The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces

William H. Whyte

Project for Public Spaces
To Our Readers

For more than 25 years, Project for Public Spaces has been using observations, surveys, interviews and workshops to study and transform public spaces around the world into community places. Every week we give presentations about why some public spaces work and why others don’t, using the techniques, ideas, and memorable phrases from William H. "Holly" Whyte’s The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces.

In our effort to create and sustain public spaces that build communities, Project for Public Spaces runs programs in markets, transportation, parks and civic squares, and public buildings. Our Public Market Collaborative uses open-air and historic downtown markets to transform streets, plazas, and parking lots into bustling “people places,” alive with vitality and commerce. Our programs in transportation are helping to reduce sprawl and create more livable communities by encouraging the use of transit and traffic calming. And we manage the Urban Parks Institute, which promotes parks as community places. We also conduct training programs for all kinds of professionals, from traffic engineers to architects, as well as for communities and government officials, to help them understand what we learned from Holly—that it’s places that matter, not projects, and that in order to function as true gathering places, public spaces must be designed with people and uses in mind. All these concepts are tied together in How to Turn a Place Around, a handbook for creating the kinds of thriving, social places that The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces first identified.

Holly Whyte was both our mentor and our friend. Perhaps his most important gift was the ability to show us how to discover for ourselves why some public spaces work and others don’t. With the publication of The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces and its companion film in 1980, the world could see that through the basic tools of observation and interviews, we can learn an immense amount about how to make our cities more livable. In doing so, Holly Whyte laid the groundwork for a major movement to change the way public spaces are built and planned. It is our pleasure to offer this important book back to the world it is helping to transform.

Fred Kent, President
Steve Davies and Kathy Madden, Vice Presidents

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Toward the end of The Last Landscape, a book that begins in the countryside of Pennsylvania, William H. Whyte writes of driving along the highway, approaching U.S. cities, searching without success for their boundaries among monotonous roadside clutter. For the last ten years, he has spent much of his time in the thick of the cities, particularly in New York. He has been looking at city space, talking with people, making notes, taking photographs and films, measuring the heights of benches and ledges, writing articles, helping to draft zoning ordinances, speaking in church basements and tall buildings, discovering the public places that people use and don’t use, and why. And, as you will discover, he has often been surprised.


They were happy—in the midst of urban crisis, on the streets of a city that many thought was going under. Of course, there were other people on the
streets without smiles, maybe even scowling. But when we think of cities and the people in them, we have been too much inclined to forget the smile altogether. There are happy people in cities. There are healthy places that people like in cities, places that contribute to happiness, places that can bring out that smile.

Those places include some of the small urban spaces that this book is about. Successful miniparks, like Paley or Greenacre in New York, Farragut Square or Dupont Circle in Washington. Or plazas, like the one at the First National Bank in Chicago. And ledges, along the street and around fountains, where people sit and pass the time of day.

In the following pages, Whyte describes how small urban spaces work and don’t work. That is, what gives them life or kills them. What draws people. What keeps them out. Spaces designed to keep out undesirables—pushers, bums, hippies—for example, generally tend to keep out other people, too. In contrast, spaces that attract people tend to be relatively free of problems. The sun is important. So are trees and water and food and, most of all, seats. These are the things you will learn from this book, things that should not be surprising, but often are. (You will also learn about how to use cameras as a research tool!)

Why should conservationists care what the people in New York City streets are doing? Thirty, twenty, perhaps even ten years ago, we might have parted ways with Whyte somewhere along that highway into the city. The challenge for conservationists, then as now, was to preserve nature, wildlife and wilderness, open space, agricultural and undeveloped land. But when we beheld the city, we beheld the behemoth. Its advance had to be stopped. But it couldn’t be.

And it can’t be now. Not without creative development to provide housing and meet the other demands of a growing population. Not unless we match our efforts to conserve the countryside with efforts to conserve the city. Quite simply, if people find cities uninhabitable, they will want to move out of them. So our challenge is to conserve both country and city. That is why in 1975, with the cosponsorship of the first major national conference on neighborhood conservation, The Conservation Foundation began its work in urban conservation. That is why we are interested in The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces.

Collectively, a city’s abundant small spaces have a major impact on the quality of life. If those spaces are unattractive, people will likely retreat from the city street, perhaps from the city itself—to the suburbs and country if they can manage it, to fortified shelters in cities if they cannot. But if we learn to take advantage of our small urban spaces, if we design new ones well, and fix up the old ones, we will keep the streets alive. We may even encourage more people to use them, and to smile about it.

