University of Calgary Press
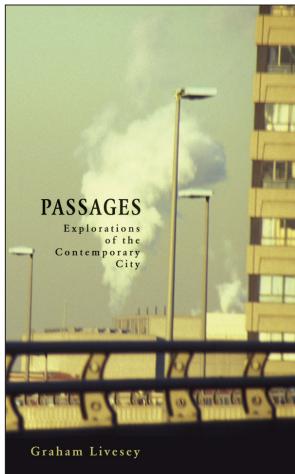
PASSAGES: EXPLORATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY
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ISBN 978-1-55238-675-0

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5 GESTURE: the PUBLIC LANGUAGE of the BODY

It is well known that the public realm, in a traditional sense, in those cities or portions of cities that have emerged since the Second World War has been largely abandoned. Public space has been usurped by what Richard Sennett describes as "the tyrannies of intimacy."[1] Those parts of cities that retain vital public areas were generally formed prior to the emergence of the automobile as an extension of human motility. It seems nostalgic to imagine the restoration of a meaningful public realm in which significant events, both communal and individual, might take place. However, if we accept Sennett's definition that the city is "a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet,"[2] and it is in the city that most of the world's population is to be found, then the examination of contemporary public space continues to be a vital subject. This essay explores human gesture in order to understand the potential for human interaction in contemporary cities.

The contemporary Canadian photographer Jeff Wall has referred provocatively, in a short text written on gesture, to the decline of bodily gesture, particularly in the city, during the modern era. He writes:

> The ceremoniousness, the energy, and the sensuous-
> ness of the gestures of baroque art are replaced in
> modernity by mechanistic movements, reflex ac-
> tions, involuntary, compulsive responses. Reduced
> to the level of emissions of bio-mechanical or
> bio-electronic energy, these actions are not really
> 'gestures' in the sense developed by older aesthet-
> ics. They are physically smaller than those of older
> art, more condensed, meaner, more collapsed, more
> rigid, more violent.[3]

Wall's carefully staged photographs are concerned with
the representation of the body and the significance of
the gesture frozen in the moment of enactment. In this
regard his work bears some resemblance to the long and
important career of Henri Cartier-Bresson, who also
documented a wide range of public human gestures.
Wall's exploration of the smallness of human gestural
expression is his way of revealing the nature of contem-
porary society, to "lift the veil a little on the objective
misery of society and the catastrophic operation of its law
of value."[4] Wall's observations are clearly evident in the
contemporary city, where a tradition of public gestural
codes has been reduced to involuntary and cryptic move-
ments that form no coherent public language.

The declining influence of what Sennett has aptly
termed "play-acting" in the public spaces of the con-
temporary city has been comprehensively explored in his

important text *The Fall of Public Man*. In that work he writes that "playacting in the form of manners, conventions, and ritual gestures is the very stuff out of which public relations are formed, and from which public relations derive their emotional meaning."[5] Sennett cogently argues that the public realm of the city should be an expressive one, where the entire range of human thought and emotion is vibrantly present. Contrary to many current notions, public space was not where one expressed individuality; instead one participated in a theatrical continuity before an audience of strangers. Traditionally this was accomplished through conventionalized forms of dress, speech, and behaviour (much like acting) that corresponded to a person's gender, class, and occupation. These conventions have, for instance, been recorded in Gilbert Austin's text *Chironomia: or, A Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery*,[6] first published in 1806.

The decline of public space, particularly in North America, has occurred in the face of increased emphasis on private space and the narcissistic/egocentric tendencies of contemporary society. Ironically, in many contemporary cities, it is often among those who hold no real power over the shape of urban growth that gestural languages still have powerful meaning, often as urban codes of resistance. The gestural languages associated with African-American street cultures,[7] or the collective expression that arises during times of protest, are examples of this. Both of these themes are documented

in Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*, which traces cultural differences played out in a typical urban block in the Bedford-Stuyvesant district of New York City. These gestural languages of the street describe the fullness of human interaction between body and the world, much as is found in the worlds of theatre and sign language, other gestural forms of human expression.

