

Urban Aesthetics and the Excess of Fact

Helen Liggett
Cleveland State University

Great Cities Institute Publication Number: GCP-06-05

A Great Cities Institute Working Paper

October 2006



UIC

The Great Cities Institute



The Great Cities Institute is an interdisciplinary, applied urban research unit within the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). Its mission is to create, disseminate, and apply interdisciplinary knowledge on urban areas. Faculty from UIC and elsewhere work collaboratively on urban issues through interdisciplinary research, outreach and education projects.

About the Author

Helen Liggett is Professor in the Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University. She may be reached at liggett@urban.csuohio.edu.

Great Cities Institute Publication Number: GCP-06-05

The views expressed in this report represent those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the Great Cities Institute or the University of Illinois at Chicago. This is a working paper that represents research in progress. Inclusion here does not preclude final preparation for publication elsewhere.

Great Cities Institute (MC 107)
College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs
University of Illinois at Chicago
412 S. Peoria Street, Suite 400
Chicago IL 60607-7067
Phone: 312-996-8700
Fax: 312-996-8933
<http://www.uic.edu/cuppa/gci>

Urban Aesthetics and the Excess of Fact

Summary

The “excess of fact” describes the complexity and crowded nature of un-staged photography, where many factors aside from the single subject interact to create meaning. This essay examines the ways in which three modes of “excess of fact” in urban life—echoes, encounters and exchange—create an urban aesthetics. Taking back the right to the city and dialogic occasions are explored in this discussion of the construction of meaningful urban existence.



“The city, which is the name of assembled humanity . . .”

(Badiou 2005,16)

Introduction

The aesthetics of urbanism, that is, how we seek to perfect assembled humanity, is both embedded in and removed from urban life. As the theorist Henri Lefebvre suggests, city plans exist as representations of space while at the same time urban space itself is constituted by the spatial practices of everyday life (Lefebvre 1991,1996). It is in the encounters of daily life that the reach for experience presents itself.

Street photography is a procedure that connects daily life to representation and thus it is characterized by what photographer Lee Friedlander calls an “excess of fact.” “It’s a generous medium, photography,” he writes (Armstrong 2005,293). In part this is a description of the type of photography he produces. But it is also an acknowledgement of how crowded the referent in un-staged photography necessarily is. Photographic space is more complex than a photographer’s interest in a single object or

viewers' tendency to think of images as being about a single subject. The complexity of any site generates a photographic space that leads to the proliferation of meaning in much the same way that urban life is not fixed, but constantly in motion. The visual cacophony produced by street photography evokes a radical urban aesthetics by pointing to the gap between the work and an audience's reading of it. What is radical about the excess of fact is that a space is both presented and unfinished. What is radical about contemporary urban life is just how crowded and unresolved it has become. Both suggest the need to explore the productive consciousness and creative imagination at the center of efforts to successfully constitute urban life and inhabit the city.



In idealizing the city, American urban designers have always had Europe. For example, there is the requisite year in Florence for serious architects and artists, and also the Amsterdam beloved of urbanists; each contributing to a widely recognized doxa about what vibrant city life could be like if only Americans would attend to their gutted

inner cities, wean themselves from private transportation, reject the growth paradigm, overcome the inability to be impractical and other sins.

The intellectual context for these conventional aspirations is the classical liberal model of governance in which claims to legitimacy are based on the consent of the individual citizens. This scheme depends on principles of assembly in which the individual is logically prior to society. This includes taken for granted spatial configurations of modernity in which nation-states and national citizenship are the primary spatial units and marker of identity (Brenner 2003). Quietly underpinning the belief in universal rationality in our own image is an aesthetics based on the belief that there *is* an order of things. Challenging this view, the realities and dangers of disassembly in cities throughout the world suggest that disruptions in urban spatial practices may not be addressed successfully from perspectives based in abstract universal humanism and the assumption of shared horizons. Globalization theory has focused on articulating transformations in the nation-state as the site of legitimate authority and policy formation, thus recognizing loosening of the tight logic connecting state, citizen; governance and identity. But there has been a tendency to bypass the city and its historical relationship to citizenship and civilization itself.

