

Exposing The Private City

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the American city can no longer be evaluated in terms of the qualities of the historic city. The accepted tenets of urban design: the primacy of the collective realm, the definition of streets and open space, and the ordering of public space and institutions have lost their ability to act as the critical conceptual and structural armature of the city. Urbanism, as a public experience, has been challenged, if not surpassed by a pervasive sense of the "private," which offers another paradigm of vastly different social and physical characteristics, and confronts the traditional qualities of urban life. While the manifestations of this emerging private culture have generally been understood as one of the causes for the crisis, or decline of the modern city, I would suggest that they might also contain the stimulus for a more complex, inclusive urban experience and patterns of development.

PRIVATE SPACE AND THE AMERICAN CITY

It can be argued that the public realm, or spaces/functions determined through municipal control, has never had a critical role as a physical generator of the American city. The grid city, exemplified by New York and other cities throughout the U.S., was planned as little more than a subdivision of land into measured parcels that promoted the buying and selling, and ultimate development of private property, with little, if any land set aside for public uses. In Manhattan's original Governor's Plan of 1811, only a few small "English squares" are proposed; most of these are quickly given up when pressured by potential private redevelopment. The important public spaces that exist today were developed as unique expressions of European-inspired ideals: Central Park's moral imperatives are based on the Romantic sensibilities of the English landscape; and the great civic improvements of the early 1900's (Grand Central Station, the Public Library, Municipal Building, etc.) are a product of City Beautiful, a kind of Paris-envy inspired by Chicago's Colombian Exposition of 1893, and virtually all designed by architects trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. The few examples of modern public space (Rockefeller Center, Citicorp Plaza, Battery Park City's Wintergarden) are actually privately owned spaces generated by developers as marketing devices, and while enjoyed by the public (if one is well-behaved), are actually highly controlled, privately managed, and come already programmed.

The truly unique qualities of the American city are private, based on division and autonomy. Each building plot within the gridiron is an individually controlled act of design with few restrictions, allowing different programs, different facades, designed by different architects, at different times to rub against each other at very close quarters. This succession of autonomous orders is an expression of American individualism and free enterprise at its best, and results in



Fig. 1. Wintergarden, Battery Park City.

an incredibly rich and diverse mix of development within the broadest possible guidelines. The gridiron itself provides a cohesive skeleton that keeps the chaos in check (just barely), and sets up the clear dialectic of public order (simple, continuous, regular, invariant) vs. private order (complex, discontinuous, irregular, variant). But given the powerful dynamics of the capitalist enterprise, the private always seems to "win out," perhaps best exemplified by the explosion of high-rise speculative and corporate monuments of the first half of the century, and the unrestrained competition resulting in a succession of the highest buildings in the world (One Times Square, Park Row, Woolworth, Metropolitan Life, Chrysler and Empire State). Without a doubt, the greatest quality and most powerful expression of the American city (as an "economic machine") are surely not its individual public monuments and public "rooms," but the wild exuberance of its private skyline, almost mythically stated by the achievement of Manhattan.

The nature of the private city in more recent times has become even more dominant, and has taken on certain insidious qualities through a number of recent developments, which even further undermine the attributes of the city's public realm. First is the so-called "privatization" of public space—the phenomenon of large-scale interior spaces (atriums, plazas, passages, arcades, etc.) built throughout the city as a part of private development, typically speculative office projects built during the 1970's and 1980's. Such

spaces proliferated through municipal "design incentives," whereby private developers were allowed to build beyond given zoning limits in exchange for providing certain "public" amenities.¹ But such spaces were often wrongly located, unrelated to context, under populated, sterile, devoid of meaning, overly controlled, and generally, everything that a public space, if it is to be truly public, can not be. Also, great public spaces are generally produced by great public institutions, which at the end of the 20th century have either lost their central position in American culture (the weakening of the church, the distrust and corruption of central government and law) or have been subverted through changes in technology and communications (the elimination of central banking and exchange markets, and the decline of rail transportation).

