Street Media:
Ambient Messages in an Urban Space

by

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B.A. in International Relations
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ABSTRACT
Ambient street media are the media of our everyday lives in cities. Manifested in bits and fragments on the surfaces of the streetscape, these media often escape our notice — tuned out as visual clutter or dismissed as unimportant. Yet, attentive viewing and analysis reveal much about the local culture of communication and expression.

This thesis blends empirical and theoretical methodologies in a year-long photographic study that takes a fresh look at the concepts and realities of "media," "the city," and "the everyday," and sets several disciplines in interaction with one another. Ambient street media include news racks, traffic and street signs, storefronts, sandwichboards, graffiti, stickers, murals, and flyers. This is in contrast to conventional notions of "the media" as one-to-many communication modalities consumed primarily in the domestic space, particularly television, radio, major newspapers, and the Internet. Studies of media in everyday life typically address these mass media, passing over ambient street media for any detailed examination.

By examining both the explicit and implicit facets of street communications, this study elevates their importance in a number of disciplines, from cultural studies to urban design and planning. For example, we find much to counter postmodern anxieties about cities. While evidence of globalization and the prioritization of government and corporate interests over those of local entities and autonomous individuals are easily found, the ecology of street media includes a vibrant array of individual communications. Currently, much of the media made by individuals are unauthorized to appear where they do. But in the commercial area of Central Square, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, they are accorded a high degree of tolerance by local authorities, making this a unique laboratory in which to see what happens when streetscape surfaces are accessible to many.

The streetscape can be viewed as a communication medium in itself, special for its direct accessibility and affordability as well as the immediacy with which messages posted there can be received. Urban planners who seek to design spaces that give people a sense of place are encouraged to more equitably apportion space among government, commercial, and individual interests and add surfaces that are more accommodating to a wider array of inscriptions.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Rekha Murthy graduated from Brown University in 1996 with a degree in International Relations. Since then, she has been a Web site producer for private clients as well as for National Public Radio's then-young Web site. In 2000, Rekha joined NPR's daily newsmagazine, "All Things Considered", as a producer of radio pieces spanning a wide range of topics in news and culture.

While at MIT's Comparative Media Studies program, Rekha spent a summer as an information designer with France Telecom R&D in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her research interests include (of course) street media in urban spaces, urban annotation practices, and the supporting telecommunications and social networking technologies. Significant projects at CMS include "Flâneurs Savants", a walking tour of Paris for handheld devices; the design of a high-quality, disabled-accessible console for the webcasting of MIT events; information and database design for Metamedia, a digital framework for interactive learning; and the design and teaching of a radio course to MIT undergraduates.

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Introduction

For those of us who live in cities, especially those of us who move through them primarily on foot and by public transportation, it comes as no surprise that we are surrounded by media from the moment we step outside. We see the newsracks, the traffic and street signs, the posters promoting upcoming (and past) events, and the storefronts and sandwichboards designed to beckon us in. If we slow our pace to contemplate the streetscape, we notice more: graffiti, stickers, murals, the flyers posted on light poles, and those we instinctively decline when someone tries to put one in our hands. These texts and images are designed and distributed with the intent to communicate, and this is essentially what makes them media. Their placement on the streetscape makes them, naturally, street media, which I use to distinguish them from the news and entertainment media consumed primarily in our homes and workplaces. The diversity of style and substance of these street media invite closer examination, which is what this study is about.

These multimodal communication forms can be viewed as a layer superimposed on the city's physical structure and layout, a patchwork that develops and changes both by design and by chance, and at varying tempos. The concept of imageability put forth by Kevin Lynch in the context of the urban built environment extrapolates well to an analysis of its media layer.

> *imageability*: that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. It is that shape, color, or arrangement which facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful mental images of the environment. It might also be called *legibility*, or perhaps *visibility* in a heightened sense, where objects are not only able to be seen, but are presented sharply and intensely to the senses.[1]

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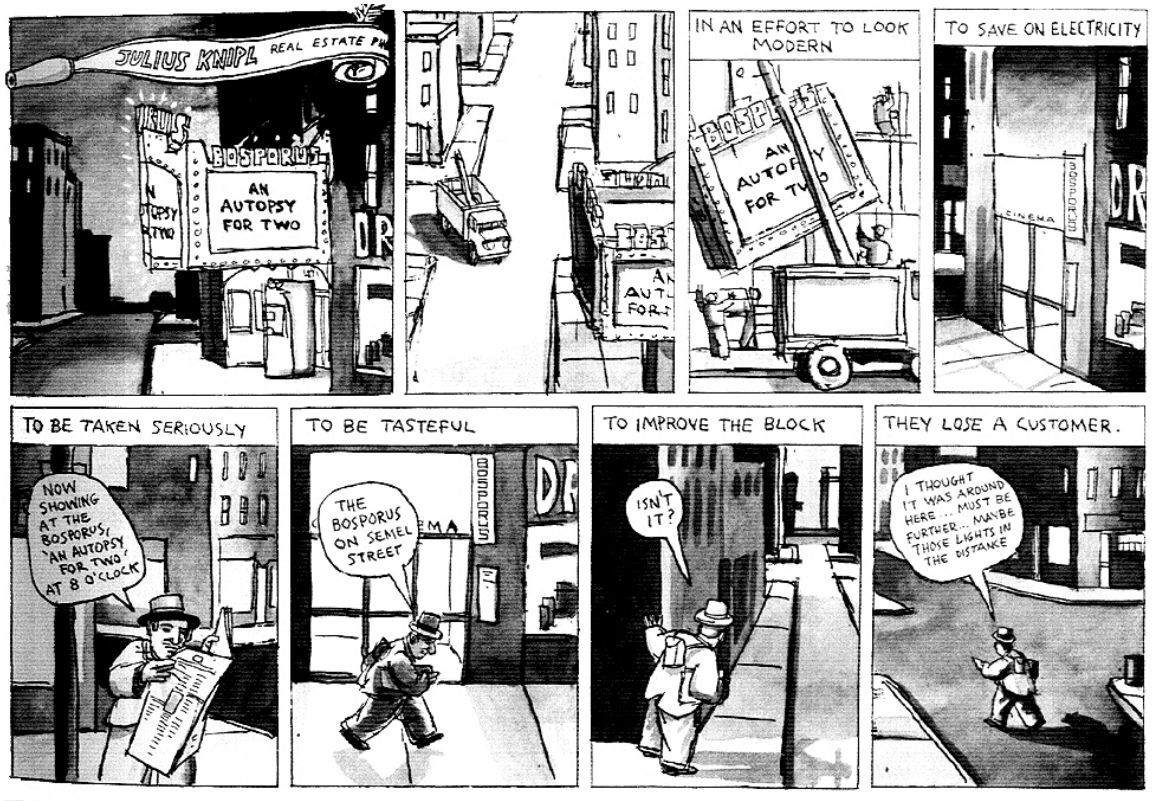
[1] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 9. Related to the perception aspect of imageability is Yi-Fu Tuan's concept of *topophilia*, "the affective bond between people and place or setting." *Topophilia*, 4.

As I hope to show in the pages to follow, street media, like architecture and layout, greatly influence how people perceive and navigate an urban space. Generally, such elements are treated in the aggregate as background ambience, rather than foreground attractions. But sometimes specific elements reach more deeply into a person's awareness and in doing so serve a variety of functions.

Like the landmarks in Lynch's notable study, media orient the subject, the obvious examples being traffic directions, street signs, and public monuments, but also familiar storefronts and memorable billboards.



Ben Katchor, Cheap Novelties, no. 37

Such media objects function like architectural details as markers that help us find our way around a place. But street media can orient in other ways, too. Explicit messages play a powerful role in telling us where we are not just geographically, but by transmitting clues to the kind of place we are in: A

sign for a yard sale conjures an image of a settled community with a market in used things, bought and sold for cash, while a sign for a sample sale announces that we are in a place of clothing designers and fashion-conscious, bargain-hunting consumers. Consider the difference in tone of "Please Curb Your Dog" compared to "No Trespassing: Police Take Notice" and how that might influence our sense of where we are. Signs such as "Crime Watch Neighborhood" and "Domestic Violence-Free Zone" might be comforting to some, but to others they signal an unsafe place that is compelled to make such proclamations.

Less explicitly, the media of an urban space display expressions of identity, taste, language, and attitude that, intentionally or not, indicate which groups or types of people live there, who might feel most welcome, and where an individual or group might fit into the local social hierarchy. Stock photography in advertisements operates powerfully in this regard. A bank or a pharmacy that hangs posters in its windows with photographs of an individual, a couple, or a family and welcoming language about being customers is ostensibly inviting self-identification by passersby, who, the thinking goes, might be more inclined to patronize a business if given the impression (however subconsciously) that people like them do business there. But another reading could recast these images as those of ideal or actual customers, or even ideal or actual inhabitants of the community.

Orientational messages are just one of the ways by which an urban space's media layer emits more than the sum of the content of its explicit articulations. Street media give not only a sense of place, they give a sense of what a place might be like. And this is by far more than the explicit text and image content alone. Language, production quality, sponsor, material condition, and placement in the streetscape all contribute to the receiver's perceptions of a geographical location as well as the society and community it

grounds. As a physical, material presence, media can make a place look cared for, comfortably inhabited, or cluttered and dirty. It can be a critical factor in people's perceptions of a place as safe or desirable to be in. This is as much due to the physical condition of the various media as it is by how and where they are placed on the surfaces of the built environment. A cacophony of new and old flyers taped haphazardly to light poles and utility boxes sends a different message about community attitudes, civic pride, and local rules and enforcement than clean, empty surfaces and neatly outfitted storefronts. The range of production qualities, from polished poster to ragged sticker to expensive billboard, give insights into who a community's members are by suggesting the kinds of production tools they have access to and where in the streetscape they are tolerated or empowered to communicate.

Even the multifarious temporalities of specific media types add to an overall message about the forces at work in an urban space. This is most clearly thought of in terms of the amount of visible turnover and decay. A newsrack with content replaced daily indicates a standard of upkeep quite different from a newspaper left on the ground for several days. And while the remnants of stickers and posters left on available surfaces add to the appearance of clutter, they might also demonstrate that someone is caring to remove them (however imperfectly), or that media makers are engaged in a (hopefully) tacit, asynchronous battle for turf. A storefront display transmits more than simply a call to enter depending on how well it is maintained and how often it is changed. By observing its specific characteristics over time we learn something about the ambitions and expertise of the businessperson behind the storefront and the expectations of the neighborhood in which such temporal cycles are established, encouraged, or at least tolerated.

Foregrounding Ambience

The above lines of thinking are just a few of the many possible ways to interpret street media's explicit and implicit communications. This study applies several interpretive lenses to a large number of media objects noticed and photographed in Central Square's streetscape over the course of a year. The main purpose is to draw attention to the messages that structure and texture our urban spaces, messages that most urban dwellers — and most media theorists — disregard most of the time (hence, the term "ambient"). My first goal is to present them in a way that honors their diversity: These messages appear in a wide variety of material manifestations of which I have tried to be as inclusive as possible. I then consider what this materiality tells us about the media and the urban space in which they appear. I extend that analysis to the practices surrounding the appearance of various media in the streetscape and the conditions to which they are subjected after they have appeared.

I define street media to include media that are authorized by the governing authority and given a place on the street, media that are not technically authorized but are tolerated by legal enforcement and/or residents and businesspeople, and media that are unauthorized and directly combated by governing authorities. These media are generally *not* in mass circulation (excepting major newspapers sold in racks); they are not electronic and/or broadcast media, and they are not "the media," in the sense of corporate entertainment and news.[2] They are not media consumed in the domestic space, but rather they are viewed while in the street. I am not looking at how media represent or distort, but rather at how media are used by a wide variety of agents to communicate.

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[2] For a clear description of "the media" that I am not studying, see "Introduction" in Couldry and McCarthy, eds., *MediaSpace*, 1-18.

As we shift our understanding of what "media" can mean, and learn how to view street media in new ways, we can then consider what attentive viewing and analysis reveal about the local culture of communication and expression and, in the process, question the assumptions embedded that culture. We can also see how this localized inquiry might inform larger theoretical and practical domains, a point I will elaborate shortly. Secondarily, I will consider the conditions of production of these types of media, inasmuch as doing so informs my close interpretative analysis of the media objects themselves. Inevitably, such an inquiry suggests the different ways in which passersby might receive these messages (which is, of course, dependent in part on varying levels of attention). While a detailed study of reception is not in the scope of this examination, I do hope that my work provides a platform to such a study in the future. I, however, found plenty to describe and analyze in the physical fact of the media themselves.

This study arises from my own casual and studied awareness of the presence of street media in everyday life. It's an awareness I had long before arriving two years ago in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but it has since heightened by virtue of seeing a new place with fresh eyes, by being a student of media, and by the remarkable density of media in my new home. I live just a block from the Central Square stretch of Massachusetts Avenue, an urban commercial strip that has existed for centuries. My initial response to the visual onslaught of its media was one of inattention, an automatic mechanism of psychological self-preservation I had developed during years of living in other media-saturated cities, a mechanism that has been well-documented by urban sociologists such as Georg Simmel. But once I mastered the local geography of Central Square, my attentions were less burdened by logistics, and I began to notice the area's media details. What I had at first written off as a simple amalgam of advertising, directional, and prohibitory signage slowly revealed itself to me as a richly dimensional collage of communication.

Many parties contribute to this collage: residents, outsiders, small businesses, multinational corporations, local authorities, and regional and national entities. Central Square's distinct combination of these sometimes-competing efforts results in a mediascape that is both prized for its communication value and derided for its cluttered look. No one who has seen this mediascape, however, denies its impressive volume, density, and variety. That alone, to me, justified a closer look.

During the past year, from the spring of 2004 to the spring of 2005, I became a camera-toting urban wanderer. I was drawn to the Central Square commercial strip both for its rich mediascape and its suitability to pedestrianism. I slowed my habitually rapid walking pace, the one I use for transit, to a pace better suited to leisure or curious observation, and made a point of noticing everything that might fall under my definition of media: flyers, posters, stickers, graffiti, storefronts, billboards, municipal signage, trucks with logos, ads on buses, even random bits of scrawl on walls. I began by photographing anything media that caught my willing eye. Examining the fruits of each expedition revealed conceptual categories that then guided future expeditions. A hybrid approach emerged, for which I moved dialectically between impressionistic, aleatory data-gathering and a more methodical quest based on the conceptual categories indicated by the media themselves. The result has been over a thousand photographs and a deeper understanding of a specific media ecology.

Theoretical and Practical Interventions

The photographs enable a close interpretive analysis that I have illuminated by theoretical and practical inquiry to develop a detailed and nuanced description of a present-day urban mediascape. One goal of such a study is to contribute ground-level research and practical insights of everyday urban life to a number of disciplines when they direct their lenses on the city, often

from on high. To be sure, the city is in no danger of being overlooked by researchers and theorists of all backgrounds. But its everyday street media have been largely passed over for any meaningful examination. The words "everyday," "city," and "media" have become so loaded with connotation, and genericized by those wishing to build theories out of specificities or other theories, that these terms have been too far removed from any actual street. Theories about everyday life in cities tend to focus on material objects, social interactions, and the microperformances of individuals immersed in their daily rhythms. Studies of everyday media abound, but they are generally concerned with "the media" — electronic forms like radio, television, and the Internet as well as print publications such as newspapers — centrally controlled channels of mass communication. In such studies, even those informed and textured by recent trends in cultural studies that encourage a more nuanced view of communication, producer and consumer are divided and their interests set in opposition, where reconciliation or even collaboration is an exception, or at least a transgression of cultural norms.

In contrast, what I have found on the surfaces of Central Square is a broader view of media and a greater fluidity between typologies of producers and consumers. My conceptual definition of media — to augment the definitions provided earlier — agrees with Friedrich Kittler's that "[m]edia record, transmit and process information,"[3] but I would add that media often record and transmit more than what their explicit messages say, and that media can be viewed as a set of practices, not just a set of technologies. To be sure, not everyone who interacts with Central Square becomes a contributor to its street media, but contribution is far more accessible when it involves printing

[3] Kittler, "The City is a Medium," 722. Kittler considers cities themselves to be media for, among other things, their role in storing and transmitting societal information from one generation to the next. This is supports his overarching city-computer analogy, one that is generally illuminating but not for the purposes of this study, which deals more with fragments and ephemera.

a poster from a computer or scrawling a message on a wall with a pen than when it requires access to expensive production tools and distribution channels authorized by hierarchies of taste or capital. A media object of limited production quality (e.g., a home video recording) might be marginalized by "the media establishment," but in Central Square, homemade and homegrown is at least as prevalent as polished and expensive and deserves analysis and acknowledgement. A broader definition of media as both material and practice, and as ambient and sometimes from the grassroots, also challenges the narrow connotations of "the media" as a top-down entity that saturates daily life with capitalist hegemonies, that favors power, manipulation, and economic concerns over creativity and expression. "The media" in that sense enclose a city in networks of information that trigger anxiety in many cultural and social theorists.[4] While I am sympathetic to these concerns, I have turned to ambient street media in my search for reasons for optimism.

From Space to Surface

My idea of media shifts the conceptual loci of my inquiry from space to surface. This redefines a predominantly spatial hermeneutics employed in urban studies, urban sociology, cultural studies, and other related disciplines. Urban designers view space as a material itself. By designing in terms of positive and negative space, they are in a sense appropriating space before habitation occurs. By focusing on the qualities of the surfaces that line urban space, I hope to shift the inquiry along a number of planes. First and foremost, as Karl Schlögel writes, surfaces invite a closer look:

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[4] Manuel Castells, in *The Rise of the Network Society*, among other writings, develops in depth the image of cities as nodes in global information networks. But Castells does not find the "network society" as anxiety-provoking as does Paul Virilio. In much of his work, including *The Art of the Motor* and *Open Sky,* Virilio writes of the use of contemporary technologies to immerse society in hegemony.

> Surfaces demand that they be examined closely: their inventory or grain must be studied and possibly touched or glided over, their resistance put to the test. Their description is an art, in any case, heavy labor. It is easier to let surfaces be surfaces and to >>concentrate on the essentials<< … He who is occupied with the entity has no need to spend time on its manifestation.[5]

The shift from space to surface is intended to open our imaginings of the city from a tightly controlled, mediatized environment to one of greater dynamism, creativity, and even serendipity. Spatial theory's totalizing tendencies remove agency from the inhabitants, with Michel de Certeau being the oft-cited exception, although a somewhat conservative one at that. Surfaces, on the other hand, open up the spatial metaphor by adding texture to its implicit assumption of sameness, a texture that might then be thought of as more accessible to appropriation and inscription by a wider range of users than just planners, officials, developers, and commercial interests.

The choice of surface aligns me with cultural theorists who take a more hopeful view of the agency of individuals living in urban society. Thomas McLaughlin acknowledges that "the lure of system making is a persistent temptation for critical theory," a temptation that, while understandable and useful for identifying, transcending, and even reconfiguring cultural assumptions, is not the whole story.[6]

> Analysts of popular culture have often depicted the public as the passive victims of power elites who control the media and thus *create* the popular mindset. Other analysts see individuals as capable of resistive agency, as makers of cultural meaning, but still as subjects so thoroughly immersed in ideology that they cannot perceive its pervasive presence. I want to align myself with the critical theorists… who see individuals as capable of at least limited challenges to the embodied systems of culture.[7]

McLaughlin is ostensibly using "ideology" as Terry Eagleton defines it in a six-part "progressive sharpening of focus." Definition five, "in which ideology signifies ideas and beliefs which help to legitimate the interests of a ruling group or class specifically by distortion and dissimulation," and definition six,

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[5] Schlögel, *Rendering Time According to Space*, 15.
[6] McLaughlin, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory*, 6.
[7] McLaughlin, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory*, 7.

"which retains an emphasis on false or deceptive beliefs but regards such beliefs as arising not from the interests of a dominant class but from the material structure of society as a whole," together describe the abstraction in contemporary society that so many cultural theorists deplore but can see no exit from (a state of affairs I will elaborate on in Chapter One).[8]

I have instead chosen to side with McLaughlin's cautious optimism, to dive into the ideologized space of the urban streetscape to better make out the media elements that comprise it and the source entities their existence implies. Doing so reveals obvious and less-obvious manifestations of ideology, but also signs of activity that counter the view of an unempowered or indifferent urban populace. I see instances, admittedly unexpected, of spontaneous and deliberate collusion between governing authorities and unauthorized street media makers who, by the placement decisions they make, appear to share a certain respect for order with municipal authorities and other residents who disapprove of clutter. I also see planners and businesspeople who are proud of Central Square's "vibrant" mediascape and authorities who share with media makers a respect for free and immediate expression, even if it sometimes appears on surfaces on which it was not authorized to appear.

Certainly, the concept of surface has its own intellectual baggage. Surface, to Fredric Jameson, means superficiality and a lack of historical, emotional, and intellectual depth brought on by postmodernism.

> [T]here are some other significant differences between the high modernist and the postmodernist moment, between the shoes of Van Gogh and the shoes of Andy Warhol ... The first and most evident is the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense.[9]

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[8] Eagleton, *Ideology*, 30.
[9] Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 60.

Jameson's point is well-taken, but it is not the entire picture. While much everyday street media are ephemeral, much are not, and close observation reveals depths that might not appear in a casual interaction. I am helped by the fact that Central Square's history also runs deep: its basic layout was established four centuries ago, and its architecture has history as well.[10] Central Square did not simply appear one day out of the mind of a postmodern planner. Its organic, "traditional city" layout and small building footprints contribute to an environmental scale and density that influences patterns of movement and consequently the placement of various street media. The media themselves — posters, handbills, shop signs, and graffiti, to name a few — have rich histories as well.

Learning from Exceptions

Central Square keeps company with many other pedestrian-friendly urban areas in the United States, but historic preservation efforts and other factors have helped to set its basic layout and architecture apart from many newer or more centrally planned areas. Other factors contribute to an exceptional diversity in the ethnicities and classes of its residents, and in the businesses that serve them. This uniqueness is due in part to the local regulation and enforcement environment. Central Square's street media are present in the expected, authorized areas: municipal signs on posts anchored in the ground, storefronts of businesses that are licensed by the city, and large banners announcing community events. They are also very present on surfaces where they are not authorized to be: light poles, utility boxes, benches, and the walls of buildings. As I already mentioned, those with the legal and financial authority to remove unauthorized media and issue citations to the offenders are not wielding that authority to its fullest. This is due to both a reluctance

[10] "Traditional city" is the term used by urban planners to indicate a form that developed organically over time, often in piecemeal response to geographic or demographic realities. This contrasts with other, more centrally planned urban types, e.g., Garden City, Efficient City, New Urbanism, etc.

to commit time and financial resources as well as a reluctance to diminish what some officials — and residents and business owners — recognize to be a vital communication space. It is also due to a growing awareness, in part raised by my study, that the visual density — or clutter, as some choose to call it — comes from both unauthorized *and* authorized media. Many connected to Central Square take pride in the area's diversity of expression. Others worry about any detrimental impacts to external and internal perceptions of the space as cluttered or dirty.

The result of these competing views and inclinations, at least during the time of this study, has been an uncommon opportunity to see how people and entities inhabit an urban space with media when given a relatively lax enforcement environment. This in turn exposes the assumptions on which classifications of desirable and undesirable are based. My hope is that examining these assumptions can lead to a reconfiguration in favor of a more inclusive vision that balances a demonstrated enthusiasm and need for a broader-based communication infrastructure with a real desire for order on the part of those who share the space. My primary goal, however, is to encourage really *seeing* everyday media on our urban streets, and to better understand the multiplicity of messages, explicit and implicit, that can be derived from what we might, at first, take for granted.

Chapter One

Everyday Media in Urban Life

> …the workshop with its song and chatter;
> Chimneys and spires, those masts of the city,
> And the great skies making us dream of eternity.
>
> —Charles Baudelaire[1]

Everyday urban life on the street — "street" here being the urban outdoors, to distinguish from home life — is a thoroughly examined phenomenon in a wide range of fields. So much so that, in many cases, "the city" and "the street" have become abstract projections only loosely moored in the real. From Walter Benjamin's phantasmagoric wanderings to Paul Virilio's dystopic fears, "the city" often makes an appearance as a dreamlike (or nightmarish) concept. By distorting, exaggerating, or even narrativizing "the city" into a falsely coherent vision, these and related thinkers have in some ways succeeded in illuminating the far messier reality. I am not favoring the dream over the reality of urban life, but as the development of my own inquiry began with theories of "the city" and subsequently sought grounding in photographic observation, such is the path I will chart here. Dream and reality are not mutually exclusive tools for better understanding an urban space. Large cities, especially in the West, are frequently at the vanguard of societal change, and it not hard to understand why philosophers, technologists, economists, sociologists, architects, planners, and many other intellectuals would use their conceptions of the city to situate their own anxieties and hopes for the future. Sometimes these highly subjective views are made to sound like objective, testable theories, which can be misleading, difficult to apply, or even repellent to those seeking a practical understanding of urban reality upon which to build. But we should not turn away from the

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[1] "Landscape," *Flowers of Evil.* In Augé, *Non-Places*, 76.

project of weaving theory into practice, for, as Alvin Toffler writes, "Theories do not have to be 'right' to be enormously useful."[2] A theory actually can be most useful where it is weakest; if it is incomplete, or if the theorist has sacrificed correctness for coherence, these zones of inaccuracy can serve as entry points or foundations for the next set of interventions or advances. However, different disciplines have different ways of describing, evaluating, and envisioning urban spaces, and I draw from several disciplines to assemble my own theoretical and methodological goals.

Society, City, and Street

What many of these disciplines share is a tendency to abstract "the city." Contributing to this is the notion that these 20th-century debates about the ideal city are, essentially, debates about the ideal society. Should its first priorities be efficient labor productivity, smooth capital flows, and democratic consumption, or serendipity and stories, or strong community and democratic fulfillment of needs, or something entirely different? Many social and cultural inquiries treat "the city" as the place where the ills and advances of modern capitalist society first manifest. Thus, praise and critique of capitalist society and of "the city" are often conflated in social and cultural theory. This is an understandable tendency, and not a wrong one, for if urban areas are generally where large-scale social and cultural change first appears, it makes sense to scrutinize them most closely for signs of social health and illness. There is a synecdochical relationship between city and

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[2] Toffler, *Future Shock*, 6. Immediately preceding this declaration, Toffler, in the context of projecting trends into the future, exhibits a break with modernism's rationalist, quantitative methodologies by calling for a hybrid approach that foreshadows mine: "The inability to speak with precision and certainty about the future, however, is no excuse for silence. Where 'hard data' are available, of course, they ought to be taken into account. But where they are lacking, the responsible writer — even the scientist — has both a right and an obligation to rely on other kinds of evidence, including impressionistic or anecdotal data and the opinions of well-informed people." *Future Shock,* 5.

society — and between street and city — that aids and motivates much useful thinking about both.

In *The Urban Revolution*, Henri Lefebvre articulates the city-society synecdoche quite clearly. Rejecting common ways "to characterize 'our' society," such as "postindustrial society," "technological society," "consumer society," and so on, Lefebvre chooses the phrase "urban society." "Urban society," he writes, "… refers to tendencies, orientations, and virtualities, rather than any preordained reality," unlike the other terms. By posing a "critical examination of contemporary reality" in this way, Lefebvre claims to frame a less prejudicial inquiry into our current phase of urban evolution.[3] To demonstrate the complexities of such an inquiry, Lefebvre turns to the street, in a somewhat synecdochal manner as well:

> The street is where movement takes place, the interaction without which urban life would not exist, leaving only separation, a forced and fixed segregation.[4]

To Lefebvre, the street brings "all the elements of urban life" together, and serves, among others things, as "a communication space":

> The urban space of the street is a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs as it is to the exchange of things. A place where speech becomes writing. A place where speech can become "savage" and, by escaping rules and institutions, inscribe itself on walls.[5]

Lefebvre's call for a new urban methodology opens the door to greater creativity. Thus, despite the seemingly limitless discourse on the topic, the project of understanding cities and urban life is far from complete.

Adding Texture to Abstraction

In my view, the abstracting effect of many of these urban discourses needs to be countered with a new infusion of field observation. Which is why I have chosen to begin at the micro-level, on a specific city street, and then bring in

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[3] Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, 2.
[4] Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, 18.
[5] Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, 19.

metatheories to illuminate my findings. By documenting and analyzing what I find and photograph in Central Square, I first 'make the familiar strange' and in the process gain a clearer understanding of everyday, ambient street media. Equipped with this data, I have both theoretical and practical ambitions. I hope to challenge assumptions about street media in ways that might encourage communities — and societies — to protect and even promote the greatest diversity of communicative and expressive styles. To accomplish this, I draw from the logics of several disciplines, particularly urban studies, urban design, cultural studies, and, of course, media studies.