Yet, metaphorically speaking, if nations are how we plan, cities are where we live. If cities are examined as sites of human assembly, the deepest problems facing cities today are not about physical boundaries but the issue of how to make the assembly cohere. At the same time, cities persist, even given their problematic aspects, in the practices of millions of daily encounters that promote connection. These ongoing negotiations that constitute urban life are analogous to the “excess of fact” in

photographic space. This chapter presents images of three modes of “excess of fact” in urban life: 1) echoes, 2) encounters and 3) exchange. They are overlapping forms of successful human assembly, albeit on a small scale, that enact a radical urban aesthetics by producing unfinished zones of contact. Each points towards aesthetics of existence that is not about a reach that may exceed our grasp, but is lodged in the capacity to inhabit indeterminacy and to participate in the construction of one’s own circumstances.



Echoes and space in which one has a place

Leon Battista Alberti’s *Art of Building in Ten Books* is an example of an urban aesthetics that produces a unified city in which assembly at all levels is oriented towards enhancing the life of the city ((originally 1450) 1997). It goes without saying in Alberti’s work that the city is the site and hope of civilized life. In this view building a good city is inseparable from making a good society. As a reflection of this unity Alberti combines cognitive, practical and moral discourse. His text is scholarly, practical and ethical. He includes all levels and stages of city building from review of ancient wisdom on how to

site a city, to detailed consideration of infrastructure, and elucidation of every aspect of public and monumental buildings, including even the management and layout of the summer home. Every aspect of building is assessed in terms of its beauty, and also its performative force in bringing about a harmonious ideal.

Alberti's approach is to first repeat the wisdom of Greek and Roman builders and then assess whether their precepts should be followed and where and how they should be amended. As befits the art of compromise that makes the actual art of city living possible, he never dismisses beliefs that are not his own out of hand, but reassesses them based on practicality and his aesthetic ideals. His definition of practicality is one that is recognizable today. For example, how one ought to attend to the climate, when and whether a building should be restored, are questions he raises and addresses in terms of the physical and social contingencies of each building situation. In this way his position at the beginning of the Renaissance (1450) is quite understandable. It is the early formation of what would become a modern worldview based in empirical truth.

Alberti's moral center is defined by harmony. This includes harmony of physical form and individual structures but also goes beyond these to include harmony and balance as a way of life. The measure of the city is the enhancement of the lives of its citizens. This is not an equalitarian or democratic vision but it is a humanist vision in the fullest sense of the term. The proper city is physically beautiful and is also understood as the personification of civilization. The image of the city presented in Alberti's work is one in which urban space is tied to the capacity to be human.

If there are echoes of the ancients in Alberti's urban aesthetics there are echoes of Alberti in ours. But at the same time there are great differences. Today it is more

common to discuss and evaluate city building within fragmented professional practices. For example, economic development discourse is eminently practical, historic preservation is concerned about the physical beauty of the city, and social welfare professions address the well being of citizens who aren't otherwise covered. The distance from Alberti's unified approach is even greater when one considers that enhancing the lives of the citizens as a measure of the city is less likely to appear in official representations of urban space than the issue of economic viability.



Echoes of harmony, as a measure of successful human assembly still exist in urban life, however. One can look, for one example among many, at the physical and social spaces constituted by African American churches. Part of the power of these churches is their capacity to secure the image of interior harmony in opposition to a hostile external reality. One could say that the excess of fact in urban life is raw materials that are taken inside where they are transformed to construct a community. Within the physical and social spaces of the church islands of harmony are created, special places of meaning and depth that provide ballast in the face of external chaos

and exclusion. The core of this urban aesthetics is not doctrine or ritual but experience. To belong is to directly experience and construct space in which one has a place.