The second phenomenon is the rapid development of information technologies occurring over the last three decades, and over the last several years in particular, which with pervasive computerization at all scales and the proliferation of the World Wide Web, have generated perhaps the most significant social and cultural changes since World War II. The reduced need for face-to-face contact and transactions undermines basic principles of real estate development; the interaction between functions and people can now take place electronically, in the privacy of one's own room or office. Proximity in terms of space, or physical location afforded through urban densities is no longer a primary ordering determinant. Another form of "virtual" space has been created on a world-wide basis through almost unlimited connections to sources of information, equally open and accessible. Thus, when over 100 million subscribers "hit" the Mars Pathfinder Web page in a 3 day period, a far higher form of "public" community has been achieved through the sharing of information than was ever before possible in the largest public open space or stadium, yet transmitted and received within the privacy of your own office, or home.

The third development which undermines traditional public space (and this is the really insidious one) is the influence of popular culture in the transformation of the city. One in fact can say that the more serious problem is not the fact that public space is no longer really public, i.e., that public space has become private (see "privatization" above), but that *private space is becoming public*. What is meant by this is that popular culture and commodities, owned by private, global corporate powers, has used the public realm of the city to advertise and expand the awareness/identity of their product. The public streets, buses, building facades, retail

entertainment centers, etc. have become a kind of "media machine," with in-your-face imagery/advertisements that transplant/magnify cultural icons from print and film media into our own, "real" space. Great public streets with formerly distinct identities have turned into popular entertainment. In Manhattan, for instance, 42nd street, formerly the street of movie palaces as a mythic center of American film and theater, is being made over as a kind of Disneyland theme park; 57th Street and 5th Avenue, once the center of New York high-fashion is turned into a series of corporate retail logos and theme restaurants, including Warner Bros. at 57th and 5th, (at perhaps what was the most important retail address in Manhattan), the Nike Store, Hard Rock Cafe, and many others. Soho, the unique cast-iron district which was transformed into an art center of world importance during the 1960's and 1970's, is now attracting national chain retail stores, and some streets have begun to resemble a common suburban mall. The "large-box" superstores, once only found outside the city, are now a common feature throughout New York, pushing out smaller, specialized stores essential to maintaining the special qualities of the city. Through the ubiquitous overlay of popular culture and global commercialism, significant places have lost their soul, identity, and connections to their own history.

This corruption, or commodification of public space into mass media-driven entertainment and sales is more than merely a change of imagery and business practice—it challenges the traditional meaning the public realm as a place that can synthesize and express the complexity of our urban culture as a diverse, democratic social, economic, and political structure based on difference, and the power of the individual. When the international corporate power elite exert the degree of presence that dominates and submerges the "institution" (as Kahn called it) of the street, and camouflages, or drowns out the expression of its actual culture and history—the public is simply no longer public. It becomes only some simulated "version" of the public, which while pervasive, seems to "speak" the loudest (although with a wink and a smile) and may certainly be partly what our [low] culture is about (Donald Duck?)—it is not necessarily representative for all of us, and assumes the power of fantasy over reality to define an improved vision of the world. But as Baudrillard says, simulation as a "deterrence machine" does not insure that everything else is real, but "conceals the fact that the real is no longer real."² Similarly, Dan Graham, in his discussion of the television medium, recognizes that television has the appearance of "eliminating all pretense, all distance, but in fact it makes the spectator all the more



Fig. 2. Building billboard, Houston Street, New York.



Fig. 3. Times Square, New York.



Fig. 4. Arthur Wood residence, Downing Street, Brooklyn.

aware of the conventionalization of television's image...that the "real" is just a media fabrication."³ The injection of media and fantasy into the public realm contaminates and falsifies its essential meaning; it no longer allows us to discern the real from the hyper-real, and undermines the power of architecture and the city to "truthfully" convey the critical complexity of urban culture.

