

# Constructed Identities

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Yet there is a certain solitude like no other - that of the man preparing his meal in public on a wall, or on the hood of his car, or along a fence, alone.

— Jean Baudrillard<sup>1</sup>

Many variables may affect the homeless person's vision of the city, including mental illness, physical disability, economic poverty, psychological trauma, racial discrimination, gender discrimination, loss of family, drug dependency. Each of these has a different set of issues. Nevertheless, when one chooses to construct a place from which to redefine the city, s/he may be responding to some common notion of place and identity. The homeless person must re-vision the city in order to make a place for himself. This re-visioning happens not only for the homeless individual, but for the rest of the city's occupants as well. A homeless population can radically change the face of the city. I do not speak for the homeless, nor do I wish to silence their speech or their interventions; however, I believe that a closer look at their actions may reveal something about how we all define ourselves as individuals, and how this may begin to influence our construction and articulation of public space and our identity within public space.

Making a claim on public space for the construction of a home, however fragile and tenuous, has a radical political dimension. This act questions the distinction between public and private, spatially as well as politically. The distinction between public and private within the political arena has restricted the scope of public discussion, confining issues such as household, racial identity, and religion to obscure margins. Although the actions of the homeless person in claiming and constructing space in the city are personal acts, these actions take place within the public arena, confronting the understanding of what is public. This struggle to create space is analogous to the struggle of women or minorities to gain an identity within the public discourse.

In her essay, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," bell hooks describes the use of text which enables her to recover who she is. "Language is also a place of struggle."<sup>2</sup> Elements of private speech, such as slang and rhythm, which identify her homeplace, are inserted into the public syntax of proper English. This text allows her to insert her gender and race into public discourse. "Language is also a place of struggle."<sup>3</sup> The language which the homeless person uses is composed of personal possessions, actions, and body movements, which speak to her of her homeplace. This language is inserted into the existing structure of the city—its streets, its buildings and its patterns of activity. These combine to allow the homeless person to construct a space within the public discourse which describes his personal identity and mediates his relationship to the city. The language of the homeless person combines with the syntax of the city to create a new interpretation of architecture.

The desire to construct a voice which speaks of personal identity is strengthened by the exclusion of the homeless person from both social interaction and spatial definitions. To be homeless is to be part of the whole, the social and political structure of the city, but outside the main body. The city is composed of many boundaries, both physical and social, between different classes and races. These boundaries are constructed of social norms which dictate how we approach and interact with one another.<sup>4</sup> However, a more profound edge remains undefined. The social edge between the homeless person and the other occupants of the city has few or no rules of interaction, making orientation difficult, if not impossible. People moving through the city make an effort not to see the homeless. "His is an irrelevant presence, a non-recognized being, a non-admitted existence: a non being being."<sup>5</sup> This being is denied his existence in the public space as he is denied a voice in the public discourse.

The architecture of this social edge also describes non-access. The edge of the city includes the thickness of facades, alleys, back doors, dumpsters, courtyards, etc. It folds into the center of the city through every street. It is this edge which the homeless person occupies, a part of the city but outside of its body, its buildings, and its social and commercial activities. The edge is not the sidewalk itself but the ambiguous space between the publicly owned street (and sidewalk) and the privately owned buildings and parking lots. The homeless person can become a vital part of political activities through the construction of a space which questions the adequacy of the existing social, political, and spatial system. The new space thickens this boundary and makes it habitable.

In her essay "Homeplace," bell hooks describes a journey through hostile territory and the significance of the homecoming, the arrival.

I remember this journey not just because of the stories I would hear. It was a movement away from the segregated blackness of our community onto a poor white neighborhood. I remember the fear, being scared to walk to baba's because we would have to pass that terrifying whiteness — those white faces on the porches staring us down with hate. Even when empty or vacant, those porches seemed to say "danger," "you do not belong here," "you are not safe." Oh that feeling of safety, of arrival, of homecoming when we finally reached the edges of her yard...<sup>6</sup>

For the homeless, home or that sense of arrival is nowhere. Therefore the arrival becomes a process which is continuously re-enacted. Home is no longer just one place; it is a series of locations, cycles, and movement fragmented throughout the city as part of a new construction.<sup>7</sup> Fragments of life are constantly constructed in an attempt to recapture a sense of arrival, of safety within the public space of the city. Private interventions are attempts to make a space that enables one to recover oneself on one's own terms, to BuildDwell.<sup>8</sup>

to be. The city itself must be re-made to accommodate all the functions of a home, becoming a kitchen, a bedroom. The dwelling then becomes a journey throughout the city. Arrivals become temporary patterns of movement in time, which allow the homeless to insert layers of memory within the city. These layers must be continually reestablished as the city changes.

