

**THE
PERCEPTUAL
FIELD
PART ONE:
LOOKING
@ THE
GROUND**

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1.0 FIRST GLANCES DOWNWARD

1.1 OUR STORIES

In the city our senses are dominated by overwhelming fields and streams of information that engage us primarily at eye level. This is the layered, fluid jumble of billboards, voices, textures, faces, scents, vehicles, sounds, costumes, and images that our eyeballs hunt, our ears drink in, and our noses sift. As we walk, shifting our attention from *this* to *that*, we direct and edit highly personalized, multisensory “movies.” These movies are, of course, myriad in number and different for everyone. They are as much products of memory as they are of perception, and are constantly being “re-made” with new scripts and borrowed plots, stock footage, live action, and changing technology. In this living cinema we are all stars, supporting actors, extras, scene-ruining intruders, makers-of-bloopers, and stunt doubles. They make up our urban experiences among hundreds of millions, our *stories* of daydreaming, shopping, mercy, and murder. We pick our costumes and soundtracks, and we improvise our dialogue, drawing on *signs* and *sign systems* found in vast archives of commerce, history, entertainment, and day-to-day struggle. There is a constant interplay between the signs we radiate and the signs we absorb that is represented by our actions and preferences: the clothing we wear, what we eat, what we see and hear, the ideas we communicate, the spaces we occupy, and how we move through them. Our stories are as intimate as the insides of our bodies, and as anonymous as a sidewalk alive with people using cell phones—and our stories constantly interact with those of others. Through these interactions we share, borrow, copy, alter, reject, steal, and destroy experiences that can be as simple and brief as bumping into someone, or as intricate and long as a family history. These are transformative processes. As habits or customs these processes become our *practices*, or ways of operating in the world.

The control and/or influence of these practices is a form of power based on *observation*, or the direction of attention or awareness. Because people are always observing each other, they form, dissolve, and maintain *shared* stories (relationships) in which the signs of practice flicker on and off at different frequencies that are received simultaneously. We can call these practices at the individual level *everyday* practices, because they are “common,” and as overlooked as heartbeats, standing upright and breathing. Just as these bodily systems are “overseen” by the brain, there are practices that emerge when individuals form group relationships. Call these *functional* practices, which allow people to organize the ways in which their shared stories are structured, developed, and maintained. There is a profound and dynamic interdependency between the everyday and the functional: Functional practices could not exist without the “cellular” cohesion of *critical* everyday practices; while everyday practices cannot be recognized or changed without making observation into a functional practice. The relationship between these two ways of story-writing should not be represented as conflict, as the two are far too tightly braided together, too commingled, though it is easy to see how functionalism tends to obscure the everyday.¹ Recognizing the everyday requires us to think of the grain of sand in a pearl, of approaching the center of an onion, or isolating malignant cells before they become tumors. Functionalism has probably always had an “advantage” over the everyday, because an individual is *embedded* in a matrix of functionalist relationships and is a *host* to them at the same time. All forms of functionalism “capture” the stories that everyday people live-write about their dreams, desires, hates, loves, and humors. At this point a distinction should be made between the “everyday” functionalism that facilitates human organization, and the *extreme functionalism* (eFunctionalism), assisted by technology, media, and industrial production, that developed in the West² and has distributed itself globally.

1.2 THE WORKINGS OF EXTREME FUNCTIONALISM

In the early twenty-first century, our stories are sampled, simplified, and distributed by huge, eFunctionalist systems (political, entertainment, and advertising, for example) that produce generalized, streamlined, sometimes exaggerated versions of everyday beliefs and practices for profit.

The extreme functionalists work through the manipulation of very specific questions: “Do you want a job?” “How many children do you have?” “Do you support the president?” “Do you recognize this logo?” The answers, if they are going to be turned to profit, are stripped of detail and conditionality. Extreme functionalism does not tolerate “yes, but...” or “no, but...” It struggles with answers like “both,” and hates incomplete surveys. If it did accommodate such differences, it would have to account for *all* such answers and end up paralyzing itself with its own procedures. Instead eFunctionalism performs a double operation that isolates as it unifies. It refines the stories produced according to our generalized responses so that when we experience them, we might recognize a tiny reflection of our specific desires for leadership, comfort, information, and entertainment. This is the operation of *isolation*. That reflection is a lowest common denominator, amplified to the point where “everyone” can experience it, and have their desires drowned out but not quite silenced. This is the operation of *unification*, where “that music is so loud I can’t hear myself think!” Through media, products, technology, and architecture of increasing seductiveness and banality, different versions of this eFunctionalist approach can raise armies, start revolutions, grow companies into monopolies, make American sitcoms popular in Kenya, and turn Tupac Shakur into an international saint.

Though the everyday can be forced into constrained positions, eliminating it from functionalist practices is difficult. When the stripped-down story-products from the eFunctionalist macrocosm are sold in the microcosm of the individual, they are subject to the same powers of transformation that the everyday has always had at its disposal. That power can open a crack in any functionalist system, and it gives the individual the opportunity to *not* use, *re-use*, or *mis-use* functionalist products. The anonymous moment that still escapes observation and direction under functionalist forces is that grain of sand, the center of the onion, the first group of malignant cells. This is a valuable moment that should be celebrated and encouraged in situations where people are being confronted with relentless standardization. But how can this be done when a project to awaken a sense of the everyday requires its own functionalist and possibly extreme functionalist practices? The only way, it seems, to gain some perspective on these endless, teeming, and increasingly regulated exchanges between humans is to get above them (literally or conceptually) and *look down*. The ability to get an “overview” is a normal product of the functionalist position, but in an extreme functionalist system, looking down is an exclusive and privileged practice. In this context everyday subjects must fix their gazes on something other than the source or symbol of that power. In the presence of royalty the subject’s gaze is directed towards the ground. But

eFunctionalism has substituted royalty with advertising and media, and it requires the gaze to be fixed on the *screen* instead of the ground. This is the tyranny of eye level, and it is a function of being observed and directed from “above.” But as we shall see below, looking down at the actual ground can be turned from a submissive practice to a subversive one.

1.3 MICHEL DE CERTEAU’S VIEWS FROM THE TOP

In the early 1980s French theorist Michel de Certeau looked down on us from the World Trade Center in New York. He found himself experiencing the functionalist’s seductive “pleasure of ‘seeing the whole’, of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts.”³ From 110 floors up, what he knew to be a roaring hive of breath, motion, signal processing, voice, image-making, gesture, consumption, and conflict became *texture*, a “texturology,” a summary of architecture, light, shadows, and frantic motion deep in the canyons. With the unique characteristics (the voices, gaits, faces, postures) of the pedestrians below obliterated by vertical distance, de Certeau beheld a vibrating mass being processed and regulated by vast circuits of buying, selling, trading, and *needing* that flowed through the city, *especially* through the very tower beneath his feet. The perspective from the observation deck of the World Trade Center was akin to the perspective of the manager, the technocrat, the planner, the cartographer, the detached “solar Eye, looking down like a god”⁴ who sought to control or at least manage the flow. And yet here he was, 1,370 feet up, profoundly critical of the aerial view’s capacity to generalize and reduce, to turn the specific into the abstract. He recognized that the strategic viewpoint atop the World Trade Center represented the elite power to shape the destinies of millions, while at the same time providing a dizzying rush, a unique experience, a raw perception that celebrated that power. Once a visitor paid admission to spend some time where “it’s hard to be down when you’re up,”⁵ there was nowhere to go *but* down, to rejoin the crush of the masses. It was this return to the ground that engaged de Certeau, and his theories would fully explore the indeterminacy that awaited him.

