Street Corner Semiology

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The intersection, where bodies move in sync with the inert and a rhythmic performance of the living and non-living occurs; a stage for a production of interactions, figurative and literal. People, through actions, can give the street identity, and in the process claim ownership of the street. In that action, the people themselves become a text, and consequently gain a portion of the city where a sub-culture is formed that forces the street and the street corner into the margin of society. Even its color, the gray-black tones, allows the street to fall into the periphery.

The street corner, a by-product of industrialization, a quasi-isolated phenomenon carved from the necessity of transportation and promoted by modernity. Within the street corner lies a sequence of texts to be read and decoded; a point at which communication occurs between objects both inert and individual through space and tangible boundaries. Therein lies the dichotomy between the physical and psychological nature of the street corner. Both a gateway and a destination, it is a non-place that either promotes or negates vice through its composition of negative space, proximity of structure to the street, and materiality.

But what is, if at all, the relationship between the street corner and the community it belongs to (or the community that belongs to it)? It is a question posed that requires an understanding of the depth of the intersection, its relationship to the urban fabric, and the human psyche. This relationship will be uncovered through analyses of the intersection in the city, particularly the city of Detroit and those cities within it, to determine whether the condition of the street corner affects the adjacent neighborhood, or the opposite. Once a bustling city on the map, Detroit presents an interesting case to be studied and analyzed. Its streets reflect pockets of urban decay and a declining population density. Here, the street corner can be used as a signifying node to uncover the condition of a community’s social environment with respect to its physical environment. The intersection is a nucleus of bustling life. It can be proven that it holds within it the ability to be a text for symbols within the community.
thesis statement

One transient person inspired this investigation: the street performer. He, not only a conductor of music, but of a finely choreographed production of people suspended in space and time. Yet, his beautiful noise, poignant and vivacious, was ignored, and the orchestra, without its knowledge, had become secondary to its venue. Why had he come to this space? What urge occupied his subconscious and forced him here? Whatever the reason, he had come to the space of the street corner and it had subsequently become his stage for a meaningless performance. He had received some invitation and accepted it. The show begins.

The intersection is a stage, figuratively and literally, for a production of interactions. It is the setting for this investigation into the relationship between the people that inhabit this space and the physical environment that surrounds them. Within this investigation, there are three main ideas that drive its conceptual foundation: the street as an interstitial space, a non-place, and the street as a text to be read and decoded.

The dynamic space of the intersection can be understood through researching the space that defines it: the street. The street has a rich social history as a “carrier of communication,” and will continue to fill that role. The street is an integral component of the urban fabric, but it is more valuable to the human experience than merely buildings along a street - a metamorphic space that has a historic relationship to certain ideas and behaviors that change and react relative to place, time, and culture. In conjunction with landmarks, built, natural, and altered, streets have been used as pathways in pilgrimages, initiations and processions. The street was a communal space where a variety of activities and interactions occurred.
Today, ignorance has become the nature of the street. It is an interstitial space that exists on maps as a series of intersecting lines and in physical space as a surface differentiated from the surrounding landscape, but the street does not exist in the sensory condition as a place for social interaction. There is a complex relationship between the physical street and the social activity that occurs within this space. The material and edges that differentiate the street from building give it permanence, but action that occurs there is always in flux. Even the manner in which the street is experienced, as a pedestrian or motorist, influences either the permanency or fluctuation of the street. As a pedestrian, the ground and the built environment are static elements, but only the body is dynamic, in a constant state of change. The opposite is true in the case of the motorist. In his experience of the street, the body is static within a kinetic capsule that forces the street to become a moving element that, as a result, is obsolete in the blur. It is this transient quality of the street that attributes to its condition as an interstitial space.

As an ignored interstitial space used only in transition, the street is also a non-place; a term used by Marc Augé, a French ethnologist, to describe spaces of transient quality. Non-places are impersonal, void of identity, isolated, and inundated with text. As a public space, the street has no legal owner, but users of the street have the ability to claim ownership to it by their actions; it is a place of both anonymity and territoriality where those who have the ability to claim ownership to the street also have the ability to restrict access to it through unwritten codes of conduct that regulate the behaviors of trespassers or intruders. The users create invisible boundaries within unbound space, thereby creating a subculture that essentially gains control of a portion of the city.

