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Disjunctive Visions: A reading of Georg Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life”

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Disjunctive Visions

A reading of Georg Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life”

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Abstract

This thesis aims to study the specific theme of insecurity and its spatial manifestation as walls, fences and related physical objects and electronic accessories of division that create and enhance spatial divisions, as well as restrict access to homes, buildings, and installations in the twentieth century metropolis. The ideas of insecurity and its spatial manifestations investigated here will be grounded in Georg Simmel’s classic essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, first published in 1903.

To that end, the primary exploration of the thesis revolves around the semiotic and psychological experiences of the individual that arises from his interaction with the visual aspects of elements of spatial division such as gates, fences, surveillance mechanisms and walls. How does the shared cognitive outlook of fear that arises from such experiences influence the conceptualization of public space in the city? How does the conceptualization of the contemporary city as an idea rooted in the production and consumption of space inform urban spatial expression? If applicable, what are the limitations of such analogies as reflected in the writings under investigations. If not applicable, what are the possible common denominators of the ideas of insecurity in the writings.

Thus, the primary argument of this essay is: following a careful investigation of Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, one might discover that urbanization and its spatial manifestation in the spaces of division- engenders a particular kind of struggle that is focused on meeting the needs of everyday existence- creates a space of interaction that encourages individual insecurity, loss and alienation within the contemporary metropolis.
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Chapter One: Views of Simmel

General Introduction

This thesis explores the semiotic and psychological alienation that arises from living in contemporary cities, as expressed in Georg Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” first published in 1903, and referenced in various works by thinkers such as Marxist philosophers Georg Lukacs and Ernst Bloch, the existentialist philosopher-theologian Martin Buber, the philosopher-sociologist Max Scheler, and the social historian Bernhard Groethuysen, as well as American sociologist Robert Park and urbanist Richard Sennett. In their criticism of mass culture and mass society Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and the other representatives of the Frankfort school of neo-Marxist sociology as well as modern German philosophers from Nicolai Hartmann to Martin Heidegger are indebted to Simmel.

In his essay, Simmel explores the emerging urban experience in the industrializing countries at the turn of the century and identifies for the first time the urban affliction which he termed a blasé attitude and which, as the idea spread widely in the twentieth century, has come to be known as urban alienation. As Simmel argues, the alienation experience is intrinsic to the physical and social construct of the metropolis itself, as it came to develop under the stimulus of industrial revolution in the nineteenth century. As industrialization deepened and widened in the twentieth century, so also did urban alienation in its various manifestations. In the context of this paper, alienation refers to the individual's estrangement from the traditional community and the unresponsiveness of the society as a whole to the

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2 Ibid.
individuality of each member of the society. Such manifestations develop from the interaction between the various spaces of mental stimulation, real and imagined, that coalesce to produce the urban space as Simmel’s “exemplary place for interdependence.”³ From amongst the multitudinous aspects of city life, this paper analyses how forms and means of spatial division- as represented by explicit physical barriers (gates, walls) and the resultant implicit semiotic barriers- inform our understanding of the subjective nature of individual alienation within the objective structures of the metropolis. This paper also examines Simmel’s perceptions in relation to the sudden burst of urban growth in industrializing Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as a summary of Simmel’s observations and arguments leading to his seminal finding of the occurrence of the “blasé attitude” affecting urban society, which in post-World War I decades came to be termed as “urban alienation.”⁴

The Perspective

Georg Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life” has been receiving much attention and accolade from urban planners and sociologists in recent decades, which is rather remarkable for a short essay which saw the light of the day nearly a century back. The essay received scant attention until the 1950s, at least in the urban literature in English, most likely because its English translation came to be published in 1950. Simmel did have a direct connection with the influential Chicago social sciences school joined in 1916 by Robert Park, who had studied with Simmel. Initial studies emanating from the Chicago school did show a

³ Ibid.
⁴ The concept of alienation used here is derived from the philosophical work of G W F Hegel and Karl Marx, and later applied in a sociological perspective (anomie) to depict urban powerlessness in Western industrial society by Emile Durkheim in his work Suicide, A Study in Sociology, trans. John A. Spaulding, George Simpson, ed., with a foreword by George Simpson (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951).
distinct Simmellian influence, with its focus on human behavior as determined by social structures and physical environmental factors in order to explain different types of individual and social phenomena.\(^5\) Robert Park picked up on Simmel’s idea of social boundaries, applying it to issues of race and social class. This did not persist as Simmel’s vision of the city as a whole, however, differing from the Chicago School’s later understanding of the city a collection of small communities.\(^6\)

The waxing and waning of Simmel’s eminence and influence as an urban thinker over the past century is intriguing in itself, but possibly has a bearing also on how the urban situation has evolved during the twentieth century and how this came to be perceived by the discipline of urban studies as it took shape in post-World Wars I and II in America and Europe. Simmel was unable to develop a consistent sociological or philosophical system, and therefore did not succeed in creating a “school” which carried on his legacy. His seminal ideas attracted many like Robert Park, but none claimed to be his disciples because Simmel offered mainly a collection of ideas and insights, rather than a theory or method that others might adopt. Possibly Simmel was ahead of his time in his perceptions about the emerging urban society at the turn of the century and thus was not understood for years to come.

The emerging metropolitan situation that Simmel had in mind was very likely that of Berlin, where he was born and educated and spent most of his academic and social life. Georg Simmel was born on March 1, 1858, in the very heart of cosmopolitan Berlin, the corner of Leipzigerstrasse and Friedrichstrasse. This location would compare to the position presently held by Times Square in New York City - characteristically appropriate for a man who lived his life in era marked by the confluence of multiple influences and a multiplicity of moral directions.\(^7\) In a sense Simmel was the modern urban man, without roots in traditional folk culture.\(^8\) Upon reading Simmel's first book On Social Differentiation (1890), F.


Toennies wrote to a friend: “The book is shrewd but it has the flavor of the metropolis.”
Simmel lived his life like “The Stranger,” his essay published in 1908; he was near and far at the same time, a “potential wanderer; although he [had] not moved on, he [had] not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going.”

The Individual, The Metropolis and Mental Life: A Broad Summary

In “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Simmel details the psychological life of the modern urban person as a cosmopolite tied to the intellectual setting of Berlin in the creation of the modern city. Looking out on to the streets of Berlin, Simmel identifies emerging relationships between the individual and his built environment as a result of changes in the socio-cultural fabric of the metropolis. Exploring the impact of metropolitan life on the mental state of “thinking people,” Simmel sees the origin of the cold, intellectual and blasé attitude of urbanites developing from the excessive psychic stimulation and the pressure of the capitalist market to reduce all social encounters to the equivalent of exchange of value.

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9 Ibid.
11 Coser, pg. 124-170
12 Simmel, *Metropolis*, pg.53
13 The usage of the term ‘thinking people’ sees Simmel establish an intellectual contrast between metropolitan in habitants and those of small towns/ rural settlements. Simmel, pg52
The Psychological Conditions of the Individual in the Metropolis

All of Simmel’s work is firmly rooted in metropolitan life and establishes the conception of Modernity as a hypertrophic development where the stimulating experiences of city life, through result of the multiple interactions with individuals and metropolitan structures, provides psychic nourishment/debilitation for the individual. Simmel establishes the “metropolitan type of individuality” as a product of the perceptual differentiation the individual experiences from the ever-changing impressions of city life.\(^{14}\) The multiplicity of images, influences and impressions creates a setting that presents the urban life in the metropolis in a unique context, in contrast to pre-metropolitan life in the small town. Existing in a state of perpetual heightened sensory awareness, the metropolitan individual faces a continual struggle to maintain his identity in the face of rapidly changing images and variations of his external environment that force him to develop an intellectualized (objective) outlook to his space. For Simmel, the struggle of the individual to maintain his identity in the face of social forces of historical heritage and external culture was one of the deepest problems of modern life.

Simmel’s metropolitan man, a “differentiating creature,”\(^{15}\) derives his individuality from the “intensification of nervous stimuli.”\(^{16}\) According to Simmel, the pronounced and continual differences between environmental impressions provides the distinguishing characteristics for the metropolis over other forms of human settlement, such as small towns and other provincial clusters. Such a statement paraphrases the role of subjectivity in determining the individuality of the metropolitan dweller. Simmel also clearly places the

\(^{14}\) Ibid, pg 48.

\(^{15}\) Simmel, *Metropolis*, 48.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
individual in the metropolis as a unique product of these circumstances by contrasting the psychological basis of the metropolis from the non-urban concentrations of rural life. In doing so, he emphasizes the difference in the germinal basis of existence of the urban and the pre-urban realm at the time of his writing (1903), marking out the structures of the metropolis as a unique social construct that cannot be understood from an extrapolation of traditional urban thinking.

...rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions...With each crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life, the city sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life. 17

Simmel places the individual in the metropolis as a unique entity in his psychological consciousness, possessing a more sophisticated and discriminating outlook than his rural counterpart. The environmental sophistication of the metropolis draws from the individual a discriminating outlook from his heightened awareness and the “predominance of intelligence” that for Simmel comes to define metropolitan life. 18 This is a result of the environment of the metropolis which provides the individual with a consciousness distinct from one possessed by a non-metropolitan individual. Consequently, this “sophisticated character,” which will later find a literary equivalent in the work of Baudelaire and Benjamin, exhibits that “heightened awareness” of his environment and uses his surroundings to define his place in the metropolis.

The Sensory Identity

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
With each crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life, the city sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life. 19

The heightened perception of emotional relationships between the individual and his environment creates the sensory identity of the metropolis. Simmel suggests that the metropolitan man comes about through an increased awareness of the environment around him and by reading his world through the differentiation in impressions. Simmel recognized this as natural condition of the metropolitan environment due to the increased objectivity of the social structures that define metropolitan life, with the “money economy” as the primary factor casting an objective shadow over all other relationships that form the “multiplicity and concentration of economic exchange.” 20

Through the calculative nature of money a new precision, a certainty in the definition of identities and differences, an unambiguousness in agreements and arrangements has been brought about in the relations of life-elements - just as externally this precision has been effected by the universal diffusion of pocket watches... If all clocks and watches in Berlin would suddenly go wrong in different ways... all economic life and communication of the city would be disrupted...Thus, the technique of metropolitan life is unimaginable without the most punctual integration of all activities and mutual relations into a stable and impersonal time schedule. The relationships and affairs of the typical metropolitan usually are so varied and complex that without the strictest punctuality in promises and services the whole structure would break down into an inextricable chaos. 21

As a product of the monetary economy of capitalism, the metropolis tends to reduce all transaction to an exchange value. The inherent layering that characterizes an emotional relationship is distilled in a value-based economy to one of direct dealing consistent with a numerical operation. Similarly, the semiotic exchange in this metropolis between signs and the reader of signs, the individual, is stripped down to a calculative communication. This

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid, 50.
21 Ibid. 50.
removes any imponderables from the equation of semiotic exchange, lest such an exchange be subjected to varying interpretations. By linking the “dominance of the intellect” as the psychological basis of individuality with the money economy, one can effectively understand all forms of exchange in the metropolis, be it social, cultural, political or artistic, as a question of “How much?” The reduction of all quality and individuality in the metropolis to a matter-of-fact exchange lays down the cause of alienation of the individual from such a system by highlighting the incompatibility of human relationship and human reactions with the logical operations that define rational operations of a pecuniary nature.

Punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence and are not only most intimately connected with its money economy and intellectualist character. These traits must also color the contents of life and favor the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses which aim at determining the mode of life from within, instead of receiving the general and precisely schematized form of life from without. Even though sovereign types of personality, characterized by irrational impulses, are by no means impossible in the city, they are nevertheless, opposed to typical city life. 22

By precisely defining identities and differences, the objective aspects of the metropolis that inform metropolitan life serve to determine the life of individuals from without, and filter out influences that inform from within the individuals life. The precise definition of identities and differences creates a shared understanding of the structure of metropolitan life, akin to Simmel’s analogy of clocks and punctuality that present a system where “agreement and arrangement” relationships are understood at a common level. Just as time is codified as a basis for metropolitan life, space is similarly codified to an objective existence, with a clear definition of uses and meanings, bounded by real and virtual barriers. These barriers, in defining the terms of access, are responsible for setting the time on Simmel’s proverbial clock that runs the urban space.

22 Simmel, Metropolis, 50.
The quality of punctuality in Simmel’s essay that serves to order the operation of actions in the metropolis, also lays down the groundwork for the impositions of rules in time and space. Such rules, which Simmel considers typical of city life, encompass restrictive measures, such as visual and physical barriers, to access of space. Widespread examples of such spatial rules include gates that permit access to neighborhoods during certain hours, security barriers that deny visual access to urban landmarks and restricted access to public squares during specific times of the year. These examples complement Simmel’s clocks, which tell us when to act by informing (or ordering by way of denial) where to act. Simmel recognizes the restrictive nature of such measures when he refers to them as determining the mode of life of the individual from without instead of from within the individual. The metropolis in its extant form appears to have taken the decisions for the individual beforehand.

A Blasé Attitude

Simmel saw the “exactness and minute precision of the form of life” as promoting an objective impersonality countered within the individual by a highly personal subjectivity. The rapid changing of contrasting impulses resulted in an attitude famously described by Simmel as “blasé.” The usage of the word “blasé” in this context does not refer to a surfeit of pleasure, instead it should be understood as a form of indifference adopted by the individual to forms of extant environmental communication. In such a development, Simmel saw the enhancement of metropolitan intellectuality. His references to such traits has a contradictory tone, as it is the state of being blasé that permits an individual to filter out redundancies and

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23 Simmel, Metropolis, 50

repetitive impulses, while at the same time the blasé state arises from the incapacity of the individual to react appropriately to sensations around him.