De Certeau left the heights of the geographer’s functional abstraction and arrived at the level of the sidewalk. At this point de Certeau’s brilliant trick was to remain in the mindset of the functionalist on the way down. From the top of the World Trade Center it is the city that is legible and not the pedestrian population, which becomes an expression of statistics. On the ground, from the perspective of the functionalist, that same pedestrian population would be considered *calculable* but not necessarily *legible*. This is the functionalist’s mistake, and de Certeau’s tactical opportunity. Where the functionalist on the ground might begin searching for patterns in the signs that any given pedestrian radiated, de Certeau held on to the “ignorance” that is the by-product of the bird’s-eye view’s (BEV’s) totalizing operation. In the bird’s-eye view, the pedestrians

remained illegible and anonymous, and essentially unpredictable. De Certeau believed that being in motion, walking individual paths, is what camouflaged pedestrians from functionalist observations, and he saw it as the source of their power. Though they remained embedded in an extreme functionalist system that surrounded them with signs and seductions, short of turning everyone into automatons there was no way to *force* anyone to consume them. People still had their individual choices, as quiet and fleeting as they were. The question became how best to represent this empowerment. This was quite a task, as he could not simply gather a body of stories about people and derive a set of general rules ... this would be no different from the functionalist practices associated with sociological research. Rather than trying to find a way to predict the practices of people walking the streets with their wandering eyes and turbulent emotions, de Certeau looked for a means of description that could simultaneously accommodate abstraction and specificity. He needed a system that was consistent but not necessarily predictable, strong enough to shape new structures and weak enough to promote their creation. His system also needed to be accessible as an everyday practice.

In de Certeau's theory the city is like the formal structure, or *grammar*, of a language. An individual's pedestrian passage through the city is like that language put to use, complete with accents, slang, dialects, rumors, code words, and jokes. Even if one's movement through the city is temporarily translated into the "mathematical" language of buses, taxis, cars, and subways, everyone eventually returns to the sidewalk as "walkers ... whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it."⁶ De Certeau understood that everyday speech "moves" ideas, even when they are embedded in a functionalist system. Thus pedestrians who create their "long poem of walking"⁷ reorganize the spaces they move through and insert their "multitudinous references and citations,"⁸ even though it is the city that constrains where one walks. De Certeau understood that people's endless practices of everyday narrative and opinion, unknowable in all of their detail and texture, could not be predicted by extreme functionalism. Instead of focusing on all the possible stories that could be told by walkers in the city, de Certeau provided a framework—the practice of storytelling/writing itself—that accommodated without being reductive or generalizing. His analysis does make use of functionalist generalization and amplification, however, to direct our attention towards the complex noise of the crowd instead of a single projected voice that might speak for it. Among the jostlings of fellow pedestrians, the looks and commands of police officers, the incessant beckonings of advertisements, and the hurtling traffic, he wrote that we were able to read the city like a text. However, it was a vantage point at the top of the World Trade Center that made his observations possible. He took advantage of a structure that channeled vast flows of finance, politics, and communication, built to a height and scale that could only (attempt to) write and tell a story of American triumph.

Now those towers are gone, and de Certeau's vantage point no longer exists. For most people, the collapse of the towers was another functionalist story delivered by television. The American political-media response encouraged people frozen in their own unique textures of shock, terror, and anger to surrender to the momentum of a thundering mass of opinion and presidential applause. De Certeau's theories of walking in the city appeared in the first volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, shortly before American cultural industries consolidated into super-structures like AOL Time Warner, Disney, and Microsoft: virtual World Trade Centers themselves. The actual view de Certeau took in, New York's "gigantic rhetoric of excess of expenditure and production,"⁹ has been replaced by its virtual equivalent. But there is no publicly accessible observation deck "atop" the towering skyscraper of media that is Viacom. Hovering over the rubble, the media networks struggle to represent the victims of the destruction, to find a way to *write their stories* into the fabric of New York and the world. The best view of the New York streets is now crowded with teenagers looking up to pop stars waving from behind the windows of the MTV studios. Our audiovisual attention stops at their open screaming mouths and at the love notes they scrawl across handheld signs. Then cut to the hallucinogenic story-machine.

1.4 WHEN OUR FACES MEET THE SIDEWALK

This chapter attempts to take over where de Certeau's theory left off. He provided a framework to understand the operations of the everyday as they relate to the spatial practices¹⁰ of moving, looking, and listening. Though he was doubtlessly aware of it, he did not discuss how his "general theory of the everyday" was modulated or tuned by everyday racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia or class conflict. Nor did he discuss the latest *-ism* that extreme functionalism has installed in the everyday: *marketism*, or the belief that profit-driven economic relationships are superior to all others. Thankfully, the structure of de Certeau's theory invites and encourages others to work out the details of any practices he may have overlooked or could not foresee. Though marketism has insinuated itself into people's everyday practices, it has not prevented its own appropriation at that level, nor has it stopped people from *walking*. The city, and people's relationships with it, remains a highly effective theoretical model. However, marketism has thoroughly structured much of the perceptual field of the everyday with audiovisual signs of aforementioned *-isms*, and a hysterical presentation of "product differentiation." Extreme functionalist practices have provided us with the illusion that we are "looking down" on everything the market has to offer in terms of goods, beliefs, ideas, and lifestyles. As we roam the markets we are tracked, and oblivious to the *strategic* visions of AOL Time Warner executives, or the designers of Cisco network technology. Instead, we have only the waning *tactical* advantage of our indeterminacy.

This chapter reiterates de Certeau's strategy at a different scale, transposing the relationship between rooftop and street to the distance between eye level and the sidewalk. At this scale, "within" the everyday while making use of functionalist observational techniques, we are *still in motion as we walk*, still writing our "long poems," still transforming our stories and those of others, still in possession of all our powers of reinterpretation. By looking down at the sidewalk we can exploit a gap in the marketist structures. The sidewalk has not yet had its visual field overdetermined by advertised signs of the *-isms* mentioned above.¹¹ Marketism has not yet gathered its forces to carry out its operations below the eye-level realm that occupies our attention the majority of the time. The sidewalk is the surface upon which we write our walking narratives. It bears traces of relative wealth, ecological security (i.e., sanitation), everyday local life, historical processes, and infrastructural maintenance. To look down at the sidewalk is to literally look down on the *foundation* of extreme functionalism. As eFunctionalism segregates and unifies our stories in the same way that neighborhoods are separated yet connected by a general system, directing our gaze downward can make our individual and shared urban experiences much more *legible*. The stories that we constantly write and the operations of which de Certeau revealed to us in greater detail are not functionalist statistics, they are composed in a concrete language with its own grammar. The sidewalk is "talking functionalism" in a language of paint, specifications, official history, and grid lines. But it is also "talking everyday" in dialects of transforming territories, unofficial markings, fractures, and debris. Sustained study of the sidewalk helps us learn to speak this language, and soon we are writing it as we walk: documenting love etched in concrete, plants growing in cracks, tree roots heaving the surface upward, illegal markets for secondhand goods, children in strollers, and so much more. To speak and read the language of sidewalks is to understand a language of revolt against the tyranny of eye level.

1.5 SIMULATED BIRD'S-EYE VIEW (BEV)

No matter how short we are, we always get a bird's-eye view of the sidewalk. From the dizzying heights near the top of our heads we look down onto a whole world that is rich in potential meaning and goes largely ignored. It is ignored because the idea of *sidewalk* is as stable and relied upon as *gravity* as we make our way from one part of the city to the next. We barely notice where curbs end and streets begin, we overlook the cracks unless they are wide enough to trip us, and we do our best to avoid obstacles that block our progress: other pedestrians, dog feces, abandoned food containers and debris. Instead we focus on our destination, gaze held at eye level or higher, reading the signs, negotiating our paths. We take that narrow strip between buildings and the street for granted. The sidewalk creates a reality in which we are *generally* confident that cars will not suddenly compete with pedestrians, and that we will not find torch-jugglers, drug dealers, panhandlers, joggers, and picketers actively doing their thing in supermarket aisles. So long as

each footstep lands solidly and our instinctive sense of where concrete becomes asphalt and flesh becomes speeding metal isn't disrupted, we get where we need to go. Because our walking journeys overflow with expressions of human life that are uniquely interpreted by each individual, we rarely think of the sidewalk itself as a medium that carries us. It is only when the signs of life drop below our chins and hit the ground that the sidewalk returns to our attention. It might suddenly frame the body of a fallen individual, become the point where an underground catastrophe ruptures the surface, serve as an advertisement for shoes, or become a morphing museum of lost, discarded, and dropped items. When the sidewalk becomes a stage it operates in a mode of presentation, and this is easy for us to interpret. But what happens when the sidewalk is viewed not as a stage but as a landscape, if it is treated as if we were looking down through the window of a plane? There are sidewalk equivalents to towns, geologic features, cultivated fields, wastelands, bodies of water, dumps, and sprawling parking lots that pass beneath us when we fly. In the same way that these aerially perceived features show us broad patterns that, as we zoom in, resolve themselves into details such as cars, waves, and crops, the sidewalk reveals its own specificities when viewed close-up. But literally being below the dominant sign systems of eye level, these specificities are not easily read. We rarely think of how the sidewalk is (de)constructed, what it hides and protects, or how it can physically express both natural and urban historical processes, and represent a vast system of laws and values made solid.

