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To cite this article:  
Tillett, W. (2014). Here, we are never here. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(3), 341-343. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1077800415489271>

Here, We are Never Here

#### *Abstract*

*This article examines how user action and subjectivity interacts with the imperatives (program, curricula) of architecture. Embedded within designed space are assumptions, directives, possibilities and limits that affect the bodies/subjectivities inhabited by a user. Both by making explicit (de-constructing) the unspoken implications of architectonic language and by describing the embodied experience of daily usage, I describe the inherent paradox of waiting in a place designed for passing on.*

There are two sanctioned activities in this space:

to pass on,

or to wait to pass on.

The second is merely tolerated.

The effectiveness of architecture is measured by how well the user and his or her *desire* conforms to the intended use. To minimize the appearance of prohibition or restriction is to minimize the eruption of an undesirable desire in the user. Plastic debit cards transform dollar bills into electronic data, deducted and spit back effortlessly. The Chicago Card works just by waving in front of a detector, requiring no pause in movement at all, and its link to a credit card allows one to almost never even think about money being spent. Payment systems become more fluid, invisible, and removed from money.

If I extend out my arm and put the plastic debit card in first thing, by the time my waist hits the turnstile the card has already been spit back out, a beep made, my remaining balance on the card displayed, and the turnstile released for one 120 degree turn so that I can push through. It is a fluid practice, done without thought, consistent with the architectural imperative. The turnstiles, with their low profile, are merely a minor physical inconvenience, a trifle of formality. The space moves, and I move along with it.

And as I move in, I am invited again to move in, and again. The well-concealed curiosity of this space is its consistent invitation to movement, its refusal to enclose a space as its own, its perpetual modernist claim that this space is simply an arbitrary point of universal space where some tracks happen to end and some vertical and horizontal planes are brought together to facilitate this function. There is not the slightest attempt to create a place here. This is not the urban place of the local real estate developers; there is no brick with fake limestone, no wrought iron, no landscaping or references to the history-that-never-was. The commodity here is movement. Space is its medium. Place is static, to be owned, purchased, lived within. Place's safety comes from exclusion. This is not a place. This is space. Space is utilized; it facilitates; it is the in-between of the place. Space's safety comes from making all visible, from ensuring all are en-route to a place. Space refuses to include. Space excludes us all from agency while we are within it. It emphasizes the absence of not being here through a rhetoric of transition, dangling the expectation of future landscapes and selves. The prior self prepares to perform a new self. The body locates between body-spaces. We are between death and (re)birth. We suspend place and agency.

We are ghosts.

The produced space consistently reflects this. The eyes follow the continuous space above, the continuous ceiling above the turnstiles. The feet follow the continuous space below, the sidewalk extended. The emphasis is on the horizontal. A large concrete ceiling/roof plane floats above, extending out past the wall, toward the street.

The concrete of the sidewalk continues on and through. A glass wall happens to enclose some space; a vertical plane that attempts to unclaim its existence. It does not stake out its claim immediately at the sidewalk on Lawrence, as is traditional for buildings in this urban context. The arbitrariness of the glass walls is coupled with the arbitrary placement of the turnstiles; located so as not to construct a corner, not to enclose space. The horizontal planes present a continuous space that denies this structure's elements of exclusion. "This is not a building." This is exterior space made minimally interior, merely an enlarged section of a public space of movement.

Within the train station, the small comforts given to waiting are made grudgingly, and with specific limitations that disrupt undesired positions. Only within this area restricted to paying customers are there benches and stools. These are rarely used due to the fact that, because this is the end of the line, often a train is waiting in the terminal for departure and passengers are allowed to board the train and wait. The benches that do exist are constructed with a stainless steel ribbon protruding a few inches up in the middle of the bench, thus dividing the benches into two flat surfaces of a maximum of four feet. While the ribbon appears to be an armrest, clearly that is not its function; it would have to be about 8" higher to reasonably accommodate the resting elbow of a seated person. However, the height is sufficient to divide the bench in the middle so that, while it is possible to sit, it would be quite uncomfortable to lie down. The different heights of three stools placed next to each disrupt any idea of lying down and bridging across them; they accommodate only sitting. Neither the benches nor stools have backs to lean on. The sitting surface is either stainless steel, or thin veneer of cork over stainless steel. Neither is comfortable for an extended period. In these ways, the minor accommodations made for waiting contain technical mechanisms to ensure that waiting clients will pass on at the first available opportunity.

I am a sitting passenger within a sitting train. Sounds exterior are blocked by the glass. The grind and squeal and click of the train itself are heard. The landscape filters through, appearing on glass like a silent television. The possibility of moving into the landscape is gone, taken by the differential in speed between the train I am in and the landscape I move through. (See de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* chapter 8 for a further description of this mode.)

Coming home, the moving train stops. I only have a few seconds to move out before the doors close again, despite the fact that this is the end of the line. If I remain seated, the attendant comes and rousts me out. This rousting is to prevent illegitimate use of the train as shelter (from the heat, cold, sun, rain). The only legitimate use of the train is to help me pass. Because of this, once the train itself stops, I must continue by foot.