Gestures, as significant and often symbolic (or metaphorical) movements of the body, belong to both language and space; gesture is an essential part of human communication. Gestures range from the posture assumed by the entire body, through a wide range of movements of hands and limbs, to the subtlest movements of the face. The linguistic dimensions of bodily gestures are particularly explicit in the sign languages employed by the deaf. Through the use of complex hand and arm movements, together with other facial and bodily expressions, the deaf are able to carve out a linguistic space in which the shape and locations of gestural signs create a visual language or landscape. A spatial zone around the body has been structured as a linguistic space. True sign languages employed by the deaf, as opposed to various translations from spoken and written languages, are independent languages with their own grammars, structures, and expressive potentials – complete symbolic and expressive systems that convey the full range of intellectual and emotional communication. As one might expect, sign languages such as ASL (American Sign

Language) are extremely spatial. Oliver Sacks, who has devoted a text to the subject, writes:

> The single most remarkable feature of Sign [ASL] – that which distinguishes it from all other languages and mental activities – is its unique linguistic use of space.... We see then, in Sign, at every level – lexical, grammatical, syntactic – a linguistic use of space: a use that is amazingly complex, for much of what occurs linearly, sequentially, temporally in speech, becomes simultaneous, concurrent, multi-leveled in Sign ... what looks so simple is extraordinarily complex and consists of innumerable spatial patterns nested, three-dimensionally, in each other.[8]

Sign languages employ the fullness of space and time to create narrative structures that have a cinematic virtuosity, allowing the signer to manipulate these dimensions.[9] It has been demonstrated that the deaf have a greater perceptual sense of space than do the hearing, and when describing objects or spatial conditions can employ bodily gestures to give very detailed portrayals. Sign languages arise from gesture and, thus, unlike speech, are fully embodied. From the sign languages used by both actors and the deaf we can learn about the expressive potential of the gestural body and also about the figural and linguistic dimensions of space, what may be called the "grammaticization of space."[10] The interaction

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between body, space, and language in theatrical perfor-
mance and sign language provides relevant models for
exploring the latent potential in contemporary cities for
the making of architecture. Gestural languages arise
from a specific cultural context, and as in all languages,
the meaning of a certain action and the potential for
expression is prefigured by the linguistic milieu from
which it derives; against this background speech and
interpretation emerge.

Those who have studied the nature of human gesture
have developed classification systems for gestural com-
munication. Wilhelm Wundt, the pioneering German
psychologist, published a work in 1921, subsequently
translated as *The Language of Gestures,* in which he as-
cribes gestures to the following categories: demonstra-
tive, imitative (descriptive), connotative (descriptive),
and symbolic. While the text is dated in many of its
propositions, his system still provides a useful structure
and corresponds closely with a more recent formula-
tion found in David McNeill's *Hand and Mind: What
Gestures Reveal about Thought.*[11] However, McNeill adds
a group that addresses prelinguistic forms of gesture
that incorporate rhythmical and punctuation types of
gestures.

Demonstrative forms of gesture are the simplest
and most direct. In effect, they are a pointing, toward
things in the world, toward ourselves.[12] They provide
an orientation to the world of others and for our body.[13]

Demonstrative gestures are immediate and concrete, reverting back to prelinguistic conditions. Therefore, they are also used to express emotions. Wundt identifies two basic concepts: "parties to a conversation" or differences between 'you' and 'I' (or self and other); and "spatial relationships" or spatial directions as they pertain to the body. Demonstrative gestures "originate in the person's own body as the center of all spatial orientation."[14] Other demonstrative gestural concepts include: dimensional qualities; parts of the body; and "gestures which place the three dimensions of space in the context of past, present, and future."[15] These qualities unite space and time. The notion of pointing, contained in these kinds of gestures, is essential to all communication and orientation in the world.