Understanding comes from contextualizing, and to a certain extent historicizing, major trends in these fields when applied both to real cities and "the city" of dreams and theoretical lenses. These trends, from modernism to postmodernism and from macro-level theory to theories of the everyday, guide my inquiry, both theoretically and methodologically. They also indicate areas for my own interventions in the existing scholarship, which primarily come from putting my creative energies toward charting a clear, simple course through concepts that have become connotationally dense with overuse, while also using my fieldwork to add texture to theories that oversimplify the city by taking a panoramic, rather than street-level, view.

Visions of the City in (Post)Modernity

Pre-modern, modern, postmodern, supermodern are the oft-used labels for historical zeitgeists in Western culture and thought. The finer points of distinction between them have fueled many a lengthy debate. However, although the lines are blurred, the differences are real, and they are useful representational frameworks for better understanding the present moment and considering the future. Overdependence on these terms risks engagement in a "teleological historiography," as Fredric Jameson puts it, a somewhat outmoded approach that is linear, periodic, and only clear in

retrospect.[6] While Jameson's caution is well-founded, the terms' endurance stems from more than simply their shorthand convenience. "Modernism" and "postmodernism" are each powerful words in their own right, and taken together, the gradual shift from one to the other connotes great social and cultural change in recent times. They have been applied in a wide range of disciplines, picking up discipline-specific connotations along the way. While as trends and zeitgeist descriptors they are hardly monolithic — and have been at times dissonant from field to field (e.g., cultural studies vs. urban planning) — that there has been movement from one term to the next does suggest areas of potential future change. Edward Soja acknowledges this in the formulation of his term, "postmetropolis":

> The prefix 'post' thus signals the transition from what has conventionally been called the modern metropolis to something significantly different, to new postmodern forms and patternings of urban life that are increasingly challenging well-established modes of urban analysis.[7]

What modernism and postmodernism provide as change-markers is a way to think about visions of "the city" in terms of totalities vs. multiplicities. Modernism can be said to have been a reaction to the ruptures and disjunctures brought on by modernity, beginning in the 19th century, with mass production and other technological developments (notably electricity) and demographic changes.[8] A visions that developed in the early-middle decades of the 20th century, the ideal modernist city was centrally planned and managed based on a value system founded on efficiency, security, and freedom from want above all else. (This vision was actualized wholesale in pre-planned cities like Brasilia, but in older cities it was applied only inconsistently and partially.) The modernist approach to urban planning is

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[6] Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 55.
[7] Soja, "Six Discourses on the Postmetropolis," 188.
[8] The Paris arcades, where "historical time is broken up into kaleidoscopic distractions and momentary come-ons, myriad displays of ephemera…" is where Walter Benjamin, who wrote of the mid-19th century,, situated his own historical explorations of the onset of modernity. Eiland and McLaughlin, "Translators' Foreword," *The Arcades Project*, xii.

typified by the work of Le Corbusier, who classified and sorted everything into its proper place, according to a logic of separation of functions and efficient productivity of the inhabitants. With the credo, "A city made for speed is made for success," Le Corbusier thinned out urban downtowns to make way for cars, and divided his "City of To-Morrow" into zones of function such as business, residence, and public space (parks). He idealized geometrical, repetitive layouts and derided the architects of his era who prized "interesting" and "irregular" buildings and sites.[9]

The goal of modernism in urban planning was to order society so as to service capitalist practices of efficient productivity and consumption. Urban planning took a top-down view of society, metaphorically and also literally, from atop the skyscrapers that Le Corbusier adored:

> Remember that up till now our horizons have never been more than those revealed to eyes quite close to the earth's surface; Alpine climbers alone enjoyed the intoxication of great heights. From the Eiffel Tower and its platforms at heights of 300, 600 and 900 feet, our horizontal vision is dealing with vast subjects which move and influence us deeply.[10]

Modernist planners had reformist ideals as well. An efficient city could spare its inhabitants from want and suffering and other social ills. Kristin Ross, writing of France's move into modernization during the modernist era of the 1950s and 1960s, describes modernism's totalizing vision:

> Modernization promises a perfect reconciliation of past and future in an endless present, a world where all sedimentation of social experience has been leveled or smoothed away, where poverty has been reabsorbed, and, most important, a world where class conflict is a thing of the past, the stains of contradiction washed out in a superhuman hygienic effort, by new levels of abundance and equitable distribution.[11]

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[9] Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow and Its Planning*, 176 and 179.
[10] Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow and Its Planning*, 187.
[11] Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, 11. Ross' description brings to mind Jacques Tati's *Playtime*, which follows a somewhat unsocialized, bumbling character through a thoroughly modernist landscape. Ross and Tati notwithstanding, modernism did have its champions: In his requiem for modernism, Marshall Berman writes eloquently of its strengths, which are easy to forget in view of its weaknesses. "All the modernisms and anti-modernisms of the 1960s, then, were seriously flawed. But their sheer plenitude, along with their intensity and liveliness of expression, generated a common language, a vibrant ambience, a shared horizon

Despite its utopian aims, modernism's centralizing and totalizing logic, once physically manifest in cities around the world, encountered strong opposition. This opposition was grounded in anxieties about the human impacts of modernity that had developed well before modernism matured as a concept. Concern and anger over the massification of society, over the perceived loss of human traditions, values, creativity, diversity, and the mutualistic relationship between the individual and society that sustained both, as well as a frustration with the endurance of oppressive social and cultural hierarchies from earlier times, fueled various forms of intellectual and political activism in the West during the middle of the 20th century.

Critiquing the homogenizing impact of modernist retrofitting of traditional American cities, particularly New York, sociologist Jane Jacobs reached into the past — or what risked soon becoming the past — to smaller, close-knit communities, older, human-scale buildings, and the life-affirming complexities formed of historical layering. Drawing from her own street-level observations as well as her fluency in the urban planning discourse of the time, Jacobs condemned modernism's homogenization of city spaces.

> Let us consider, first, the belief that diversity looks ugly. Anything looks ugly, to be sure, if it is done badly. But this belief implies something else. It implies that city diversity of uses is inherently messy in appearance; and it also implies that places stamped with homogeneity of uses look better, or at any rate are more amenable to pleasant or orderly esthetic treatment.
>
> But homogeneity or close similarity among uses, in real life, poses very puzzling esthetic problems.

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of experience and desire. All these visions and revisions of modernity were active orientations toward history, attempts to connect the turbulent present with a past and a future, to help men and women all over the contemporary world to make themselves at home in this world. These initiatives all failed, but they sprang from a largeness of vision and imagination and from an ardent desire to seize the day. It was the absence of these generous visions and initiatives that made the 1970s such a bleak decade. Virtually no one today seems to want to make the large human connections that the idea of modernity entails." *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 33.

> If the sameness of use is shown candidly for what it is — sameness — it looks monotonous. Superficially, this monotony might be thought of as a sort of order, however dull. But esthetically, it unfortunately also carries with it a deep disorder: the disorder of conveying no direction. In places stamped with the monotony and repetition of sameness you move, but in moving you seem to have gotten nowhere.[12]

This was not just a comment on visual boredom, nor simply on the logistical problems of navigating a city with few memorable features. Rather, Jacobs was criticizing urban planners and architects for their inattention to the intricacies of urban life in its many aspects, esthetic as well as social. When one thinks in totalities, heterogeneity gets smoothed over into "sameness." Jacobs, like many other critics of modernism, was calling for an acknowledgement of the intricacies and diversities — the multiplicities — of real, human-scale life.[13]

Jane Jacobs wove organic city layouts and old-fashioned community values into her vision of the good city; in contrast, Guy Debord and his French group of activist artists, the Situationists, looked forward to a future city that had no precedents, one of all play, no work, and constant dynamism and discovery, a city freed of the constraints of historical hierarchies and traditions: "The revolution in everyday life… will create the conditions in which the *present dominates the past* and the creative aspects of life always predominate over the repetitive."[14] Situationism's core views were so radical as to rule out actual implementation, but many strands of their anti-modernist thinking so greatly influenced contemporary culture that some intellectual historians stop just short of calling them "the first postmoderns".[15]

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[12] Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 223.
[13] Lefebvre, in *The Urban Revolution*, also positions Corbusier and Jacobs in critical proximity.
[14] Debord, "Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life," 244.
[15] Ball, "The Great Sideshow of the Situationist International," 25. For a similar characterization, see Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 40: "Given the common fascination with consumption and eclecticism, it is not surprising that the situationists and the Independent Group have since been regarded as sources of a postmodern sensibility. The situationist

Situationists developed a variety of tools to challenge the alienating effects of modernist urban planning. Prominent among these was the dérive,

> …a technique of transient passage through varied ambiences. The dérive entails playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effect; which completely distinguishes it from the classical notions of the journey and the stroll.[16]

For Debord, the dérive exposed the extent to which city planners overdetermined people's experiences of the city:

> 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 current, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.[17]

Fundamentally, situationism advocated the breaking open and overturning of rigid totalities, favoring multiplicities of situations and characters the dynamism of which would insert more serendipity into an urban life they felt lacked the luster of freedom. This emphasis on individual empowerment and grassroots appropriation of capitalism's outputs was a more radical predecessor to Michel de Certeau's tactics of everyday resistance.

Sometime during the middle of the 20th century, postmodernism overtook modernism in a variety of disciplines as the analytical and prescriptive framework of choice.[18] Postmodernism has been, among many things, an attempt toward greater inclusivity of diverse fragments and multiplicities in

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model of culture falling into either spectacular or anti-spectacular camps, and the Independent Group model of culture as one "long front," both had the effect of leveling the traditional cultural hierarchy of highbrow and lowbrow… The "postmodern" sensibility regularly resurfaced in situationist texts — a 1960 manifesto suggested that the breakup of aesthetic orthodoxy and hierarchy would be a necessity of the future situationist world…"

[16] Debord, "Levres Nues #8," 22.

[17] Debord, "Levres Nues #8," 22.

[18] "Framework" might be too strong a word. I prefer Celeste Olalquiaga's characterization: "…[P]ostmodernism is a state of things, not a structured and coherent ideology." *Megalopolis*, xiv.

intellectuals' conceptions of society and planners' conceptions of the city. As David Harvey writes,

> Postmodernism cultivates… a conception of the urban fabric as necessarily fragmented, a 'palimpsest' of past forms superimposed upon each other, and a 'collage' of current uses, many of which may be ephemeral. Since the metropolis is impossible to command except in bits and pieces, urban *design* (and note that postmodernists design rather than plan) simply aims to be sensitive to vernacular traditions, local histories, particular wants, needs, and fancies, thus generating specialized, even highly customized architectural forms that may range from intimate, personalized spaces, through traditional monumentality, to the gaiety of spectacle.[19]

To cultural theorists, postmodernism is what one might call the 'anti-skyscraper' — a grassroots theoretical empowerment of traditionally marginalized people, interests, and needs. As we shall see in Central Square, this marginalization is actually built into urban space by legislation and enforcement that favor municipal and corporate signage over that of individual, autonomous actors. It is reinforced by the vast majority of urban inhabitants, formerly including myself, to whom it would never occur to restructure or redistribute shared spaces more equitably.

But despite its rhetoric of diversity and inclusivity, the postmodern city, as actualized, is no social idealist's utopia. This is most clearly seen in much American urban planning today which, in addition to serving power, remains a top-down, homogenizing force, the result of collaborations between private interests and local governments to gentrify decaying urban areas with limited input from local residents and businesses. Robert Beauregard has written that the shift away from modernist planning's "totalizing vision" has been accompanied by the loss of such planning's "reformist tendencies":

> Planners… are less and less able to maintain even the facade of being concerned with those outside the 'loop' of economic prosperity. No longer is the idea to improve

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[19] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 66.

> society. The new strategy is to flee the problems of society by creating wider and wider circles of growth.[20]

Modernization and gentrification might look different from how they looked in modernist times, with human-scale development and pedestrian-friendly areas coming into favor and grand vistas and automobile-scale downtowns falling out.[21] Despite these shifts in appearance, "the city" in postmodern times is not the realization of the social hopes of modernism's resisters. Rather, its fragments and multiplicities lack depth: Capitalism creates the illusion of choice (especially among commodified media and consumer products) while masking what remains a centralized set of forces dominating our everyday existence.[22]

> [C]laims on situationism as a postmodern source need to be qualified. Situationism would have abhorred postmodernism's celebration of the meaningless forest of consumer signs and objects.[23]

Concern for the Postmodern City

To many contemporary social critics, the postmodern city is a paean to capitalism, particularly global capitalism. Corporate and government media line the surfaces of the postmodern city, not competing with but rather promoting the capitalist city's ideals of order and consumption. Local urban spaces are populated with national and international corporate symbols. They are marked by government signs that maintain order and smooth the way for commuters (traffic jams are viewed as a failure of these efforts) and other mechanisms for the distribution of material goods and information. Local, individual forms of communication are regulated out of these local spaces: The ideal postmodern urban surface is "clean" and unmarked. Jean

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[20] Beauregard, "Between Modernity and Postmodernity," 387. Beauregard cites John R. Logan and Harvey Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).

[21] A major movement in this direction has been led by the so-called "New Urbanists." Of many Web sites on the topic, see http://www.newurbanism.org and http://www.cnu.org.

[22] For more on capitalism's commodification of everyday life, see Baudrillard, *The System of Objects.*

[23] Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 40.

Baudrillard considers ideology to be embedded in the very forms of mass corporate media that promote capitalist flows. Media does not simply transmit a social relation, it *is* a social relation between (to use Baudrillard's simplification) capitalist and salaried worker. And that relation is what he calls "non-response" or "irresponsibility". The consumer is communicated to in such a way that precludes response. "[T]he revolution *tout court* — lies in restoring this possibility of response."[24] Baudrillard worries that "*people are no longer speaking to each other,* that they are definitively isolated in the face of a speech without response."[25] This is exacerbated by a social condition of capitalism in which local populations are increasingly transient, further eroding autonomous impulses toward communication and self-expression with other social participants. Kevin Lynch takes this critique of one-way communication to the street, complaining that much street media is structured in that same way:

> The receiver cannot control the city communication process as he would like to; he cannot easily shut out unwanted messages, or locate desired ones. He has no opportunity to "talk back", but must remain a passive recipient.[26]

Confronted with a vision — and to a certain extent, a reality — of "the city" as sterile, racially segregated, tightly controlled, and decreasingly human,[27] plenty of contemporary intellectuals have taken the baton from situationism in expressing their anxieties and fears. Like Baudrillard, Paul Virilio situates some of his many anxieties about contemporary life in his fear of information, especially information fueled by electronic networks, as social control: "With excess transmission speed, *control becomes the environment*

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[24] Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 170.
[25] Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* 172.
[26] Lynch and Appleyard, *Signs in the City*, 75.
[27] Davis, *City of Quartz*. Edward Soja acknowledges the value of this influential book but criticizes those "especially on the left" who 'romance' his description of Los Angeles into something far too radical. Soja, "Six Discourses on the Postmetropolis," 194.

itself."[28] That control comes from a loss of the immediate communication available in face-to-face or two-way interactions.

> In days gone by, *being present meant being close*, being physically close to the other in face-to-face, vis-à-vis proximity. This made dialogue possible through the carrying of the voice and eye contact. But with the advent of *media proximity*, based on the properties of electromagnetic waves, the value of interlocutors' immediate coming together has suffered from interference, the sudden loss of distance rebounding on "being there," here and now.[29]

The result, goes this line of thinking, is "the city" as a functional, operational entity in service of capitalist flows.[30] It is a space where history exists only as retro fashion and nostalgia; it is "historicism", not history:

> …namely the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and in general what Henri Lefebvre has called the increasing primacy of the 'neo'.[31]

Without historical depth, without existential depth, "the city" loses any of the real diversity heralded by postmodernism. This, critics say, is evident on the street, in corporate ads and corporate appropriations of "underground" media.

> If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold, and to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but 'heaps of fragments' and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory.[32]

Theoretical Totalities

These visions of a city of alienated individuals, of mediatized surfaces lacking affective or intellectual depth, of apparent multiplicities masking a capitalist

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[28] Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*, 131.
[29] Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*, 106.
[30] Interestingly, this is where critiques of modernism and postmodernism sound similar.
[31] Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, 64. This line of argument, recurrent in critiques of modernity, brings to mind Harry Harootunian's skepticism when writing about Siegfried Kracauer and Georg Simmel: "It is important to remember that Kracauer, like Simmel and other social theorists confronting the spectacle of modernity, posited the prior existence of a unified, coherent world to explain the fragmentary nature of contemporary experience… But it is hard not to conclude that this prior imaginary was produced after the fact and that the supposed unity was a way of justifying and making meaningful an analysis that concentrated on the appearance of an immediately given but fragmented experience." *History's Disquiet*, 88.
[32] Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 71.

totality, these visions do have some truth, even when we apply them specifically to street media. Contemporary urban spaces have hosted various forms of street media for centuries, but the systems evinced and promoted by those media, the professed and real goals of those media, have changed over time. Technological change might have exaggerated our perceptions of the extent of these changes, but, just as the shift from modernism to postmodernism indicates a larger social shifts, the new technologies are material manifestations of social processes that have in fact changed. That said, the descriptions of social changes as outlined above go too far in their denouncements of contemporary society, their authors ignoring evidence that might compromise the cohesiveness of their dystopic visions. Marc Augé, searching for an "anthropology of supermodernity" (ostensibly an era beyond postmodernism), writes of the "semi-illusion" wrought of the "'totality temptation'" among old-school ethnologists that we might apply to other social analysts as well.

> For although the ethnologist can hardly help being tempted to identify the people he studies with the landscape in which he finds them, the space they have shaped, he is just as aware as they are of the vicissitudes of their history, their mobility, the multiplicity of spaces to which they refer, the fluctuation of their frontiers. Moreover, he may be tempted, like them, to look back from the upheavals of the present towards an illusory past stability…
>
> But this is not the crucial part of the ethnologist's temptation, which is intellectual and has long been a feature of the ethnological tradition.
>
> Calling on a notion that this tradition has itself used and abused under various circumstances, we will name this the 'totality temptation'… Lévi-Strauss summarizes this point of view in remarkable fashion by suggesting that the total social fact is primarily the social fact perceived totally.[33]

Countless social critics have fallen prey to this "totality temptation" like the power elites whose outlooks they critique. The language is dire and the claims sound exaggerated. Baudrillard goes so far as to say that everyone, even other social critics, is so immersed in the ideology they critique that their critiques have no teeth: That claim is both overwrought and needlessly

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[33] Augé, *Non-Places*, 47.

dismissive.[34] Such exaggerated expressions of the problems of contemporary society and its urban nodes are as totalizing as anything the modernists could have come up with. Postmodernist thinking might claim to value a fragmenting of reality and examination of those fragments as a way of getting closer to human truths, but many of those who write under its banner (an amorphous banner, as it were) retain a discursive style that at times can best be described as eloquent panic.[35]

Human life does carry on in a manner that is far from purely functional; reality is messy and unboundable by any one theory. As I wrote earlier, that these theories are not fully accurate does not devalue them; in fact their inaccuracies guide toward new hermeneutic directions that might get closer to a truth of "the city", which is my goal. I write "a" truth because my own inquiry is posed as far more bounded — by one geographical location, one set of media types, and a modest set of claims. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre criticizes those who

> make society into the 'object' of a systematization which must be 'closed' to be complete; they thus bestow a cohesiveness it utterly lacks upon a totality which is in fact decidedly open — so open, indeed, that it must rely on violence to endure.[36]

Lefebvre calls for a greater emphasis on the materiality and social use of spaces, rather than on space as an idealized conceptual category. Lefebvre is a key contributor to another body of theory that motivates my inquiry well

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[34] "We pass from a society that is still contradictory, non-homogeneous, and not yet saturated with political economy; from a society in which the refractory models of transcendence, conflict and surpassing still exist; where a human nature is shredded but still present… and where there is still a history with its revolutionary theory, etc., to a cybernetized society. *We enter a social environment of synthesis in which a total abstract communication and an immanent manipulation no longer leave any point exterior to the system.*" Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 202, emphasis mine.

[35] "By changing our relationship to the resources that surround us, by violently expanding the scope of change, and, most crucially, by accelerating its pace, we have broken irretrievably with the past. We have cut ourselves off from the old ways of thinking, of feeling, of adapting. We have set the state for a completely new society and we are now racing toward it." Toffler, *Future Shock*, 18.

[36] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 11.

beyond postmodernism's somewhat illusory celebration of multiplicity and diversity: theories of the everyday.

Resistance in Everyday Life

In recent decades, social theorists have revived the everyday as an important domain of inquiry for its potential to reveal sites of actual and potential resistance to political and corporate structures that look hegemonic when viewed from too high. Debord was particularly influenced by the work of Lefebvre, his contemporary. The Situationist concept of "détournement" was one of reappropriation and recombination of the productions of 20th-century capitalism in a way that would invert their intended meanings. Proposals were wide-ranging:

> [T]he Metro should be running all night, special aerial runways should be constructed to facilitate journeys across the rooftops, churches should be turned into children's playgrounds (or Chambers of Horror), railway stations should be left exactly as they are — except that all timetables and travel information should be removed from them. Graveyards should be abolished. Prisons should be opened. Street-names should be changed. All museums should be closed and the art works distributed, to be hung in bars and Arab cafés.[37]

But where Debord's vision of détournement resonates with an inquiry into street media is in the May 1956 issue of *Les Lèvres Nues*, where he describes the myriad ways one might détourne media objects: not only street names, but advertisements, press clippings, photographs, and "bad books".

Debord provides micro sites of everyday resistance to power structures. His exhortations bring to mind the later work of Certeau, iconic thinker of the everyday, for whom resistance by ordinary people does not always have to be a deliberate, explicit act. Certeau directly critiques Debord and Baudrillard for their dystopic totalities, where they portray the consumer as a passive

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[37] Wollen, "Situationists and Architecture," 134.

"voyeur in a 'show biz society.'"[38] He writes: "In reality, the activity of reading has on the contrary all the characteristics of a silent production."[39] Certeau describes the many ways in which people "poach" the media and structures to which they are exposed daily, transforming them with their own subjectivities — often unconscious — into something quite different from what might have been intended by the producers. These "tactics" are their resistance to the "strategies" implemented by the powerful to promote capitalist social order.

Certeau's view of resistance is rather conservative, especially when compared to resistance as framed by his more radical contemporaries. He, too, sites a fair amount of passivity in the receiver. For example, when he writes, "In short, a tactic is an art of the weak," Certeau exposes his own view of government and corporate power on one side and the unempowered 'average citizen' on the other.[40] But, as Ben Highmore suggests, Certeau is simply trying to set the stage for a more detailed study of everyday life in an intellectual environment that often dismisses it as too banal or too colonized by ideology to reveal anything useful.[41] My own set of interventions are not as iconoclastic, but they do share some of Certeau's goals.

Certeau's work, while extremely useful, does demonstrate some of the ways in which the everyday as a theoretical concept is problematic. The everyday has evolved into an umbrella term for what are, in fact, a broad range of lexical interpretations; Highmore writes, "'[E]veryday life' signifies ambivalently."[42] In other words, intellectuals who look at "the everyday" as a

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[38] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* xxi. Certeau cites Debord, *Society of the Spectacle,* and Baudrillard, *Le Système des Objets*.
[39] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* xxi.
[40] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* 37.
[41] Highmore, *The Everyday Life Reader*, 13.
[42] Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 1. In "The Everyday and Everydayness," Lefebvre takes this further in the context of a rationalist society of segregated functions:

critical concept often fall into a usage based on their own understanding of the term's denotation, rather than working in an epistemologically consistent manner, where "the everyday" has a generally agreed upon set of definitions that enable the advancement and exchange of ideas on the matter. Like "the city", the term has been genericized by overuse.

One way the term's malleability is exploited is in the universalizing tone of claims about what is supposed to be a mode of being that could conceivably be as diverse and dynamic as the number of individuals on this earth. What I consider to be the wrong use of the everyday is when it presupposes an "average" or "ordinary" actor whose daily routines are shared by many. The construction of such an actor can, in a modernist sort of way, ignore real social texture in favor of simplicity, thereby excluding people and groups who are 'not like us.' Highmore introduces his collection, *The Everyday Life Reader*, with this very problem.

> Everyday life is a vague and problematic phrase. Any assumption that it is simply 'out there', as a palpable reality to be gathered up and described, should face an immediate question: whose everyday life?

While Highmore cites a number of theorists who use the everyday as a term of macro-analysis, where the concept is most illuminating to my inquiry of the practices surrounding ambient street media is where it comes closest to the street in a metaphorical sense, in the sense that postmodernism attempts to pull modernism from the skyscrapers. Close-up, we see manifestations of global and local, of scales of all sorts — in short, we see complexity.

Ultimately, Highmore calls for an engagement with "the everyday as a problematic, a contested and opaque terrain," for the insights gained by the

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"The everyday can… be defined as a set of functions which connect and join together systems that might appear to be distinct… The everyday is… the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden." In *Architecture of the Everyday*, 34.

process of teasing out its many strands of meaning.[43] That is the goal I share. What I also share with Highmore is his willingness to allow "the everyday" to generalize, but for smaller slices of life.[44] Obviously, there is no one everyday life, but there are shared everyday experiences along specific planes of social existence and among specific groups. I am not studying "everyday life" in a general, total sense. I am studying one aspect of everyday experience: everyday media and everyday media practices. In the commercial area of one urban neighborhood in one city.

Redefining Everyday Media

My focus on everyday street media sets me apart from a tendency among theorists to look at everyday material life, or to consider media as a monolithical one-to-many communication: "the media." Declarations like this, by Susan Willis, are so oversimplified that they beg refutation:

> The bottom line in daily life is the commodity form. Herein are subsumed all the contradictions of commodity capitalism and our aspirations for their utopian transformation.[45]

Even when street media are referenced, it is done in the context of capitalism rather than communication.

> In the twentieth-century megacity it is harder to see what one intends to accomplish simply by going somewhere, because representation of the everyday needs and desires orienting production and consumption no longer takes place within clear, walkable parameters of time and space. Needs and desires are piped along the street like a tribal chant on billboards, in walkmans, from car radios. The chant is virtually unending; representation of everyday needs and desires comes closer and closer to enfolding everyone, wherever they are, in a seamless wrap-about of want and lack.[46]

While I have little argument with the notion that the postmodern, Western city is predominantly a space of consumption, what I will show is that the street also harbors — and actually nurtures by its immediacy and

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[43] Highmore, *The Everyday Life Reader*, 1.
[44] "[I]s everyday life characterised by singular, individual acts (an accumulation of particularity, so to speak) or is it understandable as an overarching structure common to a large group of people?" Highmore, *The Everyday Life Reader*, 5.
[45] Willis, *A Primer for Daily Life*, Author's Note.
[46] Kinser, "Everyday Ordinary," 72.

accessibility — other ways of life that are not easily labeled as social relationships defined by capital or by politically motivated resistance. Not everyone would agree with Maurice Blanchot that "[t]he everyday is not at home in our dwelling-places, it is not in offices or churches, any more than in libraries or museums. It is in the street — if it is anywhere," but his characterization serves my inquiry well.[47] My photographic observations of Central Square are an attempt to honor the complexity of everyday life outside of the domestic or institutional sphere. For this I have chosen a particular place that, as I will show, is more open and accepting of this complexity than are many urban spaces today.

Observing an 'Uncommon Everyday'

The extreme localization and situation of this project does not render it applicable only to the specific locale and conditions it describes; rather, the unique vibrancy of Central Square's street media is what gives my findings the potential to be more generally useful. Using the everyday as a body of theory and a guiding concept helps me, as Highmore has written, "make the invisible visible."[48] Such abundance of homegrown, corporate, small business, and governmental inscriptions on these local surfaces, aided by the absence of a strong commitment to enforce prohibitionary rules, occurs infrequently in a society that values cleanliness and order. This is what one might call an 'uncommon everyday', and therein lies its epistemological strength. Central Square's streetscape provides a rare opportunity to better understand how various urban participants communicate with one another when the surfaces they pass everyday are made, either by design or by circumstance, accessible to an uncommonly wide range of contributors.

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[47] Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 17.
[48] Highmore, *The Everyday Life Reader*, 2.

