

Against Nature: The Self-Imprisonment of Contemporary Society

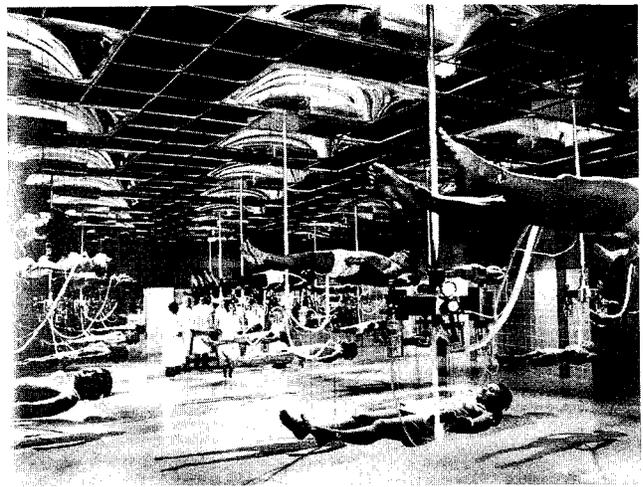
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While the table was being laid, Des Esseintes inspected his neighbors.... He saw a crowd of Islanders with china-blue eyes, crimson complexions, and earnest or arrogant expressions, skimming through foreign newspapers.... After awhile, their tongues loosened; and as most of them looked up in the air as they spoke, Des Esseintes concluded that these Englishmen were talking about the weather.

"Get up, man, and go," he kept telling himself, but these orders were no sooner given than countermanded. After all, what was the good of moving when a fellow could travel so magnificently sitting in a chair? Wasn't he already in London, whose smells, weather, citizens, food, and even cutlery were all about him? What could he expect to find there, safe fresh disappointments?

When you come to think of it, I've seen and felt all that I wanted to see and feel. I've been steeped in England... and it would be madness to risk spoiling such an unforgettable experience by a clumsy change of locality.... And to have believed like any ninny that it was necessary, interesting, and useful to travel.... (Huysmans, 142)

The hero of J.K. Huysmans' 1884 novel, *Against Nature*, Duc Jean Floressas Des Esseintes, sits alone in an English-style pub on the Rue De Rivoli in late nineteenth century Paris, virtually traveling hundreds of miles to completely extract the essence of all that he could want England to be. He finally returns home "feeling all the physical weariness and moral fatigue of a... long and perilous journey." (Huysmans, 145) Des Esseintes prefigures a trend that continues into the end of the twentieth century by expressing the undercurrent of fear and discomfort existing beneath the physical and social consequences of an increasingly modern world. With only the primitive, non-electronic, stimulation of his five senses he conjures a metonymic world in which the slightest image or experience can be expanded through simulation, allusion, and hallucination to manufacture, and ultimately improve upon, any invention of Nature.



Before television, automobiles, information flows, and Cyberspace, Huysmans, in the guise of Des Esseintes, foreshadows the contemporary demise of physical reality, such that, "It seemed to him an undeniable fact that anyone who dreams of the ideal prefers illusion to reality..." (Huysmans, 29) The increasing industrialization and subsequent heterogeneity of the modern city, the lack of taste and manners, and the affront of undesirable physiognomies caused Huysmans such pain that he pictured to himself a man

...more cultured, more refined...who has discovered in artificiality a specific for the disgust inspired by the worries of life and the American manners of his time...winging his way to the land of dreams, seeking refuge in extravagant illusions, living alone and apart, far from the present-day world.

This desire for solitude, refuge, unspoiled surroundings, and above all, safety, bears an extraordinary resemblance to our contemporary societies of self-imprisonment. In the quest to avoid physical exposure to the perceived dangers of the city, distinctions between image and reality, freedom and incarceration, have become blurred. Panoptic surveillance has become desired in public spaces for the effectual normal-

ization witnessed in the penitentiary, the school, and the clinic. The imposition on the deviant inverts to a mark of distinction when applied to the public realm, thus constricting the boundary of acceptable physical experiences to the controlled spaces of simulated freedoms.