In the following, I will present five vignettes which describe how homeless people claim space within the city. The first three vignettes describe performative space making, how individuals act out spaces with their bodies, their movements and their possessions. The last two will describe structural space making, how individuals claim an existing element within the city which structures their home.

## PERFORMATIVE SPACE MAKING

### I

Everyone in the city makes an effort to see while pretending not to look, to deny the need for a response and to provoke no response from the other. I do not see you, therefore I have no responsibility to you.<sup>9</sup> A homeless face may emerge out of this unrecognizable background through patterns, or it may force itself out of the background through confrontation. The effort to be recognized is practiced with such skill that interpersonal associations are built and maintained. These relationships are important, not only for the aid they offer, but also for the social support.

MAN performs every day. HIS performance attempts to fill the open space of the square, which is formed by overpriced coffee shops and exclusive stores. The MAN is simply dressed. HE stands in the center calling to one who passes. It is difficult to get past without making eye contact. The MAN shapes HIS body to fit yours, crouching one moment and stretching the next. HIS body is HIS tool, HIS political statement, HIS presence. He makes you aware of your presence here. "Your presence is as significant as MINE. demand that you take responsibility." There are those who are happy to see HIM, those who are embarrassed. There are those who have made an enemy of HIM. They do not come here unless they cannot avoid it. The performance becomes suddenly hostile, the space around HIM clears, the hostility evaporates as quickly as it appears and again others are welcome into HIS public space.

This man's effort to be recognized can be related to the political theater described by Brecht, in which the presence of the audience in itself is a form of consent.<sup>10</sup> The audience may not participate without responsibility. If you look at him and do nothing it is a form of consent. This man's presence makes this place a political theater. His presence is a speech act. His audiences are "walkers, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban text they write without being able to read."<sup>11</sup> He reads the text and inserts himself as an intervention, shaping and thickening the text to create a place for himself within the city.

This man's presence contains the three elements of the speech act as described by de Certeau in *The Practice of Every Day Life*.<sup>12</sup> First, the man appropriates language. The "speaker" appropriates both the space in which the speech occurs and the movements of the people he speaks to. Second, the man acts out the place. He moves parallel to the audience expanding the space which he has claimed by claiming the movements of others. The speaker takes the centerline. At the point when a person enters his space he shifts to allow entry and to mark a threshold. He then moves parallel to the person, forcing them to move in a particular direction through the space, often veering to the left or right widening the space of his speech act. He then stops abruptly, marking the extent of the space he has claimed and allowing the people to continue on their own. Finally, he creates relationships among the different positions. He

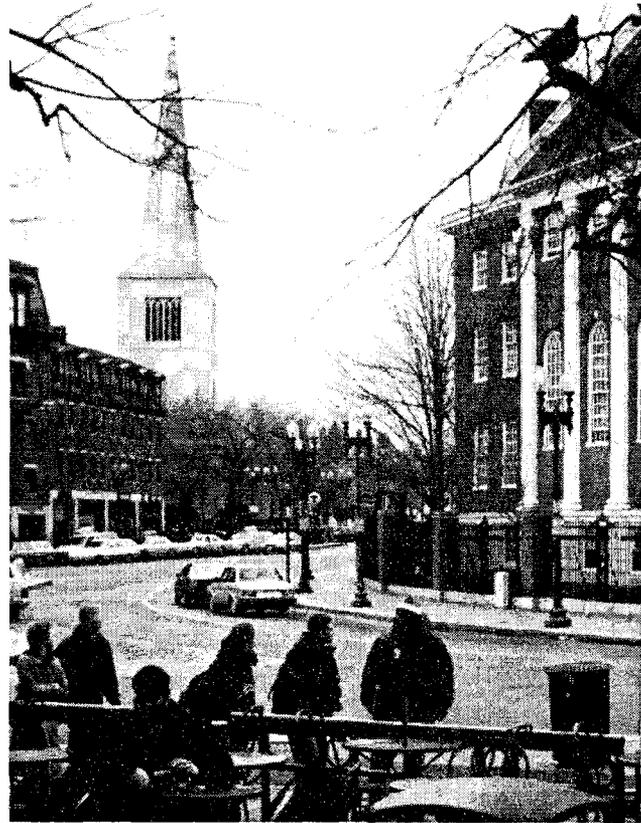


Fig. 1. A MAN performs every day - Cambridge, MA.



