When the Street Becomes a Pedagogue

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Hehehehe… People will do anything a sign tells them. —Homer Simpson (Episode 312 of *The Simpsons*, “Bart of War,” Season 14, May 2003)

Locating the Street

The street is a transitory location, a space that generally isn’t invested with the same level of meaning that those places connected by the street—places like the home, school or shopping mall—find themselves coming to assume. We move through the street, and by rarely stopping to acknowledge the significance these spaces hold as determiners of our physical and symbolic social contexts, we become largely oblivious to the effects they exert and the ways they mediate aspects of our contemporary landscapes and lifestyles. While on the street, we don’t think twice about seeing other people in abundance, expressions of our oil-powered transport networks, or signage telling us everything from which side of the road to drive on to which brand of cola is the better one. This is what streets do—they give us access to collective, contemporary culture, but in ways that seem ordinary, or everyday.

This is the essence of the street. By their very nature streets function as intermediaries; spaces between places that operate as the connection apparatus of our urban networks. These are proximal “outside” zones that we know, but don’t often connect with (at least by comparison with those destinations we find at the ends of the street). But while we might rarely stop to acknowledge the formative influence streets express, they are spaces that are actively inculcated in the production of culture. For this reason, the street fulfills an important role as pedagogue, albeit implicitly. The street is the teacher we don’t realize is there, sending out imagery and signage at every turn, requiring mediated behaviors as we negotiate the people and places it leads to and draw on our accumulated knowledge (our “street smarts”) to safely arrive at the destinations we set out for. The everyday-ness of the street masks its influence; the mundanity of the street as a product of urbanized landscapes sees us encountering these spaces regularly but unquestioningly. It is the influence these spaces exert that matters. The mediations the street exercise offer an insight into the way we live as “rapidly privatized and individualised” (Bauman, 2001, p. 15) members of the contemporary, globalized world.

For Grange (1999) the street functions primarily as a temporal location that incorporates fluid combinations of time:
Time in the street is the continual collision of the past and the future with the present. There is no time to stop and recollect the past. It simply ‘comes by.’ The future streams into the present with such immediacy that it could be said to implode into the present.

In Grange’s view, the street provides a timeless location of movement and renewal. It represents a simultaneous desire for a future (the destination) but also a shedding of the past (the desire to move from the current location—a point that was a prior destination). The street is a location of both total involvement and immediate disconnection. This is a place of vulnerabilities where we simultaneously aren’t at home or “there.” As Popcorn (1992) notes:

City streets are dim and dangerous, very “Clockwork Orange”—with wilding gangs of bandits and hordes of homeless and the mentally deranged. (p. 201)

The street space according to this vision isn’t something to be engaged; rather, it is something to be mistrusted, avoided, or traversed as quickly as possible. Streets are fleeting in our experiences of them. They are ‘just there’ providing the backdrop upon which we play out our social actions. But to merely travel through them doesn’t mean that they don’t affect us.

**Situating the Sign**

It is what we do along the way as we travel through the street that is significant. Whether staring straight ahead and maintaining a steady walking pace without making eye-contact with others as a pedestrian in a “rough” neighbourhood, stopping and taking photographs of key landmarks as a tourist, or knowing the short-cut home via quiet back-streets as a commuter says something about the way the street (and that entire zone of the street, the street-scape) is learned and utilized by us. We don’t just exist within the physical spaces of our world, but actively interact with them; we shape them, invest them with meaning and are influenced by them. As such, these spaces stand as locations of cultural production and expressions of who we are (or see ourselves as being). The street as a space is no different than any other space in our social world, and requires things of us just as much as we require things of it. It is here that we apply our mediated “public” selves to the social and interact with others and space as members of the urban landscape. What this means is that we apply our public-urban identities that understand the flows and logic of the street each time we leave the front door. At the same time, we expect certain things from our street-scape. We expect congestion of traffic and others (at the same time we complain about it), a fast-paced polyphony of culture and behaviors, access to the organizing institutions of our globalizing world and cues about how to act and be who we are as part of the urban complex.

