Pacification by Design: An Ethnography of Normalization Techniques

LARS FRERS

Conflicts are produced in specific spatial and material settings. The placement of things, the way visibility is established, the accessibility of areas—all of these aspects of built space participate in the production of human action in the city. Drawing on ethnographies of Potsdamer Platz, Berlin, and of railway stations and ferry terminals in Germany and Scandinavia, this text analyzes the processes by which normalities are produced in tangible socio-spatial constellations.

The design of urban places is an integral aspect of the conflicts emerging or taking place in urban space. In cases of open conflict, the spatial and material aspects of the situation configure its development, while at the same time, the action might reconfigure the spatial and material setup. Cobblestones present themselves as thrown weapons, cars become barricades, dead ends become traps, and, in the streets of Beijing, bicycles can become effective messenger vehicles (cf. Dingxin 1998). However, space and materiality usually play more subtle roles in urban life. They are silent participants in everyday life, nudging people in certain directions, hiding things or exposing them; they can induce pain and uneasiness, comfort and pleasure. Taken together, space and materiality participate in the production of localized normalities that have a regulating influence on the behavior of people in these localities. In this paper, I will reconstruct the ways in which these normalities are produced in

publicly accessible spaces like plazas and terminals, focusing on the mostly silent and successful evasion of conflicts: pacification by design.[1]

Although I will analyze digital video recordings, I will only be able to present them as stills, loosing what is most important about this valuable source: its temporal or dynamic character and the recorded sound.[2] This material is then enriched by my perceptions both of the surroundings and of myself, of how I feel and how I react to certain situations. An advantage of systematically analyzing your own perceptions and feelings is the privileged access one has to one's own sensual perception. I deal with these perceptions in a phenomenologically informed way, mostly based on Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception" (1962). In this perspective, sensual perceptions are not seen as a set of instruments that split the world into different parts. The act of perceiving is a process that unfolds in a specific context.

Working from this perspective means to focus less on meaning as it is ascribed in language, addressing concrete experience instead. In the context of this study, discourse about places is therefore ignored; Lefèbvre's "spatial practice" occupies my attention (Lefèbvre 1991: 33–46). This certainly does not mean that the representational or the discursive is unimportant—it is, by definition, more visible and more explicit than the subtle behavioral adjustments that are required to produce and reproduce the spatial and social urban order. Exactly because of the fact that this subtlety is so easily overlooked and yet extremely effective, I want to make it stand out more clearly.

The photograph on the right side, taken with a digital camcorder during the early afternoon of a pleasant day in June, can be used as an introduction into the spatial relations and material aspects that permeate situated social behavior. The photo was taken in the main railway station of Leipzig. People using this terminal experience its architecture, the things inside the building, the distances, the volume. Entrances allow access into the building, opening a horizon of activities. Entering the station with the escalator from the shopping mall that lies below, one is confronted with more than forty paces of open space directly in the foreground, a distance that has to be crossed to reach whatever goal one is looking for. To get to where they are, the young couple on the photo had to turn left, passing between the trashcan and the signpost. Continuing on to the escalator, the man with the backpack had to make a sharp right turn around the trashcan. Others walk through the enormous hall that stretches itself over a length of more than 200 meters. The privileged po-

1 I have been inspired to both this study and this terminology by Sharon Zukin, who talks about "domestication by cappuccino" (Zukin 1995: xiv), and by Lyn Lofland's chapter on "Control by Design" in her book on the public realm (Lofland 1998: 179-227).

2 Video clips are available on my website: http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~frers/pacification.html.

lice officers in the central background of the photo entered the station with their car, only walking the short distance from its doors to the entrance of the terminal's police station.

Figure 1: Spatial relations and materiality. Main hall, Leipzig Hauptbahnhof, June 2004 (Photo: © Lars Frers)

All of these people are in viewing and shouting distance of each other, not necessarily taking note, but potentially being aware of each other—the boy, for example, is looking straight at the observer while he passes by. These are a few of the socio-spatial relations that can be discerned in this printed photograph. Let us take a look at the materiality of the place. The floor is made of polished stone tiles in light colors with darker stripes sweeping through the hall. Most of the time, this kind of floor is too cool to sit on. It also reflects the light that is shining in through the milk glass roof and through the train hall in the back of the figure. Opacity is of great importance; both the railing of the escalator and the wall that separates the terminal hall from the train hall are made of glass, exposing the things that happen behind them visible to the eyes of others. The signpost and the trashcan are anchored to the ground; even though they might be in the way, they will resist being moved without the use of tools.

