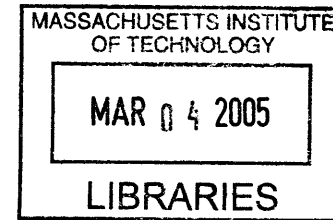


Re-curating the City:
Accessories for a New Tourism of New York

by

Virginia Nolan

B.A. Comparative Literature
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ROTCH

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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**Re-curating the City:
Accessories for a New Tourism of New York**

by Virginia Nolan

Submitted to the Department of Architecture
on January 14, 2005 in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Architecture

ABSTRACT

This thesis poses a challenge to normal modes of experiencing and representing the spaces of tourism: that is to say, it proposes new ways of touring space. Although this project was initially conceived as a critique of tourism from a social and political standpoint, the project increasingly turned towards the abstract, as it became more evident that the only way to alter the established paradigms of touring space was to approach these both (tourism and the reception of space) through their two lowest common denominators: namely, the act of walking and the act of seeing. Only if these two acts were somehow re-envisioned could tourism itself be potentially freed up from the well-known “traps” through which it alters, demeans, or destroys the very object of its attraction.

This project posits the production of tourism as a sort of curatorship enacted collectively by urban planners, architects, local businesses, local governments, and those who market tourism through books, guides, and maps. Accepting that tourism is necessarily a curated experience to some degree, I began to explore the possibility of devices that altered the accepted ways of walking and seeing the city so that they confounded our very notions of what it means to tour space. These devices take the form of video camera attachments that serve as “portable museums” reframing one’s experience of the city through this recorded analog that creates new views, relationships, and erasures of the city’s structure.

Thesis Supervisor: Meejin Yoon
Title: Assistant Professor of Architecture



From *Society of the Spectacle*

“Tourism, human circulation considered as consumption, a by-product of the circulation of commodities, is fundamentally nothing more than the leisure of going to see what has become banal. The economic organization of visits to different places is already in itself the guarantee of their *equivalence*. The same modernization that removed time from the voyage also removed it from the reality of space.”

Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* ¹

PART I: VISIONING THE CITY



From *Reconstructing Chinatown*



Touring

This thesis challenges normal modes of experiencing and representing the spaces of tourism: That is to say, it proposes new ways of touring space. Although this project was initially conceived as a critique of tourism from a social and political standpoint, the project increasingly turned towards the abstract, as it became more evident that the only way to alter the established paradigms of touring space was to approach these both (tourism and the reception of space) through their two lowest common denominators: namely, the act of walking and the act of seeing. Only if these two acts were somehow re-imagined could tourism be potentially freed up from the well-known “traps” through which it alters, demeans, or destroys the very object of its attraction.

The museum served in this project as a metaphoric model for the institution of tourism. Coming into being during roughly the same era as the Grand Tour, and clearly linked to the latter through both its objectives and its practices, the museum is in many ways a more static,

condensed, institutionally organized—and therefore more critically comprehensible—version of tourism. This project posits the design of tourism as a sort of curatorship enacted collectively by urban planners, architects, local businesses, local governments, and those who market tourism through books, guides, and maps. My first contention with tourism was what it curated and how: Why were certain places and things included at the exclusion of others and how were they represented? The conundrum here is that, in challenging the conventions of what constitutes a tourist attraction, one is tempted to assume the equally questionable role of posing a “counter-attraction,” thereby falling into the same pitfalls of authoritative selection and its subsequent omissions. Likewise, in questioning how a particular site is represented, one is left with the choice of offering a counter-representation (such as a counter-history, like those offered by Dolores Hayden’s “Power of Place”) which equally imposes itself on the viewer as an official narrative. The objection to such practices of selection rests on how they ultimately contrive to shape the city into a coherent narrative, mimicking museological techniques of stringing together artifacts to form a clear historic narrative.

Accepting, nonetheless, that tourism is necessarily a curated experience to some degree, the central problem of this thesis became the paradoxical problem of how to curate the city without actually curating it. What was wanted was a method of structuring the tourist experience that did not attempt to re-structure the city into a legible narrative. Towards this end, I began to explore the possibility of devices that altered the accepted ways of walking and seeing the city in such a way as to confound our very notions of what it means to tour space.

The site for this project was Manhattan. The project might have been undertaken in any walkable city, but compared to other U.S. cities, New York poses particular challenges for tourist practices. With its reputation as a city that constantly erases its own histories, and whose height, density, and diversity create a layered network of inscrutable complexity, New York is tricky to present as a coherent, consumable package. The consequence of this struggle has been a tourist industry that serves up the city piecemeal: Particular neighborhoods are portrayed as coherent entities, and walking itineraries are devised to navigate the tourist through a patchwork of these districts, each expressing one particular

characteristic—be it an ethnic, cultural, or architectural quality—that contributes to the city’s overarching myth of diversity. The preliminary phase of my research involved simply an exploration of what constituted these spaces of tourism and what differentiated them from the spaces of non-tourism, those excluded by the guidebooks and itineraries.

Spaces of Tourism

“Society in New York has many phases—it is cosmopolitan—an amalgam, composed of all imaginable varieties and shades of character. It is a confluence of many streams, whose waters are ever turbid and confused in their rushing to this great vortex. What incongruous elements are here commingled,—the rude and the refined, the sordid and the self-sacrificing, the religious and the profane, the learned and the illiterate, the affluent and the destitute, the thinker and the doer, the virtuous and the ignoble, the young and the aged—all nations, dialects, and sympathies—all manners, habits, and customs of the civilized globe.”

--The 1886 Guide to New York City ²

“The capitalist need of which is satisfied by urbanism in the form of a visible freezing of life can be expressed in Hegelian terms as the absolute predominance of the “peaceful coexistence of space” over “the restless becoming in the passage of time.”

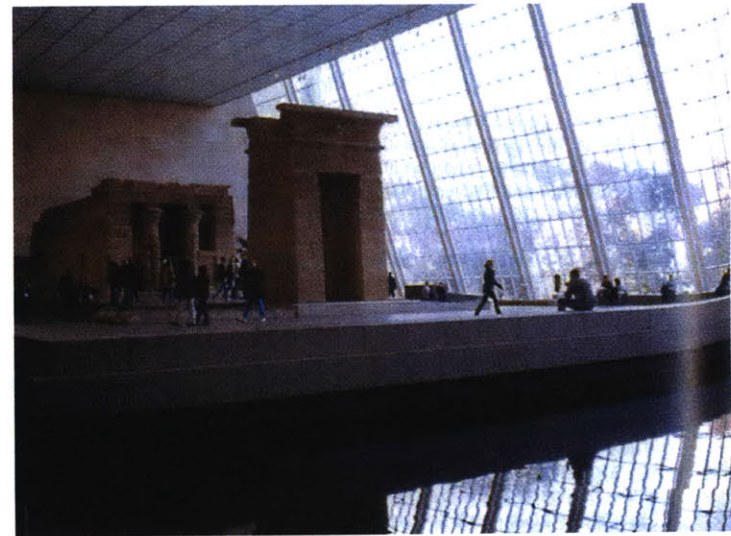
--Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord ³

What is the space of tourism? Most simply put, it is a space structured by an implied subject (the tourist) and an implied object which, in the case of urban tourism might be construed as the city itself, but which can then be broken down into its components of districts, people, and specific attractions: restaurants, museums, monuments, et cetera. It is, moreover, a space produced by a constant negotiation between the non-tourist function of the object (e.g. a cathedral still functioning as a religious center) and its double-life as a tourist attraction. The surgical procedure enacted by tourism upon the object of interest, re-contextualizing and reconstructing it, recalls the collecting practices of the museum. The key difference here is that, whereas the museum acts singly and with finality upon its artifacts, tourism often involves a more gradual and complicit

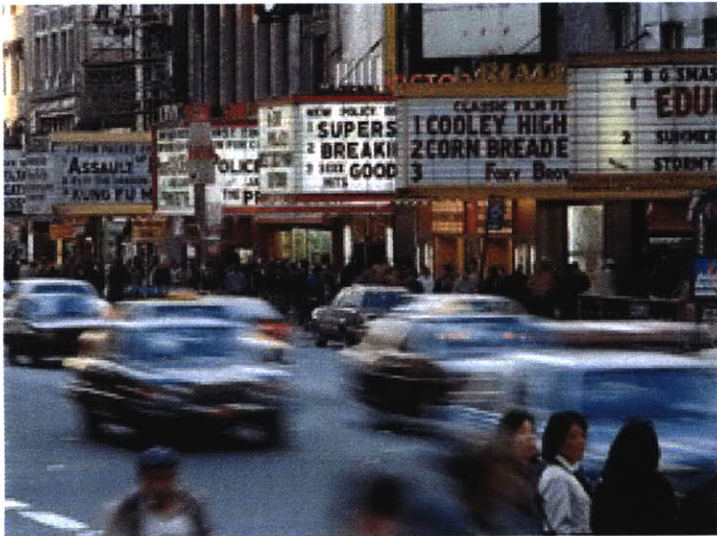
IF THE MUSEUM'S APPROPRIATION OF AN ARTIFACT IS AKIN TO A QUICK AMPUTATION AND TRANSPLANT, THEN TOURISM'S INTERVENTION IS THAT OF A SERIES OF COSMETIC SURGERIES WHICH, OVER TIME, ALTER THEIR OBJECT AS VIOLENTLY AND IRREVOCABLY AS AN AMPUTATION, *BUT MANAGE TO CONCEAL THEIR OWN VIOLENCE.*



Paolo Panini's *View of Modern Rome*, from *L'Italia del Grand Tour*



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, from *Green's Guide to New York City*



Times Square in the 1980's prior to "cleaning up."



