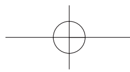

Emotion and Urban Experience: Implications for Design

Aušra Burns

We relate to our environments emotionally. Though design theory sometimes fails to appreciate the complexity and the variance of human experience, for anyone concerned with design, cultivating the ability to recognize, listen, and respond to what people undergo and feel is vital. I aim here to draw attention to the discursive topic of the urban dimension of emotion. While I focus on experience of the city, I believe that the implications of my arguments are relevant to design on many levels, as it relates to explorations of diversity of human experience in general.

Emotional experience in the urban context has been discussed in various schools of thought and within the disciplinary circles of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and geography. Certain prominent themes and representations of emotional reactions to city life enrich the interdisciplinary dialogue and broaden our understanding of issues and modes of conceptualizing the contemporary urban condition.

My intention is to bring into design discussions centered on people's experience of, and reactions to, built environments, certain aspects of disciplinary knowledge arising from the social sciences and humanities. I will communicate some of the conceptual discourse surrounding my theme toward revealing *dialogical,* and more holistic, context sensitive ways of designing for the city—ways that use effectively knowledge generated in other fields of research and, accordingly, create paradigms for design action.

Introduction

There are many ways to approach and discuss the diversity of the city. Along with the transformations of modern history and the growth of Western metropolitan culture, visions of the city have come to be divided into spheres of disciplinary competence. The complex phenomenon of the city often is defined by architects as a depository of building styles and influences, by economists as a site for regularization of retailing practices, and by planners as a transportation node and mosaic of municipal bylaws. On the other hand, a single hegemonic conceptual framework cannot account for and recognize all the diversity and conflicting notions of urban culture, its forms, and social processes. Consequently, it can be argued that no one possesses all of the knowledge and wisdom required to understand and act responsibly in this world. "We need diversity

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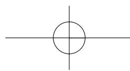
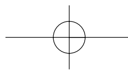




and alternative perspectives to keep alive the ongoing inquiry into ordering, disordering, and reordering that is the central enterprise of human culture."[1]

The changes experienced in contemporary Western cities over the past several decades—gentrification, suburban sprawl, physical and social fragmentation of the city, and its growing cultural and physical diversity—have been identified as dominant developmental trends. Searching for a narrative about the city and its economy "that includes rather than evicts" marginal economies and their representations in the city's physical form, political economist Saskia Sassen establishes an intellectual interdisciplinary dialogue on the subject of race, gender, and representation in the city.[2] In so doing, she provides us with an example of theorizing in the critical space in between disciplines, where new knowledge and directions for constructive action can be fostered. The need to embrace new models of reflection on urban processes has, in fact, been voiced by many social theorists and practitioners.

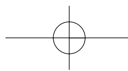
> "Emotions" are the complex conjunction of physiological arousal, perceptual mechanisms, and interpretive processes; thus, they are situated at the threshold where the noncultural is encoded in culture, where body, cognition, and culture converge and merge.[3]

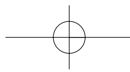
Why do I want to induce discussion on such a relativistic and seemingly unscientific subject related to urban experiences and emotions? My answer is that I think the potential benefits of this strategy outweigh the risks in terms of creating a better understanding of the phenomenon in question, and developing design strategies that work in specific socio-physical conditions. Through discussion of how we or others feel about city living—in various situations and differing circumstances—we can increase our ability to relate our aesthetic responses to perceiving the environment with the practical action we take within it. In terms of study of the subject and of theorizing, such an exchange may present us with the opportunity to critically analyze the standpoint of the researcher as a detached observer. In forums of discussion on how individuals or certain urban subcultures perceive their lives in the city, the researcher may become a more involved participant whose own stake in the issues at hand is raised and uncovered. Inevitably, when designers become more involved in the issues that concern people affected by design changes, they open themselves up to professional scrutiny and the challenges of self-definition. In order to follow and refine such a direction in professional and intellectual practice, one must identify the ontological, epistemological, and methodological aspects embedded in one's theoretical orientation. Questions that could be asked in this context include: Whose interests are represented in the project? How are the results of the research or the physical changes to an environment going to impact on various

1 Richard Buchanan, "Branzi's Dilemma: Design in Contemporary Culture," *Design Issues* 14/1 (Winter 1998): 3–18.

2 Saskia Sassen, "Analytic Borderlands: Race, Gender and Representation in the New City" in *Representing the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21st-Century Metropolis,* Anthony D. King, ed. (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 183–202.