To look down at the sidewalk is to look down at the fundamental interface between person and city, where *such-and-such* occurred, and *so-and-so* experienced *that*, where we go to do *this*, spreading out in an invisible network that potentially connects each city-dweller to any other. Sidewalks, like geography viewed from above or maps of the political boundaries between countries, tell subtle, incremental stories about the buildup, drift, and collapse of neighborhoods. Beneath our feet are the sidewalks we see, and this chapter is about the ways we might see the sidewalk: as phenomenon, fact, metaphor, and concept. In the same way that aerial views can reveal broad patterns of human behavior that are invisible on the ground, the altitude between eye and foot can reveal the hair-thin patterns of activity that go unnoticed as we stride like giants across the landscape below, locked in our own points of view. Like high-altitude gazing, discerning the patterns in the landscape below can be a matter of one-time meditation or a study produced by repeated passes. Because sidewalk features are repetitive, observing the common structures and processes behind every crack, microgarden, etched signature, stain, and maintenance panel produces unique results that need not all be taken in all at once. Though it is true that everyday life doesn't necessarily encourage or promote opportunities to look down, and that various psychological states can cause us to do so blindly, there is *definitely* something to see. I propose that the practice of making the city sidewalk a dominant aspect of our visual field can introduce a fundamentally different, potentially liberating experience of the urban environment. Take a glance shoeward, and see the differences that have accumulated, bred, and evolved while our attention was focused on street signs, advertisements, skyscrapers, and fellow pedestrians.

2.0 THE CODE OF THE “IDEAL” SIDEWALK

“Any person, firm or corporation who removes or repairs ... any existing sidewalk surface, or any portion thereof, for any purpose whatever, shall replace or repair or cause to be replaced or repaired the sidewalk surface ... with the same kind of materials, design and texture, and with equivalent workmanship, to match the existing sidewalk surface.”¹²

The city itself is made up entirely of codes that determine how land will be used, what types of building are permitted, how tall those buildings may be, and what aesthetic priorities they should follow. These codes are intended to exist independent of any given architect or contractor, to maintain standards of order and compatibility. One might imagine the modern city as *already completed* by its planners, with architects building out the predetermined spaces with their actual structures.¹³ Sidewalks are no different, and are subject to the same restrictions of possibility that make codes effective as generalities and standards. But just as the relationship between the functional and the everyday is a dynamic one of giving and taking, the sidewalk as it is planned and the sidewalk as it is lived are two different states. The sidewalk is like a beach where urban codes that specify its construction and its potential uses are for the most part at “low tide.” The public is almost always free to use the sidewalk as a means of movement, and there are a wide range of activities such as drawing with chalk, loitering, and informal sales that are tolerated by those who enforce the codes. However, some everyday practices such as panhandling, some forms of loitering, sleeping, and gathering may evoke a different response from the law. The tide can suddenly and swiftly rise. When the law intervenes in public practices, the sidewalk is re-covered by codes that are usually dormant. Therefore the “public,” everyday nature of the sidewalk can actually be suspended at any time, and the rights of its users revoked in the name of extreme functionalist operations.

The sidewalk is intended to be an expression of *sameness* that unifies the city’s functionality and its fundamental, unspoken story of *civilization*. When a street is paved or a sidewalk is poured, the emerging neighborhood is officially integrated into the fabric of the city and recognized at the most basic of levels. The sidewalks that run throughout a modern city describe a process “above” and beyond each individual that brings standard public utilities such as water, gas, electricity, and telecommunications to “everyone.” In our urban imaginations we barely acknowledge the logic of a sidewalk beneath our feet *here* implying a sidewalk beneath someone else’s *there*, even if *there* is characterized by mansions, drive-by shootings, chain stores, auto dealerships, prostitution, or pawnshops. Though the sidewalk may make room for trees, utility poles, and mailboxes, or take the form of nonconcrete paving (e.g., brickwork and cobblestone), most sidewalks in a

city—aside from those that are preservations or emulations of earlier stages of its history—are laid in accordance to the same specifications. Downtown sidewalk, for example, is not *inherently* different from residential sidewalk, as tempting as it may be to drag the signs and politics of architecture, advertising, and people down to ground level. In either locale we see the grid, the access panels, the color-coded curbs, the cracks, the debris. However, strolling down many contemporary metropolitan sidewalks shows us that the sidewalk as it is planned is not the sidewalk as it is experienced from the perspective of those who use or maintain it. The following is an excerpt from the planning code for sidewalk installation of the American city of Lakewood, Ohio.¹⁴ It is the point of departure for this section’s investigation of the “ideal” sidewalk:

2.1 SIDEWALKS

Every street has a sidewalk width specified in the Codified Ordinances of Lakewood. New sidewalks shall match this width and shall accurately align with existing walks.

All sidewalks shall be 4 inches thick and be made of cast-in-place concrete. Alternate materials and designs must be proposed to the Public Works Director (216-529-6803) and approved prior to installation.

Sidewalks shall slope toward the curb at 1/4 inch per foot of width.

Tooled control joints shall be spaced at the same distance apart as the sidewalk is wide and shall be spaced evenly. If an unsymmetrical end block is created due to an odd dimension, the joint spacing shall be adjusted by prorating so that even spacing over the entire width of the work results.

Sidewalk edges shall be tooled and radiused 1/8 inch. All fins shall be removed.

A tooled control joint shall be placed in such a way as to define a 6 inch wide curb parallel to the pavement edge at locations where the curb and sidewalk are integral.

Expansion joints shall be placed every fourth or fifth block and at each end of the work and shall have tooled edges.

A broom finish shall be applied perpendicular to the direction of foot traffic prior to tooling joints. This includes the blocks between the apron and the private drive.

Preparation for concrete casting shall consist of grading, leveling and compacting the soil surface, followed by placing a minimum 3 inches of #57 limestone or ODOT Item 304 compacted limestone base.

This excerpt represents the sidewalk as it is imagined by traditional urban planners: perfect, solid, predictable. As we shall see, some of these specifications are based on scientific knowledge of concrete’s behavior as it is exposed to the elements. But specifications for tooled edges, proper alignment, and symmetry also express aesthetic and ideological concerns with the maintenance of

the impression of order. The rigorous details in the Lakewood code attempt to ensure that new sidewalk sections match up with old ones, not only by establishing the way a sidewalk must be laid, but also the actual makeup of the concrete that is to be used.¹⁵ Like any other regulation, Lakewood's sidewalk code establishes standards of durability, safety, and construction that are intended to ensure a "universal" and reliable experience for all citizens. And like any other city code, compliance with the standards is enforced with economic threats. But do these standards which define an ideal material consistency and formal quality actually produce the desired results? The answer is a firm *no* because sidewalk specifications do not establish *when* the sidewalk must be laid, e.g., the warmest month, the coolest month, or the spring equinox. Nor do specifications determine *who* must lay the sidewalk, e.g., day laborers, union contractors, or "do it yourself" types, all operating under different constraints of time, discipline, and economics. Thus the sidewalk codes are "tweaked" and adjusted according to the circumstances of their implementation. Traditional city planners undoubtedly recognize the possibility for the creation of nonstandard sidewalks even if those who lay them are strictly following the code. As a contingency, Lakewood's code states that "absolutely all concrete work shall be inspected both before and after the concrete is cast," and makes jobs subject to both technical and aesthetic evaluation by an inspector responsible for "examination of the dimensions of the pour, compliance with the specifications contained herein, quality of the finish and conformance with surrounding grades." Ultimately, deviations from the standard are the responsibility of the permit holder who "shall correct all deficiencies so noted at his or her expense," backed by the threat that "all un-inspected concrete work is subject to immediate removal at the permit holder's expense." In Lakewood such codes might be easily enforceable (or easily avoided), but taking a glance downward at the concrete quilting of a typical city sidewalk will show us any number of violations—even Lakewood's sidewalks are probably less than perfect. Recognizing this life-world vs. code-world diversity expressed by the inevitable imperfection of the sidewalk is the point of departure for this investigation.

