Here one begins to understand something else about thick environments – they do not arise from mere formal invention; a case in point, nostalgic appliqué inevitably exudes a certain sadness because instead of reconnecting us to the past it is announcing, as Harries suggests, instead it only announces its distance from what it is attempting to reproduce. As opposed to engaging the past on formal grounds, thick urbanism recognizes that cultivating the presence of absence, that is, responding to and incorporating vestiges of earlier eras, is much more affecting than constructing a false presence. By chasing the impossible replacement, imitation and replication only obscure the fact that rich environments only come about when buildings find their

own relationship with their *own* time. As to this process, Situationist collaborator Asger Jorn reminds us that it is not direct: "an era without ugliness is an era without progress" (Sadler 1998, 73). Real progress requires mistakes as well.

For the Situationists a city was "…not so much a place of nostalgia… as one of romance, dynamism, participation, and passion" (Sadler 1998, 110). In their vision the interplay of old and new combines in an aesthetic that is almost a-formal. Here the resonance of mood returns to the fore as a critical element in understanding this type of relation to the city where "…our sensitive-spiritual existence is an aesthetic resonance chamber that resonates with the voices that are constantly reaching us, preceding all explicit aesthetic judgment" (Gadamer 1976, 8). Heidegger referred to this phenomenon as *stimmung* and said that one's "…openness to the world is constituted by *stimmung…"*(Heidegger 1962 176). S*timmung* (meaning both mood and attunement to mood) is important in understanding our feelings about certain environments, in that *stimmung* is the fundamental reciprocity between person and situation and helps to take us beyond mere visual and compositional views of aesthetics (Heidegger 1962 176). Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* presents an aesthetic that can be understood through *stimmung. Ghost Dog* reverberates with impropriety and golden days gone by: from its built environment down to its RZA (of Wu-Tang Clan)-composed soundtrack, this film suggests that meaning comes to us in its most basic form through an atmospheric exchange between person and place. Such a focus is codified in Ghost Dog's invocation "it is bad when one becomes two" (Jarmusch 1999).

Now, in this discussion one should not take this elevation of decay and passing as an invitation to neglect maintenance or avoid necessary upgrades to less than exemplary living conditions; rather, one should simply understand that "exemplary" is best not equated with an ideal. This thought challenges our Modernist legacy, which in effect has sought to neutralize time by lionizing the new and vilifying the old:

> We shift our attention with alarm to the old rotten things that
> are our snail shells, our dwellings, which hold us in their
> putrid and useless grip every day and offer nothing in return...
> everywhere, the family is ruined and minds are demoralized
> by being tied like slaves to anachronistic things…these people
> too claim their right to a machine for living in that is plain and
> simply humane (Le Corbusier 2008, 287, 99).

Despite the obvious hyperbole of this statement by Corbusier, the truths that it represents are difficult for many to escape. They are difficult to escape because of a predominant moral belief that, despite the impossibility of such a thing, the highest human achievements

come in transcending decay and death. From religions that promise happiness in an eternal world beyond to sciences that seek immortality through technology to a celebrity culture that tells us it is not natural to age, this mindset is ever-present. In our cities this mindset reveals itself both materially and existentially. Materially, it occurs in the search for low maintenance and high efficiency, an example of which is the ubiquitous vinyl siding that clads student "communities" surrounding the university at which I teach. Certainly there are economic factors at work here too, but at the root of the matter is a disconnection with place (and life) as a temporal phenomenon. Existentially, this disconnection is symptomatic of the drive to cover anxiety, and precludes undertaking projects as *ends in themselves*; in cases like the student housing, they become instead *a means* toward profit. This is an important point because danger arises when living becomes perpetually futural and satisfaction forever diverted. In this state things are often done that do not embrace the best practices, but the quickest, cheapest, and the easiest. Here it is important to recognize that cities cannot be understood in terms of mere efficiencies or as incubators for profit if they are to retain any existential significance.

Conclusion

The Situationists showed how *heightened* states of emotion can help to temper a purely rational relationship with our cities. However, awareness of exceptional emotions alone can also obscure the subtlety of ordinary things and destroy the impact of more understated encounters. Here Heidegger's existential phenomenology seems to go further toward bringing together ambiance and productive human activity as unifying and activating principles in our urban environments. In building cities, rather than chasing after expression or profit, historicism or nostalgia, cleanliness or perfection, we might do well to ask after those things that are raw and unsettled with renewed conviction. The average, the residual, and the idiosyncratic have always been necessary for the grounding and basis of multi-dimensional environments and these residual elements lie at the heart of what is urbanity. Only through creation within the built environment, taken up with awareness of such things, can one begin to understand that all is interrelated and dependent, even those things that are strange…perhaps especially those things that are strange.

In a technological era where we see an obsession for making sense, order, and understanding out of tangled encounters, it is critical that there is at least credit given, if not pleasure taken in a healthy compliment of dirt, disorder, and decay. In the end, perhaps we learn that rather than connecting with places in spite of their imperfections, it is *only by way of these imperfections* that connections are possible. For it is these

imperfections, like the strangely familiar ambiguities of Jarmusch's films, that mark the sites of intimacy and involvement and our attentiveness to them allows our encounters to come alive. The sort of listening attention that allows this play of ambiguity helps to correct for the exclusionary tendencies of the intellect and the hegemony of the visual. If urban designers lack the ability to engage small things and embrace the dynamic temporality of the city it will be difficult for our built environments to move beyond surfaces, predetermined forms, and the limitations of rational planning. Uncovering the finer grain, accepting imperfection and welcoming ambiguity into our environments allows forays into the margins where the existential dimensions of our cities lie. This step is important, as Harries reminds us: "all clear and distinct knowledge has to pay a price for its desired clarity and precision: it loses the individual and particular" (Harries 1979, 18). Retention and enhancement of those aspects individual and particular is important for the life of cites because it is the peculiarities that make places rich, memorable, and cohesive, and it is our job to make them vital by way of our daily, mindful, activity. It is these "undesirable" elements that provide balance and depth to our world, and frequently define what we refer to as "urban."

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