In the following part of the paper, I will analyze the spatial and material aspects of social settings along the lines offered by distinct experiences: those of the eye, of the moving body, of the eyes and ears in conjunction, and those of the lingering body.

Visibility—self-regulation

In built spaces, walls are the main devices that establish visual separation. Depending on the opacity of these walls, seeing through is either impossible, reduced to shapes, or allows full view. Usually, these walls are static, rigid barriers that necessitate circumvention. Examples for exceptions to these rules are walls that are made up of plants or trees, or curtains that can be pulled aside. The specific materiality of the wall produces different kinds of visibility. However, visibility is also established through lighting. The way in which shadows fall, the placement, power, and color of lamps, the angle of the sun, or the fullness of the moon expose or hide things and people.

Figure 2: Visibility. Waiting booth, Leipzig Hauptbahnhof, June 2004 (Photo: © Lars Frers)

In the case shown in *Figure 2*, opacity is a carefully implemented feature of the glass walls surrounding the waiting booth on a railway platform. The waiting booth is a place that serves several purposes that are potentially conflicting. For many people, one of the most important aspects of waiting for their trains is the fear of missing their train. Having a view of the track on which the train will roll in is the best way to provide a sense of security and control to waiting passengers (cf. Radlbeck 1981: 14). At the same time, a relaxed waiting atmosphere also requires both protection from unpleasant environmental influences, and some degree of intimacy for those waiting. The glass walls of this booth are adapted to these requirements, allowing a view of the tracks on both sides of the platform, and providing some protection from

harmful micro-climatic effects. Their most outstanding feature is probably the way in which the opaque stripes provide more protection from sight for the lower part of the body, especially when sitting, while allowing a view out of the booth (and into it for people on the outside). It is opaque enough to reduce the exposedness of those inside, while at the same time the gaze can pass into and out of the booth. Due to this specific arrangement, another effect is achieved: the waiting booth is a place in which many kinds of deviance could be observed from the outside. Vagrants and homeless have a hard time hiding here, if one was singing or playing music on a boom box, one would be heard; a fight would be seen and heard too. The design of this booth manages visibility in such a way that people using this place are made aware of their partial visibility. They are made aware of the fact that they are supposed to regulate a significant part of their conduct according to the expectations of others.[3] Gestures and movements that are big enough and/or that take place on a sufficient height should comply with the rules of the house and, even more so, with the unspoken rules of conduct in a terminal.

This self-regulation according to the expectations of others works particularly well in that it does not require the presence of dedicated personnel or technical devices that exert more or less open control. Architecture that offers many niches and corners, on the other hand, is inviting shady activities. As can be seen in *Figure 3*, in the local context of a niche these activities might even be openly displayed—the adolescent in the center of the group of five is smoking a cigarette and puffing the smoke in my direction.

Figure 3: Niches. Linkstraße, Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, May 2001 (Photo: © Lars Frers)

3 The classic studies of symbolic interactionists, and ethnomethodologists in general, are important references in this context (cf. Goffman 1971; Garfinkel 1984, and others).

These corners and niches might therefore require the installation of one-way seeing devices like surveillance cameras or windows that act as one-way mirrors. These devices serve to establish a sense of, at least potentially, permanent observation according to which people should behave. If the installation of these devices is problematic, the presence of security personnel becomes more relevant—in the course of a guided tour through the security facilities of the main railway station in Frankfurt,[4] the responsible manager, for example, was quite explicit about how quickly vagrants discover dead ends or blind corners and how it is one of the main duties of the terminal's security patrols to cover these spots.

Finally, I want to mention one other important factor that determines how visibility is constituted: the density of people moving through or spending time at a place. This case is most obvious for crowds; during the time I spent in the Potsdamer Platz area I often witnessed several hundred people leaving the local musical theater in a short time span. They gathered at the exits, talking more loudly with growing numbers. When they walked away they left traces: the normally well-cleaned ground would be littered by debris. In a crowd, individuals are not as distinct as they are in less dense social situations, the level of observation sinks, dropping stuff and pick pocketing will often go unnoticed.

Movement—channeling

Regarding crowds, control of individual behavior is difficult to attain. Other aspects of the environment come into play. The movement of people through space, the crossing of streets, passing through halls, walking into open spaces, happens according to the material setup of the locale. Again, walls are probably the most effective obstacles. Depending on their mass, structural stability, height, and texture, they are the prototypical, rigid material obstacle that people won't challenge, instead adapting themselves with regard to their position and direction.