Following the previously inviting concrete planes in reverse direction, I find I can exit through spinning steel that only turns in one direction – out. While the entry turnstiles were visually produced to appear as merely a minor inconvenience in a large, open continuous space of movement, the steel revolving doors tell quite a different story. Visually obtrusive, horizontal 1-1/2" bars splay out every 8" vertically to form a rotating spine. These bars, when turned, slide through a similar set of static bars, like a meat grinder. Only one person can fit in at a time. My head barely fits beneath the top. In contrast to flowing space of entry, at this point in the otherwise intentionally obfuscated membrane; space is compressed to the bare minimum.

This is extremely inconvenient if I am walking with small children. Are they to cram in with me, or attempt to manage the potential human grinder by themselves? If I choose the latter, I go through first so that I can stand on the other side and look pleadingly at the person behind my child, begging with my eyes not to add too much force to the spinning masher. As my child comes through, I grab their arm right below the shoulder and pull them out in the nick of time. Of course, this method has the risk that my child might not make it into the exit door in the first place, leaving me stranded and unable to help on the exterior of the space. It is possible to exit through the turnstiles, they spin out. Usually that's what I do if my kids are with me and I remember. But the shortest way to three of the four bus stops, and our home, is through the grim reaper.

Since the basic function of the Kimball train station is to pass on, the space avoids *claiming* restriction until the moment I am dispersed. The only point where I realize I am inside an enclosed place is the moment when I am thrust to its exterior. The function of the space is concealed except at the moment that function has been accomplished. The train station suddenly states that I can no longer occupy this place with this body; perhaps leaving the user to say as I did, "Wait. What body? What place?" Perhaps this is the reason for the brutality of the statement. The spinning people spitter exclaims, in no uncertain terms, "I am done with you."

But of course, this brutality also serves to mask a certain untruth. It is an attempt to cover with a statement proclaimed loudly and unequivocally the more nuanced layers of the situation. As most any teacher knows, to yell is to expose the limits of power, to mask the weak points through overcompensation. Why, in an otherwise subtle architecture, does the station scream with a final resolution at the point of exit?

The rotating menace *has* to dislodge the claim that there is no clear boundary between the transit system and public space because it makes that claim itself, in the open entry sequence of the station. The finality of exit attempts to keep me from repeating the gentle gestures of fluid invitation with which I was greeted. This place is for movement. That function has been served. Now get out.

The station's exit door puts to death the body occupying its place. To pass on is first extended as a desire, a momentum of flowing space, a current followed, a pull. To pass on is then presented as a death, a limit, a border, a finality, a you-are-on-your-own, a push. While the rest of the terminal attempted to distract the user from realizing s/he had a body, or was within a place, the door simultaneously acknowledges the body as it kills it through expulsion. The body, now manifest, is put to death.

Catching the westbound Lawrence bus means just standing on the corner, near no building at all since the mini-mall on that corner is far from the street. No seating, no shelter is provided. While not on the bus you are not recognized. It denies the user a body, and the subsequent human requirements (shelter, safety, restrooms), by refusing to claim the place. This is in direct contradiction to what all users know: no one would be standing at that point if the bus stop was not there. The constant daily accumulation of bodies at the bus stop points is not accommodated by the very system that produces this accumulation. In the usual absence of a bus, the stop can only be recognized by the street sign designating it, and the people waiting. The sign positions bodies who claim a place. The bus stops' minimal setup is equivalent to silence, refusing to acknowledge such a claim.

Waiting is overlooked. The people who occupy the space while waiting are overlooked. This, this is a network of movement, not stasis. Until I board a bus, I am not a part of this system. To conceptualize the system as including the myriad points of necessary stasis would take on responsibility beyond control, beyond the enclosed and restricted places for people who *have* paid. (Except, of course, with the notable exception of advertising, which takes full advantage of the stasis of the customer's body, whether waiting or riding.) The stop is merely a point in a line of transit designated by an intersection of two points on the Chicago grid. The stop is merely a point in space, and the sign serves only to label this point. Anything else is extra. I am on my own. To wait is only a delay in the objective of passing on.

And yet, the practice of waiting slowly erodes my refusal to be here. My impatience wears thin. I realize that I stand within this space of connection and transition. I occupy this space not to be occupied. I am here. All architectural attempts to blind me to that realization, to encourage me to pass on, are subverted by the impossibility of passing on until the system facilitates it, that is, by the brokenness of its own promise. I am here. I will be here. Even as I pass on.

Yes. Within this "incarceration-vacation", I am "*intact*" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 114). I comfort myself with my resignation. My inaction is an action.

No. I am not intact. I was never intact. My stasis betrays by my desire. My claim on being is broken, cracked through with the continuous rush of movement where I am. I "[take] in the time and [render] it up in altered form — that of expectation" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 107). I wait, in order to join, to become, the moving bodies.

*"The work is the death mask of its conception" (Benjamin, 1979, p. 65).*

The crack is paralleled here, in this text. How could it be otherwise?

As with de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, liminality exists not only in that which is described, but through the act of describing. The text betrays my use of writing to move beyond where I started.

Benjamin's *Arcades Project* was never complete. The "theatre of all [his] struggles and all [his] ideas" (1999, p. x) was a stack of papers to which were added more papers.

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