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Abstract

This paper presents a theoretical/historical genealogy of the cluster of concepts that form contemporary notions of privacy and private life. My intention is to present a broad rather than deep historical overview. The paper juxtaposes a series of images and ideas, “wall, window and alcove” that are meant to clarify the terms we use when discussing privacy/private life. It is an attempt to defend a commitment to autonomy and freedom as values linked to the private/public dialectic. Private life represents a set of highly plastic historical and phenomenological problems for humanists, historians, social scientists, architects, designers as well as policy and lawmakers. The concepts of privacy and private life in different cultures across space and time are distinguished by profound variations: but the problems presented by the ideal of an autonomous subject, the realities of the modern state and the rise of highly mobile, data gathering technologies developed by the “private sector” create similar challenges for the evolving ideas of democracies, transparency and communication. This paper tries to clarify the historical and conceptual significance of private/public confusion in consumer driven, post-War US culture.

It is impossible to talk or think about privacy without evoking metaphors and images of walls, most recently made of fire and of code. By extension, the interruption or disruption of the wall, whether as light-giving window or shelter-providing alcove, gives conceptual form and shape to the theoretical/historical cluster of concepts that support notions of security and autonomy and have become indispensable to explorations of the value of privacy and private life. In presenting a series of imaginary spaces where private and public spheres were thought to converge and/or collide, I hope to show that transparency as a political value defended by liberal democracies functions on the basis of a powerful visual and fundamentally spatial metaphor: the window. The window and the alcove are simple, even primitive elements of built environments, but they are figures for porosity and protection upon which we might be able to construct analogical and theoretical relationships between different times and different cultures. In Georg Simmel’s essay on the bridge and the door, he describes the activities of separation and connection as essentially and basically human: in the early twentieth century, he privileged doors and bridges as architectural elements that connected and separated different spaces and territories. Simmel dismissed the window as a merely visual aperture: the door was the significant interruption in the expanse of the wall. Simmel wrote, “The wall is mute. The door speaks”. For the German sociologist, the door embodies a promise of bodily freedom: a century after his meditations, disembodied and virtual freedom and trespass have made the window a critical feature in thinking about differentiation and separation. Private and public spheres divide and separate human activities. One is penetrated and protected on the other hand by the architectural construction of an alcove.
Modern buildings privilege light and air and communicate a general sense of transparency and weightlessness; more importantly, windows are considered to be extensions of walls. Built-in porosity in walls can be a good thing, encouraging intensification of activities around the borderland created by a wall. Recent work by sociologists Andrea Mubi Brighenti and Lorenzo Tripodi offer suggestive theories about how the urban wall is increasingly a “technological and mediating ensemble”, used to segregate and entertain urban populations in “structured embodiment of public space designed to optimize [sic] the exposure of city users to the spectacle of goods, impressed, entertained, directed by flows of commodified images” (Brighenti 2006) (Tripodi 2006). If urban graffiti, advertising and flat screen technologies using photosensitive materials have made walls garrulous what new kinds of egress and communication can windows promise?

Architects, political scientists, urban planners, art historians, the police, security specialists and computer programmers are all interested in controlling, assessing and creating walls that can function like cell membranes. Wendy Brown’s Walled States: Waning Sovereignty offers an analysis of the US/Mexico frontier and the Israeli wall building projects in the context of globalization and rising “xenophobia and parochialism” (Brown 2010: 40). In The Craftsman, Richard Sennett has a surprisingly positive account of border areas, or the region along boundaries. Sennett describes porous, life-giving boundaries as places where exchanges between inside and outside are intensified rather than suppressed: Sennett calls these boundary spaces “living edges”. Security-oriented walls aspire to making boundaries into strictly policed spaces where very little can happen: these boundaries are what Sennett calls “dead edges.” If security and privacy are essential motivators for wall building, “[t]he plate glass window walls used in modern architecture are another version of the boundary: though these windows permit sight within, they exclude smell and sound and prohibit touch” (Sennett 2011: 226–7). In his earlier work, Sennett cites Siegfried Giedion’s description of the glass wall as promoting an ideal of permeability (Sennett 1977: 13). The transparency of glass promotes an illusion of permeability that actually promotes hermeticism and separation. Ann Friedberg uses the concept of the window shopping and mobile urban spectatorship to clarify the relationship between 19th century visual experience and the rise of cinema. Friedberg is enthusiastic about the exchanges made possible by interdisciplinary exchanges between film theory and architectural history and urban studies (Friedberg 1994). Overcoming walled off disciplinary enclaves was in fact one of Friedberg’s intellectual achievements. Sennett’s dead areas are produced by the aggressive and highly policed walls of Brown’s waning nation-state.