The non-place of the street produces its own method of communication which, Czarnowski describes as any distribution or exchange that is either transcribed, transported, or transmitted. Transcribed communication, through the “mediation of words and texts,” defines the non-place of the street. Signs discourage interaction...
between people and forbid familiarity on an intimate level. People are forced to converse with text from vast distances. The words and texts are intended for any user of the street, inhabitant or visitor. No one person or class is singled out or given preferential treatment; everyone is the same and no one at all. Identity is lost in a non-place of no identity.

The communication that occurs within the space of the street is the nature of it; the built environment of the street is a text to be read and decoded. When the built environment is viewed as a series of texts, all objects within the environment indicate meaning that is only valid when the same language is used. The concept of signification is most clearly discussed in Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of signs known as semiotics. In this theory he describes the concept of the sign as being a whole created from that which one sees or hears, the signified, and the subsequent image conveyed, the signifier. Signification links the signified and signifier and is dependent upon particular internal structures within a given cultural system, a language. It is concerned with the nature of signs and the cultural code that governs them.

Agrest argues that the notion of a code embedded within the space of the street has strong emphasis on its functional, rather than formal aspects. This thesis begins to uncover the relationship between the formal and functional typologies of the street with respect to cultural social codes or activities, and re-presents the intersection as a barometer for the social and physical condition of the surrounding community.

The intricate nature of a culture and the codes it produces is no more apparent than at the street corner. Because the street corner is composed by the street via the intersection, the corner inherits all the interstitial, non-place, and textual properties of the street, but it is at the street corner where people force non-place into place or deny the street corner altogether. Where the street is concerned only with text transcribed, the street corner and its users recognize both the written and psychological forms of text. Negative space, proximity of structure to the street, and materiality of individual street corner typologies, as texts, all have the ability to restrict access or modify behavior.

As a result of ongoing documentation of individual street corner typologies and Detroit intersections, three intersections were chosen that have unique characteristics with respect to social, textual, and physical elements: Six Mile Road and Woodward Avenue, Eight Mile Road and Woodward Avenue, and Florence and Joslyn, a residential intersection in Highland Park – an interstitial space on an urban scale. In a historical sense, these intersections, located in Detroit and Highland Park, have evolved and declined in the same fashion, only over different periods of time. The line of evolution is as follows: nature, farmland, wooden buildings along a dirt road, brick and stone buildings along a concrete road, brick and stone buildings along a wider concrete road (climax), slow systematic decay, wide concrete road.

Inspired by the transient street performer, this is an investigation of the intersection as a social space. Over time, the character and use of the street has changed. By nature, the street is a communal space that connects people and other spaces. Today, the street is not recognized as a social space. Technological innovations have changed the nature of the street and the activities within it, but the street still exists in its permanent physical state. The street can once again be a communal space where a variety of activities and interactions occur, and the dweller within it is reunited with the physical environment of the street. By understanding how people interact with the individual typologies of the street corner with respect to their text (negative space, proximity to the street, and materiality), the intersection has the ability to evolve into a public space, and using the intersections at Six Mile and Woodward, Eight Mile and Woodward, and Florence and Joslyn, this hypothesis will attempt to derive a new text to be read by a variety of different people.
the industrial city cycle

nature, farmland, wooden buildings along a dirt road, brick and stone buildings along a concrete road, brick and stone buildings along a wider concrete road (population climax), slow systematic decay, wide concrete road.
there are three main ideas that drive its conceptual foundation: the street as an interstitial space, a non-place, and the street as a text to be read and decoded.
learning from las vegas

robert venturi denise scott-brown steven izenour

the idea of text on the street plays an important role in this thesis. although the concepts and ideas explored by robert venturi and denise scott brown came long before their study, this is where the research began. their study of the las vegas strip analyzed the existing environment with respect to signs and text along the street to determine their role in conveying order and meaning in the landscape.
the street as non-place from places to non-places
Marc Augé