Wundt divides descriptive gestures into those that are imitative and those that are connotative. Imitative gestures are pictorial or representational, in that they replicate the form of an object. In this case an object is drawn in the air or imitated by the hands. For example, a house can be indicated by making an outline of its typical form with the index finger, and an animal can be described by hand forms that imitate its characteristic shape.[16] The gestural facility of the hands is supported by facial expressions. Connotative gestures represent objects by "singling out arbitrarily one of its secondary traits to represent it."[17] Closely related to imitative forms of gesture, the connotative form is identified by Wundt as

being either transitory or held indefinitely, and can border on the symbolic.[18] Both forms of descriptive gesture fall within the realm of metaphor, hence they give an innovative and poetic dimension to gestural languages.

Wundt describes symbolic gestures as the final and broadest category, in which a sign invokes a "mental concept." As opposed to the directness of demonstrative and descriptive forms of gesture, symbolic forms operate through association, giving languages abstract and poetic dimensions. Symbolic gestures operate like spoken languages and other symbolic structures, in that they are deliberately created and must be learned; they belong to a shared understanding.

Public space, in all forms, is a product of human making in that it is tangible and cultural; therefore, it corresponds to the human body. It responds to human needs, metaphorically replicates aspects of the human body and contributes to making the world animate in human terms.[19] In the modern era, urban space was increasingly determined by machines that extended the mechanical abilities of the body. This was superimposed on the premodern city, which more directly expressed the dimensions of the human body in space. In the postmodern world we are adding layers of electronic technology that imitate our nervous and neurological systems and extend our intellect and communicative abilities. The loss of direct gestural communication as the basic expression of our embodied existence in the city, as it

is now increasingly filtered through technology, is both understandable and lamentable. However, there does remain a direct correspondence between the shape of public space and the gestural expressiveness of a culture. For example, this can be determined by comparing the shape of public space in medieval Siena to that of contemporary Los Angeles. The figurally complex public spaces of the medieval city respond to the scale and expressiveness of the slow-moving human body, whereas the spaces of the contemporary city are seemingly indeterminate in structure, understood through accumulated layers of technology.

Our gestural worlds are divided between our private lives and our public personas. The gestural codes we use in private situations with others we know well are very different from those employed in the public realm surrounded by strangers. Both are determined by cultural norms. When these are transgressed we stand out; every culture carefully defines appropriate kinds of public behaviour. The interdependence between a public space and potential public gesticulation depends upon the latent figural structure of the space. The world of action has pre-existing structure and meaning; gestures arise from a prefigured condition.[20] The space for public gesture is, according to Hannah Arendt, a constructed space within which we carry out actions addressed to others, creating a web of human relationships, or narrative order.[21] For the ancient Greeks the *polis* is "the organization of the

people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose...."[22] In the contemporary city the vital role of communications between citizens has been displaced into new technologies and spaces.

Alfred Schutz states that we know ourselves through others, by belonging to "a common environment and to be united with the Other in a community of persons...."[23] In other words, to escape from the public realm, as we tend to do, robs us of our human community and self-understanding as mirrored in the actions of others. Beyond the expressiveness and coherence of individual bodily gestures in the public realm, or a shared language, is the need for gestures or bodily events to be assembled into a structure, plot, or narrative. The question remains: Do we accept the condition that Jeff Wall captures in his photographs, with its violent tensions and lack of expression, or do we look to ways in which the expressive potential of public space can be reborn? Or does the contemporary city create new gestural codes?