Close observation and interpretation have revealed this particular streetscape to be a site for more humanity in everyday life than some feared might remain. It is true that businesses and governing authorities do claim the lion's share of the street surfaces for their own inscriptions, or against the inscriptions of others. This is in part due to the fact that they are asserting protectorship over surfaces that belong to buildings they own. This is also due to assumptions, some quite pervasive even among individuals, about what kinds of inscriptions signal order and which signal disorder and decay. And yet, despite the authoritative dominance of such entities, an astonishing plurality of voices occupy Central Square's streetscape.

Thus, this photographic study intervenes in the anxieties of many postmodern intellectuals by adding evidentiary strength to the work of those who are more socially grounded and optimistic. My aim, however, is not only to add texture to theoretical visions of "the city" and "the everyday", but also to blend theory and practice in such a way as to have an impact on the future plans of urban designers, city officials, and community activists when they have to turn away from dreams of "the city" and get down to the business of actual, local change.[49]

Understanding Contemporary Communication

To use photography for its metaphorical value for a moment, I hope to bring back into focus some answers about public communication and expression that modernity's swift changes have blurred. David Henkin does this as an historical inquiry into street media in New York City at the onset of modernity; it is now time to examine the urban street of a century and a half later.

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[49] In his essay, "The Right to the City," Lefebvre calls for a more complex set of methodologies to understand "the urban" and suggests how this might help to better ground urban planning in reality.

> In recent decades, champions of both the city and the written word have grown uneasy. For if cities and writing have traditionally served as instruments of memory, as forces of preservation and continuity, their explosive growth in the age of market capitalism has tended to produce the opposite effect. More to the point of our story, the relationship between community and communication, between reading and public space, seems particularly fragile at this point in history. The centrifugal thrust of both information proliferation and city development makes it harder to see the spatial contours of an urban public. "The contemporary metropolis," writes architectural historian M. Christine Boyer, "represents a physical site in which images and messages seem to swirl about, devoid of a sustaining context," a thematic complaint reformulated by countless critics of the digital age who mourn the loss of spatial relationships associated with printed texts.[50]

It is of course possible to misunderstand what is actually around us, to become caught up in the forceful rhetoric of change, especially technological change. When that happens, it is difficult to see how the past can be integrated with the present and future in our analytical frameworks. But it is a necessary endeavor. Marc Augé writes, "The world of supermodernity does not exactly match the one in which we believe we live, for we live in a world that we have not yet learned to look at."[51]

As we learn how to look at our present-day world, everyday ambient media and communication are essential components. Contrary to the many media theorists, some of whom are included in this chapter, who accuse media of unreality and abstraction, I agree with Roger Silverstone that the current set of everyday mediations *is* a meaningful part of our current reality, and we must not always assume that media is what we peer through and past in order to understand something real on the other side. Silverstone is referring to "the media", but his position extrapolates well to street media as I have defined it.

> This second order… reality, that of the media, does not replace the world of lived experience, as Jean Baudrillard, with his notion of the simulacrum, imagined it did, but it runs through that experiential world, dialectically engaged with it, eternally intertwined. The lived and the represented consequently become the warp and the

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[50] Henkin, *City Reading*, 24. Henkin cites M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, 28, Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, and Geoffrey Nunberg, ed., *The Future of the Book.*
[51] Augé, *Non-Places*, 35.

> weft of the everyday, and what is at stake in any investigation of their interrelationship is the historical and sociological specificity of the ensuing fabric, its strengths and its weaknesses, its coincidences and its contradictions: the touch and the feel of culture — the ethics and aesthetics of experience. From this perspective mediation is already a crucial constituent of everyday life. One cannot inquire into one without simultaneously inquiring into the other.[52]

Street media, like other forms of media, create a web of representation, consumer desire, and referentiality that is illusory, but it is also real because we live it everyday. My choice of such media as an object of study is an explicit acknowledgement of this pervasive fact of urban life.

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[52] Silverstone, "Complicity and Collusion in the Mediation of Everyday Life," 763. Silverstone cites Baudrillard, *Simulations*.

Chapter Two

Central Square in Context

Before embarking on an examination of Central Square's media, I first want to situate this particular urban area in urban studies, and to a lesser extent cultural studies discourses, for there is much in the literature to support the belief that city form profoundly affects many other aspects of urban life, including communication and media. Is Central Square a typical postmodern urban space? Do its architecture and layout, and the principles they embody, fit Celeste Olalquiaga's description of a "megalopolis"?

> Casting a hologramlike aesthetic, contemporary architecture displays an urban continuum where buildings are seen to disappear behind reflections of the sky or merge into one another, as in the downtown areas of most cosmopolitan cities and in the trademark midtown landscape of New York City. Any sense of freedom gained by the absence of clearly marked boundaries, however, is soon lost to the reproduction ad infinitum of space — a hall of mirrors in which passersby are dizzied into total oblivion. Instead of establishing coordinates from a fixed reference point, contemporary architecture fills the referential crash with repetition, substituting for location an obsessive duplication of the same scenario.[1]

Does Central Square fit Paul Virilio's similar description of the "overexposed city?"

> In effect, we are witnessing a paradoxical moment in which the opacity of building materials is reduced to zero. With the invention of the steel skeleton construction, curtain walls made of light and transparent materials, such as glass or plastics, replace stone façades, just as tracing paper, acetate and plexiglass replace the opacity of paper in the designing phase.[2]

The answer is obvious from a glance down Massachusetts Avenue: Not at all. As mentioned earlier, the Central Square area of Cambridge, Massachusetts, exhibits the characteristics of a traditional city, one that has grown organically over centuries, with small lot sizes and low buildings (figures 2.1 and 2.2). Beginning in the early 17th century, Central Square emerged as a crossroads between Old Cambridge (now Harvard Square) and Boston (figure

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[1] Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, 1.
[2] Virilio, "The Overexposed City," 441.

2.3). Some buildings have come and gone, but some have remained for decades, and the essential layout with its primarily commercial function has developed into the kind of urban space that garners approval from social thinkers like Lynn Lofland:

> **Historical Layering/Physical Juxtaposition**
>
> A fourth source of esthetic pleasure appears to be created when urban areas develop slowly and incrementally and over relatively long periods of time. When that happens, we see a kind of "jumbling" in the environment. For example, historical periods may become "layered" one on another, as when buildings of one era are to be seen cheek-by-jowl with buildings of a very different era and form a kind of panorama of overlapping architectural styles.[3]

When historically and stylistically diverse architecture, architecture built on a human scale, serves as the backdrop for people's everyday activities outside their homes, I and many others believe that people interact with the space and with each other differently than when they must navigate the spaces described by Olalquiaga and Virilio. Mike Davis describes what he calls an "'Olmstedian vision' of public space," a reference to 19th-century urban designer Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed public landscapes and parks to facilitate the mixing of classes and ethnicities to diffuse the kinds of social tensions that lead to riots. Davis contrasts this with Los Angeles, where, he claims, contemporary public spaces are segregated and militarized.[4] Between glass skyscrapers and small-scale, "jumbled" streetscapes, how do we position Central Square?

Situating Central Square

Central Square's identity as a distinct area of Cambridge is clearer than its exact boundaries. It is not an official city neighborhood, nor is it an official district. It is Cambridge's "downtown", albeit radically different from the downtown described by Olalquiaga. Four official Cambridge neighborhoods

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[3] Lofland, *The Public Realm,* 84.
[4] Davis, *City of Quartz*, 226.

converge to form Central Square: Area 4, Mid-Cambridge, Riverside, and East Cambridge. In a somewhat colloquial practice best described by Kevin Lynch, the area emanates from the intersection of Prospect Street with River Street, Western Avenue, and Massachusetts Avenue, but few residents would agree on its exact boundaries. I confined my research to Massachusetts Avenue between City Hall at Bigelow Street and Lafayette Square at Main Street, a space congruent to but smaller than the boundaries used by Sarah Boyer of the Cambridge Historical Commission: "Massachusetts Avenue from the Lafayette Square Fire Station to Clinton Street, north to Bishop Allen Drive, and south to Franklin Street."[5] (figure 2.4)

Central Square, like many urban areas, has had its ups and downs. Its current character is the latest outcome of historically ongoing efforts to facilitate access to Boston while developing and maintaining a successful, self-sustaining commercial presence that serves local residents and attracts visitors. A bustling retail district in the early part of the 20th century, the area saw a decline in business and real estate during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s and became known for its vagrant characters, rundown buildings, and general grit. One unpublished report commissioned by the Cambridge Historical Commission does not mince words:

> The Central Square of today almost defies description. It is a confused, unsightly, often directly commercial strip with great variations in scale, material, and style.[6]

Another longtime resident found the down-to-earth diversity comforting, even relaxing, because he didn't feel less sophisticated than the people around him, as he wrote in 1982:

> Here are some of the items you can't get anywhere else in Cambridge:
> chocolate-chip-banana-bran muffins;
> real army-surplus gear;
> Trinidadian phonograph records;
> tap-dance lessons;

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[5] Boyer, *Crossroads*, 8.
[6] Diver, "The Evolution of Central Square."

a Chinese lunch for $2.98;
the writings of the Defender of the International Proletariat, Comrade Enver Hoxha;
macrobiotic fast food;
back issues of pornographic magazines (covers removed);
pawned saxophones;
meat-loaf specials, choice of peas or wax beans.[7]

This appreciation of the area's multicultural uniqueness has been a constant presence in debates about how to revitalize Central Square without sanitizing it.

Protecting While Revitalizing

Yet the vast majority of city planners, residents, and business owners did agree that something had to be done to combat the crime and blight of the mid-20th century. Revitalization efforts didn't take off until the late 1980s and early 1990s. By that time, parts of the Central Square commercial strip were protected by the National Register of Historic Places. The Central Square Overlay District was enacted, requiring greater public scrutiny of "development proposals that may alter the established urban form of the Central Square area."[8] Mayor Kenneth Reeves enlisted community participation in building a vision of what Central Square should be. In the mid-1990s, Cambridge renovated the streetscape, widening sidewalks and laying them with bricks, adding bike racks, improving building facades, upgrading or replacing street lights, and adding trees and benches. Massachusetts Avenue was narrowed from a four-lane road to a two-lane road more amenable to pedestrians and businesses. New chain stores arrived, among them Au Bon Pain, Starbucks, and Gap. Change continues, with new commercial establishments and offices arriving frequently, and leaving observers to wonder what Central Square will look like even just a year or two from now, and which of its qualities besides appearance will change as well.

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[7] Nugent, "Central Square: My Part in Urban Decay," 22-25.
[8] City of Cambridge, "Zoning Ordinance of the City of Cambridge" section 20.300: "Central Square Overlay District."

The heterogeneous architecture and motley mediascape, immediately visible to anyone who visits Central Square, belong to a community whose people are diverse as well. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the area has a mix of ages, ethnicities, occupations, and incomes.[9] The streetscape renovations of the mid-1990s were intended to calm traffic and, more importantly, to give people the space and desire to stop and interact with one another and with local businesses.

> The goals of the plan are to make Central Square a destination that encourages pedestrians and cyclists to feel welcome and safe, that supports and enhances its commercial function, and that better enables and expresses its multi-cultural life… Physical improvements to the Square are essential to meeting these goals.[10]

The plan appears to have succeeded: People spend time outside walking, running, making music, making noise, and sitting.[11] They are further encouraged by the Cambridge Pedestrian Plan, outlining its commitment to promoting walking over driving. Of the 48.7 percent of Cambridge residents who work in Cambridge, 44.5 percent of them walk to work, according to the most recent available data.[12] Thus, Central Square has many prime conditions for the reception of street media, which serve to encourage would-be media makers who can know their messages will be seen. These conditions are also prime for a successful urban space, as Jane Jacobs describes:

> Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvelous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city. It is a complex order. Its essence is intricacy of sidewalk use, bringing with it a constant succession of eyes. This order is all composed of

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[9] City of Cambridge, *Census 2000 Demographic Atlas* and City of Cambridge, "Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: 2000."
[10] City of Cambridge and Carr, Lynch, Hack & Sandell, "Central Square Improvements Project Master Plan Report."
[11] Paul C. Adams is particularly approving of such uses of urban space. In his essay, "Peripatetic Imagery and Peripatetic Sense of Place," he favors walking through a place for the multisensory experience this provides, and worries about "the evisceration of our unmediated experience through the presence of machines in the landscape and elsewhere in daily life." 188-189.
[12] City of Cambridge, "Cambridge Residents Means of Commuting to Work: 1990."

> movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to… an intricate ballet.[13]

Having lived in Central Square for two years, and having interacted with countless shopkeepers, residents, visitors, city officials, archivists, and activists, I can say with confidence that for so many of the reasons described, this urban area has a unique character. It is also increasingly difficult to find in most American cities. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this uniqueness — particularly the tolerance of diversity that often extends to the style and quantity of street media — enhances the potential for my study to provide a foundation for a re-envisioning of cities, communities, and communication.

Real Emptiness in Apparent Saturation

Even after its substantial makeover, Central Square still has a reputation for being a messy urban space — some call it dirty, others vibrant. Many recognize that much of the reputation has been earned by the abundance of street media. But street media is not the only kind of media saturation for which all of Cambridge is reputed. Most residents and newcomers assume that with its many newsracks, cable channels, radio stations, and a populace that is well-educated and from all over the world, Cambridge's non-street media — news and entertainment media — is rich as well. The streetscape is full of newsracks: *Cambridge Chronicle*, *Cambridge TAB*, *The Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald*, *Boston METRO*, *Boston Phoenix*, *Weekly Dig*, and a variety of less-frequent publications on all sorts of topics. They contribute to the impression that Cambridge is well-covered, or at least that its citizenry is well-informed. So do Web sites such as the *Cambridge Civic Journal*[14] and the city's site.[15] Cambridge Community Television (CCTV) has an impressive-looking studio in Central Square. Comcast Cable offers hundreds

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[13] Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* 50.
[14] http://www.rwinters.com.
[15] http://www.cambridgema.gov.

of channels to Cambridge viewers. Yet for all of the appearance of saturation, Cambridge residents, businesses, and visitors are underserved.[16] The *Chronicle*'s paid subscribers number 5,854; the *TAB*, a free arts newspaper, has an estimated circulation of 10,797.[17] The city's population was 101,355 in 2000.[18] The vast majority of mass media available to Cambridge residents cover the entire Boston area, which makes specific coverage of Cambridge issues infrequent. What this also means, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, is that Central Square businesses have few places to advertise, city officials have few ways to reach the majority of residents, and residents have few ways to communicate with one another about issues large and small. This growing awareness was one driving force behind the formulation of my inquiry, for if the abundant mainstream media channels are in fact inadequate for a local area's communications needs, what mechanisms do people develop to make do? How do the governing authorities respond? We shall see an abundance of answers, both large and small, in the chapters that follow.

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[16] I owe much of my awareness of Cambridge's media void to Mark Lloyd, MIT visiting scholar, whose course, "Democratic Engagement and Communication Policy," I completed in fall, 2003.
[17] Herald Media, Inc., "Media Kit."
[18] City of Cambridge, "Cambridge at a Glance," http://www.cambridgema.gov/cambglance.cfm.

Chapter Three

Researching With Photography

> Aron said, pointing to his glass: 'You see, my dear fellow, if you are a phenomenologist, you can talk about this cocktail and make philosophy of it!' Sartre turned pale with emotion at this. Here was just the thing he had been looking to achieve for years.
>
> — Simone de Beauvoir[1]

> If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug a camera.
>
> — Lewis Hine[2]

When I first arrived in Central Square, I saw a streetscape full of people and sensory stimuli, much of it visual. It felt a little too dirty, slightly chaotic, possibly unsafe, but intriguing and exciting as well. After a few weeks of living there, various elements re-relativized and the streetscape began to look vibrant and interesting. My experience was rather similar to that of Herbert Gans as he became more familiar with the West End neighborhood of Boston and developed skills of "selective perception." (Although, to be clear, the specific qualities of Central Square and the West End are quite different.)

> After a few weeks of living in the West End, my observations and my perception of the area changed drastically. The search for an apartment quickly indicated that the individual units were usually in much better condition than the outside or the hallways of the buildings. Subsequently, in wandering through the West End, and in using it as a resident, I developed a kind of selective perception, in which my eye focused only on those parts of the area that were actually being used by people. Vacant buildings and boarded-up stores were no longer so visible, and the totally deserted alleys or streets were outside the set of paths normally traversed, either by myself or by the West Enders. The dirt and spilled-over garbage remained, but, since they were concentrated in street gutters and empty lots, they were not really harmful to anyone and thus were not as noticeable as during my initial observations.[3]

What gets noticed and what gets ignored or taken for granted in an urban space differs with each individual and with the varying intentions of the

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[1] Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 135. Quoted in Iain Chambers, "Maps for the Metropolis: A Possible Guide to the Present," 1.
[2] Quoted in Sontag, *On Photography*, 185.
[3] Gans, *The Urban Villagers*, 12.

makers of the media they pass. It can also change with the passing of time, as William Leach writes:

> Today, people take show windows for granted and scarcely observe the surfeit of glass shapes and surfaces on nearly every city street. But in the early 1900s many were disoriented by the images and goods displayed behind the glass, even by the glass itself.[4]

In 18th-century Europe, some signs were so large and placed in such a way that they were impossible to ignore as much due to their spectacular designs as to their physical presence, as Louis-Sébastien Mercier describes in his 12-volume *Tableau de Paris*, written between 1781 and 1788:

> Nowadays tradesmen's signs lie flat, fixed to the walls above their shops and houses; time was when they hung out above the street on long iron rods, and when a high wind swung them, threatened to clatter down upon passing heads, rods and all. Any wind, even the lightest, would set this whole rabble of signs squealing and clashing upon one another, making a plaintive and discordant *carillon*, quite indescribable; and at night they made great shadows, against which the poor light of the street lamps strove in vain.
>
> Mostly they were of iron, colossal, and cast in relief, thus offering a world of giants' appurtenances to the eyes of the most stunted people in Europe. You saw a sword-guard six feet high, a boot the size of a hogshead, a spur that might serve for a carriage-wheel, gloves where a three-year-old child might hide in each finger, monstrous heads, and armed hands flourishing blades as long as the width of the street.[5]

The typical present-day American city street is much more orderly than streets in those hazardous days. But there is still much to attract our attention, or to overstimulate or numb us, in a place like Central Square (figures 3.1 and 3.2). Some of my friends and acquaintances eagerly share their latest media finds on Massachusetts Avenue, while others say they cope with the overwhelming visual and haptic density by keeping their heads down and their eyes on the sidewalk.

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[4] Leach, *Land of Desire*, 39.
[5] Mercier, "Chapitre LXVI: Enseignes" in *Tableau de Paris I*, 177. Translation from Popkin, ed., *Panorama of Paris,* 44. See also Heal, *The Signboards of Old London Shops*, 2.

Distraction That Illuminates

The topic of distraction inevitably comes up in discussions about our society's media. Usually, such talk is anxious or resigned: Contemporary society is so saturated with media, spectacle, and sensory stimuli that the individual becomes alienated or numb. But Howard Eiland, viewing distraction through the eyes of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht in the context of art and modern life, adds a more positive texture to the concept.

> [D]istraction, in a properly modern context, must itself be understood dialectically — that is to say, beyond the simple opposition of distraction and concentration (or, in Brecht's terms, distraction and recognition). The challenge, Benjamin suggests… is to appreciate "the values of distraction," which he associates with a convergence of educational value and consumer value (*Lehrwert and Konsumwert*) in a new kind of learning (*eine neue Art des Lernens*).[6]

While this quote comes from a discussion of montage technique in film, it informs my methodology in that the key point is that to experience modern urban life is to experience montage. Unlike Georg Simmel, who described a self-protective blasé attitude brought on by overstimulation in cities, montage theorists such as Brecht and Sergei Eisenstein found the disjunctures and the leveling of importance among disparate details to be a way to instead trigger illuminated perception about the thing being experienced. Dziga Vertov, a contemporary of Brecht and Eisenstein, implements this style in *Man With The Movie Camera*. While Frankfurt School theorists like Theodor Adorno could see little value in everyday life, dismissing it as lost to social control and false consciousness,[7] Russian formalists like Viktor Shklovsky, another Brecht contemporary, saw much to be learned from the practice of looking closely at the everyday behaviors and material things so easily taken for granted. I include mention of these thinkers to show how debates about the importance of the study of everyday life have long intermingled with debates about how to portray its findings.

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[6] Eiland, "Reception in Distraction," 57.
[7] Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life*, 15.

Observing from the Margins

During this same time, the first half of the 20th century, Walter Benjamin was exploring ways to render in print his dream of the 19th-century city. The result, albeit unfinished (having been abandoned in 1940 when Benjamin fled Paris to avoid the advancing German army), easily evokes a montage feel, similar to a filmic one but in this case "literary", as Benjamin himself writes. *The Arcades Project* is a compendium of quotations and commentary — more of the former than of the latter — bits and pieces of reflections on cities, particularly Paris, by writers across a broad spectrum of disciplines. In it, Benjamin mobilizes three 19th century archetypes, the flâneur, the gambler, and the collector, as guides through modernity's consumerist phantasmagorias. The various liminal impulses of these figures contribute to the unique style and character of Benjamin's massive work. While I do not claim to occupy the same social marginality, by slowing down my pace to a meander in a space dominated by destination-oriented walkers, and by observing closely those things that others pass by, I did channel a bit of the flâneur. By "collecting" my images on camera, organizing them in a database on my computer, and spending hours looking through my loot and thinking of ways to arrange it, I might have channeled a bit of the collector — although without the compulsion, fetishization, or nostalgia — as well. By choosing to formulate and pursue this study in the first place, I can't help but feel, like so many researchers, a kinship with the gambler.

Transduction and the Art of Getting Lost

In her introduction to Benjamin's *One Way Street*, Susan Sontag writes:

> Benjamin's recurrent themes are, characteristically, means of spatializing the world: for example, his notion of ideas and experiences as ruins. To understand something is to understand its topography, to know how to chart it. And to know how to get lost.[8]

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[8] Sontag, *One Way Street,* 13.

Charting while getting lost is an apt description for this photographic study. The great dominance of visual media over other sensory media in Central Square made obvious my choice of photography as a study tool. I began by taking photographs of anything I considered to be street media, without quite knowing what I would find. I spent anywhere from a half-hour to an hour or more at a time, and I returned every few days. The more time I spent out on the street, the more time I spent examining the media objects captured in my photographs, and the more time I spent researching possible theoretical frameworks, the better idea I formed of what was happening on the street and how to frame my study of it. Now, in the interpretive phase of the study, months after the majority of photographs were taken, I have fond memories of afternoons spent wandering around Central Square, camera in hand, leisurely reading all sorts of visual stimuli, and allowing both research needs and impulse to guide my decisions of when to take a photograph. Henri Lefebvre has a term for this hybrid methodology:

> *Transduction*. This is an intellectual operation which can be methodically carried out and which differs from classical induction, deduction, the construction of 'models', simulation as well as the simple statement of hypothesis. Transduction elaborates and constructs a theoretical object, a *possible* object from information related to reality and a problematic posed by this reality. Transduction assumes an incessant feed back between the conceptual framework used and empirical observations. Its theory (methodology), gives shape to certain spontaneous mental operations of the planner, the architect, the sociologist, the politician and the philosopher. It introduces rigour in invention and knowledge in utopia.[9]

Photography as Evidence

In her book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag explores photography's uneasy relationship with truth-telling. Photographic images look realistic, but they can be deeply misleading. The way we frame the photograph at the moment of taking it, the moment in time we choose to frame, and the images we keep and those we choose to discard are loaded with meaning that removes the photograph from any hope of it as a simple representation of truth. That

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[9] Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," 369.

said, Sontag's reflections address a very different kind of photography from the kind I have chosen to engage in. My aim in photographing Central Square's street media has been to record it, to "make an inventory;" which apparently aligns my work with that of spies and meteorologists, who get a brief mention in her book.

> The "realistic" view of the world compatible with bureaucracy redefines knowledge — as techniques and information. Photographs are valued because they give information. They tell one what there is; they make an inventory. To spies, meteorologists, coroners, archaeologists, and other information professionals, their value is inestimable. But in the situations in which most people use photographs, their value as information is of the same order as fiction.[10]

In keeping with my "urban archaeology of the present,"[11] the photos in the chapters that follow are meant to be evidentiary, not aesthetic, although I admit I could not resist attending to aesthetic considerations inasmuch as my novice skills with the digital camera would allow.

Other more situational considerations infused my work as well. Most noticeably, media objects have been photographed from a variety of angles — straight on, off to the side, from above and from below. Sometimes that was the result of logistical challenges: If I were to succeed in taking hundreds of photos during a relatively brief period of time, I could not bring a ladder and an assistant to aid my photo-capture of every media object placed above my 5' 3" height. More often, however, variations in composition can be blamed on my state of mind on a given day, as well as my on gradual habituation to taking photos in public. Some days I felt self-conscious or tired, and grabbed my photos quickly, without bending down to improve composition, and without verifying in the camera screen that the light balance was successful. Other days, and following the advice of a professional photographer friend,[12] I

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[10] Sontag, *On Photography*, 22.
[11] Thanks to William Uricchio, MIT Comparative Media Studies co-director and my thesis advisor, for his artful description.
[12] Thanks to Felice Frankel, MIT research scientist and science photographer, for her advice and enthusiasm.

tuned out the presence of those around me and took the time needed to thoughtfully compose my photos and take multiple shots.

The viewer will also note in subsequent pages that the majority of images are close-up. This is primarily due to the need to capture the details, particularly the text, of the objects photographed in order to support the points I want to make. I did include contextual clues where I could without compromising the primary goal of rendering detail clearly. Benjamin's quotation montage style as practiced in *The Arcades Project* influenced me greatly, particularly in my photo-taking and sorting. These photographs of street media can be seen as quotations, the metaphor strengthened by the fact that I have taken care to present clearly the text and other details of each media object.

By making my images fundamentally evidentiary, I have sidestepped the weightiest issues of photographic representation, without effacing the very real subjectivity that went into my decisions of what to photograph, what to ignore, and what to ultimately include in the final presentation. I have used those photos to reveal and support an analysis that, I hope, honors the critical approach described by Michael Gardiner in his discussion of the evolution of Agnes Heller's thinking about everyday life.

> To use Zygmunt Bauman's terminology, Heller now sees the role of the critical intellectual as being that of an 'interpreter' of the sociocultural world, as a facilitator of self-understanding *vis-à-vis* the options facing humankind, and not a 'legislator' who seeks to impose a particular political or theoretical programme on an increasingly pluralistic and variegated society.[13]

In other words, evidence first, theory later, with "transduction" keeping the two in constant dialogue. (Clearly, while that approach influenced the research process it has been inverted in this document.) I went in with a sense of the analytical domains in which my work might belong, and have

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[13] Gardiner, 129-130. Gardiner cites Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Postmodernity and Intellectuals*.

emerged with a far more textured understanding of the relevant realities and theories than I ever could have formulated in advance.

The Richness of Urban Life

I would like to conclude this chapter with the more personal reflections of two noted urban essayists. The first, from Jonathan Raban, marvels at the image of the city as encyclopedia suggested by Pierce Egan in *Life in London*:

> The image of the encyclopedia suggests the special randomness of the city's diversity; it hints that, compared with other books or communities, the logic of the city is not of the kind which lends itself to straight-forward narration or to continuous page-by-page reading. At the same time, it does imply that the city is a repository of knowledge, although no single reader or citizen can command the whole of that knowledge. His reading, his living are necessarily selective and exclusive: it is in the uniquely personal combination of entries with which he alone is familiar that his expertise, his grasp of the larger impersonal wisdom of the encyclopedia or the city is vested. One man's city is the sum of all the routes he takes through it, a spoor as unique as a fingerprint.[14]

Mercier, writing two centuries before Raban, shares his sense of wonder at the richness of urban life.

> Even if I had the hundred mouths, the hundred tongues, and the resounding voice of which Homer and Virgil speak, it would obviously have been impossible for me to present all the contrasting aspects of the great city, contrasts that stand out all the more because everything is so crowded together. Calling it *the world in miniature* is not enough; one has to see it, explore it, examine its contents, study the wisdom and folly of its inhabitants, their weaknesses and their all-conquering chatter… If a thousand people followed the same route, if each one were observant, each would write a different book on this subject, and there would still be true and interesting things for someone coming after them to say.[15]

I have tried, to the best of my ability, to avail myself judiciously of the seemingly infinite possibilities of observation, interpretation, and reflection that cities, by virtue of their singular accumulation of multiplicities, provide. I have tried to present these observations and interpretations so that they might illuminate any of the myriad of possible experiences we might have in any urban space. The results of these efforts appear in the pages that follow.

