

Calder Anderson

5/2/2023

Seminar: Visual Culture

Lauren Krauze

Proxemics Of New York City

Abstract

As I walk through the city, my body and mind are collecting data from everywhere I look. I notice people walking, talking, yelling, crying, sleeping, laughing, selling, and minding their business. I notice the weather. Is the sun out? Is it rainy? I notice the buildings around me and the styles that create their identity in the city's landscape. I notice design choices everywhere. A laundromats logo design or a diner's logo could become a source of inspiration for me. Everything in this city is art, and everything is designed. Every detail of our everyday experience as New Yorkers is thought out to a t and constructed for an interaction with each space, object, and person we interact with.

Introduction

The design choices in urban spaces like New York City strike something inside our unconscious mind and cause an interaction between our human brains and our direct environment. As humans (and New Yorkers), we spend our days in various spaces; parks, schools, work, etc.- constantly accessing the data around us, interacting with and interpreting everything we see. Some spaces cause us to act differently and reflect on ourselves, our behavior, ideas, and interactions. This phenomenon is called Proxemics. ScienceDirect describes

Proxemics as “An intrinsic feature of social contact rituals that involve the maintenance of specific zones that people perceive as meaningful.”¹ However, I believe that proxemics isn't restricted to the interaction between people but also the interaction between people and the things that make up the spaces around them. The unique proxemics of New York City, shaped by its architecture, design styles, density, and diverse population, allows for a unique experience of urban space that cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world.

Meaning

I have difficulty not searching for meaning in the things around me. I try to understand the essence of everything I see and interact with. But maybe I just overanalyze everything. Whatever the case, once one begins to think in this framework, everything and anything can be art. Meaning can be assigned to everything you see and interact with within an urban environment.

An article from Medium.com discusses why humans assign meaning to the world around them;

“The ability to separate the things that happen to us from the meaning we assign to them is essential if we want to become capable of shaping our own reality. The meaning we assign to everything turns into a filter through which we view the world. This filter impacts our beliefs, actions, behaviors, and habits.”²

I find it interesting that while the design of the world around us causes us to act a certain way or behave differently, yet we are able to shape our own reality around these spaces. Proxemics also have a spiritual aspect that doesn't often get pointed out. Finding meaning in the world around us is what makes humans human.

¹ ScienceDirect, “Proxemics - An Overview”

² Rao, The Meaning We Assign Becomes The Lens Through Which We See The World

Everything is designed in an urban space, and the spaces design your behavior and are then interpreted by the individual. A street could be designed with a specific type of walking in my mind. It could be meant for one direction, or it could only be meant for bikes. No matter the case, the space and its intrinsic design cause a response within our conscious and subconscious minds to either comply with the “rules” each design assigns or break them. There's the saying, “Rules are meant to be broken.” Proxemic rules are broken in New York City every day. While spaces are designed for a specific purpose or type of behavior, they are often re-purposed by those who choose to do so, a direct response and rejection of the proxemic values aligned with any space used in this way.

For example, I was walking through Washington Square Park the other day and heard extremely loud music I would expect to hear in a club coming from somewhere in the park. As I kept walking, I noticed a large group of people dancing and a DJ playing music from giant speakers. The celebration was for a Jewish holiday, and the flag of Israel was everywhere. This behavior could be considered a rejection of the behavior expected in a park. When I think of parks, I think of a meeting place, a place for interaction and relaxation, not a “rave.” This is just one example of how places can inform a certain type of behavior; it's also an example of how people can challenge their expected behavior in spaces in New York City. I think it's this rejection and re-purposing of the environment that often happens in New York City, that makes me love and appreciate this city so much. The meaning of places in this city is dynamic and changed by the people who choose to inhabit said spaces.

In “Tendrils of Lost Time and the Self an Aesthetic Anthropology of New York City's "Post"-Avant-Garde”, author Morgan Pecelli describes...

“a box as geographical point, aesthetic concept and anthropological practice. The theatrical room as box is sometimes space, sometimes "the space", sometimes place, sometimes non-place, sometimes in transit, sometimes without any walls at all, sometimes Is and Os, sometimes even ink on a page.”... “But the theatrical room as box is also always vibrating nervously between the pure potential of the void and the kinetic ecstasy of symbolic excess.”³

This quote shows that while spaces have a designed purpose, they are dynamic in nature and can be used to various extents. This is especially true in New York City, as is seen in the example above. Spaces in New York City are not static and have served an almost endless amount of purposes over the hundreds of years of the city's history.

