

Restoring our Sense-of-Place

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Our perceptual relationship with the physical environment is becoming increasingly displaced as we venture into a non-human mediated existence. Urbanization leads to unknown spatial paradigms in which we no longer know where we are. Poignant but ongoing revolutions in technology have catalyzed this change in our development. We are not only engaged in a fight to preserve and cultivate reality but are waging a Nietzschean struggle to restore our sense-of-place in it. Contributing to this is a broad miscellany of forces, spawned by what has come to be known as the metropolis. A conscious perceptive reclamation of space can only occur through invention and spontaneity, using both architecture and investigations into what can be labelled as the *eutechnical* future—that is, technology deriving from the body. Such a task however, requires polar changes in thinking about both the built environment and technology. Those that are left disoriented and or even captivated, will render themselves without the skills necessary to grasp where they are.

Sphere Thinking

Contemporary philosopher Peter Sloterdijk admits that the inhabitant of the modern metropolis, the individual, understands and lives *through* in unconscious realization of the dictum whereby ‘God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.’ The two-thousand-year-old domain of European “sphere thinking” hence provides Sloterdijk with both the point of departure for a contemporary evaluation of such a dictum and an exploration into a *New* phenomena of the modern era which he describes as individualism. Sphere thinking also provides Sloterdijk with the necessary vocabulary—inherited from the ecclesiastical explorations of Plato and Leibniz, and from the German semanticists in Goethe and Heidegger—to describe the New ‘animated, interpersonal, or surreal space[s]’ that have come of individualism. Sloterdijk uses “thought-figures”—rhetorical tropes that he argues are different from metaphors, that represent the ‘now nearly exhausted term “society”’. Among them are the aptly-named terms, “spheres” which are spaces of coexistence, spaces that people fail to see but that are integral to a humanist understanding; and conjoined spheres, “foam”. Combined, they form an “ontological constitution” that incorporates humans, animals, plants and machines.

For Sloterdijk, foam, is a ‘multi-chambered system consisting of spaces formed by gas pressure and surface tensions which restrict and deform one another according to fairly strict geometric laws’. The analogy is formally and structurally indicative so as to be understood as a representation of metropolitan living and is meant to create a rhetorical picture of thinly walled, notably individual, bubbles that are at the same time connected by machine-mediated communication vectors that make us part of an orthodox, semi-rigid system. Although, this metaphor might simply be a familiar way to describe how we live, it also concisely represents contemporary articulations of *milieu*. It also appears that Sloterdijk uses such



thought-figures as a means to assert that previous natural languages were ‘developed for a world of weight and solid substances’, and that contemporary articulations of modern and postmodern experience use a vocabulary of lightness and seamlessness, which constructs a world based on mobility and the easing of life’s physical burdens.

The Ecological Niche

Sloterdijk’s inventive thought-figures are borrowed from the ecological expression of “units”. Ecological units exist in physiological, social, psychological and behavioral realms and are defined as being self-generated, as having a time-space locus and as being articulated with boundaries between their internal characteristics and their external environment. Each ecological unit has a relational position, defined as an “ecological niche”, and a feature or quality of space to perform, defined as an “affordance”. It is through the relationship of ecological niches, with its affordance, that the reciprocal relations between different levels of nested or related phenomena occur. In this way, we can read Sloterdijk’s spheres, as ecological units, each with an autonomous relationship to a collective whole; something which Sloterdijk would call foam, that in ecology, is a niche. Hence, Sloterdijk’s spheres are all at once related by location, analyzed through a contextual understanding and exist through a temporal condition. The performance factor, which for ecological units is their affordance, is for Sloterdijk, the aesthetic: their architecture or spatial dimension.

Sloterdijk cites the apartment building and the sports-stadium—mass containers—as the most important architectural innovations, because they are functions familiar to all of us and more importantly, they define both ends of what Sloterdijk labels as the “atmospheric installation” spectrum, that is, that they are opposites in the creation of a history of atmospheres, a central theme in Sloterdijk’s dissection of the modern age. The two are also extremes when understood as units of established relationships between people, their potential to form new relationships and proxemics, something which pioneering environmental psychologist Edward T. Hall defined as (Hall 1963, 1003), ‘the study of how man unconsciously structures micro-space—the distance between men in the conduct of daily transactions, the organization of space in his houses and buildings, and ultimately the layout of his towns.’