Fig. 2. Crouching one moment...

recognizes patterns and acknowledges people he has seen before and who have helped him in the past. He also recognizes and makes people aware of their fear, embarrassment, and social position with respect to his own. The man makes opportunities emerge through his improvisations, transforming himself as a signifier of "homelessness" to an individual. The relationships which he creates with specific walkers serve to undermine the abstract definition of homelessness and the assumptions which it contains. The contact between two concrete others becomes another intervention into the public text.<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 3....Stretching the next.

## II

Territory may be claimed by the simple act of marking spaces. This marking may consist of private actions in the public space. As people move through the space, they see these actions, and to avoid the necessity of acknowledging the action or the person, they veer in another direction. Although the space is not defined by any definite markings, it has a powerful presence as a space. The presence of private actions re-constructs the public space.

a woman. make s the de CisIon, to gi ve up all PRE tE nse of  
pa RtiCi pa ti on in a s Yste m whiCH ex c luDes her. She  
STOPs bAth ing, she H as no shA me. As a child she liF ts her  
sk irt S and PEES.

This woman's presence is announced by the smell of an unclean body. Her lack of acknowledgment for the public in which she lives is a demand not to be acknowledged herself. She exists in a private space of regression. The gesture of lifting her skirt and squatting, and the sudden unexpected nature of the gesture reinforces the private nature of this space. Her performance repels observers and continues to do so for some time, washing the space in ordure. Although territory may be marked by any of a number of mundane acts performed every day — brushing off a place on a bench to sit, spreading a blanket — a homeless person needs to make a stronger claim. After the passage of the actual person, the claim remains as the ordure.

## III

The homeless person has a minimum of materials which s/he can use to construct an arrival. Usually these possessions are restricted to what can be carried or fit into a cart. This adds to the subtlety of the discourse which the homeless person can describe. Often in this society we define ourselves by what we own. For a homeless person the accumulation of possessions may be even more significant. Possessions may be the building blocks for the construction of arrivals through out the city, as well as the only means of personalizing these arrivals. The space of safety follows one around, surrounding one in boundaries which can feel as real as walls.

woman has four full shopping carts.  
she moves through the city all day.  
the only pattern is the movement itself.  
She aligns the carts in two rows of two,  
she remains always between the carts.  
or in front of the cart being moved.  
of the space the carts describe when

she crosses the space seven times  
the front - right basket is pushed;  
the front - left basket is pushed;  
the back - right basket is pulled;  
the back -left basket is pulled.  
she occupies this space as a home.  
she holds a hand mirror  
if someone approaches the space  
she yells obscenities at them.  
the pattern is repeated

the carts are opaque.  
the carts mark her territory.  
she may go anywhere.  
making a rectangle.  
she moves directly behind,  
she moves on the center axis  
she goes back for the next.  
making it her own.  
she returns on the central axis;  
she returns on the central axis;  
she returns on the central axis;  
she space is completed.  
she faces one cart  
she brushes her hair.  
while she performs a private act.  
they move away ashamed.  
indefinitely all day.

The woman's pattern is expressive of the need to claim space. The space is claimed by the repetition of the movement and the ability of the movement to set limits. Inhabiting the city as house is dependent on the ability of the occupant to set limits, defining the end of the public and the beginning of private space.<sup>14</sup> The carts fragment the space around it while allowing the space within to remain legible and whole, defining clear limits of the space which expands and contracts around the woman as she moves through the city. This space is avoided entirely by walkers. The carts mark the woman as a homeless person but they also clearly define the limits of her space and therefore of the public space around her. The carts further define limits through their contents and the way the woman relates to them at a given moment. One cart contains clothing, another blankets and sheets, another a mirror, a brush, toiletries, towels, another personal objects. Anything which is precious like the mirror is wrapped in cloth to remain hidden until it is used. Each cart defines a portion of the house—the bathroom, the bedroom, the living room. The woman acts out the space of a house, relating to each cart differently. Although the configuration of the carts does not change, the space is transformed when it is used differently. When the woman unwraps an item she reinforces her arrival by personalizing the space and allowing for the performance of private actions. The act of facing the bathroom cart and brushing her hair in the mirror changes how the walker reads the space and the degree of privacy which the space demands. The woman's actions are just as effective in setting limits as the carts themselves are.<sup>15</sup>

