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Fall 2007

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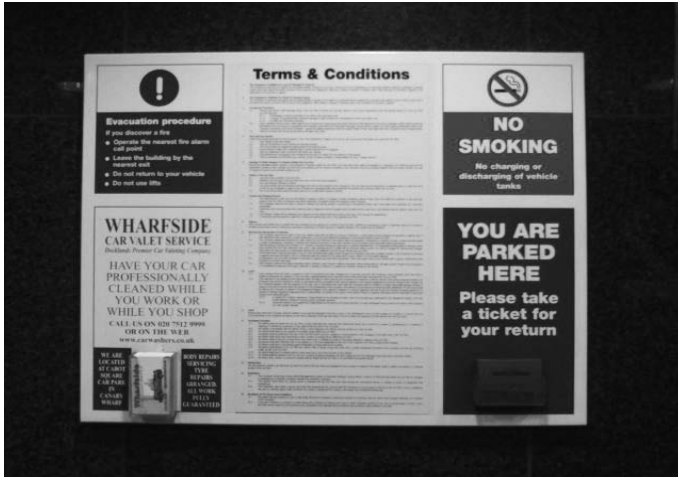
Citation Details

Colangelo, Dave. The Car Park. Street Signs, Autumn 2007, pages 32-34. Centre For Urban and Community Research, Goldsmith's College, University of London

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The Car Park

David Colangelo



Marc Augé, the author of 'Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity', argues that we live in supermodern times characterized by an excess of time (a proliferation of events and information that keeps history at our heels), space (expressed in changes of scale, imagined and imaginary references and accelerated means of transport), and individual references (a proliferation of activities and spaces requiring login and password, chip-and-pin, identity card, and/or passport). In his book he argues that supermodernity produces non-places, spaces "which can not be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (1992/1995, 78) and offers the motorway, the airport lounge, and the car park as examples. I chose to investigate Augé's theory by visiting the Cabot Square Car Park in Canary Wharf.

I lingered a little bit too long in front of the "payment-point". A business man in a long wool coat came into the space behind me and muttered an "excuse me" in my direction, somehow sensing my inactivity. He glanced at me side-long as I stepped aside to give him a chance to insert his parking stub into the grey slot beside the flashing green light. I continued to watch out of the corner of my eye. The screen said he had retrieved the stub about twelve hours earlier from the machines at the entrance to "Cabot Square Car Park: Canary Wharf" at "7:28" this "13/02/2007". He was prompted to "please insert £8", which he did brusquely. With the settling of this contractual debt his ticket in had been transformed by the machine into his pre-paid ticket out.

As the man boarded the elevator I took a few steps back, leaned against the wall and took out my notebook. I scribbled down some notes about what had just happened: "offensive loitering ... practiced expediency". Soon enough I was joined in the payment-point/elevator corridor by a girl who seemed to be waiting for someone, apparently guiding this person in by text message or just fiddling away the time. Another girl walked between us towards the machine. I watched the machine reject her damaged ticket. Frustrated, she left in a huff and went off to who-knows-where to remedy the situation.

Noticing the camera above the machine I started to wonder how long it would be before I became a security issue. I took the elevator down to "P2".

One man already had his motorbike helmet on. The recorded voice announced “P2: doors opening” and the doors opened to another set of automatic doors tripped off by a motion sensor above. The service-bell reverberated in the corridor as people filed into the garage, vacating the space as quickly as it had been filled.

I lingered in their wake. Between the pair of elevators hung a message board. The entire centre panel was reserved for the “Terms & Conditions” of the “Car Park” – the fine print. This miniscule text demanded a closeness and stillness that few, I felt, would oblige except under fleeting moments of extreme waiting-for-the-elevator boredom. I had my own reasons, so I read on. Under clause “7.2” of section “7. Tickets” it stated that “The Company reserves the right to refuse or release any vehicle”. Section “9. Moving and Relocation” said “The Company reserves the right to move any vehicle within the Car Park by driving or otherwise, to such extent as the Company’s servants or agents may in their discretion think it necessary to avoid obstruction or for the more efficient arrangement of its parking facilities at the car park” (my emphasis). There was also section “12. Prohibited Activities” and section “14. Definitions” that, in “14.3”, outlined “The Customer” as “...a person who shall have entered into the contract with The Company”. Parking sounded very complicated all of the sudden. All the while, hot waves of embarrassment washed over me every time a fresh batch of “Customers” came in to wait for the lift to take them up to the shops. I found myself glancing at my phone periodically, hoping to justify my stagnation to them.

I moved, finally, surrendering to the invisible current that led through the automatic doors and into the garage. On my way I learned that “24-hour surveillance” was in operation for my “safety and security”. I walked around, sometimes following the large yellow arrows painted on the pavement, sometimes not. On foot, these things didn’t seem to apply to me; they were not to my scale. There were other signs though, higher up with black text on white backgrounds, that seemed to be for pedestrians, outlining alternate payment points and elevator entrances.

I wandered some more. The deep frequencies of four-stroke V8s bounced off the flat concrete. Vehicles sped up and slowed down as they followed the yellow-arrow road, ascending to the next identical level on the way to the surface, braking from time to time for

the odd speed-bump. I followed the cars past the “TESCO: collection point” and the up-to-the-minute “Spaces Available” sign: “This Level: 58, Lower Levels: 279, Upper Level: 26”.