The map (*Figure 4*) shows the layout of the surroundings of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz (marked with a star), the width of the arrows indicates how many people come and go into which direction. The musical theater to the left also serves as the "Berlinale Palace" during the annual film festival, when large crowds are common in this area. The setup of water around the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz serves as a rather peculiar, and particularly efficient, crowd-management device. It blocks access to the entry of the Berlinale Palace with-

4 Organized in November 2004 by Sergej Stoetzer, Institute for Sociology, Darmstadt University of Technology.

out blocking sight, and it keeps the crowd from pressing into the fences that are set up for the span of the Berlinale. The water, along with fences and walls, blocks certain areas, channeling people into the remaining paths. Open spaces are organized into sections with specific uses, degrees of visibility, and more or less restricted access.

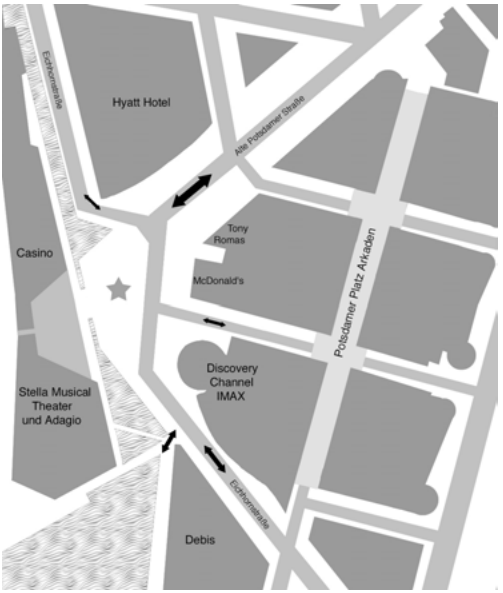

Figure 4: Water as an obstacle. Map of the Quartier DaimlerChrysler at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin (© Lars Frers)

Other ways to channel moving people into certain directions are bottlenecks. Entry gates at airport terminals, the gangway that leads to an entrance into the ferry's hull, and doors and portals in general necessitate that people collect and move through a small, easily observable and controllable opening. Often, this passage causes a reduction in speed, because the bottleneck will only allow a small number of people to pass through at a time—in situations where people want to flee from a place, these bottlenecks can become deadly traps; at other times, they might become mere annoyances. The stairways leading down to tracks in railway stations like those in Darmstadt and Berlin are overcrowded when commuter trains arrive and people spill out of the train, wanting to get home as quickly as possible. For frail people these situations can be dangerous; they might not be able to keep up with the crowd, forcing them to wait until the crowd has passed. In addition, the chance of coming into physical contact with others increases. Those that have to carry bulky items might become the target of unfriendly remarks or even shoving. In times of increased traffic, bottlenecks can produce hierarchies that center

around physical power, recklessness, and male chauvinism—however, they are also places where beneficial social exchanges can take place, ranging from helping each other out to flirting and being explicitly polite.

The combination of obstacles, open spaces, and bottlenecks organizes places in a way that steers people along paths, keeping them out of certain areas, moving them past shops and advertisements, and allowing them to stay for an extended period of time in certain places. The order that is produced in this way is stable, because the spatial setup is not easily rearranged, and it is subtle, not becoming the center of attention or reflection, instead being taken as a granted feature of everyday routines. However, the spatial arrangement may also produce conflict when it does not accommodate the needs of people or when it creates opportunities for potentially risky contact that could be evaded under other circumstances.

Noise—atmosphere

Often, conflicts are heard before they are perceived with any of the other senses. Shouting or loud noise makes heads turn and gazes look around. The acoustical setup and local activities of a place determine how easily raised voices can be heard and how far a provocation or a cry for help carries. But there is much more to the acoustics of a place; it has a deep impact on the feeling or mood of the setting into which one is entering. Loud noise, especially industrial or shrill noise, or a mix of complex and different noises is stressful and creates a sense of chaos and irritation.

Figure 5: Organs and shouting. Main Hall, Leipzig Hauptbahnhof, September 2004 (Photo: © Lars Frers)

The still frame (*Figure 5*) offers a glimpse of a setting that irritated me when I encountered it. I recorded it during an arrival in Leipzig. As I left the train, I heard loud sounds that I couldn't immediately recognize. After a brief moment, my perception shifted and I realized that I was listening to music, probably barrel organs. Leaving the platform and walking up to the main hall of the station, I quickly realized that a throng of people was gathered around a group of barrel organ players who where playing their organs in synchrony, creating a loud and, at least for me, quite unusual musical experience. I quickly readied my digital camcorder and started recording the events.

