

Theatricality in the City: Colfax Avenue

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"Walls, enclosures, facades serve to define both a *scene* – where something takes place – and an *obscene* area to which everything that cannot or may not happen on the scene is relegated: whatever is inadmissible, be it malefic or forbidden, thus has its own hidden space on the near or the far side of a frontier." Henri Lefebvre

Traversing twenty-six miles between the Colorado plains and foothills, Colfax Avenue connects three cities along a multi-faceted urban thoroughfare. Over the 140 years of its existence, the street has experienced a wide range of shifts, influences, structural changes and character assassinations. It has existed as a touchstone of cultural circumstances and has reflected and created urban and suburban identity. As an entryway to the Denver metropolitan area, Colfax has been given a tremendous responsibility to convey suitable first impressions. Its success in this role has been consistently mixed.

In its decisive linearity, emphatic presence, and idiosyncratic character, Colfax Avenue exposes a conflict between continuity and disruption. The continuity of the street's form and its associated infrastructure firmly links the cities of Aurora, Denver, and Lakewood while the diverse programming and inhabitants along the street establishes rifts, dividing the street on the level of individuals, neighborhoods, and municipalities. This dual disposition has established Colfax as a complex environment that defies easy categorization. The complexity apparent in Colfax and the subsequent difficulty in reading such a space is symptomatic of the changing structure and scale of urban development in general. The shifting scales of development leads to fluctuations in the scales of engagement ultimately requiring a reformatting of the tools we use to read and form the urban environment. A conceptual organization that facilitates this reformatting process and fosters a deeper understanding of the potentials inherent in sites such as Colfax, sites that simultaneously connect and divide, may be found in a reading of the urban environment as both absorptive and theatrical.

In this paper I investigate the physical and cultural form of Colfax Avenue through the lens of "theatricality". Working from ongoing research that investigates the significance of theatrical devices for identifying, reading, writing and staging urban environments, I will focus on three elements in my analysis of Colfax Avenue: the boundary, interaction, and sequence. The paper is structured according to three repeating narratives: the history of Colfax Avenue, its physical form, and the theoretical reading.

In 1967 the art historian, Michael Fried, published his seminal essay "Art and Objecthood" where he argues for the characterization of a work of art as either absorptive or theatrical. Fried identifies the former condition as a situation wherein the artwork negates the self-conscious presence of the viewer. This is achieved through the manifest "presentness" of the work of art – the artwork is continuous and instantaneous, having no duration" (Fried 1967). In contrast, theatrical work demands a self-consciousness of the viewer. The theatrical artwork is experienced in a situation that includes the viewer, is incomplete without the viewer, and significantly, is revealed through time (Fried 1967). The aspect of time allows the elements of the work to be recognized individually and in relationship with other elements, thus the work may not be comprehended in an instant, as a whole.

I have chosen to test whether Fried's categorization can be profitably applied in urban analysis. Where Fried is addressing the work of art as an asocial phenomenon, as an urbanist and designer, I am engaged in fundamentally social conditions. Fried champions the absorptive as the appropriate goal for art-making with the theatrical assuming the role of the everyday and the usual, and therefore understood as not a suitable mode for high art. What has become apparent to me is that the current urban condition has been tending toward Fried's absorptive form resulting in the sidelining of occupant participation and interaction. My interest is to recognize moments and forms of theatricality in the urban environment and to

determine the validity and value in reading theatrical space in the contemporary city. In addition to assessing the appropriateness of this methodology as a tool for analysis and identification, my interest is to determine its validity as a methodology for intervention.

The historical growth of Colfax has been reliant on developments in transportation. At its founding Colfax was a dirt trail connecting the central political area of Denver to a burgeoning residential community to the east. Streetcars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries allowed businesses and homes to spread further along the street, pushing east and west from central Denver as the lines were expanded. Real estate speculators bought land along Colfax anticipating increases in land values as streetcars moved further out. To generate income on their property, these investors built one and two-story commercial buildings, known as tax strips, which still stand today. Around the same time, bicycle enthusiasts belonging to the League of American Wheelmen worked to have a cycling path installed along Colfax. In the late 1920s, Colfax was incorporated into US Highway 40. Folks traveling by car began to arrive in droves. Motor courts, gas stations, diners, and other tourist amenities sprung up to accommodate the rush of travelers. Buses were introduced in the late 1920s to be followed by trackless trolleys in the 1940s. With the ever-growing popularity of the private automobile trolley travel obsolete was made obsolete with the last trolley shutting down in 1950.