The formation of new forms of publicness and private life in the spaces of the modern, cinematic city can be productively engaged in another disciplinary context: the political philosophy that promotes and protects privacy as an essential value to liberalism. In The Value of Privacy, Beate Roessler offers us a very clear and concise differentiation of three different kinds of privacy addressed by the law: the local, the decisional and the informational. Describing privacy and its relationship to liberalism and political autonomy, Roessler argues that for a point that for liberal democracy, protection of privacy is not an end in itself: privacy is one of the critical subtending conditions for the intellectual freedom and autonomy of its citizens (Roessler 2005). Decisional privacy has to do with protection of self and sexual practice, local privacy addresses an individual’s relationship to physical space and informational privacy has to do with data, produced and stored by individuals by a number of private and public actors. Local privacy is shaped by fictional, narrative and spatial ideas: the cluster of issues around privacy provides a living edge of interdisciplinarity. Visual studies scholars, film theorists and historians, humanists and social scientists of various allegiances can identify with many of the issues and the problems addressed here. Most philosophers, political scientists, sociologists and psychologists would probably agree that a minimal degree of decisional and local privacy is necessary for the cultivation of autonomy and critical thinking. Political freedom in this context is deeply linked to a psychological condition, and even the most extreme religious, Left or feminist critics of liberalism’s commitment to the individual would probably have a hard time defending the absolute dissolution of decisional privacy. Private life represents a set of highly plastic historical and phenomenological problems for humanists, historians, social scientists as well as policy and
lawmakers. Historians Georges Duby and Phillipe Ariès provided the groundwork for a dense and spatial understanding of privacy and private life (Ariès and Duby 1987). New technologies have presented a set of new challenges that Leysia Palen and Paul Dourish confront in their conceptualization of privacy “as a dynamic, dialectical process” (Palen and Dourish 2003). They emphasize that defining, regulating and designing privacy environments in a digital environment requires an awareness of privacy’s mobility, with its often ambiguous, but intensively negotiated boundaries.

**Orwell’s Alcove and Hitchcock’s Window**

In 1949, George Orwell published *1984*, a devastating portrait of the misery of Winston Smith, an editor at Minitrue, a government agency tasked with revising history and suppressing versions of history that do not conform to Big Brother’s needs. Oceania is a highly structured world where power and pleasure are reserved for the members of Inner Party: the elite are able to enjoy and experience their sovereignty behind the walls of privilege. There is the Outer Party, to which Winston Smith belongs, and then there are the Proles, a vast, faceless majority of subaltern workers who live in squalor, but enjoy a freedom of expression denied to the white-collar bureaucrats and clerks of the Outer Party. Perpetual war and material deprivation provide the backdrop against which Smith and his lover Julia carry on a dangerous and doomed love affair. Surveillant technologies are ever-present as the very incarnation of absolute power.

Winston Smith distinguishes himself as a protagonist because of an architectural aberration in his apartment: an alcove protects him from the gaze of the telescreen. The physics of light prevent the surveillance of Big Brother to “see” into the alcove. In the alcove, he has begun feverishly writing in a diary. The act of writing has produced in him experiences of scepticism, resistance, memory and desire. Thanks to Orwell’s powerful imagery, the surveillant and totalitarian state became henceforth forever associated with the everyday sensory deprivation of planned economies and political repression. The intellectual freedom and sumptuous luxury enjoyed by the Inner Party elite make a mockery of the lies, black bread and cheap gin upon which the rest of the population subsists. Smith’s concrete apartment block was permeated by the smell of boiled cabbage and evoked the drabness and mutual surveillance promoted by subsidized housing across the globe. He and his fellow citizens wear drab uniforms, disguising all physical beauty or sexual difference. Sensuality, intellectual curiosity and pleasure are reserved in Orwell’s Oceania for the corrupt and cruel Inner Party. Stalinism provided a real life incarnation of Orwell’s cruel world. For a half-century the publication of *1984*, high school English students in the United States have been tirelessly arguing that Orwell’s novel is a brave polemic against conformity and groupthink.

