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RICE UNIVERSITY

"Measures of Awkwardness"

Jonathan Bar

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
Master of Architecture

APPROVED. THESIS COMMITTEE

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The terms “public” and “private” are useful in describing the extremes of human experience. Unfortunately, actual human experience is more complex than a simple dichotomy can convey. Are we public or private when making a telephone call from a phone booth. Neither? Both?

A more apt model is that of a matrix of public and private experiences and spaces. At home watching television, we may be in a private space, but the experience has public overtones in that it is simultaneously shared by others. In a religious ceremony, on the other hand, we have private experiences, even when surrounded by others in a public space.

Private experiences in public spaces are awkward for most of us. When the experience is mediated, however, it can take on positive qualities. Standing on line in a cafeteria (alone in a crowd) should be uncomfortable, but that feeling is mitigated by movement along a sequence of thresholds, gradations of space, and events. Despite initial discomfort, we become more comfortable in a communal experience.

This project applies these ideas to a program at the scale of a community, in this case, a retirement community. For most people, the move into a retirement community is dreaded as representing a loss of freedom and individuality. This thesis's strategies of mediation attempt to mitigate the anxieties of a new environment, while still offering a varied and vital place for living.
No thesis project occurs in a vacuum. I'd like to thank the following people: my advisor, Albert Pope, for his insightful comments; my classmates, who listened and offered suggestions; Ben, Blaine, Diana, Brett, Bill and Eric; my parents for their support; and above all, Alison, my unofficial fourth advisor, whose support, interest, and assistance helped me through a difficult process.
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It is often taken for granted that human experiences can be described as either “public” or “private.” These terms, in and of themselves, indicate extremes, setting up a range of possibilities, but rarely manage to accurately capture the nuances of everyday life, which are much more complicated. The experience of talking on a payphone, for example, may have public qualities but it is also private at the same time. This thesis proposes a new context for these terms and the application of this understanding at the scale of a community.

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Any attempt at analysis must take into account both the quality of an experience and the space in which it takes place. Either one can be public or private. A private experience in a private space is the more individual extreme, while a public experience in a public space is the more communal extreme. The two other options would be a public experience in a private space and a private experience in a public space. The division between public and private, traditionally binary, can be more accurately described as a matrix between public and private...
Given the public and private realms, it is important to realize that moments of one can occur in the other.

spaces and experiences. This matrix accepts the traditional binary opposition but recognizes complexities within the dichotomy.

Modes of behavior are pretty clear within the public/public or private/private domains. It is not as clear how to behave when the realms are mixed: public/private or private/public. These awkward moments can provoke a detachment from normal experience. Sometimes this detachment is desired (as in zoning out in front of the television to “escape”). Other times, it can lead to feelings of alienation.
Lee Friedlander

Many American photographers in the 1950's and 1960's explored these issues in their work. In a number of images, a subject is represented having a private experience in a public place. The disengagement of the subject is primary. In these photographs, a bleak and hostile environment causes a disengagement of the represented subject from his or her surroundings. This project proceeds on the assumption that in addition to causing disengagement, an architectural environment can structure these types of experience through manipulation of temporal and physical organizations.

Model of a cafeteria visit

The process of going to a cafeteria serves as a good example of a mediated private experience in a public space. The experience proceeds through a series of spaces, across various thresholds, and includes mini-events along the way. The first threshold occurs when the subject enters the cafeteria building, passing through the front doors. This is followed by a standing or line period, which can be further broken down into mini-thresholds.
Since most of these cafeteria lines are "folded," that is, wrapped back upon themselves at least once, the endpoints of the various segments of the line present mini-thresholds as the subject passes from one to another. During this time, the subject is privy to a number of different views: views of other cafeteria-goers both ahead and behind, views (often, though not always) of the dining area, and views of the displayed food before he/she actually gets to that point in the line. Not only does the subject proceed through various stages of space, across different thresholds, but he/she is always aware of his/her position in the linear experience via views ahead and behind of where he/she will go and where he/she has been. The subject then passes across a major threshold (from passively standing on line to actively determining what to eat) via the event of taking a tray and silverware and joining the next segment of the line -- the actual selecting
The private moment within public space doesn't always have to be alienating. If properly structured, the disengagement that the experience provokes can allow a degree of perspective from outside the course of everyday life.

food. The "climax" event occurs at the point of payment -- the food is totaled and paid for. The subject then proceeds to find a table at which to eat, he eats the meal, and leaves the building.