Proxemics In New York City

When I think about proxemics in New York City, there are several examples that come to mind. One is the High Line, a public park built on an elevated rail line on the west side of Manhattan. The High Line exemplifies how urban design can shape human behavior. By creating a unique and beautiful space, the designers of the High Line have encouraged people to spend time there and interact with each other in new and different ways. People jog, walk their dogs, have picnics, and take photos on the High Line. Parks are a perfect example of carefully designed spaces that allow for new types of interaction between people and can influence human behavior.

Another example of proxemics in New York City is how people interact on the subway system. When people enter a subway car, they often adopt certain behaviors based on the proximity of others. If the car is crowded, people may stand closer to each other than they would

³ Pecelli, *Tendrils of Lost Time and the Self an Aesthetic Anthropology of New York City's "Post-Avant-Garde"*

in other situations. If the car is empty, people may spread out and take up more space. The subway is an example of how people adapt their behavior to the space around them. It's also an example of how the design of a space can influence behavior. The layout of a subway car can encourage certain behaviors, such as standing close to others or keeping to oneself.

Covid - 19

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a first-hand view of how proxemics affect human behavior. Social distancing measures forced people to re-evaluate their relationship with the spaces and people around them. In New York City, the pandemic has highlighted the ways in which public spaces are used and how they can be adapted to meet new public health requirements and serve new purposes than originally intended. For instance, the city's parks and public spaces have become vital resources for residents seeking a safe outdoor space to exercise, socialize, or work remotely. The pandemic also highlighted the importance of proxemics in shaping social behavior and norms. As people have adapted to new social distancing guidelines, they have had to learn new ways of interacting with each other and their environment. This has led to new social norms, such as standing six feet apart in public spaces or wearing a face covering indoors. These new norms have significantly impacted how people interact with their surroundings and each other, and they will likely continue to shape social behavior in the post-pandemic era. In this way, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of proxemics in shaping the ways in which people interact with their environment and each other.

Graffiti

Graffiti is one of my favorite examples of proxemics in New York City. Graffiti has long been used to respond to one's environment, both as a form of resistance and as a way to reclaim public space. Throughout history, graffiti has been used by various marginalized communities, social justice activists, and urban youth movements to voice their frustrations and grievances in public spaces and urban life. For instance, during the civil rights movement in the 1960s, African American communities used graffiti to protest segregation and racism in the United States, and mainly New York City. In comparison, in the 1980s, the punk rock movement in the UK used graffiti to express their dissatisfaction with mainstream society. Proxemics is relevant to the topic of graffiti as a response to an environment. Graffiti is a way of asserting one's presence in public space and can also shape that space's physical and social boundaries. For instance, graffiti can be used to mark territorial boundaries, create cultural zones, or challenge existing power structures. In this sense, graffiti can be seen as a form of visual communication that not only reflects but also shapes the dynamics of the environment in which it appears.

Graffiti reflects and shapes the ways in which people interact with the spaces around them. Often Graffiti will cause people with typically traditional values to point their noses up in disgust, with the common argument that graffiti ruins a perfectly good wall. While on the other hand, graffiti brings people together and can cause social change; it can also cause people to act differently in the spaces in which it appears. In

Hallucinations

One of my main points of inspiration is New York City itself. I am inspired by so much of what I see on a daily basis. This inspiration could come from anything from a texture on a wall, graffiti,

the design of a building, or a moment involving random people and their composition and interaction within a space. It often feels like those around me don't see these things in the same way or notice them. The closest way for me to communicate this idea would be to describe what I see as hallucinations, which others don't see, that cause me to reflect on a space's aesthetic environment and effect.

Music producer Rick Rubin discusses creativity in his book, “The Creative Act: A Way Of Being,” saying, “Look for what you notice, but no one else sees.”⁴ This quote reigns extremely true for me. In art, a new point of view is always intriguing, and I try to lean into my influences and the things I see on a daily basis that someone might not notice. For example, the other night, I was going to a party in SoHo with my friends. As we were walking, it began downpouring, which caused me to think and interact with the space in a completely different way than if it were not nighttime and raining profusely. My friends and I took shelter under an awning to catch our breaths and stay dry. As we stood under the awning, I noticed a woman with an umbrella standing on the sidewalk, waiting to cross an intersection. This is a somewhat normal situation that many people wouldn't think deeper about. However, when I saw this scene, a chord struck inside me, and I took a photo immediately. All this to say, because of the exact positioning of where I was standing and where the woman was standing, I assigned meaning to the seemingly normal situation. It was the same overwhelming feeling I often get staring at a piece of art in a museum. This feeling is hard to describe, but you can feel it when it arrives. I guess it could be considered as “inspiration.” The scene may not have been as intriguing had the conditions been different. This “hallucination” was also caused because I assigned meaning to a scene that others may not have. I saw something that “wasn't there.” This example relates to the

⁴ Rubin, “The Creative Act: A Way Of Being”

idea of proxemics because I was responding to the conditions of my environment, in this case, through inspiration.

