

The Clean Street Paradox.

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The street is a living thing. The street is a social being. In that regard, to be successful, it must show a balance between all its sociological parts: the regulated, the acceptable, the unrevealed and the unwanted. It must neither be fully known nor unknown, but a comfortable middle ground. Recent developments and interventions in city planning have seen the street turned into those extremes. The urban consciousness and unconsciousness are foolishly isolated and held in tension. The street then becomes an agent of repression, fostering but only half of our social needs, shamefully holding the rest behind its facade. Our very own psychology tells us that a forceful repression is unhealthy. We must understand that this condition applies to the street as well. Much to the unhappiness of its designers, the street has a mind of its own.

The street is a social being because it lives through the sum of its parts: individual minds. It is physically generated by the void left between adjacent structures, and psychologically formed by the constant flow of social human instincts and behaviours. Each mind is formed in part by its consciousness and unconsciousness. The collection of minds within the street, and thus the street itself, can then be said to have a collective consciousness and unconsciousness of its own. Is it not then normal that in such a conduit of social life we find everything that makes us human? It is not only normal, but vital. Civilization, as described by Freud, is the constant struggle between Eros and Death, or more precisely, between the pleasure and aggression principles found in every mind [Sigmund Freud; Civilization and its Discontents]. The complete repression of one of these two principles to the benefit of the other generates decline and chaos. As part of civilization, the street does not escape this condition. If a balance between both sides is not kept, we are left with a broken conduit.

The street psyche is comprised of both a consciousness and an unconsciousness, what we are aware of and that which is unknown to us. The street's conscious ego, its facade, is better understood using Jungian psychology. In Jung's theory of the phenomenology of the self, the persona represents our conscious ego. It is our conscious facade, our social front, a mask of the collective psyche. "Fundamentally the persona is nothing real: it is a compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be [C. G. Jung; The Portable Jung]." A possible seed of hypocrisy, this compromise is nevertheless needed in keeping our vital balance. "Far too much of our common humanity has to be sacrificed in the interests of an ideal image into which one tries to mould oneself [Jung]." There lies the warning or quite ironically the axiom that the persona is not the whole man! The facade is not the whole street! Behind the mask we find the unconscious, the unknown, the dark and negative shadow of our self feared for its constant threat to

disrupt our ego. What lies beneath the persona is more than likely negative, but it is also there that we find some of our most basic human instincts kept somewhat shamefully at bay. The link to Eros and Death is clear, and the dosage of repression crucial.

“It is one of the ironies of our age that now, when the street has become the hottest commodity in advertising culture, street culture itself is under siege. [...] Police crackdowns on graffiti, postering, panhandling, sidewalk art, squeegee kids, community gardening and food vendors are rapidly criminalizing everything that is truly street level in the life of a city [Naomi Klein; No Logo].”

The open repression of normally peaceful levels of street life, quoted by Naomi Klein, has evidently led to their resurfacing in the shape of “Reclaim the Streets”, a movement specializing in disruption and street hijacking. We cannot forcefully clean a street of what is deemed unacceptable by a minority of the urban community for we are in fact dehumanizing it. We cannot let a street sink into its shadow for we are only creating danger, decay and death. Too often recently have we tended towards those two extremes, complete consciousness and complete unconsciousness. By over cleansing in one case and letting go in the other, we are setting the stage for sudden if not violent reoccurrence of the repressed.

The purely conscious street is a regulated time bomb. Wide boulevards lined with rows of saluting trees and whitewashed iconic buildings are hosts to parades of picture savvy tourists and endless calculated circulation. On its sidewalks are no signs of poverty, panhandling, loitering or social delinquency. The hypocritical smiles are cracking the over done makeup of its faces and facades held uneasily by feeble cardboard props. The institutions and corporations have taken the street over from the people. The street is adopted by the city as an icon of the city itself. Jane Jacobs speaks eloquently of a city’s memory being formed by its streets. That memory is unfortunately the product of urban advertisement. The most notable streets of a city are kept vigilantly clean of social pollution in a public effort to sell its image to its population and the world. The shiny icons are numerous, Paris’ the Champs-Élysées, New York’s Wall Street, Vienna’s Ringstrasse. What would be the reaction of the city of San Francisco and its



1. Ringstrasse, Vienna.

millions of tourists if Lombard Street, the "crookedest" street in the world, was left to reflect an average, conventional "human" street? In the past five years there has been a concerted effort put on by the city of Toronto to clean its streets. Panhandling was criminalized and special community police forces were created to put a stop to illegal activities such as prostitution, squeegeeing and "living on the street". The results were satisfying. The streets were clean. The prostitutes moved their business elsewhere. The number of homeless death reached unprecedented heights. The street kids, starved and impoverished, were forced to join prostitution rings or more nobly, find death in the cold. The problems are not solved. They are temporarily silenced and inevitably resurface. We are not cleaning the street, we are dehumanizing it.

The other extreme, the purely unconscious street, is romantic. It is the unknown, the unwanted and the unrevealed. It is romantic in the sense of a pure manifestation of instincts and a departure from rational thought, an idealized, sentimental and fantastic view of reality. Its outcome, in the majority of cases, is represented in things deemed unacceptable by society, public exposure of emotions, prostitution, drug use, homelessness, poverty, solitude, lack of security, emptiness and the always dangerous rebellion. Ironically, these are the things being repressed by the urban consciousness. Their intensification being fuelled only by that same repression. There lies the vicious circle. Once the conscious street has been identified as the persona of the city, the unconscious street, being deprived of performing the role it should hold over the whole, will start acting negatively. It becomes itself an agent of repression. Although we rarely would want to design the romantic streets of the unconscious, we see that they arise naturally from over-focusing on the other extreme. The unconscious street is thus a side effect of institutionalization, urban advertisement campaigns and hypocrisy on the part of city dwellers, city officials, developers, planners and architects.