STORY #1

It is good to hear that the sleazy Chateau Motor Lodge on East Colfax Avenue is being renovated and developed into low-income apartment rentals. The motel, which has been a nuisance property for several years, has been a prime location for drug dealing and prostitution, according to police sources in both Aurora and Denver. The motel was closed in 1996. Before its closing, police made 276 arrests at the motel. Although the number of arrests dwindled after 1996, the motel has remained a nuisance . . . Denver Post, June 8, 2001 pB-6

The 1950s saw the peak of auto-related tourism on Colfax. The spatial character of the street was completely controlled by what was good for the car. Single-story structures with easy access parking were the most common type of construction. The earlier tax strips that fronted the street were now surrounded by buildings with deep set backs to allow for easy, visible parking. The continuous facades of earlier structures were eliminated in favor of freestanding businesses. The number of motels continued to climb reaching a total of ninety-three by 1958. Sidewalks, which were common in central Denver, were rare on the far reaches of Colfax. Pedestrians were virtually nonexistent by this time. All in all, Colfax was a thriving business

corridor by the middle of the century. The opening of I-70 in the mid-sixties would change all that.

The term “theatricality” was coined by the Russian dramatist, Nikolai Evreinov, in the early twentieth-century. Having defined theatricality as “the desire to be different, to do something that is different, to imagine oneself in surroundings that are ‘different’ from the commonplace surroundings of our everyday life.” (Evreinov 1927) Evreinov claimed theatricality to be the obverse of convention. Evreinov saw the condition of theatricality as an antidote to the monotonous routine of daily life:

“The more people came to neglect theatricality, the more they turned from art to life, the more tedious it became to live. We lost our taste for life. Without seasoning without the salt of theatricality, life was a dish we would only eat by compulsion.” (Evreinov 1927).

To realize theatricality in the physical and social realm of the theater, Evreinov began to stage plays where the spectator’s role was transformed from the traditionally passive participant into an active one. The audience now was encouraged to engage the performers by arguing and shouting, eventually transforming themselves into performers. This new way of being was facilitated through increasing theater and stage size so that an audience of actors could be placed on stage for the ‘real’ audience to identify with. In the end, Evreinov sought to reconstruct the spectator into a performing versus passive being.

While stage design was undergoing shifts in form, much theater of the early twentieth-century remained beholden to the early Renaissance and Baroque styles of the proscenium and thrust stage forms. Each of these stages allowed for a clear distinction to be maintained between the positioning of the audience relative to the actors. The shift to the participatory spectator of Evreinov was neither immediate nor complete and thus traditional staging continued the formal distancing of the audience from the action. As with all traditional theater, spectators were required to empathize and identify with the actors and believe in the ‘reality’ of the set. In Fried’s classification of absorption versus theatricality, this traditional theatrical form may be recognized as absorptive.

Both the proscenium and the thrust stage maintained delineation between the on-stage or ‘real’ space and the off-stage or ‘absent’ space. Through identification with the actor, the spectator would believe in the ‘unity’ of place – the continuity of the on-stage with the off-stage – as it was brought into being through the actions and words of the actor. The off-stage exists for the spectator only through the narrative of the actor; it is removed from time and remains physically absent. This different relation to reality allows this offstage ‘space’ to be

configured to remain always present and strongly connected to the public space of the 'on-stage'.

The new interstate system offered tourists an efficient alternative to the endless stop and go of internal streets. These internal thoroughfares saw a dramatic reduction in daily traffic and business fell accordingly. Colfax was no exception. The rerouting of traffic around the central core completely changed the economic viability of the street. The former thriving motel industry declined by 50%. A general decay began to set in. Property values slid downward, vacancies were common, and a dramatic shift in demographics was in full swing. Colfax began to redefine itself through its new population. Various immigrant groups moved onto the street, opening businesses and establishing small, relatively tight knit communities that continue to flourish up and down Colfax today.