Because this investigation is primarily visual, we turn now to the first of many "sights" of city sidewalks. Rather than referring to the accompanying images as "figures," I would like to emphasize that they depict everyday *places* and moments of *seeing* that any reader might find in their own city. I consider them to be references rather than illustrations, and prefer to call them "sights," as one might consider things seen while on a guided tour.¹⁶

Sight 1 represents a section of new sidewalk whose implementation seems reasonably compliant with the Lakewood specifications and close to "ideal" or "perfect." This sight frames a block under reconstruction in Daly City, California, and our reading of it begins with an immediate recognition of the different regions that should be easily discernible. There is the darker gray section of sidewalk, the lighter gray section, their corresponding gutters, the four different regions of



SIGHT 1
A NEW SIDEWALK MEETS AN OLD STREET.

asphalt separated by seams between them, and the area in the upper right corner that literally fences off the place where the sidewalk ends. The darker gray section of sidewalk that takes up the majority of the frame was laid more recently, reminding us that laying new sidewalks is not unlike playing the game of Tetris. If the playing field of Tetris is turned into a top-down view instead of a vertical pile, then the grid of panels and sections *slide* rather than *fall* into place, determined by the shape of the very first concrete that gets poured. Before this stretch of Daly City sidewalk was poured there was only dirt similar to that which is piled beyond the fence. New game. Execute code.

Both the darker and lighter regions represent the “ideal” sidewalk as it is specified in the Lakewood code but “dropped” into place at different times. Like chunks of computer graphic, these sidewalk sections are generally free of debris, blemishes, or irregularities, are untouched by curb paint, and have not been penetrated by signposts, fire hydrants, or utility panels. In this state they bear only the minimal, carefully regulated traces of those hands that poured them. Close inspection of the darker gray concrete reveals the brushed lines of the “broom finish” running “perpendicular to the direction of foot traffic” that is required by the Lakewood specification and apparently shared by the Daly City planning office. Even if the concrete mixture for the two poured sections is for all intents and purposes “identical,” as weather and pedestrians take their toll, the differing conditions of their pouring (e.g., temperature, attention) will be expressed along the border between them. These thicker lines between sections and between the sidewalk and curb are *control joints* and *expansion joints* that mark the former locations of wood barriers that shaped the concrete as it hardened, and accommodate the sun-driven “heat cycle” of expansion and contraction that sidewalks go through. Without these joints, the concrete would crack due to internal forces, leading to transformations that are discussed below. But before we hypothesize the changes that months or years will bring, what of the unmistakable “tweaks” of the code that are currently visible?

How might we interpret the two squares of newer concrete that jut asymmetrically into the older section? And what of that single dark gray panel at the very top of the image? These are differences between the specifications and their implementation, contingent upon any number of factors that affect construction. When this actual sidewalk is compared to the precise requirements of the code, it is “good enough” but it isn’t perfect, even when it is poured under the “best” of circumstances. The resulting difference in shading in the concrete reveals that sidewalks do not appear as if by magic, they have *histories* that are directly tied to small changes in mixing strategies, materials, and levels of the workers’ concentration. The conceptual “gap” that exists between the planned sidewalk and the poured sidewalk is a space of “opportunity” where seeing in ways other than those that are prescribed (i.e., a mundane stretch of new sidewalk) offers us a chance to interpret the sidewalk in ways that were not intended. Our viewing tactic is an example of de

Certeau’s theory of *la perruque*, in which everyday practices divert the resources of functionalist ones to their own ends. More important perhaps, we have the absent workers, somewhere beyond the temporal and spatial frame of Sight 1, to thank for this opportunity.

To further complicate our reading and prepare for some of the discussion yet to come, let’s look to the point where the new gutter interfaces with the sidewalk. Here, in the context of urban order as it is taken for granted and carefully specified, is an expression of human improvisation that seems to ignore *any* standards of paving. At this border formed by the street’s asphalt meeting the sidewalk’s concrete, two different codes and two different construction practices meet. Between the slightly darker scar caused by a diagonal cut in the road and the freshly poured gutter is a jagged slice of dark, crumbling asphalt. What happened here? By contrasting the care with which the sidewalk was poured with the casual filling of the space where it encounters an older repair we cannot help but make an aesthetic and/or technical judgment; *especially* when planning codes for streets and sidewalks are so rigorous and precise. Because we know that human hands did this work, we cannot avoid critiquing its quality. On a technical and structural level, such haphazard work creates opportunities for the heat- and water-based transformations in both street and sidewalk that their respective codes seek to avoid. On an aesthetic level, the patchwork could be considered “ugly” since *regularity* and smooth transitions from one paved state to the next are some of the standards by which the overall quality of the street is measured. On a theoretical level, this irregularity not only represents the clash of codes, it creates diverse visual and tactile *territories* to be found at street level. These territories are not simply factual expressions of human action, they can be *interpreted* to take us beyond phenomena and into allegory should we so desire (but there are many more phenomena to observe before we do that). In relatively new sidewalks, one truly has to seek out these territories because they are still fairly inscrutable if one is not used to their quiet interventions in the urban fabric. But as we shall find in the following section, older sidewalks speak a slightly different, louder dialect.

3.0 THE FORCES OF SIDEWALK TRANSFORMATION

“Clean” is the last word one can use to accurately describe a typical city sidewalk. Even if debris is taken elsewhere by brooms and weather, the sidewalk remains packed with traces, markings, and scars. It is the battered skin of the city, complete with pores, blemishes, and wrinkles. The sidewalk can grow and shrink both physically and conceptually, and it bears the evidence of that

process. This section investigates the transformations that are for the most part caused by natural forces working on and between the visible remix of materials that make it up. Take a close look. Adding texture and color to the wide variety of gray shades beneath our feet are pulverized river stones, the dust of quarries, the by-products of mines, and even the shells of sea life. Touch if you can. There are concretes that are rough and carry visible chunks of other stone, some that are made with finely ground aggregates that produce relatively smooth surfaces, others that are darkened by granite alive with tiny crystals that scintillate in the sun as one passes above them. Though humans learned to re-create geologic processes that create the cement that goes into concrete,¹⁷ and there is a veritable science behind making sidewalks good for traction, damage resistant, or aesthetically pleasing, they are not exempt from the forces that build and destroy mountains.

3.1 CRACKS

The typical American sidewalk is laid down in sections separated by small gaps at repeated intervals. As discussed above, these *expansion joints* accommodate a sidewalk's fundamental "breathing" motion driven by the sun itself, some ninety-three million miles away. However, this preventative technique is imperfect and subtle differences in expansion or contraction between two slabs of concrete can, over time, cause the sidewalk to crack. Tiny fissures appear, and if unchecked can turn into larger cracks that evolve like slow-motion lightning striking across the lightly applied grid lines that provide us with a sense of measurement and distance. Another transformative force is water, despite the conscious addition of tiny air bubbles in the concrete mixture (*air-entrainment*) so that any water that seeps into the material has a place to expand into when it freezes. Even if there is no "freeze-thaw" cycle for the sidewalk to withstand, the concrete still expands and contracts with changes in temperature. Supplement this with the geologic forces at play in an earthquake and tremor-prone city like San Francisco and one can imagine even the tiniest jolts from the San Andreas fault assisting the power of the sun and rain.

Sight 2 represents a typical urban sidewalk that has been subject to heat cycles and tremors. Rather than seeing it as a problem per se through the eyes of a contractor or traditional urban planner, it is perhaps better to see it as a continued expression of entirely natural processes. The large cracks radiating from the expansion joint are a sign of geological forces "speaking" the stresses that lurk beneath the ideal sidewalk when it is actualized. The slowly shifting foundation of the home, the tectonic activity of the region, and the total stress created by not only the sidewalk's heat cycles but that of the street that exists beyond the frame all add up to a complex process, but not a random one. The cracks are the legible results of a slow but steady iteration of applied forces. This complexity can subdivide as represented in **Sight 3**. As a photograph, Sight 3

A TYPICAL
CITY SIDEWALK.
RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD, SAN FRANCISCO.