The image of membership is not one of citizenship, but of homecoming. This is often expressed in homilies and activities organized to express and enact the theme of being home and also feeling at home. This is echoed and re-echoed in the comfortable spaces and welcoming experiences within the church that make a home, that insist that one can always come back home and be welcome and that tie coming home to acceptance. The call and response of voices are its oral form. The participation of individual members in a wide range of activities, from worship to education to social services helps to constitute the identity of believers, as good people, as God's people in harmony with the facts of their existence. The echoing frame of the church as the center of one's life and the source of one's identity reaches back to the beginning of Christianity at the same time this the image of Christian life is expressed in a way that addresses current conditions. The echoing spaces of the physical and living church are places of continual restaging to fit the shifting situations of urban life. Thus one technique for creating space in which one has a place while existing in a realm that may be characterized as an excess of negative fact is to constitute and reconstitute spaces that echo and repeat a world that one knows and also wishes to be the case.



Encounter and the Right to the City

The scope of Alberti's work is matched in modern theory by the theoretical and moral reach of Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space* (1991). In his own characterization of his project Lefebvre argues that his work supplements Marx's axiomatic use of value with a broader conceptual scheme based on assembly. As is characteristic of modern thought Lefebvre does not concentrate on physical building, except to critique specific examples. His main work is developing the conceptual tools for an active theory of space that sees space as a process. Thus Lefebvre focuses on movement through gesture, on modes of assembling space, and on specifying rhythms and patterns that make space and the selves that inhabit it. If Alberti's approach is geometric, working out each issue in terms of a set of foundational principles, Lefebvre's is symphonic. He introduces, and doubles and redoubles his themes in numerous applications to produce reflections on how social and physical space are joined. Lefebvre's spatial theory includes a history of spatial development in the West and an innovative approach to the study of spatial practices, both tied to the development of an active urban aesthetics.

In Lefebvre's image of the fragmentation of modern life, there is separation between three modes of making space. Representations of space, that is, space as conceived, have come to dominate city building. In spite of this, spatial practices of everyday life continue as what I have been calling excess of fact. That is, they are often peripheral to discussions that imagine and plan space within professional discursive practices. What Lefebvre calls representational space, that is, space constructing what it is to be human in the most profound ways, has become very limited. The dominance of representations of space, the urban spatial order organized by the roving eye of capital, dominates city building. As an example of these imbalances within contemporary European cities, Lefebvre is particularly critical of the city as a tourist destination site, drained of life and organized into separate and separating realms for show and for life.

The aesthetic he promotes, "the right to the city" is outside of the dominant modes of assembly and the abstract logic that organizes them (Lefebvre 1996). The right to the city is centered in the excess of fact that constitutes daily life. The claim for the right to the city is the claim that the city can be the active space of human experience by fully realizing the unique spatial instances that are possible only in the diversity and density of chance occurrences of urban life. Lefebvre calls these moments "urban encounters." They are situated, unplanned connections with which city dwellers assemble space that they co-occupy and that cannot exist outside of their encounter. In these moments the city dweller again becomes a citizen.

Lefebvre's hope for the city is that the abstract representations of space that control the making of space, that constitute the citizen as consumer, and that require

only rapt attention to the political spectacle that surrounds citizens, can be superseded in instances of mutually constitutive encounter. The gestures that make the space of encounter also make the subjects capable of it and re-affirm the city as a place of life (Liggett 2003).

One sees images of urban encounters in everyday fleeting contact between strangers who momentarily occupy the same space. We are familiar with moments of shared humanity in times of crisis. These moments are deeply non instrumental in the sociological sense but foundational in the ontological sense. They bring to the surface how clearly we depend on each other to reaffirm our humanity. Lefebvre sees this type of human exchange as the key to making cities work.



His way of conceptualizing the space of encounter is not centered on planning festive events or meeting places for encounter. He is oriented towards an awareness of the potential of everyday life. Lefebvre was critical of planned or staged provocative encounters as some Situationists defined them. Nor would he have been supportive of festive and themed markets places promoted and build by some American

developers in the 1990's. The encounter is infinitely repeatable, in the sense that certain conditions such as the functional density and diversity of urban life make it possible. But this is different from any abstract proposal or plan for encounters because "the right to the city" must be rooted in a way of life that Lefebvre hopes will return the city to life beyond the spectacle.

