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Frames of Visibility in Public Places

Jean-Paul Thibaud

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A place is generally considered to be public when it is accessible to all, when every person can be physically present and circulate freely within it. Conversely, a place is considered to be private when access is controlled, reserved to certain people.

Yet physical access is simply one mode of access among others, since our body experiences space through each of its senses: sight, of course, but also hearing, touch and smell. A place can provide partial accessibility without the actual presence of one's body since « the actual senses which measure proximity, which qualify presence, are senses at a distance. »¹ For example, looking through an office window at what is happening in the street or listening to a conversation taking place in an adjacent room are potential modes of access to public places.

Public places can thus be characterized according to their degree of porosity, or according to the possibilities they offer for perceiving objects and people at a distance. Rather than considering the publicness of a place solely as a function of its architectural and spatial form or its degree of openness, it is appropriate to question a full range of sensory qualities of a place².

Between Light and Sight

This paper is based on two fundamental assumptions. First, it is necessary to consider the ordinary experience of city dwellers. While urban planning tends to objectify places by being removed from them³, we are instead interested in the exercise of vision the way it occurs at the eye-level, *in situ*, for pedestrians, in their day-to-day practices. In this sense, the built environment organizes the various viewpoints of passers-by; it can be considered as a context that orients our ways of seeing and interacting in the street. As Deleuze put it: « If architectural structures, for example, are visible, places of visibility, it is because they are not only figures of stone, orderings of things and combinations of qualities, but first and foremost, forms of light which organize the clear and the obscure, the opaque and the transparent, the seen and the unseen, etc. »⁴.

Second, an interdisciplinary approach that involves both architecture and sociology is essential. Public space is simultaneously a built environment and a social setting. Analyzing the visual qualities of urban public space can improve our understanding of the relationship between spatial forms and social interactions. Interaction in public space requires the possibility of seeing, and being seen by, other people. In return, it requires rules of conduct that regulate the exchange of glances between passerby⁵.

On the other hand, buildings can increase or decrease the luminosity of places; they modify light by directing, reflecting, absorbing or bouncing it. Thus, the built environment conditions interpersonal observation, producing diverse circumstances of reduced, contrasted or hypertrophied visibility. How does the luminous dimension of the urban environment relate to the visual dimension of social interactions?

Frames of Visibility

Exposure is one of the basic categories for characterizing people's visual experience of each other in public. It involves being visible and observable by others, and behaving accordingly. Richard Sennett has argued that « fear of exposure » is the main problem of modern public space and that city dwellers have lost the ability to expose themselves and interact with each other⁶.

Although the idea of exposure helps to qualify the nature of interpersonal visibility in public, it is a generic term that fails to account for the full range of conditions that can occur in the luminous urban environment. The notion of *frame of visibility* can help to distinguish different types of exposure, specify the way that architecture conditions seeing in public, and better explain the relationships between light and sight in urban space.

A frame of visibility is a methodological device that helps describe the various luminous contexts in which interpersonal observation occurs. It enables us to specify the basic conditions in which people see and appear to each other. This notion focuses not on what people see in public places but *how* they see, depending on the place they are in. Each frame of visibility stands between two extreme cases that prevent any form of vision: complete brightness and complete darkness.

The five frames of visibility that occur most frequently in the visual experience of city dwellers are overexposure, enclosure, filtering, blurring and silhouetting. These basic phenomena are not exclusive from each other, they sometimes combine or

overlapp according to the spatial position of the observer, and nor is the list is exhaustive.

Overexposure

Overexposure involves a creating differentiation between and a hierarchy among objects in the visual world. It consists of increasing the visibility of a specific object, such as a monument or an individual. This frame of visibility displays passers-by, attracts their visual attention and points out what can or should be seen by anybody.

Such a phenomenon can be produced in two different ways:

- either by making use of contrast between lit space and obscure space (as for example at bus shelters, under awnings or in telephone booths at night),



- or by offering a view from above of what is happening underneath (as, for example, at the terrace of the Rockefeller Center skating-rink or at the belvedere entrance of the Louvre Pyramid). In this kind of situation, people are more or less observable depending on where they are located.

Whatever interpretation we give to this phenomenon, it involves a splitting of status between the passers-by: in one case there are actors (in the « box » or below the terrace) and in another there are spectators (outside the « box » or on the terrace). These urban devices increase the awareness of being potentially watched and intensify the impression of being on stage. They tend to enforce the rules of conduct in public places as well as emphasize the scenic character of the place.

Enclosure

Enclosure involves the delimitation and fragmentation of what can be seen in the built environment. Its function is to structure and direct the visual field of passers-by, to shroud a portion of the place while revealing other parts and unifying what is visible. Enclosure both reveals and hides, depending on the spatial position of the observer. This phenomenon introduces a differentiation between areas that could be considered upstage and backstage.

Passageways, narrow streets without shops and subway corridors are places characterized by a strong sense of enclosure; they tend to orient people to what is directly in front of them by preventing views to the side. Places like these make people visible to each other for extended periods of time.



Windows and other types of penetrations in walls that offer restricted vistas of a place also emphasize enclosure. People look at each other as in a picture frame; they appear when they are situated in the frame and disappear when they walk out of it. Such a phenomenon brings people together for only a brief moment. It produces short glances between passers-by and a limited period of time of interpersonal observation.