William K. Reilly, President
The Conservation Foundation
This is a pre-book. When I started the Street Life Project in 1971, it was with the expectation that our research would last about two years and that I would then pull the findings into a book. At the very latest, I told Doubleday & Co., 1974. As is often the way with projects, however, the research grew and grew. Our initial studies of playgrounds led to a project on teen-age territories; our studies of New York's most crowded street led to a request to do a similar study in Tokyo; a study of indoor spaces led to comparison studies of suburban shopping malls. So it went. A year ago, I swore off more research and started writing.

Most of our research has been fundamental—that is, I can't now think of any especial applicability for it. What has fascinated us most is the behavior of ordinary people on city streets—their rituals in street encounters, for example, the regularity of chance meetings, the tendency to reciprocal gestures in street conferences, the rhythms of the three-phase good-bye. By the time the full book is finished, I am sure I will have figured out much more significance to all this. But not quite yet.

There is one part of our work, however, which does have immediate applicability: our study of spaces that work, don't work, and the reasons why. Rather than wait for completion of the book, I thought it would be helpful to get out our findings and recommendations, and thus this manual. I am indebted to The Conservation
Foundation and its president, William K. Reilly, for publishing it, and to Robert McCoy for his editorial help.

As a companion to the manual I have completed a 55-minute film—with the same title and the same general structure. It is being distributed under the auspices of the Municipal Art Society of New York. I want to express my thanks to Executive Director Margot Wellington, and to President Doris Freedman, one of the reasons many New York spaces so delight the eye and spirit.

The main work of the Street Life Project was done by a small band of young observers, and I want to thank them for their curiosity, their diligence, and their tendency to dispute my hypotheses. The principal researchers the first years were Marilyn Russell and Nancy Lindsey. They were joined by Fred Kent, Ellen Ascher, Margaret Bemiss, Ann Herendeen, and Elizabeth Dietel. Working with us on special studies were: Beverly Peyser, Ellen Iseman, Cecilia Rubin, and Ann R. Roberts.

For their help on many things, I want to thank Raquel Ramati and Michael Parley of the Urban Design Group of the New York City Planning Department, and Kenneth Halpern and Loren Otis of the Mayor’s Office of Midtown Planning and Development.

I have many organizations to thank. The basic research was a project of the National Recreation and Park Association and was supported by grants from the Vincent Astor Foundation, the National Geographic Society, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Rockefeller Family Fund, and the Fund for the City of New York. A grant for the preparation of this publication was provided by the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. The film project was made possible by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, and by grants from the American Conservation Association, the J. M. Kaplan Fund, Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, Inc., the New York Telephone Company, and the Arthur Ross Foundation.

I thank these good people for their support and their interest, and their patience. Finally, I want to thank Laurance S. Rockefeller—for his support of our work, and for helping bring about some of the most felicitous of small urban spaces.

William H. Whyte
New York, New York
January 1980
This book is about city spaces, why some work for people, and some do not, and what the practical lessons may be. It is a by-product of first-hand observation.

In 1970, I formed a small research group, The Street Life Project, and began looking at city spaces. At that time, direct observation had long been used for the study of people in far-off lands. It had not been used to any great extent in the U.S. city. There was much concern over urban crowding, but most of the research on the issue was done somewhere other than where it supposedly occurred. The most notable studies were of crowded animals, or of students and members of institutions responding to experimental situations—often valuable research, to be sure, but somewhat vicarious.

The Street Life Project began its study by looking at New York City parks and playgrounds and such informal recreation areas as city blocks. One of the first things that struck us was the lack of crowding in many of these areas. A few were jammed, but more were nearer empty than full, often in neighborhoods that ranked very high in density of people. Sheer space, obviously, was not of itself attracting children. Many streets were.

It is often assumed that children play in the street because they lack playground space. But many children play in the streets because they like to. One of the best play areas we came across was a block on 101st Street in East Harlem. It had its
problems, but it worked. The street itself was the play area. Adjoining stoops and fire escapes provided prime viewing across the street and were highly functional for mothers and older people. There were other factors at work, too, and, had we been more prescient, we could have saved ourselves a lot of time spent later looking at plazas. Though we did not know it then, this block had within it all the basic elements of a successful urban place.