## STRUCTURAL SPACE MAKING

### IV

Bernard Tschumi defines violence to architecture as the intrusion of a human body into a given space, the intrusion of one order into another.<sup>16</sup> Spaces which were made as boundaries or projections become a unique opportunity for shelters, which attach themselves to buildings to take advantage of structure or protection from the elements. In this way the homeless person reconstructs the face of the city. The public space is redefined as contradictory forms of occupation describe different levels of meaning, both in terms of

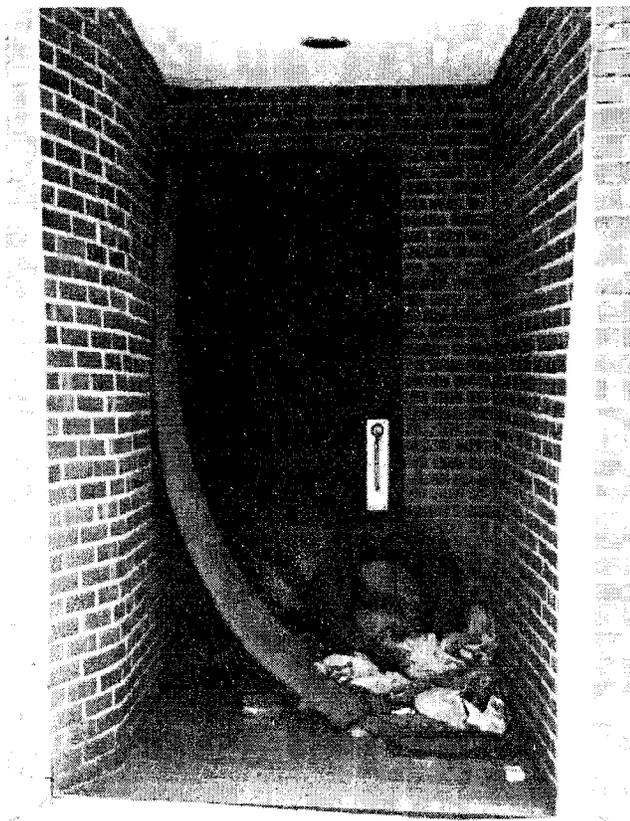


Fig. 4. Abandoned intervention site - Boston, MA.

how we see the city and how we see ourselves reflected in the city.<sup>17</sup> The city is completed to include the body of the homeless person. Shelters may consist of many layers of clothing, creating grotesque figures which fold into doorways or spaces between bay windows. These figures speak of the violence of living in public space without shelter; violence perpetrated both on the body, the individual, and on the space itself.

woman curls into a doorway. She wears many layers of clothing, becoming shapeless, masking her femininity. She has composed a structure of newspapers and cardboard. She stares out back to the wall, senses tuned to the slightest noise. She is almost entirely covered, disguised. Her posture is defensive. She is hiding, struggles to remain awake. She is still, sleep takes and body relaxes, posture remains defensive. If the city remains quiet, she will sleep through the night.

The woman has constructed a mask out of the city. The mask is composed of many layers which create an interior space around her body, protecting it from cold, the view of the walker, and physical harm. The layers of clothing mask her body, its shape, and its response to being viewed. The viewer sees only a mass with angry eyes. The movement of the viewer prevents the viewer from noticing further details; thus, the speed of the city also acts to reinforce the mask. The second layer of the mask is composed of the city's waste: newspapers, cardboard; sometimes larger elements such as scraps of wood or a tire can be used to strengthen the opacity of the mask. The third layer of the mask, the woman's awareness of the city, prevents the elements of the mask from making the woman invisible. When a person glances into the space they encounter her angry eyes, her awareness. The mask is one of silence only to the extent that the view of the woman is obscured. The woman's view cannot be blocked. She has a need to be aware which prevents her from being completely



Fig 5. Tent structure of blankets and clothing - Albuquerque, NM

silent or passive. Her awareness is her final protection. She creates a projection of herself which prevents entry into the niche. "...filling (the space) with (her) own personality until she thought no more of (her space) room than of herself."<sup>18</sup> She loses awareness when she sleeps; however, her posture retains indications of it. The body itself becomes the final mask.