3 Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 3.





parties that share the common urban realm? Questions also could extend beyond the immediate concerns of the designer. For example: What will be the impact on future transformations of decisions made today?

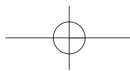
In the context of the city, the experiential realm is largely comprised of the places and objects of everyday life. Streets and backyards, and parks and monuments become situated not only in the realms of architecture or urban planning, but also in the realm of the human environment, where a distinct object, feature, or image is dissolved "into a world of perceptual experience" and can no longer be regarded as an "external location but as continuous with human life." [4] In this way, broader cultural aspects of the formation of emotional responses are grasped through research that goes beyond the study of the physical qualities of urban form: its colors, smells, forms, and textures. People's emotional relationships with the environment are framed by attributes that may be evident from an external assessment of a situation—for example: skin color, class, gender and social status; and by those attributes that are not evident, such as those formed by individuals' personal histories and life events.

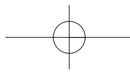
This position may represent an alternative to the traditional modes of framing experience in the designed urban environment. The tradition has been to view urban form as the static, axially oriented visual space of Western classicism. Throughout Western social thought, emotions are seen to be the very antithesis of the detached scientific mind and its quest for "objectivity." The roots of this separation and the custom of repudiating the importance and integrity of emotional experience lie deep in the Western intellectual tradition that separates body from mind, nature from culture, reason from emotion, and public from private. Moreover, these dichotomies are not value-free. The hierarchy intends to establish the supremacy of reason. Progress and precision are held above emotional, private, subjective experience. This experience is located in the realm of urban spaces, and associated with femininity and "irrationality."

Urban Experience, Its Conceptualizations and Representations

More reflective, culturally rich and dynamic articulations of our emotional relationship to the urban environment have been emerging from various disciplines of the social sciences and humanities for a number of years. An interest in the complexity of the social world and the positionality of knowledge and experience has evolved through the work of contemporary philosophers, geographers, anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists as part of a direction in social theory. Its aim is to develop an alternative to the positivistic and progressive view of the world as moving forward, in a linear trajectory toward, well, no one knows where anymore. Complementary calls have been made for radical transformations in the way we understand design as a professional activity. These calls

4 Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 77.





come from those who believe that the models and modes of action exploited earlier in this century are no longer adequate. Designers and other professionals dealing with the production and modification of urban spaces, processes, and imagery are looking for new ways to approach culture as defined by conflicting values.[5] To comprehend the "dynamics of individual and social behavior well enough to work efficiently and effectively in interdisciplinary teams" requires that design practitioners and theorists seek some common understanding of the social and cultural issues at stake, and deepen their awareness of contemporary intellectual discourses and research methods that can contribute to bringing design, the humanities, and social sciences together.[6]

The humanist tradition in philosophy and the social sciences has introduced the notion of emotional and experiential complexity in the perception of one's surrounding world, and has challenged the more traditional model based on contemplative knowledge accumulation through passive spectatorship, objectivity, and rationality. Symbolic interactionists suggest that individuals are not just aware of their place in the world, they also are involved in group interactions, each of which is located within a particular social setting worthy of careful consideration.[7] Many significant works produced within this theoretical orientation recognize the value of situated and reflective knowledge. Describing ways in which the space of inner-city Philadelphia was given meaning and made legible by street gangs through territorial boundary markers, David Ley shows how the realities of everyday life are negotiated by people in concrete contexts.[8] From this study of city gangs and their territorial behavior, Ley infers that the space, and the emotional responses to it, are socially constructed. The sociological study of the partitioning of the city into numerous territorial worlds has been a major aspect of the Chicago school tradition. In the works of members of this school, the impact of the overall diversity of the city on urban dwellers is much reduced. The main arguments comprising the standpoint of the school rest on the assumption that the city is a mosaic of different social worlds which overlap and interact. People, therefore, create their own social and territorial niches in the city and, in this way, are able to develop a sense of identity and comfort in the modern metropolis.[9]