As our studies took us nearer the center of New York, the imbalance in space use was even more apparent. Most of the crowding could be traced to a series of choke points—subway stations, in particular. In total, these spaces are only a fraction of downtown, but the number of people using them is so high, the experience so abysmal, that it colors our perception of the city around, out of all proportion to the space involved. The fact that there may be lots of empty space somewhere else little mitigates the discomfort. And there is a strong carry-over effect.

This affects researchers, too. We see what we expect to see, and have been so conditioned to see crowded spaces in center city that it is often difficult to see empty ones. But when we looked, there they were.
The amount of space, furthermore, was increasing. Since 1961, New York City has been giving incentive bonuses to builders who provided plazas. For each square foot of plaza, builders could add 10 square feet of commercial floor space over and above the amount normally permitted by zoning. So they did—without exception. Every new office building provided a plaza or comparable space: in total, by 1972, some 20 acres of the world’s most expensive open space.

We discovered that some plazas, especially at lunchtime, attracted a lot of people. One, the plaza of the Seagram Building, was the place that helped give the city the idea for the plaza bonus. Built in 1958, this austerely elegant area had not been planned as a people’s plaza, but that is what it became. On a good day, there would be a hundred and fifty people sitting, sunbathing, picnicking, and shmoozing—idly gossiping, talking “nothing talk.” People also liked 77 Water Street, known as “swingers’ plaza” because of the young crowd that populated it.

But on most plazas, we didn’t see many people. The plazas weren’t used for much
except walking across. In the middle of the lunch hour on a beautiful, sunny day the number of people sitting on plazas averaged four per 1,000 square feet of space—an extraordinarily low figure for so dense a center. The tightest-knit CBD (central business district) anywhere contained a surprising amount of open space that was relatively empty and unused.

If places like Seagram’s and 77 Water Street could work so well, why not the others? The city was being had. For the millions of dollars of extra space it was handing out to builders, it had every right to demand much better plazas in return.

I put the question to the chairman of the City Planning Commission, Donald Elliott. As a matter of fact, I entrapped him into spending a weekend looking at time-lapse films of plaza use and nonuse. He felt that tougher zoning was in order. If we could find out why the good plazas worked and the bad ones didn’t, and come up with hard guidelines, we could have the basis of a new code. Since we could expect the proposals to be strongly contested, it would be important to document the case to a fare-thee-well.

We set to work. We began studying a cross-section of spaces—in all, 16 plazas, 3 small parks, and a number of odd ends. I will pass over the false starts, the dead ends, and the floundering arounds, save to note that there were a lot and that the research was nowhere as tidy and sequential as it can seem in the telling. Let me also note that the findings should have been staggeringly obvious to us had we thought of them in the first place. But we didn’t. Opposite propositions were often what seemed obvious. We arrived at our eventual findings by a succession of busted hypotheses.

The research continued for some three years. I like to cite the figure because it sounds impressive. But it is calendar time. For all practical purposes, at the end of six months we had completed our basic research and arrived at our recommendations. The City, alas, had other concerns on its mind, and we found that communicating the findings was to take more time than arriving at them. We logged many hours in church basements and meeting rooms giving film and slide presentations to community groups, architects, planners, businessmen, developers, and real-estate people. We continued our research; we had to keep our findings up-to-date, for now we were disciplined by adversaries. But at length the City Planning Commission incorporated our recommendations in a proposed new open-space zoning code, and in May 1975 it was adopted by the city’s Board of Estimate. As a consequence, there has been a salutary improvement in the design of new spaces and the rejuvenation of old ones. (Since the zoning may have useful guidelines for other cities, an abridged text is provided as appendix B.)

But zoning is certainly not the ideal way to achieve the better design of spaces. It ought to be done for its own sake. For economics alone, it makes sense. An enormous expenditure of design expertise, and of travertine and steel, went into the creation of the many really bum office-building plazas around the country. To what end? As this manual will detail, it is far easier, simpler to create spaces that work for people than those that do not—and a tremendous difference it can make to the life of a city.
from *L'Infra-ordinaire* (1989)
Approaches to What?*

What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines. Railway trains only begin to exist when they are derailed, and the more passengers that are killed, the more the trains exist. Aeroplanes achieve existence only when they are hijacked. The one and only destiny of motor-cars is to drive into plane trees. Fifty-two weekends a year, fifty-two casualty lists: so many dead and all the better for the news media if the figures keep on going up! Behind the event there has to be a scandal, a fissure, a danger, as if life reveals itself only by way of the spectacular, as if what speaks, what is significant, is always abnormal: natural cataclysms or historical upheavals, social unrest, political scandals.