Another interesting confusion of traditional spatial roles appears in the development of new public spaces. Recent spaces designed in Battery Park City, New York, Barcelona, and elsewhere diverge significantly from certain traditional characteristics of urban space, again reflecting social and cultural changes, and the central role of private experience and individual choice in contemporary life.⁴ If historic urban space is based on singular, geometrically derived volumes reflective of a collective public order—recent space is conceived as circumstantial fragments; the notion of order is achieved primarily through the individual sequencing of experience and activities, rather than formal composition. And if historic space establishes a collective, public setting which is both a product and generator of social agreement, and induces common behavior—recent urban space is also public, but is engaged on an individual, private basis, resulting in varied possibilities for behavior and personal cognition.

These characteristics of urban space reflecting the nature of private experience are precipitated by aesthetic shifts throughout the 20th century, the familiar sources including the development of Cubism, Futurism, and montage techniques in film-making. In these early experiments in the formation of modern space, the singular focal center and tightly bounded gestalt of traditional space is radically transformed towards a non-centralized, peripheral vision, shifting points of reference, and multiple events articulated within an interrupted, non-linear flow of time, all generating a form of "marginal" space, more ambiguously interactive with its surroundings. The individual, private cognition of modern space can be traced to more recent investigations during the 1960's and 1970's. Minimalism, Conceptualism, Performance Art and Earth Art all tended to break down traditional relationships between the art work and the observer by focusing not so much on the object, or activity itself, but on the perceived space between the work and the individual observer. Or as described by Roald Nasgaard, "the character of sculpture [or urban space] has been modified from concentration in a discrete thing to expansion across a behavioral space in which the symbiotic relationship of sculpture and viewer [or space and participant] becomes the



Fig. 5. South Street, Brooklyn Bridge. Al Smith Houses, New York.

real object of experience."⁵ In other cases, artists such as Vito Acconci programmed events in outdoor spaces which were dependent on the cognitive experience of the viewer for the work to come into existence. In his "Following Piece" of 1969, for instance, he chooses a person at random, follows him/her wherever he/she goes, and the piece ends not until the person enters some private place. In this case, it is the occupation of space—the psychological association between participants that defines a type of cognitive space without fixed boundaries or public directives. The interaction between participants and events is distinctly private—"the action is unpredictable, unrehearsed, and played out on an individual basis, within a private world of fears, desires, and unlimited possibilities, specifically fitted to the cultural sensibilities and freedoms of the 20th century."⁶

An interesting depiction of the private fears and desires of the individual brought on by the attempt to cope with the spaces and conditions of metropolitan life is seen in film, most notably, the development "film noir" throughout the 1940's and 1950's. If the public realm of the city promises a sense of control, predictability, safety, calmness and conformity—and more recently, the superficial joys and beauty of Disney's "Main Street," which are best appreciated in brilliant sunlight—film noir approaches the city as a place of marginal, atypical space, back streets of pulsating, neon light, menace, anxiety, where events happen by chance, in a darkness that suppresses the repetitive clichés of the seen object in favor of the unpredictability of future action; in short, a city of shadows. Films such as "The Third Man," and "City of Fear" examine the psychological state of the individual, sometimes a criminal, or at least person placed in unique circumstances undertaking a course of unpredictable actions in hidden spaces, or spaces which are not typical of the protected, screened view of the public city.⁷ Such actions and spaces, seemingly deprived of aesthetic preference or style (which of course is most distinct as a kind of style) suggests a sense of realism and authenticity approaching something which might approximate life itself—not some idealized version of public life, or Disney's (or Haussman's) "Everyman," but an individual's life as it might actually be lived, each one different and uncompromised by convention, as well as the necessities of art's "happy ending." Or as declared in "The Naked City," a TV noir of the 1950's: "There are 8 million stories in the naked city...and this is one of them."