One example of this mediation of the street-scaped self occurs in the form of the signage that exists in the streetscape. Authorized signage, including directional signs (such as traffic signs) and those expressions of our capitalist social logic manifesting as billboards and other commercial signage, montage with unauthorized détournements including graffiti and street-art to signify streetscapes with meanings and intentioned communications. Most major roadways leading into urban centers contain an increasing amount of these cultural signifiers as the approach to the destination is made. Roadside billboards, in particular, stand as a key expression of the mass-cultural communication apparatus and ask us to think about almost anything from issues of abortion and right-to-life campaigns to a pair of jeans. These larger than life expressions of contemporary social issues and bland marketing provide an indicator into the nature of the zeitgeist and what we consider as being collectively important. Billboards beam back to
us imagery that makes sense to us, regardless of how stylized the promises being made in them might be.

Naturally, much of what appears on billboards is marketing hype and is not a reflection of the sorts of situations and people we find in the “real.” To illustrate this, a sort-of national debate (which involved federal ministers of government) occurred in Australia in 2002 about a series of two billboards advertising a brand of shoe that included seductively posing young women with a double-entendre ridden slogan suggesting that excesses of heterosexual pleasure would befit any man who purchased a pair. This clearly wasn’t an expression of “reality” (the shoes weren’t *that* good), but the production of desire (an age old advertising mechanism) that sparked public outcry due to the extent that women’s (and for that matter, men’s) identities were being presented in a contrived and outwardly sexualized way. This wasn’t what people wanted to see, argued the billboards’ critics, and the adverts were eventually withdrawn and the contract between the shoe manufacturer and billboard company ceased.

But considered another way, away from the embodied actions and identity locations the depicted subjects were issued with and on the level that marketing and consumption are significant aspects of our “fast globalising world” (Bauman, 2001, p.15), these signs still provided an indicator of who we are. We do live in a globalized-capitalist world where consumption and pop-culturally mediated construction of identity locations function as key components of contemporary existence. While we might revile at the gender-role characteristics and outwardly sexualized content of the shoe ad, no one questioned the logic of the billboard itself and why this mechanism of capitalist consumption stood gazing out over public space for the benefit of private enterprise. The poses of the seductively submissive young women became an issue while the billboard as an object of market capitalism largely went unnoticed. The message was problematic in this instance; the medium simply passed without fuss.

**Signing the Times: Learning the Identity of a Community from the Street**

I’ve long been interested in the way that public space comes to be used to present the ideas of private concerns. I’ve never quite understood why a fast food chain can blatantly display their ideas in the streetscape, yet graffiti and street art is considered the work of criminals. I’ve found much of my professional activity, including PhD research, devoted to the exploration of how signage is deployed and appropriated and want to draw on a couple of these research projects to explain how I see the public pedagogical intent of urban signage functioning in the street-scape.

I’ll use my experiences from one case site in particular to demonstrate my reasoning. Built as a master-planned, “edge city” (Garreau, 1991), Greater Springfield, located in southeast Queensland, Australia, has been the site of a major marketing campaign designed to present a specific “vision” of the development to its residents and intending residents since its inception in 1992. The development has particularly celebrated ideals of *community* and *belonging* and set about identifying and presenting definitions of these concepts via large public signage, primarily billboards. I recall during fieldwork that mention of these themes was seemingly everywhere in the
streetscape of the development—or at least that’s the impression the billboards provided. Perhaps it was the fanfare that this new, technologically advanced edge city carried or the significant investment by its developers to make it a success that gave credence to the bombardment of the branding process. Or perhaps it was due to this location’s edge city nature: a place built on the periphery of two other established cities that made Greater Springfield an almost out-of-place place that existed largely because of the expansion of the urban fringe, a place thus requiring careful definition to demonstrate the uniqueness and identity it carried. In any case, the signs of Greater Springfield were a prominent feature. They actively suggested much about what the development and this place was (intended to be).

It was the frequency and the type of suggestions made by the signs that particularly caught my attention. The images they captured and the ideas they carried shot up out of the ground on the fronts of towering facades that any visually aware person simply couldn’t miss. The subjects caught casually posing within these information dissemination tools were particularly fascinating: a 15-foot-tall little boy who beamed at me as he emerged from a swimming pool while advertising a “cool change” at a revamped shopping center; a 30-something couple relaxing in their studio apartment, whiling away a Sunday morning scene of comfortable relaxation; a statement urging me to re-evaluate my current lot in life by considering the purchase of property in Greater Springfield. These signs carried an explicit purpose. They were telling me much about the place, but more importantly they also began telling me about who I could be if I moved into the area.