In our haste to measure the historic, significant and revelatory, let’s not leave aside the essential: the truly intolerable, the truly inadmissible. What is scandalous isn’t the pit explosion, it’s working in coal mines. ‘Social problems’ aren’t ‘a matter of concern’ when there’s a strike, they are intolerable twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

Tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, tower-blocks that collapse, forest fires, tunnels that cave in, the Drugstore des Champs-Elysées burns down. Awful! Terrible! Monstrous! Scandalous! But where’s the scandal? The true scandal? Has the newspaper told us anything except: not to worry, as you can see life exists, with its ups and its downs, things happen, as you can see.

The daily papers talk of everything except the daily. The papers annoy me, they teach me nothing. What they recount doesn’t concern me, doesn’t ask me questions and doesn’t answer the questions I ask or would like to ask.

What’s really going on, what we’re experiencing, the rest, all

*First published in Cause Commune in February 1975.
the rest, where is it? How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infraordinary, the background noise, the habitual?

To question the habitual. But that’s just it, we’re habituated to it. We don’t question it, it doesn’t question us, it doesn’t seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking, as if it carried within it neither questions nor answers, as if it weren’t the bearer of any information. This is no longer even conditioning, it’s anaesthesia. We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep. But where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space?

How are we to speak of these ‘common things’, how to track them down rather, flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are.

What’s needed perhaps is finally to found our own anthropology, one that will speak about us, will look in ourselves for what for so long we’ve been pillaging from others. Not the exotic any more, but the endemic.

To question what seems so much a matter of course that we’ve forgotten its origins. To rediscover something of the astonishment that Jules Verne or his readers may have felt faced with an apparatus capable of reproducing and transporting sounds. For that astonishment existed, along with thousands of others, and it’s they which have moulded us.

What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us. We live, true, we breathe, true; we walk, we open doors, we go down staircases, we sit at a table in order to eat, we lie down on a bed in order to sleep. How? Where? When? Why?

Describe your street. Describe another street. Compare.

Make an inventory of your pockets, of your bag. Ask yourself about the provenance, the use, what will become of each of the objects you take out.

Question your tea spoons.

What is there under your wallpaper?

How many movements does it take to dial a phone number? Why?

Why don’t you find cigarettes in grocery stores? Why not?

It matters little to me that these questions should be fragmentary, barely indicative of a method, at most of a project. It matters a lot to me that they should seem trivial and futile: that’s exactly what makes them just as essential, if not more so, as all the other questions by which we’ve tried in vain to lay hold on our truth.
The Production of Space

(1991)

Henri Lefebvre

(Social) space is a (social) product. This proposition might appear to border on the tautologous, and hence on the obvious. There is good reason, however, to examine it carefully, to consider its implications and consequences before accepting it. Many people will find it hard to endorse the notion that space has taken on, within the present mode of production, within society as it actually is, a sort of reality of its own, a reality clearly distinct from, yet much like, those assumed in the same global process by commodities, money and capital. Many people, finding this claim paradoxical, will want proof. The more so in view of the further claim that the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it. The social and political (state) forces which engendered this space now seek, but fail, to master it completely; the very agency that has forced spatial reality towards a sort of uncontrollable autonomy now strives to run it into the ground, then shackle and enslave it. Is this space an abstract one? Yes, but it is also ‘real’ in the sense in which concrete abstractions such as commodities and money are real. Is it then concrete? Yes, though not in the sense that an object or product is concrete. Is it instrumental? Undoubtedly, but, like knowledge, it extends beyond Instrumentality. Can it be reduced to a projection—to an ‘objectification’ of knowledge? Yes and no: knowledge objectified in a product is no longer coextensive with knowledge in its theoretical state. If space embodies social relationships, how and why does it do so? And what relationships are they?