Attempts also have been made to articulate the conception of experience through close association of the space and the perceiving body. From this perspective, the environment that is perceived does not exist solely outside of the perceiver. It extends the "inner landscape of human beings into the world in ways that are comprehensible, experiential, and inhabitable."[10] The "active model" oriented on action, function, and response to one's surroundings has been developed by the American pragmatic tradition and in European existential-phenomenological philosophy.[11]

5 Buchanan, "Branzi's Dilemma," 19.

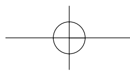
6 Jorge Frascara, "Information Design and Cultural Difference" *Information Design Journal* (1999).

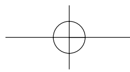
7 Following G. Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

8 David Ley, "Behavioral Geography and the Philosophies of Meaning" in *Behavioral Problems in Geography Revisited,* G.R. Cox and R.G. Golledge, eds. (London: Methuen, 1981a.), 209–230.

9 For a discussion of the Chicago School tradition as it relates to urban experience, see Peter Langer, "Sociology—Four Images of Organized Diversity: Bazaar, Jungle, Organism, and Machine" in *Cities of the Mind: Images and Themes of the City in the Social Sciences,* Lloyd Rodwin and Robert M. Hollister, eds. (New York: Plenum Press, 1984), 97–118.).10 See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958); and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1962). For an interpretation of the phenomenological tradition, see K. C. Bloomer and C. W. Moore, *Memory and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977

11 Berleant, *Art and Engagement,* 87.





Humanist geographers sought, through the philosophies of existentialism and phenomenology, to recover the essence of the experience of place. They propelled the shift toward recognizing the materiality of everyday life and the power relations that influence the emotional reaction to place. Nevertheless, as critics note, the humanists still haven't come to terms with the depths of subjectivity and intersubjectivity.[12] Another serious criticism comes from feminist geographers who remark on the lack of adequate theorizing on the broader social power relations structuring our experiences of place. One of the underlying reasons for this deficiency is that humanists assume masculinity as the implicit norm through a certain form of rationality that still considers objectivity as the touchstone of true knowledge. In a 1984 meeting of feminist geographers, it was argued that "humanists tend to show a general concern for the way in which ordinary people are subject to various forms of authority, rather than analyzing the specific forms of exploitation and oppression that occur." [13]

Turning to linguistic philosophy, we learn that the emotional realm is woven into the structure of communicative action and, therefore, open to contestation and argument. Intersubjective structuring, or communication between individuals of their subjective sensations through verbal and body language, becomes possible because emotion is publicly observable. It takes the form of actions made in response to certain circumstances. In other words, emotions can be conceived as meaningful responses to life situations.[14]

Some radical philosophers such as Marxists argue that people travel through a time-space life path while internalizing and interiorizing social relations. Human agency must be framed not only within the determinations (or power relations) of social structure, but within the *material* properties of time-space relations, and within the processes inherent in "personality." "Personality," in this case, signifies identity that is expressed through subjective reactions conditioned by the life history of each individual.[15]

In the work of behavioral geographers, mental processes and cognitive representation are of central importance. A more thorough understanding of human cognition was critical to establishing links between the mind and behavior. Mere descriptions of overt patterns of behavior were replaced by a search for, and explanation of, the reasons why people behaved in certain ways. But, as recent critics note, behavioral geographers failed to "recognize the mutual interaction between mind and environment" because they still operated in the realm of dichotomies such as those between the external and internal worlds, between the public world and the private world, between the subjective (perceptual) and the objective (phenomenal) world, and between mind and nature.[16]

Exploring different spaces of the contemporary city, feminists often reject the pursuit of generalizations and "complete" visions. Their work is more tentative. It is grounded in the details of

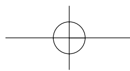
12 Steve Pile, *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 1996), 62.