The video arcade, the multiplex theatre, the mall (in all its various forms), the amusement park, and the cultural institution mark the contemporary mental map of acceptable physical experience in normative, middle-class society. Travel, even within a city, becomes a process of previsualization in which the illusion of discovery takes place within a matrix of known places and experience. All the movies shown in the local cineplex fall within the boundaries of a "G to R" rating system. Only the deviant, in the guise of the artiste or the pervert, expands the limits of this system in search of something distinctly "other". Firmly rooted within the normative matrix or social propriety, the bourgeois mind fears that which exists beyond.

In the urban realm the effects of an increasingly limited definition of social propriety and normal behavior have significantly altered our understanding of place, public, and city. A brief look at the history of the city of Santa Monica, California, and its relationship to the development of space in and around contemporary Los Angeles provides a specific example for the investigation of past, present, and future cities.

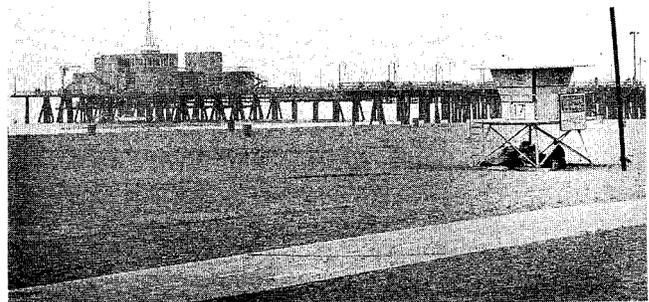
In 1875 the Los Angeles and Independence Railroad completed a 1,740 foot long wharf stretching into the ocean at the foot of the Santa Monica Canyon, thereby establishing the site of Southern California's most enduring icon. Where the East Coast has the verticality of the Statue of Liberty announcing arrival and marking the place of entry into the promised land of unlimited expanse, the outstretched horizontality of the Santa Monica Pier both marks and subverts the limit of that expanse--attempting somehow to extend the promise of the American Dream beyond its physical limits. Celebrating the fulfillment of America's western movement while simultaneously provoking an ironic claustrophobia based on a recognition of the country's physical limits, the Pier exemplifies the inherent complexity which defines the nature of reality in contemporary Los Angeles.

150 years after the completion of the railroad wharf, the Mayor of the City of Santa Monica dedicated its most recent renovation by saying, "In Santa Monica, we like to say that the Pier is the soul of the City, and the further the Pier stretches to the sea, the more soul we have." (Stanton, 174) By 1907, the popularity of the area and the need to dispose of the city's sewage became the primary impetus for the construction of the first municipal pier on the site of the old wharf. (Stanton, 20) Originally then, the distance the pier stretched into the sea symbolized the city's bowels, rather than its soul, as it was necessary for health reasons to build a pier long enough to carry the sewage away from the body of the city.

By 1916, a parallel pleasure pier and a 20-foot wide

esplanade, reaching south to Venice, had been constructed. As far as the eye could see the beach was black with people; the esplanade a mass of surging humanity. So popular was the area that all forms of accommodation were generally occupied. The city, recognizing that people had no place to stay, permitted them to sleep on the beach under police protection.

The bizarre relationship between the Pier as the embodied image of Southern California's sun, sand, and surf lifestyle and, equally, the Pier as the physical and metaphoric destination of the city's pollution remains consistent to this day.



Large stretches of beach are routinely closed after each rainfall due to the heavy runoff of human, animal, and chemical waste that flows unchecked into the Los Angeles sewer system and subsequently out of the sixty-four sewers which dump directly into the Santa Monica Bay. Warning signs alert potential swimmers and explain the dangers of eating the local seafood and the increasingly conservative City Council now calls on the police to provide protection from the people who sleep on the beach.

Three blocks inland, oriented perpendicular to the Pier, the Third Street Promenade juts out four blocks from the back door of Frank Gehry's Santa Monica Place Shopping Center to appropriate what was a traditional city street for strictly pedestrian use. From atop the parking garage of Geary's mall the formal proximity between the Pier and the Promenade is readily apparent, but at the ground level the vast spatial distinction between the two become obvious.