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[14] Raban, *Soft City*, 86.
[15] Mercier, *Panorama of Paris*, 24.

Chapter Four

Street Media Characteristics

For a study that places high value on a more-inclusive representation of reality, the epistemological questions are substantial. Taxonomy is too strong a concept and implies too closed a system for what follows; nor has that been that my goal. My primary goal in the following chapters is to present the street media I captured on camera in a way that best illuminates the communicative powers of its multiform presences. That power has come not only from the messages deliberately articulated by text and imagery, but also from their material manifestations and the spatial and environmental conditions that objects posted on the street are exposed to. My desire to explore these characteristics has resulted in the formation of a set of loosely-related categories, laid out along several planes. The categories were not pre-formed; rather, they have been derived from my repeated immersion in the media out on the street as well as an ongoing engagement with the resulting photographs. As such, the groupings formed out of a particular affinity might be better called clusters, thereby prioritizing the media objects over any provisional containers I might put them in. These clusters can be seen as being laid out along a continuum rather than having clear boundaries between them. For example, while some media are clearly homemade and others clearly originating from a local business, some media objects blur the lines, looking homemade while also promoting a small business (figure 4.1). Ultimately, the categories represent shared characteristics among individual objects, in the way that each element in a database has metadata assigned to it: Some elements share specific metadata, but many have their own unique metadata as well.

Thus, the photographs that follow have been selected by various interpretive queries, not sorting schema. What will be immediately evident in these image-laden chapters is that there is no one-to-one relationship between media object and cluster concept. Every object I have photographed belongs in multiple clusters; my selection of what to present when is guided by which images most clearly exemplify a particular point I am trying to communicate.

Before an analysis of the implicit and explicit messages of Central Square's media ecology, I will first describe the material and situational qualities of the constituents of that ecology. These qualities, derived mostly simply by looking, tell us much about the wide variety of forces making their media marks on the local streetscape. Media objects can be attributed to sources of varying scales, from local individuals to multinational corporations. They operate on varying temporalities: from daily newspapers to seasonal storefronts to permanent municipal signs memorializing a local personality. Some of these objects are self-contained, with the messages expressed entirely in their individual street presences, while others include telephone numbers and Web addresses to augment what has been published to the streetscape (figure 4.2). Sometimes, this cross-media referentiality is accompanied by references to other places and other times. Often, the media themselves are changed — or left untouched well beyond their message's relevance — by their makers and distributors. This dynamic ecology of multiple scales and temporalities is also characterized by the placement decisions made by the responsible forces: high up on a street pole, at eye level on a plywood construction wall, fronting an upscale shop at the sidewalk level. Viewed in the aggregate, patterns of placement emerge that also transmit information about the relative welcome felt by the purveyors of various media.

As I have said earlier, a thorough understanding of a particular media object comes not only from a close reading of its articulated messages, but also from an analysis of the practices and circumstances that result in its presence in and removal from the location in which I find it. This chapter is intended to describe these factors in order to later consider more deeply how they fit into the microcosmic communication universe embodied in each object. While I choose to view Central Square as a communication space rather than as a consumption space, it is both.

> Consumption spaces are fascinating precisely because they reflect cultural as well as economic processes, and the constant shifts in the meanings and practices of particular places reminds us that "the building and revolutionizing of an urban landscape is never just physical and economic; it is also social, cultural and political... it is in this competition that the intersection of cultural and economic speculation plays such a crucial role."[1]

A Note on Materiality

With the exception of one or two businesses that play music, Central Square does not have electronic or broadcast media in its outdoor spaces. It has only a handful of neon signs. The rest of the media are low-tech: paper, paint, pen, marker, ink, metal, glass, and plastic. They are affixed to the area's surfaces by tape, glue, bolts, and the metal rods generally reserved for municipal signs. This distinguishes Central Square from other urban areas that include higher-tech media, for example, LED screens networked through a central, remote server.[2]

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[1] Crewe and Beaverstock, "Fashioning the City: Cultures of Consumption in Contemporary Urban Spaces," 290. Crewe and Beaverstock cite Goodwin, "The City as Commodity: The Contested Spaces of Urban Development." In Kearns and Philo, eds., *Selling Places: The City as Cultural Capital, Past and Present*, 1993.

[2] Examples of the latest developments in so-called digital signage can be found at Web Pavement, http://www.webpavement.com/digital-signage.htm. Urban Display Network, http://www.urbandisplaynetwork.com, is an example of how technology companies, advertising agencies, and municipalities collaborate to bring digital signage to streetscapes.

Assembling Clues

Production materials, quality, and the articulated messages on a media object provide strong clues as to the forces responsible for that object's presence in the streetscape. This observational analysis reveals a loose typology of entities that embody these forces: autonomous individual (i.e., unaffiliated with a corporate or government entity in the making and distributing of his/her media object), corporate, local or small business, and government. Turning to Figure 4.3 to demonstrate this methodology, we see that the flyer's materials, 8 1/2" x 11" white paper and masking tape, are widely accessible at a low cost. The sans-serif font and ink printing are also widely available: all one needs is access to a computer and a basic printer to make this sign. These basic materials indicate that the flyer is the homemade production of an autonomous individual; the articulated message confirms this: An individual is looking for his or her bike, and provides a local (781 area code) phone number where he or she can be reached. No product or event is promoted, and no activity is prohibited or encouraged (except for the kindness of whoever finds said bike).

Contrast this with Figure 4.4. This sign is posted on all of the brown metal litter baskets that are placed along Massachusetts Avenue's sidewalks. The sign is comprised of paint on metal, typical for a municipal sign. Its prohibitory language, which includes the threat of a fine, signals both by its material and its articulated message (a small fine for litter is most often a local issue) that the local municipality is likely responsible for its production and distribution.[3] However, at least one supplier of official-looking signs, Street Signs USA, claims that anyone, not just municipalities, can purchase

[3] Urban dwellers now take these "public advisory signs," as Henkin calls them, for granted. But Henkin, in his study of New York City during the first half of the 19th century, says he was "unable to locate any street sign that regulated or directed traffic, publicized the law, warned about epidemics, or performed any similar public function." *City Reading*, 46.

such signs.[4] But this particular sign is ubiquitous in Central Square, and is posted with bolts, a sign of permanent intention. Ubiquity and consistency of placement help confirm that this sign is official.

Commercial media are another significant presence in Central Square's streetscape. Large corporate media are easy to identify — when they are not trying to infiltrate underground promotional networks — a tribute to the power of transmedia branding efforts. (Incidentally, the United States Postal Service has also harnessed the power of a strong brand, as shown in the easy recognizability of its ubiquitous blue mailboxes and green storage boxes (figure 4.5).) The confluence of local gentrification efforts welcoming chain stores and advocacy for small, local businesses has resulted in an assortment of storefronts for businesses of all scales, from multinational, to national, to local (figures 4.6 and 4.7).

Even while our basic expectations for commercial media are generally upheld by the most obvious and noticeable forms of storefronts, billboards, and bus shelter advertisements,[5] such media appear in many other ways, too. Figures 4.8 and 4.9 are among the many brand fragments floating through the streetscape. Massachusetts Avenue is a major transportation artery, and many of the vehicles that pass through carrying product on the inside proclaim their brands on the outside (figures 4.10 and 4.11).

Among Central Square's more notable mediascape elements are the wide variety of sandwichboards that dot the sidewalks. Sandwichboards used to refer to two boards, laced with string, worn by a person hired to walk along the street — and on rare occasions, still do (figure 4.12). Now, in Central

[4] Street Signs USA, http://street.safeshopper.com.
[5] While bus shelters in the Square did not have advertisements during the time of this study, a number of city officials say that Cambridge is considering renting the shelters to private companies, which will maintain the shelters in exchange for the right to sell ad space.

Square and other urban areas the "human middleman" has been replaced by two angled boards on stilts resting on the ground.[6] They are put there by international, national, and local commercial entities, who are required to receive a permit from the City of Cambridge. Figure 4.13 uses the blackboard-and-chalk materials and aesthetic commonly associated with neighborhood cafes, and confirms that supposition by explicitly differentiating itself from the larger corporate chains — in this case, probably the Starbucks, Dunkin' Donuts, and Au Bon Pain a couple of blocks down Massachusetts Avenue. Burger King's aptly designed "sandwich"-board (figure 4.14) was, until the Central Square franchise's recent closing, the most local manifestation of a brand that surfaces in television and radio broadcasts, the Web,[7] and countless magazine and newspaper ads. The more than 11,000 storefronts in 61 countries (8,000 of them in the United States) also serve to reinforce the the sense of brand ubiquity.[8]

As noted earlier, the relationships between production quality and source entity are not always obvious — sometimes deliberately not. Media makers play with norms of material and language in an attempt to make their communication more effective. Figure 4.15 shows the replacement, sometime during the fall of 2004, of an old, homemade-looking sign with a more official-looking one. Netzero, an Internet provider to the U.S. and Canada, chose a political theme (in time fo rthe November 2004 presidential elections) and a decidedly non-corporate material and location — a temporary construction wall covered with homemade-looking media — to get its message across (figure 4.16).

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[6] Henkin, *City Reading*, 76.
[7] Subservient Chicken was a notable viral marketing campaign first introduced online in 2004. http://www.subservientchicken.com.
[8] Phone call to Burger King customer service, April 2005, and Burger King Web site, http://www.burgerking.com.

Referring Across Media, Place, and Time

Figure 4.16 is a good example of another important media characteristic: referentiality. Theorists of electronic media — radio, television, telephone, mobile phone, and Internet — have written much about how these technologies complexify our sense of place by transporting events and everyday practices across space. Shaun Moores suggests a "conception of place as pluralized by electronic media use."[9] I have found that ambient street media have a similar effect on our sense of place by constantly making references to other media (in Figure 4.16, phone numbers and Web sites), other locales (in Figure 4.17, KEXP is a Seattle radio station), and other times (figure 4.18). Central Square Florist, a decades-old local business, refers passersby to its new media presence (figure 4.19). I found several references to radio stations and even one reference to television (figure 4.20). A flyer for a yard sale points those interested to a local address (figure 4.21), while these Massachusetts Avenue storefronts remind us that their Central Square presences are each one of many worldwide (figure 4.22).

Related to referentiality is the idea of self-containment. While in Figure 4.18, everything an interested person would need to know to participate in the event is contained in the flyer's articulated message, many media objects in Central Square depend on their cross-media references to provide information. The KEXP sticker in Figure 4.17 largely depends on its Web site to inform interested parties about what KEXP is. Of the wide

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[9] Shaun Moores, "The Doubling of Place," 23. Celeste Olalquiaga describes a related concept, "psychasthenia." While I find her description overly dramatic, such passages do remind us of the dystopic discursive style of much writing on postmodern urbanity: "Defined as a disturbance in the relation between self and surrounding territory, psychasthenia is a state in which the space defined by the coordinates of the organism's own body is confused with represented space. Incapable of demarcating the limits of its own body, lost in the immense area that circumscribes it, the psychasthenic organism proceeds to abandon its own identity to embrace the space beyond… Psychasthenia helps describe contemporary experience and account for its uneasiness. Urban culture resembles this mimetic condition when it enables a ubiquitous feeling of being in all places while not really being anywhere." *Megalopolis,* 1.

assortment of stickers in Central Square that promote bands, many seem to emulate corporate branding's most minimal techniques (figure 4.23). Other bands, such as The Memory Effect, don't directly let on what they are, but do provide a Web site address (figure 4.24). Interestingly, the Web site, which was active during the early months of this study, is no longer online, but a sticker or two remains in Central Square. They have become among the many street media objects that remain present even after time or change of circumstance has rendered them obsolete.

Some of these transmedial ensembles operate on multiple levels of self-containment and referentiality. Figure 4.25 gives a clear sense of its purpose just from its humble street presence, but viewers can visit the Web site for additional information. The explicit message "Vote or Die" in Figure 4.26 appears immediate (and visceral), especially since it appeared in the window of a local urban clothing store months leading up to the November 2004 presidential election. It was only by chance that I learned it was in fact part of a "national, non-partisan and non-profit" campaign by media artist Sean "P. Diddy" Combs "to educate, motivate, and empower the more than 42 million Americans aged 18 to 30 that are eligible to vote."[10] Interestingly, the same slogan worn on a t-shirt resulted in the wearer being turned away from a polling place in Ohio.[11]

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[10] Citizen Change Web site, http://www.citizenchange.com. According to an article in *Salon.com* at the time of the Citizen Change campaign launch, "Combs says that he will utilize all of his 'God-given talents as a marketer to market this election' and 'make politics fashionable,'" another way to emulate the characteristics of one form of media to enhance the message of another. Stromberg, "P. Diddy's Appeal To Youth: 'We Will Attack All Of Your Senses."

[11] Anderson, "Activists Hold Forum Spotlighting Voting Issues in Presidential Election."

Static and Dynamic Temporalities

The "Vote or Die" poster was part of a campaign that originated during Election 2004. The poster was removed soon after the November elections, and there is no guarantee that it will reappear in 2008. Flyers that promote events, like those shown earlier, have a clear date at which their relevance ends. However, as with the Memory Effect sticker, their presence in the streetscape might not end, resulting in a long physical duration for media objects made with a more ephemeral relevance in mind. In contrast, historical markers such as municipal signs memorializing various local personalities, painted on metal and anchored to the ground by metal poles, look made for permanence (figure 4.27). Newspapers, with their daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly turnovers, are more ephemeral but usually in a regular, predictable temporal rhythm — what John Hartley calls 'high-frequency public writing' to distinguish it from more permanent, 'low frequency' objects like the memorial signs (figure 4.28).[12]

Newsracks change too, but less predictably. During the winter of 2004-2005, local alternative paper Weekly Dig redesigned its racks from black plastic (figure 4.28, center) to orange metal (figure 4.29), a change accompanied by a redesigned newspaper. The original racks for the free daily *METRO* newspaper (figure 4.28, third from right) were prone to vandalism and weathering, especially due to their easily ripped plastic doors.[13] In fact, John Trant, compliance officer for the Department of Public Works, who is responsible for the issuing of newsrack permits, refused to renew their permit until they provided a more rugged rack.[14] The result is a new, "bomb-safe"

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[12] Hartley, "The Frequencies of Public Writing," 247-269. In this chapter, Hartley elaborates on this notion of media frequency by classifying various types of media.
[13] A METRO employee interviewed said that the racks weighed 80 pounds originally, but they would more than double in weight from trash that was deposited inside.
[14] Interview with John Trant, April 7, 2005.

design required by the state-run Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) for placement in subway stations (figure 4.30).

Storefronts are another obvious example of temporal change, change that implies the self-presentation priorities of the businesses they front, and change that marks the vagaries of commerce on a local, national, and even international scale. In the spring of 2005, the local Burger King franchise closed, leaving an empty storefront with a "For Rent" sign in the window. Shalimar, an Indian restaurant, let its storefront get rather rundown before putting it back in order for a reopening (figure 4.31). Many storefront displays in Central Square, including the Gap, Pearl Art & Craft Supplies, and Tello's change every few weeks, some to highlight new products and others to try different ways of catching customers' eyes. Other storefronts seem as though they might never change at all (figure 4.32), almost as if the manager has forgotten that the store window is bi-directional. Other storefront changes indicate that a grander change has occurred. When Bank of America purchased Fleet Bank, customers were saved from the immediate disorientation of signage replaced too quickly (like our protagonist on page 8) by a gradual change in storefront during November 2004 (figure 4.33). By the end of December, the storefront media conversion to Bank of America was complete (figure 4.34). The actual integration of the two companies continued into 2005, but here appearance and message preceded reality.

The various temporal cycles and discontinuities of a streetscape's media are a fundamental and powerful contributor to our sense of the dynamism and energy, or conversely, the stagnation and neglect, of an urban space. When enough dynamic media are permitted on urban surfaces, they serve as an antidote to the visual homogenization derided by so many urban observers contemplating so many postmodern cityscapes.

Surface Placement

All of the varied media presented in this chapter share the same streetscape, and as a result interesting patterns of placement emerge. When considering placement, it is important to consider not only where on the streetscape a media object appears, but why it might appear there at all. Accessibility and immediacy are two key reasons that those who post flyers and stickers give for choosing the streetscape to distribute their messages. As the majority of such media are posted illegally, surfaces need to be easily and quickly reached before the media maker can be caught and fined. Should a media maker escape notice by regulatory forces, the street proves to be an affordable means of communication as well: The organizer of a large-scale medical research study says that he reaches far more potential study subjects for far less cost than when he takes out an ad in *The Boston Globe*, for example.[15] He also says that postering has far fewer procedural barriers than taking out an ad or other authorized means of communication. The person responsible for wheatpasting signs throughout Central Square announcing his moving sale (figure 4.35) agrees.[16]

Accessibility also refers to the ease of viewing in a streetscape regularly trafficked by large numbers of pedestrians and vehicles. Street surfaces, by virtue of this accessibility to both media distributors and viewers, offer an immediacy of communication that newspapers, television, and radio cannot. In order to optimize this immediacy, most stickers and posters are placed near or just above eye level. Street light poles, distributed evenly along the sidewalks, are the surface of choice for many unauthorized media distributors. The poles holding Walk/Don't Walk signs at the corners of intersections are also popular for the captive audience waiting to cross the

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[15] Interview with the organizer of a large-scale medical research study, April 17, 2005.
[16] Interview with the person responsible for wheatpasting "Moving Sale" signs, April 20, 2005.

street. Bus shelters look relatively untouched; according to John Trant, this is in large part due to an aggressive effort on the part of the city to keep them that way. Post office boxes seem to avoid the brunt of unauthorized media placement, but that is in fact due to the efforts of Ed Marchant, a painter contracted by the local branch of the United States Postal Service to drive through the streets of Cambridge with two barrels of paint — Post Office Green and Navy Blue — stopping his pickup truck to paint over boxes that have been marked with graffiti or stickers.[17] Other prime locations include utility boxes on the sidewalks, and building surfaces that cut perpendicular to the sidewalk and are therefore in the direct line of sight of passersby. As any streetscape has a finite number of easily reachable, high-visibility surfaces (figure 4.36) not already taken by authorized government and corporate media, it is easy to see how the streetscape begins to look crowded and, to some, messy.

While logic might suppose that unauthorized media distributors would try to post as far away from the others as possible in order to set themselves apart from the herd and get more attention, that is generally not the case. There are several reasons for this dense clustering. For example, if we look at Figures 4.37 and 4.38, we see that the distributors of the unauthorized media objects — the taped posters — have chosen to place their messages on authorized objects, the presumption being that authorized media makers have staked out the best placements for high visibility in the streetscape. Several of those interviewed, including Andrea McCarty, the person responsible for the PXL This flyer in Figure 4.39, say they make a point of postering only on surfaces that already have a lot of postings.[18] One person who posts flyers regularly throughout Cambridge says he instructs the college and high school students he hires to help him not to post on "clean"

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[17] Interview with Ed Marchant, painter, November 1, 2004.
[18] Interview with Andrea McCarty, PXL This organizer, April 2005.

surfaces as a way of mitigating his sense of the degree of violation. He also avoids posting over others' flyers and stickers as part of a tacit ethic also mentioned by others who distribute media in the space.[19]

According to Trant, the placement of newsracks in Cambridge has been a somewhat contentious issue. The first complaint is their sheer numbers: At a recent meeting of city officials and Central Square business owners, one official joked that of the nearly 800 racks in the city, most of them must be in Central Square. Until Trant took on the compliance position two and a half years ago, there was no city ordinance limiting the number of racks a publisher could place in a given location. Now, publishers request preferred locations for their racks, but the city has the final say. Trant says that he has received a few complaints accusing infringement of free speech, but that he has researched legislation and court cases from across the United States to ensure that his decisions fall within legal norms.

These are some of the many influences on placement decisions that collectively result in the random and patterned media choreography taking place in the local streetscape. Anna McCarthy's study of television in publicly trafficked spaces gives us a way of thinking about these placements:

> As part of the public built environment, television operates through invisible and unremarkable conventions, inchoate forces of culture, control and habit that conspire to determine where the TV sites within its environment — behind a counter, or up high, or in an alcove. Such issues may seem dictated by transparent functionality, but they are simultaneously, like all architecture, forms of social communication.[20]

While McCarthy looks at how social communication situates the spectator, I am more interested in what street media placement practices tell us about the social communication roles played by the media makers and distributors,

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[19] Interview with the organizer of a large-scale medical research study, April 17, 2005.
[20] McCarthy, *Ambient Television*, 118.

who must negotiate legal rules, tacit ethics, and commonly held assumptions about reception patterns as they make their marks on the streetscape.

Spectacle vs. Ambience

In the preceding pages, I have tried to present, using both images and text, a glimpse of Central Square's astonishing media diversity. After taking a closer look at this amalgamation, do we best describe it as spectacle or as ambience? This distinction is useful inasmuch as it acknowledges the recurring theme of spectacle in writings about cities, particularly writing that critiques capitalism's impact, Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* being one of the most prominent. It is tempting to say that what might have earlier been spectacle is now ambience, due to its sheer density that has anaesthetized contemporary urban inhabitants. But this logic loses persuasiveness, not only because distraction can be productive, as I mentioned earlier, but also because media has long been a dense presence in earlier streetscapes.[21] To describe the "verbal frenzy" of 19th-century Manhattan streets, David Henkin employs a quote from someone who directly experienced it:

> New York is distinguished for its display in the way of signs; every device and expense is resorted to, to make them attractive, crowding them upon every story, and even upon the tops and ends of some houses, above... In truth it struck me as defeating their own purpose, for the glare of them was so uniform as to lose the power of discrimination. It is not unlike the perpetual din of their own carriage-wheels along Broadway, unnoticed by themselves, though astounding to others.[22]

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[21] "All these announcements, are torn down next morning, to give place to new ones; if they were not, the notice-boards would thicken with the horrid mass of sacred and profane advertisements until they obstructed the streets; for there, superimposed pell-mell, would lie police orders, quacks' nostrums, decrees, Orders in Council cancelling these same decrees, notices of sales by order of executors, sales in bankruptcy, lost dogs, church services, marionette shows, preachers, expositions of the Blessed Sacrament, recruiting posters, and eulogies of elastic stockings; in short, all the rubbish that afflicts the public view but is never by any chance read, and whose sole apparent purpose is to cover the nakedness of walls." Mercier, "Chapitre CCCVII: Les affiches" in *Tableau de Paris I*, 804. Translation from Popkin, ed., *Panorama of Paris*, 87.

[22] Watson, *Annals and Occurrences of New York City and State in the Olden Time*, 355-356. Cited in Henkin, *City Reading,* 48.

What is possible, and difficult to truly know, is how the relative mix of different kinds of street media has changed repeatedly over time: Mercier's Paris began as an obstacle course of homemade and small business signage, but during the time of his writing it was being cleared out in favor of government decrees and commercial signage reined in by strict regulation.[23] Historical developments such as glass storefronts and electric lighting have contributed to a sense of consumer spectacle, while chaotic use of the printing press over the centuries has enabled a cacophony of public communication among autonomous individuals and political and social groups.

Many-Sided Communication

In arguing for the importance of theory, particularly vernacular theory, Thomas McLaughlin writes:

> Mass media culture at times seems determined to destroy all possibility for reflection, inundating the subject with new texts — new fads, new shows, new fashions — in an attempt to colonize subjectivity for marketing purposes.[24]

Be that as it may, we must not fall prey to the assumption that "mass media culture" has in fact succeeded in eradicating other forms of being in contemporary Western society. Baudrillard makes himself a prime target of this critique when he dismisses amateur media production as "the equivalent of Sunday tinkering on the periphery of the system."[25] I hope this chapter has shown that when we broaden our inquiry from mass or institutionalized media to include all of those putting up media in a publicly trafficked space, we challenge the theorized dichotomy of a passive receiver bombarded with corporate and governmental media messages. Government and corporate entities do have more resources and more authority to place media in our urban spaces, but without making claims as to the relative proportions of

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[23] Mercier, "Chapitre LXVI: Enseignes" in *Tableau de Paris I,* 178. Translation from Popkin, ed., *Panorama of Paris,* 44.
[24] McLaughlin, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory*, 160.
[25] Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* 182.

contributing entities to the mediascape, it is clear that individuals, too, are communicating with one another. And, on occasion, talking back to (or at) the larger entities (figure 4.40).

Thus, we read Guy Debord with some qualifications to his declaration in 1967 that "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."[26] Debord wrote this in the context of trenchant critique of a society of capitalist consumerism abetted by governmental regulation, which we certainly have not left behind, although we confront it in an historical context different from his. Somewhat like Baudrillard, Debord sees a spectacle created by those in power and imposed on everyone else, who may or may not be aware of the imposition. While that is certainly not wrong, broadening our view of street media from pure spectacle to include the less consumption-oriented modes of communication I have described in this chapter — in a sense, broadening "spectacle" to include ambience — we can come to an understanding of the urban streetscape not only for its one-to-many communications, but for its many-to-many communications. Media makers and media receivers, participants and spectators, are not separate categories.[27] Sometimes, as when a national corporate chain places its media in a locale to which it has only a commercial connection, this might be true. But as I have shown in this chapter, corporate media is accompanied by a wide range of other types of media from a variety of sources. Allowing a view of media consumers that acknowledges their media-making, then we might better understand "the collection of images" to demonstrate a more diverse set of social relations than simply institutional producer and passive receiver.

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[26] Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 4.
[27] Henry Jenkins makes this point in depth in his book on fan cultures, *Textual Poachers*, cf. 44-49.

Chapter Five

Street Media in its Natural Habitat

Once a media object makes it to the streetscape, a variety of animate and inanimate forces go to work on it, using it, wearing it down, adding to it, improving it, moving it, and discarding it. Some of the characteristics discussed in the previous chapter, such as placement and production quality, can change as a result, thereby affecting our perception of the message being communicated: Today's newspaper offered neatly in its rack has a different appeal (if any) when we see it trampled on the ground, or when tomorrow arrives and the same paper remains. The impact of environment is perhaps best illustrated by a composite of the life cycle of a newspaper in Central Square, in Figure 5.1:

A: A newspaper taken from a rack, purchased at a shop, or picked up from a local café is read…

B: It gets left neatly on the bench, in what might be forgetfulness or a deliberate gesture of consideration toward the next bench-sitter.

C: Another reader is less conscientious about the effects of his or her newspaper use.

D: By wind or by circumstance, a newspaper falls to the ground and gets churned by the heels of passersby.

Thus, a media object that begins as a piece of authorized or commoditized media ends its life cycle as litter. I will explore the issue of media vs. litter in greater depth in Chapter Seven, but for now this example shows how environmental factors from use, to weather, to simply the passage of time keep media objects in flux and motion well after their initial placement in the streetscape (figure 5.2). This holds true for fixed media, too. Storefronts

require regular cleaning and repainting to counteract the effects of weather and pollution. Municipal signs fade with time and exposure (figure 5.3).

In Figure 5.4, flyers promoting a meditation course were used, as intended, by the person who ripped one of the contact info tabs from the bottom. But someone else chose to deface the flyer by inking a moustache on the photograph. Nearby, another "Meditate" flyer succumbed to a pervasive anti-media force: the wind. Strong winds in Central Square send loose municipal signs swinging, sandwichboards collapsing, newspapers swirling, flyers circulating in unintended formations, and, in figure 5.5, newsracks falling to the ground. Every time I pass these racks, they are in some new formation, sometimes due to windy weather, and sometimes arranged in a way only attributable to human intervention.[1]

Human Intervention

Human intervention has significant and varied impacts on the media in Central Square. This sign (figure 5.6) is easily identified by its metal material, size, shape, and placement as a municipal sign. An artist who calls himself "darkcloud" took it down from the pole, painted over it, and remounted it.

> Any sign I can grab, that has holes and can be installed is fair game as far as I'm concerned. The majority of signs are from construction areas, or are knocked over, or were just loose on the pole.[2]

"Darkcloud"'s storm clouds are pervasive in Central Square, more frequently appearing as stickers of varying shapes, stuck to walls and the backs of municipal signs. Occasionally, this particular sign has in turn been covered

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[1] When I walked by these dispensers with John Trant — who walks around occasionally to look for violations — he re-arranged two of the four, which someone had placed neatly but at an angle, so that they were again in line with the sidewalk and the curb.
[2] Email interview with "darkcloud," April 22, 2005.

by flyers (figure 5.7) possibly for the location's high visibility to cars stopped at Central Square's major intersection.

