



Las Vegas, July 2006 (Elvin K. Wyly)

Anxiety: GAP

Jacobsonian Urbanism and the Struggle for Public Space

Scott Pennington

December, 2004

Urban Studies 200 (Elvin Wyly, TA Elizabeth Lee)

The economically rational city in post-Fordist North America is no longer formed by the comfortable balance of production and consumption activities that fuelled its rapid growth during the early periods of industrialization. During the middle part of the twentieth century, the exodus of uncomfortable bodies and versatile capital to the great extra-urban expanse eviscerated much of the city's production capacity, rendering it a dying star that might potentially collapse under the gravitational pull of its own insatiable needs. Through the conditions created by advanced information and transportation technologies—most notably, that tired phrase *time-space compression*—the city, in its concentrated polyglot form, no longer needed to exist. But, for any number of reasons understood at the personal level, it still wanted to.

This guttural desire to sustain the city was best articulated by that unlikely matriarch of all-things urban, Jane Jacobs, in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, as the distinctly urban experience facilitated by its streets, sidewalks, squares, and, most importantly to the contemporary city, the shops. In Jacobs' view, locally controlled commercial space was the locus of vibrant, not-too-personal contact capable of cultivating a sense of security, inclusiveness, and place. It was an informal space where the local denizen could rely on the corner establishment to be as dependent on their business as the perpetually poor grocer Morris Bober of Malamud's *The Assistant* and, thus, be as congenial as Joe Cornacchia, the purveyor of the delicatessen on Jacobs' block, who, at her behest, would regularly pass keys along to a visiting friend.

In many commercial spaces of contemporary cities, these experiences, described by Jacobs as wonderfully authentic and engaged, are, at best, facile and, at worst, contrived or

purely economical. (The holographic GAP ‘greeter’ in the futuristic film *Minority Report* poses the extreme end of this depersonalizing commercial atmosphere.) It has been written, and I suspect that it is a widely held belief that the ‘good intentions’ of Jacobs have been perverted and used insidiously in abetting corporate incursions into various neighbourhoods hostile to their profit motives. (A disproportionate number of which can likely be found in New York City, the archetype of the *Great American Cities*). Pointing to the propagation of what he cites as the ‘tame’ and superficial festival marketplace in recent years, McMorrough states that regardless of why Jacobsonian principles were adopted (in this case of the market, for a mixed-use, vibrant, eminently walkable commercial space), they have been “convoluted” and “corrupted” (McMorrough 378). A similar sentiment is opined by Trevor Boddy who writes, “Jacobsonian urbanism has not failed but succeeded too well—or more accurately a diorama of its most superficial ideas has preempted the public domain” (126).

The questions that should be asked, thus, –and will be considered in this paper– are: what has occurred that has led to such disillusionment with the role of commercialism in creating and sustaining our primary site of public interaction? And is this corporate-driven capitalism really a counterfeit of an authentic, civic-minded type, as the above comments would seem to indicate?

Conflating the issue with corporatization is a common yet reductive understanding, granting too little agency to the individual citizen. Various essays in *The Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* emphasize that most ubiquitous of civic activities for its primary role in contemporary urbanism. The understanding here is that the insatiable human

desire to consume surplus, to shop, has been effectively harnessed by the capitalist machination at a large scale and in a self-perpetuating system such that the city can ensure its continuing relevance by facilitating new shopping opportunities. Therefore, shopping is no longer one component of the urban experience, as Jacobs viewed it, but increasingly an unavoidable element of virtually every form of (legal) public engagement. Sze Tsung Leong writes, “not only is shopping melting into everything, but everything is melting into shopping” (129). He goes on to note that the concomitant need for shopping space to become amorphous—the sheer size of some malls and stores having led to their decline—and the privatization of public institutions have made the city fertile ground for commercial expansion (133-4).

It is not surprising that the mall has, in turn, been adopted as a metaphor for urban spaces such as Chicago: US Cellular Field (a.k.a. Comiskey Park) and Niketown (the second most popular tourist attraction in Chicago according to one tourist book) becoming the iconic ‘anchor stores;’ city streets as nothing more than conduits between these consumption opportunities; and, of course, provisions are made for rest (the apartment) and fiscal replenishment (the office).

If this model is useful for speculative purposes, and we must not discount the inherent problems it contains (the city is not spatially bounded, to name one), then it is also revealing. It pulls into focus the inherent struggles over space, the interpenetration of public and private distinctions, and how these serve to highlight issues of suppression, exclusion and exploitation.

What makes the monolithically banal form of the shopping mall a focus of civic activity in many suburbs originates in its capacity to exert control over space and mediate the ways in which it is used. In the mall you are sure of your security, its capacity to fulfill all your everyday needs and, as a result, that there will be many others like you strolling its corridors and taking in its delectations. The maintenance of this 'pleasure space' (Wright 1997) is contingent on the appropriate uses and users being inscribed and, thus, becoming natural to the space. In the case of an Oregon mall, a Supreme Court decision confirmed its identity as private space in which bans could be placed on any out-of-place behaviour as defined by the owner (Crawford 22). As one sign cited by Crawford reads: "areas in this mall used by the public are not public ways, but are for the use of the tenants and the public transacting business with them. Permission to use said areas may be revoked at anytime" (23).