As a public place the Pier is all about its site; the experience of, and view from, an object integrally tied to the unique qualities of its surrounding landscape. Dissimilarly, Third Street, while open to the sunshine and mild climate, is largely blind to its proximity to the beach and the ocean. The pedestrian experiences an enclosed space that frames the internal activities of the street and surrounding storefronts. A postcard notes that, "Third Street Promenade features six large, wire frame topiary dinosaurs created by Claude and Francois LaLanne" along with a variety of stores, restaurants, movie theatres, and nightclubs.

For a significant number of city residents, government officials, and commercial developers, the current population of Pier goers do not fit predetermined demographics and thus limit the Pier's commercial potential. A look at recent postcards from the extraordinarily popular beaches around the Pier yield few of the idealized tawny, blond beauties America has come to expect from the countless images presented in movies and the endless television syndication of Three's Company, Baywatch, and Beverly Hills, 90210. The wacky antics of Jack Tripper and his two female roommates on the shores of Santa Monica bear little resemblance to the majority of today's beach goers, most of whom, like the overall majority in LA, are non-white minorities. The majority of immigrants, blacks, and latins using the area along with large numbers of homeless, the physically and mentally ill, and the elderly scare off the normative public and the business that caters to them.

The Third Street Promenade joins with Rodeo Drive, Westwood, and Melrose in the amusement/consumer reality of a "PG-13" Los Angeles. Like "PG-13" movies, these places are neither "G-rated" tame nor explicit and violent enough to merit an "X" rating. "PG-13" space marks the median of acceptability in society; not as isolated as an enclosed shopping center nor as openly accessible and potentially dangerous as the majority of the city. Fully imbedded in the city's urban fabric, these places establish a matrix of physical spaces which constitute a singular and distinct urban experience within the 100 square miles that

constitute greater Los Angeles.

Connected by the freeway system the places in this matrix provide all the significant civic needs and desires for a large segment of the city's population. Places to work, live, entertain, promenade, relax, and learn are dispersed within, yet somehow set apart from, the rest of Los Angeles. These places are not malls, theme parks, or private developments, though they share some similar characteristics. Ostensibly, anyone can occupy the spaces, as they all incorporate functioning city streets and public services.

They interweave and overlap with countless other aspects of the city and are, by definition, public. Their distinctiveness lies in their individual and subsequent collective ability to reconfigure the existing, physical aspects of their site to correspond to a particular expectation, thereby normalizing the potentially overwhelming danger presented by an unfiltered city. In "PG-13" space it is possible to be offended, assaulted, or scared, but generally the reality of the space conforms to the limits of a preconceived notion of safety. The infrequent encounter with vulgar reality occurs secondary to, and is tempered by, the primarily normal character of the space. The lone panhandler in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art may inspire a momentary pang of guilt, but the familiarity of the surroundings reduces the fear invoked by a similar encounter in Venice or Inglewood. The relative safety of these types of places is evidenced by a comparison of postcards from Third St. and the Pier. The ground level view of the Promenade suggests that it is appropriate to visit the place and experience the site spatially. In contrast, postcards only offer a **panoptic** view of the City of Santa Monica and the Santa Monica Pier. The city and the Pier are objects to be seen and consumed from a safe distance.

By maintaining the formal structure of the city, the "PG-13" spaces provide an urban experience distinct from the enclosed and essentially homogeneous quality of malls, yet withdrawn from the perceived violence and pathology of the unaltered city. Within the matrix, it is still necessary and worthwhile to travel because the change of locality seldom alters the previsualized experience.

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"Like it's so L.A.! Not Really"

What is the essence of the city? Architects aim to distill and package it into four blocks of shops and offices. The homeless will not be there, but irreverence and some ugliness is quite welcome.