The urban encounter is not based on consent it is based on an instant of connection. This momentary but infinite quality can be illustrated by applying the notion of urban encounter to street photography. Making a photograph on the street can produce an instant in which the photographer, urban space and the camera are united. It does not occur every time one photographs, but it is a photographic possibility that embedded in the unpredictability of the street. It is mutually constitutive in the sense that it is reaching beyond making a picture to making the space of humanity. Photographers' evocations of photography as "love" or "a way of living" are images of this kind of photographic space.

Pointing out this resemblance between the urban encounter and street photography helps to highlight some of the dynamics of the encounter. It is, by definition, fleeting and it is, by definition, dependent on shared horizons while it can also construct them. That is, at its best, the urban encounter is an example of a meeting with the other that produces mutually constitutive hybrid identities. One testimony to the viability of the urban encounter is how often people relate stories that are images of individual encounters in talking about why they like a city or to explain why they have chosen to live an urban lifestyle.



Exchange and The Dialogic Occasion

The urban encounter can falter if the realm of shared horizons is so limited there is not enough raw material to construct space for mutually constitutive moments. The opportunity for encounter creating a momentary hybrid space is decreased if residents of the city never cross paths. Similarly, if they understand themselves only in terms of mutually exclusive identities the chances for encounter are radically reduced. The right to the city outlines an urban aesthetic, but Lefebvre did not emphasize the dynamics that produce connections between how we see ourselves and how we read others. Further analysis of the mechanics of encounter can suggest how the fleeting victory of the ordinary encounter can be informative about the extraordinary achievement of living together.

The language of encounter does emphasize connection amid diversity, but at the same time, at some level it requires a shared horizon. This could be called aesthetics of diversity and difference within a frame. The city in this era of globalization is often populated by citizens whose identity is maintained by a combination of approximate

exclusion and distant encounters. That is, people may live physically near each other, but maintain their closest personal relations in distant places. In addition, the image of the city produced by the society of the spectacle assumes homogeneity exists and misses the fundamental differences on the ground on which we would like to stand.



If one returns to the photographic experience, one can suggest that characterizing it in terms of the photographer, the camera, and urban space, as I did above, considers only part of the process. Making a successful photograph is an open-ended project that necessarily involves more voices, including those of viewers. Although it is comforting to assume that a good photograph is a readable photograph, the excess of fact makes this too simplistic. In fact there are certain parallels between the recent interest in urban photography that is staged and the image of the city as out of control.

Outdoor photography that is staged or altered with artificial light can be seen on one level as an attempt to control image space. Images of space that one directs are an acknowledgement that both the excess of fact and the audience can't be trusted.

From this point of view the referent and the readers cannot be left on their own because it is not clear how the making and reading of the image will turn out. Staged photography has produced some complex and beautiful work, but it also seems to be producing a new genre. This genre is closer to painting because it deemphasizes the special characteristic of the photographic medium that is a relationship to the world as it is found. In classic street photography the excess of fact challenges, while widening, the horizons of the artist and viewer in making image space. In staged photography the excess of fact can be seen as a liability in the same way that different perspectives can be seen as a liability in governance and the law.

Just as Lefebvre laments the dominance of abstract modes of assembly, what he calls representations of space, the Russian literary theorist, M. M. Bakhtin is critical of formalist approaches in linguistics in general and literature in particular (1981). In “Discourse in the Novel”, M. M. Bakhtin argues that unity in language does not exist except perhaps for “the mythical Adam” and in the critical approaches of literary scholars (Bakhtin 1981,279). Instead, language always carries within it past and present systems of meaning, combinations of genres and ideologies – just some of the numerous contextual factors in play. The heteroglossic components of language recall Friedlander’s comment about photography, “It’s a generous medium.” Bakhtin says, “Language . . . is overpopulated – with the intentions of others” 1981,294). Further, meaning in language is constructed in relationship. In a way similar to the necessary labors of the viewers in producing meaning from the photographic image, Bakhtin sees the listener as active: necessary to the construction of what he refers to as actual meaning. Intention and definition, like judgment and finality are not useful notions in

Bakhtin's image of discourse. Language is not a project based on discovering the truth of the object. It is an activity that is oriented towards an answer that requires a listener. That listener's ears are also heteroglossic. The system of meaning of the listener can condition the discourse to an extent that the object becomes incidental, or only an occasion for the generative powers of dialogue. Bakhtin suggests that "The word lives, as if were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien context" (1981,284).