These images and their attached messages also transcended into other forms—newsletters, Community Updates, glossy corporate brochures and newspaper features—all distributed variously to residents, visitors and corporate partners of the development. These provided yet more suggestion of the type of lifestyle Greater Springfield yielded. Read alongside the billboards, these intra-supporting artifacts represented what it meant to be in Greater Springfield and provided textual affirmations of what the place was intended to be (as seen through the eyes of the developers and their marketing departments). Taken together, I realized that all of these artifacts of Greater Springfield provided a symbolic cultural map for how to live there and behave appropriately as a resident.

**Theming Greater Springfield**

A range of ideals was attached to Greater Springfield by its developers, with these ideals utilized in its marketing materials as branded attributes of the place. The overriding themes presented in the billboards derived broadly from the concept that
Greater Springfield existed as a location in which residents could “live-work-learn-play-shop” (Springfield Land Corporation, 2005). This often quoted Greater Springfield catch phrase stood prominently as a manifestation of the logic Greater Springfield’s developers had given to the development’s image. Out of this concern for Greater Springfield to be a location that residents “don’t ever need to leave” (Dalton, 2006; Patterson, 2007) formed specific ideals such as a concern for lifestyle, the availability of choice, the presence of community connectedness, a sense of belonging, opportunities for success and convenience of local services. These underlying ideals, expressed explicitly via authorizing words or more subtly via the suggestions of the imagery in the billboards and other artifacts, were important for understanding the logic of Greater Springfield’s creation.

It was precisely the dissemination of these highly conceptualized and philosophical statements on living presented via things as mundane as street-side billboards that carried a pedagogical intent. They operated as a sort of guidebook for living that you read as you drove past. It was even more intriguing to note that for all the lofty idealism suggested by these themes, it was humble media that carried them. While this perhaps says more about contemporary methods of advertising than it does anything else, the sublimely visual nature of these massive roadside information disseminators and the supporting flyers, brochures, and magazines was hard to beat—particularly in terms of the romanticized images of suburban tranquility and relaxed leisure these signs presented to anyone who happened to come into contact with them. All sorts of suggestions about identity, community and living were made within these static insights into Greater Springfield life.

What the Signs Said

The significance of signs in Greater Springfield cannot be overstated. Naturally, these signs were deployed as marketing tools and were designed to be idealistic. But it was the broad parameters from which they presented their ideals that suggested something about what Greater Springfield not only could be, but in fact had turned out to be. This was the formation of the boundary, as Anthony Cohen (2004) would call it, that location of discursive-epistemological creation upon which the logic of the place rested.

The importance of these signs was their everyday-ness. These mundane, ubiquitous objects of the development became significant indicators of the place due to their ordinariness. These things were everywhere, and while the suggestions for lifestyle that they carried were a bit spectacular, their ubiquity made them a largely accepted part of the landscape of Greater Springfield. No one I spoke with in Greater Springfield during four years of fieldwork saw anything extraordinary about the presence of these signs. They were a part of the place, but a part that carried significance due to the ability they had to actively present certain views of living and lifestyle.

These expressions of contemporary mass-culture became pedagogical via their intent to present a specific set of identity characteristics and suggestions of what life could be like in Greater Springfield. It was via these expressions of life in Greater Springfield that attitudinal dispositions were presented to the world about who the Greater Springfieldian is, and how that archetype
goes about living. I found there to be a largely consistent view of what the Greater Springfield lifestyle consisted of through my exploration of the place and the artifacts that carried its meanings. From this analysis, a clear sense of who was identified as being the right sort of person for the place emerged.