This discourse by French anthropologist Marc Augé, discusses those places of transience that do not hold enough significance to be regarded as places. Those places like the airport and supermarket have ephemeral qualities that can be found in the street. They are inundated with text, the physical kind one reads as in a billboard, that denies interaction within the social environment. These non-places neither promote nor negate identity of the space or the users of it.
The research required for this study revealed interesting urban conditions otherwise ignored; this is the case of Highland Park, Michigan, a city within the boundary of Detroit. Like Detroit, this city was once an automobile manufacturing center out of which a community grew, but after economic and racial stress had taken its toll on the small city, it was abandoned. Today, it stands as an empty shell with few residents and a physical environment beyond repair. It is ignored in reality and in the abstract form of a map. Woodward, the main street that runs through it, is the only portion of the city that is utilized. The city is ephemeral for those who drive through it.
intersection catalog

documentation and brief analysis of a number of Detroit intersections with varying typologies and physical conditions
several intersections were documented using the radial streets of detroit as a basis: michigan, grand river, woodward, gratiot, and jefferson avenues an ongoing component of this thesis
**Woodward + Jefferson**
- Building • Building • Plaza
- Downtown: The Central Business District
- High traffic streets with 8 lanes

**Gratiot + Russell**
- Building • Building • Open • Parking Lot
- One block west of Eastern Market
- High traffic street that meets steep low traffic street
- Saturday, the market day: height pedestrian activity spilling into the intersection from Eastern Market
gratiot + mack

open • building • building • gas station

gratiot, one of detroit’s historic radial streets, forms a vast space when it intersects with mack, a street of 4 lanes that runs perpendicular to gratiot. the older buildings that still exist were designed to address the awkward intersection, a common condition in detroit.

ellery + heidelberg

open • open • open • building

residential. located at the east end of the heidelberg project, “a massive art environment” that makes use of the street, sidewalks, trees, and vacant lots in its expression. a low density area with sporadic housing and prevalent vacancy.
mt elliot + heidelberg
building • open • building

residential, located at the west end of the heidelberg project in an area full of vacant houses and open lots, a condition becoming more prevalent in detroit neighborhoods. the slow deterioration of these neighborhoods is a consequence of the racial phenomena, “white flight.”

florence + joslyn
open • vacant • open • vacant

residential, highland park, a city that is an interstitial space on an urban scale, is riddled with economic, social, and physical decay. a city also affected by white flight, its remaining inhabitants exist alongside decaying homes. at this particular intersection, and in many others as well, it is a part of the cultural code to walk in the street. transmitted text is heavy here. anything goes.
house + house + house + house

residential, unlike the others, this is a thriving, middle-class
detroit neighborhood with beautiful homes, manicured
landscaping, and very low pedestrian activity. pleasantville
compared to the others. boring.

gas station + green + parking + parking

the university district. southeast corner. the university
of detroit mercy. this intersection has a fair amount of
pedestrian activity because of the bus stops on each corner,
the 24-hour coney island, and the elementary school further
east on livernois. there is high vehicle activity as well with
students going in and out of the university and people
visiting the mcdonald's and gas station. there is a significant
amount of transcribed text.
Highland Park, this intersection is known for its high illegal activity: sex and drugs, but there is intense human interaction and text, both transmitted and transcribed. The physical conditions seem to nurture the activity within.

Building

Woodward + Manchester
Parking
Commercial; if Highland Park had a downtown, this would be it. There are strip malls on both sides of Woodward and there is high pedestrian and vehicular activity, but rarely do the pedestrians go into the shops. They are not there for the shops but for the bus. There is no relationship between one side of the street and the other. The street is too wide and is made wider by the parking lots adjacent to it. Perhaps if the stores were directly adjacent to the street, the pedestrians, those who activate the space, would be more inclined to go into them.
davison + dequindre
landmark • green • green • green

this is a peaceful place. the overpass creates quiet spaces beneath it, and to the northwest of the overpass, there is a tranquil greenspace. there is no one here, just cars, and the overpass.