Times Square after a decade of tourist re-development.

transformation of the object, whereby a neighborhood such as Little Italy or Times Square is re-developed over time to attract tourism. To propose a slightly sensational analogy: If the museum's appropriation of an artifact is akin to a quick amputation and transplant, then tourism's intervention is that of a series of cosmetic surgeries which, over time, alter their object as violently and irrevocably as an amputation, but manage to conceal their own violence.

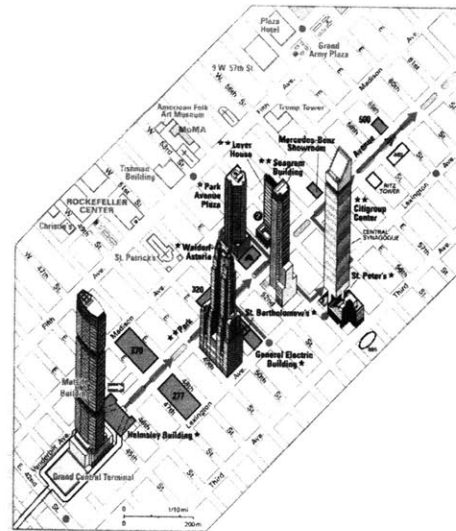
Although these sorts of adaptations are largely effected by urban planners, private business owners, and investors, I wish to examine here the particular role the guidebook plays in slicing and serving up the city in mutated form. A study of the textual treatments of neighborhoods in mainstream guidebooks for New York City reveals something about the nature of this operation.⁴ Firstly, each district is reduced to a few descriptors. Thus, SoHo, "the heart of Manhattan's fashionable art scene... is New York at its most trendiest and colorful."⁵ And in "sprawling Chinatown... the narrow streets lined with colorful shops and restaurants teem with people."⁶ The narrative then interjects a brief history (typically comprising one to three sentences) of the area's past, and from this history leaps to an

enumeration of its restaurants and shops. While there is hardly anything surprising in this structuring, it bears a curious resemblance to the structuring of the museum, and warrants further attention. In the museum, the object of interest is seized at a glance; the viewer then might briefly consult its history, as summarized in an accompanying plaque, and, following this procedure through the collection, the viewer then descends to the gift shop and restaurant. The structuring thus moves from visceral impression to historical grounding to consumption. Again, there's nothing earth-shattering in this disclosure of tourism as a form of consumption, but the relationship between sensory impression : historic-reading : consumption remains relatively unexplored.⁷ I would argue that these three actions (sensing, reading, consuming) are not disjointed but that the historic reading is the sublimating action that lifts the other two to the level of ritual—the ritual of sensing and consuming that is tourism. The fleeting tribute to the historic gives permission; it ennobles the intrusion into another people's domain, and seemingly elevates consumption to the level of a high cultural exchange. In order to consume the object of interest, its contents must first be made legible, weighted with cultural significance, and, only then, compressed into a

“His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.”
 -Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* ⁸



Rome represented as a collection of free-floating monuments, from Naomi Miller's *Mapping the City*



New York City map from *Green's Guide to New York City*



View of New York City from *Green's Guide to New York City*



Postcard

form that can be bought and sold.

So the space of tourism then is the space of the commodity. But it is no ordinary commodity; rather it is one that is endowed with the power of transubstantiation: A taste of Chinatown dim-sum is a taste of China itself. This metaphor is of course easy to apply to gastronomic consumption (and indeed, is applied with amazing regularity in tourist literature), but to apply it to vision is but a slight skip away: To see a place is to know it and own it, provided that one has armed oneself with a few grains of historical fact. Michel de Certeau describes

the psychic position of one who observes the city from a privileged vantage point:

“His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.”⁸

What de Certeau here describes is not, however, the experience of the pedestrian, but rather its antithesis: It is the experience of someone gazing from the heights of the World Trade Center. The critiques that relate this privileged gaze to power are well-known of course, but what about the not-so-privileged gaze of the pedestrian tourist? According to de Certeau, viewing the city from above “makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text.”⁹ By contrast, the act of walking through the city is lauded by de Certeau as an innately subversive act, insofar as its meanderings and fractured glimpses elude the sort of totalizing representations that depict the city as coherent and legible. I would challenge this over-

simplification, however, by pointing to the ways in which tourism attempts to construct the tourist's experience of the street as a clear, readable path. De Certeau likens the pedestrian's wandering to the improvisation of an un-scripted text: "The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other."¹⁰ I would contend however, that tourism creates a form of pedestrianism that is clearly authored with a specific spectator in mind. In fact, the mechanisms of tourism—and the tour guidebook in particular—attempt precisely to reproduce at street level the sort of totalizing view enjoyed at the summit of the skyscraper. The tourist path is scripted by the guidebook images and descriptions that the tourist digests prior to walking the city; this path is then marked through the act of photography and reinforced through the device of the postcard or souvenir. One sees what one is forewarned to look for, and then records these views.

This description of the modes of tourism is of course broadly generalizing, but it still holds largely true. The sort of walking which de Certeau extols is precisely

what the tourist machine attempts to eliminate: it seeks to harness and direct all those feet and eyes which might otherwise wander into places not designed for their incursion, places not prepared for digestion, be it intellectually, gastronomically, or visually. The guidebook serves up the city as a single meal with each particular neighborhood composing the feast's many courses. These hyperbolized neighborhoods, though distinct from each other, when compressed into a single well-constructed itinerary collectively confirm the totalizing myth of New York as a vibrant, bustling, diverse—but nonetheless harmonious and therefore legible—metropolis.

Spaces of Non-Tourism

If tourism wages a subtle violence upon the spaces in which it intervenes, then what does it do the spaces it neglects? There is a violence here too, the violence of the incision carved between the one city—packaged as part of the mythical metropolis that is New York—and that other city which is outside the myth. Although guidebooks mention repeatedly New York's diversity, the zones most favored by tourist itineraries—with the



A SAMPLING OF IMAGES FROM *GREEN'S GUIDE TO NEW YORK CITY*

“The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life. Not only is the relationship to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world... social space is invaded by a continuous superimposition of geological layers of commodities.”¹¹
-Guy Debord *Society of The Spectacle*



The atopia-utopia of optical knowledge has long had the ambition of surmounting and articulating the contradictions arising from urban agglomeration... Perspective vision and prospective vision constitute the twofold projection of an opaque past and an uncertain future onto a surface that can be dealt with. They inaugurate... the transformation of the urban *fact* into the *concept* of the city.”

-Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*¹²



A SAMPLING OF IMAGES FROM *GREEN'S GUIDE TO NEW YORK CITY*

“The image of the city’ offered by *vedutismo* is the product of a gaze for the most part positioned at a high point, often looking down or, at times, an aerial gaze. The codes of landscape painting and urban topography merge in creating such a view. *Vedutismo* strives to see a different landscape from that observed by the walker... The painter attempts to make the city visible by creating with a new point of view, a new visuality.””

-Giuliana Bruno *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*¹¹



possible exception of Chinatown and (occasionally) narrow segments of Harlem—are, rather unsurprisingly, the more white, affluent neighborhoods and the high-end commercial districts. While tourism does not necessarily create inequality, it is closely imbricated in processes such as commercial development and gentrification that work to disenfranchise the city's impoverished residents. In sustaining the myth of New York as a dazzling, madcap metropolis, tourism draws a shroud over all those spaces which undermine this image. These are the spaces of poverty, the spaces of industry, the spaces of immigrants, the spaces of decay, the spaces of brutally-scaled infrastructure, the spaces of drabness.

