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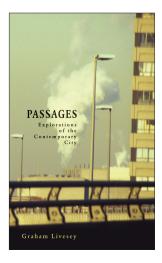
PASSAGES: EXPLORATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY
by Graham Livesey
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1 SPACE: the HETEROTOPIC DIMENSION

Many have written about the seemingly chaotic and incoherent evolution of contemporary cities, of the endless development and lack of connection between structure and inhabitation. When one examines urban growth during the last several decades it is evident that traditionally recognizable urban spaces, forms, and elements have given way to a more complex and elusive interplay of spaces, constructions, and technologies; in other words a new type of urban development has emerged. In particular, changes to urban space, and its definition, have had enormous impact on how cities are evolving. Henri Lefebvre affirms that we are "confronted by an indefinite multitude of spaces;"[1] or, new systems of space that remain little understood. Michel Foucault argues that we are in the age "of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, the near and the far, the side by side and the scattered."[2] The spatial forces generated by global economic and communications systems have altered the spatial textures of the city to produce "heterotopolis."

Beyond the larger forces that have shaped the city over the last several decades, there has emerged an active involvement in the evolution of the city by numerous

new disciplines and grassroots constituencies. The proliferation of voices during the postmodern era is a vital aspect of contemporary society. As a result we see a multitude of different languages of space engaged in trying to shape and define the contemporary city. Some of these include: geography, sociology, community activism, feminism, environmentalism, ethnic and economic subcultures, architecture, planning, transportation engineering, and land development. Each discipline and constituency understands and describes urban space differently, often generating conflicting interpretations. Finding a common ground between all the factions involved in contemporary urban development is difficult. These differing spatial models provide a very real heterotopic condition as spatial structures vie with one another or are super mposed on each other. In his book *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre searches for a unitary spatial language that will give coherence to the analysis of space. He organizes his study of space into: space as perceived (social practice); space as conceived (representations of space); space as lived (representational space); and the history of space (both abstract and absolute). In this brief exploration of the spatial aspects of the contemporary city this order will be reversed, beginning with a brief history of urban space, leading to notions of representational and social space.

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Prior to the twentieth century, urban space was understood as a negative condition that arose between structured elements; space was an invisible medium that was not often considered as a material dimension. Nevertheless, urban spaces were shaped by the form of the city, resulting in coherent types of space such as the square, the street, and the boulevard. Early in the twentieth century traditional notions of space were destroyed by the new cosmology of Einsteinian physics and technological advances in production, transportation, and communications. While physicists contemplated the spatial structure of the universe and space-time continuities, artists and designers attempted to translate the new theories of space into practice. Inspired by these developments in physics and art, the notion of space emerged as a tangible aspect of design.[3]

These changes in understanding led to the spatial explorations of early modernism, reflected in the experiments of Cubism, Futurism, de Stijl, and Constructivism. Reyner Banham has succinctly described the orthodox early modernist conception of space as infinite and homogeneous, measured by an invisible system or structure of coordinates, and having a particular emphasis placed on motion, either by the observer or implied by the structure.[4] Simultaneously, developments in construction technology in the nineteenth century led to structure being separated from the definition of space.[5] The architecture and urbanism of the early

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modern movement may consequently be described as a series of tectonic elements aligned with a Cartesian system of coordinates that attempted to manifest the infinity of space. Modernist space presented a new universal sense of space in which architecture appeared as free-standing and disconnected. Subsequently, this concept of space invaded the city, inverting the traditional relationship between space and urban form.

Despite the notion that space could be conceived as infinite and homogeneous, during this period architects and urbanists (particularly the European avant-garde movements) [6] for the first time treated space as the material or reality of architecture and urban design. This shift in emphasis is also evident in the emphasis on function over the formal aspects of architecture. Modernist preoccupations with space began to have dramatic effect at the urban scale in the post-Second World War era, resulting in what is commonly understood as global urban sprawl, or the rise of suburban forms of development. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour have defined this condition as follows:

> The space of urban sprawl is not enclosed and directed as in traditional cities. Rather, it is open and indeterminate, identified by points in space and patterns on the ground; these are two-dimensional or sculptural symbols in space rather than buildings

in space, complex configurations that are graphic or representational.[7]

The contemporary city reflects this condition with a plethora of new and often little-understood spaces that "overwhelm the architectural gesture, [and] ultimately dominate the contemporary urban environment. Vast parking lots, continuous or sporadic zones of urban decay, undeveloped or razed parcels, huge public parks, corporate plazas, high speed roads and urban expressways, the now requisite *cordon sanitaire* surrounding office parks, industrial parks, theme parks, malls and subdivisions...."[8] These are some of the new spatial types or conditions that define contemporary urbanism and which are of a different nature from the Cartesian space that defined modernism. These are spaces that architects and planners tend to design thoughtlessly or ignore as forms of urban blight.

