The Search for Messiness in Contemporary Space:
An Analysis of the Ways in Which Space Dictates the Human Experience

Most people believe they act in accordance with the perceived expectations of their audience. Adults generally adopt modes of behavior depending on the community with which they are interacting: offspring, professional colleagues, societal superiors, family members, lovers, strangers in public spaces; just as children generally speak to their teachers, friends, parents and siblings in drastically different ways. Though the people involved in these situations are obvious indicators of how and why variations in behavior occur, place and “space” are also strong indicators of how norms in interaction and behavior are formed and enacted. In exploring a variety of interpretations and discussions of space and place, I have come to realize that just as “atmospheres” or “themes” are carefully structured, crafted and realized, our reactions and interactions with these thematic spaces are prefabricated products: predicted, expected and easily malleable. The following quote, from a text which served as a basis for a lecture given by Michel Foucault in 1967, concisely addresses the crux of contemporary society’s relationship with space and place: “we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (Foucault, 23). If the sites, or places, in which humanity functions are so incompatible and naturally disparate, how then are we, as the signified within these signifiers of space and place, expected to act and interact with the world, and more importantly, the people around us? How are these expectations for behavior articulated to the participants within these spaces? Who, or what, is regulating these expectations? Most importantly, what is being lost, or gained, in these structured and anonymous modes of engagement? Though I cannot claim to provide the answers to these questions, I do endeavor to
articulate the ways and means through which human experience is managed by the spaces we inhabit.

In her article “Space Matters: The Power and Practice of Space” Raka Shome articulates what she believes to be a commonly held, yet shallowly conceived, perception of space: “we see space as a background, a backdrop against which the real stuff of history and politics is enacted” (Shome, 39). I agree with Shome’s claim that most people hold the belief that space is simply a backdrop—a static setting—in which events occur yet are not shaped by the very spaces in which they unfold. Perhaps not all people view space as merely a backdrop, perhaps they hold the one-dimensional view of space articulated by Alexandra G. Murphy in her article “Organizational Politics of Place and Space: The Perpetual Liminoid Performance of Commercial Flight.” Though her article primarily focuses on the experience of the performative space enacted in air travel, the following assertion aptly applies to a discussion of the ways in which society interacts with space; Murphy claims that most individuals interpret structured space as “a reflection of rather than departure from the realities of everyday life” (Murphy, 298). As a whole, members of society operate under the assumption that they are the sole source of agency in their daily interactions; they navigate their course as they travel from home to work, they decide when and where to seek out recreational activities, they dictate what they consume and when they procure products for consumption. However, even a precursory analysis renders these assumptions as unfounded: many cities separate commercial and residential zones, permitting access between the two locations to occur only via complex roads and highway systems; recreational activities are marketed and commodified to represent specific social strata; shopping and food centers become products of corporate mandates, subsequently limiting choice and accessibility to companies and corporations capable of paying top dollar for prime locations.
If space and place are to be critically considered, we must re-structure our understanding of location; accepting the notion that space is capable of manifesting agency and thereby manipulating human perceptions and interactions: “space is a component of power that penetrates all other social frameworks, and, although not every social relation can be reduced to space, space is nonetheless a force that helps constitute other social relations” (Shome, 41).

However, if Shome’s implication of agency seems too heavy handed, there seems to me no denying the validity of the following assertion: “Yet it is necessary to notice that the space which today appears to form the horizon of our concerns, our theory, our systems, is not an innovation; space itself has a history in Western experience and it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space” (Foucault, 22). This relationship, or subservience, to space is evidenced in many of our day-to-day activities: the hushing of voices when filing into a church or walking into a library, the groping of bodies and disregard for personal space on a nightclub dance floor, the shutting off of phones when settling into a movie theater or classroom, the loss of self upon entering a Department of Motor Vehicles office, the adoption of personas as we arrive to our place of work. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we are consistently allowing our surroundings to dictate and manipulate our modes of thinking and acting.