Simmel elaborates on this apparent inconsistency by presenting the essence of the blasé attitude as the “blunting of discrimination.” Such a condition reduces the preference of one object over another. In effect, this act appears to erode the subjectivity of the conception of the urban environment in a manner similar to the objective role of the money economy overriding subjective exchanges amongst the relationships that constitute a metropolis. The importance of the money economy in urban life results in people ignoring the individuality of others. In fact, Simmel uncovers a similar vein in his essay.

[The Money Economy and the Metropolitan Intellect] share a matter-of-fact attitude in dealing with men and with things; and, in this attitude, a formal justice is often coupled with an inconsiderate hardness…money expresses all qualitative differences of things in terms of "how much?" Money, with all its colorlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability. All things float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money. All things lie on the same level and differ from one another only in the size of the area which they cover.

Simmel’s elegant term “equal specific gravity” sums up the whole basis of his argument. He refers to the metropolis as a site of the individual’s highest level of peak stimulation. In attaining a state of peak stimulation, the individual conversely stops reacting to further stimulation, effectively devaluing the objective world around him that supplies the stimulation as he is unable to respond to further stimulation. Thus the over-stimulation is rendered meaningless. Simmel further states that such a devaluation of the objective world

26 Ibid.
translates into a devaluation of the subjective world (the mental state) of the individual as the subjective world is derived from the objective world.

Simmel finds the mental attitude of urban dwellers towards one another to be one of reserve. Such a reserve becomes a natural product of the amount of external contacts the individual is subjected to in the course of living in a metropolis. Just as the individual becomes blasé to the multiple impulses that characterize the metropolis, the individual develops a sense of blasé-ness (aversion) towards other people - one that Simmel refers to as reserve. The roots of such a reaction are seen in the earlier position of the modern metropolis as being distinct from its precedents in terms of habitat. A commonality in all the traits that is exhibited by the metropolitan man appears to be one of denial. From his blasé attitude to his reserve in dealing with others of his kind, the metropolis demands from the individual a sense of aversion, psychological detachment and indifference. This feeling is heightened when we consider Simmel’s contention that the individual in his dealings within the metropolis still feels distinct psychic reactions to impressions of other people but has to selectively override such unconscious feelings to present a state of indifference.

Simmel finds such a condition to be a mode of self-preservation for the individual dealing with a large city. In other words, a sense of detachment and indifference - and consequent disconnection from the social structures is a result of the experience of living in a metropolis. Such a condition alters the role of the individual’s identity in such a metropolis of emergence and disappearance, based upon the circumstances. This sort of dichotomy is traditional to metropolitan life, and Simmel finds dissociation to be an elemental form of socialization. In his dealings with social structures, the metropolitan man deliberately estranges individuals and structures in order to realize his freedom.
For Simmel the metropolis provides a break from the narrow boundaries of traditional society. “These barriers were such that under them modern man could not have breathed.” He places the metropolis in direct opposition to the barriers of small towns and medieval (traditional) urbanism, and distinguishes the metropolis through the freedom of movement it permits the individual and the ability to distinguish himself through differentiation. The isolation of the individual by the metropolis, which sets his free from the limiting expectations and the provincial ties of the small town, increases his individual freedom and intellectual maturity. The size of the metropolis permits individual freedom through social development. The specialization and differentiation that is inherent in the functioning of the metropolis permits the individual to assume membership of multiple domains - domains that extend beyond traditional roles of tribe and community. In effect, the metropolis provides the individual the ability to construct and engage multiple identities. The resolution of these multiple identities (guild, family, neighborhood, entertainment, association, aspirational, religious, political etc.) creates a space of freedom. The negotiation of this space of freedom comes about through the act of roaming and lingering - the realm of the Flâneur.

The tremendous agitation and excitement, the unique colorfulness of Athenian life, can perhaps be understood in terms of the fact that a people of incomparably individualized personalities struggled against the constant inner and outer pressure of a de-individualizing small town. For Simmel, to become an “individual” in the metropolis implies acquiring metropolitan traits in the individual’s outlook. Simmel contrasts “individuality” and “de-individuality” when he talks about the ancient Athenian way of life. In doing so, Simmel establishes the small town as having a de-individualizing nature, implying an absence of a space of freedom that is the requirement for individuality. Conversely, by suggesting the existence of individuality in the metropolis, Simmel clearly establishes a zone of personal freedom within the overwhelming objective structure of the metropolis.

27 Simmel, Metropolis, 54.
28 Simmel, Metropolis, 55.
The site of freedom

In “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Simmel sees the metropolis as becoming the locale of freedom for reasons quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative reason is the increase in size and population of the metropolis over previous modes of settlement; the metropolis offers greater options for the individual to expand his circles of interaction and stimulation. It is the qualitative reason that becomes the critical differentiating factor between the metropolis and other forms of settlement. Simmel sees the city as the “seat of cosmopolitanism,” in the sense of the city dweller being free from attachments or prejudices that characterize life in small towns. In becoming the site of freedom, the metropolis presents an inclusive character where everything that falls within the human domain becomes part of it and is nurtured by the metropolis. According to Deena Weinstein, Simmel sees the whole realm of culture, wherever it originates, open to the metropolis and subsequently to the individual.29

According to Simmel, the ever-widening horizons of the metropolis are seen to expand in geometric progression and quasi-automatic fashion. Therefore every step in such a growth of the citizens of a metropolis becomes larger than the previous step. Simmel sees the economic, personal and intellectual relations as the mainstays of the intellectual predominance of the city over the non-metropolitan domain. “Every gain in dynamic extension becomes a step, not for an equal, but for a new and larger extension. From every thread spinning out of the city, ever new threads grow as if by themselves.”30 Simmel contrasts such growth in the sphere of life of the metropolis with the self sufficient nature of

29 Ibid
30 Simmel, Metropolis, 57.
the small town where changes in the qualitative aspect of life is matched by its quantitative aspects. In the metropolis, Simmel finds the quantitative aspects transform into qualitative traits that develop through boundless expansion as a result of the intellectual basis of development. The “inner life” of the metropolis has a domain that is a function of intellectual thinking, instead of its physical domain. It is this breaking out of the realm of the physical that concretizes the metropolis as the site of freedom. The metropolis becomes independent of the individuals that comprise it and its functional extension transcends its physical borders.  

This functional extension of the metropolis means the role of the individual does not end with the limits of his body or the limits of his worldly (mundane) physical activities. Simmel interprets the true existence of a metropolis as a domain that presents the range of the individual that arises from his temporal and spatial intellect. Such an interpretation brings a shift in the understanding of the metropolis. For example, the metropolis becomes a site that extends beyond its physical confines into a domain that consist of its spatiality, its semiotic and metropolitan imaginaries that arise from its existence. In the popular media of Hollywood films of the 1930s and later Bollywood films of the 1960-70s, the city becomes a beacon of promise, free from the oppression of rural life and with the freedom of boundless opportunity. The metropolis becomes the site and symbol of the experience of the “particularity and incomparability” of the individual, presenting such qualities in its way of

31 Simmel’s notion of the expansion of the metropolis find a manifestation in the matter of globalization and of cities across the world whose presence, through the real and the virtual, extends beyond their regional and national identities.

32 Such a representation brings forth the illusionary semiotic of the city as a space of freedom, for the reality of the city as presented by neo-realist film makers such as Satyajit Ray & Vittorio de Sica show a vastly different picture, one of debilitating oppressiveness of urban life.
In such an understanding, the freedom that the space of the metropolis bestows upon the individual goes beyond the rights of social, physical and visual access, to one where the individual is able to determine a way of life that “has not been superimposed by others.”

The specialization that comes through the economic constitution of the city results in an inherent differentiation between the role of the inhabitants, which in turn creates personal differences amongst individuals. These differences transition into the individualization of psychic and mental traits amongst individuals. The individual, in asserting his identity as derived from the freedom that the metropolis provides, has to expend proportionate energies to match the scale of his audience. The ever-expanding domains of the metropolis require a modification in the approach of the individual expressing his (social, economic and cultural) identity. The individual tries to be different through the adoption of “tendentious peculiarities” or what Simmel calls “extravagances of mannerism” and “caprice.” The vast distances of detached mental space that characterize the psychic landscape of the metropolis make it harder still to derive an identity from the sense of awareness of others as well as the brevity of contact that the scale of the metropolis permits means that the individual has a brief moment to communicate an image of himself.

The objective and the subjective

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33 Simmel, *Metropolis*, 56.

34 Ibid.

35 The audience here refers to the individual’s selective peer groups in the metropolis at large. All falling outside these groups are detached from the individual’s mental space (blasé-ness)

36 Simmel, *Metropolis*, 56.
“...in law, in the technique of production as well as in art, in science as well as in the objects of the domestic environment, there is embodied a sum of spirit.” Simmel sees the dominance of the “objective spirit” over the “subjective spirit” resulting in the quest of the metropolitan inhabitant to reach out for a strong individual identity. Objective culture comprises the collection of rules, tools, symbols and products created by human beings while the subjective aspects are dependent on the mind of the individual for their existence and comprise the communication that individuals have been able to absorb and integrate into themselves from objective culture. The institutional products of metropolitan development - language, law, art, architecture and culture - for Simmel present the achievement of intellectual activity in the metropolis, or in his words “a sum of spirit.” Simmel also sees the individual in the metropolis failing to achieve a personal cultural level to match or comprehend the developments of the intellectual institutions. Simmel finds the specialization that defines the individual in the metropolis is debilitating for his overall development and as a result the individual feels his role reduced to a negligible state.

Even though sovereign types of personality, characterized by irrational impulses, are by no means impossible in the city, they are nevertheless, opposed to typical city life. The passionate hatred of men like Ruskin and Nietzsche for the metropolis is understandable in these terms. Their natures discovered the value of life alone in the unschematized existence which cannot be defined with precision for all alike. From the same source of this hatred of the metropolis surged their hatred of money economy and of the intellectualism of modern existence.

The objective structures of the metropolis - its institutional frameworks, technological products, social and economic organization - in dominating the mind of the individual, 

37 Simmel, Metropolis, 58.

38 Objective spirit is defined as the collection of rules, tools, symbols and products created by the individual, while the subjective spirit is what individuals have been able to absorb and integrate into themselves from objective culture. D. Weinstein, pg. 151

39 Simmel, Metropolis, 51.
transform his subjective experiences (created and modulated within his mind) to an objective life (packaged and presented for his consumption). Simmel compares such a life of objective fullness to “swimming in a stream” - effortless and easy. Yet he also points out that the personal aspects of individualism - the particularities and “incomparabilities” - are missing in such a life. In order to recover those from an objective presence the individual amplifies and intensifies his particularities and uniqueness to establish his identity, even to himself. In his essay on fashion, first published in 1904, Simmel documents such actions through the use of the wardrobe by the metropolitan man to establish his presence and define his identity. The effort the individual has to put forth to establish himself at the level of the self demonstrates an atrophication of the subjective realm (the realm of the self) through the hypertrophy (over-nourishment) of the objective culture and creates an unsatisfied yearning in the metropolitan man for the space of the individual within the space of the practice of the metropolis.

The space of the individual

The physical space of the individual in the metropolis as portrayed by Simmel in his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” is one of ever widening horizons - the individual gets familiar with the extant he wanders off to explore new territory. The individual marks out his freedom by continually establishing new linkages that the social freedom of the metropolis permits him to develop. In the feudal age, the “free” man was one who was only subject to the laws of the land (the largest social orbit) and was not forced to acquiesce to smaller circles of association (narrower social orbits). Simmel sees the corresponding “free”

40 Georg Simmel and Mike Featherstone, Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings (London: Sage Publications, 1997), pg.187-205
41 Ibid
man in the metropolis, with its ever-expanding social orbit, resulting in a domain that creates dense concentrations of physical space.42

On the other hand, the mental space of the individual in the metropolis, possessing a “refined” and “spiritualized” sense of freedom, is one of isolation. This mental distance has an inverse relationship to the visual distance that the individual develops with his environment as he responds to greater visual stimuli due to ever increasing congregation of information and influences. The act of detachment that comes by expanding one’s mental distance has a counterpart in creating a sense of loss and isolation the physical proximity heightens the sense of distance. Simmel finds this sense of isolation to be one of discomfort for the individual and as a result sees the reflection of freedom on the life on the individual not necessarily translating into emotional comfort. In effect, it is in the crowd, where his mental distance is the greatest, that the metropolitan individual would appear to be most lonely as the mental space of his psychological freedom begins to supplant his physical space of freedom of action.

**Divergence of mind and space: The city as a symbol of modernity**

This freedom that the metropolis provides entails a new kind of space - one where access is free and open. In this assertion lies a conundrum, however. As illustrated earlier, individual freedom brings about with it a sense of mental detachment, and its concurrent spatial equivalent brings about a sense of access and enclosure. This disconnect between the subjective and the objective purposes of physical space can be seen as a cause for individual alienation. This situation mirrors Simmel’s disconnection between the subjective and the objective in “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” Simmel’s conception of the space of

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42 Coser, 75
Modernity rests on the Weberian metaphor of modernity - the "iron cage" - an irresolvable and painstaking conflict between the individual, subjectively experienced necessity for homogeneous, integral set of values and consistent Weltanschauung (worldview) and the ever proliferating heterogeneous “objective” cultural world of conflicting moralities, attitudes and life-styles.  

The dialectic of the community as understood within narrow boundaries of ethnicity, social class etc. against the city as a larger whole can be conceptualized within this conflict. We are “free,” that is, made to choose from an infinity of differing ideologies, methodologies and self-identities, but we cannot but knowingly feel all those options, since they never give us certainty of their own validity and cannot meet our expectations to find an ultimate vantage point in coping with fragmented and differentiated world. The Iron Cage binds together the social universe, which is otherwise ruptured into many autonomous worlds along virtually all spheres of culture: from sports to religion to scientific disciplines. Such bindings have an objective justification to their existence in that the spiritual existence (subjective existence) should conform to outside pressures, and that art and human activity should, and could, be molded to do this. In doing so, the nature of being transforms itself from a “self – grounding” object to a form of “being in the world.” The city becomes the space for self-disclosure; freedom manifests itself in the words and deeds that are revealed in public space, becoming the “space of appearance.”