The attempt to portray the authenticity of the city and the world of the individual in a private struggle to reconcile larger forces are

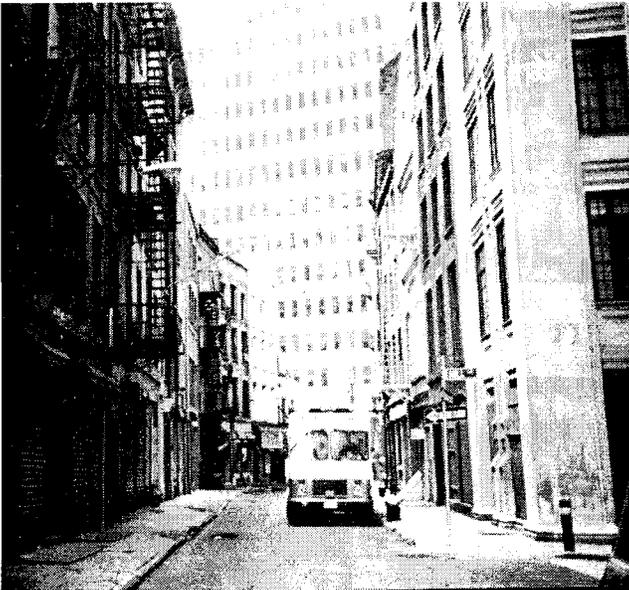


Fig. 6. Stone Place, Lower Manhattan.

found in many other investigations during the 1950's (largely the products of a post-war condition) which make this era one of the most fertile grounds for understanding the search for relationships between art and life, and now receiving renewed attention.⁸ Overlapping film noir in America is the Italian neo-realist films of Passolini, De Sica and others; in philosophy, the work of Sartre, and the articulation of Existentialist thought, as well as the work of Debord and members of the Situationist group; in literature and poetry, the work of Samuel Beckett, Hubert Selby, Henry Miller, Alan Ginsberg (and other members of the "Beats"); in theater, Jean Genet; in music, John Cage; in art, the early work of Claes Oldenburg, Alan Kaprow, and Abstract Expressionism. Taken together, this is a body of work both inspired and contaminated by urban life, and in turn depicting the forces of the city and the human psyche in its stripped condition, not always pleasant, hardly ever resolved, but always real, focused, and authentic.

It might be stated, if an exaggeration, that the public realm of the American city has lost its historic role, and has been weakened and corrupted to a disastrous degree, (and I would contend has never been fundamental to the ordering and capitalist underpinnings of the American city in the first place). This can either be lamented, decried, and fought at all costs, (the litany of many architectural and urban theorists, particularly, the "New Urbanists")—or, one may wish to explore the possibilities of a reconstituted private city, and reinforce its characteristic strengths and virtues, based on a realignment between form and culture through determined specificity and differentiation, and varying degrees of autonomy and division.⁹

The description of such a condition would produce something like the following: Rather than a public realm of commonality and agreement, I suggest a city which proclaims *difference*, exception from norms, the virtue of the idiosyncratic, based in individual aspirations and values. Articulated nationalities, cultural traditions, sexual preferences, religious practices, belief systems, business transactions, artistic pursuits, all possible without compromise or accommodation, and positioned for potential confrontation.

Rather than a public realm of continuity and flow, smooth transitions, i.e. the "open" city (characteristic of much of the urban design operations throughout the 20th century), I suggest a city of discontinuity, divided realms, fractured parts, abrupt discontinuities, and fragmentary experiences—an architecture of edges/boundaries defining distinct territories, which collectively can define fields of activity of unparalleled complexity, mix, and diversity.



Fig. 7. Vito Acconci, "Following Piece," New York, October 3-25, 1969.

Rather than a public realm of predictability and control, I suggest a private city of chance relationships, unpredictable experience, places of danger, chance encounters, hidden corners, joy, sudden surprises, close calls, changing conditions, and moving parts.

Rather than a public realm constantly open and accessible, I suggest a private city of selected degrees of exposure and closure, controlled views, possibilities of surveillance (the telescope on the observation deck of the Empire State Building), visual/aural contact, or separation, the glimpse of private acts, the framed cropping (theater?) of public activity.