The overall economic tenor of Colfax Avenue changed from a predominance of small, family owned businesses to franchise commercial outlets including restaurants, automotive dealerships, and gas stations. Abandoned motels remained standing. Empty parking lots, vacant sites, and economically marginal and locally owned businesses came to define the built character of Colfax Avenue. Surviving businesses relied on local customers rather than tourists.

STORY #2

Jung "Jeremiah" Kong enters La Plaza Mexicana, a sprawling marketplace in a cinder-block building in Aurora, and spots a group of men speaking Spanish as they eye cowboy hats and boots. He gives them a thumbs up and says, "Muy bien!" As he strolls by the car stereo shop he taps his finger on a display case to the beat of the banda music and greets shop owner Tony Torres with a hearty "hello." He makes his way to the carniceria, or butcher shop, and grocery store . . . Denver Post, May 29, 2001, pC-1.

By the 1920s theatricality as a viable dramatic mode was appearing regularly in the work of European dramatists. The spectator as participant served to fundamentally reconfigure the relationship between audience and actors. The spectator became complicit in creating meaning on stage that then could be compared with real life experience. Simultaneously, the role of the actor shifted from one where the character was acted out by the actor to a situation where the actor would 'demonstrate' the part thereby calling attention to the artificiality of the theater and "highlighting the theatricality of everyday life" (Schneider 1995). These theatrical devices were most evident in the Brechtian stage of the twenties and thirties. As I move the concept of theatricality from the theater stage to the urban street some shifts occur. The on-stage space becomes the street, the off-stage becomes the larger cultural condition operating behind the scenes, the spectators are the daily users, and the

actors are the structures and their owners/inhabitants that define the street. This new configuration of the theatrical scene, this transformed performance space, promotes some interesting readings of the city on several scales.

Following Guy Debord's claim that we have become a society of the spectacle where the "spectacle is a tool of pacification and depoliticization" culminating in the "moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life" (Best), I suggest that this condition is readily apparent in the contemporary built environment. The rapid transformation of environments from one predominant form and social condition to another is everywhere apparent. Gentrified neighborhoods, large-scale commercial zones, derelict industrial zones, decaying residential areas, take on Debord's characterization of the spectacular where the various classes including the working class become "distracted and mollified by new cultural productions, social services and wage increases" (Best). The consequences are a certain resignation and acceptance of this condition ultimately leading to complicity in its form and content. The spatial characteristics support the cultural and economic characteristics by creating a continuity of "perfect" space. According to Mike Pearson in *Theater/Archaeology*, this perfecting of space in the realm of performance

"allows a continuity of performing conditions, guaranteeing a similar quality of experience for each audience and of working environment for performers. It allows detailed choreography for known and unchanging dimensions, including speed and dynamism within a small area; the proximity and touch of three-dimensional performers; intimacy; extremes of activity for known surface and the devising of complex and detailed imagery and stage pictures for an unchanging arrangement." (Pearson 2001)

This spatial condition follows the form of traditional staging complete with a backdrop separating on and off stage or in the urban environment separating the immediacy of the street from the conditions that support and maintain it.

In Debord's scheme, the spectacle further deteriorates from the condition of having to merely appearing: "the material object gives way to its representation and draws 'its immediate prestige and ultimate function' as image" (Best). The appearance becomes more important than the actual thing. In urban spaces this is routinely seen in places that replace the specificity of the existing condition with pre-packaged models from elsewhere. The associations connected to these models registers a complete understanding of the physical and social condition without any exploration required. The standard strip mall condition that features Banana Republic, Gap, Gap Kids, Pottery Barn, etc. is a classic example of this. The spectator's role is pre-determined and behavior takes on a compulsory tone.