The city, with its “incredible diversity of experiences and stimuli,” becomes the symbol of modernity - becoming Michel de Certeau’s “machinery and hero of modernity”

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43 This expression refers to the “wide worldview” or “wide world perception” of a people. The Weltanschauung of a people originates from the unique world experience of a people, which they experience over several millennia.

44 Simmel, Metropolis, 58.
where the individual alters the institutionalized mass culture of urban objectivity from its strategic focus to a subjective tactical appropriation. Certeau depicts ordinary life as a constant, subconscious struggle against the institutions competing to assimilate everyday man. Certeau’s chief aim is to compile a vocabulary of concepts, questions, and perspectives that would make possible the formal discussion of the everyday activities which lie hidden behind the cloak of conformity. Modernism can be understood as the cultural counterpart of the economic and political processes that were responsible for the rise and formation of modern cities. In “All that is Solid Melts into Air,” Marshall Berman takes the view that modernism is inescapable in our world and contends, as an objective structure, it seems to the global fate. The place for culture in the modern world comes at the overlap of the objective socio-economic factors and the subjective interpretation of “reality” through the medium of consciousness (being) and the freedom of choice for individuals.

Marshall Berman further sees modernity as a liberation of the human spirit in the cultural sense, with the implications of the inevitable diversity and richness that allows freedom to chose and construct a cultural experience. He cites the examples of third world regimes suppressing western development and culture as a form of repression of the freedom of choice modernism provides. Modernity provides the awareness of needs for political, social and material freedom, and provides the means to achieve it through its manifestations - the primary spatial form being the city itself as the product of modernism. Like Berman, Simmel notes that the independence of the individual brought on by Modernism produces increased independence as a response to specialization. The growth of the city, the increasing number of people in the city, and the “brevity and scarcity of the inter-human contacts granted to the metropolitan man, as compared to the social intercourse of the small town makes the objective spirit dominate over the subjective spirit.”

In Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development, Manfredo Tafuri – this is not in your bibliography presents Simmel’s metropolis as the space of freedom which

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46 Marshall Berman, All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity (London: Verso, 1983), pg.15

47 Simmel, Metropolis, 58.
brings forth the architectural Enlightenment philosophy to express in built three-dimensional form the ideologies of society. While Tafuri demonstrates such an ideology was missing in the “gigantic architectural fantasies” of Boullee, Ledoux and Lequeue, he finds its total absence in the capitalist metropolis; a fact he interprets as designed to encourage individuals to accept their place in society as a brick in a wall.\textsuperscript{48} Citing as the task of an artist (architect) to project proletariat values in the spirit of Enlightenment philosophy to discredit the bourgeoisie aspects of metropolitan life, Tafuri sees the objective structures of the metropolis as a “machine for the extraction of surplus value.”\textsuperscript{49} The result of this, according to Simmel, is the blasé attitude as individual identities are blurred.

**Simmel’s Blasé Modern Man: The Flâneur**

There was the pedestrian who wedged himself into the crowd, but there was also the Flâneur who demanded elbowroom and was unwilling to forego the life of the gentleman of leisure. His leisurely appearance as a personality is his protest against the division of labor which makes people into specialists. It was also his protest against their industriousness…The street becomes a dwelling for the flâneur; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls. To him the shiny, enameled signs of businesses are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to the bourgeois in his salon. The walls are the desk against which he presses his notebooks; news-stands are his libraries and the terraces of cafés are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done.\textsuperscript{50}

In the dichotomous metropolitan setting of ideas and manifestations, we find the emergence of the archetype of Simmel’s Modern Man, the Flâneur. Appropriately enough, the conceptual origin of this archetype occurs as literal construct that finds its bearing in the urban practices that arose from evolving developments in the experiencing of space in the mid 19\textsuperscript{th} century city. The Flâneur, a product of French literature first mentioned by

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid
Baudelaire, becomes a key figure in the critical literature of modernity and urbanization, represented as an archetypal occupant and observer of the public sphere in the “rapidly changing and growing great cities of the century.” The figurative construct of the Flâneur enables our analysis to move from real products of modernity, like commodification and the practical organization and its negotiation, to a critical appreciation of the state of modernity.

The Flâneur represents Simmel’s “new cities” as a place of visual consumption, with the mass consumption in the arcades as well as the consumption of leisure and sociation in the parks, boulevards and cafes. Through this mass consumption there occurs a transformation of the public and the private spheres as city life presented experiential opportunities previously unknown, and in doing so opened up a new cultural world with its own distinct urban personality. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson in their essay “City Publics” contend that it was this ease of movement that permitted Walter Benjamin’s figure of the Flâneur to move through the different spaces of the city. The Flâneur can be understood as a valid typology for the ideal of the urban inhabitant that Simmel sees in his “individual” in “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” In her essay “The Invisible Flâneur,” Elizabeth Wilson sees the Flâneur as a social response to the emerging way of living in a new form of life in the city. The Flâneur represents the ideal of modern city life through his observational stance instead of just remaining a historical figure. The Flâneur seeks to scrutinize the city, to evoke the essence of the street, and in doing so measure and exemplify the public-ness of city life.

51 Ibid


The Flâneur represents Simmel’s position of the increase in mental distance with the corresponding decrease in visual distance, as he watches the world go by. Charles Jencks finds the Flâneur moving through the urban space with a fluidity that “enables and privileges vision.”54 In the figure of the Flâneur, the themes of Simmel’s city and mental space and the visual ethos of Modernity converge to form an expansive analytic stance. The Flâneur becomes the gentleman stroller, “botanising the asphalt” while observing the urban spectacle.55 This observation of Walter Benjamin interprets Simmel in the way the mundane activities of the individual derives a subjective basis from observing the objectiveness of the metropolis. Instead of assuming that those who have the time to wander aimlessly through urban landscapes are only engaged in a cursory and leisurely survey of their environment, Benjamin brought attention to the cognitive value and pleasures associated with urban strolling. The urban experience for the Flâneur represents Simmel’s “visual impression” of the metropolis - the sense of the city for the Flâneur translates into a primarily visual sense. The Flâneur is really Simmel’s blasé individual. He is not just a pedestrian, instead he is a “heroic pedestrian” - he retains his individuality while all around lose theirs and derives his identity from his location in the crowd, yet regards the crowd with contempt.

The Flâneur derives his subjective understanding from the objectivity that encompasses him by strolling around the city. His promenade lacks a purpose, for him walking the city is its own reward, he sets up his dwelling in the heart of the crowd, protected from the masses by his mental reserve, while enriching himself from their visual intimacy. The Flâneur’s views of the city are those of ordinary life, the spectacle of the everyday. In

54 Charles Jencks and Karl Kropf, Theories and Manifestations of Contemporary Architecture (Chichester, West Sussex: Academy Editions, 1997), 146.

this quest his primary objective is an aesthetic pleasure that comes from the awareness of the crowd that makes the city. In such a context, the presence of the Flâneur is only possible in the conditions of Modernity which provide the intense social concentrations as well as the rich objectiveness that creates sustainable conditions for flânerie. The gaze of the Flâneur typifies the experiences of the city as seen through its public spaces. The Flâneur transforms the aesthetic of the city into a text, thus the city becomes a semiotic device opening up through its public spaces. It is in these public spaces that the Flâneur gets his anonymity. Public spaces for the Flâneur are not the formal typology of square parks, but lie in the immediacy of the streets - in other words, it is in the designated public spaces (with their visual cognitive communication) instead of the traditional formal public spaces (with their action based roles) that the Flâneur comes into being. Flânerie becomes possible only in the social conditions engendered by the coming into being of the visual domain through the act of seeing and being seen.

With the establishment of the Flâneur as a personification of Simmel’s Metropolitan individual, if one looks at the space of the Flâneur, one can see the public spaces of the city as the habitat of the Flâneur. In exploring the constitution of public space, from the formal designed spaces to the incidental spaces of everyday living, one can establish the existence of a public domain that goes beyond mere physical existence and is brought into being through its presence in the public imagination. The perception of such spaces is brought about through a psychological awareness of their existence, and such spaces exhibit a phantasmagoric nature - they may be private in function yet through their visual communication become a part of the public domain. Measures of spatial division such as gates and walls serve to disconnect the individual from his built environment of the designated public space, as present in diverse instances from Delhi and Los Angeles. One can
then discover a space of estrangement and individual alienation in the modern city that has been created by the very mechanisms that formulate such cities.
Chapter Two: Simmel’s Metropolis

The Metropolis: Simmel and Berlin

A recurring topic in Simmel’s essay is the comparison of life in the metropolis with that of the “small town.” The 18th century saw the growth of numerous small towns in Germany, with populations ranging from a few thousands to several tens of thousands, as centers of trade and commerce and small-scale manufacture by artisans organized under the Guild system grew. Some of these small towns turned into big cities, as in the Ruhr valley, but others continued as small towns well into the late nineteenth century. Some of these small towns also served as the seats of universities, which were growing both in numbers and importance during the 18th century. It is thus likely that Simmel had the character of these pre-industrial regional or local towns in mind in his use of the term “small town.”

For Simmel, the metropolis of the late nineteenth century turned out to be quite different from the small towns of earlier times, not only having grown much larger in size and population, but also having the places of living and work for inhabitants separated out and livelihood gained through specialized skills in large factories or offices, which contrasted with the integrated artisan occupations of the working class in the small towns. The metropolis was also acquiring for itself a distinctive form of the built environment, with differentiated land use for industry, commerce, markets and housing, requiring people to commute as part of their daily lives. This is evinced by the fact that towards the end of the 19th century, Berlin had a population of 3.4 million, which was more or less on par with Paris and London, which had a head start in their metropolitan transformation.

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56 Simmel, Metropolis, 52.

burgeoning working population of Berlin was being largely accommodated in drab tenement blocks (*Mietskasernen* - renter’s barracks) four or five stories high. However, at this very temporal juncture, a different kind of housing comprising detached and luxurious villas, the Tiergarten, was fast being put up by real estate developers and made available to the newly rich industrialists, businessmen and professionals. A railway line separated Tiergarten from the older tenement blocks and Berlin was assuming the character of a twin city serving the rich and the poor, the capitalists and the workers, which was an early example of city extension serving separate public spaces.58

Thus, Simmel grew up literally seeing before his very eyes the built environment, working conditions and inter-personal relations changing hugely and irrevocably in his own city within a space of a few decades, affecting the individual and collective existence of Berliners. This was both a complicated and an unprecedented situation in the late nineteenth century, which Simmel could not only observe but also explicitly identify as the advent of a new kind of urban existence, which is a measure of his perspicacity and pioneering intellectual spirit.59 Simmel presents a thinking explicated by Francoise Choay that locates a belief in the constitutive role of architecture in founding and transforming cultural institutions over time.60 He saw the involvement of the individual in a variety of social circles in the metropolis leading to increased self-consciousness. And as the individual escaped the domination of the small circle (the small town life) that imprisoned his personality within its confines, he became conscious of a sense of liberation. Simmel saw a

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59 Simmel was financially well off due to an inheritance from his guardian and sees society from the viewpoint of the educated elite, a nouveau intellectual aristocracy - a social class that becomes a contemporary of the emerging metropolis.

progressive liberation of the individual from the bonds of exclusive attachment and personal dependencies, in spite of the increasing domination of man by cultural products of his own creation.61

The Twin Revolutions: The Rise of the Simmel’s Metropolis

Simmel presents one of the earliest theories on the relationship between visual culture and modernity, modernity being defined here as a way of experiencing and understanding the change (or newness) in society. Visual culture in the conception of Nicholas Mirzoeff is concerned with visual events in which information and meaning is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology as represented by any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, be it a painting, an electronic display or the cityscape.62 This presents the visual domain as the place where meanings are sought and contested, and in direct variance with the historical privileging of the text and the spoken word over visual representation.

With the advent of the 19th century, a change happened to the demographic structuring of the world. The seed of urban life, as Simmel understands it, began to bear fruit - seeds sown by the twin revolutions: in political and socio-economic terms by the French Revolution (1789) and the Industrial Revolution, and influenced politically by the American Revolution (1776). 63 In his classic studies The Age of Capital: 1848-187564 and The Age of Revolution: 1789-184865 Eric Hobsbawm refers to them as the “dual revolution”

61 Coser, pg.171
64 Eric J.Hobsbawm, The Age of Capital, 1848-1875 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), pg. 14
that brought about the rise of industrial capitalism and the consolidation of bourgeois culture that created the modern world from its pre-industrial past. The American and the French revolutions laid down the political pattern of the metropolis, while the Industrial Revolution laid down the economic pattern. The Industrial Revolution was a great turning point in the history of the world. It changed the Western world from an agricultural society to an urban industrial society and in doing so created a specialized and interdependent economic life, with the different classes of the urban worker as the bourgeoisie, the primary inhabitant of the city. As this ever increasing section of society changed its mode of living - from agriculture to industrialization – they also changed their site and their way of living, as described by Friedrich Engels in his seminal work *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*. In the opening chapter “The Great Towns,” Engels describes the alienation that afflicted 1840s London.

The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space. And, however much one may be aware that this isolation of the individual, this narrow self-seeking is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of this great city. The dissolution of mankind into monads, of each which one has a separate principle and a separate purpose, the world of atoms, is here carried out to its utmost extreme.

The idea of industrialism itself grew in scope and significance, paralleling the growth and development of urbanism. It came to symbolize and to embody the economic and technological changes that lay at its heart, as well as the resultant political, social, and cultural changes that appeared to be organically connected with it, through cause, association or effect. Thus, the democratic movement triggered by the American and the French

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67 Engels, pg.42
revolutions was seen as the necessary political transformation that, sooner or later, must accompany all movement toward an industrial society.