The ideals underpinning the archetypal Greater Springfieldian weren’t suggested forcibly—there weren’t any check-boxes to tick that affirmed whether you were in or out—and I’m not trying to suggest that the billboards and brochures of Greater Springfield exerted an automatically attitude-altering influence over the people who viewed them. Nothing in culture is that easily transferable and to suggest that it is would be to deny any ability for individuals to accept, alter, or resist the meanings being suggested according to their own interpretative agency. But via processes of what I call “passive selection” (namely, the largely accepted and rarely challenged economically-derived selection process that authorizes entry into or exclusion from the markets of consumer capitalism—including that of “home ownership”) that mediate the relative ability intending residents have to not only purchase property but to also define where they purchase it, clear indicators of the type of person welcome in Greater Springfield were applied. First of all, you had to be the sort of person with the right amount of income to purchase into the Greater Springfield vision; it wasn’t a place for just anyone to come in willy-nilly. But something larger also came into this equation. While economic determinants stood as a bland marker of inclusion or exclusion, so did a sense of style, or as Bourdieu (1984) would note, distinction.

To explain what I mean, I want to present an analysis of one of the signs displayed in Greater Springfield that worked to present an image of the ideal Greater Springfieldian. This banner, displayed prominently on a streetscape in a central area of Greater Springfield utilized imagery of a middle-aged couple looking out from a balcony of a multi-story house. Displayed on the banner was the single keyword *Choice* with accompanying slogan “Great Land Deals. What a Refreshing Change” inscribed on the side banner.

Significantly, a representative of the marketing team of Springfield Land Corporation interviewed at the time mentioned that, where possible, subjects contained within publicity and marketing materials were Springfield residents: “They’re actually Springfield residents that we use for all the commercials, all the advertising is all Springfield residents” (Nicole, March 28, 2007). I note this point again later in this chapter, as it carries significance in terms of how the image of Greater Springfield comes to inculcate the real.

Apart from the bona fides of residency the subjects within the image may or may not claim, it is a theme of agency that carries through this banner. *Choice*, the key theme of this sign, is further conflated with suggestions of *value* (“Great land deals”) and *opportunity* (in terms of finding a suitable, well priced home) in which happiness, leisure, and relaxation are possible. This theme links closely to the “refreshing change” motif that underlines the entire series of banners from which this one is drawn; the suggestion being that Greater Springfield is a location that is refreshing due to the choices it avails to its residents.

What I find this banner claiming is that, once you move to Greater Springfield, you will have the...
choice of the home and lifestyle of your desire without spending every last dollar in the process, and will subsequently be able to enjoy life via such acts as leisurely looking out over your balcony. Presumably, from the age of the subjects shown in the image, they may have chosen to live in Greater Springfield to raise children, who, outside the frame of the image, might be imagined to be playing across the road in one of Greater Springfield’s parks; a park over which mum and dad are looking from the balcony of the family home. With the themes “Family,” “Belonging,” and “Learning” emerging from other banners in this series an assumption that this is a place for families (perhaps even more specifically, young families) is made. This is certainly the suggestion presented in an accompanying brochure distributed to residents and prospective property investors in 2005 that parallels the ideals and motif of choice presented in the banner: “Imagine yourself living in a community focused setting. Where people still smile at their neighbors and kids play safely in the park” (Delfin, 2005).

Apart from these suggestions, a restrained affluence is also presented as an expression of Choice in this banner. While great land deals will allow you to choose a large, comfortable, and new house, there remains a corollary of modesty. Comfortable affluence, not opulence, is the theme presented here, and by the brief snapshot of the house shown in the image, is signified by the type of house it is; by Greater Springfield standards this house very much represents an average residence. By extension to this reasoning, an economically derived class motif joins the signifier of age (young family) to present ideas of restrained affluence as a “clever buy.” In this age of rising mortgages, the “housing affordability crisis” (see, Bartlett, 2006; Silberberg, 2007), expensive household commodities and transportation costs, the lifestyle that Greater Springfield offers is one where work, living, playing, and shopping becomes attractive to young families looking for affordable but comfortable environs to raise families. Here we have choice coming to represent a thematic in which young families live an archetypal Australian lifestyle involving comfortable middle-class affluence, space to express a suburban identity and a place to play-out the “great Australian dream” (Bolton, 1990, p. 124).