Rather than a public realm of rationality, clarity, of known, familiar places based on generic norms, of sanitized space, comfortable, and light-filled—I suggest a private city of atypical events, irrational, uncomfortable, disturbances, of forgotten possessions left outside, protruding forms which don't have a name, emanating fluids and vapors without visible cause, streets and walls with residues of colored stains of unknown origin, a succession of distinct smells, sometimes putrid, sometimes sweet, and defined shadows. Not what is seen and felt in foreground streets and open squares, but closer to that experienced in uncontaminated, abandoned spaces, back alleys, dead-end streets, underground spaces, rail yards, on rooftops, and other marginal spaces of the city, uncorrupted by agendas based only in profit and sham.

Three possibilities for exploration come to mind (there are surely others):

1. If the "city of differences" is the point, it is the edge conditions, beyond being mere political limits, that define events and articulate private realms that becomes a critical locus for architecture; boundary conditions, points of penetration/closure, arrival/departure, selective overlap vs. containment, and generally, the problem of transitional space.

2. In the privatized city, each site takes on the role of city, but in miniature. Which is to say that rather than conceiving "buildings," one thinks of more complex typologies, ones which combine multiple orders, public and private functions, unique and generic spaces, and dynamic/static events—in other words, the complexities of the city itself compressed into more limited boundaries. This description again brings to mind the seminal work of Rowe/Koetter's *Collage City* and their discussion of "miniature utopias," or Michael Dennis' work on the French Hotel,¹⁰ but perhaps without the dogma of the recurring figuration and familiar historical precedents, and certainly with a qualifying understanding of the American context,



Fig. 8. Rooftops, Soho, New York

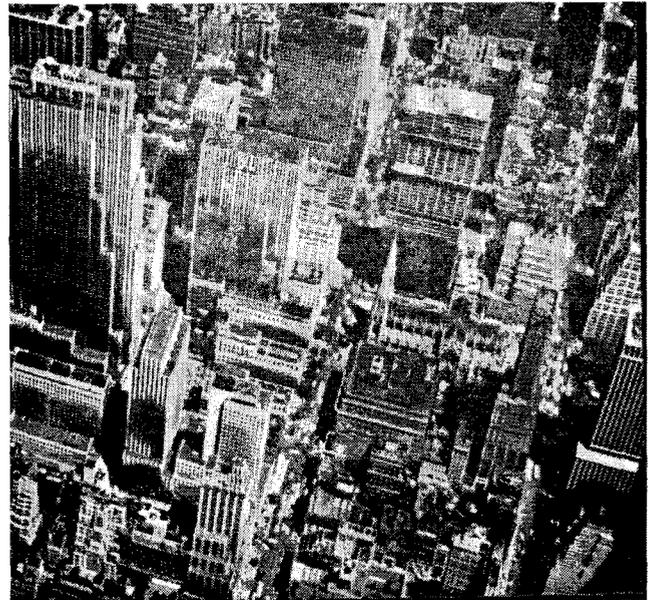


Fig. 9. Rockefeller Center, New York.

and differences in technology, typology, and culture.

3. If the private city takes on greater stakes—i.e., rather than mere economic ventures, or exercises in facadal/stylistic variations, it also strives to perform as a carrier of culture (Rockefeller Center suggests it *is* possible)—there must be an opportunity to form new, more complex hybrids in the city that allow significant differentiation, that specifically relates to different agendas, programs, social groups, politics—in other words, the diversity of the global city. The goal is to refute the simplistic polarities of public vs. private space, which at times develops conditions which are overactive, and at other times devoid of any activity whatsoever; areas which are solely given over to economic production, while others are overly charged with higher aspirations, not to mention the wild confusion of roles, or cultural “cross-dressing” which has occurred between the two. Why either/or? I imagine a city of multiple identities and possibilities, ebbs and flows of activity, changing, roles, often unpredictable—the formal and informal, dynamic and static—the city as a living organism, choreographed by its own inhabitants, impossible to control, breaking the rules as necessary. A city intertwined, mixed, unclear, unresolved, discontinuous, shifting—a scene of individual, fragmented orders—responding to the disparate mix, overlapping, messiness, chaos, and multiplicity of modern culture. (Such a city does not yet exist, although an example such as Eric Owen Moss’ “Sparcity” could serve as one possible illustration of this kind of complex, spatial hybridization of public and private space [leaving the specifics of architectural vocabulary aside], an urban assembly only possible to come into existence through an “architecturally free zone,” and alternative rules for urban development.)¹¹

