



PASSAGES: EXPLORATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

by Graham Livesey

ISBN 978-1-55238-675-0

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence.

This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY**:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY NOT**:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.

2 BUILDINGS: the ANOMALOUS CONDITION

When circumstances defy order, order should bend or break: anomalies and uncertainties give validity to architecture.¹

The role of architecture in contemporary cities has been controversial during the last several decades. Many believe that contemporary architecture has been rendered immaterial, reduced to signage and surface, particularly in urban situations, and that a return to traditional values and models is the most appropriate strategy for architects to adopt. This is a nostalgic position that tends to negate the developments of twentieth-century architecture and the evolving nature of contemporary cities. Nevertheless, the strategies that architects should adopt in the contemporary city are not always obvious. Does architecture affirm a status quo condition, or does it present alternative visions? In this essay I wish to examine one such strategy, the development of anomalous or atypical structures.

According to the dictionary an anomaly is a “deviation from rule, type or form; irregularity.”² To be anomalous is to be exceptional or abnormal. In the historic city

one could argue that the anomalous buildings were often the institutions (churches, town halls, prisons, etc.) or landmark structures that stood out from the housing that made up the vast majority of a city's fabric. This idea still carries through today in contemporary cities, where elements, not necessarily monumental, rupture the order of the structure. These are the singular structures of the city; however, not all singular structures are unconventional or deviant, nor do they necessarily break rules. In the case of the anomalous we are looking at structures that defy the common order.

In his discussion of the "conventional element," in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Robert Venturi explores the ramifications of breaking established orders:

A valid order accommodates the circumstantial contradictions of a complex reality. It accommodates as well as imposes. It thereby admits "control *and* spontaneity," "correctness *and* ease – improvisation within the whole. It tolerates qualifications and compromise ... [The architect] does not ignore or exclude inconsistencies of program or structure within the order."³

This description of an accommodating order shows how the contemporary city should or could operate; the order of the city must accommodate the complexities of

contemporary living. Venturi further writes, "Meaning can be enhanced by breaking the order; the exception points to the rule. A building with no 'imperfect' part can have no perfect part, because contrast supports meaning.... Order must exist before it can be broken."⁴ As Venturi acknowledges, anomalies affirm and challenge the general condition. There is a role for deviant elements, or structures, in the order of the city; a city is enhanced by those structures, monumental or not, that break the rules, that are nonconforming and even subversive.

As an example of this approach, the work of Le Corbusier demonstrates how an order can be interpreted and intentionally challenged. John Summerson has written the following: "... a building by Le Corbusier is a ruthless dismemberment of the building *programme* and a reconstitution on a plane where the unexpected always, unfailingly, happens.... He sees the reverse logic of every situation. He sees that what appears absurd is perhaps only more profoundly true than what appears to make sense. His architecture is full of a glorious, exciting contrariness...."⁵ One technique that Le Corbusier employed was to play anomalous elements against an established ordering system. He also, as Summerson notes, generated new typologies by inverting traditional assumptions about building elements and relationships; he explored new forms and materials in his work. It is out of this "contrariness" that meaning in Le Corbusier's

work emerges, along with its striking influence. A project such as his Salvation Army Building in Paris (1929–33) is radically different from its surroundings, and is sited in a way that breaks with traditional rules for urban buildings. Yet, it is a building whose difference reveals much about how relationships between a building and a context may be defined.

The anomalous condition, whether structural or spatial, creates a condition of difference. Jacques Derrida writes: “*Différance* is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing [*espacement*] by which elements relate to one another.”⁶ According to Jonathan Culler the concept of *différance* defined by Derrida contains three meanings:

- 1) The universal system of differences, spacings, and distinctions between things; attention paid not to a vocabulary itself but to the dimensions along which items in a vocabulary separate themselves from each other and give rise to each other;
- 2) The process of *deferral*, of passing along, giving over or postponing; of suspension, pro-traction, waiving, and so on; a ‘spacing’ in time; and
- 3) the sense of *differing*, that is, of disagreeing, dissenting, even dissembling.⁷

The first and third aspects of Culler's definition are of particular interest here. Inherent to Derrida's concept of *différance* is the spacing between, in this case between a normal and an abnormal condition, a condition where the spacing becomes more defined than it does between like elements. The "universal system of differences" gives individual elements their definition. The notion of degrees of difference, from the minimal to the maximal, as suggested by Henri Lefebvre, is also a useful contribution here.⁸ The anomalous strives for maximum degrees of difference, but may also function under minimal conditions. In reverse it can be stated that the norm, or the typical, gains its legitimacy against the anomalous or atypical. The third part of Culler's definition, the idea of differing, providing an alternate or dissenting position, provides a reinforcement of the ideas presented here; it recognizes the subversive nature of anomaly.