k

gas station • building • parking • vacant

b + joseph campau

not too far from highland park or hamtramck, this intersection in detroit is a prime example of the disintegration of the neighborhood commercial district and the proliferation of the parking lot, gas station, liquor store, and coney island at the average detroit intersection. institutions like these promote unhealthy neighborhoods and social environments because they fail to contribute positively to the surrounding community.
& + livernois

building • gas station • gas station • gas station

the end of detroit. 8 mile is a physical and psychological boundary that prohibits detroits from entering the suburbs. 8 mile is a total of 10 lanes wide and has an island in the middle. it is rather intimidating to cross this street without a car, the street becomes a trench, transmitted. there is also significant transcribed text in the gas station and restaurant signs.

& + woodward

green • open • open • green

again 8 mile is a boundary denying detroits access into the suburbs, but here the boundary is much more pronounced in its physical state and again, caters solely to the automobile.

there are three levels of this intersection and only one is meant for the pedestrian and even on that level, he is disadvantaged because there is no visual connection from one side of the street to the other diagonally. there is a strong textual and physical presence, but no social interaction. this may not be an intersection but momentary housing for the automobile that denies pedestrian activity.
As a result of ongoing documentation of individual street corner typologies and Detroit intersections, three intersections were chosen that have unique characteristics with respect to social, textual, and physical elements: Six Mile Road and Woodward Avenue, Eight Mile Road and Woodward Avenue, and Florence and Joelyn, a residential intersection in Highland Park.

It is a valid argument that this investigation may be stronger without the Eight Mile and Woodward intersection, a place stripped of its social nature by the imposition of the third-dimension on the street. The Six Mile and Eight Mile intersections are specific instances that display the use of the intersection in dramatically different ways: the former a social incubator of perceived and realized vice, the latter an intersection no longer viewed as such because of its multiple levels of vehicular activity that neither cease nor consider the pedestrian. On the other hand, the intersection of Florence and Joelyn represents a common occurrence in Detroit: a seemingly vicious residential neighborhood nearly void of its physical and social presence yet loaded with text and code, both transcribed and transmitted.

At the intersection of Six Mile and Woodward in Highland Park, there is a vibrant social network active that is not visible from any initial observation from a kinetic capsule. From that position, all one sees is the language of decay and poverty manifest in abandoned buildings, broken windows, vacant lots and homeless persons, but to experience this intersection at street level is to look beyond its physical condition into its communal realm. It is an active space that is host to a variety of social interactions: exchange and consumption, support, flânerie, and transit. This intersection is an example of transit-oriented decay; poverty as a driving force in the success of mass transit in Detroit. The condition of the space, the history that brought the space to its present condition, and the economy and politics tied to its condition all have an effect on how people interact within this intersection. These defects become texts that are woven into this space and have become a part of it.

Although the people at the intersection of Six Mile and Woodward may use the intersection in promotion of vice, they use the intersection nonetheless. There can exist some dialogue between the Six and Eight Mile Road intersections at Woodward. A didactic relationship can occur in which Eight Mile at Woodward adopts a social module from Six Mile. Although Eight Mile and Woodward is weak in its social context, it has strong prominence as a text. It is a boundary in both directions: Woodward separates the eastside of Detroit from the west and Eight Mile creates a divide between Detroit and Ferndale. The latter boundary psychologically prohibits the free flow of Detroit residents into Ferndale, Royal Oak, Southfield, and other first-ring suburbs of Detroit, a historically racial divide. In its present physical condition, this intersection does not work as a social space; it requires a manipulation of the street.
the building that meets the street

The area of the street corner defined by a physical edge is a place for gathering, advertisement, exchange, and observation. Physically, this is a perfect edge condition for the street corner.

the landscaped space

Is a rarity in Detroit. The landscaped space for public use is an even greater rarity, but the empty grass lot is rampant in the cityscape. Maybe the empty grass lots are the Detroit version of a landscaped space waiting to be programmed and/or used in some way.