SIGHT 2



SIGHT 3



A CLOSER VIEW OF THE
AREA TO THE RIGHT
OF SIGHT 1.

is a closer view of Sight 2, intentionally composed to bring out the aesthetic moments that hover at the margins of our vision, but it is nothing that any of us couldn't see for ourselves should we stop and look. Here the aggregate in the concrete becomes a landscape instead of a stretch of urban gray, and the "islands" created by cracks-within-cracks evoke an aerial view of rivers flowing through that landscape. In Sights 2 and 3 the light grid lines of the sidewalk are dominated by the emerging cracks. If we interpret the grid lines as smaller scale versions of the grid formed by city streets seen from above, and it is accepted that the grid itself is a *regulating* pattern, then the cracks cutting across this grid fracture it. We must be careful, however, how this fracture is characterized, especially when we take into account that the crack was made possible by the expansion joint itself. One might read the crack as a *failure* of the sidewalk, but knowing that the sidewalk itself is not beyond the rules that govern the carving of valleys and the shattering of mountains dulls the edge of that interpretation. Alternatively, one might read the crack as a *triumph* of "nature" in revolt against the regulatory grid, but that interpretation is limited by the fact that natural processes of erosion and shifting were not halted by the introduction of sidewalks.

Reading the crack in terms of failure or triumph, loss and victory, or intrusion versus reclamation brings *values* into play where they might not be appropriate. Is the Grand Canyon a "failure" of the earth? A "triumph" of the Colorado River? With one's eye close to the sidewalk, the crack becomes equally grand, complete with all of the details we appreciate at the superhuman scale. Value-based readings "erase" the crack and draw on the generalizing power of the bird's-eye view. So then what is it we are actually seeing when we inspect a crack in the sidewalk? We are witnessing complex interactions between the specific and the general, a unique expression produced by "universal" forces. Reading the crack portrayed in Sight 2 provides an opportunity to perceive *difference* (not ruin or revolution) without obstructing it with values, something that demands the practice of specificity and not generalization. This will be a unique experience for anyone who does so. However, this is not to say that we should exclude the forces of civilization and geology from our reading, as they form the conceptual framework we are operating in. Rather, we should hold them at bay for a moment, to see how they actually manifest in the material rather than the abstract. To practice perceiving difference without judgment should reveal that difference is *everywhere*, and it lurks in the details. Fortunately, in our pursuit of detail there is more to the transformation of sidewalks than microtectonics.

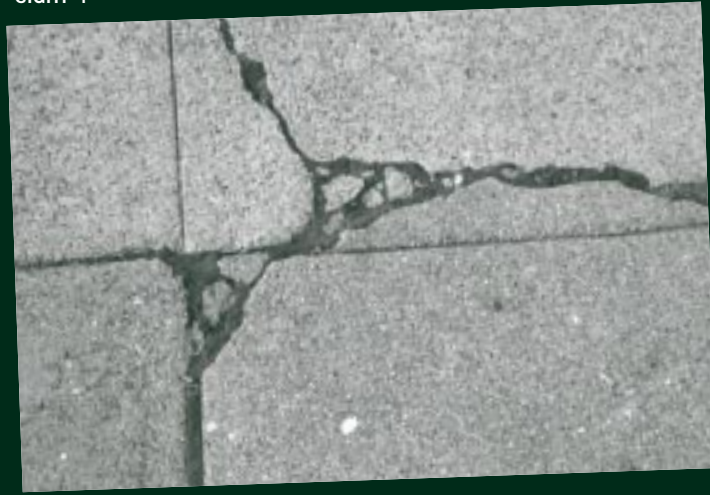
3.2 PLANT LIFE

Sidewalk cracks are ecological opportunities—*la perruque* as a natural process—as much as they are material fractures. Should the contractor choose to make larger expansion joints to accommo-

date the sliding earth and the pendulum of heat and cold, wind-driven grit will eventually fill the gap—even if it must patiently wait for the joint's seal to inevitably erode. Over time, this grit accumulates and becomes dirt, and where there is dirt, there can be plants. Mosses and grasses, as seen in Sight 3, are often the first forms of plant life to take advantage of a sidewalk crack's tiny ecosystem. They accent the cool gray with the color and texture of rain forests viewed from above. In some cases, the sidewalk can end up dusted with a light green, as if an artist with an airbrush decided to echo the locations of evaporated puddles, or accent the soft carpeting in the cracks with a Gaussian blur of green life. Simply looking for these miniature gardens and stopping to admire their tenacity and richness can take one out of the layer of visual noise we have grown accustomed to. Seen against the ordering grid of the sidewalk, these zigzagging miniature canyons, like scaled-down fertile river valleys, are powerful evidence for the ongoing process of life going on in *all* neighborhoods. Sight 3 illustrates a thriving case that undoubtedly supports communities of insects as well. Here we can follow the canyon running towards the upper left from the expansion joint all the way to the wall where a plant is doing quite well along with its cousins and some patches of sprouting grass. Beyond this frame, farther up this street is a fairly large park where these plants' seeds were probably born before the wind took them on their colonizing journeys.

When these fertile niches go unattended, what was a simple crack delineating a border between sections of sidewalk becomes a fully developed territory that is unaccounted for in the sidewalk code. The moss developing in the cracks of **Sight 4** is a rich depiction of this process. Cracks as we have already read them have fractured the code-based sidewalk grid and come to dominate this sight. The system of cracks centered at this intersection starts at the moss-packed expansion joint that enters the frame from the bottom. As the stresses of microtectonics break up the adjacent panels, the cracks have developed into subdivided territories surrounded by moss. Gently, the fracture has drifted into a slightly different category now that the resulting space has been filled with life. We might be led towards the metaphorical impression that it is the moss and not the flexing of the concrete that is causing the cracks, or that the sidewalk panels are floating atop a hidden sea of green like ice floes over water. We might also read the emergence of the moss as we did the cracks: in terms of intrusion or reclamation. However, it must be reemphasized that the real wealth of this sight reveals itself when we give in to the *differences* that emerge upon closer inspection. The difference here, as perceptible in terms of touch as it is of sight, is a matter of changes in hardness, color, texture, and depth. Discovering such details in a real sidewalk (instead of the representation in Sight 4) demands from us a new practice. Squatting with a camera or sketchbook we become cracks and fracture the pedestrian flow, radiating an entirely different set of bodily signs, like an emerging plant.

SIGHT 4



SIGHT 5

A FENNEL PLANT THRIVES IN THE "GREEK" RUINS OF A DALY CITY STRIP MALL.

As the plants push upward and spread outward, our attention can be captured by the radial pattern of leaves, or the vertical struggle of green stalks rupturing the regularity of the grid. If sidewalk cracks go ignored because of their essential flatness, plants sprout, creep, burst, and spread into the third dimension in physical gestures of growth. Plants occupying the cracks sink their roots into the soil below the sidewalk, and can so firmly anchor themselves that risking skinned knuckles and sore fingertips to pull them free may yield only a handful of leaves that return to the stripped stalk soon enough. Some of these plants are so tenacious that cutting them down to the level of the concrete or spraying them with "weed-killing" chemicals simply delays their growth rather than stopping it. In the concrete backyards common in San Francisco, in sidewalks that are primarily used to get people from their cars to their destination, and in semi-abandoned stretches of concrete, plants can thrive with all of the vigor of an intentionally planted garden. The right species can, if left alone like the fennel plant in **Sight 5**, literally make itself at home, and in an echo of rain forest ecology, provide a niche for other plants to develop.