And why, after all, would one visit such places? Why does a person visit any place? A reading of contemporary guidebooks suggests that the qualities most sought by tourists in an urban neighborhood might be roughly described as genteel historicity (as conveyed by architectural aesthetics), vibrancy (animated street life, often of a purportedly ethnic variety), glamour, monumentality (the sublimity of skyscrapers and city lights), and, of course the amplitude of shopping and dining venues. To take issue with the appeal of such

attractions would require an almost draconian puritanism. So entrenched are we in the culture of urban leisure, that, while it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where its specific appeals may lie, it is equally impossible to imagine the appeal of a tourism without such attractions, and indeed there is nothing necessarily wrong with glamour, monumentality, nightlife, quaintness, and so on, in and of themselves. What is at fault is rather the way in which such things are presented as a comprehensive overview of the city. Indeed, there is an injury inflicted in the very phrase: "See it *all!*" that renders invisible all it excludes. The city is split between the visible and the invisible. Moreover, this construction of an *all-visible city* ignores the essential fact is that the city can not be seen. It always eludes vision, much as one must still seek it on visual terms, this being among the only ways to seek it.

It is not the aim of this thesis to argue the appeal of one sort of site over another. It would be absurd to simply propose an alternate tourist route that flipped the spaces of tourism and non-tourism, for—even neglecting the objection that there would be no inducement for anyone to follow such a route—this tactic too would divide the city as surely as any tourist itinerary. The aim, rather, is



**Persons 5 Years and Over
who do not Speak English "very well"**

- 3,000 or more
- 2,000 to 2,999
- 1,000 to 1,999
- 500 to 999
- Under 500



**Percent of Persons
Below the Poverty Level**

- 50.0% or more
- 35.0 to 49.9%
- 20.0 to 34.9%
- 15.0 to 19.9%
- Less than 15.0%



White Nonhispanics

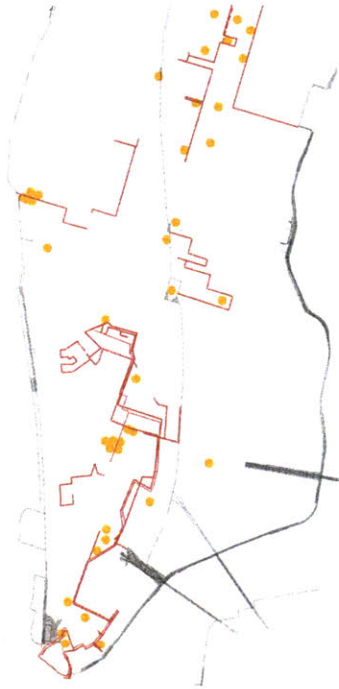
- 3,000 and over
- 1,000 to 2,999
- 500 to 999
- 100 to 499
- Under 100

Census data from
www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/census/

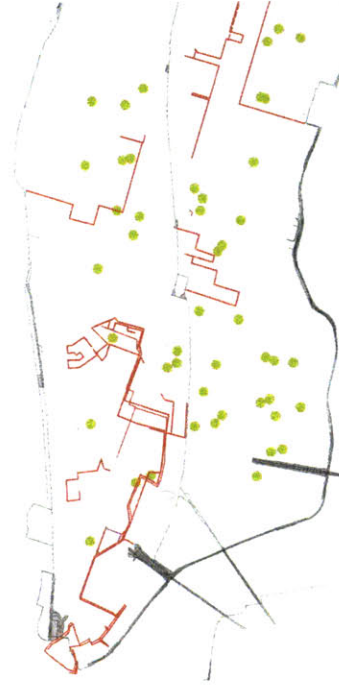
The red line denotes common tourist walking itineraries.

to try to scratch away at the constructions of tourism, and propose a tool for undermining them. To do this, it was necessary to examine why the spaces of tourism are not the spaces of non-tourism, or vice-versa. Although the economic prosperity of a neighborhood—its ability to offer both a sense of safety and attractive leisure venues—plays a large part in this equation, there are also finer subtleties to be unraveled. For example, why are Chinatown and Harlem targets of tourism in spite of their relatively high proportion of crime and poverty, whereas neighborhoods like Chinatown's adjacent Loisaida, an animated Puerto Rican district, or Washington Heights, an equally bustling Dominican enclave just north of Harlem, are completely written off the tourist grid? The difference here may well lie in the packageability of Chinatown, which is marketed in the well-known form of Chinese food, cheap "exotic" novelties, and an easily identifiable architectural style. (Granted, these products have been largely fabricated by the tourist economy). Harlem is likewise comprehended in terms of jazz, soul food, and ornate brownstones. The Latino and Dominican neighborhoods, by contrast, aren't particularly associated with any purchasable novelty or obvious visual cues: They are at once too exotic and not exotic enough.

As the breadth and focus of this text is hardly adequate for a more nuanced analysis, it will suffice for now to distinguish the spaces of tourism and non-tourism on the basis of their "packageability" as manifested through dining, shopping, and notable architectures. Such urban fixtures allow the tourist to see, learn, and consume in a coherent, uncomplicated manner and ultimately collate these experiences into a single mythical vision of the city. If the most significant difference between spaces of tourism and non-tourism lies in how readily they may be packaged for consumption—both on their own and as part of a larger myth of the metropolis—then the crux of this thesis is to devise a way of re-packaging the experience of city space in such a way that de-structures the myth of a unified, easily consumable and comprehensible urban entity. To return to my original query—how does one curate without curating?—I might respond: By complicating rather than simplifying the object of vision and by eliminating the divisions separating the spaces of the tourism from those deemed unworthy of notice.



Museums / Galleries



Soup Kitchens



Historic Districts

The red line denotes common tourist walking itineraries.

PART II: REVISIONING THE CITY



“Visual space in its specificity contains an immense crowd, veritable hordes of objects, things, bodies. These differ by virtue of their place and that place’s local peculiarities, as also by virtue of their relationships with ‘subjects.’ Everywhere there are privileged objects which arouse a particular expectation or interest, while others are treated with indifference. Some objects are known, some unknown, and some misapprehended. Some serve as relays: transitory or transitional in nature, they refer to other objects. Mirrors, though privileged objects, nevertheless have a transitional function of this kind.”

-Henri Lefebvre *The Production of Space*¹⁴

Tourism As Architecture?

“But capitalism is surely approaching a threshold beyond which reproduction will no longer be able to prevent production of new relations. What would those relations consist in? Perhaps in the unity, at once familiar and new, of space and time, a unity long misapprehended, split up and superseded by the rash attribution of priority to space over time.”

Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*¹⁵

“The architecture of tomorrow will be a means of modifying present conceptions of time and space. It will be a means of knowledge and a means of action.”

Ivan Chtcheglov, *Formulary for a New Urbanism*¹⁶

Tourism is not a practice contained within architecture in the way that the practice of building is contained within architecture. Rather, architecture and tourism are complicit, mutually dependent on each other. Tourism lies at the very heart of architecture, insofar as travel and its subsequent cross-pollenizations contributed

to the development of a building-art that synthesized diverse techniques and styles. Conversely, architecture lies at the very heart of tourism, as the design of novelty buildings such as the Guggenheim Bilbao or the humbler interventions of Chinatown archi-kitsch continue to attract tourist capital to particular regions or neighborhoods. Unfortunately, this all makes for a very legitimate topic of writing and research, while its implications for a design project remain obscure at best, particularly as my interest was not to design a building to accommodate tourism, but rather to slice my way through the very sinews that string together architecture and tourism in the service of capitalism.

To take on such a project as an architectural design thesis was both foolish and necessary: On the one hand, the profession hardly needs another architect quixotically tilting her pen at the windmills of social-economic issues, vainly imagining these to be ogres of an architectural nature. On the other hand, I maintain that architecture is so deeply complicit with social and economic injustices that the practice of it can not be simply “innovated” in any way that would alter its complicity, but rather must

be used (against its own self) to attack architecture at a more fundamental level. Let me clarify this distinction, as it appears rather self-contradictory: Architecture is quite limited in its capacity to redress social ills through techniques of building design, as these ills are part of a much larger system. When I speak of tilting at windmills, I refer to the many projects that purport a radical political stance, whether through juxtapositions of unlikely programs à la Tschumi, or use of cheap materials, or claims that visual transparency betokens political openness, et cetera, et cetera. Architects, touting politically critical agendas, generally seize on the typical devices of architecture (i.e. composing material and space in the service of program), as if they could use these as a weapon against architecture's fundamental relationships to social inequity. But so long as architecture is designed to service wealthy and powerful clients, so long as it is wedded to property value, architects can not very significantly attack social injustice through any mere tweakings and tunings of architectural vocabulary. Rather, the only way to seriously attack architecture's relationship to power is to cease to service powerful clients, a proposition hardly

feasible for most architects.