2. An example of lack of efficiency and security in Prag. Closed access to cars, meandering narrow way, solitude.

There exists another contemporary cause of this extreme, the by-pass of space. City space is now experienced in commuting points rather than in lines of experience. The typical North-American city is the perfect example. The mass circulation, proudly resting on the automotive industry, has strived to create a fully accessible city when in fact it

has created holes in the urban fabric. "Toronto the City that Works", a slogan teeming with irony and dark sarcasm, sells a city built for speed, accessibility and the good life. The trip from point A to Z used to involve the experience of everything in between. Now, completely private streets are created by people locking themselves up in metal cages and only experiencing A and Z. The faster the street, the more oblivious we are of its space. For the commuter, the city could exist in solely two radii. The streets are used one dimensionally and are left to slowly sink into unconsciousness. By reducing the street's activity to one of by-pass, we are killing a whole field of possible interactions. "Activity generates activity [Jacobs]." The opposite is also sadly true. As long as urban spread and commuting will continue to rule dynamics in the city, this recession will occur. The good life seems less and less human.



3. Los Angeles highways and neighbourhoods.

The street must become an individual or a complete, honest and indivisible picture of its very self including both the conscious and the unconscious. Individuation, as described by Jung, means becoming an "in-dividual", and, in so far as "individuality" embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self [Jung]. Investigation of the individualized street can primarily be done through scale and use. Its scale, in a very direct way, influences and shapes its use which in turn forms its social structure.

First, we must look at street scale not as static but as dynamic. We must establish a rhythm of spatial expansion and contraction. Our social liberation seems inversely proportional to the scale of the space we are occupying. Therefore, the manipulation of setbacks and building to building distances can directly influence social interactions. The more enclosed we are, the more privacy we enjoy and vice-versa. In the narrow, winding and odorous medieval streets we are closer to ourselves. We are deep in our own thoughts and far from the eyes of the crowd. Our senses are acute and every sound and smell generates warm, primordial emotions. The sudden burst of a plaza throws us back into the collective. We are once more, part of a whole. The shift in spatiality is crucial to the individualized street. "[Planners and architects] operate on the premise that city people seek the sight of emptiness, obvious order and quiet [Jane Jacobs; *The Death and Life of*

Great American Cities].” Although written about seventies urban planning, this is unfortunately still true today. Moreover in North America, the city seems afraid of density. Space is dilated to a breaking point of what constitutes a safe and comfortable setback. The urban fabric is spread so thinly over so vast an area that a majority of streets have lost all potential to tease our senses. By establishing rigidity, we are sacrificing a part of happiness for one of efficiency.



4. Karen Walk, Waterloo, Ontario.

Second, we have to allow for fluctuation of use and programmatic interpretation. The street’s programme cannot be pre-defined and set in stone! This may translate into building activities spilling onto the street and street activities spilling into the built fabric. What lies beyond the facade must be allowed to seep into the conscious realm and vice-versa. St-George Street in Toronto is designed on the basis of sharing. In one direction runs the right-of-way of transportation and sidewalks, in the other direction an extension of porches across the former creating a weave of different levels of circulation. An array of paving material spanning from one house to its facing peer crosses the normal street asphalt. Nothing major is changed in circulation patterns, but the street is different. The street has achieved a higher level of individuation. It has become integrated. The



5. St. George Street, Toronto, Ontario.

usually dominant flow of cars and public transportation is regarded as but one of the many circulation patterns of the right-of-way. The collective understanding of this exists simply in the unspoken barrier between public and private [Jacobs].

The celebration of mountain deity festivals in Japan lies similar principles. A variable street edge is used to affect public space. The procession of the deity comes down from the mountain and into the main street of the village. The doors of all buildings lining the street are opened for the duration of the celebration. The festivities from the street swell into the open doors and soon what used to be a line of circulation becomes a belly full. The procession passes. The day ends. The doors are closed and the street returns to its linear form. In a dense fabric, social space has been taken, remodelled and intensified by a dynamic swelling of the street's edge.

How do we design the individualized street? The problem is in design practice. The problem is that, unfortunately, design is a conscious exercise. The unconscious can more than likely never infiltrate a design because the designer makes himself aware of every detail. The threat of the unconscious to the ego is ever present. The defensive mind has a hard time recognizing this inspiration as its own. It represses it. The final product is consciously and totally the designer's. What does this mean in practical terms? We should certainly never advocate a design philosophy based on dreams and self-hypnosis. This would only lead to ultra-instinctive if not destructive design. The design of streets must simply start with a thorough understanding that our consciousness and unconsciousness are not mutually exclusive. The denial of one or the other eventually leads to its resurfacing, quite often in an undesirable and uncontrollable way. Once this is accepted, another problem faces us: time. In a world hurried by a self-inflicted pace, designers have over vulgarized some of civilization's most natural and complex processes of evolution. The design of large scale urban developments, naturally a long organic process, is now a question of a handful of weeks. The same problem plagues the street. How can we possibly create an individualized street, a social being showing the complexity of the self, the conscious and the unconscious, from one designer's mind? We cannot. For this there is no perfect solution, only a possibility for humility. The blatant hypocrisy of designing a ready-to-live world must be eradicated. We must achieve this leap of faith for our own human nature. We must understand that we cannot create the street's own consciousness and unconsciousness, but only plant its seed. Only then can the vital balance be satisfied. Only then can the street become a true social being.

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