



PASSAGES: EXPLORATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

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6 POINTS: the PROLIFERATION of INTERSECTIONS

This essay explores “passage,” put forward in the introduction, as a word that defines both an urban structure and the corresponding action. Kevin Lynch has written that systems of urban movement and communication “perhaps constitute the most essential functions of a city...”¹ In any city the means of passage most literally describe the functions of the street. The street was the primary space for movement and communication in the traditional or premodern city, and as human technology has evolved, so has the street and its uses. Joseph Rykwert defines the street as “an essential carrier of communication” and “human movement institutionalised.”² Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the passages or streets of a city were constructed to accommodate pedestrians, animals, and animal-drawn vehicles. Marked out on the ground or defined by dense urban fabric, the premodern street was the principal means of moving goods and knowledge about; it was also the realm for exchange and performance. Traditional streets formed a system of vital public spaces in the city. These qualities of the street emerged from vernacular craft practices where buildings and space were intertwined, and scaled to the human

figure. The fabric of the medieval European city with its “organic” structure fulfils this description. By the seventeenth century, the great Baroque streets emerged to accommodate the swift movement of horse-drawn vehicles. Signalling an increased emphasis on the speed of movement, the straight, wide, and perspectively ordered boulevard indicated that “the man on horseback had taken possession of the city.”³ The linear spaces of the street, within urban structures, remained the principal space of communication until the Industrial Revolution.

In the modern era, waves of mechanical technology transformed the nature and range of human movement and urban form. The train, the automobile, and the aircraft have each shaped urban passage. The advent of the railway and mass transit in the early nineteenth century, in response to new modes of production, greatly enlarged the city horizontally and caused great upheaval in both urban and rural structures. The invention of the elevator by mid-century enabled the city to be extended vertically. Each new mechanical technology opened up new passages in, over, and under the city, parallel corridors of movement and communication that supplemented and transformed the traditional street, adding new layers of complexity to cities.

The modern city emerged from cultures intent on invention, experimentation, and discovery, cultures that produced both the Scientific and Industrial revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Founded

on a progressive drive toward a utopian condition, the primacy of mechanical technologies used to enlarge premodern cities ultimately led to many of the urban models of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lewis Mumford has suggested that the mechanization of the previously organic city, following the Industrial Revolution, was a form of "un-building" where "a more advanced form of life loses its complex character, bringing about an evolution downwards, toward simpler and less finely integrated organisms."⁴

The automobile has probably done more to redefine the traditional public role of the city street than any other technology. The automobile rendered the horse-drawn vehicle obsolete, greatly expanded our horizontal movement (most notably into the countryside and the resulting suburbia), and enhanced our privacy.⁵ The overtly private nature of the car and the overblown scale of road and parking systems required to accommodate it severely altered the traditional street that had been carefully scaled to the pedestrian and pre-industrial forms of transportation. In Los Angeles, the glorification of the automobile has generated a wide-open city whose most obvious form of passage is the freeway. The freeway transports goods, people, and information, but is no longer a vital social institution as a place of exchange. The social role provided by older forms of passage has shifted to other urban and suburban locations, notably shopping malls and entertainment complexes.

Since the invention of the telegraph and the discovery of electricity in the nineteenth century, information has been dematerialized; hence, its movement no longer relies on traditional spaces.⁶ We have witnessed, during the last few decades, transformations in both urban structure and spatial perception brought on by the rapid growth of “invisible” electronic technologies. This expansion of spatial perception during the modern era has been replaced by an imploded condition, a collapsing of the world reflected in Marshall McLuhan’s use of the “village” as a metaphor of the world.⁷ Through the use of new forms of communication, global dialogue has been powerfully extended, complemented by worldwide computer networks that create new communities, locally and globally, outside the traditional urban realm. A city such as San José, California, the centre of the computer industry, is an unbounded low-density sprawl traversed by freeways, flight paths, and communications networks connecting elsewhere, in which the traditional street is virtually absent.