In more elaborate ruptures, trees planted in their circle/square-ghettos can come to the assistance of plant colonies occupying the earth that surrounds their bases. While the trees are ice fishing for earthly nutrients, the incredible patience and strength of their root systems can lift and buckle entire sections of pavement, push curbs aside, and damage buried elements of urban infrastructure. We typically read trees as eye-level signs of prosperity in a neighborhood, but sometimes their underground growth is not tolerated, even as kids happily use the altered landscape for improvised bicycle ramps. When people trip and fall over the outcroppings, or twist their ankles on them and sue property owners for such irresponsible maintenance. In some sense, the tree is the visual link between the realm of eye level and the overlooked landscape of fractured sidewalks. As a force of transformation, its growth can trigger a cycle of sidewalk maintenance that makes major contributions to the natural and semiotic ecosystem that thrives below our noses. Out come the work crews who undo the efforts of their predecessors. In the best of scenarios enough sidewalk is removed to accommodate the root system of the tree, while in the worst, the sidewalk code is invoked with great wrath, sentencing the tree to summary execution. With the gritty scrapings of shovel and trowel a patch of new sidewalk is then installed, almost always differing in color and texture, filling the hole where the tree once stood. A new territory of the sidewalk is established in its memory.

3.3 REPAIRS

Of course, not everything in the sidewalk landscape proceeds at the geologic pace of cracks or the still-too-slow-for-humans pace of plants. It is common to step out onto a familiar sidewalk one morning and confront the diagonal stripes of contractors' sawhorses, bright orange traffic

cones, a plywood panel, or a yawning hole in the ground. There are newcomers in the neighborhood, dressed for the outdoors and manual labor. Their identities, summarized and stereotyped by the politics and regulations of eye level, often obscure their work, which is intimately concerned with the sidewalk. They open the concrete with jackhammers, picks, shovels, and wailing saws, sometimes assisted by a groaning, bleating mechanized backhoe. Or we might find them gathered quietly over a hole, looking down as if in some kind of prayer. Sometimes the hole is occupied, and the innards of the city are under repair or being replaced. Unless services to our home are disrupted by this type of underground work, or begins while we are asleep, it is tolerated, if not quietly taken for granted. This is, after all, what keeps our lights on, our water running hot, and our stoves cooking. The infrastructural work of the repair crews is almost as overlooked as the sidewalk itself, but sometimes, when weather permits, they might be seen eating their lunches while sitting on the ground, their backs against the buildings. Their labor, operating in the rhythms of the human workday, transforms the sidewalks along with the cracks, plants, and trees. They are responsible for playing the allegorical Tetris game discussed earlier. With all of the sidewalk's "blocks" slid into place, the repair crews go about removing old ones and replacing them with new sections of different sizes and shapes. When they are done, they have inevitably contributed their own forces to those that steadily change the sidewalk. The new patches, especially nonrectangular ones, often lack expansion joints. By ignoring this specification in the sidewalk code, the relentless forces of microtectonics, seasonal erosion, and the heat cycle go undeterred. New generations of cracks and their attendant symbiotic systems come into being, creating entirely new possibilities for fracture and growth in the sidewalk's fabric. The repair crew *amplifies* this transformation process, producing difference and increasing specificity in sidewalks that were at one time as "perfect" as the new sidewalk from Sight 1.

4.0 DIVIDED SIGNS OF THE SIDEWALK

4.1 TERRITORIES AND BORDERS

"The slate sidewalks outside our home in NJ were used to play hop scotch, solve math problems, keep score for street games, draw cartoons, make face powder from red rocks, and write romantic comments in hidden spaces about who loved who. We rollerskated on those same sidewalks that changed from slate to concrete and made the transition in sound and vibration of the wheels on the skates switch from smooth to bumpy. We rode bicycles on those sidewalks, standing on the pedals when we hit a bump so as not to break our bottoms. Tree roots caused the sidewalks to act as tectonic plates. Yet, we endured summer after summer, winter (shoveling snow off these slabs) after winter and "blessed" the fact that we had those wonderful supporting architectural creations..."—BG (F), December 27, 2001¹⁸

The labor of maintenance and development is the main engine that produces the most of the diversity in sidewalk texts. This text is written with two major "grammars": that of the *territory* which is established by paint, cracks, debris, utility panels, grid lines, cast shadows, puddles, or the irregular shapes of sidewalk patches; and that of the *border*, which is a special case that emerges where two or more territories meet. To avoid setting up a relationship where this pair is fixed by exclusive definitions, it should be noted that through differences in area and scale, a border can become a territory and vice versa. There are many types of processes at play within and across different territories, and chief among them is time. Territories established by street names stamped into the concrete can claim miles of blocks in the name of the honored dead, or sequential precision. Smaller sections of sidewalk can be claimed by the contractors who stamp their company name and the date the work was done.¹⁹ Territories can be built up through long-term accretion, as of the constellations of dark ovoids formed by flattened gum, and the quilt of oil stains left by illegally parked cars. They appear and depart as splashes of bodily waste, dropped food, spilled beverages, and the tragic impacts of lost scoops of ice cream. Territories can manifest as reflections of statistical forces that make some sections of sidewalk more likely to be sectioned off by police tape than decorated by children's drawings and hopscotch games. Some territories are officially declared, others unofficial, and both are often staked out in paint. Between the color-coded parking laws on the curbs, the fluorescent arrows maintenance workers spray to indicate the location of subterranean services, and hip-hop and gang-oriented graffiti tags, the competition for attention is fierce. Needless to say, the *borders* between these territories require the perception of spatial as well as temporal *overlaps*, and the ability to consider simultaneous states.

The sights in this section are intended to depict the diversity of this simple grammar when it is fully expressed. In **Sight 6** we might define and redefine any number of territories and the borders between them, depending on where we choose to "draw" or interpret the lines. Like a political map of the globe, sections of this corner can be separated from one another based on color, texture, and shape. Matters of geometry and color help us distinguish the difference between Department of Parking and Traffic (DPT) red, the dark gray of the curb, the lighter gray of the wheelchair ramp, and the heavy fault line of the main expansion joint. This reading is supplemented by recognizing expressions of the transformative processes discussed in the previous section. Sight 6 not only depicts the results of microtectonics, but the wide range of craftsmanship with which sidewalks are poured and repaired. Frequently the border between new and old territories is made up of erratic, seemingly random angles that can be difficult to interpret as intentional decisions or bad implementations. The wheelchair ramp in Sight 6 is probably decades newer than the rest of the corner, and the seam that defines this quarter-circle joins a corner that has already been quilted by different generations of streetwork. The result is an even more complex visual moment created at the edge of the block. If our observations include the territories claimed by the freehand



SIGHT 6

A POLK STREET CORNER, SAN FRANCISCO, DEPICTING A VARIETY OF TERRITORIES, BORDERS, AND MARKINGS THAT ARE BOTH OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL.

graffiti tag, the DPT stencil, and the empty bottle of malt liquor, Sight 6 also represents the outcome of numerous human interactions with the city on the everyday level. As the opening quote from BG helps us realize, sidewalks are constantly conforming to the people that use them, and are constantly spawning and being shaped into new territories.

These memory-making, territory-marking aliases take their place among the “proper” signs of the sidewalk. These human expressions, combined with the continuous marking and fracture caused by the seasons, weather, plants, and trees, form a consistent set of pavement signs—an alphabet of sorts. This alphabet is camouflaged by the overgeneralized concepts of “litter” and “ugliness” if we notice it at all. When we do, we fail to recognize “litter” as the continuing “speech” of advertisement taken out of its intended context, or “ugliness” as evidence of the sometimes brilliant, sometimes tragic, sometimes brutal writings of life itself. This pavement alphabet has literally been projected and ejected from our brains—the processor for much of our thought and behavior—to settle at our feet where it reminds us of our desires, actions, and their consequences.