The pursuit of difference requires a close reading of existing conditions and an engagement in the responsibilities architects and others have for constructed environments. There has been a preoccupation in the last two decades with the marginal and the peripheral, a fascination, on the part of some architects, with edge and in-between conditions. This is an affirmation of Derrida's ideas, using the techniques of deconstruction to expose the fallacies and contradictions inherent in systems. Within the seemingly homogeneous spatiality of the contemporary city, anomalous elements create

spatial tensions, the spaces of difference. Difference can both undermine and perpetuate existing conditions. Deconstructionist strategies can populate homogeneous space with heterogeneous conditions.

The contemporary city is often perceived as either chaotic or exceedingly banal. The banality of suburbia has to do with the lack of difference, the sameness, the proliferation of singular typologies. In the contemporary city, the norm has been severely criticized for many decades, where low density, poorly constructed and placeless development proliferates. Post-Second World War architecture rarely seems to define public space adequately. Architects tend to celebrate surface play and concentrate on the potential of interior environments. In the best case, anomalous structures can throw into question, or relief, the nature of standardized practices. They can also raise questions as to what is the order of contemporary urban development. The anomalous can address atypical conditions and generate new types or norms.

Anomalous structures can employ many strategies: they may be monstrous, parasitical, subversive, alternative, deviant, or strange. Works of architecture, landscape, infrastructure, or urban design can include inconsistencies, exceptions, circumstantial elements, distortions, contrasts, inversions, paradox, irony, mistakes, contradiction, juxtaposition, or the unconventional use of conventional elements. They may also appear to be quite conventional, incorporating only subtle abnormalities.

The work of leading “deconstructionists,” including Daniel Libeskind, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, and Frank O. Gehry, provides examples of this. However, as Michael Benedikt has pointed out in his thoughtful book *Deconstructing the Kimbell*, there is a real role for the techniques of deconstruction as articulated by Derrida, and these can be employed in the reading or creation of any work. Architects as diverse as Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier incorporated formal and functional techniques that align with deconstruction. All of these architects put forward projects that question the norm, that could be said to be anomalous, that examine and challenge the formal and functional aspects of buildings.

The form of a building, which provides its linguistic dimension, can express many things; it is the metaphorical aspect of architecture. Within a given urban context a singular building is like a word or phrase in the larger urban text. It can be an undistinguished word in a sentence or the moment of disruption. The use of unusual form is an obvious way for creating a condition of difference. Landmark structures like the Eiffel Tower, Sydney Opera House, or Guggenheim Museums (New York and Bilbao) achieve iconic status due to the atypical nature of their forms; they register in the collective memory and imagination. The unusual qualities of a building (shape, size, colour, or material) can give it an anomalous dimension.

The landmark structure, either intentional or not, may disrupt the banality of contemporary cities.

Complementing form is the engagement with form, the functional intention or response. To be functionally precise is a difficult task, as function inevitably changes and evolves. The modern search for the functionally defined building has produced many disappointing results. Functional openness and ambiguity allows the form of a building to be more enduring. It also allows for shifting and evolving connections to the context. To be functionally anomalous would be to propose a building type that does not fit into contemporary zoning orthodoxy or to contain the absence of form. The radical juxtaposition of functions within a building structure can also engender anomaly, as can certain kinds of multi-functional approaches. Some structures, typically industrial buildings, are open and fluid to change. The typical suburban house, while a relatively closed structure in its organization, can accommodate a variety of living arrangements. Buildings evolve and shift functionally as they accumulate history, and through ongoing relationships with context and inhabitants.

Anomalous structures can also be structures that appear to be out of context, as either functionally or formally inappropriate to a specific location. Radical juxtaposition is one of the most powerful means for establishing difference. The nineteenth-century North American city was premised on this idea. The ground

plane established a two-dimensional order. Within that order buildings were given latitude with respect to function, form, and size. This resulted in heterogeneous development as subsequent waves of development created radical juxtapositions, for example, a house adjacent to a skyscraper. In older urban areas the cacophony of structures is inherent to the structure of cities.

Contemporary urban zoning and regulatory control attempts to create homogeneity, to at least rule out what are believed to be unhealthy or undesirable functional adjacencies. Nevertheless, anomalous conditions often pre-exist or slip through the cracks: the nonconforming structure or the building that was not built according to codes or regulations. In other cases the owner and/or designers argue for a deviation from the regulations and manage to convince the approving authorities to accept an atypical solution. There are always sites, even within the most conservative developments, that are anomalous in shape, location, or servicing and which deserve a suitable response.

