

PostScript: Urban Blind Spots

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Blind spots exist in every society, culture, and urban fabric. They can be spatial, social, economic, or policy related. On the one hand, blind spots are typically situations or topics that are obscured by other themes; they fall beyond our radar because they are neither considered topical nor pressing enough to be addressed by policy or planning, or picked up in the media. Blind spots are created by particular ways of seeing, which re-iterate a 'Western' canon of urban history or an urban discourse that focuses on those global, fast growing metropolises that provide us with a high level of imagery, staggering data and socio-spatial extremes. On the other hand, blind spots also describe necessary locations of informality; places and spaces which are overlooked by the authorities, by planning or other users, and thereby allow for indeterminate, unregulated, informal, non-prescribed and open uses.

This is not to suggest that the relative importance or challenge of blind spots is determined by their size, materiality, scale or location. Blind spots also relate to approaches, research and teaching projects, where they play a similar double role, both as a product of obscuration and an opportunity for exploration. Indeed, this double role is inevitable, as blind spots are arguably product and productive of the ways we grasp the world around and beyond us. Accepting the impossibility of the total view, Lewis Mumford noted 'No human eye can take in this metropolitan mass at a glance.'¹ Many thinkers have developed metaphors from the way the eye sees, and applied these to aspects of our broader engagement with the world. Merleau-Ponty, for example, noted that it is the lacunae or 'invisible' within the 'world' that actually generates the possibility of 'vision':

¹ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (San Diego, Harcourt Inc, 1961), p.620.

What [blindness, [the] (punctum caecum) of the “consciousness”] does not see is what in it prepares the vision of the rest (as the retina is blind at the point where the fibres that will permit the vision spread out into it).” Whenever we ‘look at’ something, either literally looking with our eyes or engaging through other capacities of thought and perception, with this process of viewing come blind spots within that process of engagement and exchange.²

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible & the Invisible*, Working note [May, 1960] (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1969), p.248.

While Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical work was perhaps content to identify the fundamental interconnectedness of blind-spots and vision and its role in our connections with our worlds, his contemporary Georges Bataille not only described the operation of blind spots but also expanded their sphere of application and sought to activate their potential for political ends, revealing and challenging the status quo of power relations. As Marx & Engels consistently pointed out, societies in every epoch see themselves through (and consequently are usually seen through) the ideas that are formed and sustained by the ruling class:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.³

³ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1985), p. 64.

Lamenting what he saw as the dominance of hegemonic scientific, functional or ruling-class worldviews, Bataille’s interest was drawn to moments when science, functionality or the ruling-class view broke down. He did not simply celebrate instances where non-functional ‘gaps’ or voids appeared within an apparently functional system. Instead, he considered them to be the blind spot of any functional economy: the moment or location from where it was possible to demonstrate that a particular economy’s reliance on what he referred to as a ‘general economy’ operated beyond any ‘system.’ In another formulation, Bataille explained this relationship as being similar to that between the festival and everyday life, which while being antagonistic, is also mutually reinforcing:

Festival is the negation of actions, but it is the negation that provides a SENSE for actions (as death provides a sense for life).⁴

⁴ Georges Bataille, “Plan”, (OC, 2:388), in Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, translated by Betsy Wing (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), p.97.

However apparently unassailable, however impermeable any particular discourse might seem, reaching its blind spot could reveal the reliance of that economy on others, and demand that we acknowledge its contingency. The potential political importance of such a move is significant, for it demonstrates that things could be otherwise.

Even when we actively and intently see a place, if it is apparently not a blind spot, it could still, unknowingly, represent a blind spot for us, as we are not able to gauge its true meaning. Referring to Henri Lefebvre's concept of the trialectics of spatiality⁵ which identifies perceived, conceived and lived space, we, as professionals, will inevitably operate mostly with and in the first one, the perceived space, the physical space. It is a space that can easily be represented, measured, planed, or altered. And yet without an understanding of the conceived and lived space we will fail to read this space in its full social and symbolic meaning. The Urban Blind Spots will be right in front of us.

But again, in order to detect, experience, and represent these spaces we will have to alter our ways of seeing urban spaces, of engaging with urban spaces, and of documenting these urban spaces. We need other techniques of seeing, other lenses, other tools of recording. In order to engage with Urban Blind Spots we need look beyond the conventional approaches of architectural and urban history in order to value and champion other ways of surveying and of accounting for cities; ways that aim at transforming the tools with which both citizens and architects might understand cities. In this sense, blind spots refer to different perceptive and representational methods through which urban conditions can be described. Italo Calvino has already reminded us in *Invisible Cities* that something as complex as a city can sustain multiple viewings through different lenses: it can be read again and again, understood in different ways, each reading not necessarily more or less valid than the next.