4.2 HISTORICAL TRIGGERS, HISTORICAL FIGURES

At ground level there are facets of the city’s history and function that are intended to structure and regulate both memory and action. In addition to street signs attached to poles sunk into the concrete at most urban intersections, the name of a street is often pressed into the concrete before it hardens (particularly in San Francisco). By giving a street a name, several interdependent functional and historical aspects of the street are gathered in/under one sign, though they might not all be present in every case. They are another sidewalk *code*, another collection of regulations that could only have started at the “ground level” of everyday practice but were embedded in the networks of urban functionalist practice as people organized themselves and each other. First, street names *locate*. They *locate a place*. This place is often determined by terrain (hill, valley, river, bay, wall), or function (market, brewer, palace, gallows, piers). Cities often grow from the point of people’s first act of observing these locations. Second, the street name provides a means for people to *locate themselves*. The street name introduces standardization to an individual’s everyday navigational and positional practices that make use of, for example, landmarks, terrain, counting, and colors. The name contributes to a “shared vocabulary.” Third, this shared vocabulary serves a similar purpose at the city’s functional level. Street names anchor and zone functionalist urban practices so that they can *locate each other* and open and close circuits between their systems. Thus, for example, the mail gets delivered, infrastructure is maintained, fires are extinguished, and commerce continues. Fourth, street names *evoke* life on the streets themselves. They often “stand in” for the *everyday character* of a neighborhood, and many neighborhoods can be identified or described in shorthand by simply citing one street name. Lastly, street names

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attempt to *invoke* the memory or spirit of historical events such as battles, revolutions, and sacrifices, as well as historical figures such as leaders, artists, entertainers, and saints. Naming streets after historical figures and events is intended to weave meaningful threads through the social, cultural, and commercial fabric of the city. We are all enmeshed in this locational code, but we aren't determined by it. As de Certeau pointed out, everyday practices are characterized by acts of rewriting and by the insertion of "local" references and citations. To stop and look down at the name of a street is an example of this rewriting, even in neighborhoods we know intimately. What we see when we look down brings us out of the "heights" of the locational code and into an individual experience that transforms it.

What is going on in and around the physical impression of the street's name? We find the street name playing the role of marker and beacon in various contexts: a flawlessly graded curb, a dark spattering of dried blood, freshly stamped, half-submerged by a backed-up sewer drain, in crumbling ruins. We might find the letters precisely aligned or staggering along the curb. The letters of some street names nurture moss and shelter cigarette butts, while many are wearing away under wind, water, and footsteps. Though we cannot assume that the state of the sidewalk and the lettering will be reflected in the everyday life of the neighborhood, sometimes it is. Suddenly the territory claimed by a few letters in the concrete not only encompasses the whole corner, but expands into a complex relationship with the entire city and its population.

Perhaps we are looking down at "Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard" but we refer to it as "MLK" or "King" in our everyday speech. Is the street as it is spoken (everyday) the same as the street as it is read (functionally)? The relationship between these two states is the crux of de Certeau's city-as-text theory. Depending on people's physical location and cultural identification—in other words, the *stories* they live-write—life on MLK might *not* be the same as life on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Similarly, when everyday naming codes turn New York's 42nd Street into "Forty-deuce" or "Forty Doo-wop," parallel universes are brought into being. In a more complicated example, one might imagine a street named "Paradise Avenue" that has created citywide associations with its frequent drive-by shootings and its excellent immigrant cuisine.²⁰ This type of harsh irony leads people to rewrite the relationship between the actual experience of the street and the "locational code" that determined its name. In the "Paradise Avenue" example the street itself locates, evokes, and invokes *different* things than what the committee—representing a *completely different social group*—originally intended. What would it mean for the survivors who live along Paradise Avenue to rename the street "Murder Boulevard" or for the restaurant clientele to call it "Best Restaurant Street"? Though the city would never officially sanction such acts, the spent shells in the intersections and the discarded flyers might write the changes anyway. These are examples of seeing the street name *in the street* and finding that it does not match up with the street name in one's head. When a street name is contemplated in context, contradictions,

resonances, and ironies seem to rise from the surface of the sidewalk. To inhale these "vapors" is to immerse oneself in the everyday, and *experience* the city being constantly rewritten.

4.3 UTILITY PANELS

There are islands on the sidewalk's concrete sea, drifting at the pace of the continents themselves.

These territories belong to different urban entities, and they distinguish themselves with a dry formality. One can recognize them first by the "moat" that sets them apart from the rest of the sidewalk and second by the words and initials stamped into their concrete surfaces.²¹ In San Francisco these territories are claimed in the names of the entities they belong to: PACIFIC_BELL, PG&E (Pacific Gas and Electric), DPW (Department of Public Works), SFWD (San Francisco Water Department), RCN (Residential Communications Network). Sometimes the initials simply indicate the services accessible below them: CATV (Category Five communications), and TRAFFIC_SIGNAL. Depending on the type of utility they stand for, they appear at regular intervals in front of buildings, at intersections, and at points where multiple services are concentrated.

From the perspective of the pedestrian BEV these panels are symbols of functionalist power that represent the critical systems that sustain life in the city. To stand between a utility panel and a building is to stand in the synapse between two neurons with power literally flowing through the "gap" of the sidewalk. To interrupt that single flow would cause a relatively harmless "misfire," but causing multiple interruptions at this "cellular" level would trigger an "epileptic seizure," disrupting the city's "thought process." However, utility panels do not draw attention to themselves, as functionalism would rather make advertisements about its infrastructure than point out the infrastructure itself. Wires, cables, and pipes are "boring" when compared with what they actually allow us to accomplish in our homes and businesses, so we take the infrastructure for granted. This is exactly the state of mind that functionalist systems require to deter investigation and possible tampering by everyday people. With water, gas, and phone lines being the critical services that they are, one would imagine that they would be heavily guarded, but this is not the case. Instead, utility panels are protected by gravity, camouflage, and mystery. Being made of dense concrete fit snugly into their frames they are hard to lift,²² and usually require use of a specialized hook-like implement. That same concrete materiality helps them to blend in with the rest of the sidewalk. They are positioned to echo the regularity of the grid lines and are set closer to the curb. Though some utility panels are circular or oval, their predominantly rectangular shapes are forgotten soon after they are perceived, especially when the sidewalk is relatively new and unmarked. Supplementing these visual camouflage techniques are symbolic ones. The cryptic initials stamped into the panels show up in the logos on people's utility bills, the uniforms of maintenance workers, and the vehicles they drive. A complete system of utility signs is formed at

eye level, one that directs attention away from understanding how a city functions, towards an individualized focus on payment and accounting under the threat of disconnection. In the contemporary American climate of “homeland safety,” where the nexuses of power are guarded with increasing paranoia and expenditure, the half-buried on-off valve or bundle of cabling beneath a utility panel goes entirely overlooked. Who would dare tamper with the innumerable tiny switches that maintain civilization? The transformative forces of the sidewalk itself.

The utility panels depicted in **Sight 7** form an interesting field of territories that quickly undermines the layout standards discussed above and the sidewalk code itself. We can only wonder what was going through the minds of the contractors who installed those panels, which are as enigmatically aligned as monumental architecture of the ancient world. Are the pipes and cables beneath the sidewalk *completely* askew? Judging from the panels’ layout, they must intersect with each other! The territory of the largest of these overlaps with that of the dirt where the plants and bushes visible at the top of the image are growing. Meanwhile, the accessible, oval part of the panel is centered amid three other territorial boundaries, creating a small world unto itself. Just below the largest panel are two other DCWD (Daly City Water Department) panels of a more traditional size, but also aligned in a nontraditional manner. All the borders around utility panels serve as expansion joints, and the ones surrounding the WD panels are passing cracks across all the territories visible in the frame.

Some might consider the improvisation in layout and materials in the territory-rich sidewalks depicted in Sight 7 and **Sight 8** to be unsightly and question the spirit or discipline with which the sidewalk modification was undertaken. The traditional urban planner’s sidewalk is intended to be a regulated structure for “smooth” living, but it gets implemented by different contractors who offer the lowest bid to get the job done in the shortest amount of time. Even though inspectors in Lakewood, Ohio, have the power to veto any sidewalk even if it is finished, would they actually take on the additional costs that such inspections might incur? Would their peers in San Francisco do so? Article 15, Section 703.2 of the San Francisco public works code (see quote at the beginning of **Section 2.0**) *explicitly states* that any repairs should be carried out with the same materials and workmanship as the original sidewalk. Apparently the city’s extreme functionalism has focused its concerns on things other than the surfaces of the sidewalk and ignored its own requirements. We might now ask if there are any aesthetic standards for sidewalk alteration and upkeep. Should everyday citizens then have the right to complain if their sidewalks are put back together in what appears to be a careless manner? Aren’t people concerned with trash, human waste, and debris (“nuisances” in SFDPW parlance) on the sidewalk able to judge these *unofficial* acts of sidewalk modification? This capacity to judge the unofficial or undesired is linked to our ability to judge the quality of an *official* act of city modification. Should we not hold the vandal, the litterbug, the city planner, and the contractor to the same standards of urban aesthetics?

