

## PASSAGES: EXPLORATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

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## 7 LINES: the CARTOGRAPHIC IDEAL

Lines criss-cross the contemporary city at all levels. They range from those delineated physically, legally, and mentally to the infinite lines of movement that pass through, above, and below the city. As a stroke or mark, and as a basic geometrical element, a line possesses length without breadth. Lines are everywhere: lines of flight, assembly lines, lines of division, power lines, lines of demarcation, transportation lines, lines of text, service lines, property lines, lines of communication, sight lines, and lines of force. Lines can delimit, guide, outline, measure, mark, and imply a course of action (e.g., “line of attack”); lines can unite, but they can also separate, divide, and confine. Lines define the landscape of the city; they produce networks or patterns of overlapping linear systems. Lines also provide the language of operation for various related disciplines: geometry, surveying, navigation, cartography, urban design, and architecture.<sup>1</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari make the distinction between “striated” and “smooth” space in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*:

... the striated is that which intertwines fixed and variable elements, produces an order and succession

of distinct forms, and organizes horizontal melodic lines and vertical harmonic planes. The smooth is the continuous variation, continuous development of form; it is the fusion of harmony and melody in favor of the properly rhythmic values, the pure act of the drawing of a diagonal across the vertical and horizontal.<sup>2</sup>

These categories provide useful background for discussing the linear dimensions of the contemporary city as both structure and engagement. Striated space refers to the highly ordered structures of sedentary or urban cultures, whereas smooth space is defined by the open spaces of nomadic cultures. The definition and inhabitation of these two kinds of space is fundamentally different; however, as Deleuze and Guattari note, there are situations when these conditions reverse (or overlap) themselves.<sup>3</sup>

The rapid and continuing development of sprawl since the Second World War and the general suburbanization of the city has meant that land that existed as smooth space was striated, first by agricultural activity and then by urbanization. The contemporary city exists in relative flux. This is no more evident than on the periphery, what has been called the *terrain vague*. Here there are no real limits, but an ever-shifting space that creates a kind of frontier, populated by a nesting, but highly mobile, group. And yet there are an abundance of lines within

the urban structure of sprawl: subtle, idiosyncratic, shifting, and possibly solipsistic. Linear structures guide the lives of those who live in contemporary urban environments, together with nodal and surface structures.

Lines are used by planners, engineers, and surveyors to set out and manage the city. Lines are used to determine the territoriality of the city, the difference between toxic and non-toxic environments, changing functions (zoning), divisions between classes and races, and how security is managed. The surveyor sets out the limits of the city, of property, of cut and fill, and of buildings. Engineers determine the alignments of systems: lines of movement, lines of supply, lines of force, lines of removal, and power lines. Architects, engineers, and construction companies build structures within the planned, surveyed, and engineered order of the city.

I would like to explore the following types of lines as they apply to the contemporary city: those we cross (networks) or cannot cross (edges), and those we follow (routes) or follow us (trajectories). We cross lines all the time, consciously and unconsciously. Lines that cannot or should not be crossed were more explicit in traditional cities, where the limits of the city were known. In the contemporary city, linear systems shape movement across the city; this tends toward highly controlled movement. Are there opportunities for the meandering, drifting, or diagonal line?



While the linear dimensions of the contemporary city are numerous, do any of these provide the existential definition that linear structures provided in traditional cities? Despite the density and complexity of lines in the city, the crossing of most lines goes unnoticed, intersections and thresholds are usually indiscernible, and movement is largely predetermined, customary, and automatic. We follow paths, and communication flows through regulated and modulated channels. Lines link points in space in the striated order of the city; they create the departure and destination points. In nomadic cultures a point in space is secondary, the journey is primary. The endless movement through suburbia, with its paradoxical emphasis on the private realm, diminishes the role of architecture in shaping the public realm, placing emphasis on the journey through space and landscape.<sup>4</sup> Can highly striated cultures that are shifting toward the smooth adapt the smooth space strategies of nomads?

At the point where two lines cross there is an intersection or threshold, a moment or event in time and space. It is the point at which a line of movement crosses a physical line in the city, a border, frontier, or edge. It is passing through an opening. An intersection might be the random crossing of two people (in the street and by telephone), a car accident, the overhead flight of an aircraft, the crossing of two systems or the junction of two

streets. An intersection is the transition between modes of technology, the station that defines the transition between pedestrian travel and railway travel. If significant, these intersections or events in space register in some other order; they may weave themselves into a narrative structure. This is only determined if the event contributes to the structure of a plot. Ultimately, the intersection, as a point in space, participates in a larger order of lines, the network. A network is created by a multitude of lines and their crossing points.