Andrew Wood effectively and succinctly articulates an interpretation of the ways in which space dictates human experience in his article “The Best Surprise is No Surprise”: Architecture, Imagery, and Omnitopia Among American Mom-and-Pop Motels.” In this piece, Wood offers an explanation of what he sees as three key “practices through which places become nodes of a ubiquitous continuum” (Wood, 401). Wood identifies these practices as “dislocation,” “fragmentation,” and “mutability.” Though Wood focuses his discussion on the ways in which these elements are portrayed in the context of motels as travel destinations in the U.S., his
discussion has universal implications addressing the ways in which spaces impact and exploit social interaction. In introducing his discussion of space, Wood defines the concept of *omnitopia*: “an intersection of architectural design and human practice through which distinct ‘places’ become nodes of a perpetual continuum” (Wood, 400). Wood utilizes this definition to bolster his assertion that these omnitopias displace distinctly identifiable experiences because they “enable the emergence of a conceptual environment that resides above and beyond specific locales” (Wood, 401). These “conceptual environments” prevail in today’s iconic global culture: hungry travelers can find the comfort of the golden arches in 32,478 locations around the world, weary travelers can rest their heads in any one of Best Western’s 4,000 global locations, and style-conscious travelers can shop at one of the 3,085 Gap locations dotting the globe. Though the items available for purchase and the accents of the employees handling the transaction may differ from location to location, the “iconic signage” identifying each location ensures that the “fantasy of travel becomes fragmented into a series of surface-level images” (Wood, 406). Regardless of where the traveler may be in physical location, this familiar iconic signage creates an “omnitopian continuum [through which] fragmentation creates a sense of diversity, the perception that *this* place is meaningfully different than *that* place” (Wood, 406). Is this omnitopian continuum genuinely sought by travelers, or is it a concept which humanity is incapable of avoiding due to the current global mentality? It saddens me to consider that Wood is correct in his claim that American travelers are defined by an “unwillingness to conform to the surrounding environment” (Wood, 410) and a desire to “broaden one’s horizons [but] only until morning” (Wood, 403). However, perhaps more disturbing is the idea that this is not the dominant experience sought by travelers, but the only experience to which they have access.
In line with this loss of distinction is Shome’s assertion that “spaces today are being utilized, deployed, and (re)articulated by processes of globalization and transnationalism in new ways” (Shome, 45). For Shome these processes of globalization and transnationalism indicate “complex planes of exclusion and inclusion [which] are being engendered in ways that far exceed and complicate the dialect of self and difference” (Shome, 40). The eventual altering of space and place over time should not, on its own, create overt consternation in a society; what should be alarming, however, is this redefining of self and difference through these shifting boundaries and locales. Members of society must be cognizant of the ways in which they define and identify self: most people claim their personality, style or individual nuances serve to shape and create a personal identity. Though these truly are components of identity, these are not the only factors comprising the make-up of a person or influencing they ways in which they perceive—and are perceived by—the world around them.

Contemporary constructions of space should be considered a main contributor to this loss of distinctive identities; or, perhaps it is the other way around: it could be our melding and blurring of identities which is creating generic space in contemporary times. In his discussion of the space of airport terminals (“A Rhetoric of Ubiquity: Terminal Space as Omnitopia,” 2003), Wood asserts that an intrinsic purpose of airport terminals is “the construction of a generic environment whose primary value is consistency” (Terminal Space 329). Airports, perhaps more than any other construction of society, represent the coming together of humanity. There are few other places in our societal repertoire in which such a large variety of nationalities, ages, social classes, cultures and races have the potential to interact and encounter one another. Airport space often serves as a first introduction to a country, a first glimpse into a local culture. Airports have the potential to welcome, alienate, befuddle or impress foreign visitors from all walks of life.
Airports really can serve as gateways into a new culture, an introduction to a new set of beliefs, a fresh perspective on the world around us; yet, as Wood points out, airport terminals often serve only to suggest “a generic rhetoric of interchangeable utterances and commercialized imagery devoid of authenticity” (*Terminal Space* 332). A critical look at the generic nature of airport terminals offers major insights into the ways in which space influences and impacts societal interactions: if this potentiality for vivid authentic experience is consciously minimized and down-trodden by systems of control, when are people allowed to engage with new cultures, new environments and new people in vibrant and meaningful ways? By exploring new countries and cultures through these anonymous, non-distinct spaces “one does not expect to encounter genuinely different people imagined to occupy these tourist locales” (Wood, *Mom-and-Pop Motels* 403). By attempting to re-create a preconceived set of expectations, these spaces inherently serve to minimize and de-value the reality of the variations and differences which occur organically throughout all facets of humanity.