**The City Culture**

Max Weber, writing on economic and social topics in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was an early enquirer into the multiplicity of factors behind the formation of cities and their functioning from a historical standpoint. His essay “The Nature of the City” is representative of efforts of nineteenth century social thinkers to come to grips with emerging industrial urbanism, which in some respects was a continuation of past historic trends, yet was also quite different. 68 Weber considered the consumer-producer-merchant cities which were coming up in industrializing Europe as vastly removed from their semi-rural predecessors. His preoccupation with the historical evolution of cities as feudal bastions, production and trading centers seems to have been an effort towards deriving a conceptual approach towards urbanism, which relied heavily on historicity. He saw the medieval city, as an agent of social change from feudalism to capitalism.69

Yet, neither modern capitalism nor the “state” as we know it developed on the basis of the ancient city, whereas the medieval city, though not the only significant antecedent developmental stage and certainly not itself the carrier of these developments, is inseparably linked as one of the crucial factors with the rise of both phenomena...the characteristic of the city in the political definition was the appearance of a distinct ‘bourgeois’ estate.” 70

Weber was perspicacious still in his characterization of emerging metropolises like London (or Paris or Berlin) as “the location of international financiers or large banks…or of

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69 Ibid.

70 Ibid, pg. 30-34
joint stock companies or cartels and the resultant emergence of the bourgeoisie within the capitalist framework. For the urban bourgeoisie as a new political community, with its democratic forms of association, the city became a free association in which the individual participates in his personal right and created a unique culture of the city, free from traditional groups, drawing upon the individuality of the city dweller.

The contribution of the city in the whole field of culture are extensive. The city created the party and demagogue. … The city and it alone has brought forth the phenomena of the history of art. Hellenic and Gothic art, in contrast with Mycænean and Roman, are city art. So also the city produced science in the modern sense. In the city civilization of the Greeks the discipline out of which scientific thinking developed, namely mathematics, was given the form under which it continuously developed down to modern times. The city culture of the Babylonians stands in an analogous relation to the foundation of astronomy. … Finally, the city alone produced theological thought, and on the other hand again, it alone harbored thought untrammeled by priest craft. The phenomenon of Plato, with its question of how to make men useful citizens as the dominant problem of his thought, is unthinkable outside the environment of a city.

The city, dominated by the bourgeoisie whose class interest was preserved by the secular, rational, individualist ethics of urban life, also nurtured the development of capitalist institutions that fuelled urban growth. In representing the setting for socio-economic, political and artistic change, the metropolis became the center of civilization and cultural expression, with concepts of open democratic public space as central to its ideal. The symbiotic relationship between Capitalism and the non-feudal, individualistic urban culture of Weber leads us to Hobsbawm’s assertion of the dual revolutions (the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution) as the foundation of modern cities.

71 Ibid, pg. 30-36

It is in this setting that Georg Simmel can be located. Like Max Weber, Simmel was a pioneering German social thinker, though not enjoying the latter’s eminence in the academic hierarchy. Between themselves, however, Weber and Simmel maintained intellectual contact and mutual respect, and were co-founders (along with F. Toennis) of the German Society for Sociology. In the essay “The Metropolis and the Mental Life,” the “mental life” investigated by Simmel was essentially that of an individual, possibly a migrant from a small town or a rural area living and working in the big city; the ideas he expressed in this essay are quite different and original as compared to any shown by his predecessors or contemporaries. In the process, Simmel was able to chart out psychological urban analytical paths and arrive at conclusions that were ahead of his time and have come to be recognized as belonging to the very core of urban sociology as it was to develop during the twentieth century. Simmel saw a vision of a progressive liberation of the individual from the bonds of tradition and subjugation, yet foresaw “a cage of the future” (to use Max Weber’s term), in which individuals bound into rigid social functions will pay the price of the objective perfection of the world through the decline of their subjective and emotional existence.

Simmel’s primary inquiry in the essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” deals with the changes in the life of the individual as a consequence of modernity, with particular reference to the metropolis. Simmel explores the notion of individuality in the metropolis. Changes in urban life, in family form, in individual and social values, and in intellectual outlook, were all seen as linked to industrialism. Following up on Weber’s theories about capitalism and urbanism, industrial society came to stand as the epitome of modern society.

73 Coser, pg.124-171

Such origins might be reason why the “open, civilizing and democratic” possibilities of the city has fascinated urbanists.\textsuperscript{75} Seen by Marx as rescuing a vast majority from the “idiocy of rural life” metropolitan growth and development brought profound changes in people’s lives: innovative labor processes, new services, mass communication as well as a widening cultural and political gulf between the classes, created on the basis of access to capital as embodied in the cause and effect of the money economy that drove the metropolis.\textsuperscript{76}

Contrary to the 19\textsuperscript{th} century sociological understanding of the city, Simmel did not see monetary transactions as the founding factor at the heart of urban life.\textsuperscript{77} He saw money as a way of balancing relationships between strangers in public so that they did not have to deal with each other face to face in an emotional way, a notion that urbanist and social theorist Richard Sennett finds bizarre in contemporary society.\textsuperscript{78} Sennett interprets Simmel’s notion of urban relationships not in the explicitly monetary trade, but instead as a refuge from the conditions of density and diversity that represent the metropolis. This refuge, according to Sennett, happens by forms of impersonal relationships, where the value of a transaction (monetary, social, and cultural) is clearly defined and there is little room for interpretation.\textsuperscript{79} Such a refuge manifests itself psychologically in the blasé, indifferent attitude that the metropolitan dweller has towards others.


\textsuperscript{76} Simmel, Metropolis p. 54

\textsuperscript{77} Ferdinand Tönnies, Ferdinand (1957). Community & society. Michigan State University Press


\textsuperscript{79} Weber’s ideal city construct has three perspectives on city, sociological, economic and political, administrative and legal, with discrete relationships governing their interplay.
According to Simmel this notion of indifference as a defense mechanism serves to rationalize and equilibrate personal exchange. This rationality for Simmel is a social construct in everyday life that arises out of people’s inability to live in the city in an open manner without self-imposed barriers. Across these barriers, imposed by the mask of rationality, information is exchanged but communication is lowered; particularly communication that transcends self-interest and emotional communication. Similar in operation to an online profile on a social networking site on the internet, the exchange of information is codified and restricted, serving to create an impersonal public realm. While the cyberspace experience is greatly detached in time and space from Simmel’s writings, they exhibit a striking similarity to the way urban relationships for Simmel were inhibited by a lack of trust and driven by the necessity to survive in the “money”-driven metropolis instead of a desire to foster interpersonal relationships amongst individuals.

Simmel provides a notion of the operation of codes for urban relationships, that rationality is more effective when it operates through visual cues instead of oral ones. The sense of exchange on the street between two strangers happens a lot easier if they do not speak but take clues from each other about how to look. An example can be seen in two strangers passing each other who know how to manage their eyes so that they do not stare into each other’s. This privileging of the visual over the verbal was where Simmel saw the modern conception of the urban realm taking shape.

…today metropolitan man is “free” in a spiritualized and refined sense, in contrast to the pettiness and prejudices which hem in the small-town man. For the reciprocal reserve and indifference and the intellectual life conditions of large circles are never felt more strongly by the individual in their impact upon his independence than in the thickest crowd of the big city. This is because the bodily proximity and narrowness of space makes the mental distance only the more visible. It is obviously only the obverse of this
freedom if, under certain circumstances, one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd…\textsuperscript{80}

Marshall McLuhan makes a similar argument of the uncritical acceptance of visual metaphors and of reality lying in the visible in \textit{The Gutenberg Galaxy}.\textsuperscript{81} The “open, civilizing and democratic” possibilities of the city that has fascinated urbanists find its origins in this school of thinking, and aesthetic parallels can be drawn between such thought and the rebuilding of Paris with its replacement of a medieval street plan with grand boulevards and enhanced visibility.\textsuperscript{82} Between the Revolution of 1789 and Haussmann's renovation of Paris in the 1860s, ideals changed from those of a politically motivated city to those of an economically and socially centered city. Modern technology such as railroads and gas lamps were conveniences which the rising bourgeoisie could enjoy in their leisurely lifestyle. New spaces that were created during the renovation encouraged the bourgeoisie to flaunt their new wealth, creating a booming economy. All of these examples of the changes occurring in Paris during this time period can be seen in representations of the city. This precedence of the sense of the visual serves to define an incontestable reality of the city, however fragmented that vision might be from other sociological conceptions of the city.

\section*{A Simmellian Approach to Metropolis and Mental Life}

\textsuperscript{80} Simmel, \textit{Metropolis}, 47-60.


\textsuperscript{82} Napoleon III’s hiring of Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann in 1853 involved the dual agendas of a civic modernization of Paris and a political agenda of widening streets so rebels could not build barricades across them and troops and artillery could circulate easily in the city. Shelly Rice, \textit{Parisian Views} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).
A Simnellian approach to social questions focuses on the abstraction of forms of interaction that underlie human behavior within organizational networks, such as socio-economic or spatial systems like cities. Such an approach that abstracts from concrete content to analyze a sociological question has been labeled as “formal sociology.”\(^{83}\) Formal sociology isolates form (social structures) from the heterogeneity of content of human sociation. In doing so one finds that diverse interests and purposes give rise to specific associations and also similar interests often present themselves in different forms.

In abstractions of formal sociology, where new perspectives extract from reality hitherto unseen features of concrete phenomena, it is possible to compare situations and histories that are different in context but similar in structural arrangement. Such a mechanism can be seen in the abstraction of literary figure of the Flâneur from the arcades to the “city trenches” (borrowing Ira Katznelson’s term)\(^{84}\) of the contemporary metropolis seen in the light of Marshall Berman’s all encompassing vision of the maelstrom of modernity.\(^{85}\) By abstracting the visual role of the public realm and positing that the public domain comprises the prime societal identity of the metropolis, one can begin to see spatial artifacts play a role that goes beyond their mere physical purpose and assumes a psychological role. For example, gates, walls and fences often go beyond their concrete purpose (objective role) of physical removal and assume a subjective (psychological) role creating insecurity and alienation through the act of disconnection. Extrapolating such a process through Simmel’s lens of

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\(^{83}\) Sociology, as conceived by Simmel, concentrated on the forms of interactions that underlie political, economic and social behavior instead of directly using concrete data from the subject matter of economics, ethics, psychology, or historiography. An often cited example is that of a comparison of the behavior displayed at the court of Louis XIV and that displayed in the main offices of a multinational corporation. A study of the forms of subordination and superordination in each will reveal underlying patterns common to both...Coser, pg. 124-171

\(^{84}\) Ira. Katznelson, City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), pg 1

\(^{85}\) Berman, 15.
subjectivity and objectivity, further shows that the overwhelming objectivity of modern metropolitan life fosters conditions of alienation and estrangement for the individual. Simmel, Weber and Walter Benjamin have shown that individuals evolve as a means to apply a layer of subjectivity to the objective structures of the city to derive meaning, and it can be inferred that the overwhelming objectivity that is the cause of alienation according to Simmel comes at the expense of subjective aspects of city life.86

Yet, such abstractions and extrapolations do not define relationships on their own - since they can only exist in content, they only serve to heighten configurations and relationships underlying reality without being factually actualized in reality itself. Just as “social forms” serve to represent abstractions of social structures and relationships, “social types” serve to present the individuals within these abstractions.87 Defined by specific reactions to their environments and societal expectations, these types represent attributes and effects of social structures. Examples of such types in Simmel’s work include “the stranger,” “the adventurer,” and “the mediator,” amongst others; a position that is occupied in this text by the figure of the Flâneur, defined as a detached pedestrian observer of a metropolis, a “gentleman stroller of city streets,” first identified by Charles Baudelaire.88 The term Flâneur has no exact equivalent in English.

Just like Simmel’s “Stranger,” the Flâneur attains an individual objectivity about urban space that is not possible for the other constituents of such a space. The concept of the Flâneur is important in academic discussions of the phenomenon of modernity, and has become meaningful in architecture and urban planning. In his role as an observer of space,

86 Simmel, Metropolis, 47-60.
87 Coser, pg.124-171
the Flâneur like “the Stranger” has a specific structural position of being intrinsic yet uncommitted to his domain. The Flâneur becomes an active sociologist or reader of the environment around him or her. Simmel’s metropolis, with its complexity and richness, provides numerous opportunities for the individual in the role of the Flâneur to observe and interpret events. In such a function, the Flâneur comes to represent Simmel’s “individual” whose role according to Simmel was within society and outside it. Such a dialectic is seen in the role of individuals in social networks, where such networks impress social life upon the individual and impart specific human qualities while impeding autonomy of the individual.

Simmel argues that the conflict that characterizes a dialectical relationship is natural and desired, as social conflict involved reciprocal action that removes the prospect of unilateral imposition. Therefore, it is only the act of withdrawal from social contact that can be considered deleterious to the formation of social capital. He elaborates on the relationships of conflict and reciprocity in his text “Super-ordination and Subordination,” using the relationship between a despotic ruler and his subjects which shows the dominant impact of an unilateral level of interaction as an example. On the other hand, democracies show intermediate gradation in their social structures that mitigate the impact of superordinate and subordinate hierarchies. This implies that as hierarchical systems, gradations in social relationships make a system more sustainable, and therefore stable, than direct unilevel social systems which lack the buffer between levels of communication.

The intermediate gradations in a multilevel system supplements dependence with authority at each level, providing for greater adaptability at each level. Seen from a spatial

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standpoint, this would suggest that urban systems with multiple levels of hierarchy and communication present greater reciprocity and therefore greater inclusiveness amongst its user, and are thus more effective in communication than abrupt monolithic spatial systems that, through their limited reciprocity and often binary nature, serve to restrict communication and therefore alienate their users. In the specific case of gates and walls that completely cut off communication at intermediate levels where there previously used to be linkages, and in the act of abruptly reducing communication to an unitary level, they serve to alienate as they have completely objectified the spatial discourse leaving no room for individual subjectivities that come from the gradations that intermediate levels of communication provide.