Barring the presence of the extreme exclusionary devices illustrated in Mike Davis' various urban diatribes, urban commercial areas tend to employ more benign methods of control and suppression: natural surveillance of spaces by purveyors and patrons alike as well as keeping the public ambivalent to the question "who cleans the buildings, the sites, the bathrooms...and where do the workers live?"(Wright 101).

As Tim Cresswell states, what follows these subtle declarations of appropriateness is the creation of "*expectations* about behaviour that relates a position in a social structure to actions in space" (3). It is expected that those who cannot or are unwilling to participate in these consumption spaces in the ascribed ways, will not impede the experience of others who wish to do so. In Vancouver and other British Columbian cities, this understanding

has been codified by the Safe Streets Act (strongly supported by Vancouver's Downtown Business Improvement Association), a law implemented in an effort to curb 'aggressive' panhandling. The understanding here is that the passive beggar can be like those who clean the streets and the bathrooms: a part of the system; whereas, active soliciting is an unwelcome disruption.

This law, like other measures meant to ensure the pleasantness of the environment assumes an inherent meaning and purpose to urban space—which, of course, is never essential, but created, constructed and continually reaffirmed. Cresswell argues that the most lucid understanding of place as a site of *contested* meanings is created through acts of transgression (9). These take the form of out-of-place activities and “serve to foreground the mapping of ideology onto space and place, and thus the margins can tell us something about ‘normality’” (9). A few years ago, the Bad Sheets public art project by Gil Doron and the group Transgressive Architecture in London, sought to explore these ideas. At various public areas in the city deemed to have undergone the process of “social cleansing,” including Oxford Street and Leicester Square, the group laid out bed sheets “stained” by photographs of transgressive activities (rough sleeping, public sex, busking, etc.). The intent here was to create un-celebratory monuments to those displaced; their strange presence in public space (and the actual absence of those depicted) provoking the casual passer-by into a critical view of the power systems that control our cities (Doron 46).

This artistic intervention aside, when it comes to the commercialized cityscape, the most effective political action is typically initiated by those who 'belong' (e.g.. the middle class consumer) and framed by issues of urban *authenticity*, especially those values shared by

Jane Jacobs. There is a desire to 'hang onto something real' against the onslaught of artifice, or 'protect the essence' of city neighbourhoods; sentiments that resonate with anyone concerned with the social life of the city. For a fairly mundane example observe the almost universal urban struggle against that big box raider from the suburbs, Wal-Mart. A more noble cause is described by Brown-Saracino as the 'social preservationist' movement, characterized by the efforts of some people to preserve the "authentic social space"—most notably, the presence of old-timers—of the neighbourhoods in which they have moved, and, by their very presence, threaten (135). Yet viewing commercialization (or gentrification, for that matter) as tantamount to the abstracting of 'real' spaces and dynamics into something artificial can be misleading, and it is with this idea that I conclude.

As Doreen Massey writes, "a 'sense of place,' of rootedness, can provide...stability and a source of unproblematic identity" but this is "reactionary," not a base level or preexisting identity (151). We may seek out vibrant neighbourhoods or historic buildings in order to rip through the artifice, but essentially these are appealing aesthetic experiences not necessarily 'authentic' ones. Indeed, if we consider dominant (global) economic forces as a litmus test for natural rather than contrived creation of the city, then a GAP store is arguably more authentic in today's urban space than a neighbourhood deli. Therefore, a holistic attitude must be taken towards our increasingly commercialized public spaces, one that recognizes the value of our heritage but is also cognizant of the social inequities being continually reaffirmed at the local scale. It was not simply the authentic storefronts that Jacobs valued but rather the diverse range of activity and participants that the shop brought together, and it is this that ensures the ongoing vibrancy of our cities.

Works Cited

- Boddy, Trevor. "Underground and Overhead: Building the analogous city." Variations on a Theme Park : The new American city and the end of public space. Ed. Michael Sorkin. New York : Hill and Wang, 1992.
- Brown-Saracino, Japonica. "Social Preservationists and the Quest for Authentic Community." City & Community. 3 (2004): 135-56.
- Crawford, Margaret. "The World in a Shopping Mall." Variations on a Theme Park : The new American city and the end of public space. Ed. Michael Sorkin. New York : Hill and Wang, 1992.
- Cresswell, Tim. In Place/Out of Place: Geography, ideology, and transgression. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1996.
- Doron, Gil M. "The Bad Sheets." City. 6 (2002): 43-59.
- Jacobs, Jane. The Death and Life of Great American Cities. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- Leong, Sze Tsung. "...And Then There Was Shopping." Harvard Design School guide to shopping. Ed. Judy Chuihua Chung et al. Köln: Taschen; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Design School, 2001: 129-55.
- Massey, Doreen. Space, Place and Gender. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1994.
- McMorrough, John. "Good Intentions." Harvard Design School guide to shopping. Ed. Judy Chuihua Chung et al. Köln: Taschen; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Design School, 2001: 371-8.
- Wright, Talmadge. Out of Place: Homeless mobilizations, subcities, and contested Landscapes. New York: State UP, 1997.