In 1954, a scant five years after the publication of Orwell’s novel, Hitchcock’s cinematic paean to crime-busting nosiness and surveillance, *Rear Window* would be released to critical and popular acclaim. In the film, an effective surveillant apparatus was naturalized as cinematic storytelling. The protagonist, Jeffries played by Jimmy Stewart, enjoys a rather suspect scopophilic curiosity about the lives of his neighbors, who he can see across the courtyard of New York’s Greenwich Village. Watching their comings and goings from his living room window, he takes obvious pleasure in following their neatly out played dramas of hope, heartbreak and domestic discontent. Any possible transgression of his neighbors’ right to privacy is redeemed by the hero’s discovery and apprehension of a criminal. In the post-war period, a sharp awareness of the challenges of contemporary surveillance regimes was evident in both Orwell’s novel *1984* and Hitchcock’s film, *Rear Window*. The lingering scent of cold, wet, war-time misery in Orwell’s novel is entirely dispelled by the Dior-inspired Hitchcockian tribute to redemptive qualities of haute couture and paranoid interpretation in paving the way to post-war marital bliss. *Rear Window* combines two narratives – the first having to do with the domestication of Jeffries (played by Jimmy Stewart), former war-time correspondent turned fashion and feature photographer for the glossies, *Life* and *Look* magazines, and the second having to do with spying on one’s neighbors and solving a crime. By the
1950s, mass production of consumer goods in the Western world were providing better living conditions for the masses from Peoria to Palermo (De Grazia 2006; and Ross 1996).1

While *Rear Window* naturalizes both the surveillant gaze and the visual evidence that it is able to isolate and analyze, it also offers a theory of spectatorship that is deeply uneasy with the immobility of the panoptic gaze. After suffering a broken leg during a reckless act of documentary photography, Jeffries is confined to a wheelchair. He has nothing better to do all day than to watch his entertaining neighbors from the aerie of his windowed apartment. *Rear Window* proposes that the movie camera and telephoto lens can provide the discerning viewer with incontrovertible forensic and narrative evidence of criminal activity. Friedberg points out that that “like central tower guard, the film spectator is totally invisible, absent not only from self-observation, but from surveillance as well” (Friedberg 1994: 20). *Rear Window*’s editing of what is seen through Jeffries’s lens with what happens in Jeffries’ apartment establishes one simple continuous space of realism according to Tom Levin’s idea of “surveillant cinema” (Levin 2002). The window is merely a very large aperture, the apartment a camera where the images revealed are developed, analyzed and dissected. Through the aperture as window, Hitchcock “shows” us what appears to be a psychologically complete and satisfying story about a mysterious flowerbed, a murderous husband and a nagging, housebound wife. Hitchcock’s film about citizen-detectives establishes the visual foundation of neighborhood watch groups: in the 1960s, Jane Jacobs may have thought that informal neighborhood surveillance provided for the most effective form of urban security. Mike Davis argues that “neighborhood watch” and its institutionalization of citizen surveillance in urban environments dovetailed neatly with intense policing and anti-gang policies of the 1980s. Eyes on the street evolved into neighborhood watch and the increasingly segregated urban spaces of the 1980s (Jacobs 1961) (Davis 1992, 2006). While Jodi Dean’s densely networked “Little Brothers” describe the exchange of digital information of workplace surveillance of the 1990s, Hitchcock’s representation of decentralized surveillance functions focuses on the private individual as a Little Brother, whose everyday vigilance leads to proper police intervention and the apprehension of a criminal (Dean 2002: 79-81). When Jeffries finally does become visible to the murderer he has been watching, his apartment and “watch tower” are threatened, but not mastered by the criminal.