The Primacy of Visual Culture

For Simmel, modern urban culture has a predominance of the visual sense, as demonstrated by the blasé calculative nature of the urban dweller as he scans his environment for his daily interactions - visual interactions that Simmel considered to be the basic material of society. Simmel's thinking about metropolitan culture and visual interaction indicates the ways in which modernity impacts visual culture. “The eye cannot take unless at the same time it gives...In the same act in which the observer seeks to know the observed, he surrenders himself to be understood by the observed.”[90] Sight for Simmel represents the action of the *mutual glance* as the fundamental act of observation. The mutual glance becomes the mode of conveying sociologically significant feelings such as recognition, acknowledgement, understanding, reaction, anger, intimacy etc. The glance becomes an indicator of disposition and purpose, be it for humans or for architecture. The primary

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impression thus formed for a person or an object comes from its countenance and not its actions. Therefore from a sociological standpoint, the face of a person or object has the primary purpose of conveying the state of mind of its possessor. Simmel distinguishes between the reactions of the deaf and the blind to situations around them.

For the blind, the other person is actually present only in the alternating periods of his utterance.'… (The blind have)…'a peaceful and calm existence'… (in contrast to the)… 'more perplexed, puzzled and worried' …(attitude of the deaf).91

The visual mode of communication assumes consequence in the metropolis because of the large numbers of encounters that occur under the condition of anonymity. In such encounters appearance communicates Simmel’s “mere visual impression,” and such information contains similar confusion to that experienced by the deaf in their visual communication with their environment, with the limited role of visual communication creating a feeling of alienation with the environment.

91 Simmel, Sociology, pg. 187-205
Chapter Three: The Space of Distance

To change life, we must first change space.\textsuperscript{92}

Simmel’s Vision

One sees an echo of Rousseau when Simmel ideologically pronounces that “man’s nature, originally good and common to all, should develop unhampered,” which sounds unconvincing in the light of twentieth century experience of many instances of human ill-will and cruelty perpetrated on massive scales.\textsuperscript{93} In the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Rousseau’s contention of Man’s inherent good nature being spoilt by his society reflects his belief in the rift between society and human nature, where human nature is seen as an allegory for Simmel’s individual’s struggle for a subjective existence in the face of overwhelming objective structures.\textsuperscript{94} A more realistic assessment might be that human nature can be good as well as bad, and it requires conscious efforts both individually and collectively, generally in the form of agreed ethical codes and common institutional framework, to keep human nature on the right track. Simmel is pragmatic, though, and takes note of 19\textsuperscript{th} century contradictions found to be hampering human development. 19th century inhabitants from small towns and the countryside, in their search for escape from feudal bondage and a more assured livelihood, were getting caught up in the “social-technological mechanism,” brought about by the industrial revolution. Being the traditional individualist

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{92} Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, trans. Donald Nicolson-Smith (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), pg. 1-65
\item \textsuperscript{93} Simmel, Metropolis, 47.
\end{itemize}
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they were, they had to resist “being leveled down and worn out.”95 The brave new world of the 19th century metropolis found itself confronted with an incompatibility between the “individual and super-individual contents of life.”96 The metropolitan individual, typically the migrant from the small town, was having to adjust to a crisis in his “mental life,” which Simmel proceeded to investigate.

The small town resident had been accustomed to a social life which was tradition-bound but individualistic, hard in some respects but easy-going in others, and ever so familiar because of the very narrowness of its domain. Catapulted to the helter-skelter of the metropolis in search of a livelihood, possibly as an industrial worker residing in a ghetto and working in a factory somewhere else, the migrant from the small town finds everything about the metropolis much too large, complex and incomprehensible. Having to negotiate in his daily life fleeting glimpses of a multiplicity of city segments and crowds of people, the metropolitan man has to contend with “an intensification of nervous stimulation,” which is beyond his mental capacity to digest.97 This presents an existential dilemma which he has to resolve within himself, since he cannot alter his external environment. To explain this situation, Simmel comes up with the innovative psychological concept of man being a “discriminating creature,” who can intellectually filter out sensory impressions not of interest to him.98 The metropolitan man disposes of the surfeit of unwanted impressions his senses are subjected to through a process of deliberate rejection.

95 Ibid.
96 Simmel, *Metropolis*, pg. 47-56
97 Ibid
98 Ibid.
It is not merely that the individual effectively insulates himself from the metropolitan environment – the reverse process is also in operation in the metropolis as observed by Simmel. The metropolis functions through institutions which are characteristically impersonal and calculating, even “coupled with inconsiderate hardness,” like the money economy and mass production in factories and stratified markets where anonymity rules and person-to-person linkages have no place, as opposed to the direct producer-consumer contacts in the small towns. 99 Unlike the custom of small towns, neighbors living close by have no occasion or need to know each other and get habituated to remain as strangers. Moreover, the metropolitan system, complex as it is, has necessarily to run like clockwork - quantitatively and objectively, as opposed to the inherently qualitative and subjective functioning of the human personality.

The metropolitan individual finds the enormity, complexity and the impersonality of his metropolitan environment disconcerting, even oppressive, and instinctively strives to carve out a mental space for himself where his individuality can find a realm of its own. He does this through a deliberate rejection of the flood of sensory impressions forced on him by the metropolis, except those of direct concern to him, in order to “preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life.”100 He develops a “blasé attitude,” as Simmel puts it, characterized by indifference and even antipathy towards his external environment. Such an attitude might be objectively irrational but still subjectively meaningful; the metropolitan individual chooses to remain a loner in a crowd and a stranger to his surroundings. The physical extent and continuity of the metropolis find no correspondence in the fragmented perceptions of the metropolitan individual. Simmel very

99 Ibid.
100 Ibid
aptly describes this process as “the self-preservation of certain personalities… at the price of devaluing the whole objective world…which in the end unavoidably drags one's own personality down into a feeling of the same worthlessness.”  

In other words, the blasé attitude is a method of preservation of individuality, albeit at a price – the inhibition of the natural instinct for interaction between the individual and his environment, both physical and human.

Simmel was eminently successful in pinpointing the urban quirk of “blasé attitude” at its very nascent stage and perhaps for the very same reason, was unsure about its future implications for the urban society. He explicitly sought “only to understand” without taking the “judge’s attitude.” Within two decades after Simmel wrote, specifically within the interregnum between World Wars I and II, the germ of blasé attitude grew, spreading its branches and roots, and came to be recognized as the phenomenon of “urban alienation.” However, Simmel must be credited with having identified, rather precisely and prophetically, the mechanism and concept of “urban alienation,” though not using the term itself as it came to be coined later by urbanists.

It is interesting to further observe that Simmel not only refrained from judging the metropolis for giving rise to the blasé attitude, but even expressed guarded optimism to anticipate that “it is the function of the metropolis to provide the arena for this struggle and its reconciliation.” Urban experience during the twentieth century has been, however, one of increasing alienation and even conflict rather than of reconciliation, spreading across countries and continents like wildfire simultaneous to the spread of industrialization. It is rather ironic that a globalized world of the twenty-first century, increasingly urbanized and

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101 Ibid
102 Ibid
103 Simmel, Metropolis, 57
empowered with highly sophisticated technology, is attempting to take a leap into space but still has to carry on its back the baggage of alienation within the society, which it acquired as part of a crude form of industrialization in the nineteenth century. Clearly, the urbanist of the twenty-first century must go beyond Simmel and seek deliberate solutions to urban alienation rather than leave it to be solved autonomously by the entity of the metropolis itself. The lesson seems to be that human artifices, howsoever complex, powerful and seemingly autonomous, have to function under human guidance to avoid going awry. As far as the urban situation is concerned, it is for the urbanists, amongst others, to remain constantly engaged in seeking dynamic planning and design solutions, both humane and sustainable, in an ever-changing world.

The incidental public spaces of the gaze and sight in their functioning lean towards Paul Virilio’s conception of “media buildings” - buildings housing information instead of habitation.  

Such public spaces are directly connected with public culture. Unlike the spaces of the traditional public forums, the designated public spaces pf the gaze and sight provide a public image and imagination. This public image also implies a collective engagement also implied by the public culture of early Modernism. This culture of Modernity brings forth the role of the crowd as a significant social actor of the metropolis. The crowd represents the collective of Simmel’s individual man creating the groundwork for the cosmopolitan “perfect public man.”  

For such a man, the city has the effect of being a panorama of social forms governed by images. It is this panoramic setting that permits the formation of the framework that allows strangers to engage each other. Such a framework emphasizes observation over expression, privileging gazing over speaking. Such a

\[ ^{104} \text{Ibid} \]

\[ ^{105} \text{Richard Sennett, The Fall of the Public Man (New York: Knopf, 1977), pg.1-400} \]
privileging can be seen in Nicholas Mirzoeff’s analysis of visual culture, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, where he quotes German philosopher Martin Heidegger on the predominance of the visual representation as the essence of the modern age: “…the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age.”

Robert Venturi’s *Learning from Las Vegas* recognizes the importance of iconography and signage over the physical space, converting the urban landscape into a stenographic setting, a stage for the Flâneur. The Flâneur in his role as Sennett’s “perfect public man” begins to see the city as a locus of signs - a semiotic city. Yet such a vision is inherently fragmented - removed from the totality of the urban landscape. The boundaries between reality and imagination are blurred in the act of living, akin to Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, a drive towards the rationalization of reality creates a shift towards the imagination and poetic complexity. The city becomes a space for experience, understood through its portrayal in the consciousness. Independent of its brick & mortar existence, the outside of the metropolis becomes the “inside of mental life.”

This experiential space eschews the particular and the objective, for the event happens anywhere and everywhere. Detailed observation of people and places have little meaning, for the metropolis is larger than what it contains. Simmel’s metropolis entailed a new reality, a reality that defines the split between the subjective and objective culture.

**The Vision of the Metropolis**

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106 Mirzoeff, pg.1-20
107 Ibid
108 The totality seems to appear only to architects, politicians and planners!
109 The Heisenberg uncertainty principle represents a limit on the accuracy with which it is possible to measure everything there is to know about a physical system
110 Simmel, *Metropolis*, pg.50-58
In the interstices between the objective and the subjective lies the promise of the Utopian city as found in the disclosure of planners and reformers where the city becomes an object of knowledge and overlaid on the reality of the city. Life in such a city operates within Simmel’s “enormous organization of things and powers” and becomes the “forms of motion” of the actual practice of living. The city can be seen to derive its identity from the phenomenon of its unique conceptual organization. The understanding of such relationships cannot be gauged within the sharply defined domains of economics, sociology or political science, for they preclude the question of beauty. The art and artifice that represents this city is a symbolic signifier - a language that, in a way, speaks of man. It is through the usage of these symbols that human society is constituted and the symbolic represents the difference between reality and appearance, with the capacity to transform the real through its power of representation.

In this realm of tumultuous change, the “mental life” is drifting from the reality (or unreality) of the metropolis, and as Simmel posited more than a century back in his lecture “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” the increase in the mediation of urban life results in necessitated self-interest on the part of the individual. Simmel suggested the blasé intellectualizing attitude as a strategy for self-protection from the variegated stimuli. One form of response of such a strategy is the NIMBY (Not in my backyard) attitude of urban dwellers in high-density cities. The aversion that is implicit in such an approach represents a form of containment that comes from restraining one’s emotions in a situation where closer contact results in potential confrontation. While Simmel talks about aversion, distance and deflection are other ways of dealing with such confrontation.

**The Need for Distance**
The appearance of forms of division serves to answer the need in an individual to create distance between himself and his realm. Not necessarily to disassociate from the realm, but to symbolize the presence of distance to reduce the amount of communication between him and parts of his realm with which he cuts off his diplomacy. The walls, gates and fences serve as stolid yet forceful diplomats in such a process. The communicative role of such elements of division within the urban realm is to intone and not indulge in dialogue.

There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which has been so unconditionally reserved to the metropolis as has the blasé attitude. The blasé attitude results first from the rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves. From this, the enhancement of metropolitan intellectuality, also, seems originally to stem. Therefore, stupid people who are not intellectually alive in the first place usually are not exactly blasé. 111

The blasé intellectualizing attitude that Simmel suggested as a means for the individual to create mental distance between him and his realm in the city assumes that the individual has the intellectual capacity to create the intellectualizing plane from which to base his social transactions. In a spatial sense, this mental barrier is supplanted, and in certain cases replaced, with a physical barrier that serves to remove the sense of public space. Whereas the mental distance served to offset the physical closeness the 19th century well-to-do urbanite faced in dealing with the newly arrived lay inhabitants of the city, the factory workers, the contemporary urban inhabitant supplements the capability to create such a mental space with the physical barrier and its explicit refusal of dialogue.

Simmel saw the metropolitan man becoming genuinely “free” from the “pettiness and prejudices that limit the small town man.” 112 While Simmel saw the projection of the metropolis on the inside of the mental life of the individual, the outward projection of mental

111 Simmel, Metropolis, 57
112 Simmel, Metropolis, pg 50-54
life that Lefebvre saw demonstrates a different reality from the potential of space to free the individual. Lefebvre’s space is perceived as well as conceived. A “representation” of space produced by such abstraction and conceptualization reveals that the space of urbanity in the contemporary city is fractured and divided. A symptom to this end is seen in the case of the house that has a boundary wall that rises twelve feet above the ground and is capped with barbed wire. Measures such as these heighten the sense of insecurity in the metropolitan individual to the extent where he becomes blasé to such happenings - he does not realize the exceptional nature of these happenings and begins to accept the insecurity as part of his daily existence. In responding to the objective insecurity around him (by becoming blasé to its existence), the metropolitan individual has condemned his subjective existence to a similar sense of insecurity. In such a way, a sense of insecurity has been transplanted from the objective to the subjective domain by virtue of its appearance in the images that is read by the metropolitan dweller.