As I approached the exit gates, I looked up to see a maze of pipes and ducts allowing water and air to flow through the space. Walking past the cars without “Pass Cards” or “Prepaid Tickets”, items which would have allowed them to slip through unmanned gates, I noticed that most drivers were clutching their steering wheels and tickets simultaneously, often with mobile phones in their free hands, waiting out the last moments of their stay.

Having completed this unorthodox circuit I went back to the elevators, stopping at every other parking level to re-confirm that they were all – apart from different primary-colour accents – exactly the same. Back up at the payment point where I began my journey, I stuck around long enough to notice a customer accidentally putting her ticket into the credit card reader. Quickly, almost reflexively, she remedied the situation and continued on her way.

The car park – along side the airport lounge and the motorway – seems to epitomize Marc Augé’s (1992/1995) theory of non-place: it is a creature of modern capitalism and provides a critical service to it (something that is excruciatingly apparent in Canary Wharf), it is a landscape of recognition in that it bears direct resemblance to other structures of its kind, and it speaks to us in the standard forms of payment point machines and standardized graphical signage. In other words, it does not relate to the specificity of its geographical location (passing the “picture test” in which a photograph of a place should not, roughly, reveal its location), it is not historical in that it appears exactly as any other car park and makes no reference to the historicity of the place, and it is not concerned with identity outside of the standardized forms of chip, pin, license number, and ticket (78). It is not place.

In fact, I would take Augé a little further and say that the car park militates against being what he calls place. Whenever I stepped out of the flow prescribed by screen prompts, elevator voices, and big yellow arrows I distinctly felt out of place. As Marcuse (1964) says in *One Dimensional Man*, “The intellectual and emotional refusal ‘to go along’ appears neurotic and impotent” (5). I certainly felt that way, particularly when I was asked to move away from the pay machine that I clearly was not intending to use. At times it even felt

criminal, and the omnipresence of video recorders served only to multiply my anxieties. When I went along with the crowds, when I did what was expected, the anxiety went away and a kind of calmness set in. In this space flow was clearly encouraged and blockages were at best deemed strange and somewhat annoying and at worst illegal.

Both illegal and coincidentally almost unthinkable in this space would have been some kind of alteration or vandalism of its no-frills interior. Just as in Chris Petit and Iain Sinclair's 'London Orbital' (2002), this non-place, like the motorway, embodies ceaseless flow in its untouchable and unalterable surfaces that appear to go on forever. Altering this would shatter the spatial flow, and alter the uneventful spatial narrative that typifies the space and makes it efficient in its express purposes. One wonders, as in *The Orbital*, what the cameras see in a disciplined, controlled space made immune to the passing of time, the variability of weather, the phases of the moon, and the earth's daily rotation. In such a homogenous space, even the smallest aberrations, such as a lingering pedestrian, become painfully obvious to both the camera and the self, regardless of who is watching.

Augé's (1992/1995) point that in non-place "...individuals are supposed to interact only with texts, whose proponents are not individuals but 'moral entities' or institutions" (96) was also verified by my experience of the car park. The uninvitingly small-print "Terms & Conditions" just outside of the elevator explained the rules and prohibitions with the most important ones reproduced in smaller graphical signs around the car-park (ie. No smoking, no refueling, no entry), or apparently understood by the customers I observed who did not even come close to breaking a single rule. And, of course, the proponent of these instructional texts was the institution, the "moral entity" that owned, operated, and set the rules: "Cabot Square Car Park", shortened to "The Company" in the "Terms & Conditions". The importance of contractual relations (101) in this non-place also become apparent, where innocence or belonging was proven and ensured through the purchase and validation of a ticket or a pre-paid pass card, made possible for the most part by machines and screens. More obviously – but I think also worth mentioning when speaking of legitimacy in the space – is the ownership of a motor vehicle. As a pedestrian, a large proportion of the space did not apply, or speak, to me.

Despite the congruencies, there are some aspects of the seemingly banal car park that can lead to a critique of Augé's concept of non-place. Firstly, the car park

can, in some cases, be seen as both relational and historical. For example, how can we forget that the car park formerly under the World Trade Centre was once the sight of terrorist bombing? Surely this car park can be given a place in history apart from all the rest. What about Joni Mitchell's famous indictment of those that 'pave paradise and put up a parking lot'? Here, car parks in their symbolic totality, are used to mark a particular time, space, and place (the 60s, the proliferation of suburban retail centres, North America) and make a political point.

Still, for most of us, these examples remain subconscious if anything, seldom entering into our thoughts as we hypnotically slip through the space of the car park that so strongly militates against said divergence. What these points may prove is that although place and non-place cannot be fully separable, there are certainly some spaces such as car parks that lie very close to – and gravitate towards – the non-place end of the spectrum.

One last critique of Augé would be the potential for individual agency in turning non-place into place. From my observations of patrons filing through the "Cabot Square Car Park" I feel as though the potential for this is quite low in the car park. It seems as though those who were most familiar with the space, such as the business man who "excused-me" out of the way in order to expertly operate the payment point machine, exhibited only greater mastery of the space's privileged flow, preferring to get out to some place else as quickly as possible instead of engaging in anything but highly distracted thought. I doubt that anyone who uses the car park thinks of it fondly, if at all, and thus the non-place remains as such. The only way that I can conceivably see non-place drifting into place is by examining and writing about it thereby simultaneously opposing, exposing, and critiquing the epistemological foundations that underlie more and more (non)places in supermodernity. Apart from this, Augé seems to be right in saying that non-places, such as the car park, "... create neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude" (103).

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