After the end of the war, men like Jeffries, returning home from war, find in the binds of romance the dilemma of forming relationships with women who had stayed at home. Lisa, Jeffries’ girlfriend played by Grace Kelley functions in the film as an object of desire and Jeffries’ initiatrix into the white magic of 1950s consumer society. Instead of offering him ham sandwiches and bad coffee, Lisa orders dinner delivered from New York’s fanciest restaurant and uncorks a fine bottle of French wine. Marriage is finally made acceptable to Jeffries when Lisa is able to join him in his surveillance of his murderous neighbor. For Hitchcock’s male protagonist, World War II offered a setting of significant action, hardship and male bonding: in the new post-war order, Jeffries resorts to life and limb-endangering antics in photographing race cars in order to evoke the excitement of the front. In the end, Lisa shows enough courage and mettle to earn her a place as Jeffries’ wife and partner. Hitchcock’s reconciliation of satisfying private life (marriage to an adventurous fashion model) and robust public action (apprehending a murder suspect before he has time to skip town) provides a happy cinematic vision of hedonistic domesticity and everyday vigilance. Hitchcock’s film provides an instructional narrative about the power

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1 Consumer culture worked over time to seduce people traumatized by economic crisis and war-time privation that it was safe to enjoy life, and that beyond that, participation in a new hedonism was both politically and culturally forward-looking. In the mid-1950s, Terence Conran opened his first restaurant in London, the cleverly named Soup Kitchen: its Northern Scandinavian design and elegant Continental cuisine weaned the British urban classes from their 1984-ish diets of bangers and toast. Conran’s genius also included the promulgation of principles of home design, based on simplicity and functionality. Like Charles and Ray Eames, he was a pioneering figure in a consumer-oriented modern design during the early Cold War era.

2 Hitchcock’s film also ironically anticipates Jane Jacob’s theory of “eyes on the street” informal surveillance that allows for the neighborly and mutually protective anonymity of big city neighborhoods like Greenwich Village.
of American consumer culture to fulfil its promise of harmonizing duty with pleasure, war with peace, security with freedom, and public with private. Hitchcock’s vision presages the late 20th century’s increasingly refined popular promotion of fortuitous confusion of the subjective with the objective.

**Ancient and Early Republican Conceptions of Public Life**

The Early American Republic paid political homage to the vigorous and truly foreign conception of civic duty inherited from the Ancient world, hence its tolerance for slavery. For example, in Paul Veyne’s analysis of private life in ancient Rome in Volume 1 of *A History of Private Life* offers a forensic investigation of linguistic, archaeological and literary artefacts in order to present a painstaking rendering of the sphere of the domestic economy. Classical notions of the intersection between public and private existence were revealed in Romans’ wills, which were read out loud in a public space upon the death of the testator. In the public reading of the will, private relations and secret feelings were revealed as the distribution of the wealth of the deceased was made public. The most important will of the classical period was the *Res Gestae* of Augustus Caesar, which is now a part of the Ara Pacis museum and monument designed by Richard Meier. August Caesar’s will and testament was engraved in full as an epitaph upon his tomb. If Augustus can be considered an ideal Roman citizen of his time, his will is both exemplary and normative. The *Res Gestae* consist entirely of Augustus’ public actions in service to the Republic. The decline of the Roman Empire was distinguished by the inward turn of Roman citizens preoccupied with new religions and forms of mysticism: post-Augustan Romans were distinguished by their reluctance to take action in public life. Richard Sennett of the 1970s argued that the decline of public life in the US is compared to the decline of public life in post-Augustan Rome. Sennett’s *The Fall of Public Man* is a historical and social meditation on the social and intellectual origins of a turn towards the privatization of meaningful experience that gave shape to cutting-edge, countercultural forms of dissent. For Sennett, the hyper-individualism of late 20th century Americans was not born fully formed from the head of hippie leaders like Jerry Rubin.