The predominance of space paradoxically, developed at the same time that the structure of the city changed from an open to a closed system. Albert Pope notes that the open and continuous structure of the original nineteenth-century gridiron has imploded into the closed and fragmented city, what he describes as the city of "ladders." Pope defines a ladder as the "remainder of a partially eroded grid,"[9] or a closed fragment of urban structure. The ladder is a useful structural notion that describes the disintegration of the contemporary city

into an endless system of disconnected enclaves reflected in the organization of much of suburbia. The dominance of space has emerged at the same time as the fragmentation of the city, further adding to the heterotopic nature of the urban realm.

The sprawling city that emerged coincidentally with the communications revolution can be described as a complex system of spaces randomly interrupted by urban stuff (buildings, signs, infrastructure, etc.). It is zoned as a closed system by the transportation and infrastructure patterning of the horizontal surfaces, and by the regulatory systems that seem to guide its evolution. Urban space is made sensible by rules and signs that direct movement and action. This notion is affirmed by Susan Sontag when she writes that "space is black, teeming with possibilities, positions, intersections, passages, detours, U-turns, dead-ends, one-way streets...."[10] Venturi et al. determined this when examining Las Vegas in the early 1970s in their seminal study, *Learning From Las Vegas*. The realization that space was dominated by two-dimensional signage systems that directed traffic and unabashedly sold pleasure relegated architecture to a secondary role in the definition of urban space.

Surfaces have supplanted both the materiality of architecture and the phenomenology of space. The abstract nature of the contemporary city, described by Venturi and Sontag, means the reduction of space to a two-dimensional visual field organized by a multitude of

systems. As Lefebvre suggests, there has been a flattening of space and the emergence of quasi-spatial dimensions:

> Thus space appears solely in its reduced forms. *Volume* leaves the field to *surface*, and any overall view surrenders to visual signals spaced out along fixed trajectories already laid down in the 'plan.' An extraordinary – indeed unthinkable, impossible – confusion gradually arises between space and surface, with the latter determining a spatial abstraction which it endows with a half-imaginary, half-real physical experience. This abstract space eventually becomes the simulacrum of a full space (of that space which was formerly full in nature and in history).[11]

The building as billboard continues to be a reality in the contemporary city, despite a renewed nostalgia for the materiality of traditional architecture reflected in the promotion of tectonics and "craft." In the contemporary city the exterior skin of a building remains a critical dimension of architecture, the possibilities of coherently exploring space being mainly an interior condition. The innovation of twentieth-century architecture and urbanism has been the materialization of space and the consequent dematerialization of architecture. This arises, as Frederic Jameson states, from a disjunction between the human body and the city.[12] The technological

extensions of the body, mechanically and electronically, have created this disjunction. The human body has been extended to the point where the body and the immediacy of urban environments have been largely negated.

The contemporary urban condition requires strategies of engagement; it is futile to assume that the structure of the contemporary city will disappear or can be reconstructed as a false reproduction of the past. Through our human inventiveness we must make the potential in space come alive. Despite the scale of contemporary urban space, the closed structures on the ground, its constantly shifting boundaries, and the necessity for an endless signage system to render it comprehensible, the hermeneutical role of architecture persists, as does the need to develop ways of finding locations in space. We are in and of space; it is a fundamental condition of our existence. We search for a spatial project against the world in which we find ourselves. In a pluralistic urban heterotopia spatial figures are constantly being made, then sustained, altered, or dismantled. Defined space is a fleeting condition that has more to do with action than with form. Urban space is many things: constructed, commodified, experienced, demolished, designed, and/or narrated. Urban space is a project or an artifice; infinite territories to be engaged, altered, and/or lived. Space is "a set of relations between things."[13] Despite the seeming incoherence of the spaces we construct, either consciously or by default, there are strategies that are and

can be employed to populate, transform, and question the spaces of sprawl. As Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau have argued, space is a social construct within which we exist, in which we act.