This particular landscaped space is on the Ferndale side of the Eight Mile and Woodward intersection on the northeast corner. Although it appears to be nicely manicured and well-kept, this area does not seem to be for public use. Not even the residents who live alongside it feel free to use it.
the parking lot adjacent to the street is a common occurrence in Detroit. Strip developments, small businesses, and restaurants spring up overnight bringing with them miles of pavement for parking that recedes the street edge. Essentially, the parking lot becomes an extension of the street, the domain of the automobile. As a consequence, social activity is removed from the street and re-located within the buildings or adjacent to them. Public space is no longer on the street but within the shopping mall, supermarket, or big-box store; the non-place has become the social space. Authors John Jakle and Keith Sculle contribute the street-adjacent parking lot to the proliferation of the gas station in the book *The Gas Station in America*. In an analysis of a street that connects Urbana to Champaign in Illinois, they began to understand the gas station as a “colonizer” for commercial development that eventually leads to the disintegration of the street wall.

typology catalog

a result of the documentation and brief analysis of a number of Detroit intersections, a collection of archetypes present on street corners.
the landmark a term used by kevin lynch in the book the image of the city to refer to readily identifiable objects which serve as reference points to aid in wayfinding or to contribute to the legibility of the city. however, in this case, the landmark seems foreign to the landscape and more utilitarian than legible.
The plaza is a rare space in the city of Detroit, the majority of them are downtown, where the photo to the left was taken. Where there are plazas, they are not designed well. For example, Hart Plaza is packed with people in the summer when there are festivals, but during the other three seasons the space is a vast concrete lot with the Detroit River as its background. Campus Martius is the only urban plaza in Detroit that is functional year-round.

To take some weight of Detroit, designing the urban plaza is no easy task. According to the social life of small urban spaces by William H. Whyte, the plaza must have several characteristics in order to be successful: adequate sitting space, good sunlight, moderate wind conditions, trees, water, food, and most importantly, something that sparks interest and conversation between strangers who visit the plaza. This is a concept that William H. Whyte refers to as “triangulation.”

The open lot. Detroit has come to be defined by its many open/vacant lots that reflect its shrinking population density. There is a constant exchange of ideas concerning the future of these spaces. What can/will they become? Parks? Urban farms? Urban wilderness? Urban ruins? The open lot is a unique condition that has redefined the landscape of this city, a decay of unbound potential.
there is no single program that recognizes the condition of all three intersections. the program at each intersection is either adapted or infused.
an active social environment that exists within a decaying physical environment, home to a language filled with symbolism.
because of its high pedestrian activity and degrading physical condition, this intersection has an existing program unique to its environment.
street corner inhabitants

the activities that exist within this space define its urban identity as dangerous.

showgirls streetwalkers dealers addicts those recovering homeless
the adapted program creates a new text that allows the existing and adapted programs to coexist.
A graphic representation of how the people of metaphor and reality transmute and coexist within the intersection
schematic program
collage
the initial attempt to incorporate the re-shared route into a design for the intersection at no cost and without the scheme was carried out with the northern leg of the sub-station building to redefine space the street inside and outside, concepts and defining spaces for interaction and integration the street the area the formerly empty for the streets of the intersection has been sensitized to derive from more height pedestrian and reduced enclosures the gas station has also been redesigned to address concerns of its present condition.

This is an unsuccessful attempt to derive a new text for this intersection. It is not double coded for reality and metaphor. It is riddled with contradiction, and an ignorance to the existing condition.
Image showing the shelters alongside shops that house the street market, urban park, and theatre.
second proposal

This is the second attempt to apply social research to the architecture revealed at the intersection of its role and audience, that it may be double-coded and serve its dual purpose.

The gas station is redesigned to be more efficient for the headlines who use it and also allow easier pedestrian access. The number of pumps has been reduced in order to eliminate the wasted footprint and, again, improve efficiency; the convenience store is the same size as before and it is horizontally reorganized to reduce the amount of shadow cast on the space between the store and the pumps. Most importantly, landscaping is incorporated to improve the aesthetic value of the street corners.