Although the free spirited yippie and the brooding courtier may seem far apart, they share a sense of the importance of inner life. The emergence of a sense of early modern individuality is made legible in the intelligence and secular ambition of the courtier. Nowhere is the portrait of intelligence and mortification more sharply drawn than in Hans Holbein’s 1527 painting of Sir Thomas More.
The value of self-control in court society increased exponentially: in Orwell’s imagination, Proles or peasants enjoy greater social and libidinal freedom while the Outer Party or lower aristocracy and clergy are most stringently repressed: this social structure bears a close resemblance to the Court Society. Competition for power made the entire interior architecture of the king’s palace a surveillant space: those who did not have to live in the sovereign’s shadow could aspire to a greater decisional freedom. In fact, Court Society’s intensive surveillance systems, made up of one part sociability and two parts coercion is fitting model for regimes of mobile, informational and ubiquitous surveillance that are alleged to have replaced Foucault’s panoptical and disciplinary regime.

**Surveillant Spaces and the Court Society**

Jeremy Bentham’s famous Panopticon functions as a labor saving device for surveyors of criminals and deviants. The disciplinary architecture of Bentham’s panopticon immobilized the jailkeeper as surveyor in a central tower. The Court Society on the other hand used all sorts of mobile forms of surveillance embedded in space of power - from servants to keyholes, from eavesdropping to hearsay - “local” privacy was sacrificed by courtiers to the demands of court life. Information was power: rumor and innuendo could be ruinous to courtiers and ladies alike. While Bentham’s built environment presented institutionalization and rationalization of a unique form disciplinary visibility, the Court Society had already arranged for architecture as spectacular sequestration: for Foucault, Bentham’s prison was an exemplary theoretical intervention and innovation in disciplinary society, but the intrigue of the Court and
the requirements of visibility, civility and self-presentation were prototypical of regimes of mobile and ubiquitous surveillance culture.³

In *De Civilitatemurum puerilium* (1577), Erasmus instructs noble born sons to refrain from addressing themselves to acquaintances urinating in the street. Not only does Norbert Elias’ *Civilizing Process* demonstrate how laborious was the early modern process of redefining the private functions of the body, he also shows proves that the refinement of civilized behavior served to distinguish one class from another. New forms of self-control reflected one’s accession to new forms of political and social domination. Refinement itself was becoming more refined: a hierarchy developed in the evolution of *courtois-courtly*, to *civile-civil* and finally to *délïcat-discerning*. Elias cites a fifteenth century civility manual that offers its readers the following advice: “Do not offer anyone a piece of food you have bitten into…. Do not put back on your plate what has been in your mouth.” (cited in Elias 1994: 71-72). Pre-chewed food was not considered off limits to others. As Elias, during the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance in Europe, the privacy barrier was very elastic, but it was also the object of intense interest and scrutiny. Literate elites sought to codify distinction for noblemen who were no longer able to use physical force as a form of domination. By the eighteenth century, the bourgeois individual began to value privacy over public displays of self-control and embraced a sentimentalized idea of the domestic sphere as a political and ethical alternative to the corruption, falseness and inauthenticity of the Court.

Bernhard Siegert argued that the rise of the modern state is legitimized by its ability to run and guarantee the privacy of new channels of communication, namely a national postal system that could offer standardized delivery costs while protecting letter writers’ privacy (Siegert 1999). Ian Watt argues that the modern individual was given life in early novels and fiction and the various forms of writing the literary form could draw upon. Winston Smith’s act of self-discovery through diary keeping was a cherished ideal of private writing that the 18th century middle class had more or less invented. Diary-keeping and the epistolary novel encouraged the cultivation of inner life as a space where bourgeois subjects experimented with spiritual, romantic, material and forms of satisfaction (Watt 1997: 2001). If diary keeping and letter writing took place in alcoves and other protected spaces of self-production and self-contemplation, reading itself became an increasingly private and silent activity for newly literate classes. Furthermore, the practice of self-surveillance and self-exploration was linked to self-accounting. As Habermas argued, the public sphere emerges full force only when private individuals found repose in an autonomous area of private life, free from the scrutiny of king and clergy. Newly literate classes engaged in the allegedly self-enriching activities of reading and writing and newspapers and other “literary technologies” allowed for the flowering of private activities roughly characterized by the term “critical thinking” (Habermas 1994: 57-73). Succinctly summarizing Habermas’ conceptualization of the public sphere, Jodi Dean writes, “Habermas makes clear [that] the public sphere emerges in private, and it emerges via a particular mode of subjectivization” (Dean 2002: 145). Even if private life and the public sphere can be described as “co-extensive”, separation, distinction and differentiation remain key to classical, liberal ideals of private life in relationship to autonomy and political participation.