Thus, the electronic or post-industrial revolution of the last few decades has radically impacted on the nature of urban space and its use; McLuhan has suggested that electronic technology “bypasses” any previously understood idea of urban space.⁸ This has escalated with each new generation of technology, the subsequent implementation of telegraph, radio, telephones, television, and computers. In the contemporary city, the passages are

now the airwaves, cables, and fibre optic systems that link together the inhabitants with each other and the world. The netscape, what M. Christine Boyer has described as a "free-floating membrane of connectivity and control,"⁹ is an entity where most communication is not restricted to passages that are spatially defined or can be physically moved through. This forms the basis for the virtual city or "cybercity." The information age generates what McLuhan describes as "a total field of inclusive awareness."¹⁰ This notion is reflected in pervasive information technology, the recent phenomenon that layers surfaces, particularly urban surfaces, with ever-changing digital information.

As complex artifacts of human production, responding to cultural needs, cities have transformed from metaphorical representations of the entire human body (the organic city), through the machine city to a structure that is most akin to the nervous system, the informational city, where connectivity is the predominant order.¹¹ This notion is reflected in McLuhan's statement that whereas "all previous technology (save speech, itself) had, in effect, extended some part of our bodies, electricity may be said to have outered the central nervous system, including the brain."¹² Marshall and Eric McLuhan suggest that the visual preoccupations of scientific and mechanical cultures have given way to a more tactile sense of structures:

Since electronic man lives in a world of simultaneous information, he finds himself increasingly excluded from his traditional (visual) world, in which space and reason seem to be uniform, connected and stable. Instead, Western (visual and left-hemisphere) man now finds himself habitually relating to information structures that are simultaneous, discontinuous, and dynamic.¹³

In the transfer from the modern to the postmodern the McLuhans argue that we have shifted from a visual definition of space to an acoustic one, from stability to discontinuity, where touch provides the interval of change between structures.

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Premodern and modern perceptions of urban existence have been transformed by the post-industrial electronic revolution. Traditional structures have given way to more complex and ambiguous systems. The animate organism of the premodern city was transformed into the mechanistic model of the modern city, only to be dramatically restructured into the electronic and informational structure of the contemporary city.

In the premodern city, formally and functionally, streets were distinct from the piazza or square, spaces intended for gathering and lingering. As the primary

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corridors of movement and communication, streets were integral to the structure of the city. The street intersected either with other streets or with defined public spaces such as the square. Streets linked urban thresholds, such as the gates of the city or the doorways to buildings. Despite the clarity of these junctions, the movement between these systems did not require a dramatic technological or inter-modal transformation; it tended to be a phenomenological, symbolic, or metaphorical transition.

The modern city, transformed by science and industry, saw the emergence of systems of movement that forged new territory both above and below the ground level movement typical of previous cities. Railway, subway, and tramway systems carved their way into the fabric of the older city, dramatically increasing the speed and range of movement and communication in the city. Early “invisible” technologies, such as the telegraph and the telephone, added new layers of communication. In order to interconnect between these systems, the station arose as a necessary urban institution: the railway station, the subway station, and eventually the airport. As Deyan Sudjic has observed, “it is these interchanges from one form of transport to another, and to buildings and public spaces, that are what really create the public life of a city.”¹⁴ Lynch has described these essential urban junctions as “nodes,” one of a series of elements that make cities comprehensible.¹⁵ In the past century the increased

dependency on the airport has replaced both the railway station and the traditional gateway to the city. The airport is now rapidly becoming a destination centre for shopping and entertainment, while continuing to assert its role as a station or transfer point.¹⁶

McLuhan has called attention to the numerous technologies that shape the contemporary city, noting that "where there are great discrepancies in speeds of movement, as between air and road travel or between telephone and typewriter, serious conflicts occur within organizations."¹⁷ The discrepancies between technologies that McLuhan warns of can constitute a vital new order in the contemporary city. Lynch has described the paths through the city as the most important and comprehensible urban system; however, in cities where there are complex layers of passages, it may be suggested that it is the intersection points, stations, moments of encounter or interface, that are the new urban structure. These points of inter-modal transference provide order in the matrices of systems that make up contemporary cities.

