Street Smarts/Smart Streets: public pedagogies and the streetscape.

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Abstract:

The Street functions as a location that we rarely stop to invest with a level of meaning more often attributed to destinations such as the home, school or shopping centre. However it operates as a key pedagogical location, introducing us to a range of information flows and discursive formations. These influences work in broadly implicit ways, with the transitory, fluid nature of the Street cloaking this pedagogical function. This article explores notions of public pedagogy and their connection to the pedagogical operations of the streetscape.

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Locating the Street

The street functions as a transitory location. A space more often than not that isn’t invested with the level of meaning and interaction that those places connected by the street - places like the home, school, shopping mall or school- find themselves coming to assume. We find ourselves moving through and along spaces like the street, rarely stopping to acknowledge its significance, and perhaps more importantly, its effects on us. This is in many regards the essence of the street. By its very nature it is an intermediary point - a space between places that functions as the connection apparatus of the social network. It is the street that forms a proximal ‘outside’ zone that we know, but don’t often connect with- at least to same level of interaction to those destinations we find at the ends of the street.

But it is precisely this proximal nature of the street that makes it simultaneously an implicit pedagogical and an explicit but assumed marker of the urban landscape. Whilst we might rarely stop to acknowledge the formative influence of the street (and for that matter, that entire zone of the street - the streetscape), it is the production of culture that occurs in it that is significant and requires interrogation. For Grange (1999) the street functions primarily as a temporal location that incorporates fluid combinations of time:

*Time in the street is the continual collision of the past and the future with the present. There is no time to stop and recollect the past. It simply “comes by”. The future streams into the present with such immediacy that it could be said to implode into the present.*

In Grange’s view, the street provides a timeless location of movement and renewal. It represents a simultaneous desire for a future (a destination) but also a shedding of the past (a desire for a continual destination point - a point that may also have been a past location for the return journey). Here we have in the street a total involvement, but immediate disconnection; a zone where time and connectedness are removed in search of the end point - that immediately physical, but also very much conceptual end of the street - the destination point.

Informed Streets

It is in precisely this way that the street operates as an implicit pedagogue. As a zone of our unconscious assumption- we move through but not often stop to reflect on the street- the street shapes us and enters our identity as a formative site of the urban milieu. We find located in the street very specific and deliberate information markers - right up to the point where the street is the information marker - as with the information superhighway. The street comes to be a site of knowledges and discourses, in constant interplay and renewal, presented to us as we pass through.

For the *flaneur*, that street walker and social critic of fin de siecle Paris, the street offered a key location for the play of the social:
The Flaneur lives his life as a succession of absolute beginnings. From the past, there is an easy exit; the present is just a gateway; the future is not yet, and what is not yet cannot bind (Bauman, 1994:139)

It is the flaneur that:

... is like a detective seeking clues who reads people’s characters not only from the physiognomy of their faces but via a social physiognomy of the street (Shields, 1994: 63)

From his (as the traditional flaneur was only ever a man) reading of the street- from this detective like gathering of information on the street- the flaneur operates as a fixed point on the temporal continuum of the street. It is he who stops to exert his reading, his observation of the streetscape in order to fix it in a point in time and space.

**The Street as Public Pedagogue**

But to say that the flaneur is dead, gone with the arcades of modern Paris, denies that we are all, as street-users, implicated in a flanerie of necessity in this period of late capital. We find ourselves exposed to a range of message systems in the streetscape- information networks that represent the global village in our very own local thoroughfares. It is the street that exposes us, in our corner of the world to the multiple discourses of the urban environment. The street is an open location away from our comfort points in the home, shopping mall or school. A space that is inhabited, yet common, invested with multiple meanings and ownerships simultaneously.

We might see the street functioning in terms of what Giroux has labelled ‘public pedagogies’; those informal pedagogical practices that:

> Are not restricted to schools, blackboards, and test taking... Such sites operate within a wide variety of social institutions and format including sports and entertainment media, cable television networks, churches and channels of elite and popular culture, such as advertising. Profound transformations have taken place in the public space... (Giroux 2004: 498).

The street functions in this way, as both active host of public pedagogies (such as the roadside billboard, or traffic sign) and as a pedagogical force of its own contextualisation. As urban flaneurs we negotiate our streetscapes whilst being bombarded with information flows as public pedagogies, each drawing their own discursive formations and identity forming practices. In itself, the street also locates us within the larger milieu according to what it says about the destination it leads to- those suburbs and areas linked to racial and class grouping as one example. We find the street not as a neutral zone of transport, but as a vibrant location of information flows, discursive practice- public pedagogies.

And it is this that incorporates us as unwitting flaneurs. We absorb the flows and constructions of the street and its streetscape and interact as individuals contextualised by the urban environment. We read our way through our urban habitats with the street guiding our path to those key points of destination. We perform meaning construction acts as we pass through the streetscape and as it responds to us, sending us images and representations of our global, urban space. The street as both a physical entity and imagined space is implicit in the
construction of meaning via this public pedagogical capacity. As such, the street warrants more serious attention as a location of the construction of the social and location in which discursive formations find meaning and information flows present representations of our world.

*Bibliography*