In the network of the city there are an infinite number of crossings; it is a highly striated condition. By fluidly changing modes of movement and communication, the linear web can create a landscape that approximates a smooth space. Those moments where an intersection is registered, or in fact prevented, become thresholds or points of resistance. They become events in the ever-unfolding life of the city.

The encounter with the edge, boundary, or frontier defined the spatial and existential limits of the premodern city. The importance of boundaries in traditional cities was particularly poignant in the boundary rituals of classical cultures. The boundary of the city, most clearly delineated by the fortification walls, provided a defensive system, but also a limit to understandable space. The limits of the city and the world were known, the difference between inside and outside, between sacred and profane, and between citizen and foreigner. This clarity

was necessary for historic urban cultures. The fixed dimensions of the traditional city are largely gone; other kinds of order have come into play.

In the contemporary city this kind of definition is rare, and usually takes the form of chain-link fencing that has been erected to keep out trespassers. There is no outer edge to the city, as this is a constantly moving condition, and while there may be major divisions within the city between districts and functions, or defined by geographical features (hills, escarpments, rivers, and ravines), these rarely act as profound ordering devices. Lines create division, borders, boundaries, and frontiers. A line creates an edge between two territories. In the contemporary city these are the internal boundaries that separate the rich from the poor. They are the arterial systems that create a closed urban structure defined by inward-looking residential enclaves. As Mike Davis notes, it is the “militarization”<sup>5</sup> of urban space into heavily policed suburban enclaves and gated communities that provides the strongest examples of urban definition.

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The second set of lines involves those lines we follow or those that leave a trail in our wake. If we are following a route we look ahead for the usual indicators that guide our motion through the city or territory; we follow a line or path. However, when we move in cities, we also

leave linear ghosts or traces of our motion. If it is a foray into an unknown territory these lines can be described as trajectories: a target has been determined but the precise line of flight may not be known. According to Kevin Lynch, urban paths provide the predominant orienting system in a city.<sup>6</sup> In suburbia it tends to be the freeway and arterial road systems that provide the governing reference systems. Options for selecting different paths to a destination have been radically reduced by the closed street systems that have replaced the open gridiron structure.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, much movement through a city is predetermined. Routes tend to be homogeneous in their definition, defined more by signage systems than by unique features. As Lynch notes, a route or path should be defined by its distinctiveness, continuity, functionality, directionality, and relationship to topography/landscape.<sup>8</sup> A route is a prescribed movement controlled by the highly striated nature of the city. This can shift to the meandering line of the nomad.

A number of essays on literature by Michel Butor provide insight into the nature of lines, what he usefully calls "trajectories." These link together narrative, the structure of urban space, movement, and writing. According to Butor a city is a sum of trajectories.<sup>9</sup> A trajectory is the passage of something through space and time. It often has a military application such as the "curve described by a projectile in its flight."<sup>10</sup> Butor's use

of trajectories is directly linked to notions of narrative, as a sequence of events occurring in space and time.

A trajectory begins somewhere and moves toward some destination; when a line is drawn, it begins and moves toward an ending. A trajectory is a shot in the dark, a journey into an unknown territory, the action of the *flâneur*; it is a heuristic action, a probe or a voyage of discovery. It is the path of life from birth to death. It is also the action of a nomad through a smooth space. Smooth space depends on a radically different form of engagement, where the line of movement defines points or locations in space, rather than the more conventional line between two points.<sup>11</sup> Smooth space requires the actions of a nomad or explorer; orientation constantly changes, is constantly re-evaluated, as one moves through a territory. Nomadic cultures understand and define space differently: smooth space has not been measured, mapped, or subdivided. Reference is not determined by the ordering of the land or the construction of cities. Instead,

... the haptic, smooth space of close vision is that its orientations, landmarks, and linkages are in continuous variation; it operates step by step... Orientations are not constant but change according to temporary vegetation, occupations and precipitation.<sup>12</sup>

Michel de Certeau argues that inhabitants of a city are “poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality....”<sup>13</sup> Their “wandering lines” are signifying practices, “their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences.”<sup>14</sup> The trajectories of movement can subvert the established rules, make the dominant order function in other ways. Intertwined paths of movement give shape to spaces,<sup>15</sup> the “art of composing a path.”<sup>16</sup> Urban practices can invent spaces and fictions, edges and routes: these are the strategies of urban living.