SIGHT 7



TWO SAN FRANCISCO WATER DEPARTMENT UTILITY PANELS IN TERRITORIES CHARACTERIZED BY EXTENSIVE TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESSES.



SIGHT 8

RCN UTILITY PANEL SURROUNDED BY INSCRIBED GRAFFITI, SAN FRANCISCO.

On the other hand, we can accept the lapse in urban functionalism and use it as an opportunity to see the sidewalk differently. While utility panels can be read as signs of the city's functionalism, they also have an everyday aesthetic character that makes no two of them alike. Not only do the uniquely expressed transformative processes of fracture and growth affect how the utility panels look, but they aren't always set with the precision and consistency that the sidewalk specifications require. When these sights are encountered in the city, the functionalist narrative is altered and drifts closer to the category of landscape. When utility panels become landscape, as they do in Sight 7 and Sight 8, the results can be associated with artistic expression. We are tempted to interpret the skewed alignments of the utility panels in Sight 7 and the crumbling panels of Sight 8 as meaning more than what they suggest as phenomena. Faced with such irrationality, such blatant disregard for the sidewalk code, we can only wonder if there might not be a psychoanalytic approach to interpreting the sidewalk. In Sights 7 and 8 we may be witnessing "subconscious," dreamlike expressions of the sidewalk undergoing transformation. Why use the term subconscious or compare these Sights with dreams? If the properly installed utility panel can be understood as a rational or conscious expression of the sidewalk code, then the skewed panels "adrift" in Sight 7 and the shattered, blended territories of Sight 8 are totally irrational. Either way, by recalling the neuronal allegory presented earlier, the practice of seeing the city as if it were "lost in thought" or outright dreaming adds yet another tactical move we might use while writing our "long poems of walking."²³ Some readers may be alerted to the fact that earlier I discouraged the use of value judgments to describe the transformative forces of cracks and plants, and now I am inviting us to do so in the case of utility panels under transformation. The distinction I make is as follows: The transformative forces of fracture and growth resist human control, and anthropomorphizing them is akin to the tyrannical practices used to sell products at eye level. We are using the sidewalk as a field for perceptual refuge, and as a matter of discipline should avoid the use of eye-level strategies. Utility panels, however, *are* anthropomorphic expressions of extreme functionalist power with aesthetic and material specifications. When they are witnessed in odd alignments or crumbling, we have found the opportunity to see difference-as-hypocrisy, and making the recognition of hypocrisy into an everyday practice has a corrosive effect on extreme functionalism.

NOTES

- 1 No mention of such complex interactions of *power* would be complete without acknowledging the work of Michel Foucault, who carried out several exhaustive analyses of power and knowledge and has had a *huge* impact on many fields. See especially Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
- 2 The term "West" refers to the political, economic, cultural, and technological standards set by (primarily) the United States, Britain, and Western Europe. Due to cultural affinities, economic compatibility, technological sophistication, and historical ties, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand can be considered "Western." Countries that follow different (yet *stable*) political practices, speak non-European languages, and can "compete" economically with the West can be considered "non-Western" but "compatible." This would include many Asian nations (especially Japan, Taiwan, and China). Countries that have relatively stable political and technological infrastructures and the material resources that the West wants are not necessarily "Western" but not necessarily "non-Western." They are the West's "interests." This would include "friendly" Middle Eastern nations, some Central and South American countries, and some Southeast Asian countries. Countries that aren't considered economic "competitors" and might be less stable politically (but not as chaotic as most of the African continent which is "developing") are "markets," and outside of the West/non-West scheme. In this model, most of the countries in South America, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and the Pacific Ocean are markets. This summary leaves out a handful of nations that are generally only thought of in terms of tourism, terrorism, being a "rogue state," or oppression at the hands of some non-Western nation. This includes but is not limited to Israel, Iran, Iraq, and Tibet.
- 3 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 92.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., 93.
- 7 Ibid., 101.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid., 91.
- 10 This term is used extensively by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre to describe in general terms the activities that individuals carry out in the built environment. It is perhaps the broadest possible term that allows us to conceptually "hover" between high abstraction and specific instances. See: Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, England, and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1991), 33.
- 11 However, shortly after the completion of this chapter I came across a tread-resistant four-color advertisement for a BBC soap opera *glued* to the sidewalk outside of a local bar. Needless to say, I defended my thesis.
- 12 San Francisco Public Works Code, ARTICLE 15 MISCELLANEOUS, SEC. 703.2. See American Legal Publishing, <http://www.amlegal.com/sanfranpublic/lpext.dll?f=templates&fn=altmain-nf.htm&2.0> [cited February 3, 2002].
- 13 Thanks to architect Teddy Cruz for this insight.

14 Use of the Lakewood, Ohio, code is almost arbitrary. The code was found on the Internet using the keyphrase “sidewalk code.” There are similar types of specifications for other cities.

See also: City of Lakewood, Ohio, site: SIDEWALK SPECIFICATIONS,

<http://www.lkwdpl.org/city/code/ch903.htm>; City of Longview, Washington, site: SIDEWALK SPECIFICATIONS, <http://ci.longview.wa.us/works/7sidewalk.htm>; City of Seattle, Washington, site: PAVEMENT OPENING AND STREET MARKING IDENTIFICATION, <http://www.ci.seattle.wa/td/stdappa.asp>; and City of Elko, Nevada, site: SIDEWALK CODES, http://www.ci.elko.nv.us/commdev/2-4_eng.htm#243 [all cited February 3, 2002].

15 From the code: “All concrete shall conform to ODOT Item 499 Class “C” with a 28 day compressive strength of 4000 PSI, minimum. This mix has a per cubic yard fine aggregate content of 1160 pounds, a coarse [coarse] aggregate content of 1735 pounds, a cement content of 600 pounds and a maximum water/cement ratio of 0.5. Type I, II or III cement is permissible.” See City of Lakewood, Ohio, site: SIDEWALK SPECIFICATIONS, <http://www.lkwdpl.org/city/code/ch903.htm> [cited February 3, 2002].

16 These sights were captured with the simplest possible camera of reasonable quality, a six-dollar “throw-away” camera without a zoom lens and without any means of controlling the aperture. The simplicity and economy of the camera used is intended to work on two levels. First, I consider the images such cameras capture to be as “close to the eye” as possible, as they record light on film with a minimum of technical mediation. Second, for the sake of others who might begin to capture their own sights, I felt that setting an inexpensive example would be best while leaving room for those who have more sophisticated documentary equipment to use it. For the sake of the print medium the negatives were printed and scanned and had their color levels digitally adjusted.

17 Sidewalks are made of concrete, a mixture of *cement*—the result of extremely high temperatures applied to finely ground elemental materials such as limestone, clay, and shale—mixed with an *aggregate* such as gravel, sand, or crushed stone, and water. Cement itself occurs naturally and has been discovered in twelve-million-year-old samples created by oil shale reacting with limestone during spontaneous combustion. In its engineered state concrete has a long involvement with human cultures including the Egyptian, the Chinese, and the Roman. It underwent rapid experimentation and development during the 1800s, thanks to Joseph Aspdin of England who in 1824 introduced “modern,” or Portland cement (after the English town whose quarries produced high-quality building stones) to the world. Over the next hundred years Portland cement would undergo refinement, reinforcement, and patenting, culminating in structures such as the Hoover Dam whose permanence probably rivals that of the Egyptian pyramids.

18 The author’s mother, BG, is a collaborator who participated via e-mail by sharing recollections and observations about sidewalks and urban living.

19 There are also examples of embossed badges set into the sidewalk.

20 “Paradise Avenue” is a hypothetical street and does not exist to the best of my knowledge, though there are many neighborhoods struggling with poverty and crime with a “Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard” running through them.

21 Some older utility panels are cast iron, like sewer grates. In San Francisco they are not as common as the ones made of concrete.

22 Some panels have been in place so long that dirt and plant life has filled their expansion joints and “eye” into which the lifting hook is inserted. This often creates an unintended seal that locks the panel in place and sometimes frustrates the maintenance workers themselves.

23 De Certeau, 101.

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