The street that used to run alongside the old 6/6 building is now an urban park that houses the street market and an outdoor community theatre. During the day, the space accommodates those people of passing: the vendors, community performers, and those who merely wait to gather.

The formerly empty lot also is an urban park that sits between a restaurant, a café seating area, and another covered space for a street market. With the night comes a different life and the people who inhabit the streets come in reality: the space they use the adjacent awning attached to the frame to view or enjoy view to their activity, even the landscaping becomes a cover to mask activity.
southwest corner of the intersection looking east: community theatre and street market vendor shelter
reactivated restaurant/cafe and urban park next to the formerly empty lot on the northwest corner.
Image above: framed on right-hand corner showing adjustable canopies and integrated seating that begins to allow a variety of activity at the intersection.
presently, there are no programs that exist at this intersection; it is no man's land. Its most important purpose is to restrict.
this program is infused, all activities and programs are projected into the intense physical environment.

schematic program collage

A transit hub for the proposed light rail system is at a programmatic component at the Eight Mile and Woodward intersection. Given its heavy infrastructural quality and lacking social connections, the activities to occur at this intersection will be infused with commercial programmatic elements of the Eight Mile and Woodward to create a dialogue between the two and attempt to figure out the future frontier between Detroit and Ferndale. Residential uses and green spaces in conjunction with a reorganization of the streets will help bring this space into the social realm.
design proposal

This proposal is an attempt to redefine the intersection as a unitary space as opposed to one that loads and divides. Its goals are to dissuade the intersection by connecting it horizontally and vertically as well as to link the street corners via pedestrian paths and narrower surface streets at the intersection.

The structure proposed stands not only as a gateway between downtown and the suburbs but also serves as a light rail terminus to promote mass transit and to define this intersection as one that unites.
This is an intersection void of any social activity or built environment, but it is heavy with text and cultural codes that define behavior.
This socially and physically void space, will be used as a canvas to introduce the intervention as an interstitial space. It is an interstitial space issued by the interstitial space of the street. Programmatically, the intervention is issue. The rules of the world outside of this space do not exist, only the code of its inhabitants who adhere to it and the test of physical decay. In the absence of the common rule one must understand the code instituted here. It exists exclusively in the street and test of its vacant space.
Using the street corner to test this analytical process of symbolism in the urban landscape has proven to be both difficult and inviting in terms of its physical and social environments, respectively. In addition, there are additional layers within this particular environment that may not be readable or even visible to an observer including the kinetic environment, but the meaning inherent in those settings is more easily understood if one begins to recognize that the physical context supports the social environment. Furthermore, these two contexts compose the textual environment.

Making this assumption early on in the investigation allowed for a more in-depth social analysis at the intersection of Six Mile and Woodward where human interaction defines the space. The process began with an analysis of the intersection as a whole, examining the strong social environment in order to understand the physical. The information arose from the analysis of the people and their activity. Both of which became symbols for a positive person and activity in the urban landscape. In theory, the symbol and its metaphor exist alongside one another, but this can only happen if the architecture created allows a symbiotic relationship between the two.

Where there is no social context to analyze, as with Eight Mile and Woodward, the physical environments are analyzed as a text. By its character, this intersection is inherently a non-place, purely transitory and anonymous. This intersection is already double-coded a restrictive text. There is some question on how to combat a text such as this. Does it require a complete obliteration of the physical environment to redefine its meaning? Or perhaps one works within the text, as is done in this experiment, to reinterpret the meaning. There is yet a third possibility to carefully pierce the infrastructure in an attempt to maintain its physical presence while erasing its restrictive meaning.

Florence and Joslyn and intersections like it that do not have energy to expel or draw from the surrounding neighborhood exist simply as areas within Detroit’s decaying cityscape. Together, these intersections act as a network of interstitial non-places on an urban scale, voids in the urban fabric that are rich with text of Detroit’s unstable past and present. While these spaces can be analyzed in terms of their lack of social and physical contexts, their prevalent interstitial nature is neither positive nor necessary. Therefore, how can architecture, or the antithesis of it, begin to react to intersections like Florence and Joslyn in a meaningful, innovative way?