The people at MCA Development Company have done their market research and discovered that for many people in Los Angeles reality has become too much of a hassle. Crime, pollution, the homeless, traffic, and unruly crowds are "invading even the most charming places in the city." "Take Venice Beach," says MCA President Lawrence Spungin, "There is a homeless person on every corner with a 'work for food' sign. It just isn't fun anymore." For these men, and the movie and

entertainment company they represent, the reality of the city, even the "PG-13" city, fails to provide proper places for recreation, entertainment, and gathering. For them, existing public spaces have become symptomatic of Los Angeles' failure to live up to the promise of its utopian image.

The middle/upper-class public for whom the urban entertainment matrix was established has developed an appetite for pedestrian-oriented, fresh air consumption, but the slight spice of miasmatic heterotopia makes them nervous. In this state of distress, the traditional gathering spaces around the Santa Monica Pier dissolve into a surreal memory infrequently recalled to the present via television and the news media: "For the second straight year the traditional 4th of July fireworks display at the Santa Monica Pier has been canceled due to renewed concern over gang activity and the possibility of violence." The proximity of Third Street to the Pier, of Bunker Hill to Skid Row, and of Melrose Avenue to its surrounding side streets has become unacceptable due to the inability of the matrix to maintain its distinction from the contaminants of the city.

For a site high on a hilltop overlooking the Hollywood Freeway, MCA (the parent company of the Universal Studios tourist attraction) has hired architect/master planner Jon Jerde to create a new type of public, urban place. "City Walk" will be the spine of the larger, 400-acre "Entertainment City" they plan to assemble from their mix of historic film studios, sound stages, backlots, Disney rivaling Universal Studio Tour (with its 8 million yearly visitors, life-size King Kong, and life-like earthquakes), popular amphitheater, and 18-screen cineplex. "After all," as Architectural Review Magazine says, "they already have all the basic components of a city," now all they need is a central gathering space to allow the public to orient themselves.

The vision of urbanity embodied by City Walk promises the "real" feel of a Los Angeles street without the guilt of poverty, the mess of traffic, or the worry about crime. As planned, it will have the gritty billboards of the Sunset Strip, the fanciful facades of Melrose, and its own faux Venice Beach, complete with sand, all supported by an infrastructure of retail and commercial space, plenty of parking, easy access from the freeway, and a Sheriff's Department substation. "This is no mall," says President Spungin, but rather, "idealized reality."

The uniqueness of the project, compared with other idealized spaces--Mainstreet U.S.A. at Disneyland or the virtual Hollywood Boulevard at Universal Studios in Florida--lies in the realization that City Walk does not replicate the mythical or distant, but actually mimics the very city in which it is located and, further, that a respected professional journal and a leading newspaper, after reviewing the physical and philosophical tenets of the project, have described it as a viable attempt to create "a socially responsible urbanism."

The preceding examples of the Santa Monica Pier, the Third Street Promenade, and City Walk serve to outline and exemplify a short history of urban design strategies as they have developed in Los Angeles over the past 100 years, in an

effort to speculate on the future of urban experience in the city.

The physical and societal relationships between these three examples trace a diagram of urban planning tendencies based on successively increasing degrees of denial and escapism. As Mike Davis notes in his book *City of Quartz*, "We live in 'fortress cities' brutally divided between 'fortified cells' of affluent society and 'places of terror' where police battle the criminalized poor," and, ". . . security has less to do with personal safety than with the degree of personal isolation from 'unsavory' groups and individuals, and even crowds in general." (Davis, 224) Now we have Des Esseintes' desire for isolation and hermitage translated into urban design.

The heterotopic character and desirability of truly public places like the Santa Monica Pier have become increasingly tarnished in the last two decades by an "obsession with physical security," in which "the architectural policing of social boundaries has become the zeitgeist of urban restructuring." (Davis, 223)

Much of contemporary urban design and place making has focused on the redevelopment and renewal of existing urban fabric in an effort to replace the city with isolated simulations of itself. Cultivated points of constrained freedoms mimic a physical urbanity no longer available due to the perceived degeneration of the traditional city. In this way the space of the city begins to implode. The specifics of the existing city, the physical, mental, and political oddities of place, invert from their prior status as qualities to become stubborn and potentially dangerous resistors which must be subdued and/or eradicated in the attempt to create a new, safe, and universally acceptable image of urbanism. As the majority of existing spaces are written off as unacceptable, the normative mental map of the city shrinks and a matrix of strategic fragments, produced by the repression of difference, replaces the previous continuum of urbanity. Commenting on the contemporary state of urban and utopian discourse Michel de Certeau notes that,

Administration is combined with a process of elimination in this place organized by "speculative" and classificatory operations... there is a rejection of everything that is not capable of being dealt with in this way and so constitutes the "waste products" of a functionalist society (abnormality, deviance, illness, death, and the like.).