It is because of all these questions that a thoroughgoing analysis and a full overall exposition are called for. This must involve the introduction of new ideas—in the first place the idea of a diversity or multiplicity of spaces quite distinct from that multiplicity which results from segmenting and cross-sectioning space ad infinitum. Such new ideas must then be inserted into the context of what is generally known as ‘history’, which will consequently itself emerge in a new light. Social space will be revealed in its particularity to the extent that it ceases to be indistinguishable from mental space (as defined by the philosophers and mathematicians) on the one hand, and physical space (as defined by practico-sensory activity and the perception of ‘nature’) on the other. What I shall be seeking to demonstrate is that such a social space is constituted neither by a collection of things or an aggregate of (sensory) data, nor by a void packed like a parcel with various contents, and that it is irreducible to a ‘form’ imposed upon phenomena, upon things, upon physical materiality.

More generally, the very notion of social space resists analysis because of its novelty and because of the real and formal complexity that it connotes. Social space contains—and assigns (more or less) appropriate places to—(1) the social relations of reproduction, i.e. the biophysiological relations between the sexes and
between age groups, along with the specific organization of the family; and (2) the relations of production, i.e. the division of labour and its organization in the form of hierarchical social functions. These two sets of relations, production and reproduction, are inextricably bound up with one another: the division of labour has repercussions upon the family and is of a piece with it; conversely, the organization of the family interferes with the division of labour. Yet social space must discriminate between the two—not always successfully, be it said—in order to ‘localize’ them.

To refine this scheme somewhat, it should be pointed out that in precapitalist societies the two interlocking levels of biological reproduction and socio-economic production together constituted social reproduction—that is to say, the reproduction of society as it perpetuated itself generation after generation, conflict, feud, strife, crisis and war notwithstanding. That a decisive part is played by space in this continuity is something I shall be attempting to demonstrate below.

The advent of capitalism, and more particularly ‘modern’ neocapitalism, has rendered this state of affairs considerably more complex. Here three interrelated levels must be taken into account: (1) biological reproduction (the family); (2) the reproduction of labour power (the working class per se); and (3) the reproduction of the social relations of production—that is, of those relations which are constitutive of capitalism and which are increasingly (and increasingly effectively) sought and imposed as such. The role of space in this tripartite ordering of things will need to be examined in its specificity.

To make things even more complicated, social space also contains specific representations of this double or triple interaction between the social relations of production and reproduction. Symbolic representation serves to maintain these social relations in a state of coexistence and cohesion. It displays them while displacing them—and thus concealing them in symbolic fashion—with the help of, and onto the backdrop of, nature. Representations of the relations of reproduction are sexual symbols, symbols of male and female, sometimes accompanied, sometimes not, by symbols of age—of youth and of old age. This is a symbolism which conceals more than it reveals, the more so since the relations of reproduction are divided into frontal, public, overt—and hence coded—relations on the one hand, and, on the other, covert, clandestine and repressed relations which, precisely because they are repressed, characterize transgressions related not so much to sex per se as to sexual pleasure, its preconditions and consequences.

Thus space may be said to embrace a multitude of intersections, each with its assigned location. As for representations of the relations of production, which subsume power relations, these too occur in space: space contains them in the form of buildings, monuments and works of art. Such frontal (and hence brutal) expressions of these relations do not completely crowd out their more clandestine or underground aspects; all power must have its accomplices—and its police.

A conceptual triad has now emerged from our discussion, a triad to which we shall be returning over and over again.

1. Spatial practice, which embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society’s relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance.

2. Representations of space, which are tied to the relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to ‘frontal’ relations.

3. Representational spaces, embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art (which may come eventually to be defined less as a code of space than as a code of representational spaces).

XVII

If space is a product, our knowledge of it must be expected to reproduce and expound the process of production. The object of interest must be expected to shift from things in space to the actual production of space.

It might be objected that at such and such a period, in such and such a society (ancient/
slave, medieval/feudal, etc.), the active groups did not 'produce' space in the sense in which a vase, a piece of furniture, a house, or a fruit tree is 'produced'. So how exactly did those groups contrive to produce their space? The question is a highly pertinent one and covers all 'fields' under consideration.

Specialists in a number of 'disciplines' might answer or try to answer the question. Ideologists, for example, would very likely take natural ecosystems as a point of departure. They would show how the actions of human groups upset the balance of these systems, and how in most cases, where 'pre-technological' or 'archaeo-technological' societies are concerned, the balance is subsequently restored. They would then examine the development of the relationship between town and country, the perturbing effects of the town, and the possibility or impossibility of a new balance being established. Then, from their point of view, they would adequately have clarified and even explained the genesis of modern social space. Historians, for their part, would doubtless take a different approach, or rather a number of different approaches according to the individual's method or orientation. Those who concern themselves chiefly with events might be inclined to establish a chronology of decisions affecting the relations between cities and their territorial dependencies, or to study the construction of monumental buildings. Others might seek to reconstitute the rise and fall of the institutions which underwrote those monuments. Still others would lean toward an economic study of exchange between city and territory, town and town, state and town, and so on.