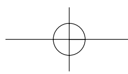
13 Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 44.

14 For a brief discussion of these issues, see Ray Crozier, *Manufactured Pleasures: Psychological Responses to Design* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1994), 19.

15 Nigel Thrift, "On the Determination of Social Action in Space and Time" in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 1/1 (1996): 241–50.

16 For a critique of conceptualizations of the urban in behavioral geography, see Pile, *The Body and the City,* 43.





the everyday, and enables interpretation of social life and spaces in the city as heterogeneous.[17] The strategies through which feminist geographers pursue their goals include undoing, subverting, and transcending the power-infused dualisms between dynamic and progressive time and static space; between the public and the private realm; between rational knowledge of, and the emotional responses to, the environment; and hierarchical dichotomies built on notions of masculinity and femininity. The "disorder" of urban life does not disturb women. The "socialization of women renders them less dependent on duality and opposition." [18] To many women, urban spaces simultaneously represent delight, a site of connection, and a place of danger and oppression—spaces that are lived, experienced, and felt.

Another important contribution to more reflexive and reflective theorizing about emotional responses to the city comes from geographers using psychoanalysis to reconceptualize the dialectics between the subject, society, and space. Each individual may be seen as "tied by the bonds of love and hate, in many directions, to numerous groups; each forms a sense of self in relation to different models of behavior; each has a share of many group identities." [19] These diverse relations are spatial, but originality and richness of experience, and the strength of ties between the individual and the environment, come from *within,* from the agent.

All of the nineteenth century founders of sociology touched on the topic of emotion. Among them was Max Weber, who wrote about the anxious spirit of capitalism that evolves in the modern metropolis, and the role of rationality and charisma in the formation of this new way of living and being a member of a capitalist society. Karl Marx developed a view of alienation as an inevitable consequence of class conflict that brought to Western urban centers resentment and anger toward capitalist exploitation. Georg Simmel believed that the emotional state of the modern individual being was profoundly shaped by a continuous bombardment of the stimuli of urban life.[20] Among the most evident reactions he points to is the "reserve" attitude one develops in order to survive in the saturated life of the city. This reserve attitude remains central in contemporary discussions regarding the reactions of the postmodern individual to the commodification of culture and her or his involvement in the collective consumption of fetishized commodities.

The attempt to establish scientific legitimacy in the discipline of sociology turned many researchers in urban studies toward explorations of social action, rather than of peoples' perceptions or other "soft" images of the city.[21] Despite this trend, Robert Park, a key member of the Chicago school, wrote:

> The city is…a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradi-

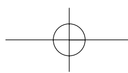
17 Rose, *Feminism and Geography,* 133.

18 Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (London: Virago, 1991), 282.

19 Pile, *The Body and the City,* 118.

20 Georg Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations* (New York: Free Press, 1955).

21 For further discussion of this direction, see Langer, "Sociology—Four Images of Organized Diversity," 198.



> tion. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it.[22]

From the perspective of the environmental psychologists, our rapid and largely unconscious decision-making process is influenced by the potential for functioning in the locale. Such pointers for potential functioning are perceived abilities: the ability to enter the setting, to acquire the necessary information about the environment or setting, and to maintain one's orientation.[23] Acknowledgment of the complexity of human emotions and their variance depending on the particularities of individual circumstances and cultural settings has brought psychologists' discussions closer to an understanding that "it is a person's experience of the world rather than the world's objective properties that counts."[24] Neisser's seminal book *Cognition and Reality* marked a transition for psychologists.[25] This more reflective and holistic conceptualization of psychological responses to one's environment caused psychologists to respond to, and gain interest in, research on cognition and the mental processes that underlie behavior. It has seemed to psychologists that "physiological processes, including variations in arousal levels, are not in themselves sufficient to discriminate between emotions, but that cognitions, beliefs, or attributions are also necessary."[26]