Searching for difference is often the striving for the shocking or the new.⁹ There is the danger that anomaly becomes novelty, or an empty effort to be different just to be different. One important role of the artist or designer is to demonstrate to society alternative conditions and opportunities. Often radical movements will become consumed and subsumed by the collective culture, rendering difference null and void. Conversely, a work

of difference can be an enduring work of resistance, or the presentation of an alternate view. Another inherent danger is that a radical work is either ignored or is seen as a threat that reinforces the resolve of the status quo. What may appear to many to be strange or foreign can become the target of prejudice, ridicule, or contempt. On the other hand, anomalous conditions provide spaces for the plurality of contemporary society – the many subcultures that populate contemporary cities, people of varying ethnic, religious, sexual, economic, artistic, and political orientations – to exist within. The atypical can embrace the marginal or disenfranchised.

Differences endure or arise on the margins of the homogenized realm, either in the form of resistances or in the form of externalities (lateral, heterotopical, heterological). What is different is, to begin with, what is *excluded*: the edges of the city, shanty towns, the spaces of forbidden games, of guerrilla war, of war. Sooner or later, however, the existing centre and the forces of homogenization must seek to absorb all such differences, and they will succeed if these retain a defensive posture and no counterattack is mounted from their side. In the latter event, centrality and normality will be tested as to the limits of their power to integrate, to recuperate, or to destroy whatever has transgressed.¹⁰

The role of the anomalous structure, the construct that attempts to describe difference is, as Henri Lefebvre points out, a difficult and dangerous one. While the deviant has an operational logic and role, it can also be the target of prejudice, misunderstanding, or ideological opposition.

One role for artists and designers in our society is that of the avant-garde experimenter; another is the *provocateur*. To reinforce the status quo has not been the task of leading artists or architects in Western society during the last century. There is also a role for the architect to challenge norms, to strive for a better situation, not to accept ready-made solutions. This is not a wilful task, it is not searching for difference just for the sake of it. There is a danger in creating structures that are merely freakish, the targets of misunderstanding. This is not a case for the purposefully outlandish, nor is it a case for the work of artists and designers to always strive for the new. However, it is an argument for work that is provocative. Not every construction should strive to be anomalous, and yet structures that depart from the typical order provide the order with its definition. The space of difference allows a structure to be read or interpreted, to contain meaning; the forces that influence any project are responded to by the designer in any number of ways. Responding to a context to create meaningful spaces is a difficult task in the rapidly evolving environments that define the contemporary city. Setting up propositions

that develop strategies based on a close reading of the situation, or searching for difference, can lead to ruptures in the fabric of the city.

In a homogeneous architectural condition, such as is found in many suburban developments, difference can be found among the inhabitants and in the vestiges of local landscape that remain. Most of which is atypical is hidden from view. The opportunities for abnormal structures are rare, and would likely be met with a hostile reaction by community groups protecting what they perceive to be the value in their neighbourhoods: stylistic and economic consistency. The addition of singular anomalous structures into such environments can also go unnoticed, absorbed by the banality of the surroundings. On the other hand, an atypical construct could initiate a debate about the nature of persistent norms. One critical and anomalous condition found in all urban environments consists of the spatial figures executed in a complex and fleeting way by the actions of the inhabitants. These actions, which are endless and complex, leave subtle traces that can challenge the presumptions of suburban development; they are the trajectories of the inhabitants.

The anomalous structure is a form of pollution, the trace of a toxic element, an infecting agent, or a virus. Unusual solutions to a problem are what provocative designers like Le Corbusier or Frank Gehry strive for: not difference for the sake of difference, but difference in

order to expose or reveal some idea, condition, or experience. Projects that incorporate unusual or unexpected functions or arrangements can produce new typologies that respond to new situations. Juxtaposition does not always result in conflict; eventually an intermediate zone emerges. The buffer zone, employed in a widespread manner in contemporary cities, is the mandated space of difference. Meaning arises from a “system of differences.”¹¹ Cities need unusual and atypical conditions. This adds to the complexity of the urban environment. Difference provides meaning, or the means for interpreting structures, creating the space of difference. Anomalous buildings and spaces provide the city with unique landmarks, large and small, and make the city memorable. These structures provide anchoring points in the city. The idea that urban structures should conform to some commonly held notion of tradition is a conservative attitude toward urban development that denies the forces shaping contemporary cities. The “neo-traditionalist” approach argues for typological consistency by employing historically developed models. Cities are complicated, inclusive and messy; they must support a panoply of approaches, ideas, and opportunities. The order of cities must be complex enough to embrace diversity, or what some people might understand as deviance. The inhabitants of cities are increasingly diverse; therefore, the heterogeneity of urban structures becomes a necessity.



Montreal, 1986, Graham Livesey