Critiquing the Dream

The implicit suggestion underpinning the theme of choice is that there is something for everyone in Greater Springfield. Of course, this is good marketing practice; by suggesting that a range of choice is available, a wider market of potential investors is opened. But this isn’t all that accurately a suggestion in terms of what actually happens in Greater Springfield. There isn’t, in fact, a lot of actual choice available, and what is available is presented in terms of a couple of variations of brick-veneer detached housing, access to familiar styles of retail outlets that sell much the same sorts of thing that other retail outlets throughout the country sell, and parkland that functions as parkland does in most other parts of Australia (albeit in a contemporary, landscaped-with-native-flora kind of way). While subtle differences in terms of an overriding “philosophy” (expressed by a specific style of architectural aesthetic and finish) exist, the Greater Springfield development is still just an urban development that in this case caters to an affluent middle-class market. As such, very specific identity characteristics attach to the desired inhabitants of Greater Springfield according to the modes of lifestyle that are mediated by the imagery of the billboards and expressed in the development’s built form. There is nothing in the design and construction that suggests anything other than an archetypal Western, middle-class existence.

And this is exactly the rub. There is no such thing as the “archetypal Western, middle-class existence” apart from that which exists in the idealized imagery of the billboards of places like Greater Springfield. This is the style of living that is created as much as it is catered to, and more significantly, where the image is maintained as a point of aspiration. The suggestion from the
signs is that Greater Springfield provides choice by catering for every possible need and desire. But we know that this is, in fact, impossible—no development constructed from a single vision and philosophy could ever hope to achieve something for everyone. So what is left is the pretense of inclusion that, in fact, presents a desirable life ethic that by its very nature excludes everything that isn’t presented in the image. Here is a place that exists because of its imagery and maintains its imagery via its physicality (I recall the point made earlier that it was actual residents who are drawn on to feature in advertising for Springfield Lakes; here the real maintains the image). This place is a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994) that is modeled off the imagery of its own creation.

As an expression of collective interaction and similarity (a shared sense of being in the world) the ideals of the development (such as Choice) translate as contrived manifestations of a middle-class aesthetic, an aesthetic that is mediated in the first instance by the desires of the developers and presented via the billboards and signs distributed in the place to appeal to people who find the place appealing and who will subsequently fit in with its pre-fabricated logic. This is not a location where choice means something for everyone, but a location where very specific determinants of money, senses of style, distinction, and approaches to lifestyle fit with what the development has become. This is a streetscape that beams its image of what its residents will be from the fronts of billboards and other signage, and subsequently attracts people who look like the images contained in the signage to its neighborhoods (these same people going on to fulfill the development’s promises by being who they are, where they are). Those carefully selected residents who appear in the billboards go on to provide an image for themselves to model life against.

Informed Streets

It is in this way that the street operates as an implicit pedagogue. As a zone of our unconscious consumption, the street shapes us and influences our identity as a formative site of the (sub)urban milieu. We find located in the street very specific and deliberate information markers. The street comes to be a site of knowledges and discourses, in constant interplay and renewal, presented to us as we pass through.

We become flâneurs, of sorts, in these information rich streetscapes. By “of sorts,” I mean that we take and read our way through these landscapes, but unlike the critically detached (and intentioned) flâneur, we consume these information disseminators as ordinary components of our urban landscapes and stop short at asking questions about their logic and underlying purpose. A critical aesthetic that not only questions the content of the mass-communication apparatus and its attendant representations of gender, race and class locations (amongst others), but also engages the very logic of consumption, desire, production and identity mediation that underpins the workings of exchange in the capitalist system, must be undertaken. To do anything else means that we will perpetually fall into the workings of the billboards themselves by playing a continual cat-and-mouse game of liking or not-liking the content of the ads (such as the overtly sexualized content of a shoe ad) while missing the purpose of these ads to begin with. This is the site of the pedagogical intent of this apparatus, where the formation of specific ideas, ideals and identity locations is beamed onto the public for specific purposes (in most cases, the purposes of market capitalism).