It is this boundary, or gap, that provides insight into the mechanisms of successful urban encounters. Encounters are not a meaning of minds; they are the occasions for the construction of minds. In other words, one model of an urban encounter implies something like a Venn diagram. Encounter is possible to the extent that spheres overlap. A dialogic model based on Bakhtin's work suggests that the overlap is the effect of encounter – and it may not be an overlap, but a new creation. Dialogue is discourse that finds zones of contact by producing them.

It is not difficult to make an argument for the city as heteroglossic space. One of the most ubiquitous features of cities touched by globalization is their heterogeneity. They are concentrated spatial examples of how any discursive site contains many languages. One can argue that at some level heteroglossia within shared space is both the definition of urban life and also its greatest achievement. Two factors creating the gap between the potential for the city and life of citizens within it are the recruitment and voluntary movement of populations across national borders and the separation of identity from national citizenship. Not only do many people not live in the land of their birth, they may not plan to, and/or the state of their birth may no longer exist as a state. In addition, for some migrants, citizenship in their new residence may not be possible or desirable. Add to this the fact that the clearly defined nation-state system has never existed wholly in fact in an uncontested way, and one can see some sense to one of the early statements in this piece that we may plan at the national level, but cities are where we live (Brenner 2003). As Bakhtin's analysis of meaning suggests, in practice cities cannot be sites of the law, or of governance, unless they flourish as places of exchange.

The most familiar site of exchange in the city is the market. The principle of assembly in the traditional marketplace is not the commodity form of exchange. The commodity form puts value in the object and buyers and sales persons have very little to do with each other as people or with creating new meaning. In exchange in the traditional barter sense, however, the object is the occasion for working out value in the context of a relationship between buyer and seller. The barter exchange is in this sense a dialogic occasion. In commodity exchange in the common retail form, relationship in any transaction is considered beside the point, an excess of fact. But barter requires

interlocutors with personalities who engage each other. It is a space of encounter that begins with difference and moves toward the creation of value, rather than producing the mutual recognition of pre-existing values. The excess of fact that comprises the dialogic occasion of bartering makes this creation of meaning and value possible. What makes the dialogic occasion itself possible is not the imposition of law, but the presence of desire, the desire to create a shared space for the purposes of achieving a successful transaction.



From this viewpoint the mechanism for successful encounter becomes the willingness to engage the other in order to secure the self. Each of the images of encounter discussed in this paper is an existing mode of human assembly in urban space. In each, human assembly is forged from different combinations of engagement at the level of identity and commitment to that engagement. None offers a totalizing solution for the ills that beset contemporary urban life. But each example offers insight

into how the shared space that constitutes urban life is produced. In each, the willingness to risk the loss of the illusion of an independent existence is joined to the desire to gain the right to the city.

References

- Alberti, L. B. (1997) *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* translated by Rykwert, J., Leach, N., and Tavernor, R. (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press).
- Armstrong, C. (2005) "Lee Friedlander, Museum of Modern Art, New York" *ArtForum* September, 293-4.
- Badiou, A. (2005) *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination* translated by Emerson, C. and Holquist, M. (Austin: The University of Texas Press).
- Brenner, N., et al. Ed. (2003) *State/Space* (London: Basil Blackwell).
- Cheah, P. and Robbins, B. Ed. (1998) *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space* translated by Nicholson-Smith, D. (London: Basil Blackwell).
- Lefebvre, H. (1996) "The Right to the City". in *Writings on Cities*, ed Kofman, E. and Lebas, E. (London: Basil Blackwell) 147-159.
- Liggett, H. (2003) *Urban Encounters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).