The loud, hand barrel orchestra music combined with the general background noises of the train station in a confusing mixture that made it necessary for me to reorient myself and spend some effort in the interpretation of the situation at hand. However, as soon as I had made up my mind about what was going on, I was able to make use of the situation for my research. Others made use of this situation in different ways. As can be seen in the figure above, some people are standing around the ensemble in a loose semi-circle, watching the band and listening to the music. In the center of the figure, one might be able to discern two kids, who were dancing to the music. Many were just walking by—or being pushed by on a wheelchair by a member of the Bahnhofsmission (a Christian welfare organization for railway stations). Others changed their route and passed through on the other side of the hall, where no throng was making the passage difficult. The adolescents that are on the far left of the still frame, walking further leftwards, took this setting as an opportunity for a contrasting activity. While they were approaching the scene, one member of the group started to raise and shake his fist in time with the rhythm of the music. A few steps later the frontmost boy, who is carrying a bag over his shoulder, picked up on the characteristic of the setting itself: the music. He started to bawl to the rhythm. His shouting was acknowledged by visible consternation in the case of some of the bystanders and musicians, and grinning faces in the case of fellow members of his peer group. As I demonstrated with this example, music in this particular setting is used as an opportunity for more or less active entertainment and as an opportunity for provocation and the conflict-laden challenging of norms.

There are other aspects of the acoustic setup that frequently caused perceivable readjustments of people in the setting. One feature was particularly prominent in terminals during the less-dense traffic of evenings and during the night. People, both men and women, turned their heads or shifted their gaze when they heard the sound of footsteps, specifically the sound produced by women walking with high-heeled shoes. Most railway stations have stone or marble floors; this kind of floor material, when located in buildings with long halls and very few sound-absorbing surfaces, produces sounds that carry over long distances. Women with high heels adjust their behavior, taking particular care not to risk eye contact with strangers or appearing confused and

disoriented—a brisk pace is best suited for this environment during a time when few people are present. The spectators are made aware of the arriving business-like person early, they can study him or her, look some other way, start talking about the person or even hollering something in his or her direction. The combination of soundscape, usage pattern, and outfit produces specific vulnerabilities and makes social hierarchies audible—both gender and class hierarchies, which in this particular case often run cross to each other.

Figure 6: Relative calm. Color Line Terminal, Oslo, December 2004 (Photo: © Lars Frers)

Soundscapes have a significant impact on the mood of a setting. People in the Western world have experiences with the implementation of sound in shops and warehouses. Depending on clientele, product, and season, music is played that supposedly improves sales and binds customers to a particular chain or brand. In terminals, the playing of music is not part of the usual setup. This does not mean that sound cannot participate in the creation of an atmosphere that fits the experience of traveling. In the case of the Color Line Terminal in Oslo, captured in the photo above, the low roof, which is tiled with pin-holed panels that muffle sound to a certain degree, helps to create a feeling of calm and orderliness that fits the rest of the setting: comfortable chairs, many benches with thick upholstery, plants, and models of Color Line's ships—sound, noise, music; all these are important participants in the creation of atmospheres (cf. Böhme 1995) that can be anywhere on the spectrum from calm to overstimulating to chaotic and even to outright aggressive.

Body—comfort and suffering

The comfortable upholstery in the ferry terminal makes it easier to use the waiting time for relaxation, idle chatter, or just watching others do the same until boarding time begins. During the last minutes before the gangway becomes accessible and the boarding gates are opened, the boarding area of the terminal rapidly fills with people, and many will leave their seats to join the queue. Those that remain seated—either because they do not want to squeeze themselves in with the rest or because extended periods of standing or slow shuffling are not convenient for them—will often be literally faced with a wall of human bodies that is thickening more and more before it starts seeping away through the boarding gates.

Figure 7: Edges. Railing in front of the Casino and Musical Theater. Marlene-Dietrich-Platz Berlin, May 2001 (Photo: © Lars Frers)

When an extended period of time is being spent in a single place, either in a ferry terminal lobby, in a waiting booth at a railway station, or in some other publicly accessible place, the need for some kind of seating or bodily support

grows steadily. In the case of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz (*Figure 7*), this may become a serious problem. As can be seen on the map in *Figure 4*, the Platz has characteristics of a dead end. When people arrive, they tend to slow down, look around, and finally stop. A decision has to be made: should I stay or should I go now? Staying will be trouble. There are no benches or "official" resting facilities at all. What about commonly used substitutes? The architecture here does not include stone slabs on which one could sit. There are stairs, though. The Marlene-Dietrich-Platz itself is lowered into the ground a bit, slightly reminiscent of an amphitheater. However, there is a significant difference from the steps of an amphitheater: the height of the steps is only about ten centimeters (four inches). Sitting on these steps is like sitting on the floor, making it an invalid option except for people who are fit enough and do not care about the stigma that is associated with sitting on the ground, i.e. adolescents and some younger adults.