This thesis thus explores ways of severing the relationship between architecture and capital as they are currently united in the practices of tourism. On the most fundamental level, this project achieves this through relocating the curatorial interventions of tourism from their present interferences within the actual built form of the city into the manipulative space of the video camera. If tourist economies have exploded the practices of the museum into the fabric of the city, then this project proposes the opposite: It compresses the museum into the space of the video camera through the augmentation of lenses that re-configure views of the city. Rather than relying on the tourist props of commodity, itinerary, and historic gloss, these devices are intended to guide their user in search of new visual narratives of the city. The objectives in designing these devices were:

Firstly, to destabilize the urban built environment by visually reconfiguring its relationships and highlighting typically

“invisible” relationships through such edited juxtapositions;

Secondly, to develop ways of seeing which disenfranchise the object of vision and discourage reading the city as a coherent unity, or as a composition of discreet units;

Thirdly, to scratch away at the boundaries presently separating the mythical city from the marginal city.

In designing these devices, the aim was therefore to employ “architectural” design (i.e. the design of the optic instrument) to pose a challenge to standard architectural practice and to the larger processes of capital development which architecture often serves. These small lens-boxes are a form of architecture that replaces architecture.

Walking

“...The gaze of the allegorist that falls on the city is estranged. It is the gaze of the flâneur, whose mode of life still surrounds the approaching desolation of city life with a propitiatory luster... He seeks refuge in the crowd... The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city lures the flâneur like a phantasmagoria. In it the city is now a landscape, now a room. Both, then, constitute the department store that puts even flânerie to use for commodity circulation. The department store is the flâneur’s last practical joke.”

Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capital of the 19th Century*¹⁷

“In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. The element of chance is less determinant than one might think: from the *dérive* point of view cities have a psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points, and vortexes which strongly discourage

entry into or exit from other zones.”

Guy Debord, *Theory of the Dérive* 18

In the first section of this text I critiqued what might be described as de Certeau's half-naïve endorsement of walking as a subversion of hegemonic constructions of the city. Yet this was not intended as an outright dismissal of de Certeau. On the contrary, this thesis project might be construed as an effort to salvage what is instructive in his theory of city walking. If, as I argued earlier, the views glimpsed by pedestrians—especially tourists—at street level are in fact constructed as surely (albeit more subtly) as the views glimpsed by the voyeur gazing from the 110th floor, then it is imperative to develop a way of walking that avoids the constructedness of such views. We might return for a moment to the origin of tour-ism. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “tour” firstly as a verb:

- “1. a. “To ‘take a turn’ in or about a place, esp. riding or driving. Obs.
- b. To turn, direct one’s steps. Dial

2. intr. To make a tour or circuitous journey, in which many places are visited, usually without retracing one’s steps; to make a prolonged excursion for recreation or business.

3. a. trans. To make the tour or round of, to tour in (a country or district).
- b. To cover (a distance) in touring.”¹⁹

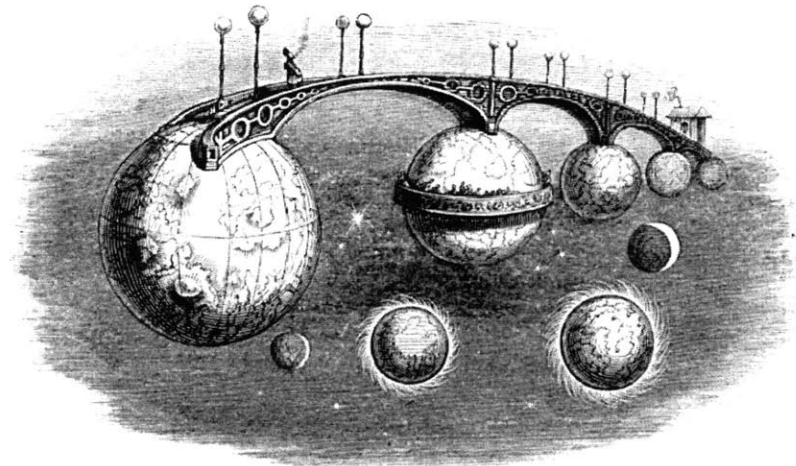
From its original sense of simply “taking a turn” around a given site (literally from the French “faire un tour”), the tour has been laden with the trappings of a far greater cultural specificity. *Tour* has whittled its way down from the generality walking to the intricate and highly involved rites of *tourism*. This evolution of meaning reflects an evolution in walking itself, from the sort of walking that, as de Certeau maintains, escapes and undoes the minute tailorship of the planners’ design, to a walking that follows the designs of tourism.

So how does one walk? A stupid question, but one that practically requires a taxonomy of urban movement: To start with the simplest distinction, there is walking for

the sole purpose of reaching a particular destination, and there is walking that is meant as an end unto itself, and then of course there is something that lies between these two, the meandering of street shopping with its scattered destinations and possibilities for detour. These latter two bring us—inevitably—to the flâneur.

The flâneur is drawn to the crowds, but he is also drawn to the commodities glittering in the shop windows and arcades of nineteenth-century Paris. Flânerie was a way of transgressing social boundaries, allowing the bourgeois flâneur to mingle with the masses. It also became a way of seemingly transforming the urban landscape into an array of commodities, much in the way that Grandville turns the entire universe into a sort of pedestrian tourist commodity in his famous image of inter-planetary pedestrian bridges that Benjamin finds so telling.²⁰

In this project I accept (and assume) the role of the flâneur as a walker of the city drawn to and fro by the magnetic lure of commodities. I furthermore accept *in a revised form* the commodity as one of the principal



An "interplanetary bridge", from *Un autre monde*

seductions of the act of walking. In fact, the video devices I have designed transform the entire landscape into a commodity through the lens of the camera. But of course, these are not commodities that are bought or sold: They have no material reality or duration; they are fleeting and reveal the commodity for what it really is: a trick of packaging, an optic lens. The commodity thus remains, but it replaces the real commodity--the items bought and sold in stores--and offers in its place the ability to package the world, the buildings, sky, people, and trees, in the "storefront" of the video

tour, v.

a. intr. To 'take a turn' in or about a place, esp. riding or driving. Obs.

b. To turn, direct one's steps. dial.

2. intr. To make a tour or circuitous journey, in which many places are visited, usually without retracing one's steps; to make a prolonged excursion for recreation or business; spec. of an actor, a theatrical company, or the like: to go 'on tour', to travel from town to town fulfilling engagements.

3. a. trans. To make the tour or round of, to tour in (a country or district).

b. To cover (a distance) in touring.

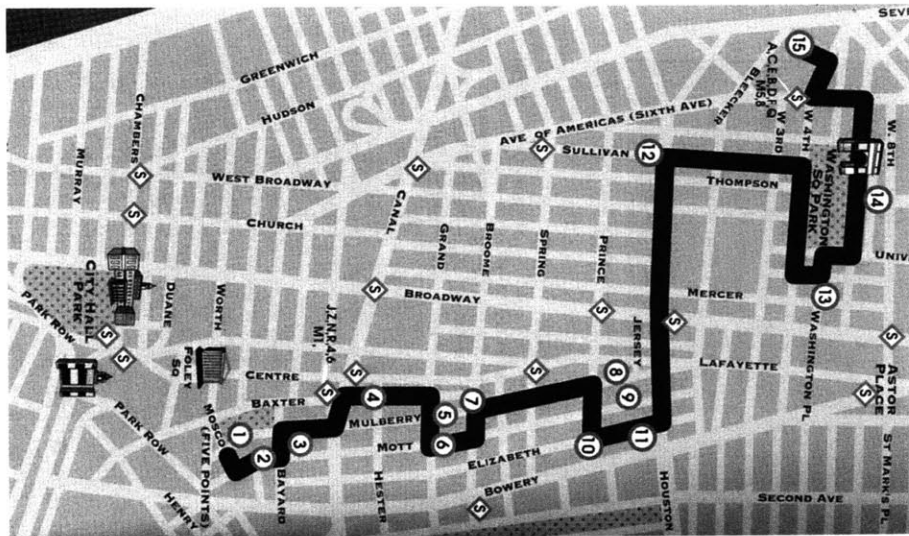
detour, n.

A turning or deviation from the direct road; a roundabout or circuitous way, course, or proceeding. In 18th century, mostly fig.

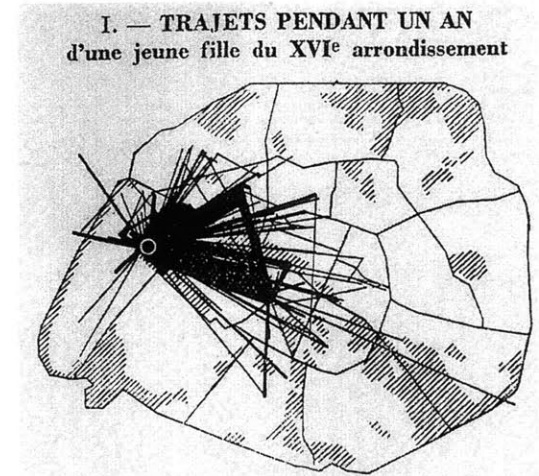
detour, v.

a. intr., to make a detour; to turn aside from the direct way; to go round about.