The problem of proxemics is precisely that it occurs in confines of the unconscious, which inevitably explains the interest business has to harness an understanding of the mind and its behavioral motivations, to manipulate space for economic gain, to use, in the starkest sense, an understanding of proxemics at the expense of our own unconscious. It is only within the haven of isolation that we are partly liberated from spaces created with, and dependent upon, the millions of dollars poured into psychological research and focus groups intent on mastering our own thought patterns, and wishes. This displacement from sense-of-place in what should be considered natural or human, is made more evident by these manipulations,

however disguised. Where spaces of interaction could serve to reinforce human exchange and provide a sense-of-place rooted by proximity with others, they are today most often designed to replace such potential connections with relations mediated by consumption. What has become even more threatening to our mental state is not the erosion of the humanist potential of these ecological niches, but rather the problem of preserving an autonomous existence whilst dealing with overwhelming social forces and the commercial rat-race. These forces have come about through the creation of metropolises and a globalized modernity.

Foam and the Metropolis

First the universe was globalized with the help of geometry. Then the Earth was globalized with the help of capital and now with each crossing of each street, we try to keep up with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life. Foam is our metropolitan home; capital regrettably validates our social interactions through worth and gain. Nineteenth century scholar Georg Simmel in his seminal text *The Metropolis and Mental Life* of 1903 compares rural-life—where the rhythm of the everyday and mental imagery flows more slowly, more habitually—with the “arithmetic problem” that is the metropolis. According to Simmel, the modern mind harbors punctual, calculable and exact traits forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence. This pressurizes our sense-of-place and develops an urban existence that places importance on getting from A-to-B. The metropolis becomes a series of high-speed vectors punctuated by nodes of importance or necessity.

Sloterdijk’s foam is a dense web of people with differentiated interests trying to integrate all activities and mutual relations into a stable and punctual time schedule. To be metropolitan is to embark on a mode of being that, to be successful, requires a skill-set defined by a pathological level of emotional self-mastery. Richard Sennett has elsewhere described how this occlusion of emotional experience leads to a corrosion of character which is the cost of advanced capitalism. The metropolitan is completely atomized internally: evaluating and balancing their social relations and engaging in impersonal transactions. These responsibilities mark the ends of the vectors. The vector itself, the city fabric, sends manipulated, coded messages, consumed at high-speed and presents a bodily proximity and narrowness of space that makes the mental responsibilities more prominent. This disorients our body from its surroundings and reduces us to a transient state, focused only on the end destination. Aviation links these metropolises, providing a bird’s eye relationship with the Earth’s surface and as we are born flightless, our bodies connect to the Earth through a cabin window not big enough for us to fit our shoulders through—one of many non-physical forms of travel.

Psychogeography

Simmel (Simmel 1950, 424) concludes *The Metropolis and Mental Life* tellingly with: “as a cell, belong[ing] only as a part, it is not our task either to accuse or to pardon, but only to understand” the forces of metropolitan life that affect us. Despite forays into the economic and political impingements on our mental state of being, his précis overlooks the contemporary paradigm of recentralizing our geographic bearings (which is to be attributed to our more technologically-mediated existence). Our sense-of-place has always been defined by our bodies and movement defined by an exertion of muscular power. Contemporary novelist Will Self describes his world similarly comprised of scattered micro-environments—*islands*—which are internally disoriented, unconnected and separated by long-distance travel, independent of the body’s physical ability or range. From our mitochondrial beginnings to the invention of the steam-engine, the body has been engaged in a direct relationship with its physical output/input. Self indicates that the *body-never-lies* dogma is fast being usurped by the *body-doesn’t-know*. If Sloterdijk’s mass-containers increase our potential for human-mediated interaction, our sense-of-place could perhaps be restored by other means: *psychogeography*.

The key psychogeographic epiphany is to engage in this restoration by means of an aimless excursion across the city: a city that it seeks at the same time to “destroy”. Psychogeography was formulated as a mechanism to tear apart Paris, a means to cut through the Haussmannian lines of civil oppression. Guy Debord’s fellow Marxist, communist revolutionaries believed that our kinds of societies created a “spectacle”—an illusion in which we live. In his landmark book, *La Société du spectacle*—a catalyst for the May ‘68 riots—Debord (Debord 1994, 12) argues that a society is not simply made of “a collection of images; rather, it is” one where “social relationship[s] between people [are] mediated by images,” alluding to the sorts of micro-environments Sloterdijk documents under his theoretical framework of individualism, mediated by technology. Napoleon’s urban-renewal project was, as the Situationists observed, devised to disorient them. The very fact of knowing where they were would be considered a dangerous and rebellious act. The original psychogeographer’s purpose was to destroy his own isolated sphere and to break open the permanent curfew laid down by geometry. Today, Haussmann’s geometric incisions have been replaced by a machine-mediated existence that leads to a similar kind of displacement.