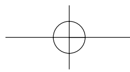
Anthropology, on the other hand, embraced emotion in terms of how its conception and expression were subject to cultural production. The question facing anthropologists today is how best to integrate the subjectivity of those they observe into their analysis: in other words, how to redefine the conditions of representativeness to take into account the renewed status of the individual in our societies.[27] "The notion of material culture, developed by anthropology, initially due to the need to reconstruct social life through an analysis of extant objects, provides a conceptual frame for the understanding of how cultural models are promoted by material objects."[28]

Urban Experience: Themes and Representations

Since my topic revolves around people's emotional experiences of the city, I would like to present a range of emotional responses and sensations that theoreticians from diverse fields of knowledge have identified, and later discuss how a broader knowledge of these themes and ideas can help designers in their professional work. While not representing a complete or exhaustive review of the subject, such discussion might lead designers to revisit or reevaluate our paradigms of action and theorizing.

One of the city's strongest aesthetic appeals is to the person as pedestrian, and "this appeal rests very much on its attraction to the moving body, its ability to entice one to follow along a street in relaxed and irregular rhythms."[29] Information derived from anthro-

22 Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie, *The City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1.
23 Rachel Kaplan, "The Analysis of Perception via Preference: A Strategy for Studying How the Environment is Experienced" in *Landscape Planning* 12/1 (1989): 174–5.
24 Crozier, *Manufactured Pleasures,* 75.
25 Ulrich Neisser, *Cognition and Reality: Principles and Implications of Cognitive Psychology* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1976).
26 Crozier, *Manufactured Pleasures,* 19.
27 For further discussion, see Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995).
28 Frascara, "Information Design and Cultural Difference."
29 Berleant, *Art and Engagement,* 101.



pology and psychology can support the argument that people enjoy "crooked streets" and the richness of urban experience, but they are most afraid of being lost. The intensity of this fear of being lost, disoriented, or confused by the monotony of the city suggests that designers (and urban planners and architects) should strive to produce "imageable" urban space by sufficient knowledge and through conscious manipulation.[30]

Among the most powerful and brilliant descriptions of the emotional experience of individuals roaming the nineteenth century Western metropolis was presented by the social theorist and philosopher Walter Benjamin. Employing techniques of surrealism as well as avant-garde montage and cinema, Benjamin created the portrait of an urban drifter, the *flâneur,* whose daily experiences were embedded in the "novel kind of beauty in the streets," through mundane activities of shopping, strolling, and socializing.[31] The Paris *flâneur* was lured by the magnetism of the city streets, by the sensual power of crowds, by the erotic pleasures of window shopping, and offerings of sexual pleasures outside of the family circle. One of the important aspects of urban culture that Benjamin was able to relate through his narrative, and that still remains important in the contemporary city, was that experience was atrophying—that there was a rise of spectacle and spectatorship, and that interpersonal relationships were being replaced with the packaged messages of a commodified culture of spectacle and merchandising. Simmel argues that the individual is constantly presented with myriad possibilities in the dense and varied realm of the city. The person is continually confronted by strangers, and this makes it impossible to establish any deep personal relationships. The only reasonable reaction to this situation is the adoption of a posture of "reserve" and impersonality. The Chicago school sociologists stressed another aspect of urban experience. People's ties, relationships, and attachment to their particular territorial niches in the metropolis were significant because it is in these niches that they "come to have some control," where they "are able to develop the sense of identity and comfortableness that one large downtown world makes impossible."[32]

If we adopt a perspective that recognizes the city as a site of power struggles and, therefore, a site of diverse and situated experiences, we can see why it may matter "who is walking the streets and who is doing the looking, and why, it also matters which streets are being walked, and how the spatial regime of the visual is constituted."[33] From the viewpoint of feminist geographers, the gaze of the urban drifter, as presented in literature concerned with issues of urban experience, often is accepted as universal, and is, in fact, a *masculinist* gaze embodying a relationship of an active onlooker and a passive object.[34] From this perspective, Benjamin's *flâneur* appears to be in such a position of power. He is captivated by the movement and excitement of the urban modern, but out of fear holds to a safe

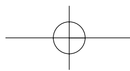
30 Kevin Lynch, *Good City Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

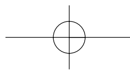
31 For an interpretation of Walter Benjamin's literary images of the city as experience, see Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City,* 280.