Most often, media layering involves the covering of authorized media by unauthorized media, possibly because, as I will elaborate later, authorized media — newsracks, storefronts, and municipal signs, to name a few — are given first claims to the streetscape's surfaces, and consequently are placed in areas of highest visibility. The authors of an MIT study claim that a proliferation — and sometimes redundancy — of signage overloads and dulls the senses.[3] While they describe how such overloading slows or halts reception by the beleaguered individual, I would also suggest that the omnipresence of certain municipal signs, for example, might also lead a media maker to tune out the explicit messages and view the signs simply as appropriate surfaces to cover over (figures 5.8 and 5.9). That said, it is important to note that the majority of unauthorized postings are placed on the reverse side of street signage or around the text, leaving the explicit messages — "One Way", "No Parking", "No Left Turn" — still visible (figure 5.10).

Central Square, like so many urban areas, has its share of graffiti. Some call it art, others call it vandalism. Graffiti is also media: Regardless of whether anyone can decipher a particular instance, graffiti as a genre is generally recognized as an act of communication, be it affirming or destructive. It is a prevalent example of human intervention as an environmental factor affecting Central Square's outdoor media. In Figure 5.11, we see a door originally labeled in careful lettering with the name of a local restaurant (*right*). A few months later, its manager succumbed to the expediency of combating graffiti by choosing to replace only the paint and not the label

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[3] Brower et. al., *Signs in the City*, 4ff.

(*left*). Not long after the *METRO* newspaper began placing its new newsracks, several of them were tagged like the one in Figure 5.12. Graffiti is generally very difficult to fully remove — certain types require chemical treatments and high-pressure washes — so where possible, those wishing to efface it do so by painting over it, creating another kind of layering on the surfaces of the city street.[4]

The inverse of such layering is removal, and the traces that are left behind by a media object's past existence, traces that are sometimes themselves covered over by a new generation of media. The surfaces of the city become a palimpsest of generations of inscription that cannot always be fully eradicated, whatever the desires of inhabitants and officials (figure 5.13). Old building signs are among the more romanticized examples of historical tracings in the urban and non-urban environment (figures 5.14 and 5.15).[5] But in Central Square, street poles are by far the most common and striking palimpsests (figure 5.16, one pole all the way around). The effect seen here results from a number of forces. Stickers and the heavy-duty tape used to affix flyers and posters to the poles are intended to weather both the elements and any casual efforts towards removal. But a gust of wind might tear off part of a loose poster. A passerby interested in or offended by a particular media object might rip it off quickly, leaving remnants still stuck, and continue on. A business owner annoyed by what he or she perceives to be clutter, or a municipal employee charged with cleanup might take a little more time to remove the entire posting (figure 5.17), but as with graffiti, thorough removal often requires chemical treatments, scrapers, paint to smooth it all over, and a lot of time to do this to each affected pole. This is

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[4] Interview with John Trant, April 7, 2005, and Whitford, *Getting Rid of Graffiti*. For an interesting take on graffiti removal, see McCormick, *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal*.

[5] For more fading ads with some historical context included, visit "The Fading Ad Gallery," http://www.fadingad.com.

just one illustration of how media makers, media receivers, and city enforcers keep street media's physical presence dynamic.

Regulation and the Economics of Enforcement

City enforcement not only attempts to keep unauthorized media to a minimum, it also influences how authorized media appear on the streetscape. Emerging from decades of hard times, city officials and business leaders have worked hard to improve run-down storefronts. Launched during the 1980s, the City of Cambridge Facade, Signage and Lighting Improvement Program "seeks to improve the physical appearance of independent businesses and enhance the commercial districts of Cambridge."[6] It does this by providing free architectural consulting and matching grants for eligible improvements. Eligibility guidelines require compliance with a host of city streetscape and building regulations, thereby reinforcing the city's preference for order and cleanliness. The program is split into two parts: one for facade improvement and the other for signage and lighting improvement. The latter program's mission is described as follows (Central Square is considered a commercial district):

> The program is part of the City's ongoing efforts to help revitalize its commercial districts as well as businesses that operate outside of a commercial district. The program's objectives are threefold: to enhance the physical appearance of storefronts and, thus, overall streetscape; to increase safety through additional appropriate storefront lighting; and to build a stronger customer base for individual stores and commercial districts.[7]

The program's design considerations and economic priorities reveal some of the material, aesthetic, and functional ideals that Cambridge has for its storefront media:

> As improvements are being contemplated, the following basic design considerations should be noted:

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[6] City of Cambridge, "Facade, Signage and Lighting Improvement Program," http://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/ed/cr/cr_facade.html.
[7] City of Cambridge, "Signage & Lighting Improvement Program Guidelines."

Scale – Will the size of the proposed signage and lighting be compatible to the size of the storefront and building?

Placement – Will the proposed placement of the signage be easily seen by potential customers? Will the proposed placement and ***intensity*** of lighting properly illuminate the storefront and window display without being a distracting element on the street?

Lettering – Will the visual message on the proposed signage be legible and attractive?

Color – Will the color scheme be compatible with the rest of the building's exterior?

Texture – Will the design and materials used provide an interesting three-dimensionality to make my storefront subtly stand out without being displeasing?

Attractiveness – Will all the above combined elements create an attractively cohesive storefront which will help draw customers into my business?

All improvements must comply with standards set forth in the City's zoning ordinance and building codes.[8]

The guidelines for eligible signage help shape our own expectations of what kind of enterprise is managing a particular storefront. Of course, the details change with the locale, and these specific guidelines are only in effect for stores willing to comply in exchange for financial help. But if we expect clean and orderly storefronts from retail chains (figure 5.18) and something more eccentric from smaller and local businesses (figure 5.19), these guidelines indicate that other forces beyond the business owners influence what we see and consequently, what we expect to see.

A. Eligible Signage

Signage funded through the program must follow the guidelines outlined below.

1. Must be new or the restoration of historic signage;

2. Must be made of durable material;

3. May include the business name, street address, phone number, type of business, business logo, and other business-related symbols/pictorials;

4. Must *not* contribute to or produce a cluttered storefront appearance;

5. Interior signage must enhance the storefront and be easily visible from the street;

6. Awning or canopies must also serve as signage (i.e., display business name and/or other relevant information, logos, symbols or pictorials);

7. Color scheme and size must be complementary to building facade;

8. Must *not* display brand names of products;

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[8] City of Cambridge, "Signage & Lighting Improvement Program Guidelines," 2.

> 9. All other signage may be considered and approved under the reasonable discretion of the Review Committee.[9]

Those responsible for policing the urban space and managing media before it appears are also concerned with retarding media dynamism that slants toward decay. Many of Central Square's newsracks get moved around; they get dirty, scratched, covered with stickers, and stuffed with trash. Publishers, deemed responsible by the City of Cambridge for maintaining the racks and keeping them stocked, often hire locals to do this. Maintenance does not come naturally to many of those with a newsrack in Central Square, and John Trant, who issues newsrack permits, also enforces their upkeep. He does this by periodically walking along Massachusetts Avenue and photographing neglected racks, such as those in Figure 5.20. He sends these photographs with a warning to the appropriate publishers, and will eventually remove racks and fine the publishers if they are not brought into line.

But even when Trant's efforts toward order and cleanliness have succeeded, Central Square's streetscape is speckled with dozens of newsracks in a motley array of sizes, materials, and colors. As such, they are part of a larger debate that occasionally flares up in municipalities across the country, a debate that generally falls along the lines of a city's desire for order and publishers' desires to set their particular media apart from their competitors. A *METRO* employee describes some of the criteria involved in designing a newsrack:

> You want to have something that's larger than your competitor's, something that gives good marketing appeal… The primary purpose of the box is to get papers in the hands of people. It's a billboard in a sense.[10]

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[9] City of Cambridge, "Signage & Lighting Improvement Program Guidelines," 2.
[10] Interview with employee of METRO newspaper, May 9, 2005.

Cities from Los Angeles to Hackensack have tried to tame visual clutter caused by attention-getting efforts by replacing individual news boxes with more compact, uniform racks segmented into separate windows for multiple publications, or by banning newsracks altogether. Publishers have sued, arguing that municipal efforts to curtail some or all newsracks infringe on their right to free speech.[11] Two notable cases have reached the U.S. Supreme Court, and in both cases the Court sided with the publishers.[12]

Across the river in Boston, city officials with the Coordinated Street Furniture Program are planning to replace the current assortment of newsracks with newsstands painted green to match new toilets, bus shelters, information panels, and telephone pillars. The program's director, Peter O'Sullivan, provides a clear view of the preferences and assumptions on both sides of the debate in a way that applies well beyond newsracks to larger issues of communication, individuality, and order.

> There are thousands of single boxes throughout the city," he says. "And people know that the *Globe* is green, the *Herald* is yellow, and *USA Today* is white. The condos take away individuality, but it's a cleaner, more organized structure.[13]

Similarly, when talking about flyers and stickers, Trant describes what his ideal streetscape would look like: "[C]lean poles and clean signs and everything else. Clean sidewalks, obviously. Neatness is what we're looking for!"[14] This statement exhibits the assumption criticized by Jane Jacobs regarding the entire streetscape, not just its media, "the belief that diversity looks ugly… It implies that city diversity of uses is inherently messy in

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[11] Orlov, "More News Rack Colors Nixed." See also Alvarado, "Hackensack Reviews its News Rack Ordinances," and Borges, "Newsracks Grounded at Airport."
[12] For an excellent roundup of case law regarding cities and newsracks, see Hudson, Jr., "Newsracks: Overview."
[13] Healy, "News Sensation," 15.
[14] Interview with John Trant, April 7, 2005.

appearance; and it also implies that places stamped with homogeneity of uses look better."[15]

Thus, a complex web of regulation, politics, and economics competes with the forces of decay as an environmental factor affecting street media. Embedded in much of the regulation is the assumption that order and neatness are ideals shared by the majority of urban inhabitants:

> John Trant: I think everyone wants that. I don't think anyone wants a dirty sidewalk, stickers on the poles and everything else. I can't imagine that anyone would really want that.
>
> Author: I think some people feel that clutter is a worthwhile sacrifice for communication.
>
> John Trant: Well… I think people looking at it from that perspective don't see the costs involved in the cleanup.[16]

Cambridge has laws that explicitly prohibit the posting of unauthorized media on its surfaces. The language casts such posting as vandalism or defacement, and as "Offenses Against Property", both public and private.[17]

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[15] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 223.
[16] Interview with John Trant, April 7, 2005.
[17] City of Cambridge Municipal Code. "Chapter 9.04 OFFENSES AGAINST PROPERTY" [selections]:
Section 9.04.020 Injuring or destroying public or private property.
A. No person shall, without proper authority, paint on, write on, or otherwise injure, deface, destroy or vandalize any public building or any public or private property.
B. Any person who violates this section shall be subject to a fine of three hundred dollars. (Ord. 1049 § 1, 1987: prior code § 13-2)…

Section 9.04.050 Defacing public property.
A. No person shall post or attach, or directly or indirectly cause to be posted or attached in any manner, any handbill, poster, advertisement or notice of any kind on public property except by permission of the City Manager or his designee, or on private property without the consent of the owner or occupant thereof.
B. Any handbill or sign found posted or otherwise affixed on any public property contrary to the provisions of this section may be removed by the Police Department or the Department of Public Works or the Inspectional Services Department.
C. The person or persons responsible for causing the unlawful posting of any notice described herein will be liable for the cost of removal and for the penalties described below. Persons liable under this section include, but are not limited to, any individual, corporation, partnership or other organization whose advertisement, message or information appears on the unlawfully posted notice.

One law in the section prohibits the sale of spray paint to people under age 18. Another specifies that only "religious, fraternal or charitable organizations" can place banners extending above and across a roadway.

But laws are not the only regulatory force in play. City officials and local businesspeople say that residents and businesses do get involved in the effort to remove media objects they believe to be unauthorized, mostly by calling the city to request their removal. The city encourages this with its "graffiti hotline", set up a few years ago.[18] But economics are an important consideration, too. Trant says that both writing citations and removing unauthorized media are "very, very, very time consuming" and that his department does not have the time and resources to engage in the kind of maintenance he'd like to see. As a result, city officials have shifted their efforts from punitive enforcement to cleanup as a deterrent. Some Central Square residents and visitors judge by looking at the media-saturated environment that regulatory forces play a minimal role in keeping the streetscape clean. Media makers such as "darkcloud" judge enforcement levels by how long their work stays up:

> The art in Central Square has actually been up for a good long time, they have a slower removal rate, then, let's say... Allston. But a couple signs have been taken down, but most of the stickers still remain. The city of Cambridge has to be the one that removes them, because they gotta cut the bolts off.[19]

D. Any person who violates this section shall be subject to a fine of three hundred dollars. Each illegally posted notice, advertisement, poster or sign shall be considered a separate violation of this section, and a separate offense shall be deemed committed on each day during or on which a violation of this section occurs or continues.

E. As an alternative to the penalty set forth in subsection D, whoever violates any provision of this section shall be penalized by a noncriminal disposition as provided in G.L., c. 40, §21D. For purposes of this section, the following officials shall be enforcing persons: Cambridge Police Officers and designated staff of the Cambridge Department of Public Works and the Inspectional Services Department.

Then noncriminal penalty for the first violation of this section shall be twenty-five dollars; for the second violation, one hundred dollars; and for the third and all subsequent violations, two hundred dollars. (Ord. 1138, 1992)

[18] City of Cambridge Department of Public Works, "Fighting Graffiti" brochure.

[19] Email interview with "darkcloud", April 22, 2005.

Trant says officials try to reverse the perception of a lax environment by stepping up their removal efforts to communicate to unauthorized media makers that their efforts will be in vain: "The quicker you respond to something, the more often you take it down as quickly as they put it up, they stop doing it."[20] Another non-confrontational tactic used by the city has been to work with the Cambridge Public Art Council, a non-profit agency, to have teenagers participating in the Mayor's Summer Youth Employment Program paint Central Square's many utility boxes with their own designs. The collaboration, initiated by the Department of Public Works three years ago, is not intended to divert the energies of potential graffitists — in fact, some of the teen program participants admit to being "taggers" — but rather focuses on claiming a surface before graffitists can. This, judging by the condition of the boxes (and the observable fact that they would be difficult to repaint), has largely succeeded in warding off unauthorized postings (figure 5.21).[21]

Order and Communication

The city street has long been the site of struggles great and small between a desire for order and a desire for more open communication. Louis-Sébastien Mercier writes of the cat-and-mouse games played by city officials and those who posted handbills in the evening shadows of his late-18th-century Paris, where only wedding and death announcements could be posted without a permit.[22] David Henkin, describing 19th-century Manhattan, tells of "a barely conspicuous and patently ineffective public authority and a burgeoning commercial culture intent on leaving no vertical space unmarked."[23] Unlike New York City, however, where aggressive commercial street media came under its share of criticism, in Central Square, the blame for disorder is usually put on unauthorized, usually non-commercial, media

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[20] Interview with John Trant, April 7, 2005.
[21] Interview with Lillian Hsu, Cambridge Public Art Council, May 18, 2005.
[22] Mercier, "Chapitre CCCVII: Les affiches" in *Tableau de Paris I*, 803.
[23] Henkin, *City Reading*, 70.

— stickers, flyers, and graffiti. It is interesting that, despite centuries of tension between order and communication in urban space, one is hard-pressed to find examples of creative solutions in American cities. Such solutions might involve opening city surfaces to a broader range of media while honoring the widely-held assumption that media density and aesthetics are mutually exclusive. I believe that this is in part due to an insufficient appreciation for the wide-ranging communicative functions street media play. Which brings me to my next chapter.

Chapter Six

What Street Media Communicates

In the previous two chapters, I have tried to present the street media in Central Square in a way that honors their substantial diversity and dynamism, qualities intensified by the special environmental conditions to which such media are subjected. These chapters have hinted at the communication aspects of these media, and it is now time to consider in depth what messages they, individually and collectively, explicitly and implicitly, transmit to those exposed to them. Before delving into specific communicative functions, however, it helps to think more generally about the kinds of communication embodied in the media ecology. Jean Baudrillard's complaint about the one-to-many nature of mass media and the inability of the receiver to answer back to so much of this media is shared by Kevin Lynch and Donald Appleyard in the context of media at the street level.

> Communication in our cities suffers from many difficulties. One obvious problem is the visual confusion and intrinsic ugliness of the explicit messages: the posters, billboards, marquees, and street signs. The messages themselves are often trivial, redundant, false or out of date… The receiver cannot control the city communication process as he would like to; he cannot easily shut out unwanted messages, or locate desired ones. He has no opportunity to "talk back", but must remain a passive recipient.[1]

Lynch and Appleyard do qualify the harshness of these remarks shortly after, admitting that for all of the disorder, "Much essential information does get across, and many individual signs are highly expressive."[2] It is true that much street media express information without inviting interaction (figures 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3), but such a quality does not make them intrinsically bad. There are also plenty of media objects in Central Square that *do* invite interaction (figure 6.4) and still others that interact with one another, for

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[1] Lynch and Appleyard, *Signs in the City,* 75.
[2] Lynch and Appleyard, *Signs in the City,* 75.

example by sharing a topic, if not a viewpoint (figure 6.5) or because they were placed in proximity, either intentionally or unintentionally (figure 6.6).

Understanding Communication

James Carey gives us another way to think about the outdoor media in Central Square, based on his understanding of John Dewey's work and philosophy of communication: "Society is possible because of the binding forces of shared information circulating in an organic system."[3] Carey proposes viewing these binding forces through two lenses: the transmission view and the ritual view of communication. The transmission view takes media as information which, as it circulates, influences attitudes and opinions. The ritual view acknowledges the ceremonial aspect of communication, rooted in religious tradition, by which a society's beliefs are shared and reinforced among its members. Neither view excludes the other, but acknowledging both as elements in the act of communication enriches our understanding of those acts. In a way, Carey's thinking maps onto Henri Lefebvre's descriptions of absolute space and abstract space. Lefebvre's description of absolute space is tinged with nostalgia; it is an "agro-pastoral" space before and beyond the entrenchment of law and capitalism, a space of shadows and symbols where inhabitants created their own imageries and explanations for the world around them.[4] Abstract space comes where the state systematizes and homogenizes space under a rule of law conducive to the economic and strategic interests of those in power. Ritual and absolute, transmission and abstract — these are not one-to-one relationships, of course, but we start to see some commonalities in thinking about how people interact among each other and in relation to larger ordering structures.

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[3] Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 22.
[4] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* 234.

Carey's ritual view makes a significant contribution to my exploration in this section of how street media give individuals a sense of the kind of place they are in, and how that place might fit into a larger social, political, economic, and geographic context. In that spirit, I have generally confined my own inquiry to the same outdoor views available to any curious passerby, avoiding the contextualization that additional research could do. As Karl Schlögel writes about sidewalks, so I have ventured with the media objects that line them:

> The condition of the sidewalks is the surest indicator of the condition of the city itself. They are the skin — and like skin, they are either well-cared-for or neglected. It is easy to tell whether money is being spent on their upkeep or whether they have been abandoned to ruin.[5]

This notion of telling a city from its sidewalks hearkens somewhat to the psychogeography of the Situationists, or even the city imaging of Kevin Lynch, in that it calls for urban inhabitants to pay closer attention to how different spaces of the city affect feeling, perception, and memory.

> Environmental images are the result of a two-way process between the observer and his environment. The environment suggests distinctions and relations, and the observer — with great adaptability and in the light of his own purposes — selects, organizes, and endows with meaning what he sees. The image so developed now limits and emphasizes what is seen, while the image itself is being tested against the filtered perceptual input in a constant interacting process. Thus the image of a given reality may vary significantly between different observers.[6]

I align with cultural studies and its emphasis on the polysemous nature of perception and reception: The subsequent pages are meant to suggest, not declare, possible readings of the various media objects. That said, at times curiosity and the desire to test the accuracy of some of my observations compelled me to interview media makers and regulators and to seek more information on the Web, where many of these media objects do point, either

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[5] Schlögel, *Rendering Time According to Space*, 15.
[6] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 6.

explicitly with Web addresses or implicitly with a name unique enough to satisfy Google.

Orienting the Subject

At its most basic, a city's media orients by helping people to find their way around (figure 6.7). This function is most evident when one is a newcomer to a particular urban environment:

> Urban texts (many of which validate the stranger simply by presuming his or her existence) mark the possibilities and limits of understanding a new urban environment, of engaging a place where we can function without necessarily having personal contacts, family history, productive responsibilities, or even conversational skills — a place, in other words, where we both do and do not belong.[7]

Both newcomers and long-term residents also derive, often unconsciously, a volume of other orientational messages as to the kinds of people who live in a particular urban space and, by extension, whether or not they, the receivers, fit in. Most powerfully, these messages are the result of Certeauian "strategies" by corporations seeking to invert their desire for consumers into a consumer desire for their products and services. Often, marketers straddle the line between the pragmatic targeting of a particular set of local demographics and the abstract fantasy-building of a lifestyle image for the local demographics to aspire to, as David Henkin describes:

> Despite differences in class, gender, ethnicity, and education, most of us know what it is like to be a consumer and a spectator, to be impersonally and indifferently included in the imagined activities of an abstract group.[8]

Even without knowing the exact motivations that drove the selection of the ethnicity, clothing, age, and language of the people in Figures 6.8 and 6.9, we can see how the resulting images, displayed prominently in their respective storefronts, might influence our perceptions of the local demographic makeup. Or of something else — a feeling, a perception, an aspiration — less

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[7] Henkin, *City Reading,* x.
[8] Henkin, *City Reading,* ix. For an example of standard demographic clusters used by marketers, see Michael J. Weiss, *The Clustering of America*.

grounded in reality: Famous adman Leo Burnett provides another way of seeing these images — as archetypes:

> The most powerful advertising ideas are non-verbal and take the form of statements with visual qualities made by archetypes. Their true meanings lie too deep for words.[9]

And yet, words are used widely in contemporary street media. They suggest, by their mode of address, the expected, imagined, or desired audience, such as in Figure 6.10, where the message is that everyone is or should be weight conscious, and that going to the gym will enable people to eat things other than salad without guilt. Contrast that language with another sign, just a few blocks down the street: The "Vote or Die" exhortation addresses a person who might be better accustomed to more dire, rather than playful, language (figure 6.11). Another bank poster relays the supposed thoughts of professional women who work hard and view home ownership as challenging but attainable (figure 6.12). Many of the municipal signs we take for granted, particularly those regulating traffic, from directional signs to signs prohibiting various actions (e.g., "No Parking" and "No Turn On Red"), are relatively recent developments in urban text, according to Henkin.[10] Their language, intended for the broadest general audience and for people in motion, is extremely simple and concise.

Other street media, rather than hinting at the relationships between marketers, governing authorities, and a local population, are clearer in how they communicate who are the actual people who live or work in a particular place. Homemade media objects provide the most direct clues, partly due to

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[9] Broadbent, *The Leo Burnett Book of Advertising*: 3. Quoted in Smith et. al., eds., *Handbook of Visual Communication*, 55.

[10] "[W]e have come to expect cityscapes to be legible, much as we expect consumer goods to come with labels, instructions, and promotional copy. But there was once something novel in the spectacle of so many words, and something radical in the notion that buildings and streets ought to be marked… Signs regulating traffic, for example, were virtually unknown in antebellum New York." Henkin, *City Reading,* 3.

the immediacy and accessibility of their making and distribution, as discussed earlier, and partly because they are most often made and placed by people untrained in sophisticated methods of mass promotional address. Flyers suggest the presence of an arts community (figures 6.13 and 6.14). A humble-looking sign announces the presence of a weekly farmer's market, and by extension that of a community that supports a weekly farmer's market (figure 6.15). Two flyers in amusing juxtaposition suggest that Central Square hosts at least a few people whose stress levels might make them tempted by alternative sources of relief (figure 6.16).

As we assemble, at differing levels of awareness, clues as to the demographic identities inhabiting a particular urban space, street media is also contributing to an impression or opinion we might form in our minds of the kinds of values held by these people and/or promoted by the commercial community and the governing authorities. Central Square is home to a number of organizations providing social services to the less-advantaged: The YMCA, the Cambridge Senior Center, and the Salvation Army have prominent, well-maintained buildings and signs right on Massachusetts Avenue, while other services such as the YWCA, Multi-Service Center for the Homeless, Food For Free, and the Cambridge Housing Authority are just off of the main strip. This sign in front of Cambridge City Hall gives a sense of how the city might welcome its disabled community (even if the community itself is unable to read the sign) (figure 6.17).

Anyone who walks along Central Square's sidewalks with any regularity will encounter at least one distributor of *Spare Change* newspaper, a project of the Homeless Empowerment Project, based in Harvard Square. Vendors are homeless people who purchase the newspapers from the Project for 25 cents each and resell them on the street for one dollar. Unlike the publishers who must pay for permission to distribute in plastic or metal newsracks,

Massachusetts State Law allows *Spare Change*'s human distributors to sell newspapers without a license. According to Megan Mahoney of the Project, newsracks would not support the overall mission: Encouraging in-person newspaper sales is an integral part of giving low-income people the opportunity to earn their own money while also reminding other people that homelessness does exist.[11] Taken altogether, these various media provide clues as to who lives in or near Central Square, and how the city and its businesses and residents receive a relatively wide diversity of lifestyles.

Local political values are also suggested by the media in Central Square. The Center for Marxist Education has a brightly colored doorway on Massachusetts Ave (figure 6.18). In late October 2004, while "Fahrenheit 9/11", Michael Moore's documentary criticizing the administration of George W. Bush, continued to trigger protests in front of movie theaters nationwide and refusals by many theaters to run the film, local rental shop Hollywood Express saw fit to devote its entire front window to it (figure 6.19). For some, even the presence of a Starbucks (or any chain store, for that matter) is a political statement, especially for those who remember Harvard Do-Nut, the mom-and-pop coffee shop that preceded it.[12]

In the months leading up to the November 2004, elections, I might have expected Central Square to be ablaze with political posters and stickers, most of them left-leaning in keeping with Cambridge's liberal reputation. Not so. A smattering of stickers promoted Democratic candidates, some (judging by candidate name and weathered condition) placed in advance of the spring primaries (figures 6.20 and 6.21). These were sometimes accompanied by

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[11] Interview with Megan Mahoney, Homeless Empowerment Project, May 4, 2005.
[12] Some of those upset by the arrival of Starbucks to Central Square in December, 1997, did not know that the situation was more complex than simply the defeat of a small store by a large one: The owner wanted to retire and willingly sold his license to Starbucks, a move he saw as a sign of progress, not defeat, for the area.

flyers announcing protests against the Iraq War. There were a couple of Bush-Cheney stickers as well (figure 6.22). But on election day, November 2, 2004, indications that national elections were taking place were few: headlines visible through newsrack windows, the one-day appearance of this NAACP sign (figure 6.23), and the populating with a voting list of what had until then been to me a mysterious structure (figure 6.24).[13]

As discussed earlier, Central Square's commercial identity has risen and fallen on the economic scales over time. These days, the juxtapositions are somewhat *dis*orienting to those who might use storefronts to characterize the area. There are the nationally recognized trappings of gentrification and yuppiedom: Starbucks, Gap, Au Bon Pain. There is an upscale gym, a couple of gourmet restaurants, and a couple of lounges for hipster nightcrawlers. A food cooperative known for its organic offerings as well as its high prices suggests the presence of a demographic that can afford healthy food, and another demographic willing to pay more for such food even at the expense of other luxuries. In contrast, there is also a check cashing place, two thrift stores, a McDonald's, and two 7-Elevens just a couple of blocks apart (figures 6.25 and 6.26). If anything, this remarkably varied assortment of commercial establishments tells us that Central Square's clientele is economically diverse and — if most urban neighborhoods in the United States tend toward class uniformity — in flux.[14]

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[13] Sixty-nine percent (42,443) of Cambridge's registered voters, both active and inactive, voted in the November 2, 2004, elections, according to the Cambridge Election Commission. That number is higher than the national average, estimated at 60 percent by George Mason University's United States Elections Project, but leaves room for growth that improved communication, among other things, might bring.

[14] While the presence of certain chain stores does connote a basic class identity for a community, chain stores are perhaps less of a clear indicator than smaller businesses. This is because chains, especially those that are centrally managed, like Starbucks, can spread risk throughout its network, thereby tolerating ebbs and flows in the success of a particular location.