None of the above in itself necessarily proposes radical departure from the existing city. The existing public realm, with its institutions, parks, plazas and streets are not to be abandoned (although as stated above, their traditional role has been challenged). And subdivision of property is common to all cities based in the capitalist enterprise. But given possibilities of formal autonomy, one can imagine a far greater differentiation of the parts, assuming the rules for development are not overly restrictive (they are not) and that one has incentives to define development as much more than merely the maximizing of income-producing space—clearly, alternate criteria about the making of the city, as well as new catalysts for change need to be brought into play here.

The goal is authenticity of place and experience, and a redefined correspondence between culture and urban form—the reemergence

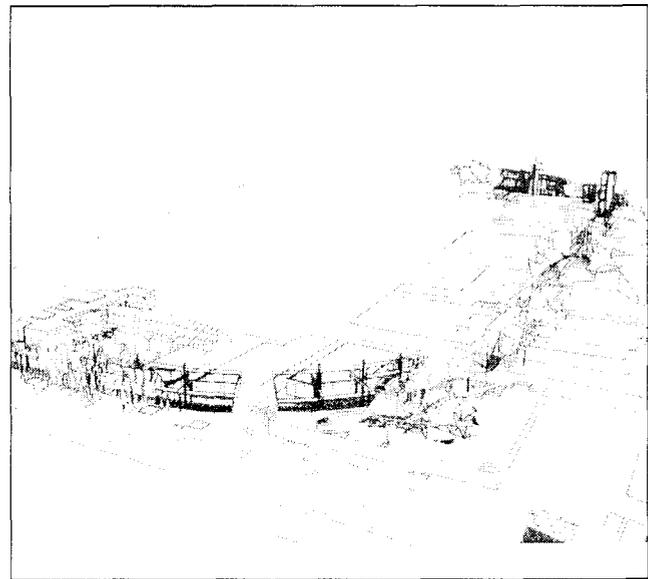


Fig. 10. Eric Owen Moss, Sparcity.

of primary human values and aspirations and the uncompromised expression of diverse groups and traditions—rather than the simulated city of fantasy, universality, assimilation and commodity. The difficulty here is whether one can achieve the above without being a victim of another form of fabrication, or “staging” of patterns/events which are doomed to a falsehood not entirely unlike what one is attempting to correct. And given the reduced role of our urban institutions, and the fact that the city has always been as much a center of (low) commerce as much as (high) culture, is any other scenario for the modern city beyond the theme park and shopping center possible? It is suggested that possibilities lie in new private realms, partly hidden in shadows, partly emerging from their surroundings, and definitely not for mass consumption.

NOTES

¹ Johnathan Barnett, *Urban Design as Public Policy* (New York: Architectural Record Books, 1974), pp. 29-67.

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- ² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext Books, 1983), p. 25.
- ³ Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).
- ⁴ This topic is more thoroughly discussed in: Richard Scherr, "Action Space," *Proceedings of the 84th ACSA Annual Meeting* (March, 1996).
- ⁵ Roald Nasgaard, *Structures for Behaviour* (Ontario: Art Gallery of Ontario, Ontario, 1978), p. 14.
- ⁶ Scherr, op. cit., p 371.
- ⁷ Edward Dimendberg, "City of Fear: Defensive Dispersal and the End of Film Noir," *Any Magazine* (No. 18, 1997).
- ⁸ *The Beat Generation and the New America* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1996).
- ⁹ This could also be seen as a very different take on Wright's "city of democracy," but without its anti-urban sentiments. See Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Living City* (New York: Horizon Press, 1958).
- ¹⁰ See Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1978), and Michael Dennis, *Court and Garden: From the French Hotel to the City of Modern Architecture*, (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1986).
- ¹¹ *Eric Owen Moss: Building and Projects* (New York: Rizzoli, 1996), pp. 88-99.