## V

Transitory buildings are fleeting forms that exist and move on; however, they do leave an imprint on their sites. The presence of the doorway always remains as the site of an intervention and elements of the intervention may remain long after the home has been abandoned. There are homes which exist only at night. These homes remain present during the day because their memory changes our reading of the city.

a man claims a parking lot in the city. at rush hour he returns and settles into his space as the city empties. he has carefully chosen his space at the edge of the lot. he is a part of both the publicly owned street and the privately owned lot but not fully a part of either. when the parking lot clears he builds his shelter. it is sited so he can see the lot and surrounding streets easily, but he is inconspicuous. here there is a steel pipe set into the concrete. he builds his shelter incorporating the steel pipe and the scale of two bushes which help to camouflage his army-green construction. the tent is constructed from blankets and outer layers of clothing. the tent is constructed on a floor which consists of backpacks, cardboard boxes, and more blankets, which he is seen carrying during the day. the shelter faces away from the street opening into the parking lot and surrounds a small outdoor space. the man occupies the opening in the tent until the street is quiet enough for him to sleep. by morning he is already gone. his presence remains in the form of the steel pipe set in the concrete. those who have seen the tent cannot see the pipe without seeing the tent.

This man has chosen to become a part of the city only at night when it is abandoned. However his intervention remains throughout the day through the operation of memory. Memory as we experience it can be described as a series of layers which combine to help us interpret the space around us and respond to changes in that space. It is reconstructive; memory detects inadequacy in the present view, and reconstructs it to include past experiences of the space.<sup>19</sup> When the man is seen during the day, his presence is reconstructed to include his shelter, and to reinforce his claim on a part of the city. The scale of his presence is distorted by the shelter, which he carries on his back. The shelter is dramatically transformed when it becomes a backpack; however, it recalls the tent in its color, materiality, and scale. It also begins to suggest how the shelter is constructed. The

materials used in the foundation of the tent are present on the outside of the backpack: the cardboard, the frame. The rope used to anchor the shelter to the pipe ties the backpack together. The discreet nature of the shelter is also reflected in the man's posture and his obvious desire not to be seen. He slumps, relegating the daytime activities of the city to the unfocused background. His posture recalls the image of him lying on the shelter waiting for the city to quiet down. The memory of the shelter helps to transform the man's presence in the city during the day into a private occupation of space to be respected and avoided by the walker.

To live is to leave a trace. The steel pipe becomes the trace of this man's life. During the day, the pipe becomes strange in the presence of the cars. Its relationship to the bushes is more comfortable. The space of the shelter as well as the small outdoor space that the shelter describes is still present between the bushes. To those who have seen the shelter, the space becomes a gap, an emptiness which describes the inadequacy of the city to provide a space for this man. The space becomes a memory shadow. The presence of the object alters the ground and remains present in its absence as a fleeting shadow which is washed away by the cacophony of the city. The pipe remains.

### CLOSING REMARKS

"For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer, whether he acts from natural necessity or out of free will, is the disclosure of his own image."<sup>20</sup> The homeless person is constantly engaged in self-creation in order to come to terms with his/her relationship to the changing city around her. This form of self-examination is necessary for survival. Although her first concern is survival, her actions are not different from radical actions or statements, which are performed for the sole purpose of changing public discourse. Survival is a political act. The "speech" of the homeless person is not less significant because she uses a language of survival, of body and territory.

"Language is also a place of struggle."<sup>21</sup> The language used by the homeless person in claiming his space is the appropriation of architecture. Space is defined and constructed within the city using the body, personal artifacts, found objects, and memory. The space of the city becomes a found object, the raw material to be manipulated in the creation of shelter. A new architectural interpretation is created out of a need for survival. This language is as powerful in its fleeting nature, its absence, and its memory as in its presence, affecting the way everyone experiences the public space of the city.

### NOTES

I would like to thank Bryan Benham, Patricia Boge, Denise Dea, and Roo Heins for their comments and criticisms of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> For a more complete discussion of social orientation see Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 153-159.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>6</sup> bell hooks, "Homeplace a Site of Resistance," in *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, p. 148.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), pp. 143-162.

<sup>9</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, pp. 153-159.



Fig. 6. Tent structure lost in the city.

<sup>10</sup> This idea comes from discussions with Elaine Scarry about Bertolt Brecht, "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 33-42.

<sup>11</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (California: University of California Press, 1988), p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>13</sup> For a more in-depth a discussion of the "concrete other" see: Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self, Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 158-170.

<sup>14</sup> Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 18-25.

<sup>15</sup> Much of the analysis of the previous paragraph was inspired by: Diana Balmori and Margaret Morton, *Transitory Gardens, Up-rooted Lives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 123-125.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>18</sup> Marcel Proust, "Swann's Way", *Remembrance of Things Past* (Random House, Inc., 1981), pp. 10,11.

<sup>19</sup> John Morton, "Memory," *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Samuel Guttenplan (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1995), p. 438.

<sup>20</sup> Dante Cited by Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 175.

<sup>21</sup> bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, p. 146.