This also leads us to a consequential shift, as we have to ask who can tell of blind spots. It suggests a move away from the singular authoritative position of the researcher or writer to a pluralistic one that is both personal and multiple. It is the tendency for any intellectual discipline—especially those that are developed alongside a professional discipline—to aim for the authoritative position that delineates it from those outside this discipline, the non-expert, the amateur, the other.⁶ It establishes a position of power, the power of defining what is important and what isn't, what has value and what hasn't, what our understanding of the world, and of cities for that matter, is supposed to be. As Bataille suggests, to identify, celebrate, mobilise, and even simply to communicate existing blind spots is to challenge authority by undermining its assumed singularity.

Architecture as a discipline and profession tends to stick to a rather narrow, self-perpetuating and self-serving definition of cities. Architecture

⁵ See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). For an expanded reading of Lefebvre's notion of trialectics see Edward W Soja, *Thirdspace; Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

⁶ For an analysis of the development of the 'expert' and its problematics see for example Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (London: University of California Press, 1977).

⁷ See for example: Francis D K Ching, *Architecture: Form, Space, and Order* (John Wiley & Sons, 2007); William J R Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (London: Phaidon, 1996); Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007); Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Harvard, 2009); John Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980).

⁸ See for instance Paul Virilio *The Original Accident* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007)

⁹ See Gordon Matta-Clark, in an interview with Liza Bear in *Avalanche*, December 1974, p.34.

also tends to see its remit as physicalities, it tends to privilege certain understandings or morphologies of physicality (we might refer to these as ‘proper’ architecture) at the expense of others. This can all be found in the so-called standards of architectural and urban history.⁷ What it is most lacking in these accounts is attention to what Virilio calls the ‘integral accident’, the unplanned, that is inherently, but mostly involuntarily, the flip side of all carefully designed objects, spaces, or cities.⁸ The train accident at the Gare Montparnasse in 1895, where a steam locomotive burst through the station’s front façade and dropped one floor down onto the street, was not part of the city’s definition, it wasn’t deliberately planned. Yet it happened and it happened because someone had planned a station, because someone had designed a steam locomotive. Without them, the accident wouldn’t have taken place and wouldn’t have become part of the city’s history. In that respect, the widely reproduced historic photograph of this tragi-comical accident tells us as much about what cities are about as, for instance, the complex yet abstract map of the Tokyo metro system.

Looking at and understanding the integral accident – as one expression of a blind spot—is thus important if we are to develop and find strategies to ‘preserve’ its notion in a world that is fundamentally driven towards the suppression of such instances. But what happens when we ‘preserve’ them and, more, define them as ‘positive’ instances? How are they developed and how do they come into being?

The 1973 project *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* by Gordon Matta-Clark works with the accidents produced by a ‘functional’ system.⁹ Matta-Clark’s curiosity opens up architecture and reveals it to be underwritten by non-architecture (what he referred to elsewhere as ‘anarchitecture’), by a non-functional gap or metaphoric void which, when viewed from within the closed system of architecture, cannot be understood as belonging to the same system. This non-functional use is considered by Bataille to be the blind spot of any functional economy, the unseen heterogeneity that underwrites any economy of homogeneity.

So, is Matta-Clark’s tactical working with the gap transferable to an ‘other’ or ‘otherwise’ understanding of space? How can we use this understanding to refine our design and planning strategies in a way that can facilitate or accommodate urban blind spots, or blind spots in general? Or is this simply impossible by their very nature and definition? Can one design an accident?

We observe how traditionally, the tools of both historical urban analysis and of urban design have been similar. (That is to say, the same techniques of epistemology and projection have been run without problem backwards and forwards). Mining this apparent procedural continuum, we argue that something of a disciplinary blind spot can be revealed when such

¹⁰ 'Abstract space...is not in fact defined on the basis of what is perceived. Its abstraction has nothing simple about it: it is not transparent and cannot be reduced either to a logic or to a strategy. Coinciding neither with the abstraction of the sign, not with that of the concept, it operates negatively.' and 'Abstract space is not homogeneous; it simply has homogeneity as its goal, its orientation, its 'lens.'" Henri Lefebvre on Abstract Space, from *The Production of Space*, op.cit. p.50, p.287.