In light of Augé’s claim that “a non-place is a space of solitary individuality that is not rooted or grounded in historical relations or identity” (as cited by Murphy, 300), airport terminals—and perhaps even chain establishments with familiar iconic signage—by this definition become “non-places;” places which remain unaffected by the idiosyncrasies inherent in the locations in which they reside. This “simulation of ‘placeness’ in a non-place” (Murphy, 300) occurs in many facets of contemporary society and for a host of unarticulated reasons. In her discussion of the in-flight experience Murphy points to power relations as the reason for this anonymity in experiencing location: “Historical and contemporary organizational strategies maintain passenger divisions and reflect and reinforce social hierarchy” (Murphy, 302). In her provocative essay on contemporary motels in New Zealand, “The Motel: An Image of
Elsewhere,” Sarah Treadwell also sees this anonymity as fostering powerlessness in the space’s users. For Treadwell, the nature of motels dictates “temporary occupation enforced by movement” (Treadwell, 224) which leads to “only a fleeting allegiance: it is a space where the fixed and mobile converge” (Treadwell, 216). If the relationship between space and user is transitory, there can be no ownership, no possession of space and time; stripping the user of identity and power as they attempt to navigate and effectively utilize this space. This stripping away of self, or infusion of anonymity, serves to create “a discursive universe of mobile identity and homogenized culture extending beyond our personal experience of public life” (Wood, *Terminal Space* 333). This loss of agency should not be taken idly: if humanity cannot navigate the world while retaining a sense of self, all identity will be pre-determined and all experience pre-fabricated. As Foucault said in 1967, perhaps these non-places are intended “to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled” (Foucault, 27). This messiness Foucault speaks of is one of the defining factors of human existence; if this non-uniformity in interaction is lost, what will be sacrificed from the human experience?

Structured spaces—or spaces that structure—do much more than threaten the spontaneity of human interaction, they also have the potential to perpetrate political control over the users of the space: space “functions as a technology—a means and medium—of power that is socially constituted through material relations that enable the communication of specific politics” (Shome, 40). Shome’s assertion implies more than an innocent engagement in a thematic experience; she is addressing a potentially manipulative force which most people only recognize as their participation in a managed experience. This simplification of participation minimizes the fact that “being able to exist in public space is dependent also on having rights and access to the
legalities that protect our bodies in that space” (Shome, 47). Though Shome frames her discussion of space in an analysis of the border between Mexico and the U.S., the severity of these political implications is wholly related to all facets of society’s interaction with and participation in public spaces. Perhaps Barthes’ less sinister view should be considered as well: “The human habitat . . . . constitutes a veritable discourse with its symmetries, its oppositions of places, with its syntax and its paradigms” (Barthes, 166). Though Barthes’ assertion lacks the threat inherent in Shome’s claim, his identification of a discourse existing between humans and our habitat should be enough to alert humanity to the substantial role space plays in framing reality. Concepts capable of syntax and opposition are by nature much more than simple concepts; they become agents imbued with the ability to push or pull; agents capable of affecting outcomes and influencing dynamics of engagement. Humanity makes itself vulnerable by placing itself at the mercy of unquestioned agents of power; whether those agents are tangible in form or not.

Some people may be comforted by this lack of location inherent in contemporary space. Perhaps this anonymity in location allows weary travelers to easily negotiate their experiences: non-French speakers can navigate their way through a French museum with ease; monolingual Canadians can successfully order from a McDonald’s menu while in Japan; homesick college students can find comfort in eating a Domino’s pizza while visiting Central America. Though the uncritical may perceive these elements of familiarity as a balm for a road-weary heart, I think it is essential to consider Wood’s claim that these anonymous environments serve to “dehumanize [experiences] even as they provide individuals a dizzying array of opportunities to affirm a sense of self through various forms of consumer activity” (Wood, Terminal Spaces 339). I cannot help but think that a refusal to acknowledge the agency of space will eventually serve as a refusal to
acknowledge the legitimacy of difference. If we fail to recognize the power of space, all our reactions within these spaces will become predetermined by the creators of the space, usurping our control over the ways in which we function within and react to our world. I do not think Wood is far from the truth when he asserts “omnitopian design seems to affirm the ascendance of corporate power as an ideology with little serious regard for national borders or cultural practices” (Mom-and-Pop Motels 401). Personally, I would like to experience the world through my own lens of biases, expectations and interpretations—as flawed and as messy as they may be—rather than through the perfectly framed, sanitized and predictably ordered lens of Government or Corporation X.
References