According to Lefebvre, social space encompasses things and actions. Social space is the "outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others, while prohibiting yet others."[14] Therefore, space is an active condition to be engaged. Lefebvre writes that "each body *is* space and *has* its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space."[15] A heterotopic spatial condition can be inhabited by using a multitude of methods:

> Every space is already in place before the appearance in it of actors.... This pre-existence of space conditions the subject's presence, action and discourse, his competence and performance; yet the subject's presence, action and discourse, at the same time as they presuppose this space, also negate it.[16]

Michel de Certeau proposes that "space is a practiced place."[17] He writes that space "occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities."[18] The body turns otherwise undefined space into comprehensible spaces, as a project, an act of making or territorializ-

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ing. This occurs as both an individual and a collective activity. Routes, boundaries, abodes, intersections, and spaces are established both individually and collectively, fleetingly and in a more enduring way, that reinforce the heterotopic condition. Space is thus able to depict many states of being: emotional, linguistic, cultural, economic, and/or ideological. The city remains a tapestry of ever-changing spaces, juxtaposed, and overlapped, in which no space "ever vanishes utterly, leaving no trace."[19]

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We must acknowledge that space often exists in dimensions beyond those understood by architects, planners, and urban designers. The practice of regulatory agencies and established professions does not necessarily coincide with social space, or everyday practice. Engineers determine the stratification or fragmentation of urban space in the first order, setting out the systems that allow for the movement of traffic, products, information, waste, energy, water, and the like. This, together with a complex regulatory bureaucracy, zones the spaces according to use; this method, much maligned in recent years, is necessary to coordinate the scale and toxicity of the environment. All of this is subservient to the basic commodification of land that underscores capitalism. It is no wonder that there is no coherence or human scale, in a traditional sense, to the resulting spaces. This merely

provides a substructure for all the groups and disciplines who will attempt to inhabit the city. As noted earlier, space is fragmented between disciplines, each of which has its own language that particularizes and problematizes space. The spatial coherence of the past has given way to the fragmented pluralism of postmodernism.

Pope argues that we have collectively failed to understand the true nature of the changes to the city, knowledge of which would substantially alter our strategies for urban design. In particular, he stresses that applying formal models from the past will not do anything to contribute to or change the new urban spaces that surround the vestiges of the nineteenth-century gridiron city. Often hidden from the eyes of the professional, unable to see beyond formalistic models that they project into an unreceptive milieu, are a wide range of strategies for engaging the space of the post-industrial city, in particular those developed by urban subcultures. As Lefebvre and de Certeau argue, urban spaces are rendered habitable through the strategies of popular culture. For example, the "power centre," a disparate collective of large retail structures in a parking lot, becomes a new urban paradigm whose spatial structures seem to defy traditional classification. If one reverts to the agora, the forum, the piazza, and the boulevard as models, it will remain incomprehensible. Nevertheless, despite the paucity of design inherent in these environments, they are actively

used by suburbanites who do manage to make sense of the structures.

Spaces come into existence and survive or disappear. While the combination of modernity and contemporary technology and economics has produced space as the dominant dimension in the structure of the city, this is fragmented space that results from the practices of zoning, transportation engineering, and land speculation. It may read as an endless space that defies definition by singular projects and is impenetrable to the phenomenology of experience; however, spatially the city is more about distinctions between scales of traffic engineering and land zoned as residential, commercial, institutional, or industrial. Any actual mixing of these causes an inordinate strain in the system as planners, engineers, politicians, and community groups struggle with hybridization. However, as Foucault notes, this is the power of the heterotopic approach: "heterotopia has the power of juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces and locations that are incompatible with each other."[20]

Within the world of professional urban design there has been a sustained critique of the modernist city since the 1950s. There has been the work of the various neo-traditionalist movements, including proponents of the European city (Aldo Rossi, Leon and Robert Krier, Maurice Culot, Vittorio Gregotti et al.) and small-town America (Peter Calthorpe, Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk et al). There is, however, an alternate

stream of thinking, less pessimistic about modernism, led by Rem Koolhaas and others (including MVRDV, Neutelings and Riedijk and Foreign Office Architects), that is tackling the forces that are rapidly shaping cities across the world. By invoking various modernist and postmodernist movements, this group, centred in Europe, is producing provocative work. Other architects and urbanists are responding imaginatively to the challenges provided by the contemporary city. These have included Steven Holl, Bernard Tschumi, and Will Alsop. These designers are developing strategies for inhabiting the spaces of the contemporary city: deconstructing the rules, building new reference systems, searching for new architectural typologies, or establishing a choreography of events.

The production of heterotopic space requires working through the seeming homogeneity and closed nature of the contemporary urban structures. The emphasis on surface found in cities can be challenged by relocating depth in the urban experience. The plethora of languages involved in defining the systems of spaces that comprise the post-industrial city must be seen as the basis for the continuing evolution of the city as an ongoing project. Urban space emerges from a conglomerate of strategies. While the space of the contemporary city is homogeneous in appearance, it has resulted from and can be inhabited by heterogeneous processes.

Montreal, 1987, Graham Livesey