The seeming incoherence of the contemporary city is brought into order by the wandering lines of its inhabitants. As de Certeau says, these practices follow popular conventions, but also manage to diverge into new patterns or statements. This language of movement, or choreography, brings harmony to seemingly dissonant structures. These trajectories are essentially figural in that they are narrative and make ephemeral figures in the space of the city and on its surfaces. They can be habitual, aimless, wilful, or directed. They are essential to any inhabitation of an environment. These wanderings are largely unshaped by urban form, but they give the contemporary city its legitimacy.

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The homogeneity of sprawl has meant that a highly structured or striated environment has become like the smooth space of nomadic cultures. Therefore, we discover that nomadic strategies of movement can give order to the indeterminate structure of sprawl. This is consistent with the idea that a general or universal space, the space of modernity, dominates the contemporary city. In smooth space the line of the journey is a "vector, a direction and not a dimension or metric determination."<sup>17</sup> Space is created by local operations and filled with events.<sup>18</sup>

The lines of movement, or lines of force, through a territory continually define or redefine that territory.<sup>19</sup> Every line that constitutes a part of a city, whether engaged or not, determines, even fleetingly, a territory. For example, the relentless movement of vehicles across and through the city, is a kind of scribbling action, incessant and trivial, a back and forth that leaves no discernible condition. It may only be the territory of that line, the link between A and B. However, more likely it is part of some circumscription.

This networking together of a city or territory through both the construction of the landscape and the actions of inhabitants gives any city its vitality. The contemporary city's emphasis on space and shifting definitions means that these actions are necessarily heuristic (a searching) and hermeneutic (interpretative). Every site in a city is connected to every other site. An infinitely

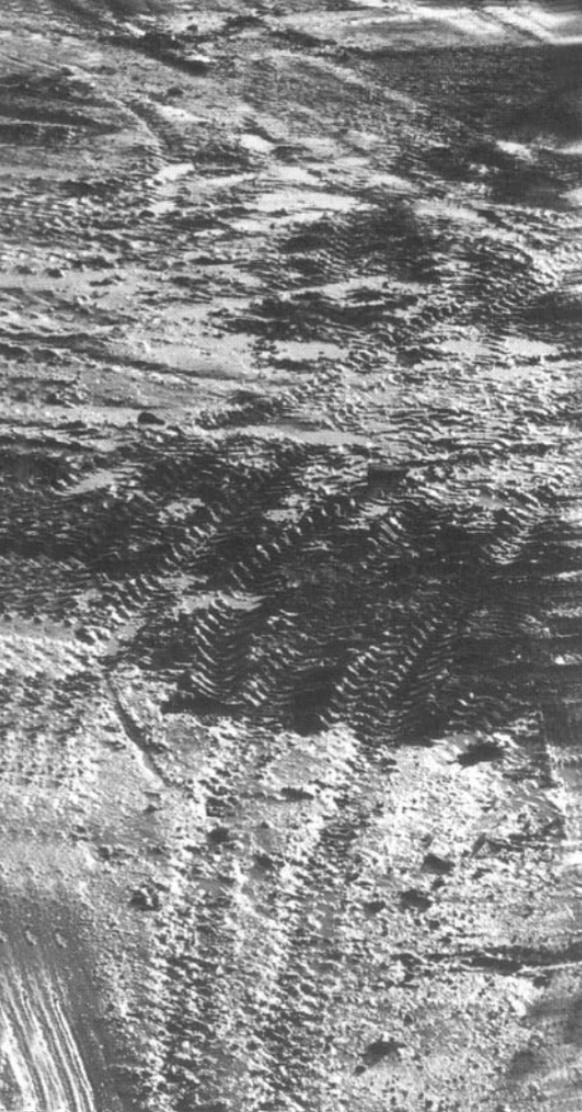
complex web establishes the potential in an urban structure. Many lines will never be travelled or activated; they are standing potential. Within the striated order of the city is always present the smooth space of nomads; there is a passage from striated to smooth, and from smooth to striated.

The city can be understood as an infinite complexity of lines, made up of networks and edges, routes and trajectories. According to Deleuze:

One might say in a certain sense that what is primary in a society are the lines, the movements of flight. For, far from being a flight from the societal, far from being utopian or even ideological, these constitute the social field, trace out its gradation and its boundaries, the whole of its becoming.<sup>20</sup>

These lines control and pattern space. Ultimately lines determine the degree to which a city is structurally open or closed, is easy or difficult to transgress. The navigational dimensions of urban lines provide the intrepid citizen with a multitude of strategies and narrative linkages. A “line of drift” intersects a “customary line”; these lines compose a map, a cartography of actions.<sup>21</sup> It is the diagonal movement across the landscape that challenges the striated order of the contemporary city.





*Montreal, 1987, Graham Livesey*