techniques are challenged. Such techniques are usually formal, they are beholden to architectural tendencies that favour abstraction: the grid or axis, building typology, centre–periphery, transport network, and so on. As Lefebvre amongst others has pointed out, this drive for abstraction does not relate to our ordinary experience of cities, nor does it actually successfully attain abstraction.¹⁰

These techniques are also historically linear, chronological and historically delimited and the 'Standards' are reliant on these traditional modes of architectural representation: the plan drawing, aerial perspective, the finished (usually civic) building. They are concerned with containers. The 'whole' city is frequently shown and understood as a discrete whole: the whole can be further sub-divided into discrete sub-wholes as retrospectively understood or projected urban planning zones (Central Business District, Civic or Downtown, Residential, Industrial, all of which are disconnected from some great outside—the rural, or nature). All these containers, or objects, are static not dynamic, unable to register flow (people, materials, energy, language, goods, plants and animals, germs),—Lefebvre's perceived space.

The 'Standards' are driven from the singular to the general: many of them explicitly move from the study of particular cities towards the divination of universal rules, typified in Arthur Korn's 'general laws', where he stated:

Each town has a personality due to geographical or other natural influences; but as well as this personal 'accidental' character each town is the result of the social and economic forces of a distinct historical period. The most elementary way to study a town is to see it as an individual specimen. Everybody is aware of this method. The next stage is to classify it as a historical type; as for instance a mediaeval town, a renaissance town, or a great modern city. The last stage is to see it as a product of general laws which apply to towns of all types and periods.¹¹

¹¹ Arthur Korn, *History Builds the Town* (London: Lund Humphries, 1953), p.3.

Many 'Standards' of urban histories establish similarly clear phases as morphological rings of city growth. Moreover, this kind of urban history ends at a certain date, such that history is contained in the past. Specific cities are linked to certain ('golden') periods, and are shown at their 'best' or most important moment, and are thus denied a (prior) past or an afterlife. They set out to tell history 'the way it really was'. This raises questions regarding the status of evidence and extant material; think no further than the famous Rome tablet which claims comprehensive knowledge of that city but is composed only of fragments. But with the 'Standards', by definition, everything that doesn't fit in to this standardisation is left out or overlooked, and creates blind spots on various levels.

Finally, most of the ‘Standards’ are discipline-specific and ‘Western-centric’. So called ‘global’ surveys of urban history map directly onto the history of European colonisation: in Banister Fletcher, Pevsner, and Summerson, for example, South-American, Persian and Indian histories—accounted for or retold as the extended stories of European Cities—feature larger than East Asian or Chinese examples. As Marx observed more broadly, this tendency to appropriation runs through history, written all too often according to the terms of the powerful:

In actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short force, play the greatest part... and this history... is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.¹²

¹² Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin: London, 1976), p. 874.

There is a close connection between the received ‘tools’ of urban analysis (which are themselves culturally defined from a European tradition), and the establishment and maintenance of the linear narrative and received hierarchies of urban development as these are usually portrayed in a traditional architectural and urban history. However, these tools are not applicable on cities such as Lagos, Tokyo, Mumbai or Las Vegas, or for looking at informal settlements that house a large part of the world’s population. This has and still does lead to obvious blind spots in our urban histories and the general discourse of architecture and urbanism. To understand these cities, other histories and techniques are needed if we are to begin to account for these places. In turn, these techniques can broaden our awareness and understanding of what Michel de Certeau calls the ‘opaque and stubborn places’ within Western cities that make up the canon of urban history. By examining the ‘imbricated strata’ of Rome, as one example of the opaque and stubborn places he finds ‘[t]he revolutions of history, economic mutations, demographic mixtures lie in layers within it and remain there hidden in customs, rites and spatial practices.’¹³

¹³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Rendall, (California: University of California Press), .p. 200 and p.201.

The technique, or tool, through which Michel de Certeau gets to these places is walking, which he valorises in opposition to the view from above. He contrasts geometric, geographic readings with the ‘opaque and blind mobility’ of the citizen whose walking ‘creates within the planned city a “metaphorical or mobile city”.’¹⁴ Acknowledging this kind of challenge, philosopher Jacques Derrida picks up on the heterogeneity of space, action, and movement, and notes the role that this offers the body.

¹⁴ *ibid*, p.110.

[In the architecture of the event] opportunity [for chance, formal invention, combinatory transformation, wandering] is ... given ... to whoever engages ... in architectural writing: without reservation, which implies an inventive reading, the restlessness of a whole culture and the body's signature. This body would no longer simply be content to walk, circulate, stroll around in a place or on paths, but would transform its elementary motions by giving rise to them; it would receive from this other spacing the invention of its gestures.¹⁵

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Point de Folie" in Bernard Tschumi, *La Case Vide: La Villette 1985* (London: Architectural Association, 1985), §10.