Communication in Urban Form

The communicative aspects of contemporary urban form are diffuse in nature. The fleeting nature of communication in the city results in the message containing little redundancy, therefore resulting in high chances of misinterpretation. Life in a small town presents a certitude of living and its resultant semiotic certainty, understood by Simmel as the pre-modern societies, comes out of its limited intersection of social circles. Such a condition produces significant redundancy in the information conveyed, and since whatever “new” information is conveyed in strongly redundant information field, the communication is inherently clear. There is little awareness of ones surroundings for the individual living in

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113 Henri Lefebvre, The Urban Revolution, trans. Robert Bonnomo, with a foreword by Neil Smith (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pg.10-65
such a system, as one is innately familiar with one’s surrounds and there is little change to be encountered in the course of one life.

An analogy can be found in a driver driving his car along familiar streets, where the amount of familiarity that comes through the redundancy of the information being passed on due to the familiar streetscape puts the driver at ease. There is little information and a lot of redundancy. The counter analogy runs with the same driver in a new city, where he is sharply aware of his surroundings, keenly looking out for signs to get some comprehension of his whereabouts. In this case there is a lot of information and little redundancy. With a lot of information at his disposal, the driver may not be able to make sense of the framework to perceive all the information that is produced through redundancy, and the driver will very likely take wrong turns or worse still, crash against something.

In the similar way the multifaceted involvement in a variety of social circles within the city increases self-consciousness, and conversely reduces comprehension. So the complex semiotics of the city lacks suitable redundancy for its clear understanding. The subtlety of relationships within the modern city, with overlapping circles of superior and inferior relationships - workers in a factory can be dominated by their employer for working long hours at a time, only once out of the workday they can very well usurp the domineering role - produces split personalities. In such a way, it may be possible that the appearance of gates and walls, with their strong physicality, have a sense of semiotic absoluteness that is a sign of resistance to the complexity of image in the city. This is a simplistic reaction to the environment in a way that presents a duality - us and them. In a dualistic system, the information is non-existent as the message is redundant; the switch is on or off. Yet, the urban system is one where the inter-weaving of social circles creates a complexity where the switch is on and off at the same time. In such a system, there would occur a communication
breakdown between an absolute wall and its larger environment, making the existence of one of the participants (the wall or the urb) irrelevant, ironically creating a binary of “either/or.”

The power of the image

There is no reality without the specter…

The wall, as represented by the gate/wall/fence, presents the city as becoming Simmel's proverbial “fortuitous fragment of reality” a seemingly insignificant spatial artifact that represents reality in a manner more stark than other urban indices. The residents of gated communities seek community, and in a twist to the historical precedent of the wall limiting of the boundaries of a community and thus establishing its spatial presence and communal identity, appear to first plant the symbols of a community (namely the walls and the gates) and then hope that a sense of community comes from the space so created. The gates and walls represent the anxiety of the individuals who live within, and turn around and afflict the people who are outside of the community by transmitting the message of insecurity, thus creating a general atmosphere of insecurity. At the semiotic level, these walls and gates speak of the power of images in city life. And in that measure, they hold the promise of a cure to the ill they create. Studies have shown the real-life efficacy of such measures are suspect, and often they result in an environment more dangerous than before due to the reduction in the density on the street. Yet the hope and security they provide the residents, false as it might be, is a testament to the power of architecture in the lives of people in the city. It is the design of environments that are responsive and provide behavioral cues while addressing the larger urban spirit that lies in the future.

115 Simmel, Metropolis, pg 47-60
The designers of urban environments have largely failed in their task of communicating the high ideals behind the conception of city life. The openness and freedom that the modern city represented has turned out to be a cruel joke for most of its residents, and the reaction of some of these residents can be found in their manifestation of walls and gates as a way of cutting ties with the city around them. In the process, since they still remain an integral part of the city, they disconnect urban life for the other inhabitants through the consequences of their actions. The divided city we experience through its symbols does not get the measure of the real - the unpaid debt of the symbolic to the real comes back in the guise of a spectral apparition.\textsuperscript{116} James Donald interprets this as the real making its presence felt. In the imaginary, one can find a model for the production of the actual (imagining the modern city). He posits we do not read the city, we instead understand the reality of the city by imagining the city. The city presents itself as the field that opens up actions of imagination for the “citizen of this constituted reality.”\textsuperscript{cite} The complexity and multiplicity of such city make visual cues essential to the individual’s understanding of the environment, as it represents the basis on which the individual and the larger community make decisions and judgments.

The urban quality is understood through the potential of diverse human actions, of conversation between constituents and the pattern of circulation networks. Commentators have described the quality of being urban in various ways. Johan Asplund finds urbanity to be a “great potential for events and coincidences” with the potential of creating “new possibilities and resources” and the measure of such a potential to influence the lives of the city dwellers determines the degree of urbanity.\textsuperscript{cite} Henri Lefebvre locates the dialectic of

\textsuperscript{116} Zizek, Slavoj (1994). Mapping ideology. London ; New York, Verso 1859849555 1859840558 (pbk.)21
the meeting of differences and conversation between strangers through the use of all senses as the oeuvre of a city and its products (buildings, lives and art). According to Richard Sennett, in a city one learns sociability; the art of living with strangers. The city, with its scales and density, makes such a sharing possible through the encounters with difference. This unhindered sharing of experiences and events amongst individuals is essential to the practice of modern democracy which has a foundation in the celebration of diversity.

**Alienation, Estrangement and Division in the City**

In a literal sense each inhabitant of a city was once a stranger, a newcomer to the urban network. Urban life has been accused of creating strangers - the over-stimulation presented by Simmel which produces a defense that makes the individual blasé to his complex environmental conditions. The wall and the gates present the city by becoming Simmel’s proverbial “fortuitous fragment of reality,” a seemingly insignificant structure at the spatial level yet representing reality in a clearer manner than other urban indices. City life in Delhi portends freedom and economic opportunity in just the same way it does in other places around the world. The mythic lived tradition of open, friendly neighborhoods and comfortable homes in white middle class America finds a parallel in the vision of planning and design of Delhi’s neighborhoods in the post-independence period. The full glow of the “Nehruvian enlightenment” was influencing the emergence of an entirely new, modern India, and precedents that planners and designers drew upon were heavily based on the principles of CIAM(spell out) and modernism, influenced by Le Corbusier’s involvement in the planning and design of Chandigarh as well as Indian architects and planners, such as

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117 Lefebvre, *Production*, pg.1-65
Achyut Kanvinde and Charles Correa who were educated in universities in United States by pioneers of Modernism like Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe. Through the last few decades, changes have been introduced into the workings of these neighborhoods, such as the transformation of low walls at the front of houses to high walls, open access streets to restricted access and in cases closed access with the blessing of municipal authorities. The appearance of gates on these streets provides cues towards the psychological make-up of the inhabitants of such neighborhoods.

**The Effect of Alienation**

Alienation begets estrangement. The size, density and heterogeneity of cities result in a form of alienation, which for the underprivileged, means being ignored and abandoned by the city while for those in command of capital, it means ease of movement and stimulation. Engels found this to be a material process that was the outcome of social relations of capitalism and the experience of urban inhabitants to be at a distance from the imagination or a denial of imagination. In his study on Manchester housing in 1844, Engels found that the separation of workers in different quality housing and separate districts led to a separation of their (collective) imagination and suppressed the possibility of a revolutionary consciousness.\(^{119}\)

The estrangement of consciousness from public space signifies such a mechanism by which a portion of users manipulate the communicative aspects of space. Engel’s study can be understood as documentation of the retreat of public space from the city. Balzac and Benjamin’s writings find the figure of the Flâneur inhabiting the public space in the geography of coffee houses, squares and boulevards - both the subject and the object very

\(^{119}\) Engels, pg.1-44
much a product of their time. The growth of cities, a natural product of the growth of industrial capitalism, appears to have broken this urban arena, as people sought retreat in the private sphere. In contrast to Simmel’s “overstimulation,” in Manchester, Engels appears to find a case of under stimulation due to exclusionary division - through a spatial flow of perpetual dislocation and relocation, as well as varying extremes of environmental and sanitary conditions. “(A city)is composed of different kinds of men; similar people cannot bring a city into existence.”

In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels suggest that modern life in the city rests on a process of perpetual creative destruction and the relentless reshaping of environmental conditions. Harmony, equilibrium and an organic “natural” order is inimical to such a system or relentless social reorganization. They felt the production of new ideas and environments rose out of the contradictions engendered by capitalist society. The exclusionary and divisive city, for Engels, appeared to be the harbinger of possibly more socially emancipating urban environments through the erasure of such divisions.

**Participation**

In flânerie lies the concept of exposure as participation - a common chord that ties the concept of Simmel’s stranger representing the city, or in a Lefebvre-ian sense “representing the space” of the city. The sense of public has changed in public spaces and within the wider realm and in the new circumstances the division has an insidious nature - a drive to atrophy the very nature of public space.

120 Aristotle, Eckart Schütrumpf, et al. (1991). *Politik*. Berlin, Akademie-Verlag 3050000112 (set) 3050006501 (v. 1) 3050017481 (v. 2) 3050025212 (v. 3) 3050035617 (v. 4)
The complexity and multiplicity of the city make visual cues essential to the individual’s understanding of the environment as they represent the basis on which the individual and the larger community makes decisions and judgments. The collective imagination that occurs as a result of humans coming together also makes the city a locus for the imposition of discipline and authority over the imagined communities. Thus a collective imagination of fear can arise just by the appearance of cues signifying such a state in the way monuments work where specific usage of symbology creates a state of mind. Actions formed as a result of such symbology permeate across the entire collective imagination creating shared memories and practices. For example, the khaki color in India conjures up notions of police brutality in individuals who have never personally experienced such brutality. This shared memory, set in motion by perceptible cues, can also be seen to shape the city, both psychologically and physically. The lived practice in the city therefore influences the public imagination, and the simple instance of a gate on a street can remove the sense of the public from the mind of the individual.

Occupation, segregation and exclusion on every level are conceptualized in streets and neighborhoods, types of buildings, individual buildings and even parts of buildings. Institutionalized in architecture and conventions of use, these visual artifacts reinforce the social structure and re-present the city by making social rules legible.121

Scholars have understood metropolitan development as a signifier of a move toward a more emancipated society. The essence of the move towards such a cosmopolitan society lies in the access as well as the enduring richness and quality of the public realm. The sense of an open, unrestricted, civic “publicness” that the conceptualization of the modern city represents has a critical link with free access to its spaces. Conversely, hindrances exist to

121Sharon Zukin, “Symbols in the Age of Decline,” in The City Cultures Reader, Malcom Miles, Tim Hall, and Iain Borden, eds., (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), pg.81
the access to the public realm through its replacement with the selective, private realm, thereby excluding the consciousness of modern urban life. The formation of enclaves, guarded by walls, gates, fences and related security apparatus have created new forms of exclusion and exacerbated social cleavages. Richard Sennett sees the modern city reflecting the divide between subjective experience and worldly experience, or between the self and the city.\textsuperscript{122} The city at large becomes a fearful zone of exposure which is then manipulated to protect the inner (or spiritual) self from social contact and difference. This concept finds a parallel in the idea of a fortress city or the private gated community which play into the fear of the “other.” The American suburb was imbued with a similar imagery, counter-posed against a dangerous, congested and criminal inner city. The suburb becomes the imagined place of community and family. Borrowing Ira Katznelson’s term of city trenches, Engel’s exclusionary division finds a contemporary expression in the fortress architecture of gated communities and exclusionary suburbs serving as trenches that block imaginative identifications with the other.\textsuperscript{123}

**Objectivity in Spatial Relationships and Associations**

The selective and specialized nature of interactions in the city results in fragments and associations of human personalities instead of the whole human being taking part in events. This allows for a highly objective nature of relationships in the city, reducing the role of the personality in such relationships. It would appear to make for the absence of the space of the personal, spatial constructs which are created to serve as proxy through their personal role to confront the individual. Gates, walls and fences fit in to the role of an extension of

\textsuperscript{122} Sennett, *Fall of Public Man*, pg. 1-408

\textsuperscript{123} Katznelson, pg.1-286
the personal touch that is lost through social interactions that occur in the spatial realm within the city. The implicit message of distance and remoteness that the individual sought to accomplish through his intellectualized outlook to life according to Simmel, has been visually appropriated by objective symbols that communicate with subjective life.

The problem is that this objective culture comes to have a life of its own. “The individual has become a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of objective life.”124 This sounds similar to Marx's alienation, Durkheim's anomie, or Weber's rationalization as explained in Chapter Two, although contrary to the other writers, Simmel associates this with the city, rather than with the society as a whole. In Simmel’s “enormous organization of things” there is an echo of Manfredo Tafuri’s later assertion of the capitalist system of production in cities encouraging rigid definitions of roles of individuals as well as eroding moral values through consumption.125 The fleeting nature of impressions in the city, resultant from the vast number of images produced and waiting to be experienced in a limited time, ensures lasting impressions are not possible. In such a situation, obtaining self-esteem and the respect of others is achieved by seeking the awareness of others. This keeps with Simmel’s position on the way individuals asserted their personality in the metropolis by being different through “concentration” of the image presented to the world and becoming “strikingly characteristic” in style.126 There is a sharp discontinuity in these images as well as a multitude of styles and messages. This is in


126 Ibid.
contrast to the small town setting where impressions are built up gradually over time on the basis of habit.

This “striking characterization” comes through the reaction of society to the personality of the individual. Yet the relation of the size of the group defines the nature of such reaction - the size of the group that constitutes society makes such reactions complex in nature, and concurrently difficult to assess. A coherent message is communicated through the virtue of its simplicity and directness, which is where the impact of the appearance of gates and walls comes about, as there is nothing subtle about their presence. Such spatial measures serve to liberate the individual, and by extension his social circle, from close control and scrutiny because it serves to create greater distance as it substitutes a segment of personal interaction. Such barriers, when created, serve to sterilize the social space and provide the assurance of objective neutrality. Building upon Richard Sennett’s concept of the “neutral city” the terror and doubts of outer life (public life and the world of strangers) are isolated through a functional segregation that presents a semiotic homogeneity in addition to the obvious functional filtration mechanism it so provides.\(^\text{127}\) The intent of withdrawal is legitimimized through the means of establishing neutrality - the apparently passive intent of walls and gates serve to highlight their non-offensive intent, and the isolation they provide emphasizes neutrality. Yet there exists a striking difference between this position of withdrawal as neutrality and the role of the public sphere as the true forbearer of neutrality.