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A proposed tourist walking itinerary from *Green's Guide to New York City*

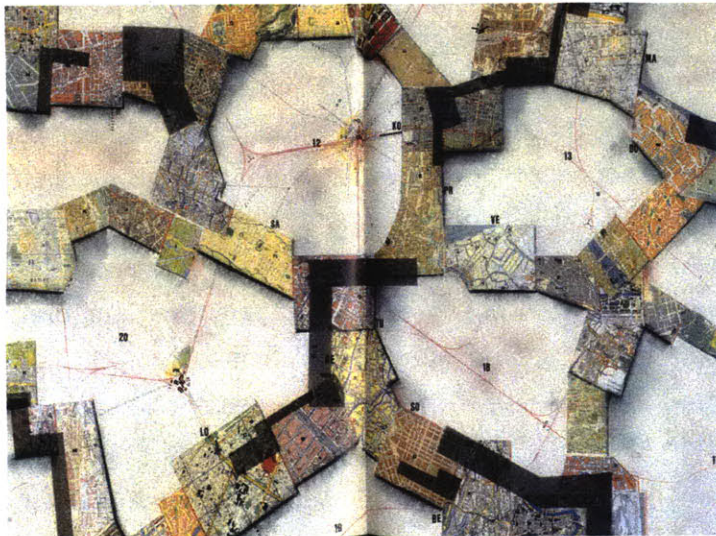


Le triangle central a pour sommets : le domicile, les leçons de piano et les cours de Sciences politiques.

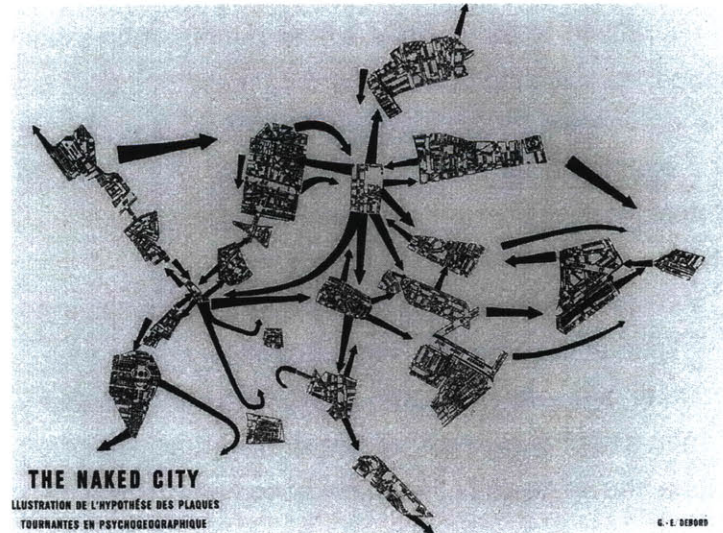
"Routes taken throughout one year by a girl in the sixteenth arrondissement," from *The Activist*
 Drawing: *Retracing Situationist Architectures*.

“It is true that the operations of walking can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths... and their trajectories... But these thick or thin curves refer, like words, only to the absence of what has passed by. Surveys or routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by.”

-Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* ²¹



Collaged maps based on similarities of ambience, from *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures*.



Collaged maps as suggested derives, from *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures*.

image without any of it being purchasable. Hence the severing of architecture and property. With these optic video attachments, the flâneur can produce his or her own commodities at the neglect of those offered up for sale.

The flâneur is perhaps the predecessor of another creature: the Situationist pursuing his *dérive*. Although this project owes a certain debt to the Situationists, it is, surprisingly, in the notion of the *dérive* and of psychogeography that we part ways, so to speak. Of the Situationists' theories, the most influential to this project is the linking of architecture to the realms of time and space, establishing that architecture must thus address the movement through the city in time as surely as it addresses the form of the city's space. According to Chtchevlov:

“We know that an object that is not consciously noticed at the time of a first visit can, by its absence during subsequent visits, provoke an indefinable impression: as a result of this sighting backward in time, the absence of the object becomes a presence

one can feel.” 22

What this suggests for my project is that the video camera can create an analogue to the act of walking which edits out certain experiences of the walk but retains through their absence a ghost of their presence. Whatever is retained in spite of being omitted comprises then quite literally the essence of the walk. This is significant because the walker always wants to retain some souvenir or memory of the walk, a souvenir that is inadequately provided in the form of postcards, local novelties, or food, or even the photograph itself which secures the literal vision of a place, while often letting a non-visible essence escape. This notion of essence is not a reiteration of the Situationists' ambience or psychogeographies, which attribute the reaction produced by a place to some sort of unexplained presencing conveyed by the patina of oldness. It is simply an acknowledgment that there are temporal, extra-visual experiences that elude reproduction through typical “straight-up” techniques of photography and video. Through walking the city, one may learn the city to whatever extent that it can be learned, but

one can not capture the knowledge of this walk through the sort of commodities offered to walker. Rather, the experience must be captured by a recording that does not simply reproduce the perspectival view of the camera lens, but actually edits the city into essential fragments and components, which, when pieced together, form a narrative of city walking.

Seeing

“The 1370 foot high tower that serves as a prow for Manhattan continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text.

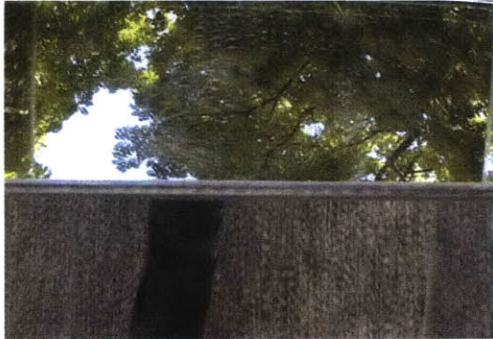
Is the immense texturology spread out before one’s eyes anything more than a representation, an optical artifact? It is the analogue of the facsimile produced, through a projection that is a way of keeping aloof, by the space planner urbanist, city planner, or cartographer. The panorama-city is a ‘theoretical’ (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion



Umberto Boccioni: *The Street Enters the House*, from www.artonline.it/

and a misunderstanding of practices.”

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* 23



“All cities are geological... We move in a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past. Certain shifting angles, certain receding perspectives allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought in the magical locales of fairy tales and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, little forgotten bars, mammoth caves, casino mirrors.”

Ivan Chitchevlov, *Formulary for a New Urbanism* ²⁴

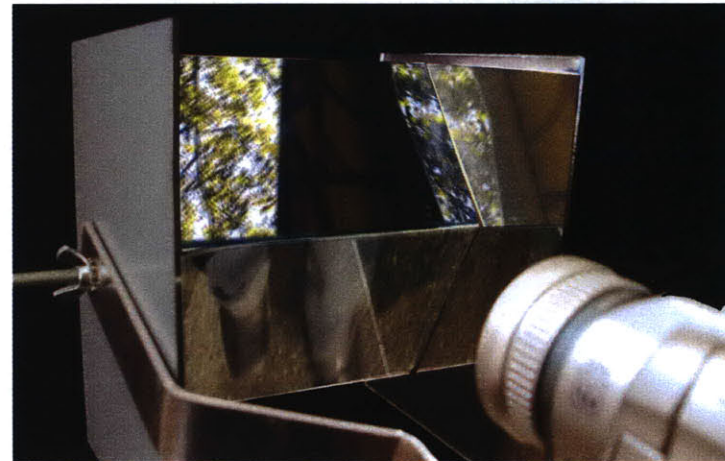
This project does not challenge the hegemony of vision: What it does challenge is how vision is drawn into the hegemonizing perspective of the city. The instruments designed here serve the somewhat contradictory function of helping to reveal the composition of the city by decomposing it to make it less legible: The city, through these instruments, becomes less understandable as a coherent whole, and more understandable as shifting and non-perspectival collage of fragments. Although several of the instruments were designed initially to reveal specific conditions of the city, such conditions are so shifting in and of themselves, that the instruments would “behave” unpredictably, picking up viewpoints

and creating effects not initially anticipated.