One other option remains and is used by those who cannot or will not sit on the ground: the railing that runs along part of the water channels in front of the musical theater. Several times I observed elderly people, who were waiting for others at the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, looking out for a spot where they could rest. Not finding anything suitable, they would lean against the railings visible in the figure. In one case an elderly women, after leaning on the railing for almost ten minutes, finally tried to squeeze herself into the railing to sit on the lower bar. However, sitting on either of the bars causes pain too. The bars are wide enough to offer some support, but they have sharp edges that quickly begin to hamper circulation and cause discomfort.[5] Spending more than a few minutes in this place is a problematic occupation.

Most people will quickly leave this place, those that remain will have to manage their corporality in a way that allows them either to ignore their physical discomfort and remain standing somewhere, or that allows them to ignore potential stigmatization as loiterers who sit on the ground.

Space and materiality—normalization

Regarding the evidence that I have presented about the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, it can be argued that it is on the one hand a place that is secured and pacified by its design, exposing deviant behavior and preventing certain movements and activities. The behavior that establishes itself as normal is one of passing through, looking at the unusual architecture, and perhaps spending money in one of the local entertainment or food-consumption facilities. What

5 As I noticed recently, the situation got even worse: the water channels behind the railing now contain fountains that spray the railing with water, making it practically impossible to sit on them.

struck me as particularly interesting about this place is the fact that there is almost no visible presence of security personnel—very much opposed to the interior of the nearby Sony Center on the other side of the Neue Potsdamer Straße. The design of the Sony Center includes many corners, benches, and a fountain around which people gather to watch and talk. In this place, security personnel are patrolling regularly and openly. I would argue that the design of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz makes this kind of policing mostly unnecessary. This does not mean that police or security personnel is not available—its visible presence is just not needed to establish a specific kind of self-controlled normality at this place: one of passing through, of consumption, of a tourists' place with unusual architecture and entertainment facilities. This orderly normality is based on the reduction of risk: encounters are brief and visible to everyone, extended stays are made difficult.

On the other hand, the design of this place produces a certain degree of uneasiness, discomfort, or even physical suffering for the people that want to use this place. A similar statement could be made about the halls and waiting facilities in train stations. The acoustic setup makes disturbances perceivable over long distances, this helps in securing the place to a certain degree, while at the same time this design could also make people more vulnerable and uneasy. Other places, like the lobby in the ferry terminal, or even the somewhat covered, lower part of the waiting booth, allow for a higher degree of relaxation. In both of these cases, hired staff is present and helping to keep up an orderly normality. Hired staff does not necessarily mean security personnel—other employees, in particular the members of the cleaning personnel, play an important part in the production of sanitary design. Places that offer hideaways that are somewhat shielded from sight and hearing make it possible to engage in other activities, be they as harmless as loitering or flirting, or extending into the realms of the criminal and unlawful.

One could say, therefore, that design can produce specific, highly controlled normalities that are based on spatial and material constellations in which principles of visibility or perceivability in general are governing. However, this kind of pacification by design has at least two limitations. First, this kind of design does not prohibit conflict and provocation per se. As has been demonstrated in the example of the adolescents who challenge the normality of the barrel organ entertainment setting, the design can also be a resource for the open display of deviance. Second, this kind of pacification by design also produces specific feelings of uneasiness, making it harder for some people to use these places, and causes specific vulnerabilities. The Marlene-Dietrich-Platz can make you feel uneasy, watched, and insecure about what you should actually do there; the non-existence of seats and benches and the unwieldy design of similar objects like stairs and railings can make it hard for frail people to spend time in a place, and the display of people can also make them

vulnerable to harassment, especially if they belong to "weaker" groups like women, or to (ethnic) minorities.

The design of places, the spatial arrangement of walls, obstacles, and other objects, the channeling of people through a place, the opacity of barriers, the texture of surfaces, the acoustics of a place, and other features that did not fit into this text, like the micro-climate, the olfactory circumstances, and electro-magnetic design (wireless networks, radio, mobile phone networks etc.), all participate in the production of local normalities. These normalities are not completely stable and rigid, they may be challenged. Accordingly, I define these normalities as dynamic constellations. These constellations, however, contain spatio-material components that are of a greater stability and persistence than many social and situative ones. Temporary, even regularly occurring disturbances can happen, but the constellation quickly returns to the previous, stable setting.

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