Baader Meinhof Phenomenon

The Baader Meinhoff phenomenon, also known as frequency illusion, “is when your awareness of something increases. This leads you to believe it’s actually happening more, even if that’s not the case.”⁵ In the context of proxemics, the Baader Meinhoff phenomenon can occur when we become aware of a particular element or pattern in our environment and begin to notice it more frequently. For example, if I became aware of the prevalence of public art in New York City, I might begin to notice it more often and appreciate it in a new way. This phenomenon can shape our perception of our environment and lead us to experience it differently.

In New York City, the Baader Meinhoff phenomenon can be seen in how people interact with the city's distinct and iconic proxemics. The density and diversity of the city create a complex web of social and spatial relationships, where people are constantly negotiating their physical and social boundaries. Once we become aware of these dynamics, we begin to notice them more frequently and appreciate the unique experience of urban space that New York City offers. Whether it's the way people navigate the subway system, the improvisational use of public spaces, graffiti, or the subtle gestures that signal respect or disdain, the Baader Meinhoff phenomenon allows us to see these elements in a new light and appreciate the intricacies of urban life in New York City.

⁵ Pietrangelo, “Understanding the Baader - Meinhof Phenomenon”

Conclusion

In conclusion, New York City's unique proxemics create a dynamic and complex urban environment that shapes the way people interact with each other and their surroundings. The city's density, diversity, and architectural features all contribute to the unique experience of urban space that cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world. The relationship of physical and social boundaries, the improvisational use of public spaces, and the subtle gestures that signal respect or disdain are all part of the complex web of social and spatial relationships that define New York City. By examining the ways in which people interact with the spaces around them, we can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural, social, and political dynamics of the city. Ultimately, the study of proxemics in New York City offers a valuable lens to view urban life and provides insights into the ways in which people shape and are shaped by their environment.

Bibliography

1. Kelling, George L., and Catherine M. Coles. *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities*. New York: Touchstone, 1997.
2. “The New Proxemics: Covid-19, Social Distancing, and Sociable Space.” Taylor & Francis. Accessed May 2, 2023.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13574809.2020.1785283>.
3. Pecelli, Morgan. *Tendrils of Lost Time and the Self an Aesthetic Anthropology of New York City's "Post"-Avant-Garde*, 2011.
4. Pietrangelo, Ann. “Understanding the Baader-Meinhof Phenomenon.” Healthline. Healthline Media, December 17, 2019.
<https://www.healthline.com/health/baader-meinhof-phenomenon#what-it-is>.
5. “Proxemics.” Proxemics - an overview | ScienceDirect Topics. Accessed May 1, 2023.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/medicine-and-dentistry/proxemics>.
6. Rao, Srinivas. “The Meaning We Assign Becomes the Lens through Which We See the World.” Medium. Mission.org, August 24, 2018.
<https://medium.com/the-mission/the-meaning-we-assign-becomes-the-lens-through-which-we-see-the-world-49ce1d365a2b#:~:text=The%20Meaning%20We%20Assign%20Becomes%20The%20Lens%20Through%20Which%20We%20See%20the%20World,-https%3A%2F%2Fstock&text=The%20ability%20to%20separate%20the,which%20we%20view%20the%20world>.
7. RUBIN, RICK. *Creative Act: A Way of Being*. S.I.: CANONGATE BOOKS LTD, 2023.
8. Simon, Jules. “Introduction: Introducing Philosophy of the City - Topoi.” SpringerLink. Springer Netherlands, March 13, 2021.
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11245-021-09739-0>.
9. Simon, Jules. “Introduction: Introducing Philosophy of the City - Topoi.” SpringerLink. Springer Netherlands, March 13, 2021.
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11245-021-09739-0>.
10. Watson, O. Michael. *Proxemic Behavior; a Cross-Cultural Study*. The Hague: Mouton, 1970.