Enclosure is possibly one of the most basic experiences of living in a city. It enables us to understand how the built environment conditions the way people temporarily relate to each other and offers specific views of the urban landscape.

Filtering

Filtering involves the quality and the propagation of light in the built environment. By passing through a physical milieu (such as glass or foliage), natural light can be refracted, absorbed or reflected. Filtering produces an ambiguous relationship between the inside and the outside, and creates various types of luminous



surroundings depending on the weather, the season or the time of day.

This phenomenon occurs frequently in places with glass roofs, such as atriums or train stations, and along arcades or shaded paths. In places like these, the lighting of the place is neither completely bright nor totally obscure; instead, the light produces a mottled atmosphere. Such an impressionistic surrounding enhances and transfigures the shapes and the colors of the place.

This frame of visibility creates the sensation of bathlight or a luminous envelope shared by everybody. Such a diffuse light increases the coherence and the unity of the place. People located in this kind of surrounding feel physically bonded with the environment and can also sense the time passing by. The way people appear to each other is constantly changing, depending on the light and shade projected onto their own body.

Blurring

Blurring involves the reducing of visibility of people, making it difficult to perceive the contours and the shapes of objects and bodies. Such a frame relies primarily on a rather problematic relationship between the figure and the ground: the former tends to merge with the latter. Blurring emphasizes the dilution of the visible forms and limits the perception of depth.

This phenomenon occurs naturally in certain weather conditions, such as fog, mist or smog. Some urban waterfalls, tinted glass windows and other types of translucent screens interposed between people can produce a similar effect. In this case, the observer can barely identify the presence of someone else located at the opposite side of the screen. In places that are dimly lit at nighttime, passers-by can have difficulty distinguishing the location of obstacles.

Blurring enables people reduce their visual interaction with other, even to hide; it can be used as what Goffman called an « involvement shield ». A feeling of insecurity, mystery or surprise can result from this luminous context: the pedestrian cannot really anticipate what will be in his path. Such a frame may also be interpreted as a means to enhance the secretive character of a place and dramatize the experience of urban space.



Silhouetting

Silhouetting emphasizes the contour of objects or individuals instead of the details of their surfaces. This frame involves a particularly pronounced figure-ground relationship; it produces a clear differentiation between several juxtaposed planes or visual elements. Backlighting is the most common example.



The transition from a dark, artificially lit place to a bright, naturally lit place, such as the exit from an underground place into the daylight, is the most common context for experiencing silhouetting.

Such a frame reduces the visibility of people's faces, especially their expressions, and tends to make passers-by anonymous, since visual recognition is difficult. However, the perception of the outline occurs only one way around, when the brighter area is in front of, not behind, the perceiver. Thus, this phenomenon involves a non-reciprocal visual relationship between passers-by, a completely different experience depending on the location and orientation of the subject. From an architectural point of view, silhouetting makes it possible to strongly accentuate the transition between two places and clearly differentiate the foreground from the middleground and background.

Conclusion

The notion of frame of visibility is an attempt at linking the design of an urban space to the social relations that occur there. The aim of this paper was not to advance one particular frame of visibility to the detriment of others; it does not argue that any particular frame should be systematically sought out or avoided. Rather, my purpose was to point out some basic criteria that could be useful to architects and urban planners. Three main issues have been suggested:

The relationship between the built and the visible forms. In terms of visual perception, architecture is not merely a juxtaposition of buildings to be seen, it also helps establish the conditions of visual reception. For instance, the built space can

open or block vistas (enclosure), offer a glimpse of specific objects or places (overexposure), emphasize their contours (silhouetting), dilute the visible forms (blurring) or transform them (filtering). Thus, one of the issues in the design of urban space is to consider the patterns of ambient light and the viewing conditions that buildings create.

The reciprocity of interpersonal observation. Architecture can be analyzed as a device that structures the way people relate to each other visually. Each frame of visibility mediates the way that people see each other: differentiation between actors and spectators (overexposure), short glances between passers-by (enclosure), creation of a shared luminous milieu (filtering), reduced mutual visibility (blurring), asymmetrical visibility between passers-by (silhouetting). The goal for architecture should be to incorporate and promote the « civility of the eye » in the design of public places.

The variability of the urban scenery. Too often, places or buildings are described as if they were always experienced the same way, as if they had no temporal dimension. Each frame of visibility emphasizes factors that can change in time and contribute to the visual diversity of a place: body orientations and spatial positions (overexposure, enclosure), weather conditions and time of the day or night (blurring, filtering), directions of walking and transitions from a place to another one (silhouetting). The goal for architecture should be to integrate the plurality of conditions into the singularity of a place, the temporal to the spatial dimensions of the urban environment.

Notes:

¹ Mikel Dufrenne, *L'oeil et l'oreille* (Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 1991).

² Grégoire Chelkoff & Jean-Paul Thibaud, « L'espace public, modes sensibles » in *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine* 57-58 (1993), 7-16.

³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Paris: Minuit, 1986).

⁵ Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places* (New York: The Free Press, 1963).

⁶ Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye* (New York: Knopf, 1990).