In The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs finds that the casual encounters between strangers in a public place bring the being of the city into life.\(^\text{128}\) The metropolitan individual, common to Simmel and Benjamin as the blasé flâneur, becomes the

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\(^\text{127}\) Sennett, Disorder, pg. 1-216

social figure who defines metropolitan life, freeing himself from the social rigidity of small communities, wandering around the city enriching his knowledge and understanding of his realm for the sheer pleasure of it. His city is one of diversity, drifting from one experience to another along roads and open spaces, his gaze lingering on “the magnetism of the next street corner, a distant mass of foliage, a street name.” The removal of the unknown formulates conditions for the removal of the public from the life of the individual - as on neutral ground the social and economic standing of the participants are unimportant, instead the interaction between them becomes paramount. Public spaces have a leveling tendency in the nature of their interaction, with the construct of personality serving as the currency of social interaction. On the other hand, gates and walls, through their spatial role in the social interaction, serve to create an image even before they have an opportunity to present their natural role as a physical barrier. In that sense they preclude the interaction at the level of personality. The eclipse of the linear Renaissance perspectival view of the physical public space by the fragmented virtual electronic image of the public space is an example of the transformation of the personality to the image.

Chapter Four: The Realm of the Public

The public sphere forms the setting for the interactions that define social networks and the resultant place of the individual. The institution of public space as the spatial realization of Jurgen Habermas’ setting of civic participation signifies larger social networks, whereas Simmel’s objective domain, with its supra-individual structures, finds its manifestation. Yet, the institutionalized existence of public spaces cloaks its identity, for it is in the public domain that the Flâneur formulates his subjective identity in order to comprehend an objective reality. Such a dual existence, presented earlier in the second chapter, reveals the public domain as a formal institutionalized space as well as a psychological space for the individual in its function as designated public spaces. As designated public spaces, the public domain imbibes a communal presence by becoming part of the public imagination.

Public Spaces

The cultural form that Weber and Simmel considered fundamental to the existence and nurturing of the metropolitan way of life comes into being in the jointly shared way of modern urban life. The architectural setting for such an existence occurs in the domain of the public realm. A fundamental spatial trait defining cities is an implicit sense of a public existence, an enduring characteristic that is seen in the Greek Agora and the Roman forum and finds continuity in the urban tradition. Public spaces can be identified into two categories. The first category comprises the traditional public forum such as streets, sidewalks, squares and parks, arising from the practical requirements of urban planning. The second category comprises the designated public forum, defined by the US Supreme Court.

130 Ghirardo, pg 43
in 1983 as “public property which the state has opened for use by the public as a place for expressive activity,” which contains the incidental spaces of the Flâneur, comprising those aspects of the built environment that do not have a deliberate public role infused into their working, but instead presenting a collective improvisation on public life.\textsuperscript{131} This space of the collective becomes the setting where, according to the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, citizens practice political participation which is comprised of democratic practices. This assertion is in keeping with the aforementioned views of Weber, Hobsbawm, Benjamin and Simmel on the civic nature of urban space. The inherent nature of a space for collective discussion is the absence of restrictions that impair such a dialog and the preeminence of a sense of shared ownership. Designated public forums imbibe a communal presence by their existence as part of the public imagination. In doing so, these spaces provide a visual communication of thoughts and ideas to their larger audience, becoming part of the same forum as that defined by traditional public fora.

In her book \textit{Architecture After Modernism}, Diane Ghirardo presents the divergence in the role and purpose of traditional public forums and designated public forums.\textsuperscript{132} She finds the traditional public forum, with its celebratory spatial nature, cloaked in exclusionary practices, which in effect limit their public definition thereby transforming them into “social spaces” from “public spaces.” She also finds an ominous exclusionary practice in the inclusionary rhetoric of the democratic nature of formal public spaces, contending that such spaces only exist for the “relevant public,” be it a social class (white collar public) or an

\textsuperscript{131} Perry Education Association and Perry Local Educators' Association, 1983, 460 U.S Supreme Court. 37 Source: http://www.freedomforum.org/packages/first/publicforumdoctrine/ -

\textsuperscript{132} Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, \textit{Architecture after Modernism} (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 43.
economic class (ticket holders at an event).\textsuperscript{133} On the other hand, designated public spaces, with their imprecise and provisional nature of operation and ownership, belong to the passerby (the Flâneur) as an apparition or a transition engaging the metropolitan dweller. Ghirardo uses the example of teenage cruisers (evocating Benjamin’s Flâneur) on foot and automobile in cities, representing an ephemeral urban event that becomes an engaging experience for the individuals assuming the dual role of the active object for the urban space (teenage cruisers in this case) and the observer of the passive urban space.\textsuperscript{134}

Spatial development in cities around the world in the last couple of decades demonstrates a marked direction towards the reduction of the public domain represented in cities. This has been documented by Nan Ellin in \textit{Architecture of Fear} where he examines the ways in which the contemporary landscape is shaped by our society's preoccupation with fear, as apparent in home design, security systems, gated communities, semi-public spaces (shopping malls, theme parks, casinos, office atriums), zoning regulations and cyberspace.\textsuperscript{135} The division of the built space, through various means of restriction, has altered the perception of space amongst the larger metropolitan populace. While such restriction can be seen in the formalized public spaces, it is more apparent in its subtraction of the public nature from the constituents of the designated public forum. Unlike the formal designed spaces of traditional public forums with their semiotic role complemented by their functional role, \textit{designated public forums} exhibit a phantasmagoric nature as their functional role exists independently of their semiotic role. Spaces that are private in function can serve as public space by virtue of their visual communication with the observer. In such an operation, the

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid, 43.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid, 44.

\textsuperscript{135} Nan.Ellin, \textit{Architecture of Fear} (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997),
semiotic role of such spaces operates in opposition to their functional role and presents a situation where the objects create a symbology that goes beyond their domain of physical existence and enters the realm of the imagination. The designated public forums can thus be seen as a basis for the development of a collective imaginary of the constitution of a metropolitan existence.

Spaces of division primarily function by disrupting the gaze, either directly or indirectly through an implication of disruption. As designated public forums have a strong visual identity, they are functionally vulnerable to visual disruption, explicit or implicit. Additionally, the visual culture formulated by the collective imaginary finds itself threatened by the removal of the visual basis of a psychological of consciousness that is formulated in public spaces. Spatial elements of division by their imposition on the field of vision, thus extrapolate their functional role of separation to a semiotic role, which leads to the formation of a shared cognitive outlook amongst the observer/s that directly affects their conceptualization of space. One can see in such a cognitive outlook the workings of a visual culture that creates the public forum as well as affects its workings through projections onto itself of spatial mechanisms. Simmel’s exploration of the Mental Space of his archetype, the Metropolitan Man, finds a literal personification in the figure of the Flâneur. The Flâneur’s historic habitat of the sidewalks and arcades finds a contemporary observational stance in the designated public spaces of the city where he indulges in his act of sauntering and observation. Through this act of observation, the Flâneur serves to define a set of public spaces that owe their identity more to their cognitive presence than to their physical existence.
The sense of public is the key defining feature of urban space. In such a definition arises the symbolic association of cities with moral purposes, as seen historically from the ancient Greeks to post-modern thinkers like Manfredo Tafuri in Architecture & Utopia. Homer attributed the “civility” of the Greeks to the presence of assemblies to observe one another and debate within. In his first book, De Architectura, Vitruvius proscribed the symbolic universal appeal of rigor, order and discipline in the laying out of Roman cities. Spiro Kostof saw a “freedom of action” emerging from the charter of public spaces, going on to posit that the fundamental aim of public places was being a place to establish community and mediate social conflict. As spaces of the collective, public spaces became the setting for abstraction that Simmel finds crucial for individuals and societies to form and comprehend relationships. Seen from a Simmellian perspective, the role of urban spaces often presents a dichotomy. Using the example of the public square, one sees the square becoming a symbol of authority, a formal exercise in the consolidation of a regime through the usage of symbols such as ceremonies, parades and architectural embellishments like administrative offices surrounding a square, as well as the usurpation of the public realm at will by restricting access and regulating behavior within the square. While examples of such behavior can be commonly seen all over the world, Tianamen Square in Beijing is a prominent example of the Chinese authorities stamping their norms on the social and political system by controlling the space of the square.

At the same time, the public square can be seen as the site for the assertions of the individual against the larger powers that dominate his life, through the force of visibility and

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136 Public (adj.) 1: of, concerning, or open to the people as a whole. 2: done, perceived, or existing in open view. Oxford English Dictionary (2000), s.v. “Public”

137 Tafuri, pg. 1-5

138 Ibid
the collective, the square gets a voice of its own, inciting and bringing about revolutions. Public spaces have also been seen as homogenizing influences against class barriers. In America, Frederick Law Olmstead planned new towns around public parks with the intent of breaking down class barriers amongst the segregated immigrant groups that comprised 19th century America, and in the process creating a “homogenized America.” The park had become an integral part of the city plan, partly as a means of reducing the overwhelming congestion of the medieval city, as well as an outlet for the new urban fashion of seeing and being seen. Yet the figure of the Flâneur is unseen in the parks, which was historically the domain of royalty in Europe and Asia, as can be seen in the origins of the gardens and public squares in Paris with the Bourbons and the Mughals in India. Parks. Squares do not present the space of the incidental, where the Flâneur can construct his interpretive identity; instead their wide-open spaces have a strong objectivity about them, something the Flâneur dislikes with his penchant for the subjective.

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Figure 1: Orange revolution, Independence Square, Kiev, Ukraine  
(Source: fr.wikipedia.com)

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The public space presented by the arcades in 19th century Paris are those traversed by the Flâneur. These are the streets that led the Flâneur anywhere he chose to go, creating a distinctive way of seeing, a new aesthetic mode and a form of seeing that lays the groundwork for Simmel’s view of Modernity (see Chapter One). For Benjamin these arcades reflected and inspired the utopias projected by the social visionaries of the nineteenth century, embodying the “anticipation and imaginative expression of a new world.”\textsuperscript{140} In the notion of a “new world,” Benjamin quotes Karl Marx, who used that phrase in a letter of 1866.\textsuperscript{141} The foundations of public spaces that underlie this aesthetic mode lie in the network of streets. Cultural intercourse is formulated within the movement pattern created by streets. By providing connections, streets give meaning to spaces, both public and private, and as a result of so doing, assume their own meaning. They are the backdrop to the city, for the social networks that create a city cease to exist in the absence of the street networks that physically bind them. Streets connect the private to the public, providing them a public presence by proxy creating a public imaginary. Seen as representative of the public space, streets present a notion of access; a role that goes beyond their normative arterial functions of urban circulation. Streets become urban balconies - a platform to observe life in the city while simultaneously participating in it. It is through the role of the spectator that the feeling of “being” is derived from the conjugation of the feeling of presence (observing the street and its environment) and the feeling of involvement (being simultaneously observed). Benjamin’s flâneur becomes concrete in walking the streets. In such a role, streets present the case of having a dual function of being concrete public spaces as circulation corridors and

\textsuperscript{140} Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, pg 120

\textsuperscript{141} Marx, letter to Ludwig Kugelmann, 9 October 1866 Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, pg 120
also as the foundation of designated public spaces by becoming ingrained in the urban imaginary as psychological public space.

**Spatial Division: The Confinement of the Flâneur**

Gates, walls and fences have come to define many an urban landscape. Elaborate at times, or simple and crude in construction and presence, they serve the common purpose of keeping some of the users within and the others without. Their visibility occurs in the physical landscape as visual barriers and in our mental landscape as cognitive barriers. In their physical role they serve to demarcate and separate, while in their cognitive role they create a landscape of exclusion and fear. Contemporary spatial morphology represents a new qualitative form of social space. In analyzing this morphology, I am focusing on the retroactive appearance as well as the designed appearance of gates, walls and fences as representative of architectural incarnations of division in the city. This writing specifically deals with their appearance in situations and contexts where they were not present at an earlier date when the house/neighborhood in question was designed. The study therefore does not include the phenomenon of newly developed gated communities that are typical of greenfield suburban developments. Instead this study focuses on the retroactive and restrictive physical enclosure of houses, streets, sidewalks and other parts of the city through the provision of gates, fences and walls used independently or in conjunction. The phenomenon of such barriers operates at the social level by restricting access - visual as well as physical - to streets, parks and other urban artifacts that were originally designed to have unhindered public and private access.

As referenced earlier, the typology of gates and walls specifically deals with the appearance of such in a context where there is designed unimpeded public access through
existing codes and formal practices. The concept of a formal practice serves to establish a precedent that permits the evaluation of measures of spatial access based on existing and past practices of access. The gates and walls studied in this work refer to those that prohibit visual and physical access to streets, sidewalks, shopping malls, public buildings, parks, plazas and their corresponding architecture and vistas, admission to which would have been otherwise unimpeded without the presence of gates and walls.

The Denial of access

The back alley, or the English mews, is an historical example where a street is independently owned by the property owners it directly serves. Suburban America also provides examples of such streets in gated communities where streets are privately owned and access is severely restricted. While private streets of the suburban kind have a measure of anti-publicness built into them, it is in the appropriation of a thoroughfare that lies the greatest challenge to the public-ness of space. Through the provision of gates and fences, access to the street is restricted to only the property owners of a particular street. A well-known historic instance of a thoroughfare being blocked occurs in the West End of 18th century London.\(^{142}\) Gates and bars were introduced to prevent the usage of the West End streets as traffic thoroughfares through the disreputable districts of North London.