Each of these zones can be characterized by its own type of space. The ordering provided by these events, qualities of space, and thresholds between types of space make a potentially uncomfortable communal experience less threatening and positive. When these awkward experiences are structured, the subject, by virtue of participating in an event larger than himself temporarily gives up some of his/her individuality. The removal of the obligations of individuality can be liberating, and allows the subject to participate in a communal experience without (or at least with reduced) self-consciousness.
This interaction of environment and experience occurs in many different instances. In airports, for example, another sequence of progression often has an impact on mood. After entering the airport, a subject passes through a ticketing area, through a security checkpoint into the more restricted area not available to the unticketed, and on to the gate. From there, the subject surrenders a ticket, moves through a door, down the long corridor of the skyway to the doorway of the plane itself. Airflight is something that few people are entirely comfortable with, and this sequence of procession can help to allay fears by making the traveler feel that he/she is inhabiting an organized system, larger than themselves, but which at least appears to make sense. The system doesn’t present itself all at once but is traversed over a series of manageable stages. The same elements occur in the airport as in the cafeteria: event, gradation of space, and threshold.

Stages of the cafeteria experience:

Enter
Stand on line
Take tray and silverware
Take food
Pay
Find Seat
Eat
Leave
Within a religious service, the private experience in the public space is structured by rituals (any set of repeatable actions that follow a specific order). Rituals tend to organize an experience temporally, while events (themselves often rituals), gradations of space, and thresholds tend to organize the environment of the experience.

Structuring breaks experiences and impending experiences into manageable chunks. Awkward experiences are more easily handled if they can be seen as a series of small tasks. This breaking down of the experience helps to distract the subject from any discomfort he/she may feel. Sometimes this is accomplished by routines as simple as putting on the right shoe before the left or parking in the same spot every day or reading the comics in the newspaper before reading the news everyday. These are the methods by which we assert order on an unpredictable world.
One of the first attempts to integrate these ideas into a project came through an observation that each day we tend to move through the experiential matrix in the same pattern. The movement from sleep to work and back again suggested the pursuit of a linear organization. The first attempt to express this idea was to model a very simple house/office that responded to each of these phases. Divided into equal fourths, each quarter of the house corresponds to one of the four phases of the matrix. In the image below, on the very left, a bedroom with frosted glass and many windows mullions is the most mediated private/private space. On the right, a home office is the most exposed public/public space, with clear glass and few mullions. In between are a living area and a covered outdoor vestibule (the private experience in a public space. The long walls are visually open to the exterior, while between the different "rooms," relatively solid walls with doors act as thresholds from one space to another.
The apparent importance of a linear organization to this project (even before a program was chosen) suggested finding a site with a line already inscribed upon it. The site chosen was the former Pearland Airport in Pearland, Texas about 15 miles South-Southeast of Houston. Pearland is a fairly rural community that hasn't quite yet become a suburb of Houston despite its proximity. Located directly between two highways, suburban development hasn't quite reached the center of Pearland but is beginning to creep over the edges of town. The airport, just on the edge of the business center, is no longer in operation. The most obvious remnant is a helicopter service, which ferries material and personnel to offshore oil-rigs in the Gulf. The airport appeared not to ever have been very large -- its longest runway measured 1800 feet (about 3000 feet shorter than the longest runway of its closest competitor, Clover Field, about five miles away.
The site is now mostly open fields covered with grasses of various sizes and colors. Helicopters land and take off and occasionally will hover a few feet off the ground for minutes at a time as the vehicles are tested. Other than a soccer field at the Southeastern corner of the site, the fields are vacant, with few trees at the very edges. Hayrolls dot the fields, hinting at the only use the site currently supports. Two new streets have been put in across the site, with services ready for prospective inhabitants, and the main runway (diagonal across the site) and access roads have been removed. There are traces of two smaller runways left, each about 12 feet wide and mostly overgrown. One of these existing "traces" was chosen as a site for this project, the inscribed line being a datum to which the project could respond.
The program chosen for the project was that of a retirement community. The desire was to work with a total community, incorporating all aspects of life, living as well as work. This specific program is intended as a lens through which to view the experiential matrix and its interaction with its environment. In this way, it could represent any total community.
The project was initially conceived as pieces of program associated with fields of landscape (lawn, low grasses, high grasses, and forest). The more public programs (meeting rooms, staff offices) became linked with fields of lawn, while the more private programs became linked with fields of forest. Each of these types of landscapes are currently present on the site and would be reused depending on the level of privacy offered by each. The other major element is a long corridor on the site of the runway trace. This corridor would function as a linear, un-folded cloister, the “center” of the project, a place for uninterrupted walking.

There are two elements which exert “pulls” on the program -- the corridor bar and the fields. The corridor bar, acting as the public center of the community, pulls the more public programs toward it. The fields pull the more private programs to an atomized distribution across them.
Originally, the fields were conceived of as arbitrary shapes ("blobs") with paved walkways between. That organization later changed to a more straightforward banding of the fields across the site.