In today's functionalist administration of normality, that which is characterized by qualities outside the specified limits of middle-class propriety constitute waste. In places like Los Angeles, where the previously abnormal--that is to say minorities, elderly, poor, and homeless--now constitute the majority of the population, the city itself becomes waste and the traditional definition of public is lost.

Beyond the isolated renewal of the city into "fortified cells" the leading edge of contemporary urban planning has decided to cut its losses; abandoning all but the most tentative links to the physical realities of site in favor of completely

new, expertly packaged, police-controlled micro-societies of nostalgic simulacra. Simulation allows for the redefinition and reconstruction of a new civic reality through a combination of mimicry and the fascist elimination of difference.

Public gathering and urban experience are once again acceptable, desirable, and ultimately safe because physical reality has been reorganized along strict guidelines of normalcy. Urban planners and city designers adopt the Serbian logic of "ethnic cleansing" to ensure that "the homeless will not be there," while they distill the derelict urban corpse for potentially acceptable images in an attempt to maintain a reassuringly familiar connection to the traditional city.

The ultimate effect of, and implicit desire for, isolation exemplified by City Walk inverts the familiar spatial relationship between city and penitentiary. Once a marginalized fortification of incarceration and punishment dedicated to the isolation of society's deviant population, prison typology is now being incorporated to isolate and safeguard society from the deviant city. That space historically understood as the city is discarded while the civic functions of working, living, learning, and socializing now take place within defensible compounds. The deviant other, formerly contained within the relatively small space of the prison, now inhabits the spatial majority while "normal" society squeezes itself into four blocks of socially responsible urbanism.

The potential for continued spatial minimalization and physical isolation appears to be strong. The emergence and phenomenal popularity of telephone sex lines and computer dating foreshadows an electronic future. The novel *Vox* reached the New York Times best seller list in 1991 by transcribing a fictional(?), multi-hour example of the latest in "safe sex" --two-dollar-per-minute verbal intercourse over telephone lines. No cars, no bars, no contact.

Ultimately, Des Esseintes' dream, "to live alone and apart from the present day world," faces realization in the utopic expectations of "virtual reality". The proponents of Cyberspace promise a new society of computer-generated, electronic fabrications indistinguishable from known physical experience.

According to Michael Benedikt, Cyberspace is:

The realm of pure information . . . decontaminating the natural and urban landscapes, redeeming them, saving them from all inefficiencies, pollutions and corruptions.

For those capable of accessing the new technology, computer-generated simulations construct familiar yet completely new worlds of pseudo-physical and spatial interaction. Special gloves, goggles, and headphones, in addition to the potential development of body suits and neural implants, provide the cyber-citizen with a full spectrum of senses with which to have "real" experiences within the space of simulation. All sensations will be available in Cyberspace. You may walk, talk, eat, burp, and even make love, but to the extent that these activities depend on computers and computer programmers, cyber-experience may also be filtered, controlled, and altered to maintain predetermined boundaries of risk, excitement, and propriety.

Within the realm of "pure information" all forms of unsavory characteristics could thus be eliminated. Faced with the paradigm of an omnipotent experiential archive it is easy to imagine the development of cyber-addiction. Cyberspace, the ultimate high; a drug finally capable of fulfilling the alcoholic promise of continual escape without the impending downer of reality. Alone and apart, individuals in isolated and fortified cells may share a communal hallucination far from the dangers of the present-day world. Continually plugged-in to this parallel universe normative society may finally escape the contamination of the natural and urban landscape, but only to the extent that they remain imprisoned by their fear.

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