The architecture of the event that Derrida theorises in response to the architectural practices of Bernard Tschumi invites an inventive reading, where a 'whole culture' and the reader's body are taken as dimensions. Reading architecture is not achieved by rote, but rather it is an activity that constitutes the reader as much as the architectural work. This reciprocal constituting sets the limits of body and world—reader and architecture—for that interpretation only, rather than falling back on accepted discourse or ideas of the ruling-class ideas (if we return to the formulation of Marx & Engels).

In different contexts, both Derrida and Tschumi note that there is something central to architecture that allows it to be *taken for nature, for common sense itself*.¹⁶ The way we 'use' architecture, its ability to become the background to our everyday lives and thus fall into our blind spot, can grant it a pseudo-naturality, but also constitutes the possibility of a generative reading: that architecture is in continual use presents the opportunity for this different reading. In this respect, function could be taken as architecture's blind spot - function here exceeding the control or projection of the architect or urban designer.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

For all the wealth of surprises that can emerge from this particular blind spot, it is important to stress that within such readings no final synthesis is reached; if we describe this as a dialectic, it is one that remains in play. The political importance of this can be highlighted in the growing concern voiced by urban theorists regarding the increasing difficulty of attaining a legible landscape view of many large modern cities. While legibility has historically been sought by authority as a means of establishing and maintaining control over citizens and territory—control that has been disrupted through tactics of developing alternate views—the increasing invisibility of power is accompanied by an increasing illegibility of urban borders. Fredrick Jameson articulates his worry that effective political agency and action is caught up in changing urban legibility: "The incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience."¹⁷

¹⁷ Fredrick Jameson's 'Cognitive Mapping' (in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 1988) p.353.

¹⁸ Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography", in Ken Knabb (ed), *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p.5.

In the oft-reproduced Naked City map, incorporating the blind spot of homogenous discourse, the "renovated cartography"¹⁸ of the map counters

the traditional Cartesian cartography of the Plan de Paris; narration counters description, interlocution counters monologue, and movement (the spatialising actions of the SI *dérive*) counters knowledge.

The Paris of the Plan exists in a timeless present; this timelessness is imagined spatially in the map's (illusory) total revelation of its object. That is, users of the map see the entire city laid out before their eyes. However, such an omnipresent view is seen from nowhere.¹⁹

¹⁹ Thomas F McDonough, 'Situationist Space', October, Vol. 67 (Winter, 1994), p.64.

For Bataille, the possibility of this omnipresent view depends upon the blind spot of scientific discourse; recognition that the authority and dominance of this discourse is founded on a gap, that in fact it is without foundation and is reliant upon a first order heterogeneous discourse would reveal this 'total revelation' as illusory. However, as Hollier notes, mapping as total revelation in a timeless present is not possible: 'The labyrinth we discuss cannot be described. Mapping is out of the question. Or, if it is described, it will be like the trajectory described by a mobile; not described as an object but as a traversal.'²⁰

²⁰ Hollier, op.cit., p.58.

Further trajectories

Looking at and understanding Urban Blind Spots seems ever more important if we are to find and develop strategies that highlight and treasure their existence in a world that is fundamentally driven towards the suppression of blind spots. This refers not only to the 'contingent spaces' of the city as Iris Murdoch coined them: 'industrial estates, rubbish tips, suburbia, railway sidings, dead ends and wastelands, as oppositional to the 'necessary' parts of the urban centre such as the law courts, royal parks and sophisticated shopping malls.'²¹ More fundamentally, it is probably about the ambition (and illusion) of control, that age-old architectural disease, which is challenged through the notion of blind spots. Shifting focus onto blind spots allows us to see and valorise uncertainty and indeterminacy. It allows us to critically review the increasing levels of control that are being exerted over the process of construction and occupation, or to understand the overwhelming tendency to reduce risk and the accidental. Seeing blind spots helps us champion diverse mono-use. Yet we also have to be quick on our feet, as the flowers that grow in blind spots are fast recuperated, appropriated into mainstream discourse and practice, which often takes away their potency as a tactic of and for 'other' spaces. Despite this, our hope is that the more attempts are made to eradicate Urban Blind Spots, the more they will spring up elsewhere.

²¹ see Judith Rugg, *Exploring Site Specific Art* (London: I B Tauris, 2010), p.22.