When using media to orient oneself and situate the urban space one is in, it is important not to trust the streetscape entirely, however. The story told by the local street media is not so accurate when we consider the disconnect between the ethnic makeup of the local population and the languages represented in the streetscape. Approximately one out of three residents in the four neighborhoods that come together at Central Square speak a language other than English at home, and slightly fewer were born outside of the United States.[15] Yet, a year of regular observation yielded only one or two signs in Spanish (figure 6.27) and only a couple of foreign-language newspapers (in racks), including *World Journal*, "the largest Chinese newspaper in North America."[16] There are many possible reasons for this. Perhaps only certain people are willing or comfortable with making their own marks on the streetscape, or that they are unaware of how to make those marks authorized. Besides, what does the presence of an Indian goods store in Central Square actually tell us? Does it tell us, like this photograph in Figure 6.28, that there is a strong Indian diaspora in the immediate area, or does it tell us that there are a lot of people of all ethnicities who enjoy Indian groceries? Or, perhaps, it tells us that this was the only available space at the right size, price, and zoning classification in the entire region. It is therefore best to view media objects as pointers and guides to possible qualities about an area, rather than viewing them as fixed and true landmarks in the orientation experience.

Situating the City

As pointers, however, they can still tell us a lot; more literally, media objects can indicate, by their referentiality, whether and how Central Square plugs into the larger world. Chain stores, with their national and global brands, are one obvious indicator, and in Figure 6.29 this global connection is made

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[15] City of Cambridge, "Neighborhood Demographics Profile," 19-20.
[16] World Journal Web site, http://www.worldjournal.com.

explicit. In fact, the arrival of several chain stores to Central Square during the mid-1990s, Starbucks included, was welcomed by some as an early step to end the economic blight that had plagued the area for decades. In other words some, Carl Barron included, see the chain storefronts and read better times for Central Square. Barron, a Central Square native, local business and property owner, and active community member said in 1997: "I have waited 30 years to see Central Square cleaner and more active, and that is now arriving."[17]

Central Square is looped into other, larger mediascapes as well, for which "underground" might be an appropriate description if they hadn't taken on a more mainstream notoriety. Case in point: Andre the Giant, a meme started in 1989 by Shepard Fairey, an art student at the time. While the original sticker was an explicit reference to wrestler Andre René Roussimoff (figure 6.30), abstracted variations have appeared on streetscape surfaces worldwide. Fairey sells stickers, posters, stencils, and other paraphernalia and posts meditations on his work on a Web site dedicated to the phenomenon (figure 6.31). While disclaiming any explicit meaning in the Andre stickers, Fairey explains on his Web site what he intends to implicitly communicate.

> The FIRST AIM OF PHENOMENOLOGY is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment. The OBEY sticker attempts to stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the sticker and their relationship with their surroundings. Because people are not used to seeing advertisements or propaganda for which the product or motive is not obvious, frequent and novel encounters with the sticker provoke thought and possible frustration, nevertheless revitalizing the viewer's perception and attention to detail. The sticker has no meaning but exists only to cause people to react, to contemplate and search for meaning in the sticker.[18]

Or, perhaps, people are no longer searching for meaning in the sticker but are rather seeing meaning in its presence, proof that their particular urban area is linked up to a global inside story:

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[17] McKim, "Critics Of Facelift In Central Square Point To Traditions."
[18] Fairey, "Manifesto," http://www.obeygiant.com.

> When Fairey's posters appeared on downtown Kansas City buildings last month, my first reaction was neither favorable nor unfavorable. A companion and I saw the "Obey" poster when we were driving to the West Bottoms.
>
> "Wow," my friend said. "He made it down here, too."
>
> "Yeah," I replied.[19]

Andre the Giant is one among countless manifestations of "indie" or "underground" media in Central Square. Bands are behind the vast majority of postings; some are explicit as to their identities, but most require that the reader be in the know or do a Web search for the name (figure 6.32). Multiple searches reveal that Central Square is targeted by bands of all ilks: local, regional, national, independent, and big label.

Telling Time

Street media orient the subject and situate the city in conceptual and geographical space; they also situate them in time. Weather in the Boston area is capricious and frequently "unseasonal," but one needs only to walk down Massachusetts Avenue to know the time of year (figures 6.33-6.36). One can mark major news events simply by quickly scanning the windows of the newsracks (figure 6.37), bringing out to the street John Hartley's observations on the role of the news media in everyday life:

> Time and news are obviously bound up in each other… [F]or the public, part of the quotidian sense of time in everyday life comes from keeping up with the news. For its devotees, news confirms a sense both of time passing, as stories unfold and new ones emerge, and of the concrete experience of the "nowness" of each day and time of day, as one pays attention to a particular news program or title.[20]

Zooming out from these close-up analyses of the mediascape to a panoramic view, there is another significant communication observation to be made. As I have already mentioned, much of the street media in Central Square is unsophisticated from a materials point of view. Such low-tech materiality sends its own kind of message about Central Square. What exactly that

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[19] Kaufmann, "Fairey Tale."
[20] John Hartley, "The Frequencies of Public Writing," 247.

message is is debatable — traditional, backwards, tasteful, homey, boring — but we can better imagine other possible characterizations if we consider the media that Central Square does *not* have, or has little of. There are no televisions in the storefronts, no flashing lights, no LED screens with scrolling messages, and very few neon signs. Only one establishment, Cheapo Records, broadcasts music onto the sidewalk, and only once did I encounter any media besides printed pages offered to passersby — a bunch of CDs by a local band piled on a utility box. The few billboards in the Square are enlarged posters lit with floodlights from below, rather than with any ornate electrical arrangement. Only recently has one establishment, The Middle East Restaurant & Nightclub, advertised wireless, and that in plain black printer ink on 8 ½"x11" paper taped to its front windows (figure 6.38).

Getting Attention: No Place Like the Street

While an observer uses street media at varying levels of attention to orient himself or herself in this particular urban space and the space in the world, the primary purpose of much of this media is to promote, as is evident in so many of the examples already provided. Most often in Central Square, media promote products, services, and music. In addition, they tell us of moving sales, apartment rentals, self-help workshops, fundraisers, political candidates and protests, community events, and even "something" vague and unspecified (figure 6.39). As discussed in Chapter Two, Cambridge appears at first to have plenty of other media channels besides the street. And yet, if we try to imagine alternative or additional channels for many of the following examples, we find that the street has an immediacy and an accessibility to both media makers and receivers that no other medium can provide. If a cat is missing, a notebook lost, or even a friend or acquaintance misplaced, where or how else might someone try to find them (figure 6.40)?

In the case of one medical study that sought research subjects by postering in Central Square and other areas, the researcher responsible for the budget accidentally omitted a line item for patient recruitment in the study grant application. He said he was consequently obliged to think of creative, affordable ways to recruit large numbers of subjects for the two-year study. Doing a bit of research on his own — asking callers how they learned of the study, and counting the number of tabs ripped from the bottoms of flyers in some areas — he found that flyers far outpaced advertising in *The Boston Globe* for the number of calls received. He has advertised in the *Cambridge TAB*, but says its circulation is inadequate for reaching the large numbers of local people needed for his studies. One major challenge of street recruitment is figuring out how to take advantage of uneven enforcement while negotiating the responsibilities to the law carried by a federally funded project. Another, the researcher says, is that "it's more professional not to advertise in the street," due to the low-quality look of taped-up flyers. "But," he says, "this was a desperation measure."[21]

The problem of reaching a large local audience is also felt by Central Square's business community. At a recent meeting of city officials and business leaders, a small business owner said that he would like to have better ways to reach potential customers. Robin Franz, the new executive director of the decades-old Central Square Business Association, is constantly made aware of this void in local communication: "[Businesses] all want to know how to advertise… In terms of reaching the Cambridgewide audience, we don't do a very good job."[22] This void affects more than just business-to-customer communication. Franz says the CSBA is trying to get more involved in putting interested businesses in touch with owners of available commercial space in Central Square. Much of this communication is by word-of-mouth,

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[21] Interview with the organizer of a large-scale medical research study, April 17, 2005.
[22] Interview with Robin Franz, Central Square Business Association, May 3, 2005.

and, in the case of the recent closing of the local Burger King franchise, by a walk through the streetscape. Franz didn't know the franchise had closed until she walked by and saw the empty storefront with the phone number of the building owner posted in the window. "If it hadn't been a brand-new owner I might have known sooner, but I didn't know this person and he didn't know me."[23] In a city where only one-third of housing is owner-occupied, where nearly one-third of the population are students,[24] and where only 39 percent of residents in 2000 had lived in the same place in 1995, word-of-mouth, relationships, and networking, which take time and stability to develop, are inadequate to reach everyone who might be reached.[25]

Shouting Out, Getting Heard

For all of the messages placed by those trying to promote something, there are many whose motivations are unclear, beyond a desire to announce that they exist, or simply to make their marks on the surfaces of the street (figure 6.41). But many times, what might seem like a simple, self-contained mark on the mediascape is in fact referencing something larger, and what gets transmitted depends on the receiver's prior knowledge (figure 6.42). This insider/outsider divide is apparent throughout Central Square: Over the course of this study, serendipity, the knowledge of friends and colleagues, and my own familiarity with a range of media added communicative depth to messages I had initially taken at face value, or clarity to those I knew fronted something larger, but didn't know what.

A striking example of this occurred during an examination of a photo I had taken of a graffiti tag. A closer look revealed scrawl in the upper right corner

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[23] Interview with Robin Franz, Central Square Business Association, May 3, 2005.
[24] City of Cambridge, "Cambridge at a Glance," http://www.cambridgema.gov/cambglance.cfm.
[25] City of Cambridge, "SF3 Census Profile: 2000," http://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/data/demo/prof/sf3_2000.pdf.

of the photograph: "Rest Well Elliott." Well familiar with the indie rock slant of those who post band and concert information in Central Square, and a bit of an enthusiast myself, I realized that this was likely a reference to Elliott Smith. The brooding indie rock songwriter's death in the fall of 2003 at age 34 shocked and dismayed his fans, at least one of whom apparently chose to express his or her feelings on a local surface (figure 6.43).

Other times, I recognized media objects for which recognition was contingent on being an insider, like this incognito entrance to The Enormous Room, a hipster bar and lounge (figure 6.44). Friends had brought me to The Enormous Room during my early days in Central Square, thereby fast-tracking me in from my outsider status. But another swanky bar and lounge was revealed to me more slowly. I first noticed the sleek storefront with its minimalist sandwichboard (a somewhat uncharacteristic use for the chalk-and-blackboard crowd) (figure 6.45). Later, I began to notice a new sticker around the Square, of mostly icons rather than text (figure 6.46). A few weeks later, when I finally had drinks at Middlesex, I saw the same icons on a small postcard strewn in piles on tables throughout the bar. I couldn't help but feel just a little insider cool for having made the connection by myself.

Before urban populations were fully literate, icons were, in fact, the more explicit way to transmit messages — for example, a picture of a violin on a London shop sign indicated a maker of musical instruments, or a frog carved above a doorway in Prague served instead of a number as a descriptor for that particular locale.[26] Now many icon-only media objects seem to intentionally rarify their message so that it reaches past the swarm of public eyes and communicates only to the initiated. Figure 6.47 began as an urban art project and now has participants worldwide sending photos of their

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[26] Heal, *The Signboards of Old London Shops*, 138.

handiwork to a Web site.[27] Over time, some insider iconic messages do become accessible to a broader audience (figure 6.48).

Some messages on the streetscape invite further research to those who might not know the specific communication mode just yet. Yellow Arrow is a worldwide art project originating in Brooklyn that enables people to "tag" geographical locations with personal snippets (figure 6.49). The user places a sticker on the desired location, and then sends a text message, which includes the sticker's unique ID code, to a phone number provided for this purpose.[28] Sometime later, a passerby notices the bright yellow sticker, and if he or she understands the project (perhaps by visiting the Web address added in a recent redesign), text messages a query with the unique ID to the same phone number, and a server sends the initial message to the passerby's cellphone. As the Web site describes in language that implies a familiarity with theoretical discourse on everyday stories and histories, "Through this location-based exchange of text-messages, the Yellow Arrow becomes a symbol for the unique characteristics, personal histories, and hidden secrets that live within our everyday spaces."[29]

Art and Affect

One of Central Square's more ubiquitous — and unauthorized judging by its placement — images is of gray clouds. They appear in all shapes and sizes, mostly as stickers but occasionally, as shown earlier, as paint on municipal signs. Artist "darkcloud" claims he's treated Central Square to "a miniscule amount of coverage" compared to other spots in Boston and New York.[30] No

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[27] http://www.space-invaders.com.
[28] To view the precise locations of Yellow Arrow stickers in Cambridge, visit http://www.yellowarrow.net.
[29] http://global.yellowarrow.net/about.php.
[30] Email interview with "darkcloud," April 22, 2005.

one who sees these clouds could know their origin just from their street presence, but I tapped a few networks and located "darkcloud":

> The concept of the clouds came about almost 2 years back, and has grown with time. The original idea was nothing like it turned out to be. It kinda formed with the project. Basically, a friend of mine was always bitchy, like he had a cartoon rain cloud over his head all day. So I called his ass the cloud, or black cloud, or whatever variation of being "cloudy" I felt like calling him that day. Anyway, it was a joke, but I just kinda adapted it into an image. But it has quickly transformed itself into the concept of the angst, and the shit that everyone has in their lives that they just can't seem to escape. Like, we all have some cloudy shit hanging over our heads that we wish weren't there, but it just won't leave. The art is just a way to remind you, and beautify that situation.[31]

Despite being unaware of who makes them and how they came about, some people enjoy the clouds for the whimsy they add to a space most often lined with more functional media. "Darkcloud" says that sometimes he engages strangers in conversation about a particular cloud without letting on that he is responsible, and says he generally gets positive feedback. Franz, the CSBA director, is a fan, and says that she loves seeing them around Central Square. Anyone who seeks a larger meaning will be disappointed, though. "I'm not really trying to make any huge points, or political statements," "darkcloud" claims. "I'm just trying to make the streets a nicer place to walk around."[32]

Perhaps that same desire for whimsy and non-functionalist expression, in a society that Baudrillard says is driven by operational logic, is what drives the person who has spray-painted a few red hearts in Central Square and elsewhere (figure 6.50), or the person responsible for the images in Figure 6.51.[33] Such expressions return us to Lefebvre's absolute/abstract spatial dichotomy. To Henri Lefebvre, homogenization is the goal of the state, but it is never total: For most of history, absolute and abstract spaces have co-existed in society, the result of deliberate and unintentional efforts by individuals, corporations, governments, and other institutions to produce

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[31] Email interview with "darkcloud," April 22, 2005.
[32] Email interview with "darkcloud," April 22, 2005.
[33] Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 108 ff.

their own types of spaces. In the tension between the rational and the symbolic, the two complete each other:

> Even today urban space appears in two lights: on the one hand it is replete with places which are holy or damned, devoted to the male principle or the female, rich in fantasies or phantasmagorias; on the other hand it is rational, state-dominated and bureaucratic, its monumentality degraded and obscured by traffic of every kind, including the traffic of information.[34]

A textual expression like the one in Figure 6.52 also seems to challenge, albeit on a small scale, Fredric Jameson's concern about the "waning of affect" in postmodern society, especially if we consider this description of what for him constitutes affective depth:

> The very concept of expression presupposes indeed some separation within the subject, and along with that a whole metaphysics of the inside and the outside, of the wordless pain within the monad and the moment in which, often cathartically, that 'emotion' is then projected out and externalized, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward dramatization of inward feeling.[35]

Rather than saying, as Jameson does, that "depth is replaced by surface" in postmodern society,[36] we might say that even surfaces can be made to have depth, most often where such expressions have not been invited by those governing the surfaces.

Of course, not all of this self-expression is intended or read as positive and uplifting. Sometimes this is due to simple misreading: I ran into a friend who told me she had just seen a sign that read "Satan is Real". She was able to describe the exact location, as the message had stayed in her mind. I returned to the location, and this is what I found: Figure 6.53. Another prevalent example is graffiti, a mode of self-expression that gets read in numerous ways. As Graham Ashworth, head of the Tidy Britain Group, puts it in a way that aligns him with John Trant,

> Whether or not graffiti is art and whether or not it is therapeutic for the perpetrator may, for some, be a fascinating topic for debate. Let those who wish to exercise their

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[34] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* 231. Lefebvre's "today" is the 1970s.
[35] Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 61.
[36] Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 62.

> intellect on such matters do so. For people faced with graffiti day after day... an academic approach is irrelevant.
>
> Urban living has much to commend it and I recognize that a sterile environment will not satisfy the need within us for the vibrancy and character that modern towns and cities provide. Though graffiti does indicate a human presence I believe that, along with litter and fly-posting, it is endured rather than accepted, invariably creating an atmosphere of neglect and unease rather than 'life'. Where it is threatening, it can be a portent of worse to come.[37]

Countless writings debate what graffiti means to the people who make it and what it means to those who live among its marks, and outsiders who include graffiti in the first impressions they make of an urban area. Tim Cresswell tells of how many of those concerned by graffiti worry about its impact on residents' and outsiders' image of that area. In such a view, he writes,

> Graffiti is a crime because it subverts the authority of urban space and asserts the triumph (however fleeting) of the individual over the monuments of authority… Graffiti can be described as a "tactic" of the dispossessed — a mobile and temporary set of meanings that insert themselves into the interstices of the formal spatial structure (roads, doors, walls, subways, and so on) of the city.[38]

Conversely, Cresswell writes that graffiti in New York during the 1970s assumed the trappings of a legitimate art, appearing in galleries at the same time that it covered subway cars and other unauthorized areas. The communicative aspects of this particular type of street media became mixed and confused, depending on the context where it appeared.[39] The belief that graffiti can be assimilated and deflated by turning graffitists' energies toward artist endeavors continues to this day.[40]

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[37] Whitford, *Getting Rid of Graffiti*, x-xii.
[38] Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, 46-47.
[39] For a brief history and analysis of graffiti in New York City, see Cresswell, "Heretical Geography 1: The Crucial 'Where' of Graffiti," *In Place/Out of Place*, 31. Also, in his essay, "The City and Human Speech", 146, Yi-Fi Tuan brings his own generalized reading of graffiti: "Expressions disapproving of society abound visually in cities. Frustration and resentment build up in people who feel that they have no voice in society or that what they say is systematically ignored. Spray paint and graffiti cannot be ignored so readily. They are too conspicuous; their language is colorful and sometimes violent. Whatever the specific message of a graffito, the fact that it is written means that it is intended to contradict and cancel."
[40] For a roundup of recent state-sponsored techniques to combat graffiti, see Blume, "A Parisian Attempt To Tame The Tagueurs."

Central Square has its share of graffiti, although to Franz, the CSBA director and Trant, the city compliance officer, it does not outrank litter and poorly maintained newsracks as a "problem". Cambridge has taken steps to directly combat graffiti, in addition to the hotline mentioned earlier. To a graffitist looking for his or her next surface to tag, other street media sometimes communicate quite differently from what the non-graffitist might see. From such a perspective, the utility boxes painted by local artists are not simply a sign of a community that appreciates local art; they are also a message that there is one less surface available for spray-painted inscription. Confirming this message is the fact that few of the painted utility boxes ever get tagged by graffiti, which has in turn encouraged Trant to work with Lillian Hsu of the Cambridge Public Arts Council to have additional boxes decorated.

Habit, Serendipity, and Vibrancy

When we examine the streetscape from various vantage points, mostly the closeup, the density and variety of communication is astonishing, if I can judge from the reactions of the dozens of people to whom I have presented my work. What is even more striking is how these messages reinforce one another:

> [W]e accept the total system of publicity images as we accept an element of the climate. Usually it is *we* who pass the image — walking, travelling, turning a page… Yet despite this, one has the impression that publicity images are continually passing us, like express trains on their way to some distant terminus. We are static; they are dynamic — until the newspaper is thrown away, the television programme continues or the poster is posted over… It is true that in publicity one brand of manufacture, one firm, competes with another; but it is also true that every publicity image confirms and enhances every other.[41]

This is true not only of corporate publicity images, but of so many of the forms of communication I have described in the preceding pages. Think of the standard "No Parking" sign — do we actually read every word every time we see one? Perhaps, instead, we recognize it more quickly out of habit. In

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[41] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 130-131.

another example, my opinion of seeing my first instance of the tag, "esef", changed as I began to see versions in multiple places and sensed a greater ubiquity of presence than I had initially (figure 6.54). The first Kaiju Big Battel image I saw had no text, and I had no idea what to make of it. But, over the course of my meanderings through Central Square, other versions of the Kaiju presence revealed more details (figure 6.55).

The richness of Central Square's street media has endeared it to many residents and business owners. George Metzger, a former resident who works in Central Square and remains an active participant in Square affairs, likes the streetscape as it is: "Cities are all about diversity and density and open activity."[42] Franz says that while litter is a concern, she's more aware of enthusiasm by many in the local business community for Central Square's feeling of vibrancy and activity.

> I think a lot of the businesses like being part of the hub of transportation and media,… the sort of communication, people, and flow that goes through Central Square. I think business people do like being part of that and in the middle of that.[43]

Franz does acknowledge that some see clutter where others see communication, and she does not claim to have an answer for these conflicting views. In fact, the city sends out mixed messages as to its streetscape priorities: Several of the unauthorized media makers interviewed agreed that they have learned from experience that Cambridge is relatively lenient about enforcing its anti-posting laws. On the other hand, some of these media makers had received calls from Trant. In addition, the city recently teamed up with local business owners to organize a "Central Square Spruce Up", during which volunteers were given metal scrapers and could be seen removing stickers and bits of tape from light poles.[44] At a planning meeting for the event, a couple of city officials agreed that people are less

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[42] Interview with George Metzger, HMFH Architects, December 3, 2004.
[43] Interview with Robin Franz, Central Square Business Association, May 3, 2005.
[44] "Central Square Spruce Up," May 21, 2005.

likely to post on recently cleaned surfaces, and saw that as one more reason to step up efforts to make Central Square's surfaces free of unauthorized inscription.[45]

[45] Meeting, Central Square Business Association Environment Committee with City of Cambridge, March 9, 2005.

Chapter Seven

Authorized, Unauthorized, and the Space Between

In previous chapters, I have used the labels of "authorized" media and "unauthorized" media rather liberally. The more time I spent in Central Square, the clearer the defining characteristics of each became, as did, somewhat paradoxically, the gray area between them. As discussed earlier, authorized media include (among other things) storefronts, municipal signs, newsracks, sandwichboards, and any other object that is either placed by the city or whose maker has received permission from the city to place it in an agreed-upon location and has followed rules of content and construction. Unauthorized media are essentially the inverse: Media whose makers have not received permission by those managing the placement surface — public or private — to place their media there, and media that are designed or constructed in a manner not in accordance with city regulations, some of which have been listed in earlier chapters. Application of these distinctions, like so many others involving street media, is not static. A media object that begins as authorized, such as a newsrack whose owner applied for and received a permit, can become unauthorized when that newsrack falls into dirt and disrepair. Less frequently, a media object believed to be unauthorized can become authorized, for example, when the governing authorities change the rules to be more permissive. Between authorized and unauthorized is a vast gray area, where objects that are or have become technically unauthorized are tolerated by governing authorities. In the case of Central Square, this enforcement authority is not absolute, but is instead contingent on time, economic resources, the moods and attitudes of the responsible enforcers, and a web of social relationships among media makers and producers.

This loose typology is embedded in urban spaces around the world, and it profoundly shapes commonly held expectations about what gets first claims to the streetscape. Even though, as David Henkin writes, regulatory and directional municipal signage is a relatively recent phenomenon, it dominates in Central Square as in many other urban environments. In Washington, DC, for example, I remember improving my parking probabilities by training myself to reconcile in seconds the conflicting or redundant messages of the multiple parking regulations posted on each street pole. In addition, media made by commercial entities both small and large get priority. Ultimately, individuals operating autonomously or non-commercially are left with few if any acceptable or authorized locations to place their media.

This situation is embedded in the urban built environment of a society where private property is a cardinal value and the vast majority of property owners do not approve of uninvited postings on the walls of their buildings. It almost goes without saying that the few publicly owned buildings are government managed and also prohibit uninvited inscription. The situation is also embedded in the unexamined assumptions shared by governing authorities, commercial entities, and individuals alike, assumptions that I have discussed in previous chapters, that a clean, organized space where permission is required to make one's mark, is the ideal space. Cambridge city officials say that they receive complaints about stickers, posters, and graffiti from businesspeople and residents. Rumors are that some residents take down media objects they presume to be unauthorized, an impulse the city and local businesses encouraged by organizing the "Central Square Spruce Up" event.[1]

[1] "Central Square Spruce Up," May 21, 2005.

Rethinking Media Priorities

Raymond Williams describes what gets lost in a communications environment that privileges government and commercial speech over other kinds:

> Many people… have seen the growth of modern communications not as an expansion of men's powers to learn and to exchange ideas and experiences, but as a new method of government or a new opportunity for trade. All the new means of communication have been abused, for political control (as in propaganda) or for commercial profit (as in advertising).
>
> My own view is that we have been wrong in taking communication as secondary. Many people seem to assume as a matter of course that there is, first, reality, and then, second, communication about it. We degrade art and learning by supposing that they are always second-hand activities: that there is life, and then afterwards there are these accounts of it. Our commonest political error is the assumption that power — the capacity to govern other men — is the reality of the whole social process, and so the only context of politics. Our commonest economic error is the assumption that production and trade are our only practical activities, and that they require no other human justification or scrutiny. We need to say what many of us know in experience: that the life of man, and the business of society, cannot be confined to these ends; that the struggle to learn, to describe, to understand, to educate, is a central and necessary part of our humanity. This struggle is not begun, at second hand, after reality has occurred. It is, in itself, a major way in which reality is continually formed and changed. What we call society is not only a network of political and economic arrangements, but also a process of learning and communication.[2]

The view of society that Williams critiques is so deeply rooted in everyday life in the Western world that it took me quite some time to locate my own assumptions about the existing order of media and begin to challenge them.

Taking these challenges onto the street, small instances abound where one might imagine things to be different. For example, I have been struck by the contrast between parking meters — their solid materiality and ubiquitous urban presence — and the myriad paper notes — handcrafted and fixed only tenuously to the meters — announcing when a meter is broken (figure 7.1). Setting aside the question of whether such a note absolves of responsibility the person who chooses to park next to a broken meter, these notes appear with some regularity. Imagine a more balanced power relationship sited in

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[2] Williams, *Communications*, 18-19.

the meter itself, one in which each meter is built with, say, a metal flag that can be manually activated by an individual in the event of a meter malfunction. A parking meter, the embodiment of government assertion and individual defensiveness ("See the meter? I have six minutes left!") might be reconfigured to better balance the two-way communication that necessarily occurs.

Media vs. Litter

Another challenge to our assumptions about authorization and street media can be inserted into the heart of the debate over what is and is not litter. As mentioned earlier, litter is viewed by officials, businesspeople, and residents as a major problem for Central Square, especially as it contributes to a rundown reputation for the area that people have worked hard to change. Some items, like those in Figures 7.2 and 7.3 are clearly litter. But how might we classify Figures 7.4 and 7.5? Is it a matter of placement, the difference between a vertical surface (litter) and a horizontal surface (media) or something else? As discussed in earlier chapters, many people are quick to blame posters and stickers for Central Square's cluttered look. But authorized and unauthorized media can share the blame. Unauthorized media are unquestionably problematic in the pursuit of a clean streetscape, but we might consider distinguishing between new, relevant media and older, outdated media. I have earlier described how media objects have different temporal cycles; those cycles can contribute to a given object's classification as media or litter. For example, this sign, pointing to local music venue T.T. The Bear's is relevant "tonight", but not tomorrow (figure 7.6).

Turning our gaze to the authorized media in Central Square, there is much that could be called litter for lack of maintenance, outdatedness, or even perceived proactivity on the part of the city. Figure 7.7 demonstrates this last point, that when Department of Public Works crews hastily and

incompletely rip down posters while making their morning rounds (including this particular poster), it does not necessarily improve things. Newsracks, a significant authorized media presence, are cited by many local businesses as the greatest problem for a streetscape they want to look orderly and inviting.[3] If not regularly maintained, newsracks become dirty, marked with graffiti, and used as trash cans. Sandwichboards are another authorized media item that sometimes add to streetscape clutter. For example, the local branch of T-Mobile, a multinational telecommunications company, seems unaware of the highly competitive nature of the mobile phone industry and the emphasis placed on branding, choosing to attract customers with a shoddy sandwichboard (figure 7.8). Municipal signs that have long been outdated, such as Figure 7.9, a Cold War relic, and others that have faded with time (figure 7.10) remain in the streetscape long after unauthorized media have been removed. Figure 7.11 suggests another source of authorized transgressions of order.