To follow this up further, let us return to the three concepts introduced earlier.

1 Spatial practice: The spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it. From the analytic standpoint, the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space.

What is spatial practice under neocapitalism? It embodies a close association, within perceived space, between daily reality (daily routine) and urban reality (the routes and networks which link up the places set aside for work, 'private' life and leisure). This association is a paradoxical one, because it includes the most extreme separation between the places it links together. The specific spatial competence and performance of every society member can only be evaluated empirically. 'Modern' spatial practice might thus be defined—to take an extreme but significant case—by the daily life of a tenant in a government-subsidized high-rise housing project. Which should not be taken to mean that motorways or the politics of air transport can be left out of the picture. A spatial practice must have a certain cohesiveness, but this does not imply that it is coherent (in the sense of intellectually worked out or logically conceived).

2 Representations of space: conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent—all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived. (Arcane speculation about Numbers, with its talk of the golden number, moduli and 'canons', tends to perpetuate this view of matters.) This is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production). Conceptions of space tend, with certain exceptions to which I shall return, towards a system of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs.

3 Representational spaces: space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users', but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who describe and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. Thus representational spaces may be said, though again with certain exceptions, to tend towards more or less coherent systems of nonverbal symbols and signs.

In seeking to understand the three moments of social space, it may help to consider the body. All the more so inasmuch as the relationship to space of a 'subject' who is a member of a group or society implies his relationship to his own body and vice versa. Considered overall, social practice presupposes the use of the body: the use of the hands, members and sensory organs, and the gestures of work as of activity unrelated to work. This is the realm of the perceived (the practical basis of the perception of the outside world, to put it in psychology's terms). As for
representations of the body, they derive from accumulated scientific knowledge, disseminated with an admixture of ideology: from knowledge of anatomy, of physiology, of sickness and its cure, and of the body’s relations with nature and with its surroundings or ‘milieu’. Bodily lived experience, for its part, may be both highly complex and quite peculiar, because ‘culture’ intervenes here, with its illusory immediacy, via symbolisms and via the long Judaeo-Christian tradition, certain aspects of which are uncovered by psychoanalysis. The ‘heart’ as lived is strangely different from the heart as thought and perceived. The same holds a fortiori for the sexual organs. Localizations can absolutely not be taken for granted where the lived experience of the body is concerned: under the pressure of morality, it is even possible to achieve the strange result of a body without organs—a body chastised, as it were, to the point of being castrated.

The perceived–conceived–lived triad (in spatial terms: spatial practice, representations of space, representational spaces) loses all force if it is treated as an abstract ‘model’. If it cannot grasp the concrete (as distinct from the ‘immediate’), then its import is severely limited, amounting to no more than that of one ideological mediation among others.

That the lived, conceived and perceived realms should be interconnected, so that the ‘subject’, the individual member of a given social group, may move from one to another without confusion—so much is a logical necessity. Whether they constitute a coherent whole is another matter. They probably do so only in favourable circumstances, when a common language, a consensus and a code can be established.

XIX

If indeed every society produces a space, its own space, this will have other consequences in addition to those we have already considered. There is no doubt that medieval society—that is, the feudal mode of production, with its variants and local peculiarities—created its own space. Medieval space built upon the space constituted in the preceding period, and preserved that space as a substrate and prop for its symbols; it survives in an analogous fashion itself today. Manors, monasteries, cathedrals—these were the strong points anchoring the network of lanes and main roads to a landscape transformed by peasant communities. This space was the take-off point for Western European capital accumulation, the original source and cradle of which were the towns.

Capitalism and neocapitalism have produced abstract space, which includes the ‘world of commodities’, its ‘logic’ and its worldwide strategies, as the power of money and that of the political state. This space is founded on the vast network of banks, business centres and major productive entities, as also on motorways, airports and information lattices. Within this space the town—once the forcing-house of accumulation, fountainhead of wealth and centre of historical space—has disintegrated.