**Fantasmagoria**

The early days of the industrial revolution shook up in the public/private separation that normative forms of political thought were trying to secure: “To fantasize that physical objects had psychological dimensions became logical in this new secular order” (Sennett 1977: 22). Under the principles of a secular immanence, distinctions between perceiver and perceived, inside and outside, subject and object were breaking down. Marx would call this peculiar order of things commodity fetishism. Mass distributed, manufactured goods had the power to produce unpredictably powerful relationships between people and

³ See Machiavelli's *The Prince*, or Elizabethan court drama, and Walter Benjamin's work on the German Mourning Plays for a sense of early modern mutual surveillance.
things, and people and images in T.J. Clark’s analysis. Parisian streets became an urban space where new relations between private activity and public visibility could be put on display. Clark’s analysis of the process by which publicness became more visual and spectacular in high and late capitalism bears the marks of his apprenticeship to the Situationist International. In the 19th century city, public space was increasingly shaped by spectacular forms of state-funded and private exhibitionism as well as anonymous seduction. For bourgeois men, the public was seen as a realm of instructive sensation; for women of the same class, the dangers of publicness and immorality were all too vivid.

In the 19th century city, anonymity guaranteed a certain degree of privacy – in public. New urban spaces allowed for strangers to occupy the same continuous physical space while being entirely to self-absorbed in private exchanges. The visual and spatial interpenetration of public and private lives and selves became one of the hallmark experiences of the modern city. Confusion and fusion of public and private spaces emerge in modern life as one of the critical dimensions of a democratic and popular visibility. On the street, in department stores, arcades, brothels and boudoirs, images of desire and seduction existed at the crossroads of private tastes and public spaces, forming the dream-like world of commodity fetishism over which the detached gaze of the connoisseur, the real estate speculator and the flaneur could linger. For Richard Sennett, the city is a “human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet” (Sennett, 1977, p. 39). In order to feel at home in a crowd of strangers, the modern urbanite had to learn the art of discretion, or when to avert her gaze when she is thrown into spaces of temporary intimacy. Martin Jay’s downcast eyes take on a literal meaning: naked curiosity about the proximate stranger is to be avoided in the modern city. T.J. Clark points out that what is truly remarkable about Édouard Manet was his ability to capture that particular mix of 19th century urbanity, resignation, self-absorption and psychological withdrawal in often chaotic public spaces of mass transit and urban recreation. Friedberg’s critique of Clark’s neglect of gender notwithstanding, the theatricality of urban self-presentation was increasingly refined as the street became a space where mobile gazes of mutual recognition and desire could be exchanged: the common language spoken was fashion. Individuation, once dominated by epistolary and literary practice was now crystallized in visual deployment of small differences in one’s manipulation of mass manufactured clothing. Manet’s paintings were closely observed, but fleeting glimpses of the confusion of private experience and publicness in the modern city. Although his application of the brush was highly impressionistic, Manet’s psychological realism offered us a window onto the world of 19th century characters and their ways of being. Although the hard gaze of his Olympia (1863) defies us to look at her closely, her body is presented in a starkly revealing light. Olympia lays supine in a new world of display windows overlooking the narrow pedestrian walkways, offering passers-by access to the dreamworld of commodity fetishism.

Sigmund Freud’s discovery of another kind of dreamworld was made in a composed bourgeois interior. The traces of the unconscious produced an array of symptoms deciphered in the quiet and sequestration of private rooms, tucked away in a corner of an expansive private apartment. Freud’s famously inspiring couch was located in his “home office”, an extension of his or her own domestic space. Freud like many analysts saw patients in a protected area of his private home. The psychoanalyst’s couch exists as a secret space within a private space. The intimacy of a home-like setting and the supine posture of the patient promoted the kinds of free association necessary to Freud’s talking cure. The protection of domestic sphere must have appeared as a haven for neurotic patients of the Freud’s Vienna. On Freud’s couch, they were able to discover through the singularity of their symptoms, the objective, unconscious origins of their illness, as well as the uncanny meaning of their dreams. The patient was engaged in the modern project of struggling to find a language of authentic self-representation in order to be capable of true acts of self-assertion. Typical neurotic complaints focused on the inability to recognize oneself in one’s life or one’s condition. Patients felt themselves to be controlled by inscrutable forces, whether demiurgic or unconscious, and it was to be assumed that their private suffering made them incapable or unwilling to participate fully in normative activities in the public sphere. The dreamworld was separated from the
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Windows as Walls at Mid-Century