The line between authorized and unauthorized media begins to appear somewhat arbitrary in light of these observations. Figures 7.12 and 7.13 make the delineation even less clear. And when we realize that all of the media in Figure 7.14 is authorized (excepting the storm cloud), we might solidify any lingering doubts that visual clutter comes from many sources. As an aside, we might also reconsider our sources of authorization. "Darkcloud" knows that his storm clouds are illegal, but he finds other kinds of authorization from the old ladies who comment approvingly, and from business community leaders like Robin Franz, who value his work as well.[4]

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[3] Interview with Robin Franz, Central Square Business Association, May 3, 2005.
[4] Interview with Robin Franz, Central Square Business Association, May 3, 2005, and email interview with "darkcloud," April 22, 2005.

Coping Tactics: The Ethics of Unauthorized Media Making

Certeau, elaborating on his paradigm of big media and small consumer/receiver, reserves no place for the consumer to talk back to the media, but simply to be creative in how he or she receives the media.

> In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called "consumption" and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of the circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it.[5]

Where, indeed, would Certeau's "average" consumer place his or her productions in a streetscape that has no room set aside for them? In Central Square, the makers might be "quasi-invisible" but their marks are more visible than in other urban areas. Operating in this gray area where their messages are technically unauthorized but de facto tolerated, what Michel Foucault calls "a space of tolerance, gained by force or obstinacy,"[6] media makers have established a set of coping tactics, different from Certeauian tactics in that they result in creative production, not just creative reception, but similar in that they are ways that less empowered communicators find work-arounds in a society structured to tune them out. From these coping tactics have evolved a set of ethics that guide media makers as they make and place their messages on the streetscape.

A major tenet of this tacit ethic involves not posting media on clean surfaces. Clearly, not everyone follows this, for clean surfaces would always remain clean if that were the case. But in Central Square, media tend to cluster together. City officials know that when they do a major cleanup of surfaces, it takes a few months for stickers, posters, and graffiti to proliferate again. The medical researcher says he asks the college and high school students he hires to avoid posting on clean surfaces, and to retrieve and discard any flyers

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[5] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* 31.
[6] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 82.

that have fallen or look worn. To him, this is both to maintain a professional image as well as to be a good citizen, the latter impulse having been enhanced by a phone call from the city asking him not to place his flyers in certain locations. In addition, some of the people the researcher hires to post have their own personal ethics and will only post on authorized surfaces such as community billboards in local parks, cafes, and grocery stores, while others are willing to post more widely.

Other media sources that rely on random individuals to distribute their works address on their Web sites the ethics of stickering and postering. Yellow Arrow is based on the placement of stickers on streetscape surfaces.

> **CHOOSE**
> Find a place that speaks to you, something you want to point out, a detail in your environment that counts. Mark that place with the Yellow Arrow™ sticker. Do not vandalize public or private property. It's simple: ask permission.[7]

Shepard Fairey's Andre the Giant work is unauthorized on two levels. According to CMG Worldwide, which manages the Andre R. Roussimoff Testamentary Trust, Fairey does not have a license to use Andre's likeness.[8] Compounding this is the fact that Fairey's work can be found, unauthorized, on urban surfaces worldwide. Fairey does address this issue, and plugs his art work into a debate over how "public" space gets apportioned.

> Please use common sense and consideration when applying stickers or other propaganda materials. Giant is designed to provoke thought about the mechanics of the system we live in...not to destroy it. Everyone has to live here. Plus there are extreme individuals who wish to label all street artist as vandals and push for harsher and harsher penalties and prosecution. These people are very organized and lobby for public support. To counteract their attempts to vilify street artist, the street artist community needs to befriend local arts councils, graphic arts organizations, and anyone and everyone with political power who could be sympathetic to artists who have no sanctioned public venue to express themselves. The cities build tennis courts, basketball courts, football fields, even skate parks at millions of dollars cost to the tax payer. Where are the public mural walls? It's all about control of the public space. If the opponents of street art are the only ones who speak out then they will be the only ones who are listened to. We need to fight fire with fire and express

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[7] http://global.yellowarrow.net/help.php
[8] Email response to Web site inquiry, May 11, 2005, http://www.andrethegiant.com.

> ourselves intelligently. If we don't come across as a bunch of vandals we may find that the silent majority is actually supportive of public artistic expression.
>
> - Shepard[9]

Communicating Where to Communicate

Returning for a moment to the "space of tolerance," there is a particular location in Central Square that highlights the tacit communication that happens between governing authorities and unauthorized media makers. The medical researcher says he has slowly, over time, built a list of places throughout Cambridge where he can post flyers without getting calls from the city, thereby extrapolating from the absence of phone calls that particular locations are tolerated. One such place I have taken to referring to as the "gray wall," a plywood construction lining several yards of the Massachusetts Avenue sidewalk. The wall blocks access to the construction site of a new performance theater. It has been there for a few years, and has become incorporated into the posting routines of many media distributors in Central Square. George Metzger calls it "a missing tooth" in the Square's streetscape; John Trant has decided to permit the posting of bills on the wall until construction is completed and it is removed.[10] Trant has not publicly informed anyone that this is an authorized space, but in order to further people's ability to communicate regularly on the gray wall, he occasionally removes the posters to make room for new ones. In Figure 7.15, images taken on two consecutive days show the visual impact of such actions.

Local Ties

In this chapter, I hope to have complicated the commonly shared typology of authorized and unauthorized street media. To conclude, I would like to share

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[9] "Engineering: Warning," *Obey*, http://www.obeygiant.com.
[10] Interviews with George Metzger, HMFH Architects, December 3, 2004, and John Trant, April 7, 2005.

an interesting situation that further complicates — or arguably mitigates — these distinctions. Figure 7.16, a local hair salon, places its sandwichboard several hundred yards away from its storefront, in direct violation of local placement laws that require sandwichboards to be placed close to the storefronts they tout. A city official, who asked not to be named, said that the current placement is tolerated by the city now. The owner of the building that leases space to Vision Hair Braiding, a community pillar with deep personal and commercial roots in Central Square, refused to allow Vision to place its sandwichboard in front of his building. After some back-and-forth between the city, the salon, and the owner, city officials chose to recognize the salon's need for promotion while honoring the wishes of its well-respected landlord. The result: An authorized breaking of the rules, and a sandwichboard placed far from its required location. An interesting confluence of city authority, personal whims, commercial needs, and social relationships — and the implementation of a not-so-rationalist logic in a contemporary urban space.

Conclusion

This study arose from many personal, academic, and professional motivations. Fundamentally, it is the product of my desire to better understand how people use street media to inhabit — in the most profound sense of the word — a built urban environment. Just as important has been the desire to explore how we can use the media objects themselves to learn about that habitation. In the process of noticing and analyzing ambient street media, of course, I became intrigued by street media's astonishing power to influence the realities and perceptions of the specific areas where they appear.

The question of how people inhabit their built environments links to the issue of placemaking, a buzzword commonly wielded by urban planners[1] but resonant among anyone who seeks orientation and meaning in whatever location he or she is in. I have preferred to focus my inquiry on surface rather than on space (see Introduction) for several reasons, particularly in order to make the point — counterintuitive to some theorists of postmodernity — that surfaces, too, can have depth. But when we talk about habitation and place, we must talk about space, as it is a frequent discursive companion to place.

Space and Place

Which is more inhabited, a space or a place? The answer varies. To Henri Lefebvre, social space, absolute and abstract, is what is produced by society's

[1] Robert Beauregard takes a cynical, but not untrue, view of "placemaking" in urban planning: "[I]n order to attract capital investment, civic boosters and economic development officials attempt to commodify the 'particularities of place' through public spectacles and festival marketplaces." "Between Modernity and Postmodernity," 506.

occupation of a geographical place.[2] Michel de Certeau agrees: "*[S]pace is a practiced place*."

> Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs.[3]

Certeau writes extensively of the role of "everyday stories" in animating a place into a space while delineating the physical and conceptual boundaries of the place in question. As I have shown in this study, even apparently benign or fragmented bits of text and imagery can tell larger stories. Thus, in my view, all forms of media — street and mass included — are also elemental to the production of space and the practice of place (figures 8.1 and 8.2).

I warned in early chapters against overdependence on spatial analysis for the totalizing tendencies that mask the real texture of everyday life lived by ordinary and not-so-ordinary people. Yet, the opposition of space and place as presented by Lefebvre and Certeau helps to illuminate some of the differences between a planned urban space and an inhabited one. This thread is picked up by urban theorists, who generally leave behind critical theory's conceptions of space in order to focus on place and what makes a place good. Here, place actually connotes what critical theorists call space: an assemblage of built and human elements the animation of which emits varying degrees of orientation and meaning. For example, a place might be overwhelming, alienating, and forgettable or it might be grounding, even comforting and congenial. Writing about urban design, Kevin Lynch expresses his belief in the importance of place, and clearly views the term itself as connoting something positive and desirable:

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[2] See Lefebvre, "From Absolute Space to Abstract Space," in *The Production of Space*, 229-291.

[3] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 117. For another perspective on space and place, see Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience.*

> [C]larity of structure and vividness of identity are first steps to the development of strong symbols. By appearing as a remarkable and well-knit *place*, the city could provide a ground for the clustering and organization of these meanings and associations. Such a sense of place in itself enhances every human activity that occurs there, and encourages the deposit of a memory trace.[4]

Space for Stories

But Lynch emphasizes that planners can only do so much — city design must be open-ended to allow urban dwellers to create their own modes of habitation. Here, as with Certeau, stories are an important element:

> An environment which is ordered in precise and final detail may inhibit new patterns of activity. A landscape whose every rock tells a story may make difficult the creation of fresh stories… [W]hat we seek is not a final but an open-ended order, capable of continuous further development.[5]

Jane Jacobs also emphasizes the importance of open-endedness when she cautions planners not to approach the city as a work of art, or in other words as a closed, complete system.[6] Urban life, as I have shown through its street media, is far messier and richer than any one work of art could ever be. Of this study's many analytical revelations has been the exhibited need for flexible surfaces on the streetscape, surfaces open to inscription by anyone who has something to express. When the exhibited desire for order is also taken into consideration, then perhaps these flexible surfaces can be managed in some way so as to clear media made obsolete or irrelevant by time or circumstance in order to make way for fresher replacements.

Of course, we must be careful not to eradicate history in the process of managing street media. As Certeau writes, "Stories about places are makeshift things."

> Disposed in constellations that hierarchize and semantically order the surface of the city, operating chronological arrangements and historical justifications, these

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[4] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 119.
[5] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 6.
[6] Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 373.

> words… slowly lose, like worn coins, the value engraved on them, but their ability to signify outlives its first definition.[7]

A recent article in *The Boston Globe* illustrates the risks of forgetting:

> When wrecking crews began bulldozing Camille Floccher's West End neighborhood a half-century ago, workmen came to take down a signpost dedicating her street corner to an army sergeant killed in World War I. Spying them from her doorway, Floccher flew into a fury.
>
> "She raised holy hell, if you'll pardon my English," recalled her nephew, Francis C. Ventre, now of Deerfield Beach, Fla. "She said, 'Leave that sign alone; that's my brother!'"[8]

Thus, the capriciousness of collective memory adds yet another dimension to decisions about what belongs in the streetscape, and for how long.

The Place-ness of Central Square

What kind of a place is Central Square? Many answers come through in the pages of this study. As a "traditional city" type of urban area, Central Square has a fair measure of open-endedness in its form, as it is not the result of one master plan implemented in a short period of time. More germane to the question of placemaking, Central Square's open-endedness also appears in the current tolerance for diversity in its authorized and unauthorized media. As I have shown, this tolerance is provisional, dependent on enforcement constraints and the attitudes of community members, but it is real: Local government, small and large businesses, and residents are to a great extent free to use various forms of street media to inhabit and occupy, to communicate — not just exist — in this place. As several of those interviewed indicated, Central Square's vibrant media ecology does contribute to a feeling that this urban area is indeed occupied by a diverse group of people, that it is a place important to many of those people, that it is a place worth being in. Understanding and appreciating this can hopefully encourage those involved in shaping urban spaces to be more inclusive in their visions of who gets to make their marks on the surfaces of these spaces.

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[7] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 104.
[8] Lisa Wangsness, "Memorial Wish."

Making a Place "Public"

These visions are both abstract and practical. As I wrote earlier, the city and the street are so often treated as synecdoche's for the larger society. If we dream of an urban public the ideals of which support democracy and civic engagement, then we need to understand how those ideals can be supported — or suppressed — by practical manifestations in the city street. David Henkin makes this connection explicit when he contrasts the political, "placeless" "public" of Jürgen Habermas, Michael Warner, and Benedict Anderson with that of "public of the great outdoors," rooted specifically, in his case, in the streets of Manhattan. Among other factors contributing to this sense of a real public in a real urban setting,

> To read a street sign, a parade banner, or a sandwich-board advertisement… was… to be aware of the other readers whom the text impersonally addressed, but also… to be aware that one's act of reading was itself a public spectacle.[9]

This is not a call for a return to the chaotic streetscapes of 19th-century Manhattan, for as I have also shown, too much street media, placed at random and/or left to decay, creates visual clutter than can undermine people's pride of place. As Lynch and Donald Appleyard write,

> We believe that the fundamental reason for public interference in the process of communication via the cityscape should be to increase the clarity, congruence, and visible meaning of the environment, as a powerful means of bringing the citizen into contact with reality, and of increasing his interchange with it. From such interchange many desirable things might flow: a better understanding of the world; greater individual maturity and a better sense of self identity; more effective community and individual action; a greater sense of being at ease or "at home"; more interest and delight in the urban scene.[10]

Thus, another of this study's many goals has been to reveal the depth of street media's content, while acknowledging the real needs of cities to manage their finite surfaces in a way that upholds some reasonable desire for

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[9] Henkin, *City Reading*, 10-11.
[10] Lynch and Appleyard, *Signs in the City*, 75-76.

order. In my pursuit of content analysis, I have also suggested how theorists' and activists' despair over the dominance of governmental and commercial communication over that of individuals and small groups might be assuaged by recalibrating the apportioning of these finite surfaces. When given the chance, many people and businesses in Central Square are eager to communicate, and they often communicate creatively.

New Street Media Technologies

As a sort of coda, I would like to acknowledge some of the myriad, mostly nascent ways in which new technologies are being tapped for their possibilities in enabling more creative, everyday communication. Often, these fall under the umbrella term of "location-based" media. I have mentioned Yellow Arrow and its use of basic cell phone technology and stickers to allow users to geo-locate their stories. [murmur] in Canada also gives people access to local stories via their cell phones.[11] Others are turning more advanced technologies — smart phones (Internet-enabled cell phones), Global Positioning Systems, and handheld devices (like Palm Pilots) — into urban annotation tools. Urban Tapestries is one such project.[12] Users of mobile technologies can seed an urban space with their own stories, stories that might be accessed by other users.[13] As with Yellow Arrow, the stories are grounded in specific locations. Unlike Yellow Arrow, they are completely unseen without the aid of a technological device; without presuming to know the motivations of the creators, the project does sacrifice immediate and wide accessibility to the avoidance of material clutter. The creators of Urban Tapestries are aware of the potential for such a network and the set of practices it might encourage:

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[11] http://murmurtoronto.ca.
[12] http://urbantapestries.net.
[13] For some Urban Tapestries user scenarios, visit http://urbantapestries.net/early_scenarios.html.

> The Urban Tapestries software platform allows people to author their own virtual annotations of the city, enabling a community's collective memory to grow organically, allowing ordinary citizens to embed social knowledge in the new wireless landscape of the city. People can add new locations, location content and the 'threads' which link individual locations to local contexts, which are accessed via handheld devices such as PDAs and mobile phones.
>
> Urban Tapestries seeks to understand why people would use emerging pervasive technologies, what they could do with them and how we can make this possible. It seeks to enable people as their own authors and agents, not merely as consumers of content provided to them by telecoms and media corporations. The project centres on a fundamental human desire to 'map' and 'mark' territory as part of belonging and of feeling a sense of ownership of our environment.[14]

These are just a few of the many such projects taking form. Perhaps, at some hypothetical later date when advanced mobile technologies become as ubiquitous as paper and pen, these will provide the kind of flexible (virtual) spaces for inscription that I have called for in the physical urban environment. But for now, like so many of the processes for posting authorized street media, these too lack the key qualities of immediacy and accessibility that drive many, particularly but not exclusively individuals and local businesses, to the street.

What Has Been Done, and What Next?

It has been quite challenging to set boundaries to this topic and to honor them in order to achieve a final result. But final is truly the wrong word for this project. Like the graduation it enables me to enjoy, this too is a commencement. So many questions remain to be answered, or at least explored more thoroughly. With a thorough description of Central Square's media objects and their producers as complete as it might ever be for a given period of time, a natural next question is how is this ecology received? Media reception studies is a domain worthy of its own thesis, especially should analytical tools be applied to the myriad users of Central Square, or any urban space for that matter. Reception studies have been applied abundantly to mass media, in the process influencing the production of the

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[14] http://urbantapestries.net.

media forms themselves. It might now be time to do the same with everyday ambient street media. By working this media genre with established modes of theoretical analysis, we can further my goal of raising its academic visibility and, perhaps, the level of sophistication in the production of the media objects and in the arrangements made for the distribution of various types of such objects in the streetscape. I hope to have achieved a similar effect by raising awareness of street media's importance in the study of the everyday. And, more practically, in the urban plans conceived of by the wide variety of actors in the planning and design process.

Much of this study involved the application of a hybrid methodology, one that blended photographical research, empirical research, and impressionistic analysis. Such a methodology, as described and practiced in the preceding pages, lends itself to a variety of other applications. Most pertinent to my core interests would be the studies of other urban areas to see what their street media, or lack thereof, reveals about them. Central Square's abundance of unauthorized street media should not be a precondition for such a study; rather approaching any urban area with an understanding of how authorized and unauthorized media are met with differing levels of acceptance can illuminate the underlying assumptions governing the management of that space while also revealing certain qualities about the community of people and businesses that inhabit it.

Last in this incomplete list of areas for further study is the notion of referentiality. In a world of interconnected media, street media most certainly do not exist in a vacuum. I have shown only partially how so many of them reference other, non-street media (e.g., Web site addresses in storefront displays), across media (e.g., national brands appearing in local stickering campaigns), and across scales of space and time (e.g., local and national bands sharing the same postering tactics). We might further

consider these intricate webs of referentiality not only to better understand how they operate, but even to make more room in the streetscape by clearing some of it through a more effective transmedia synergy: If a Web site address or a radio show's date and time say it all, then less needs to be said on the street.

In parting, I hope that this study has encouraged not only areas for further research, but areas to apply new ways of thinking about the media we often take for granted. These new ways of thinking involve production qualities, content, and placement of the media objects. But more fundamentally, I hope to have encouraged a deeper examination of our assumptions regarding the existing (im)balance between government, commercial, and individual interests in the city streetscape. As we understand how current street mediascapes have evolved, and what the communication needs for a given urban area might actually be, we come closer to envisioning philosophically and practically our urban spaces (and surfaces) as information conduits, media themselves, and essential to the making of a place.

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Interviews and Email Correspondence

Some interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

Interview with Rosalie Anders, Project Manager, City of Cambridge Community Development Department, November 30, 2004.

Interview with Steve Carr, urban planner, November, 2004.

Email interview with "darkcloud," April 22, 2005.

Interview with Robin Franz, Executive Director, Central Square Business Association, May 3, 2005.

Interview with Kevin Hoskins, booking agent, Middle East Restaurant & Nightclub, May, 2005.

Interview with Lillian Hsu, Cambridge Public Art Council, May 18, 2005.

Email interview with Rachel Jellinek, MIT Community Relations, April 20, 2005.

Interview with Andrea McCarty, PXL This organizer, April 2005.

Interview with Megan Mahoney, Homeless Empowerment Project, May 4, 2005.

Interview with Ed Marchant, painter, November 1, 2004.

Interview with George Metzger, HMFH Architects, December 3, 2004.

Email and phone correspondences with Elaine Thorne, Project Manager, City of Cambridge Community Development Department.

Interview with John Trant, Compliance Officer, City of Cambridge Public Works Department, April 7, 2005.

Email interview with Robert Winters, *Cambridge Civic Journal*, May 9, 2005. http://www.rwinters.com.

Interview with the organizer of a large-scale medical research study, April 17, 2005.

Interview with the person responsible for wheatpasting "Moving Sale" signs in Central Square, April 20, 2005.

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Street Media:
Ambient Messages in an Urban Space

by

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B.A. in International Relations
Brown University, Providence, RI, 1996

Submitted to the Comparative Media Studies Program
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science in Comparative Media Studies

at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

June 2005

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Thesis Advisor

Accepted by: _____
Henry Jenkins
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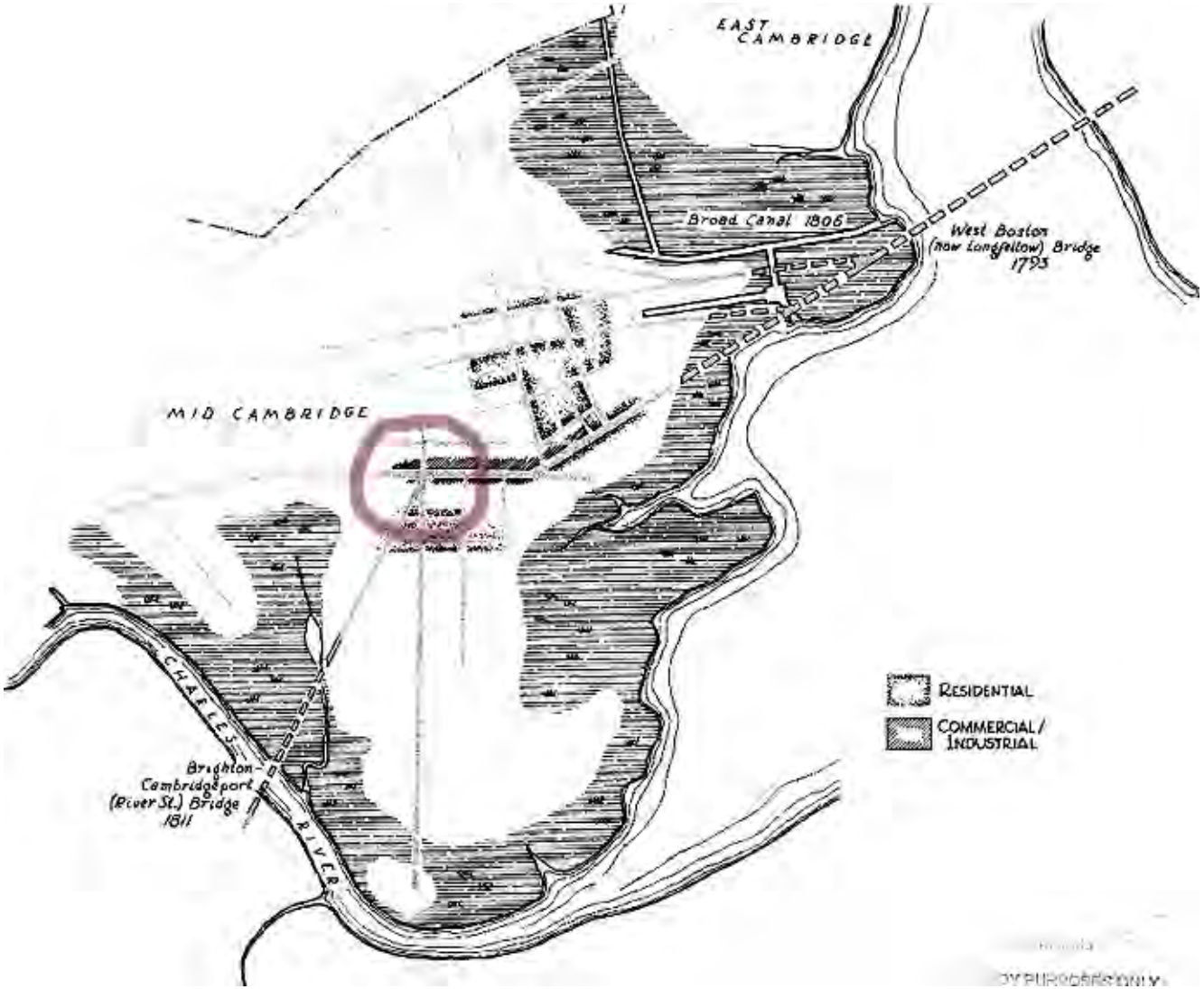
Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2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Broad Canal 1806
West Boston (now Longfellow) Bridge 1793
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CHARLES
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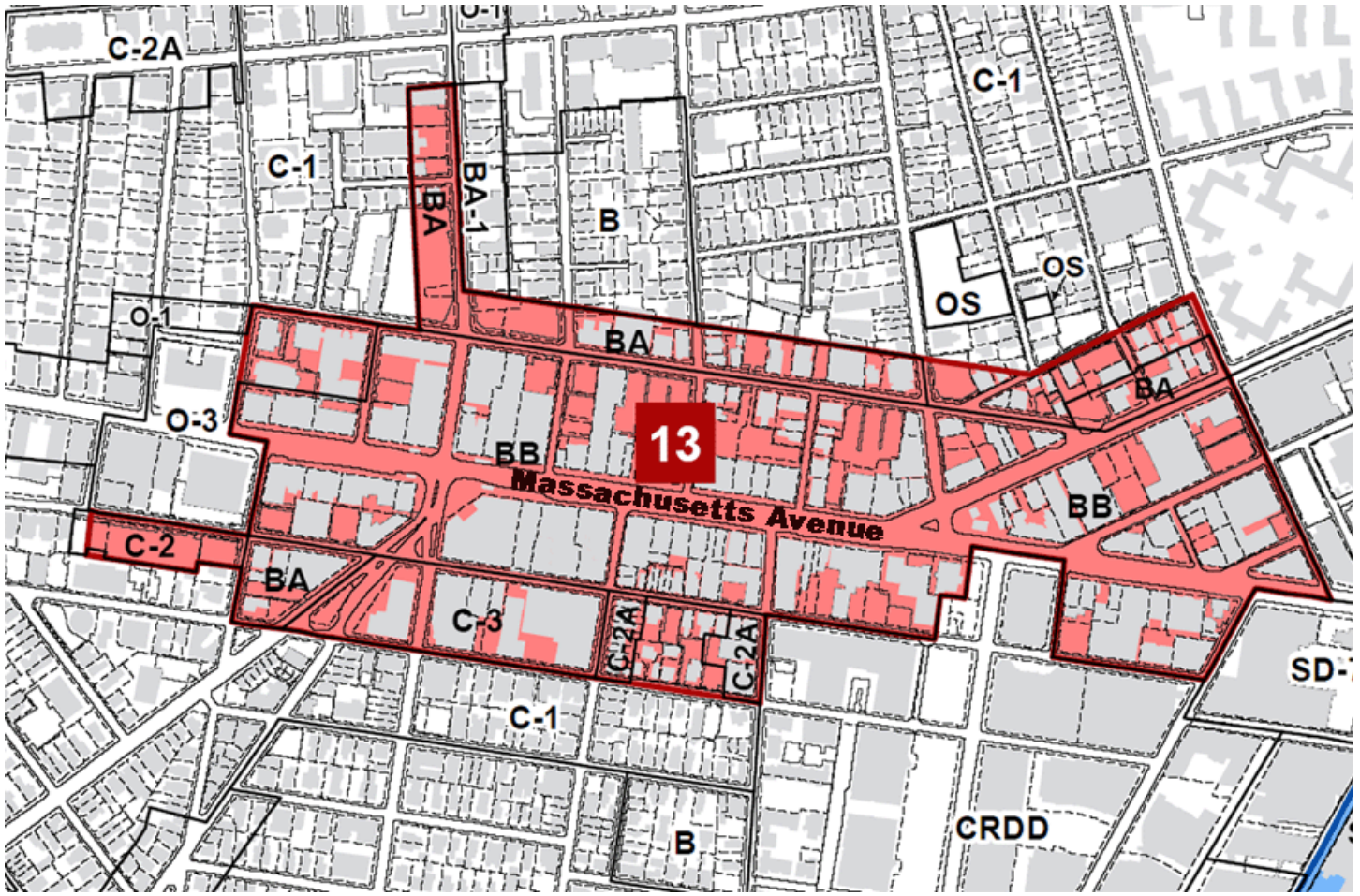
RIVER
RESIDENTIAL
COMMERCIAL / INDUSTRIAL