In designing these instruments, I have struggled between the intent to give them a level of specificity—in both the physical conditions they record and the social critique latent in such a recording—and my gradual resignation that the city largely confounded my efforts to dissect it in any clearly-intentioned way. True to the thesis (even if *against* the design of the instruments themselves), the city was too complexly heterogeneous to submit to such simplistic surgeries. It was frequently in the subsequent dis-functioning of the instrument that the most striking results were obtained. Such results generally eluded clear description and analysis, and were compelling largely on an aesthetic basis—effects of light, color, etc...—but such effects often picked up on some quality of street life or architecture not usually perceived in the roving of pedestrian vision—some detail, or new relationship always there but never consciously perceived. To repeat once more the words of Chtcheglov: “As a result of this sighting backward in time, the absence of the object becomes a presence one can feel.” What was omitted from the frame of

the camera often intruded as a vague presence, the existence of which was just hinted at by the zoomed-in fragmentary details that re-focused the viewer’s vision. I’ll illustrate with a few examples to make this clearer:

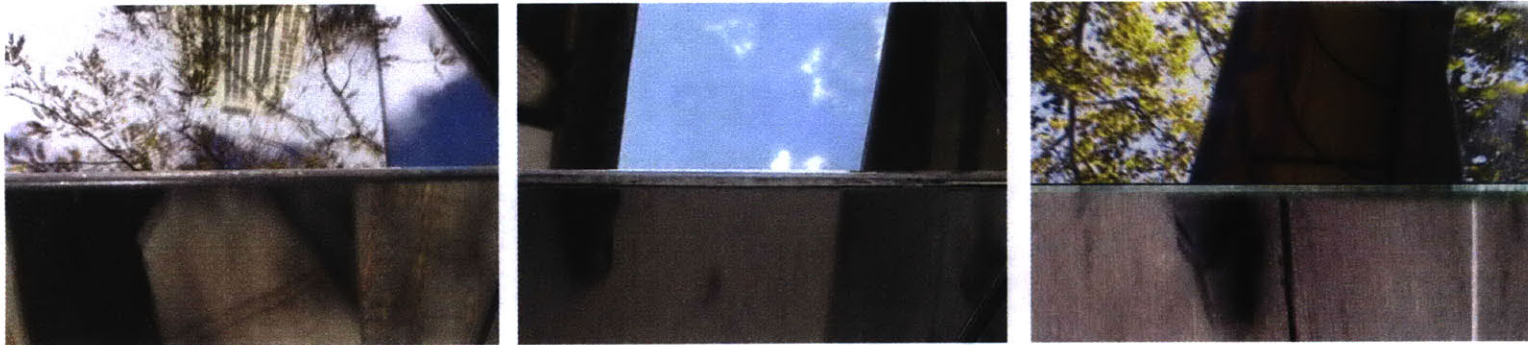
The first and most simple of my optic instruments made use of two angled mirrors to reflect the sky and sidewalk. The idea was to cancel out the distinctions between neighborhoods, to eliminate their uniqueness—so touted by guidebooks—and reduce the city to its most typical common elements: sidewalk, trees, sky, lampposts, traffic lights. While this intention was realized to some

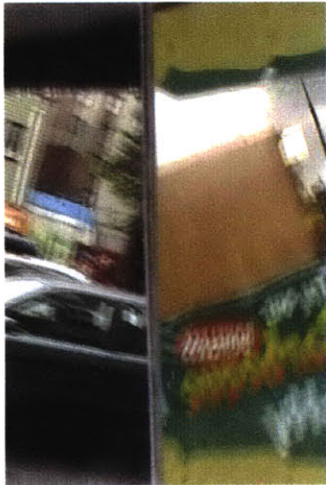


Canopy over the Old Navy Store on Thirty-third Street



The idea was to cancel out the distinctions between neighborhoods, to eliminate their uniqueness—so touted by guidebooks—and reduce the city to its most typical common elements: sidewalk, trees, sky, lampposts, traffic lights, but the city’s particularities invaded against these efforts.



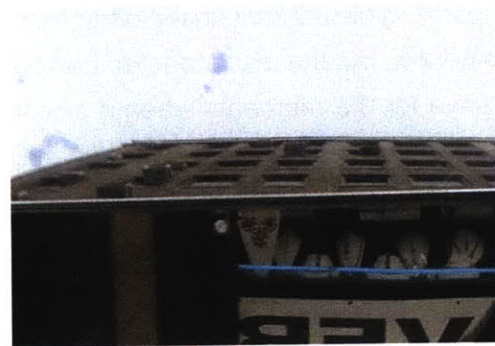


degree, minute details that encroached into the video frame did reveal certain local distinctions. Although long stretches of footage might show more or less nothing but sidewalk with trees and sky above, this footage was interspersed with images of storefront canopies projecting over the sidewalk, and views of distant skyscrapers. What became interesting here was how an area of the city could be interpreted through a few slender visual clues, clues that lie outside of one's usual viewpoint (i.e. one rarely walks looking up at the underside of storefront awnings). This random selection of details, magnified by their dislocation from a broader visual context, proved more alluring than the original intent to simply cancel out all details. The banalities of these scraps of urban architecture—planks and scaffolding, lobby canopies—became intense through such minutely edited focus of vision.

Taking a cue from the footage of these first test walks, I then tried different uses for the instrument within different contexts. By flipping the instrument on its side, its mirrored planes could collapse the space around them, reflecting what lay on either side of a street, and

eliminating the perspective view of receding space. As one of my initial interests had been the streets that act as boundaries between two distinct neighborhoods, I used the instrument to collapse the space separating the two sides of the street. East Houston Street, with its vast width and marked economic differences on south and north sides (marking the boundary between the East Village and the Lower East Side) was chosen as a site to deploy this instrument. The result was the creation of a dislocated city, not belonging to any one place, demographic, or scale. Because I walked on the north side of the street, its storefronts and architectural materials were reflected in close detail, whereas the south side of the street was reflected as a series of zoomed-out slices. In viewing the footage, the mind wants to link the detailed content that occupies one half of the frame to the more legible content on the other half, to make them fit somehow, but the disconnected halves defy this impulse, save for the moments when a street intersection provides a more compatible (although still fractured) combination of images.

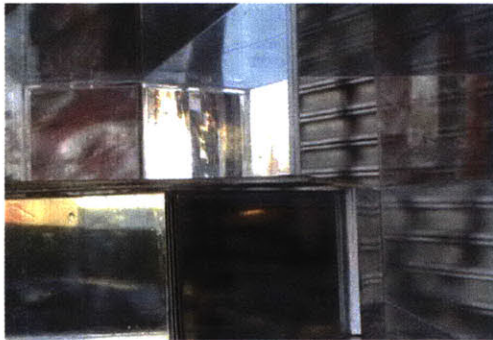
A third, more specific use, for this instrument returned to



the original interest in the commodity. New York still bears relics of a dying species: small-scale manufacturing spaces occupying the same building as their retail shop below. In the history of nineteenth-century flânerie, this relationship between manufacturing and the commodity was made increasingly invisible: “To the idler who strolls the streets, things appear divorced from the history of their production, and their fortuitous juxtapositions suggest mysterious and mystical connections.” In New York City, manufacturing jobs have decreased by almost 75% in the past half century, as real estate development pushes manufacturing industries to the city margins (or to other cities), and the professional classes occupy more and more of New York’s central space. This marginalization of the spaces of manufacturing, in combination with a tourist economy that markets the city as a space of luxury and leisure, creates an apparent erasure of industry, and feeds the subsequent myth of the post-industrial city. With this optical instrument then, I attempted to re-marry the commodity and its manufacturing history by directing the two mirrors to reflect the space of the commodity—the storefront—in juxtaposition with the space of manufacturing—the

sweatshop above. To anyone walking the streets of the Garment district, this relationship should be self-evident, but the jarring tumult of the street and the visual allure of the merchandise keep the pedestrian’s viewpoint riveted at street level. Although didactic in its intent, this instrument also offered surreal potential: The close-up footage of the novel wares of the Garment District—rhinestone tiaras, feather boas, wigs, and perfumes—in contrast to the massive dirty brick buildings and boarded windows above, made for a strange world: The enlarged Grandvillean things-of-cheap-beauty butt up against an incomprehensibly looming and seemingly infinite other world of sooty brick walls and windows. The effect of this enlargement of the commodity object and the comparative shrinking of the architecture is both unreal and super-real: While the footage does not reproduce our daily visual reading of the city, its re-scalings are in some ways closer to the truth than what is presented by our usual quotidian vision. That is to say that such re-scalings exaggerate our own subconscious framings of the city.