The rise of Fascism and the global economic collapse threatened the continuation of Freud’s project in Europe. Fascist revolt against civil society seemed to confirm what Progressive and pragmatist thinkers in the US had been suggesting since the turn of the century: a political system that protected economic prosperity for the few did not create the conditions for a healthy or stable society. Citizens and subjects existed in a world of political economic and psychological interdependency. The public good could only be strengthened by the cultivation of a robust sense of collective and cooperative life. John Dewey’s arguments for building a robust sense of cooperation were generally welcomed by the 1930s as economic crisis made Americans feel as if collective undertakings were the only ones that could lead the nation out of misery. Collectivism had not yet fallen in its post-War state of ill-repute. Dewey proposed that a desired convergence of “private”, or self-interest, and collective interest could be achieved pedagogically, in the Progressive classroom; the natural interest of students as individuals could be conjoined with the collective good and the needs of industrial democracy. In the 1950s, American ideas of social harmony still bore the strong imprint of 1930s and 40s aspirations for the harmonization of private experience and public good: but collectivism, Progressivism were increasingly occluded by a new ethos of adjustment and self-help aimed at giving out mass-produced advice to anxious citizens and consumers. C. Wright Mills and Richard Hofstadter were critics of the discourse of self-help and adjustment - they found its callow opportunism and anti-intellectualism supported by a tyrannical injunction to “fit in” to the demands of large organizations and free markets. At the same time, with the growth of the American economy and the explosion of consumer goods, the sphere of what was defined and valued as private life kept expanding.

The great migration of Jewish intellectuals, artists and psychoanalysts contributed to a Cold War sense that intellectual freedom and American prosperity were not only highly compatible, they were mutually interdependent. According to Beatriz Colomina, modern architecture’s forced migration to the US after World War II married modernism to domesticity (Colomina 2007). In the New World, images of democracy and freedom were revitalized through a revisionist, ecstatic American take on Bauhaus modernism. In Weimar, Germany, Bauhaus celebrated beauty, but dictated asceticism. American modernism was adapted by Charles and Ray Eames, a married couple and collaborative design team who affirmed the pleasures of democratic, domestic life. Hitchcock’s Rear Window also promotes the happy marriage of Jeffries and Lisa as a union of young business partners: Lisa promises that she will bring very desirable publicity to his studio photography business. Their very happiness allows them to advertise that they, unlike their neighbors, have nothing to hide. When Jeffries’ neighbors draw the blinds, we feel that they are concealing something ignominious. The modern design of private life relied on both technology and publicity to produce a sense of spectacular and transparent weightlessness. A Utopian vision of middle class prosperity, good design and the domestic application of modernism’s principles of form’s harmony with function promoted the convergence of private happiness as the most desirable of public goods. The glass box as home asserts that its modern occupants can move in and out of public and private spaces with disarming and unprecedented ease: their happiness banishes secrets and bodily shame from the perimeter of a charmed existence. Furthermore, the glass box eliminates the alcove: if the state is watching us at home, it is a benign, paternal presence, funding space programs and technological innovation, even as it provides free public higher education in particularly progressive states like California, where the Eames made their home and sited their studio practice. The Eames’s case study houses use walls and windows interchangeably to create an aesthetically pleasing alternation between opacity and transparency. The case study houses were suffused with both sunlight and optimism about the newly empowered mass middle class and their taste for the well-designed life.
In Colomina’s analysis of modern architecture as a visual medium, she talks about Le Corbusier’s understanding of the windows of a house as a frame for looking at the outside world. In the modernist home, the windows are extensions of the walls: they teach us how to look outside. Indoor/outdoor living expansively encompasses the backyard, the patio, the garden and rooms themselves flow into one another without resistance. The domestic architecture of 1950s American modernism demonstrated that the interpenetration of private and public lives was taking place within technologically driven architectural innovation. In the open floor plan home, freedom of movement between rooms was accompanied by flow of air and light through all the rooms of a home. The Eames’s designs were deeply imbued with a Progressive ethos; designers, like philosophers, had to solve problems of ordinary people. Furthermore, Eames designs were meant to be mass-produced, there is nothing remotely esoteric or academic about them. Visibility and transparency became design values that could be directly opposed to the inhumanly-scaled state-sponsored modernism of the Soviet Union. The rise of the domestic integration of walls and windows of Eames 1950s home designs coincided in 1949 with the emergence of an increasingly partitioned and walled off international scene - with NATO and the Soviet Bloc facing off as enemies across increasingly fortified barriers until East Germany decided to build the Berlin Wall itself.