There are a number of ways in which to approach this problem. The first would be to follow the present practice of ignoring the problem and failing to take any action to resolve the decay. As can clearly be observed in Detroit, no positive catalyst has come of this. A second approach would allow intersections like these to be treated as if they were like Six or Eight Mile and Woodward, but the problem here is that the activity created would be isolated because, again, there is no energy to which to contribute unless a number of intersections are developed as to create a network of energy. This particular solution also begins to create a pseudo-facade that masks underlying problems with architecture and program. The third and most dramatic option for intersections like Florence and Joslyn is to relocate the remaining residents and accelerate the decay by ripping up the infrastructure and tearing down homes and other facilities in hopes that the area might transform into some urban prairie.

This thesis began as a process to uncover the relationship between the physical and social environments and semiotics in the urban landscape via the intersection, a non-place that is inherently interstitial. No method of analysis, reading, or programming will ever change that. The interstitial nature of the street is not negative, it is necessary. The street must be the space in between that carries and communicates. The street must be subject to the architecture, people, and the text, both written and psychological. It also must be superseded by the spaces it defines, the street corners. These are spaces that are ignored. Rather, they are not designed to perform to their full potential.
appendix

city: semiotic
The city is a tragedy. The city is a text.

[The city] does not sublimate unattractive aspects of the world. It can include ugliness, decay, banality, austerity, without becoming depressing. It can confront harsh realities of climate, or politics without suppression. It can articulate a bleak metaphysical view of man... without evasion or bleakness.

Before this discourse begins, it is important to define text and its composition. When the city is viewed as a text, all forms within it indicate meaning that is only valid when some common language is utilized. The text of the city adopts principles from the theory of semiotics as described by Ferdinand de Saussure as it has signs, double entities composed of the signified (that which one sees or hears) and the signifier (the subsequent image conveyed). Signification links the signified and signifier and is dependent upon particular internal structures within a given cultural system, a language. It is concerned with the nature of signs and the cultural system that governs them.

The theory of semiotics has been applied to the practice of architecture repeatedly, but it seems the city is a challenge to semiotics. In “Sociology and the Urban,” an essay by Roland Barthes, he explains the difficulty of applying the theory of semiotics to the city. As a text, the city is in a “metaphorical stage” that requires intense contemplation as it comes to be defined in reality. He describes initial measures one should take before building an urban semiotic just as Charles Jencks prescribes that architecture as a sign should be legible to both the architect and the civilian. In the case of the city text, prescriptions are not necessary when the semiotic city performs in reality without metaphor in the present and past, preparing itself for analysis.

In Detroit’s recent history, the urban semiotic came to life in the systematic destruction of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, thriving centers of Black art, music, and culture. This Black community confined to a small area of Detroit, north of Gratiot Avenue to the Detroit River, was a consequence of urban division by a necessary economic and cultural exclusion that eventually became eradication of an entire community. In The City Assembled, Spiro Kostof discusses the apparently inoffensive nature of organized exclusion that uses legal and planning instruments. In Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, federal housing and the practice of eminent domain played distinct roles in the exclusion, and eventual obliteration, of these African American communities.

A new text, Lafayette Park, was designed in its place that denied access to the former residents of the area. As a text, the city has the ability to define, restrict, and allow through the implementation of architecture and physical elements. Unlike Jencks’ prescription, the architecture designed here does not address architects or intellectuals, but instead, it addresses people of the middle and upper classes and those of the lower working class – double-coded not on multiple spectrums, but on different levels of the same spectrum. The architecture within the city became a symbol and a sign to be interpreted differently by people on opposite ends of the socioeconomic scale.

The city is a text, but it is what the city accommodates that tells the true story: the physical and social environments, signs within the text of the city. Together, they act as a testament to its cultural system. The composition of the city tells the story of the man in space and time, but it is the components of the city that have the ability to define, restrict, and segregate. The city is a text composed of signs to be read and decoded.
2 Rykwert, 23.
3 Rykwert, 15.
7 Czarnowski, 207.
8 Augé, 94.
11 Agrest, 218.