My next instruments were designed as a further

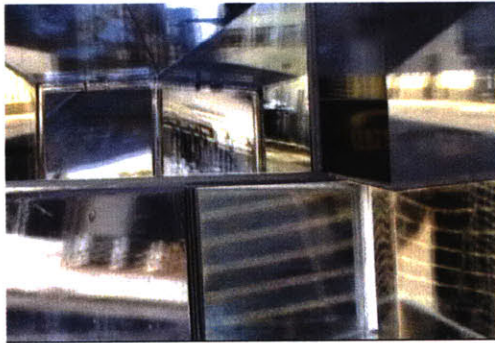
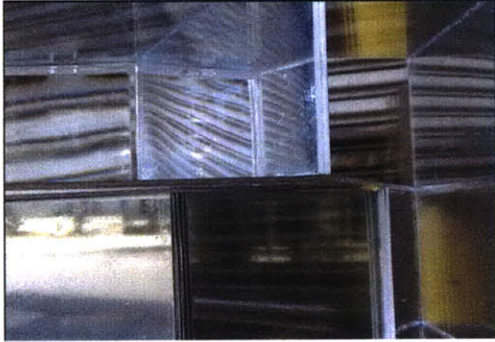


exploration in framing, scaling, and recombination—leading to the conceptualization of these instruments as a series of portable museums. I have already touched briefly on the museum's re-configuration of objects as an essential operation of its mission to collect and order. To temper this critique, I would add that although the museum's methods of re-contextualizing cultural artifacts has generated such an ongoing lament of scholarly criticism, there is still something intrinsically compelling and valuable in the act of removing the artifact from its context in order to place it within different possible narratives: As reckless as such an intervention might be, it is also a creative act of generating knowledge, one that potentially enables its curators (and presumably its audience) to reconsider the myriad connotations of an object, its relations to other objects, and how objects might be pressed into the construction of a history. Where the museological project falls most short is in its recurring dependence on those objects which are all too easily removed from their normal sitings—monuments and statuary which already announce their presence as extra-normal and self-evident objects of attention—as opposed to those trifles

of daily life which are never seen precisely because they are always seen and whose connections to their surroundings do not obviously beg further inquiry simply because they appear so intrinsically united with them. As an act of unveiling the all-too-visible invisibilities of the city, I designed these instruments to re-configure and re-scale the objects of pedestrian vision in such a way as to call attention to that which is always there but just barely or subconsciously noted. Without physically intervening in the city or intentionally privileging particular aspects of it, the instrument randomly dissects the city's composition, draws out certain elements, and re-scales them in relation to one another.

The second instrument then was constructed with the following elements: a magnifying glass which only magnified an object in close proximity, and which would otherwise present the world as an inverted miniature, thus oscillating between the macro- and micro-scopic; angled planes of glass coated with a semi-transparent mirrored film, designed to superimpose the view seen through it with a competing view from behind; and opaquely angled mirrors designed also to simultaneously



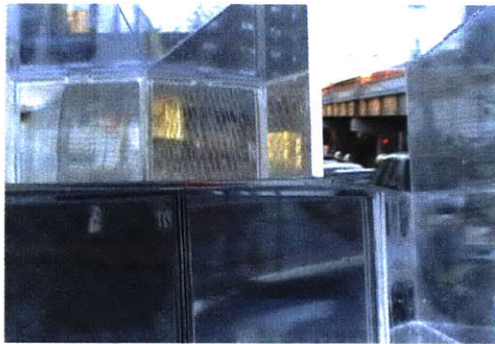


offer a different viewpoint. The effect of such multiple viewpoints naturally calls to mind the efforts of Cubist and Futurist painters to offer simultaneous viewpoints of a single object. However, whereas these earlier movements were concerned largely with the collapse of time into a single frame of two-dimensional space, my own instruments constructed the apparent collapse of space as an ongoing trajectory through time. Additionally, the varying levels of magnification presented multiple proximities to alter one's normal perception of the relationship between object and landscape, or rather, object and cityscape.

The implications for such an operation vary according to the specific context of application. I chose three sites for the deployment of this instrument, the first site offering a visual and kinetic commotion to be dissected by the apparatus of this portable museum; the second site posing the opposite challenge: a monolithic stretch of delivery warehouses whose material monotony and desolation would repel the tourist unless reconstructed into a more spectacular terrain; and the third site a street lined with housing projects that were bleakly repetitive.

This first deployment revisited East Houston Street, which had been filmed previously with the dual-mirror device. With the subsequent application of this newer instrument, a very different version of the streetscape was derived, one that juxtaposed close-up slices of material—brick walls, chain-link fence, plywood fencing around construction sites—with small, fleeting glimpses of larger street activity—a man's passing face; a car; a miniature, blurred and inverted perspective of the street, recognized just barely before flipping back to a magnification of material. What was compelling in the resulting footage was how these bits of information could form an impression of the city with fragmented juxtapositions that were at once more complex than a typical mono-perspective, but also simpler through the reduction of the landscape to distinctly framed—albeit ever-shifting—components.

The second site, situated on the far west side, a sort of no-man's-land between SoHo and Greenwich Village, called for the application of a bi-polarizing lens in addition to the instrument itself, in order to draw out tonal contrast



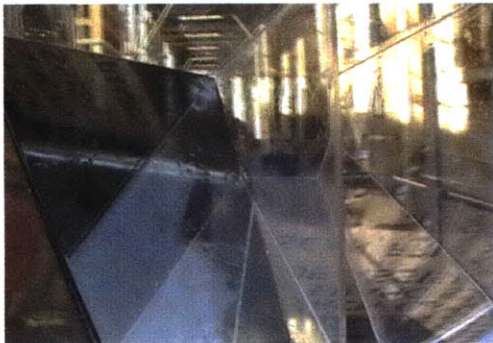
from the drabness of the site. The resulting footage was possibly more visually tantalizing for its very simplicity than the other footages with their rush of images. If one of the aims in designing these instruments was to erase distinctions between the sites of tourism and non-tourism, then the virtual spectacularization of the seemingly banal is key to revealing the broader urban spaces and functions that lie on the margins of what is considered “interesting”. Accordingly, on the third deployment of the instrument, the housing projects that loom on the fringes of the Lower East Side and their surrounding landscape of decrepitude are re-scaled and re-framed through the instrument. Such re-scalings reveal the neighborhood’s physical composition in a way that attests more eloquently than a typical perspective view to the not-so-coincidental relationships between the massive infrastructure of highway overpasses, the dispersed towers, and the dwarfed and crumbling smaller buildings that remain as vestiges of a former tenement district. I do not intend the aesthetic effect of the footage to act as a misting veil flung over the visual evidence of poverty; nor is it meant to romanticize the “edginess” of urban slums. On the contrary, the



aesthetic effect is implemented as a tool to draw the viewer/walker into places which would otherwise be ignored. The footage retains the sad cheapness of such places—indeed, zooms in on it—while didactically underscoring the architectural elements that structure such sites. I am not questioning then the importance of aesthetic appeal in attracting people to different parts of the city. I am simply re-locating the aesthetic appeal from its currently perceived position as something intrinsic to the site (though more often it is part of a series of cosmetic surgeries devised by planners, architects, and developers specifically towards the attraction of capital)

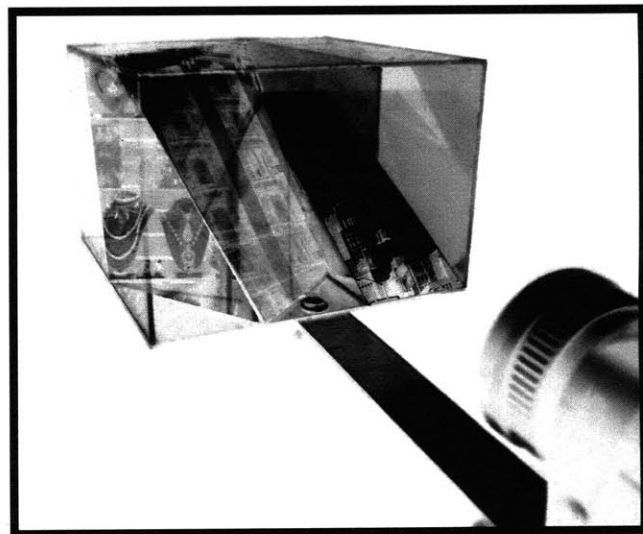
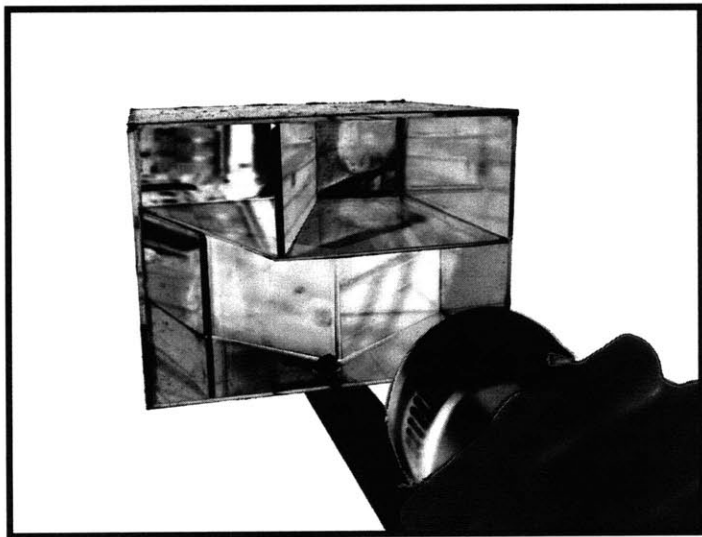
to the apparatus of the video camera itself.