In contrast, places that cannot cater to this controlled and uniform spectator reveal a complexity and diversity of forms. Again, drawing from Mike Pearson's analysis

"site-specific performances are conceived for, mounted within and conditioned by the particulars of found spaces, existing social situations or locations, both used and disused: sites of work, play and worship. They rely, for their conception and their interpretation, upon the complex coexistence, superimposition and interpenetration of a number of narratives and architectures, historical and contemporary, of two basic orders: that which is of the site, its fixtures and fittings, and that which is brought to the site, the performance and its scenography: of that which pre-exists the work and that which is of the work: of the past and of the present. They are inseparable from their sites, the only contexts within which they are intelligible." (Pearson 2001)

Translated to the urban context, these places cannot or have not been consumed by the spectacle. They remain in flux dependent on the local and adjacent conditions as well as the diversity of occupants to create their form. The character of these areas compels interaction and redefinition by the spectator who in turn adjusts her experiences according to the specific conditions of the scene or street.

Returning to Colfax Avenue we can find evidence of both absorption and theatricality at play. Over the course of its history, Colfax has realized physical, cultural, social and economic shifts up and down its 26-miles. The forties and fifties saw the full realization of an environment that catered virtually exclusively to tourists. Businesses adapted their built form to accommodate the automobile centered travel - motor courts, easy access parking lots, drive-in restaurants. By the early seventies this atmosphere had largely dissipated leaving behind the vacant structures and automobile scaled environment.

Over the ensuing thirty years Colfax has fluctuated dramatically. The two ends of Colfax - the one-third in Aurora and the one-third in Lakewood - have become generally homogeneous in their spatial form and social and cultural makeup. Aurora's Colfax remains scarred by the changes of the sixties. The former tourist motels and motor courts now accommodate short-term stay customers and 'down on their luck' residents. Homeless families are often offered accommodation on holidays. Several manufactured home communities front Colfax and adjacent neighborhoods feature small, often poorly maintained, single family housing. Individually owned businesses cater to the ethnically diverse and typically economically disadvantaged inhabitants of this area. Payday Loan establishments proliferate on East Colfax.

STORY #3

There is advertising on beer trucks and on the floors of grocery stores, so "why not advertise Jesus?" asks Steve Chavis. That's what he's doing as he spends four days walking the 26-mile length of Colfax Avenue dragging a 9-foot cross that rests on a wheel. Since Tuesday, he has walked four or five hours a day. The cross "is not as big as the original one," said Chavis, spokesman for Promise Keepers, the national men's evangelistic organization headquartered in Denver . . . Denver Post, June 1, 2001, pB-4.

Opportunities for business were capitalized on by the seamy side of the population as well. Drug dealers, prostitutes, and their clients flocked to the area, especially the east side. Colfax grew in notoriety as the crime statistics rose. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the street had reached an all time low with crime as high as ever. Nearby residents, law enforcement officials, and city government sought ways to clean up the area. Shutting down businesses that abetted or turned a blind eye to illegal activities, stepping up police presence, and cleaning up the decaying streetscape set the ongoing reclamation of Colfax in motion.

STORY #4

Recently, local authorities shut down six motor courts and motels along Colfax Avenue. A high incidence of prostitution and drug dealing were cited as the primary reason for the closures. Neighbors complained of unsightly activities and unseemly characters populating the area. The majority of these individuals and their disagreeable actions were noted to have occurred at the targeted establishments. The sweep was made as part of the ongoing attempt to clean-up Colfax Avenue. However, this latest effort has met with considerable consternation from the Korean community. All six of the motor courts/motels were Korean owned. Charges of racism have abounded and the City has been unable to satisfactorily allay these concerns voiced by the various concerned parties and the larger community.

Lakewood's Colfax, on the other hand, has seen considerable economic growth since the seventies due primarily to its proximity to established and increasingly desirable suburban neighborhoods west of Denver. Chain stores are numerous including up-market grocery stores and higher end retail franchises. This section of Colfax is predominantly middle class and white.