32 Langer, "Sociology—Four Images of Organized Diversity," 108.

33 Pile, *The Body and the City,* 231.

34 Rose, *Feminism and Geography,* 104.

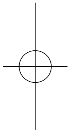


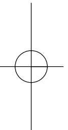


proximity or distance. What stands beyond this distance is an "uncharted territory: women, masses, the city: a territory which was simultaneously psychic, bodily, spatial, and social; simultaneously real, imagined, and symbolic." [35]

Let's turn for a moment and look at the city through the eyes of those who are being watched. Women often feel vulnerable in public because they are seen as properly belonging to the domestic sphere.[36] "Being in space is not easy. Indeed, at its worst, this feeling results in a desire to make ourselves absent from space; it can mean that 'we acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure.'" [37] Rose recalls her personal emotions about being in everyday spaces of the city. "I have a strong sense of space as oppressive, for example, from being scared walking at night in the city in which I live." [38] On the other hand, the city's crowds and spaces make it easier for many men and women to become anonymous, to escape to a certain degree from the control of traditional hierarchies.

Power relations and their symbols are embodied not only in the actions and relationships of city dwellers, but in the spatial forms of the city, within the anchoring points of its architecture. The power of authority is displayed in the centrally located skyscrapers of contemporary cities, often housing the dominant economic, political, and state power of the city.[39] One of the important issues here is that this spatial organization seems to give an impression of intelligibility and transparency. Modern architecture's abstract transparency alludes to the Utopian vision of a "radiant, egalitarian, dynamically open society," while embodying the "reality of panoptic, hierarchical bureaucracy." [40] What is lost or, more accurately, pushed away or erased, are the representation and acknowledgment of the subordinate, marginalized, less powerful cultures inhabiting the urban realm.

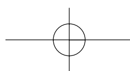


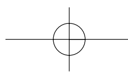


Where, then, is this marginality of the city embodied? How can we "excavate" this experience of the "other"? "Otherness" is embodied in the places of everyday: the homes, parks, and shantytowns of our cities. There is no homogeneous "other" behind this theoretical cliché of "otherness." There are actual, flesh-and-blood others.[41] Some of them: the sick, disabled, and elderly, find a certain degree of comfort, security, autonomy, and even freedom in sites of everyday life such as the home, the public park, and the department store. While the home, under certain circumstances, to some people, can be a source and site of oppression and violence (women and children in abusive families); to others, and in other circumstances, it can be a place that fulfills deep yearnings for empowerment and control over one's life and place of community contact.[42]

Many of us have experienced the devastating feelings of estrangement from one's surroundings engendered in such places as shopping malls, large hotels, and transit points—places controlled by computer networks and personal credit card identification.

35 Pile, *The Body and the City,* 209.
36 Gill Valentine, "Images of Danger: Women's Sources of Information About the Spatial Distribution of Male Violence" in *Area* 24 (1992): 22–9.
37 R. J. Johnston quoted in Rose, *Feminism and Geography,* 143.
38 Rose, *Feminism and Geography,* 143.
39 See Pile, *The Body and the City,* and Sassen, "Analytic Borderlands."
40 Joan Ockman, "Mirror Images: Technology, Consumption, and the Representation of Gender in American Architecture Since World War II in" *The Sex of Architecture,* Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, eds. (New York: Abrams, 1996), 205.
41 Mary McLeod, "'Other' Spaces and 'Others,'" *The Sex of Architecture,* eds. Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway and Leslie Kanes Weisman (New York: Abrams, 1996), 21.
42 Chislaine Hermanuz, "Housing for a Postmodern World," *The Sex of Architecture,* Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, eds. (New York: Abrams, 1996), 235.