Self, an evangelical modern-day psychogeographer, describes the enormous commercial inducement that exists to reside within micro-environments. Flight companies, travel agencies, cabs, computers, the Internet, media are our pre-defined interfaces with information. It was the automobile that allowed “land-of-the-free” Americans to realize their dreams. Today, the car is no longer a means of freedom. The turn of the steering wheel gives one an illusion of choosing a direction but at the same time defines the boundaries of a micro-environment. Slowly navigating our unified conurbations—through what are ironically



known as wind-screens—the automobile heightens our reactive instincts yet displaces our body even more potently. According to Self, those whose psyche is engaged day-by-day with virtual environments are, again ironically, going places. They are simultaneously jumping through cyber-spheres and sporadically referring to real-time, real-world space, perhaps to make a coffee or chat with a colleague. The term WYSIWYG refers to something the eyes can register but the body cannot touch or sense – a GUI. No *graphical user interface* allows us to have a natural spatial experience. In a webcam feed your mind spends time in the location that is fed to you, however you have no knowledge of bodily parameters or limitations within that distant space.

Certain reactive tools such as the photo-camera, play an important role in initiating aimless excursion across the city. Susan Sontag (Sontag 2001, 55) referred to photography as a tool for re-understanding our personal space in her 1977 essay, *On Photography*: “The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes. Adept to the joys of watching, connoisseur of empathy, the flâneur finds the world ‘picturesque’.” The photo-camera gives the city-dweller reason to engage with his or her urban milieu. It thus provides a good reference for the tools and machinery designed for tomorrow. They should be devised with the body in mind: an eutechnical approach. Our bodies, should be fully engaged in the production of these tools and made essential to their workings, for it is not the limits of human effort that should be exploited but rather a spatial awareness that should be invoked.

Additionally, certain theoretical methods allow for the breaking open of these atomized worlds. While Self, encouraged to live a different kind of spatial awareness, argues for eutechnical forms of travel to open these micro-environments, the territorial confinement in which we live and calls for a reenactment of that which Baudelaire describes as the botany of the sidewalk: *flânerie*. Walter Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* provided Parisians with a more open, yet still capitalist framework to become fully oriented habitants. For Sloterdijk, *Passagenwerk* is a crucial exemplar for contemporary cultural theory because “it already anticipates almost everything that was to become important later: the passion for the archive; the ‘micrological’ examination of the detail; media theory; discourse analysis; and the search for a sovereign viewpoint from which to grasp the capitalistic totality”.

The role of the architect calls for built manifestations of spaces that repel such capitalistic ventures yet still contain programs for interaction and movement. The architect should provide the inventive spatial distribution of a given program and the structure within which it exists. Sloterdijk hints at the need for an “air-conditioning” project for large social entities or a generalized “greenhouse” project. He condemns Benjamin for placing the historically outdated architectural type of the arcade at the center of his analysis. Sports stadiums, convention centres, large hotels, and resorts would have been far more worthy of Benjamin’s attention: a mixed-use edifice whose inner-workings were the subject of critical

dialogue but whose exterior aesthetics were the result of only minor debate. The post-Benjaminian effect of capital on architecture is its transformation into brand and the transformation of the architect into a performer of signatures, making it more difficult to arrive at the project outlined by Sloterdijk.

A conscious perceptive reclamation of our sense-of-place can be achieved. On different scales and in different programs, we have a responsibility to question our designs so that they conform to the body and its extents. At the same time, the method in which we use space can be reinvented. Peter Sloterdijk and his theoretical explorations of sphere thinking and mass-containers imbue human-mediated interaction with a new urgency. A psychogeographic battle with the optimised geometry of the city provides the blinded modern city-dweller another clue to understanding the captivating qualities—nourished by capital—of Simmel's *Metropolis*. It is thereby, through this consciousness, that they can begin to re-evaluate their physical relationship with the city, their sense-of-place.

The challenge is the act of realizing.

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