For the flâneur, that streetwalker and social critic originally of fin de siècle Paris, the street offered a key location to watch and be consumed by the play of the social: “The flâneur lives his life as a succession of absolute beginnings. From the past, there is an easy exit; the present is just a gateway; the future is not yet, and what is not yet cannot bind” (Bauman, 1994, p. 139). The flâneur “is like a detective seeking clues who reads people’s characters not only from the physi-
When the Street Becomes a Pedagogue • 169

ognomy of their faces but via a social physiognomy of the street” (Shields, 1994, p. 63). From his (as the original flâneur was only ever a man) reading of the street—from this detective-like gathering of information on the street—the flâneur operates as a fixed point on the temporal continuum of this transitory space. It is he who stops to exert his reading, his observation of the streetscape in order to fix it in a point in time and space.

But to say that the flâneur is dead, gone with the arcades of 1890s Paris, denies that we are all, as street-users, implicated in a flânerie of necessity in this current period of late capitalism. We find ourselves exposed to a range of message systems in the streetscape—information networks that represent the global village in our very own local thoroughfares. It is the street that exposes us, in our corner of the world, to the multiple discourses of the urban environment. The street is an open location away from our comfort points in the home, shopping mall, or school—a space that is inhabited, common, invested with multiple meanings and ownerships simultaneously.

Yet we need to be critical in our contemporary flâneurist pursuits. The street isn’t a neutral space; it is contested with claims and power plays. Just like Greater Springfield, where significant agency to determine what the space means is held by the developers of the place, the street is a location of specific interests and appropriations. The concerns of a neoliberal, globalized and late-capitalist world see informal, public pedagogical activity occurring increasingly in these public spaces. As Giroux (2004) reminds us, these are pedagogical practices that:

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

The street functions in this way, as both active host of public pedagogies (such as the roadside billboard, or traffic sign) and as a pedagogical force of its own contextualization. As urban flâneurs we negotiate our streetscapes whilst being bombarded with information flows, each drawing their own discursive formations and identity forming practices.

It is this submersion in the global, mass-communicated, economic complex of late capitalism that incorporates us as unwitting flâneurs. We absorb the flows and constructions of the street and interact as individuals contextualized by the urban environment. We read our way through our urban habitats with the street guiding our path to those points of destination. We perform meaning construction acts as we pass through and as it responds to us, sending us images and representations of our mediated, global world. The street as both a physical entity and imagined space is implicit in the construction of meaning via this public pedagogical capacity. The street warrants more serious attention from us; as a location of the construction of the social and a location in which discursive formations find meaning and information flows present representations of our world, we as unwitting flâneurs should enter it with a critical capacity to determine and deconstruct the messages it beams to us. To do anything else would mean that we simply end up looking unquestioningly at our heterotopic selves in the billboards we pass by.

Notes

1. A friend of mine, whom I visited in a large Australian city, mentioned that the worst thing I could do when walking late one night in a busy suburban center was to look at oncoming pedestrians. He cautioned me to not say a word to or look directly at anyone. He also suggested that I simply maintain a steady pace and not stop for anyone or anything. This is what collectivity and human interaction in urban spaces had become for my friend.

2. The tourist stands out via their touristy accoutrements including such things as the camera, as well as their confused awe as people who are simultaneously dazzled by the new location and coming to terms with its codes.
3. A true test of local knowledge or "street smarts" is the quick route home bypassing traffic congestion. Knowing the street so well that you know alternative paths is an indicator of a connection with the urban space and its physicality.

4. I recall seeing, within the space of a kilometer or so, two billboards displaying exactly these messages on return drive back to my home city from a fieldtrip in mid-2006. I thought it entirely fascinating that a deeply moral-political message and a bland piece of marketing could be presented within a kilometer of each other and use the same media apparatus to present their case.

5. See Steven Moynihan's report from *The Age*, "Bid to Tear Down Sexist Ads" from June 18, 2002.


7. The "Community Update" is a serial publication prepared by the Springfield Land Corporation and distributed to residents, intending residents, and corporate partners of Greater Springfield. This tabloid size, glossy brochure variously contains community interest articles, advertising, and features about the development.

8. This phrase has recurred in speeches by representatives of the developers and numerous promotional documents from the Springfield Land Corporation.


10. All personal names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

11. Other banners in this series utilized the key terms “Community,” “Family,” “Belonging,” “Learning,” and “Convenience.”

12. From what I saw during my fieldwork and was told in interviews with residents of Greater Springfield, this is very much a major segment of the Greater Springfield population.

References


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