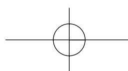


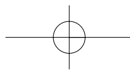
These places of "supermodernity" erase senses of real communication and memory. The individual becomes a passenger, customer, or driver who is "possessed" by the "passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing." [43] But despite our worries about the changes that digital technology has brought to our cities, we have to face the fact that boundaries are becoming blurred between the social and the technological, and between the natural and artificial. The important question that is asked by many is: "what are the implications for human emotional experience of these new forms of technology and the various 'hyperrealities' they spawn?" [44] It can be argued that new forms of emotional intimacy, sharing, and meaning are beginning to open up as a consequence of these technological developments. "The computer network provides opportunities to get together with considerable personal intimacy and proximity without the physical limitations of geography, time zones, or conspicuous social status." [45] Though the "intrusion of commerce and sophisticated technology into every crevice of daily life can hardly be considered cause for comfort, it is also the case that the built representations of postmodern society are no longer charged so heavily with dichotomous gender stereotypes." [46]

One of the themes that recurs in discussions about feelings and perceptions of the built environment is that of diversity and fluidity, of emotion's dependency on context. Physical and virtual places appear to coexist and blend in the contemporary metropolis. This demands from designers, architects, and planners significant revision of design strategies and methods of work. Such changes involve recognizing the presence of marginality in social life and formal representation of the city, and working toward recovering the "informal life" in the city's dominant representations. We need a radically new approach to cities if we are to see realized the city's potential to offer freedom and autonomy to all individuals and groups.[47] In many cases, the recovery of marginality offers passages into mysterious human nature and, at the same time, provides confused "form givers" with some constructive understanding of what kind of city it is that people need these days, and of how that city is supposed to serve their needs and reflect their emotional yearnings in a just and responsible way.[48]

Mere formal subversion of "otherness" in buildings as objects of art, and placing dominant value primarily on the physical features of the designs, is not sufficient or effective toward making contemporary cities better places to live. To adopt the position of an informed designer, one must pursue a deeper understanding and appreciation of the cultural issues and practices that converge in the body of the contemporary city. One of our valuable resources of creativity and skill is our ability to listen and learn from those for whom we design.[49] In the urban context, we should not forget that public space is the representation of a "public, as a living, acting, and self-determining community." [50]

43 Augé, *Non Places,* 103.
44 Simon Williams, "Emotions, Cyberspace and the 'Virtual' Body: A Critical Appraisal," *Emotions in Social Life: Critical Themes and Contemporary Issues,* Gillian Bendelow and Simon J. Williams, eds. (London: Virago, 1998), 120.
45 Williams, "Emotions, Cyberspace and the 'Virtual' Body," 124.
46 Ockman, "Mirror Images," 208.
47 Pile, *The Body and the City,* 283.
48 Ann Cline, *A Hut of One's Own: Life Outside the Circle of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 14.
49 Frascara, "Information Design and Cultural Difference."
50 Susana Torre, "Claiming the Public Space: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo" in The *Sex of Architecture,* Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, eds. (New York: Abrams, 1996), 249.





As we develop a more profound sense of how different people live in the same city, we might not be surprised to find that "the public realm that can be some people's heaven can be other people's hell." [51] I would argue that professionals should become more prepared to accept and learn from the unexpected twists and turns of real life city events. Many spontaneous and informal practices are deeply significant to the engaged individuals and groups, and can be very revealing to such professionals as designers. An example of such a practice is that of Latin American dwellers of the Bronx constructing, in the "vacant" land between apartment buildings, little houses that remind them of their "home" country. These "casitas" are filled on summer nights with the bustle of people enjoying comradery and the night.[52] This example also reminds us of the fact that a sense of security and enjoyment of public spaces such as a park or a street depends on matters that extend beyond demands for sufficient lighting or smooth paving. Many ideas that transform our lives and are of greatest significance derive from non-architectural sources. Don't we often find ourselves perceiving the city, our daily journeys, and our inner thoughts and routines as one inseparable physical-emotional-mental landscape? Aren't our impressions of city sites and experiences of sightseeing subordinated to our daily worries and thoughts as we walk or drive along familiar streets?