In the contemporary city the mechanistic and linear structures of modern urban passage have given way to a multidirectional network of linear systems that come together as a structure where the intersections are more vital than the passages. These fleeting moments of interface, transformation, or translation between technologies are the postmodern equivalent of the railway or subway station.¹⁸ However, electronic technologies require an

instrument in order to render the invisible visible, the inaudible audible, and the illegible legible. The electronic appliance, increasingly portable, is necessary to make the required interface or translation between technologies or media. The gateway and the station have been supplanted by the computer terminal and the cell phone (and other handheld devices), which allow their users to interface immediately with a world of possibilities, to create moments of dialogue anywhere, anytime, anyplace. These points of interface or intersection often have a material and spatial component; they are also the events that enrich the narrative life of contemporary cities.

The transformation of urban passage that began with industrial technology has been accelerated by post-industrial technologies. Contemporary cities are complex superimpositions of technologies. Once the street accommodated all movement and exchange in the city, as information was material and had to be moved physically; the street was scaled to suit the walking or slow-moving individual, who could socially exchange in the same space. Now, many overlaid mechanical and electronic systems perform the same functions with greater speed and complexity. There has been a zoning of the city into parallel systems (subways, railways, freeways, airways, telephone networks, and airwaves) which have tended to exclude the simple urban activities of the pedestrian.

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There are definitions of the word “passage” that begin to suggest strategies for practice in and inhabitation of the contemporary city. The first is a figural or metaphorical sense of the word that means the “transition from one state or condition to another (*spec.* from this life to the next, by death): the passing or lapse of time; the going on, course or progress of events, etc....”¹⁹ An archaic form of the word suggests that it may also mean something “that ‘passes,’ goes on, takes place, occurs, or is done; an occurrence, incident or event; an act transaction or proceeding.”²⁰ This is related to “rites of passage,” as alluded to in the definition of passage that incorporates moments of transition, and also to narrative structures as suggested by the phrase “progress of events.” These moments of transition, or events, extend the linear form of the passage into a comprehensive and multi-layered system that interconnects the systems that comprise any city. Michel Butor affirms the complex nature of sites found in the framework of the city, providing us with a description supporting the notion of the contemporary city as a web, net, matrix, or mosaic.²¹ Every site or potential site in a city arises by virtue of its connection to a multiplicity of other sites; this narrative model holds for the postmodern condition. A location comes into being because it is the intersection of differing technologies, of humans and technology, or solely between humans.

If we re-examine the spaces of passage, we can observe that movement has become faster and more

wide-ranging, and it has taken on a multiplicity of forms that both complement and destroy traditional aspects of urban structure and existence. Fragmentation, decentralization, and complexity have transformed older forms of order. However, technological evolution, while progressive, is not linear, as we are constantly retrieving aspects of previously lost technologies.²² This provides for an accumulation of technologies superimposed on each other. Inevitably, existing conditions are altered and new or parallel systems emerge. Despite the vestiges of the traditional street which still thrive in much of the world, its linearity and specificity are obsolete and its functions have been dispersed. What is of relevance to the urban designer are the points of intersection, the stations, nodes, intersections, events, or moments of translation between these various overlaid systems. The loss of urban space scaled to the human figure means that specific locations in space play the vital role in providing the necessary structure (spatial and narrative) for our inhabitation of contemporary cities.

A final relevant definition associated with the word “passage” refers to the “definite passing or travelling from one place to another, by sea, or formerly sometimes by land; a journey; a voyage across the sea from one port to another, a crossing.”²³ The reference to crossing suggests a movement with a defined origin and destination or the trajectories of movement that every city comprises; however, the word “journey” extends the meaning of the

word into the heuristic realm. The craft and inventive productive paradigms of previous eras have, in post-modern culture, given way to the figure of the *bricoleur*, “someone who plays around with fragments of meaning which he himself has not created.”²⁴ Adrift in a fragmented world, the postmodern figure “wanders about in a labyrinth of commodified light and noise, endeavouring to piece together bits of dispersed narrative.”²⁵ The exploratory nature of current existence is supported by the fragmentary nature of many contemporary urban spaces. The stations and events that mark the intersections between technologies are encountered as part of the daily journeying through the city. Cities cannot be taken for granted, but must continually be challenged as part of an ongoing heuristic process of interpretation.

The physical passages of the city have been rendered less important than the passage of information. The moments of intersection, of translation, or of inter-modal shift create the points, or the moments, in the overlaid networks of the city. Linear structures are arrested by points in space, the proliferation of events that affirm the existence of those who inhabit contemporary cities.

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Paris, 1987, Graham Livesey