We could even go so far as to say that sensualty and functionality were reconciled as values promoted and protected by democratic and free societies. Hofstadter and Mills may have worried over the enforced

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4 The Eameses perfected their technique of molding plywood when they built light-weight splints for use on World War II battlefields.
harmonization of public and private spheres of interest, but they could do nothing to stop the general
tendency of late 20th century consumer culture to conceive of the fusion of public and private realms as
both politically and economically desirable. Finally, the full significance of publicity, the medium to
which Colomina compares modern architecture becomes clear in the context of Jodi Dean’s discussion of
“publicity’s secret” and its relationship to communicative capitalism. Because Dean does not accept the
separation of privacy from public life as either original or normative, she casts doubt upon the assumption
that private lives are both rich and meaningful. Dean considers the question, what if our private lives were
revealed to be particularly empty, or entirely shaped by external forces, that is, objectively constructed
rather than idiosyncratic or particular? Dean seems to suggest that “communicative capitalism”
exacerbates or at least exploits the symptomatic structure of the “scopic” drive, materialized as the
irrational “other” of democratic transparency and publicity: “publicity is what we can’t escape: it taints
everything as it collapses democracy into the circulation of ideas, slogans, memes and images” (Dean
2002: 130).

For Dean, the conceptual norms of liberal democracy can no longer address the political problems of
communicative capitalism because a massive apparatus of publicity has substantially refashioned the
public sphere and the psychic lives of citizens and subjects. Even so, she does not go so far as to celebrate
Deleuze’s concept of the “dividual,” or data-double, whose flatness and inauthenticity once seemed a
tonic alternative to ponderous notions of subjectivity. In the new media ecology, we are told that the more
we share about ourselves online, the richer our interactions will be in social media. Contemporary subjects
of surveillance have been well-prepared for life in highly mediated, data-driven, information-rich
societies: the very architecture of modernism has encouraged us to live our lives perched on the boundary
between public and private experience. Privacy becomes an object of anxiety and seems to be able to lay
claim to a purely negative value, and one that fits nicely into the set of priorities defined by security.
Meanwhile, communicative capitalism urges us “to share” information about our erstwhile private lives:
in a networked world, the digital exchange of information about our preferences and our locations
intensifies the confusion of private and public spheres of activity. Mobility is replacing autonomy as the
primary condition necessary for the realization of individual sovereignty. The alcove and the window must
both become portable. As even a cursory overview of the work of Elias, Sennett, Friedberg, Clark and
Colomina reveals, none of these developments is particularly novel. In a world of popular confusion over
private/public distinctions what is surprising is the persistence of a desire for collective life and enterprise
that cannot be eliminated in favor of anxiety over protecting privacy and private experience. By promising
the delivery of new forms of knowledge and the intensification of intersubjectivity in the networked
world, communicative capitalism continues to address a persistent and objective desire for public forms of
solidarity.5

References

MA: Harvard University Press.
Brighenti, Andrea Mubi. 2009. Walled Urbs to Urban Walls and Return: On the Social Life of Walls, in The Wall and the City,
Press.

5 This essay was written during the explosion of public protests in the Arab world, but before the emergence of the Occupy
Movement; the cautious optimism of my concluding sentence regarding a tenacious collective desire to reappropriate public
spaces can only underscored during the month of November, 2011.