While this does not mean that many traditional disciplinary skills and artistic imagination are obsolete to the designer of urban spaces, images, or products; it does suggest that the issues relevant to a designer's professional competence require serious scrutiny and expansion. One of the critical aspects of this revised picture involves the transcendence of static and oppressive dichotomies between male and female, between reason and emotion, and between the rational and subjective. It means that space and time should be redefined, and seen as interrelated. "We need to conceptualize space as constructed out of interrelations, as the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelation and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global." [53]

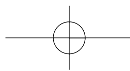
Along with accepting the fluidity and diversity of concepts we operate with in our daily practice, it is necessary to adopt a flexibility in our methods of work and research. As architect Denise Scott Brown remarks, it is a sense of professional responsibility that moves her to accept the diversity and temporality of social agendas and meanings attached to designed spaces and buildings in the city. Instead of following the rigid directives of dominant ideologies, Scott Brown, in her daily work, chooses the more difficult route of negotiating mutually accepted agreements between parties involved. She admits, however, that "ideologies come and go and functional needs change with time, yet our buildings may remain." [54] As difficult as it is to concede, we might never be able to determine the ultimate method or the perfect methodological pack-

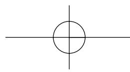
51 Cline, *A Hut of One's Own,* 53.

52 Ibid., 21.

53 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1994), 264.

54 Denise Scott Brown, "Through the Looking Glass" in *The Sex of Architecture,* Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, eds. (New York: Abrams, 1996), 215.





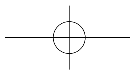
age that would free us from continuous self-questioning, end our creative search, or address all the transformations in our working context. Cities, places, societies, and the emotional responses of people will change. "Each situation demands specific responses, and all that methods can do is help us approach each new situation with a more sensitive and efficient eye." [55]

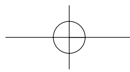
Urban Experience and the Design Practice

While I have been exploring the role of emotion in urban life, I hope that the reader has been encouraged to adopt a critical position with regard to the information and the complementary or competing ideas presented. As I asserted earlier, there is no one correct answer to all our problems of urban living and, therefore, there is not one set of criteria according to which the design process, under the current conditions, is supposed to develop. Nevertheless, I argue that, through informed selection and thoughtful consideration of some leading ideas offered by philosophers, geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists, designers may be encouraged to reconsider the paradigms they traditionally identify with. Beyond adopting greater moral responsibility for their actions, a more profound awareness of contemporary social conditions, and enhancing their knowledge of methods, designers can embrace the diversity of human experience, fundamentally shifting their standpoint within the profession. The key to making this transition, I believe, is to adopt theoretical and action paradigms that enable designers to influence social change through interpretation and negotiation. This stands in marked contrast to design practice based on authorship and the imposition of opinions and expertise.

The diversity of these concerns does not signify to me a loss of direction in design, nor a retreat to formal experimentations. As a designer working on urban design issues, the complexity I discover in conceptualizations and perceptions of the city serves to encourage me to continuously revise and adapt my working methods to the contextual criteria of each design situation, and to assess the forces shaping people's attitudes and actions. In this context, then, I contend that knowledge gained through work on design projects does not accumulate in an absolute sense; rather, it transforms us and leads us to more informed insights. Since much of this approach is linked to postmodern paradigms, it also can be defined as inherent in the wisdom of everyday living. Isn't this the way we, as human beings, gain life experience and life skills: moving from one experience to the next, from one life lesson to another? What accumulates, of course, is not a catalog of events defined by frequency or location of occurrence, but images, sensations, and perceptions of the critical links and relationships. This accumulation becomes a wide web of practical knowledge which cannot easily be labeled as "true" or "false." Knowledge can only be revealed through an understanding of the cultural discourses within which it

55 Frascara, "Information Design and Cultural Difference."





is embedded. In such an approach, whether the research and design transformations are concerned with peer relationships, work strategies, perceptions of images, or patterns of use in built environments, detached reflection based on a purely theoretical way of thinking is transformed into discussions and negotiations between the researcher and the user-participant.