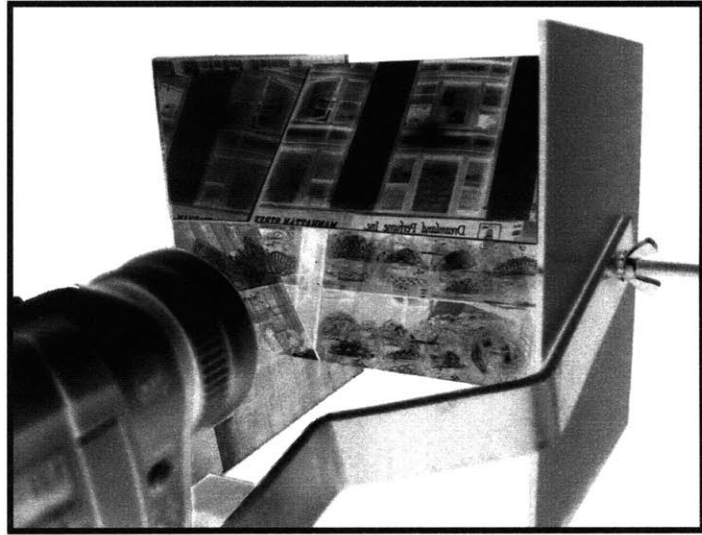
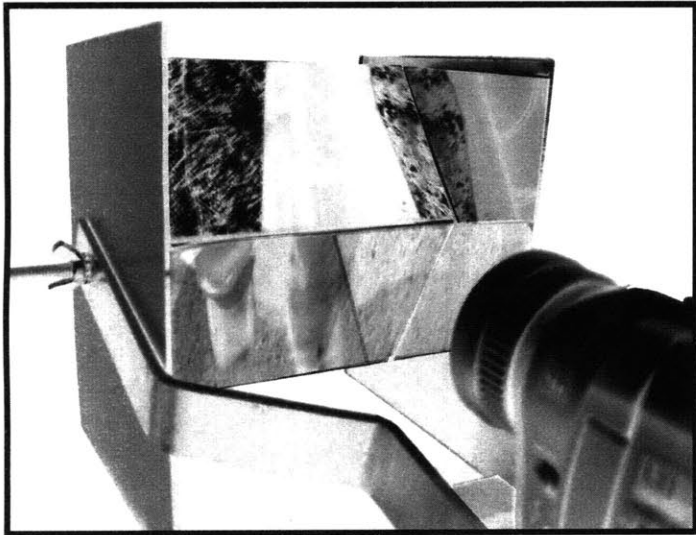
The last instrument was designed as a further iteration of these ideas, while drawing its original motivation from the earlier exercise of re-editing the Garment District. To break from the initial and somewhat limited dichotomy constructed by the first instrument, this third instrument used semi-transparent mirror on two angled planes, along with a third angled plane of opaque mirror, and a small slot or oculus of transparent glass. One of the semi-transparent facets was aligned to reflect storefront merchandise or whatever happened to be



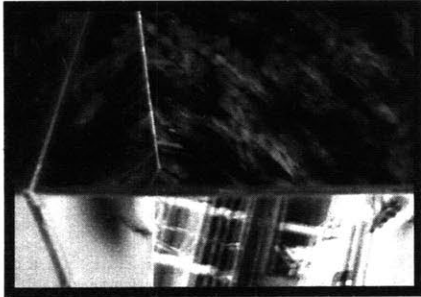
at this level; the second plane was aligned to reflect more broadly the opposite side of the street, with its architectural facades; the third plane that was opaque reflected the more looming, distant architectures of the skyline above; the slot was designed to provide a slivered glimpse of whatever happened to be directly before the walker--often people or traffic. Unlike the previous instrument, this one did not make use of magnification techniques, but it still addressed notions of scale through the framing of different distances (i.e. merchandise, façade, skyline, and streetlife). Because of the semi-transparency of the reflective glass, these scales are overlaid on the perspectival view of the city, but to varying degrees according to the light conditions reflected in the differently angled planes of mirror. In the actual deployment of this instrument, the shifting conditions of the urban terrain often escape the intended framings and simply produce instead fractured, overlapping slices of the surrounding landscape. In this vision of the city, de-stabilized though it is, an essence of its realities is nonetheless retained. In fact, I would argue that this essence is rendered more potent through its distillation into taxonomies of scale and material.

When I say “taxonomies” I don’t mean to imply static or legible categories that enable a clear reading of the city; Rather I speak of a sort of decomposition of the city into components which are not noted from the frame of a typical pedestrian viewpoint. The very illegibility of the non-perspectival viewpoint impels the viewer outside of his or her normal perception and arouses a greater attentiveness to the details and relationships that comprise the city.





CONCLUSION: CURATING THE CITY



In the introductory section, I spoke of the violence inflicted on the city by the incursions of tourist-gear development. However, what I have proposed as an alternative to this form of tourism is undoubtedly violent as well: It involves no less than an ongoing vivisection of the city. But this surgery is in a sense a virtual one, occurring within the space of the video camera. Moreover, it does not conceal its violence: It is always evident to passersby and tourist alike that a transformation—albeit a virtual one—is being enacted upon the city by the video instrument. The instruments, which are obtrusive attachments to the video camera, dramatize the role of the tourist or flâneur as an alien intruder into a foreign realm: The tourist becomes a mockery of tourism in donning this cyborgian explorer's gear. There is something humorous in this manifestation of the enormity, bizarreness, and, ultimately, the futility of the tourist's endeavors. The city can not be adequately captured, and this elusiveness comprises its very allure, thereby constructing the central paradox of tourism: that the tourist can not capture the object of

interest without somehow destroying it. It is my own struggle with this paradox that has driven the perversity of this entire project. It is not intended to solve the paradox, but rather to play around it, to tease out its conundrums.

I earlier stated as the central thesis this project the aspiration to curate the city without really curating it. The designed automatism of these instruments is meant to fulfill this mandate to whatever extent possible. Moreover, in never functioning quite as planned, the instruments themselves confound the curator's designed intentions as well as the possible intentions of their potential users. However, in a broader way, the instruments do, I hope, conform to certain criteria laid out in the body of this text.

They do not freeze an image of the city or attempt to make it legible.

They allow for complexity within a single frame of vision.

They free tourism from its fundamental (structural) reliance on consumption.

They do not require the city to change to meet tourists' expectations but rather "change" the city virtually.

They reveal tourism as an operation of intrusion, while, at the same time, rendering this intrusion less obtrusive.

They attempt to erase the strictures that delimit spaces of tourism and non-tourism.

Architects have long been fundamentally involved in the development of tourism and the practices of curating. They are called on to preserve or beautify neighborhoods designated as historic. They design museums and other spectacular monuments as tourist magnets. They work with curators to design museum exhibits that aesthetically structure the representation of artifacts. My intention throughout this project has been then to reconsider such forms of architecture that are so complicit in the destruction and re-creation of city districts. Ultimately, the only way out of such complicity is not through a revision of standards of building, but through a rejection of building altogether.

These instruments have been designed to replace to a certain extent the practice of building by re-focusing on the fundamental abstractions of architecture: time as experienced through the movement of space. This foundation of architecture is also that of tourism, and can be designed not only through buildings but, more simply, through a re-design of walking and seeing.

Notes:

1 Section 168

2 p. 23

3 Section 170

4 Here I referred mostly to *Fodor's Guide to New York City* and *The Green Guide: New York City*.

5 *The Green Guide: New York City*. 148

6 *Ibid.* 143

7 This is notwithstanding the highly valuable work compiled in Nezar Al Sayaad's *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage: Global Norms and Urban Forms in the Age of Tourism*.

8 *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.* 93

11 *Society of the Spectacle*, section 42

12 *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93

13 *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*

14 *The Production of Space*, 209

15 *Ibid.*, 219

16 "Formulary for a New Urbanism", 2

17 "Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Reflections*, 156

18 Guy Debord, Theory of the Dérive, from *Situationist International Anthology*, 50.

19 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*

20 Grandville, *Un Autre Monde*. See Benjamin's discussion in *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*.

21 *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97

22 "Formulary for a New Urbanism", 3

23 *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92-3

24 "Formulary for a New Urbanism", 1-2

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