Abstract space works in a highly complex way. It has something of a dialogue about it, in that it implies a tacit agreement, a non-aggression pact, a contract, as it were, of non-violence. It imposes reciprocity, and a communality of use. In the street, each individual is supposed not to attack those he meets; anyone who transgresses this law is deemed guilty of a criminal act. A space of this kind presupposes the existence of a ‘spatial economy’ closely allied, though not identical, to the verbal economy. This economy valorizes certain relationships between people in particular places (shops, cafés, cinemas, etc.), and thus gives rise to connotative discourses concerning these places; these in turn generate ‘consensuses’ or conventions according to which, for example, such and such a place is supposed to be trouble-free, a quiet area where people go peacefully to have a good time, and so forth. As for denotative (i.e. descriptive) discourses in this context, they have a quasi-legal aspect which also works for consensus: there is to be no fighting over who should occupy a particular spot; spaces are to be left free, and wherever possible allowance is to be made for ‘proxemics’—for the maintenance of ‘respectful’ distances. This attitude entails in its turn a logic and a strategy of property in space: ‘places and things belonging to you do not belong to me’. The fact remains, however, that communal or shared spaces, the possession or consumption of which cannot be entirely privatized, continue to exist. Cafés, squares and monuments are cases in point. The spatial consensus I have just described in brief constitutes part of civilization much as do prohibitions against acts considered vulgar or offensive to children, women, old people or the public in general. Naturally enough, its response
to class struggle, as to other forms of violence, amounts to a formal and categorical rejection. Every space is already in place before the appearance in it of actors; these actors are collective as well as individual subjects inasmuch as the individuals are always members of groups or classes seeking to appropriate the space in question. This pre-existence of space conditions the subject’s presence, action and discourse, his competence and performance: yet the subject’s presence, action and discourse, at the same time as they presuppose this space, also negate it. The subject experiences space as an obstacle, as a resistant ‘objectality’ at times as implacably hard as a concrete wall, being not only extremely difficult to modify in any way but also hedged about by Draconian rules prohibiting any attempt at such modification. Thus the texture of space affords opportunities not only to social acts with no particular place in it and no particular link with it, but also to a spatial practice that it does indeed determine, namely its collective and individual use: a sequence of acts which embody a signifying practice even if they cannot be reduced to such a practice. Life and death are not merely conceptualized, simulated or given expression by these acts; rather, it is in and through them that life and death actually have their being. It is within space that time consumes or devours living beings, thus giving reality to sacrifice, pleasure and pain. Abstract space, the space of the bourgeoisie and of capitalism, bound up as it is with exchange (of goods and commodities, as of written and spoken words, etc.) depends on consensus more than any space before it. It hardly seems necessary to add that within this space violence does not always remain latent or hidden. One of its contradictions is that between the appearance of security and the constant threat, and indeed the occasional eruption, of violence.

XX

‘Change life!’ ‘Change society!’ These precepts mean nothing without the production of an appropriate space. So long as everyday life remains in thrall to abstract space, with its very concrete constraints; so long as the only improvements to occur are technical improvements of detail (for example, the frequency and speed of transportation, or relatively better amenities); so long, in short, as the only connection between work spaces, leisure spaces and living spaces is supplied by the agencies of political power and by their mechanisms of control—so long must the project of ‘changing life’ remain no more than a political rallying-cry to be taken up or abandoned according to the mood of the moment.

XVIII

From a less pessimistic standpoint, it can be shown that abstract space harbours specific contradictions. Such spatial contradictions derive in part from the old contradictions thrown up by historical time. These have undergone modifications, however: some are aggravated, others blunted. Amongst them, too, completely fresh contradictions have come into being which are liable eventually to precipitate the downfall of abstract space. The reproduction of the social relations of production within this space inevitably obeys two tendencies: the dissolution of old relations on the one hand and the generation of new relations on the other. Thus, despite—or rather because of—its negativity, abstract space carries within itself the seeds of a new kind of space. I shall call that new space ‘differential space’, because, inasmuch as abstract space tends towards homogeneity, towards the elimination of existing differences or peculiarities, a new space cannot be born (produced) unless it accentuates differences. It will also restore unity to what abstract space breaks up—to the functions, elements and moments of social practice. It will put an end to those localizations which shatter the integrity of the individual body, the social body, the corpus of human needs, and the corpus of knowledge.