Figure 2.3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C-2A
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SD-
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CRDD
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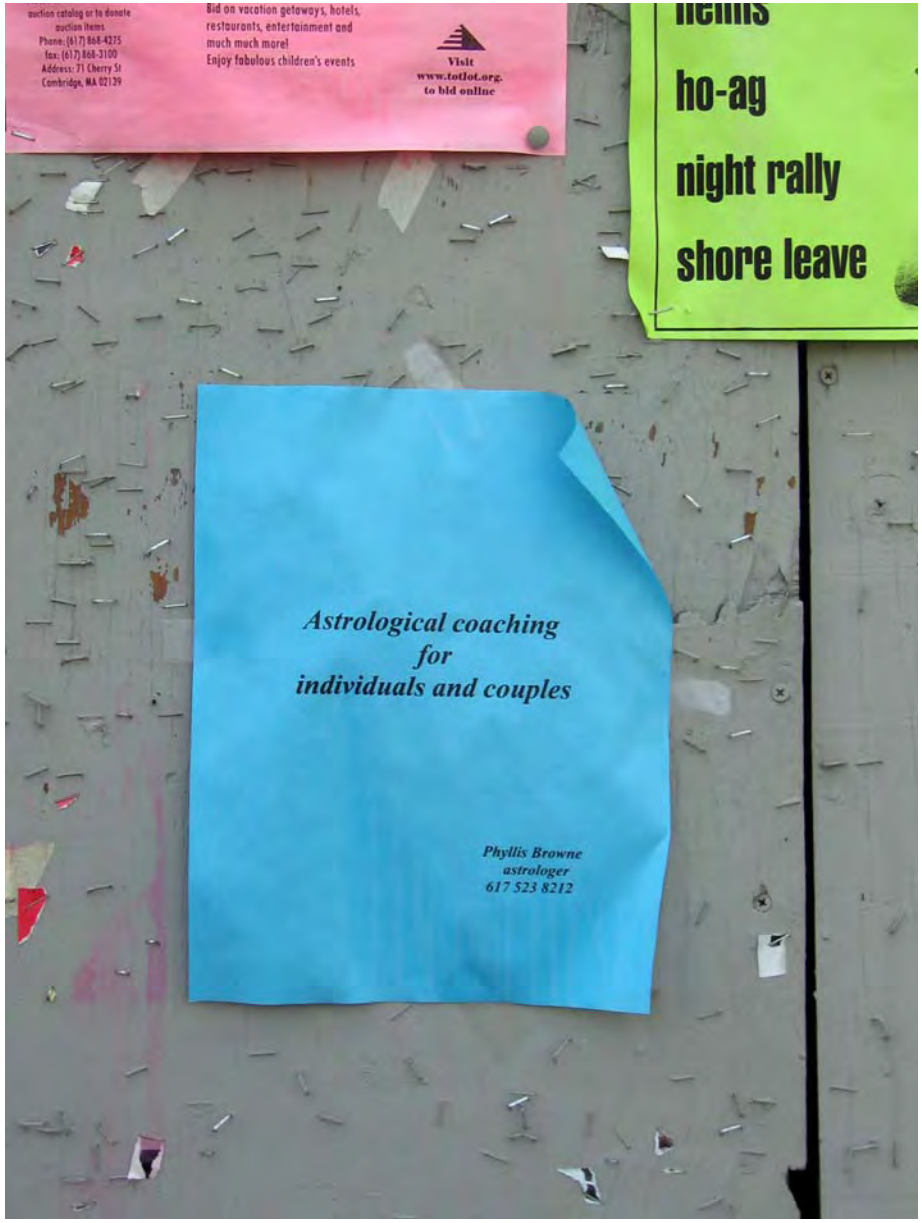

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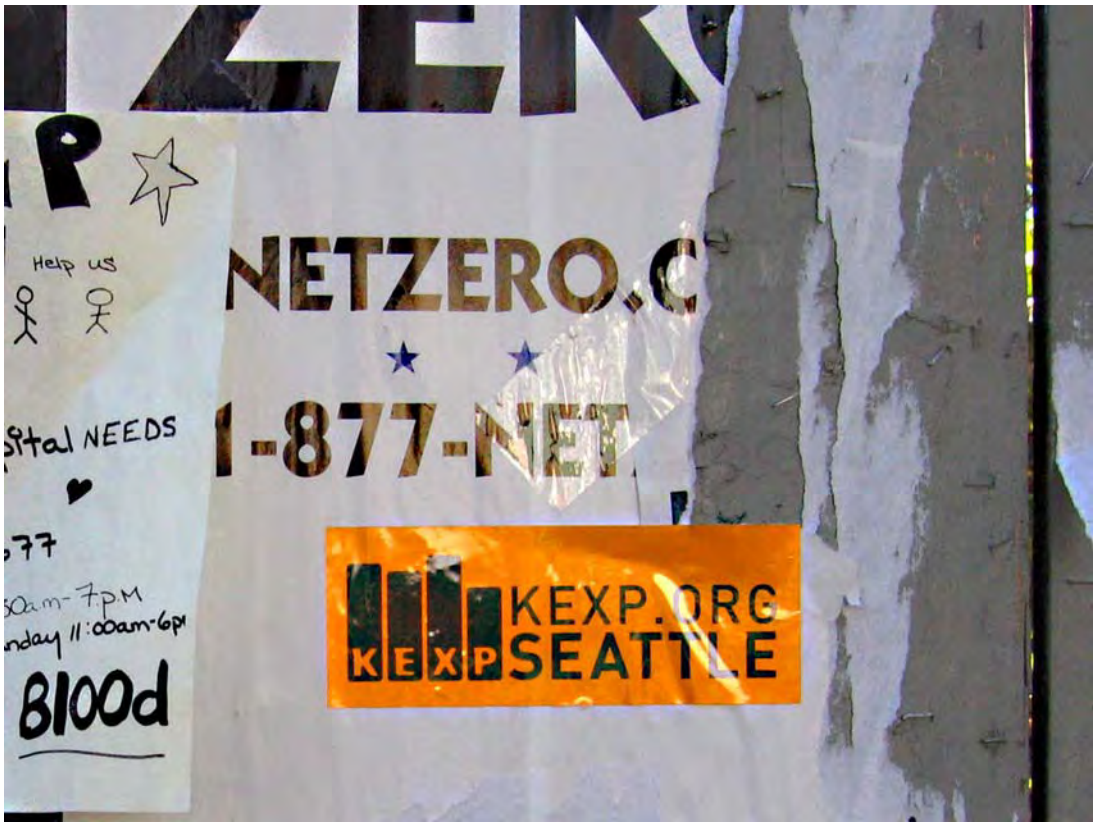

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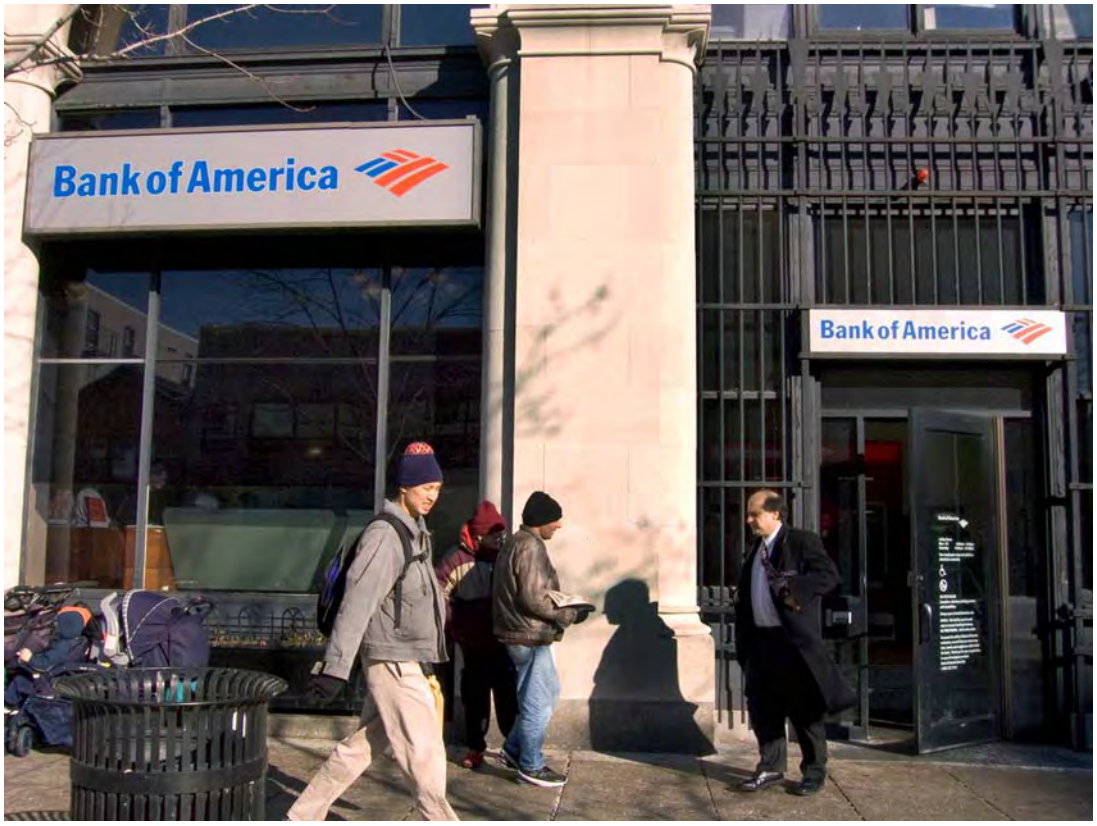

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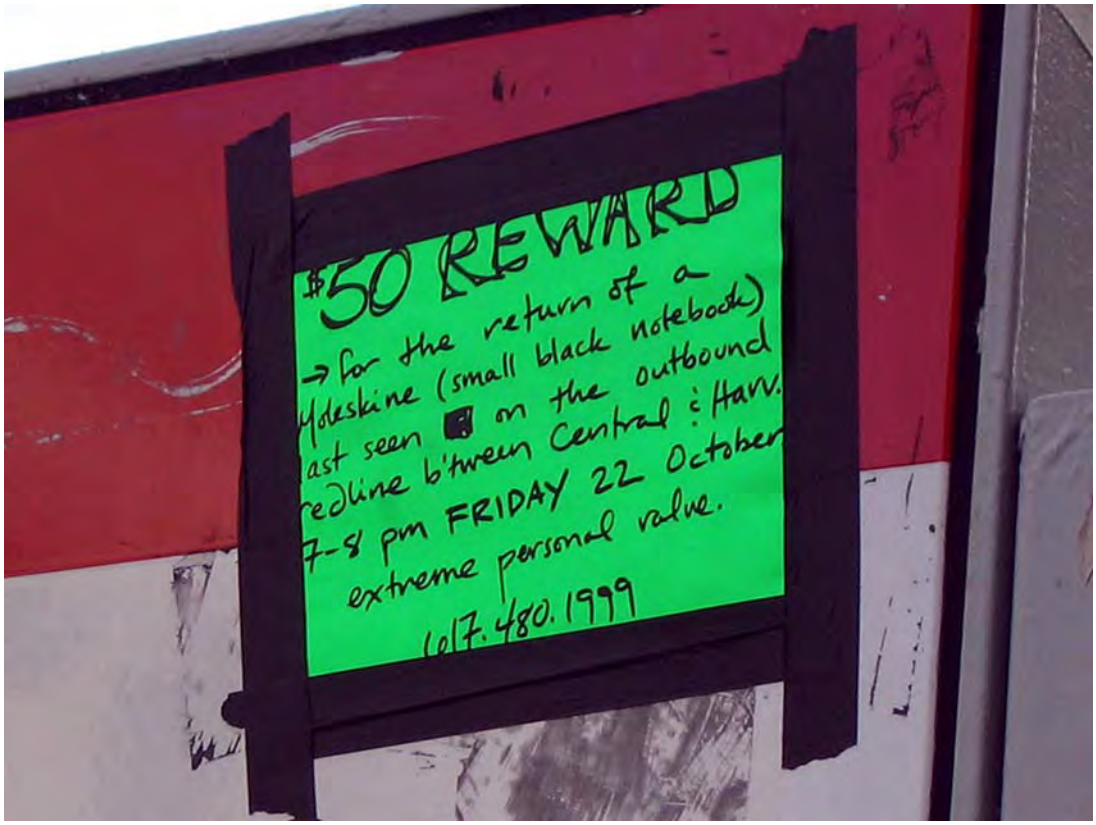

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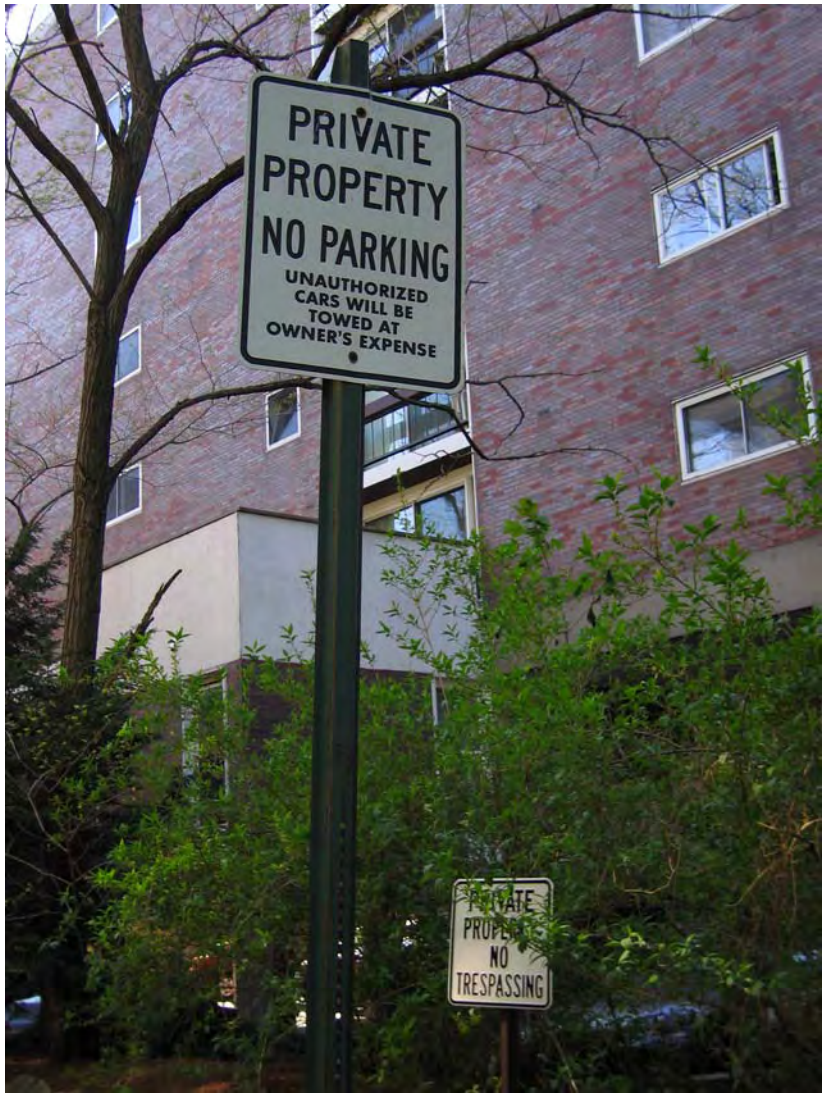

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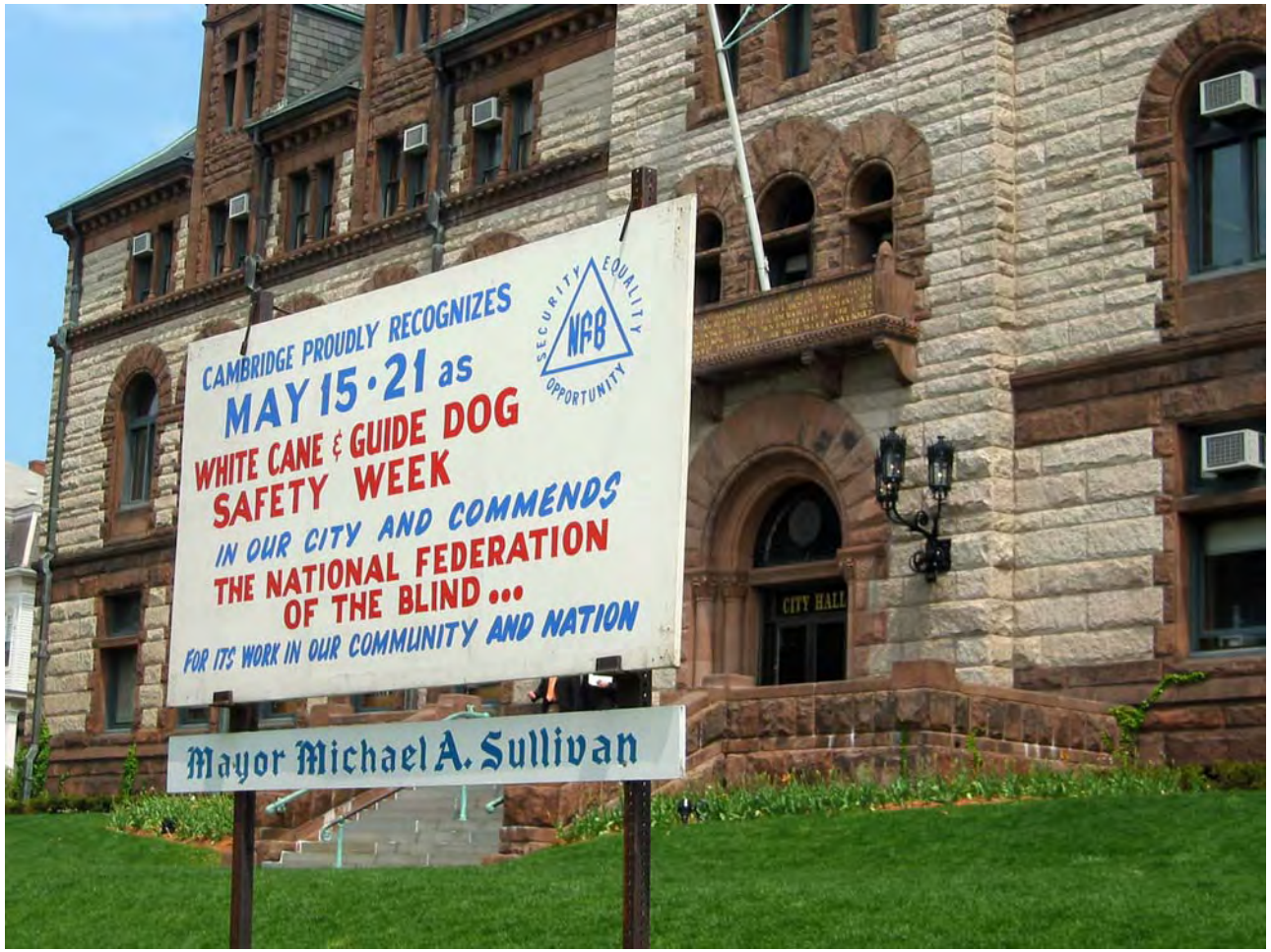

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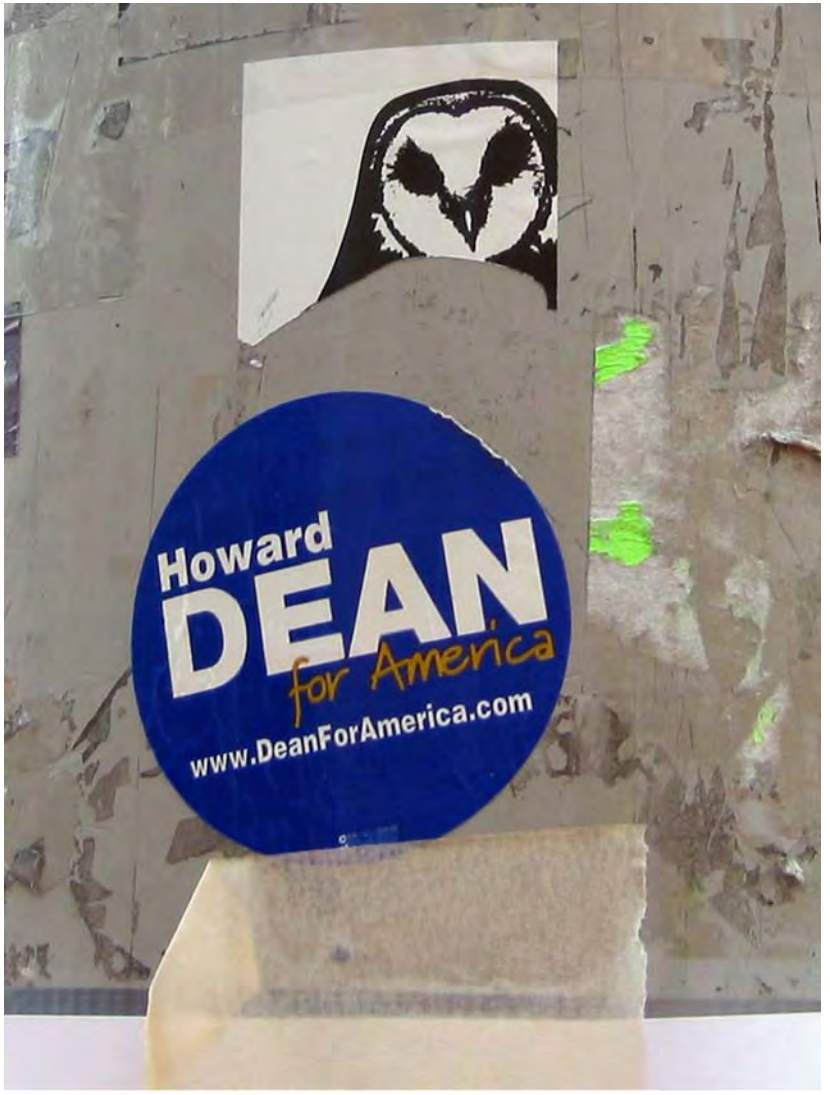

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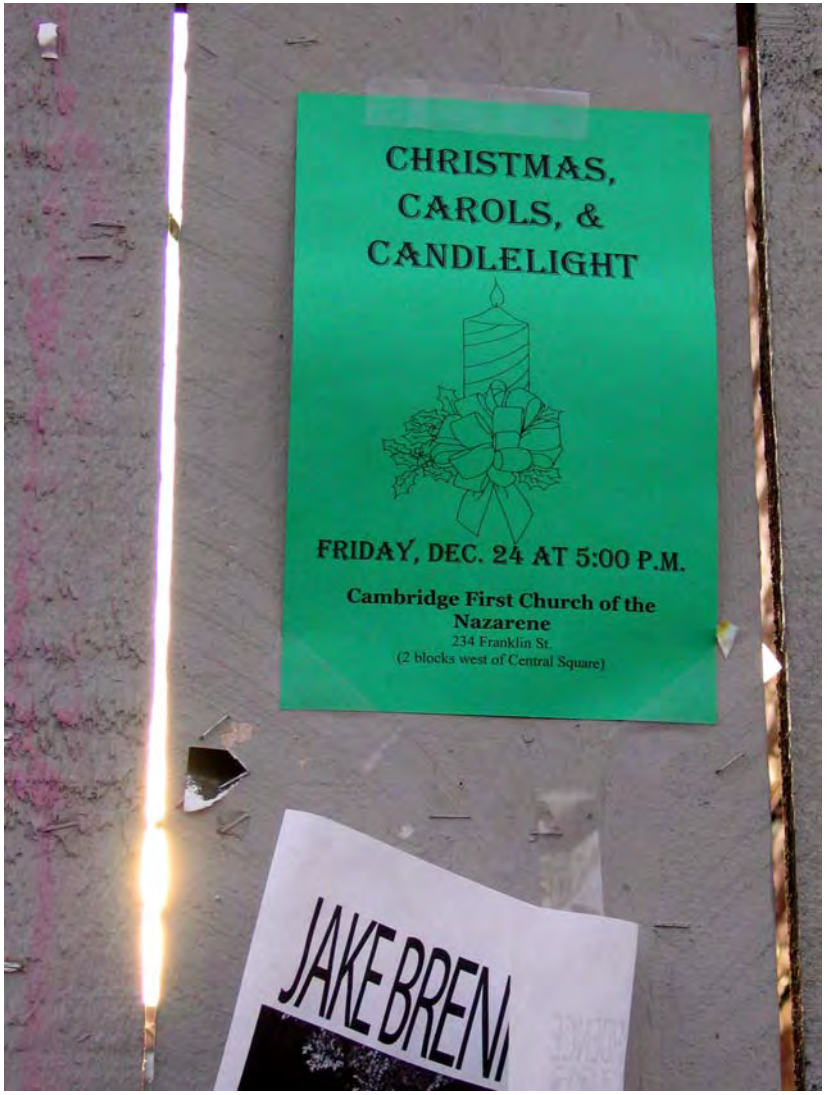

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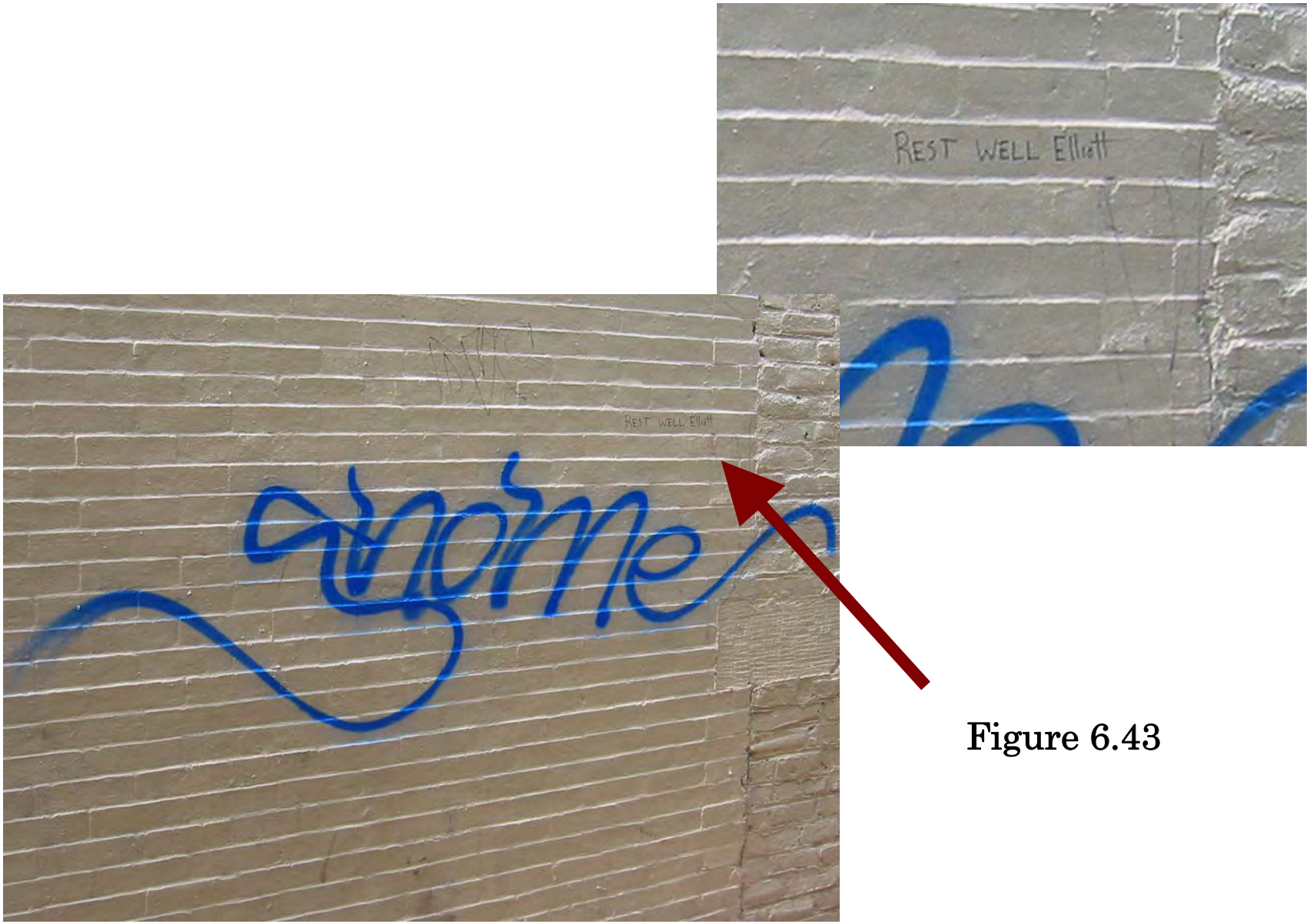

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