\(^{142}\) Kostof, The City Assembled, pg 121
The gates built at Bedford Estate in the 1750s sought to restrict access to the elegant Georgian townhouses, and originally permitted only residents of the Estate to pass through. Later they were opened to non-commercial traffic between the hours of 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. They lasted for more than a hundred years until the 1890s, when they were finally torn down by an Act of Parliament. The introduction of gates in neighborhoods designed on a modernist grid serves to disrupt the street pattern and harks back to the traditional neighborhood with cul-de-sacs as well as suburban developments. The gate becomes an artifact of the medieval city symbolically inserting itself on the metropolitan landscape, an effort to contain the development of the city. The street grid, other than its ease of planning, also served to clearly present the space by enhancing its presentation. This can be understood as the laying open of the aspects of the city for the appreciation and understanding of the lay inhabitant (flâneur) through the structuring of the experience that presents these views of the city. A clear instance of such a policy presents itself in an ordinance that was common to most cities in the mid twentieth century. This ordinance, which dealt with the height to the

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boundary wall of buildings, residential and institutional, restricted the height of such walls commonly to three feet. Such a restriction ensured that the views of the architecture were unimpeded as a matter of official policy. To be urban in such a scheme would therefore entail a potential unfolding of the constituent of urbanism for inspection and education. Access is fundamental to such a premise. Gates and walls, through their removal of access, therefore work counter to such an approach and serve to reduce the urban practice in the city to a non-urban practice.

This denial of access, visual, physical and psychological, occurs through the appropriation of space in various ways. Some ways are apparent, such as overbearing walls and streets that are gated off, while there are other ways that work in a more subtle manner with an indirect effect on the psyche of the individual cloaking its potency. Such appropriation can commonly be seen in a homeowner’s blocking off of pedestrian access to a sidewalk in front of his house by varied means, such as putting flower pots across the sidewalk, installing a guardhouse, parking his car on the sidewalk, landscaping the sidewalk
as an extension of the yard, or in blatant cases, completely fencing the sidewalk off. Such measures and means serve to disconnect the individual from the urban environment by confining the visual and psychological realms of expression that they perceive, to form a subjective understanding of the metropolis. In effect such a mental confinement results in a removal of urban space from the domain of the viewer (the Flâneur) as vast tracts of the urban landscape are removed from the public imagination, with the urban space being defined through absence and loss instead of presence.

While examples of such urban operations abound around the world, a pronounced example of the substitution of presence with absence occurs in post independence New Delhi. The contrast in the strategy behind the formation of space and its actual operation is exacerbated by the relatively short urban tradition of New Delhi (mostly post independence-1950s onwards) as well as its bounding population. Such conditions create fertile grounds for the observation of the “social conflict” that Simmel used to define human sociation. In the modern post-colonial tradition, New Delhi came about as a planned development originally adjoining and later engulfing Old Delhi. New Delhi was a study in spatial contrast to the traditional planning of Old Delhi, as well as the concomitant social traditions that come with such contrasts - socially conservative Old Delhi against the progressive New Delhi, closed and winding streets of Old Delhi against the broad thoroughfares of New Delhi.

**The Case of Vasant Vihar, New Delhi**

Vasant Vihar is an upscale neighborhood in South Delhi. After the creation of the Delhi Master Plan in 1958, this 220 acre neighborhood comprised of five blocks became primarily residential, with a majority of single-family houses and a sprinkling of multifamily housing societies. In keeping with its social position, the constituent demographic of Vasant
Vihar is comprised mostly of retired senior bureaucrats, diplomats, businessmen and executives of multinational firms. Also in keeping with the zeitgeist of the time of its inception, Vasant Vihar was planned as a network of open streets with blocks ordered around a system of parks, where the visitor has the ability to walk across the neighborhood. There was an effort to produce a sympathetic and inclusive attitude in the buildings’ relationships to the existing urban context; a pedestrian scale with wide sidewalks and numerous parks for the enjoyment of the community, set the context for a dialog between the neighborhood, the city and the urban inhabitants.

This sense of openness was carried over to the design of individual houses by building codes that restricted the height of boundary walls to three to four feet, and only permitted low height steel gates. Since the law required that all houses be designed to follow the building code, the original designs of the 1960s had houses with expansive frontages and low walls with a feel of openness to them. This was in keeping with the Nehruvian vision of post independence urban India heralding a new way of living in the city, appropriately enough since the city itself was a product of the changing times.

Yet with the passing of decades the Nehruvian dream soured, as did the urban form of Vasant Vihar. The networks of streets that had provided unimpeded access from one end to another experienced a slew of circulation changes in the name of neighborhood security. Within the last decade, gates have appeared at most places restricting access during specific hours of the day, or in certain cases restricting access solely to residents of the particular houses for which the street the gate serves. Some of these gates remain closed throughout the day with traffic, vehicular and pedestrian, being rerouted around the consequently non-
existent streets. Certain blocks within Vasant Vihar posted security guards to serve as gatekeepers at these gates to restrict access to their block. While the purported origin of the gates on the streets lay in the guise of providing security to the inhabitants, this was a form of security that had its roots in monetary and location-based discrimination. The residents of Vasant Vihar never really got to terms with the presence of the outsider (Simmel’s Stranger) in their neighborhood, blaming the presence of outsiders for all their supposed ills from car thefts to burglaries, as they felt their upper income status made them attractive targets for anyone who was not their ilk. Their response to such a condition was to fence themselves inside a network of steel gates and to increase the heights of walls, in some cases thrice over. Such measures ensured the non-resident traffic moving through the streets of Vasant Vihar would be greatly reduced over the last decade, as restrictions imposed by the presence of the gates forcefully communicated that visitors are not welcome (the individual as Simmel’s stranger in the guise of Walter Benjamin’s Flâneur).

![Example of gates on municipal street in Vasant Vihar](image)

**Figure 3:** Example of gates on municipal street in Vasant Vihar. It is interesting how the left plate shows a wall that has increased in size thrice over- the stucco finish at the bottom is the original wall, the brick band in the middle was the intermediate increase and the metal spikes on top represent the final increment. *(Source: Author)*
Figure 4: An Aerial View and a Figure Ground study of the street network c. 1991 shows main roads with neighborhood streets branching out to connect various blocks of Vasant Vihar (Source: Author)

Figure 5: A Figure Ground study of the street network c. 2004 shows main roads with access to neighborhood blocked due to the appearance of gates at the connections between the main road and the neighborhood streets. (Source: Author)

An analysis of the figure ground of Vasant Vihar reveals the changes in circulation pattern in the neighborhood over a period of fifteen years. Whereas until 1991 there was clear
system of intra neighborhood circulation, with residential streets connecting with the main roads of Paschimi Street, Vasant Street, and Poorvi Street, since then there has occurred a progressive deterioration of the circulation networks, culminating in a situation in 2004 where gates were put up on all streets connecting the residential quarters of Vasant Vihar with the main roads. The purpose of gating off all five blocks, comprising 220 acres of Vasant Vihar, was very clearly to send the message across to non-residents that they were unwelcome in the urban space of the neighborhood. This can be seen to bring forth a selective form of Flanerie, that is class dependent and is limited to the residents of Vasant Vihar who have the privileged access to the streets and spaces of the locality. The private Flâneur appropriates the publicness of the city for his private use, opening up and exploring the urban space with a selected few who are his ilk.

Concurrently, there has also occurred a metamorphosis of architectural form in Vasant Vihar. The gates on the houses have more than doubled from the predominant four feet in height to eight to twelve feet in height. Correspondingly, there has also been an increase in the height of the boundary walls on the houses, and in almost all cases this increase has been buttressed by the addition of barbed wire/ broken glass shards/ steel spikes on the top of the walls, enhancing the siege

Figure 6: High wall and gate in Vasant Vihar, New Delhi (Source: Author)
mentality that has come to define the urban space of Vasant Vihar. The overriding dominance of the high wall/ gate boundary condition for residences in Vasant Vihar has monopolized the visual field of the neighborhood creating a monotony that debilitates the visual richness and diversity of an urban neighborhood, which for Simmel, was an essential component of the metropolis.
The high walls and gates of Vasant Vihar create an abruptness of space, where the wall becomes the object through the conversion of the boundary to the sole object of
observation, instead of the traditional role of the boundary as one of the hierarchical modes of the spatial definition of the object. The wall becomes an end unto itself in the reading of urban space as it comes to dominate the visual environment. In such domination, it also removes the other urban constituents from the public imaginary, thus creating a psychological vacuum in the reading of the urban space. This serves to reinforce the walls’ and gates’ physical purpose of the separation of the individual from the urban domain of Vasant Vihar by removing the presence of the urban space from the mind of the individual, thus acting as a mental wall. This mental wall precludes the formation of the subjective networks that Simmel found essential for the individual to comprehend his surroundings and therefore it is the objective role of the wall as an object, and by extrapolation its neighborhood, that it now represents and that the individual perceives. This lack of comprehension of the environment also precludes the formulation of a structure for communication between the individual and the urban environment.

Figure 8 Appropriation of the sidewalk as parking space in Vasant Vihar. The increase in wall height with barbed wire fence is in contravention of building codes. The lamppost on the sidewalk has been
installed the homeowner who parks his car on the sidewalk, to illuminate his parking spot. (Source: Author)

The sense of publicness that is derived from shared visibility, which in the case of Vasant Vihar has been precluded by spatially restrictive measure such as gates and walls, creates conditions for the privatization and exploitation of public municipal space. As the circulation of pedestrians has declined due to lack of access, there has occurred an appropriation of public space like roads, sidewalks and parks by rich and powerful residents, in blatant violation of civil laws. The lack of public usage of the urban space of Vasant Vihar has been replaced by private usage of public space. In effect the private life has replaced public life in the streets and sidewalks of Vasant Vihar. Roads are blocked with gates, sidewalks are used to park cars and parks are fenced in with security guards only letting the children of residents play while denying the usage of municipal parks to children from surrounding neighborhoods. In certain instances, sidewalks in front of houses have been reappropriated into a private lawn, while in other cases it has been converted to off street parking. In many ways the conscience of a city is its public domain and the removal of the public by the denial of physical and visual access through spatial measures, as evinced in the case of Vasant Vihar, leaves open the urban environment to abuse and exploitation.

The lack of clarity of public space and the formation of private spaces in place of public spaces presents a partitioning of the metropolis. The opening up of space in modernity, Simmel’s “spaces of freedom” reflects a desire to break with the past, while the partitioning of space in the realm of postmodernism reflect a desire to rekindle the past. It can be conjectured that if the opening up of spaces engendered a sense of emptiness, void and meaninglessness, then the partitioning of them would perhaps bring meaning back. If flowing space suggested and facilitated the elimination of social differences, perhaps
enclosed space vindicates and reasserts these distinctions during a time of pervasive insecurity.

Space in the Vasant Vihar neighborhood is partitioned to the greatest degree, defined to an extent that removes all ambiguity about the nature of space that they create. At the level of the neighborhood, public space is altogether removed by restricting access to the streets, parks and other traditional urban hallmarks of public life. At the architectural level, the iconography and the symbology of the gate and the wall serve to remove access from the visual resource of a city, replacing the rich variety of urban space with an abrupt space of division that disorients the observer (should he ever manage to reach the architectural object!) and in removing the cues to read an environment creates a sense of loss and alienation.

**Estrangement in Vasant Vihar**

The freedom of movement that is essential for the existence of the Flâneur, as well as the individual’s perception of the metropolis and his environment, have come under grave attack in the urban spaces of Vasant Vihar, and indeed in similar neighborhoods around the world, from Rio de Janeiro, to Bombay, to Beijing and Los Angeles.\(^{144}\) The restriction of movement, vision and consequently thought serves to limit the adjectival definition of “public” and the lack of ability of the individual to exercise his perceptual senses creates a sense of *powerlessness*. The paths and vistas of Vasant Vihar create destinies that are beyond the control of the individual and determined in part by his circumstances and in part by institutional arrangements by way of collusion of the administrative authorities with the residents. The frustration that comes with trying to navigate the divided terrain of security

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\(^{144}\) Ellin, pg. 43
‘apparatus’ is transformed to an urban anxiety in the minds of the individual as he finds huge swathes of the landscape inaccessible.

The inability of the individual to comprehend his environment due to restrictions beyond his control creates a sense of Meaninglessness, as he is unable to find consistent meaning in the urban structures of Vasant Vihar against their origins in the Nehruvian vision of a democratic and participatory metropolis. While the restrictions have their root in the powerlessness he feels as he traverses the city, the scale of the operation of the restriction to movement and vision begins to overwhelm the individual. The appropriation of sidewalks, parks and other community spaces by the residents creates a sense of Normlessness, as the social conventions of behavior of the residents of Vasant Vihar lies in stark opposition to the metropolitan values of shared public spaces. This results in a feeling of distrust in the individual about his urban space and removes him from his larger urban setting as well as the established social values.

The widespread deviance from the norm and common social values in Vasant Vihar results in a cultural estrangement of the individual because of the exclusionary nature of the gates and walls that serve to alienate the individual from the social environment. The individual begins to perceive apparent inconsistencies in his environment - public spaces built with his money (tax payers) that become inaccessible to him, residential architectural masterpieces that are completely hidden from sight, and vistas and promenades that assume a phantasmal existence, for they now exist only in his imagination as their physical accessibility ceases to exist. For the Flâneur, such exclusion creates social isolation as he becomes part of the minority, unwelcome in his urban setting with his habitat snatched away from him. Ultimately with the removal of the public sphere, the Flâneur’s reference co-
ordinates, stripping the Flâneur of his identity, and resulting in him losing touch with himself. Such alienation creates conditions for self estrangement.


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