STORY #5

Colfax Avenue is home to a dense array of businesses catering to the continuous stream of motorists that cruise the street. 1950s

era establishments maintain a highly visible presence all along the corridor and over the years have accrued a varied history. The A Bar D motel at 11891 W. Colfax was home to John Hinckley the week before he shot Reagan. The Bugs Bunny Motel at 6110 W. Colfax was the site of a desperate starlet's attempted suicide in 1958. Since the building is only one-story, her fall was too short to kill her. The Disney Corporation eventually sued the motel and the name was changed to the Big Bunny Motel. Jack Kerouac enjoyed traveling along Colfax and immortalized the street in *On the Road*. Golda Meir once resided at corner of Colfax and Julian joining the robust Jewish community of West Colfax. Her house was subsequently displaced to the Auraria campus. Sexual exploits and illegal activities define many East Colfax motels. Despite repeated attempts to terminate this behavior by city officials, clandestine activity continues to proliferate on the street.

The central section of Colfax Avenue, the portion that crosses Denver, however, has developed into a diverse, complex and sometimes contentious zone. The avenue itself retains traces of its earlier history combining it with contemporary uses and businesses. Adult entertainment theaters abut upscale furniture and clothing stores, strip mall ethnic restaurants sit next to expensive restaurants serving continental cuisine, beat-era bookstores, tattoo parlors, wig shops, and yuppie taverns occupy the same block.

The diversity of the street is inserted into the much more one-dimensional residential fabric that borders it on the north and south. Residents of the adjacent areas, known as Capital Hill and Uptown, have average incomes in the low to mid thirties, are typically professionals and are single or married with no children. The residents of Colfax, on the other hand, are often homeless or low-income single men. Each day a temporary influx of teenagers fills the street. Given this clash of cultural, social and economic make-up of the occupants, the interactions on Colfax begin to take on the quality of theatricality. This theatrical performance of place promotes a continual oscillation between the surface, the immediately legible facades, actors and spectators, and the content, the cultural and social fabric, of the broader Colfax context. This fluctuation results in an active environment that engages and supports various levels of conflict. The site enacts spontaneity inviting investigation, involved living, and participation.

STORY #6

“Colfax on the Hill Inc., a coalition of business owners, proposes zoning changes that would prohibit new tattoo parlors and businesses that offer adult entertainment, as well as auto repair shops, taxidermy operations, exterminators, fireproofing businesses, sign makers, stone and tile workers and gun shops. The group also would limit new liquor stores to 1,500 square feet.

But several longtime business owners in the area disagree with Colfax on the Hill's philosophy. They say that Colfax, though not fancy, matches the surrounding neighborhood and any changes would destroy its character. The zoning 'doesn't improve the neighborhood at all, it replaces it with a yupified version,' said Walt Young, owner of Upper Cut barbershop at 1912 E. Colfax. Young, 69, is known by his Colfax Avenue neighbors as the 'Conscience of Capitol Hill.' For 43 years, he has run a barbershop – complete with a spinning red and white pole and hulking leather-covered barber chairs – in the neighborhood targeted by Colfax on the Hill for rezoning. 'In the jargon of politicians, this is called community development,' Young said in a letter to Colfax on the Hill. 'It is purely dollar driven and it is a glaring example of the disparity between the words and deeds of those who undermine our sense of community while they lay claim to restoring it.' . . . Steve Titus, *The Business Journal*.

Within this spatial-temporal dynamic, there is a continual conflict between the theatrical surface and the abstract or absorptive one. Social, cultural, and economic trends banter back and forth, and in the current formulation of urban landscape, often result in the periodic disappearance of either environment – more typically (and more desirably for economic purposes) the theatrical. What becomes of interest in these scenarios is to understand how this type of conflict may be reintroduced and what form it should take. This initial investigation into the dynamics of Colfax Avenue in which I have outlined a conceptual framework for interpretation sets up a new lens through which to read urban space. Working from the standpoint where theatricality defines spontaneous sites, sites that invite investigation, that are lived in and encourage multiple levels of participation, allows for the understanding of places that differ from their broader context and bring conflict – positive and negative – to their immediate and adjacent environments. The divisive nature ascribed to streets and places such as Colfax can be redefined through the understanding of the theatrical space as a marker or border that consolidates identity without draining it of diversity. A primary goal of this mode of reading urban space is to develop a method for intervention in space that reinforces and promotes the theatrical as a desired environment.

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