Gestural codes used in performance, in conjunction with speech, or by the deaf, use combinations of the various types of gestures that Wundt describes: pointing toward, imitating, or symbolizing. Phenomenology implies that gestures, particularly those gestures that are demonstrative and descriptive, can be shared across cultures. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes:

> The communication or comprehension of gestures
> comes about through the reciprocity of my inten-
> tions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and
> intentions discernible in the conduct of other people.
> It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my
> body and mine his.[24]

Given the chaotic nature of most contemporary spaces,
it would seem that what Wundt describes as demonstra-
tive gesture, the most primary form of human gesturing,
remains essential as an interpretative and heuristic (i.e.,
hermeneutical) process that allows the body to con-
stantly find new strategies for anchoring and reorienting
itself to the spaces and structures of the city. The city
provides the locations to which the body connects itself.
The demarcation of boundaries through the gestural
extension of the body is a fluid process that builds upon
the ephemeral landscapes of the contemporary city.
Spaces of the city tend to be open and indeterminate.
An ever-changing landscape of structures and surface
zoning means that the body is constantly seeking a
reorientation; primary forms of gesture unite time and
space. The displacement of the expressive and emotive
body from the public realm into the private, the realm
of intimacy, means the city no longer functions as a
gesticulating community. Gestures in public tend to be
cryptic, or imply a false sense of intimacy. The spaces of
the contemporary city, while lacking expressiveness, still

function in developing narrative from the intersections, or events, that the structure engenders. Ultimately, what will emerge are new gestural codes that make sense of contemporary urban environments.

Wundt's second type of gesture, descriptive gesture, is pictorial; the characteristic shapes of things or animals are replicated in a mimetic manner. This form of gesturing populates space with a fleeting metaphoricity; it can transform the mechanistic and informational nature of contemporary space into a world full of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and productive qualities. The metaphorical aspects of gesture allow for what Nelson Goodman describes as a "territorial invasion," where one conceptual or poetic schema invades another.[25] This strategy can be critical, a type of guerrilla action, or it can be revelatory, exposing new potentials for the city. The figural aspects of the gestural body can challenge the mechanical and informational structure of urban space.

An extension of the descriptive gesture, symbolic gesture, is another of Wundt's formulations. Here, abstracted codes are employed that have associative power. Symbolic gestures may also have a transcendental power and, like the operations of language, are part of shared understanding. The complex sign languages used by the deaf fall into this category. The gestural languages employed in the city until the nineteenth century, and still maintained in more traditional societies, would also

belong here. This is the aspect of the urban gestural space that has largely disappeared, enhanced by the proliferation of electronic technologies. Watching actors on the screen, in the protected comfort of our private worlds, provides a surrogate for our desire to watch the expressive human body. However, as mentioned, there are also examples of thriving urban gestural languages that indicate directions for reinvigorating this aspect of public space.

Can the fecundity of face-to-face communication survive in the contemporary city? There are a number of preliminary ideas that can be drawn from this exploration of gesture. Firstly, there is a close connection between gestural expressiveness and space, and a reciprocity between the constructed world and the body. Secondly, urban designers can learn much from studying theatre and sign language as disciplines that have a highly developed sense of human gesture and spatiality. Thirdly, following Wundt, gestures are demonstrative, descriptive (metaphorical), and symbolic. Fourthly, an investigation into gesture questions the nature and forms of human communication in the city, in the face of ever-proliferating electronic technologies that enhance communication at a distance.

In conclusion, the Polish author Bruno Schulz, writing of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, describes an important sensitivity regarding gesture when he states:

> Kafka sees the realistic surface of existence with unusual precision, he knows by heart, as it were, its code of gestures, all the external mechanics of events and situations, how they dovetail and interlace, but these to him are but a loose epidermis without roots, which he lifts off like a delicate membrane and fits onto his transcendental world, grafts onto his reality.[26]

Beyond adding an expressive or figural aspect to the spaces of the city, human gestures are gifts to the city, gifts to the strangers who populate any city. Inhibitions, fear, and technological suppression have reduced gesture to a minimum necessary to get by. In order to produce new forms of urban space, designers must understand the fullness of human action. For urban designers a new order of heterogeneous, amorphous, and anomalous spaces must emerge against the banality and predictability of contemporary cities. For example, these spaces could be derived from the spatial figures that arise between two people gesturing toward one another. Conversely, the body does carve out of the indeterminate spaces of the contemporary city spaces that can be comprehended, if only temporarily.

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Barcelona, 1994, Graham Livesey