A further change was to remove the lawn fields from the banding logic. The area along the street side of the bar became all lawn, the most public landscape, with parking interspersed. On the other side of the bar, the lawn fields become localized "moments" within the more private landscapes.
Along the street, the lawn (and public areas) is the typical condition. To the other side, this most public landscape is the exception. These "moments" of extreme publicness contain the more outdoor, exposed programs; one is an area for allotment gardens, another is the location of athletic fields.

The bar acts as a threshold into the community, and gradations of space continue as one moves deeper into the community. Parallel to the bar, three North/South paths traverse the site, becoming narrower and more meandering the further away from the bar.
Between the bar and the first path are the community facilities: library, dining hall, meeting room. Between the first and second paths are the semi-private arts and crafts studios and assisted living facilities. Beyond the second path are individual houses, scattered from North to South over all the fields.

Gradations not only occur in the West to East direction, but also in the North to South direction. Each landscape band creates a threshold with its neighbor. As one moves from walking in a forest field to a low grass field, the transition acts a threshold, mediating the experience of movement over the site.
Movement from any one point in the site to another involves crossing many different thresholds, passing through various gradations of space and moving across "event" spaces (such as the allotment gardens). Each of these forms of transition helps to mediate experience.

The buildings within this project have not been individually designed, but guidelines have been created. The private houses have pitched roofs which restrict views in the East/West direction. At the same time, this allows clerestory lighting, under the pitch, to bring natural light to the more private centers of the houses. Picture windows frame views from inside the houses across the different landscape zones.
The more public buildings essentially follow the opposite logic. A reverse pitched roof opens up the building to allow views from within and accept views from the outside. The more public buildings tend to be clustered together, while the private houses are more evenly dispersed over the site.
A retirement community was chosen for this project because the issues of public and private experiences become especially important. The move to a new community in later life represents a new location, new people and neighbors, and new routines. All of these changes often stir up feelings of anxiety. In most cases, this anxiety is combined with a dread of losing individuality and freedom. This project attempts to mitigate the anxieties of a new environment and a new way of living while still offering a varied and vital place for living.
As with any thesis project, there are a few directions in which this could and probably should proceed. All along, this project has been concerned with the planning of a community, specifically through its diagrammatic organization on the site. Taking this project further would involve conceptual moves away from the scale of the site plan in two possible directions. By both conceptually zooming into the project and by also conceptually zooming away, the project could be made stronger.
Zooming into the site would involve trying to imagine inhabiting the project. The landscape collages are an important first step. They begin to point out a few issues: mainly, that there might not be enough variety of spaces yet. By loosening the rigidity of the East/West paths, a more unique set of spaces could be created. An introduction of gradual curves might help to relieve the (oppressive) forced perspective that now exists along the paths. In addition, by increasing the range of landscapes used, the project might begin to attain spaces of further uniqueness and interest. At this point, there is probably too big a difference in height between the high grasses landscape and the forest areas, for example. There should be a landscape which might begin to restrict eye-level views but still allow views of the sky, operating as hedgerows or cornfields do. Another aspect of zooming in would be useful: design of the individual buildings would also yield opportunities to apply the strategies of mediation at a more tangible scale.

The other possible direction of further inquiry would be to effectively zoom away from the project and speculate how it would survive and behave in the contemporary and future markets in respect to demographic and cultural trends. This type of scenario planning might be a way to
refine the effectiveness of this proposition. For this thesis, however, the main point of effort was to develop a community from specific observations about social psychology and then to look backward again, at the images that provoked this thought in order to keep the process linked to its conceptual roots and to see how the moments represented in the photographs might occur within the project. Scenario planning would be useful from this point in the process on, now that the project has been defined, but not before this point.

This may only be an initial inquiry into the linkages between aspects of social psychology and architectural environments, but it has opened a realm of questions. By examining some of these issues further, or even retaining them in the back of one's mind, we might begin to plan for and design more livable human environments.
For further reading:


“The ruling order serves as a support for innumerable productive activities, which at the same time blinding its proprietors to this creativity . . . . Carried to its limit, this order would be the equivalent of the rules of meter and rhyme for poets of earlier times, a body of constraints stimulating new discoveries, a set of rules with which improvisation plays.” page xxii


“Mortification or curtailment of the self is very likely to involve acute psychological stress for the individual, but for an individual sick with his world or guilt-ridden in it mortification may bring psychological relief.” page 48

Thomas Barrie, *Spiritual Path, Sacred Place*, Shambhala Press, Boston, MA 1996

Photographers Monographs:


Photographic Collections:

