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# Tapestry of Space: Domestic Architecture and Underground Communities in Margaret Morton's Photography of a Forgotten New York

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Margaret Morton's photographs of New York's homeless demonstrate how urban space impacts the psyche and directs behavior. *The Tunnel: The Underground Homeless of New York City* was published in 1995 and *Fragile Dwelling*, which captures the shanties built on the streets of New York, was published in 2000. Morton's books pair photographs with stories of communities that reinterpret the subject of home through the use of discarded materials. The Situationist International (SI) views on psychogeography and material production will guide interpretations of the work of these specific communities of the homeless in 1990s New York. Situationist International theory will also be applied to Morton's role as a photographer, the city as public space and tourist attraction, and the work and experience of domestic architecture.

The underground and aboveground homes are designed by taking material fragments and lining up the pieces in a cohesive manner that corresponds to the splintered identity's attempt to conform to the notion of a unified and solid self. This self-representational architecture is a visualization of human connection to space. Because shelter is an essential part of sustaining oneself, identity is closely tied to one's place of home, and because no place is guaranteed to be a permanent home, this aspect of identity is consistently fragile. The homeless community's complete involvement in home building is also the process of understanding that a home is not permanent, yet the act of constructing these homes can define a person through his or her creative response to instability.

Although the self symbolically comes together as homes are built out of scrap materials, the reality of the ephemeral nature of these homes destroys the chimerical possibility of identity wholeness when city officials demolish the homes or close off the tunnels. Homelessness is not truly the condition of not having a home. Because the homeless indeed have a home they build on the streets or in the tunnels, their condition is more accurately described as the absence of a stable home. Defining oneself through such terms is flawed because such stability does not exist for either the homeless or the housed. The two are not a binary; rather, both encounter varying degrees of stability. The fragility of home and identity is universal, but with the homeless population, the vulnerability is far more apparent. For this reason, the displaced best represent the universal relationship between space and the splintered identity.

## **Situationist International and Material Production**

To discuss Morton's pursuit to record urban New York life, I apply twentieth century Marxist ideas developed by the Situationist International. Her commitment to anti-capitalism, psychogeography, and participation in the *dérive* builds upon situationist ideas and provides a framework for further exploration of the urban environment. From 1957 to 1972, the group Situationist International articulated the significance of everyday life through analysis of commodity fetishism and the cultural condition of the spectacle.<sup>1</sup> The term "spectacle" is used to comment on society's reliance on consumption through image promotion; therefore, in a society of the spectacle, individuals understand themselves by means of mass media. Human relationships and contact are thoroughly influenced by images of commodities people are made to feel they need, and the accumulation of commodities evolves into that of spectacles because people can no longer directly experience reality. Everything is a representation, and images dictate what people desire to have. Situationist International's concern with the capitalist order, as described by founding member Guy Debord in 1957 in "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency," is that "Capitalism is devising new forms of struggle (state intervention in the market, growth in the distribution sector, fascist governments); it is relying on the deterioration in workers' leadership; it is masking the nature of class oppositions by means of various reformist tactics."<sup>2</sup> On a global scale, Debord not only views this as a way in which capitalism maintains the society it has created, but also argues that the people of anti-capitalist countries must question power instead of accepting reforms. Without the abolition of capitalism or any oppressive order, the working-class continues to struggle within the boundaries imposed on them by the system in place.

In place of material production, which often exploits the environment, Morton's interviewees use space as a creative guide. They build on space using found materials and personal items in ways that do not treat the environment as a commodity. Morton's New York-focused photography is an example of how the Situationist International philosophy is pertinent to discussing the conflict between the society of the spectacle and the reality of homelessness within it. Through a series of films and publications, SI made evident that the spectacular society is passive, and, as a result, the group contributed to the Paris riots of May 1968. The riots addressed the group's concerns with the oppressive state and educational system, and this event attests to the relationship between concentration on space and search for social justice. This relationship stems from the knowledge about society one obtains through observing space. While Morton's projects are not a direct reference to SI, her photographs of New York poverty are a response to the society of the spectacle and are consistent with the SI investment in the power of the proletariat. By taking a city that is a site for

mass-marketing and depicting communities that have been pushed out of the consumer image of New York and out of adequate New York life itself, she proves that spectacles take place at public expense. To locate the New York that exists beyond the spectacle, Morton employs the situationist method of exploring the city.

Situationist International's goals were to eliminate the division between art and life and to examine everyday life in its entirety. A symbiosis between art and life is apparent in the environment's influence on human emotions, so the *dérive* (also referred to as the "drift"), a technique for exploring spaces, is employed by situationists to understand the environment's psychological impact. The *dérive* takes place without previously formed notions about the environment, and the one who practices the drift is aware of the environment's effect on one's behavior, and such alertness to psychogeographical components of the drift separates the participant of the *dérive* from the casual wanderer.

### **The Role of the Urban Photographer**

Before the *dérive* is used to describe the urban photographer's function in the context of situationist theory, the history of the *dérive* must be addressed. The precursor of the *dérive* is *flânerie*. The *flâneur*, or one who practices *flânerie*, is a mercurial character, who plays roles ranging from a dandy stroller to a careful observer who studies social space. He is a nineteenth century figure developed by Charles Baudelaire and later given significance within Marxism by Walter Benjamin. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin expanded on the *flâneur* role through his observation of the Parisian arcades, which were intended as a site for conspicuous consumption.<sup>3</sup> The arcades stand in contrast to the places Morton visits in her study of space because the arcades are examples of the type of locations used to promote cities as tourist destinations. In the context of Benjamin's work, the *flâneur* is male, and no female equivalent (or *flâneuse*) exists because women in public space in the early twentieth century are prostitutes and other working-class women. They are not perceived as privileged, active observers who search for social meanings in the space they occupy.

Susan Sontag, in theorizing the role of photography as of the 1970s, sees the camera as a tool employed by the *flâneur*, describing the artist as "an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes. Adept of the joys of watching, connoisseur of empathy, the *flâneur* finds the world 'picturesque.'"<sup>4</sup> Susan Sontag's *flâneur* is a wanderer with the artistic purpose of recording through photography. Walter Benjamin scholar Graeme Gilloch describes the *flâneur* as impulsive and likely to give in to whims: "To surrender oneself to the pleasure of distraction, to allow oneself to be led by fancy and caprice, is the fundamental basis of the heedless wanderings of the

dawdling *flâneur*. To lose oneself requires practice, because it demands that one overcome imposed prohibitions and inhibitions.”<sup>5</sup> While Sontag’s voyeur and Gilloch’s easygoing *flâneur* contrast with the conscientious and sensitive reflections of urban photographers, the act of overcoming inhibitions plays a key role in Morton’s willingness to journey into tunnels and abandoned streets. The situationist revision of the *flânerie* better describes urban photographers and their method. Unlike the stroll of the *flâneur*, the *dérive* is the walk of the everyday pedestrian, and the participant in the *dérive* abandons social status and can be male or female.

The *dérive* applies not only to the photographer’s study of the city streets and tunnels but also to their inhabitants’ observations, as their efforts to survive in the city become a method of understanding the environment’s effect on their internal life. In *The Tunnel*, Morton captures the underground society of people with a collection of photographs and interviews. Her photography confronts public unfamiliarity with the transitory lives of the homeless in 1990s New York. In observing tunnel dwellers’ efforts to create homes, Morton also captures outsider attempts to destroy these homes. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” when discussing the photographer Eugène Atget, who was known for documenting the streets of Paris, Walter Benjamin states: “It has quite justly been said of Atget that he photographed [deserted Paris streets] like scenes of crime. The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance.”<sup>6</sup> Benjamin sees the photographs of Paris streets as a challenge to the viewer. When Morton travels underground and documents abandoned tunnels the way Atget captured deserted streets, she shows that what appears to be forgotten is space that is very much alive, cared for, and necessary for its inhabitants. Morton’s evidence incriminates those who do not respond to the forced removal of the homeless and their self-created homes, and her documentary form of photography suggests that the apparently mythical existence of marginal societies contributes to public apathy.

Gradually, Morton’s work breaks down the mythical and illusory qualities of the conception of underground life by satisfying mainstream society’s curiosity and refusing to embellish the group’s search for a home in New York. Morton begins her storytelling and collection of images at the north gate, where a man named Bernard narrates his purpose in the tunnels by commenting on aboveground life as distracting from the individual self:

There’s a certain level of consciousness required of a man. And one can’t perfect that in functional society. You have to basically be separated and apart from it. And I guess that’s why I’m going through what I’m going through. I’ve been put into a hell of an environment to try to perfect this.

But by the same token, it's a perfect environment. It's all about one's focus and one's will to be. And everything is challenging.<sup>7</sup>

His analysis of life aboveground is consistent with SI criticism of the spectacle as a filter for human interaction. Because underground life is not dedicated to images or accumulating commodities, Bernard uses this space to achieve the level of consciousness he believes is necessary.

Shortly after moving into the tunnels in the mid-1980s, Bernard met Bob, a volunteer cook at All Angels' Church, who told him about the option of living underground. In the tunnel, Bob built a home and did not have to fear being mugged; however, despite describing his experience in the tunnel as one of security, in his last lines, he explains that this life consumed him: "The tunnel's not bad. The tunnel's a good place if you want to find out who you are. But when you find out who you are, you have to move out or the tunnel will eat you up like it ate me up for several years. Like I say, I built everything up around the tunnel. Now I have to learn to build it around myself."<sup>8</sup> It is critical to appreciate that Morton introduces life in the tunnel not solely as a political portrait of poverty, but as a psychological space for its inhabitants. By ascribing internal significance to shelter, she sets up the discussion of homelessness in terms of its psychological aspects rather than as a strictly economic issue. Seeing poverty exclusively as an economic problem takes its pervasiveness in humanity for granted because it ignores how the notion of homelessness can also be extended to talk about the mental state of refuge. For Bob, refuge is the tunnel as both a place and as a way of thinking that prevents the outside world from causing him harm. It liberates him, yet his freedom is complicated by extreme isolation and poverty, which reveals that although a connection with the environment is conducive to human agency, it is not the systemic change that is necessary for the well-being of the working-class. By letting Bob describe how the tunnel consumes people, Morton averts romanticizing underground life with her book.

### **Psychogeography as Rejection of Imperialism**

The resistance toward an abstraction of the city that Morton demonstrates can also be observed in Simon Sadler's *The Situationist City*, which examines Situationist International's recognition of the psychology of space: "By analogy, the situationist city was at odds with the Corbusian vision of people at ease in an ideal urban landscape, a place where the struggle with nature, with the body, with space, and with class had inexplicably come to an end ... In psychogeography all the struggles were acute again, making a nonsense of the Corbusian fantasy of the city as something abstract, rational, or ideal."<sup>9</sup> The situationist struggle with developing a method that comments on urban space without accommodating an idealistic perspective of the city parallels Morton's photography as a creative

project that does not limit the discussion of a social issue to a rendering of hardened, inured tunnel residents.

Sadler compares the situationists' exploration of the city with imperialist travel around the globe. Both sought out the exotic with the belief it would advance society, yet Sadler also argues that the situationists' desire to possess the city was more than the fetishization of the space. Urban exploration was not designed to exploit the city; instead, when the drift was adopted for city examination, situationists such as Guy Debord began creating maps they believed would humanize city space. Rather than enforcing order the way typical maps would, these maps promoted intimacy with the city and depicted "the surrealist disorientation of the drifts around Paris by scattering the pieces of map and the arrows showing their routes."<sup>10</sup> Traditional cartography claims absolute, objective knowledge of spaces, and commenting on the difference between situationist mapping and conventional maps, Sadler states: "Rather than float above the city as some sort of omnipotent, instantaneous, disembodied, all-possessing eye, situationist cartography admitted that its overview of the city was reconstructed in the imagination, piecing together an experience of space that was actually terrestrial, fragmented, subjective, temporal, and cultural."<sup>11</sup> The outdated method of exploring the city was taken apart by the situationists the way New York's underground residents disassembled conventional journey around the city. Because the urban economy is heavily dependent on consumerism and tourism, the exploration of a city is guided by the authorities' definition of what the city consists of. The government authority and the business authority will treat both the resident and the visitor as a tourist if the journeyer shows potential to be a worthwhile consumer. A tourist's map will guide a visitor to theaters, restaurants, shopping centers, and museums. Meanwhile, every unprofitable location is treated as an abyss on traditional city maps. Here, the journey of the flâneur and that of a tourist are contrasted when the intent of the exploration is taken into account. The flâneur's desire to observe is driven by the need to understand and connect with the space, and while the flâneur and the tourist think of exploring the city as a similarly enjoyable adventure, the tourist has nothing invested in the impact a city has on identity.

The tunnel epitomizes a neglected and undesirable location, yet in doing so, it provides a monastic refuge for its residents. For example, resident Manny describes a sense of security (not unlike the aforementioned inhabitants) in the tunnel by recalling an instance of nearly being attacked but escaping because no one would follow him into the tunnel: "I feel safe in the tunnel because I don't care how big you are—even if you have a gun or a weapon—if you don't know where you're going or if you never been in there—it has no light, no types of light."<sup>12</sup> The absolute darkness of the tunnel prevents danger from entering it, which explains how it is possible to have the highest feeling of safety in a place that is perceived as most dangerous.

Seeking out peace in the tunnel by expecting fear of the unknown to prevent criminals from following the tunnel dwellers partially defines the psychological relationship the inhabitants have with space. In a situation like Manny's, this relationship is an understanding of outsiders' reactions to urban places. The knowledge of outsiders' perceptions is developed through the exploration of the city and through Manny's own oneness with his environment. When Sadler explains the drift, the situationist attempt at urban exploration is comparable to that of the tunnel dwellers:

As its name implied, psychogeography attempted to combine subjective and objective modes of study. On one hand it recognized that the self cannot be divorced from the urban environment; on the other hand, it had to pertain to more than just the psyche of the individual if it was to be useful in the collective rethinking of the city. The reader senses Debord's desperation to negotiate this paradox in his "Théorie de la dérive" (Theory of the *dérive*), a key document first published in the Belgian surrealist journal *Les lèvrès nues* in 1956 and republished in *Internationale situationniste* in 1958. The drift, Debord explained entailed the sort of "playful-constructive behavior" that had always distinguished situationist activities from mere pastimes. The drift should not be confused, then, with "classical notions of the journey and the stroll;" drifters weren't like tadpoles in a tank, "stripped of intelligence, sociability and sexuality," but were people alert to "the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there," capable as a group of agreeing upon distinct, spontaneous preferences for routes through the city.<sup>13</sup>

Prior to settling in the tunnel, the residents had extensive knowledge of the aboveground space, which is how they are able to travel back to gather food and materials for their homes. Their familiarity with the tunnel itself is much like the situationists' awareness of the various routes and their effort to use this awareness to bond with the city.

This attempt at developing a social geography (or recognizing a social geography already in existence) is further evident in Larry's story. He is a friend of Bernard's who was unable to stand the chaos and the violence in the shelter system and settled in the tunnels. He references the aboveground shanty towns of New York when discussing his choice against building a shanty: "You never know what's going to happen there in the structure. This is a solid structure. And there's not a lot of traffic here like you find up above this. On the streets there's too much traffic and there's too many things that can endanger your life."<sup>14</sup> There are two entrances where Larry lives and the other gates are locked, so because a person does not end up in the tunnels unless they specifically intend to live there, the outside world is not feared the way it is when one lives on the streets, in a shanty, or in a shelter. Since the tunnel is shelter from the conflicts above, the

residents' choice to live underground demonstrates that the social problems above ground have forced them into an alternate sphere. Larry's experience demonstrates one of the central points of psychogeography. Sadler further explains how the motivation behind psychogeography was to recognize the sociological conflicts in urban space:

Psychogeography thus produced a social geography of the city, especially important at a time when social geography was still struggling to emerge from the shadow of academic geography. Against academic geography's "scientific" taxonomy of the physical factors that supposedly determine the character of a space, social geography theorized space as the product of society. It was an approach pioneered in the late nineteenth century by the former Communist Reclus, who recognized in geography "nothing but history in space." Situationists were naturally inclined toward the goals of social geography, which opposed academic geography's reduction of the city to "the undifferentiated state of the visible-readable realm" (to use Lefebvre's disdainful phrase) and to the homogenization of the conflicts that produce capitalist space.<sup>15</sup>

The tunnel responds to space as the product of society by taking in the residents who have been failed by that society. The move underground aids in evading the reality that the pragmatic perception of space is dominant aboveground. The move is also a critique of the consumerist society's failure to apply psychogeography, which would cause the society to reject the use of space as a tool in promoting excess consumption because it reveals societal conflicts in which wealth exists alongside poverty's pervasiveness. With a theoretical approach to urbanism out of the picture, parts of the city's population had to seek out alternative systems of survival.

A theoretical approach understands that survival is not an uncreative enduring of homeless life. The people living underground reach out for psychological peace and for artistic expression, and the artwork underground reinforces that the tunnels cannot be reduced to space for only primal survival. The artwork in this tunnel includes an imitation of Salvador Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* and graffiti of the sculptures *Venus de Milo* and Michelangelo's *David*.<sup>16</sup> In her acknowledgements, Morton credits the art to Chris (recognized by his signature "Freedom"), who has been creating murals in the tunnels since the 1980s. The presence of art in the tunnel establishes the underground society as comprehensive. Similar to how underground families and community responsibilities demonstrate a functioning way of life, the graffiti represents the presence of Humanities, which further demonstrates a complete society.

Art is a display of talent manifested in hidden places, which mirrors the subterranean nature of the dwellers' lives. One of the residents, Marcos, described

the tunnel as like living in an art museum.<sup>17</sup> The art dismisses any assumption about the tunnel as a pallid location for ghostlike residents. By helping the reader let go of the idea of the tunnel as eerie, Morton is more convincing in discussing the peacefulness that is underground and absent in the dwellings built in the streets. While most residents discuss this peacefulness, Joe, who lives toward the south end, addresses his experience in Vietnam in expressing contentment about living in the tunnel. He describes leaving his apartment because of flashbacks and states that they have diminished in the tunnel. Five of his six children died, some from the effects of Agent Orange. This strained his marriage, which ended in divorce and caused him to lose touch with the only child who is alive.

On the street, Joe met Cathy, who is a Vietnam veteran's widow. She lost her only child to a stray bullet in Central Park. Joe and Cathy married and made a home in the tunnel. In discussing Cathy's first husband, who died from an overdose, Joe describes his military experience: "He was a tunnel rat [in Vietnam]. I know how it is to be a tunnel rat because I did that tour myself—flashlight and a gun, go down in the tunnels, visit people."<sup>18</sup> The irony of choosing to live in the tunnel after being sent to destroy the underground complexes created by the Viet Cong lies in the fact that Joe chose the tunnel for peace and safety while his experience with the tunnels during the war was perilous due to waiting soldiers, traps, and dangerous animals. Going into a very different tunnel, Joe and Cathy sought to escape the effects the war had on their lives. The tunnel as a place of peace and a place that pacifies the consequence of war is an example of mental space that is purposefully created through inhabitants designing and adapting to physical space. The tunnel as a place for storytelling functions as an image of the mind; it is virtually hidden unless entered into through stories that explain choices in day to day life.

### **Public Space vs. City Attractions**

Most of the residents Morton interviewed stayed in the tunnel while others moved away to take a chance on the aboveground world again. In the epilogue, Morton states: "Most of the entrances have been padlocked or welded shut by Amtrak police. Many long-term residents have been informed that they are trespassing and have been threatened with arrest. As this book goes to press, the tunnel residents have been notified that eviction is imminent."<sup>19</sup> Ordinarily, a person cannot make use of a public space when his or her conduct prevents others from using the space, but the label "homeless" has been mistakenly approached as a criminal behavior in itself. Being pushed out of the tunnels is yet another step in controlling and prohibiting the use of public place that is not uncommon in urban areas. For example, urban theorist Mike Davis calls the destruction of public space a crusade: "The contemporary opprobrium attached to the term 'street person' is in itself a harrowing index of the devaluation of public spaces. To

reduce contact with untouchables, urban redevelopment has converted once vital pedestrian streets into traffic sewers and transformed public parks into temporary receptacles for the homeless and the wretched.”<sup>20</sup> Altering these spaces to correspond to the population inhabiting them treats the homeless with ignominy and brands both the people and space with a degree of disgrace. Davis refers to this as the extinction of democratic space that is comparable to Victorian England: “In a city of several million yearning immigrants, public amenities are radically shrinking, parks are becoming derelict and beaches more segregated, libraries and playgrounds are closing, youth congregations of ordinary kinds are banned, and the streets are becoming more desolate and dangerous.”<sup>21</sup> In *The Tunnel*, the move underground responds to the lack of public space and the poor conditions of the public space that is still available. Throughout Morton’s subsequent publication on the homeless in New York, it is evident that the war on public space intensified in the years after the closing of the tunnel.

In *Fragile Dwelling*, Morton’s study of the city places the images of the urban environment into a binary. She presents no postcard photographs that stereotype or glamorize the city. Such representation of the city in her book would have no function because conventional images already exist in the minds of viewers. The typical images and the highly decorative commercial attractions of the city are constructed ideals designed for the tourist and consumer mindset; meanwhile, *Fragile Dwelling* embodies the hidden reality. The city has become an area to be exploited by all who wish to profit from it. In order to profit, businesses have to expand, bring in the wealthy, and attract tourists. The means to this goal has been to push the poor out of sight. The most damaging binary in the images of life in the city has been wealth and poverty. While one is something to strive for, the other is a state of being an outcast. In observing these spaces, Morton employs the *dérive*, and in the responses of the shanty town residents, she finds their simultaneous participation in the *dérive*. Their *dérive* is rooted in understanding everyday life through space, and with this perceptive, they assert their identity by performing work (home building) that defines them, rather than contributes to mass production. What distinguishes this work from all work outside of mass production is that it is necessary for their survival. The homeless population represented in Morton’s work does not live outside of mass production or capitalism; rather, the individuals innovatively navigate the system they exist in even if it fails them.

With this particular collection, Morton returns to the psychological relationship the homeless have with the city, and psychogeography is again instrumental in understanding how the city’s inhabitants relate to the environment. In “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” Debord claims that psychogeography:

is not inconsistent with the materialist perspective that sees life and thought as conditioned by objective nature. Geography, for example, deals

with the determinant action of general natural forces, such as soil composition or climactic conditions, on the economic structures of a society, and thus on the corresponding conception that such a society can have of the world. Psychogeography sets for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.<sup>22</sup>

This definition of psychogeography is consistent with Morton's study of space. The environment's effects on emotion and behavior are observed in *Fragile Dwelling* as much as they are evident in *The Tunnel*. But what is newly apparent in Morton's later work is the rarity of seeing an urban construction outside of what attracts tourism and consumerism.

The use of commodities to alleviate one's onerous circumstances comes from the false sense of security images of wealth create. In this case, self-conception is formed through commodities that do not reflect one's own economic situation, constructing a sense of escape through consumerism. Debord comments on the culture of excess by condemning how the population's desire for excess is motivated by the desire to emulate the images of the city created to bring in big businesses and temporary visitors:

We know with what blind fury so many unprivileged people are ready to defend their mediocre advantages. Such pathetic illusions of privilege are linked to a general idea of happiness prevalent among the bourgeoisie and maintained by a system of publicity that includes Malraux's aesthetic as well as Coca-Cola ads—an idea of happiness whose crisis must be provoked on every occasion by every means.<sup>23</sup>

Because the public trusts in commercial messages, they seek out the material items that double as signs of privilege. In this mindset, the material is demanded based on publicity-created fixation rather than need (or even want), for prior to the publicity, the individual is not aware that he or she either requires or desires the item. This distracts from an awareness of the populations Morton interviews because their lack of resources cannot be approached with the commercialist understanding of the material.

The city, as it is altered for business and tourism and consumerism, repulses Debord in the context of psychogeographical maps. He sees these maps as free from the influences that construct an artificial, consumer-based relationship with the city:

The production of psychogeographical maps, or even the introduction of alterations such as more or less arbitrarily transposing maps of two different regions, can contribute to clarifying certain wanderings that

express not subordination to randomness but total *insubordination* to habitual influences (influences generally categorized as tourism, that popular drug as repugnant as sports or buying on credit).<sup>24</sup>

Breaking down conventional maps is dedicated to the personal relationship with space. The situationists aspire to living in a democratized space by the means of reinterpreting maps. Debord explains how this process is sometimes artistically inventive when he provides an example of a friend who “wandered though the Harz region of Germany while blindly following the directions of a map of London. This sort of game is obviously only a feeble beginning in comparison to the complete creation of architecture and urbanism that will someday be within the power of everyone.”<sup>25</sup> In *Fragile Dwelling*, the awareness of the city through reinterpretation is present throughout the images of domestic architecture, which refer to the homeless population’s construction of home environments. While the projects of New Yorkers are not deliberately experimental, their investigative nature redefines space in a similar fashion.

### **Domestic Architecture**

The very idea of domestic architecture is a new understanding of structural design, and it assigns a different meaning to homelessness. The people of *The Tunnel* and *Fragile Dwelling* technically have homes they have built. The argument that they do not own the property and therefore have these homes only temporarily can be dismissed with the realization that many people do not own the property they live on. While the inhabitants classified as homeless are more vulnerable to a property owner’s decision to push them out of their residences, this fragility is widespread.

The difference between those who have been categorized as homeless and those that have not been categorized as homeless is the level of vulnerability and the level of awareness of this vulnerability. The homeless are faced with a reality others avoid recognizing by divorcing themselves from urban space and by providing themselves with a false impression of control by obtaining material signs of wealth and security. Having to face this reality of vulnerability, the homeless demonstrate, for the rest of the people, the inventive nature of endurance. In his introduction to the book, Alan Trachtenberg states:

*Fragile Dwelling* crystallizes the paradox at the root of Morton’s work: not only the coexistence of wealth and poverty in the world’s richest metropolis, but the coexistence of despair and hope in the devices whereby the rejected contrive a life for themselves. We have the paradox of fragility itself: the dangers of hanging by your fingernails, and the pride of creative survival.<sup>26</sup>

In the metropolis, the homeless struggle with creating personal space within an area that the richest population of the city or the city itself owns without utilizing. To allow people to create their own personal space would be to give them the right to housing and to remove the damaging stereotypes of laziness and need for charity. If the homeless are seen as independent individuals, a system they can succeed in would have to replace the custom of sporadic and patronizing charity.

Morton captures their homes and retells the stories of the inhabitants of domestic architecture. To embark on this project is to remember that to patronize is also to demean, and patronization is not completely unlike the demonization of the population living below the poverty line because both approaches convey perceived inferiority. Their survival can be attributed to their connection to the land, and this survival is not connected to forms of charity. They care for gardens, for animals, for all the living things that those who live more comfortably often neglect because they are disconnected from spaces they live in.

While Morton celebrates the power of the human creativity of the homeless, it is her creative work that invites readers and viewers into their lives. The areas in which the homeless reside (and the homeless themselves) are almost always described to the audiences by outsiders. Morton's outsider status in the situation of homelessness takes the fear out of the idea of what it is to be an insider. Documentary photography can occur at the expense of the subject, allowing the photographer to use the subject as representative of a political stance or sociological research. However, Morton represents the voices of the neglected, so while the audience does not have access to the self-representation of the homeless, Morton brings her audience closer to what is rendered invisible through physical and emotional distance. In *Fragile Dwelling*, Morton records interviews and takes photographs and turns them into sociopolitical commentary, informal anthropological fieldwork, and perceptive journalism. Most importantly, she allows the neglected to define the city and voice their reflections on existing within abandoned space.

Morton's first story is based on her interviews with Pepe, the self-described watchman of the New York neighborhood of Bushville, who made his money in typesetting and in electronics. After an accident in 1957, his skill set had to change and he began working for a friend. Other housing he has lived in was not only unaffordable but had unbearable living conditions. At the time of the interview in 1990, he collects his Social Security check, which is not enough to pay rent, so he creates his own dwelling and watches over others in the neighborhood. He continuously improves his home, fixing leaks and making it warmer for the winter months. Pepe finds tools and building materials in stores and at construction sites. In 1993, Pepe is finishing the kitchen and hoping to begin working on a bathroom for his home. By the end of the year, Bushville is demolished.

The photographs of Pepe's home show the progression of his house as it becomes a more complex piece of domestic architecture. The very last image of his home is as a pile of scraps with which he started. The morning of the demolition is described by Morton through interviews with the residents of Bushville and through photography that is accompanied by the following description:

The residents were notified of the impending destruction but had nowhere else to go. As the Bulldozers arrived, people quickly gathered their belongings. The noise of the heavy equipment was deafening, as massive shovels wrenched the small houses from their foundations, held them high, and then hurled them to the ground. Everyone scattered, seeking temporary shelter in doorways, abandoned cars, or with friends, while their homes fell splintered, piles of refuse again.<sup>27</sup>

The homes made out of materials deemed worthless by those who discarded them were built into dwellings that provided shelter and security to the homeless. Their efforts to create homes for themselves and their success in doing so did not prove to their destroyers that these materials, pieced together for survival, held any significance. The demolition of homes represents a robbing of identity. To destroy something a person has created is to deny their capacity for such creativity, and considering the negative images of the homeless, the destruction of their homes is also the denial of their willingness to be self-sufficient.

The building of homes is also connected to the ability to self-identify, to represent the inner self through the personal and practical art of domestic architecture. In discussing the building of his home on East Ninth Street in his interview with Morton, Moses describes his previous struggles with housing. He found life in a shelter to have conditions that do not even meet prison standards: "A man can't live like that. First of all, men need a private room; they need a sink, they need a sanctuary—not in an open place where they're ushered around by security guards."<sup>28</sup> Moses presents his home building as a need to have a room of his own. To have personal space is to have room for individuality, which is not an idea that is considered when the public expects the homeless to retreat to the shelters. The importance of being allowed to self-identify has been neglected when it comes to the discussion of homelessness. The homeless describe their transitory dwellings as homes, which conflicts with the very term used to identify them, but their right to be heard on the subject is disregarded because they are never asked to define their space.

The issue of voice in human survival is not only about the individual voice but about the community. Morton's interview with Louie reveals how the homeless take care of one another (even though the stereotype would only recognize crime among them). Louie describes his home at the Hill to have been initially a culmination of rats and weeds that eventually became a site for shacks.

He became a part of this and began to build houses for the residents. Many have burned down. He cares not only for the people in the neighborhood by building the shacks, but also for the homeless animals that wander around the area.<sup>29</sup> Louie's efforts to help his community do not stem from contempt or charity; rather they are a product of social responsibility. The distance that exists between the homeless and those who are not homeless is vague. The public has othered the homeless as a group it cannot become. The homeless are a group that is in some way beneath the public, and whether this idea of superiority is a product of the perceived laziness of the homeless or of recognition of a difficult existence, it does nothing for the homeless.

Around the same time Morton conducts the interviews and collects the photographs of the homeless, New York anthropologist Arline Mathieu writes that mainstream images of the homeless either try to elicit sympathy or stereotype the population as: "the worst of life...drunks, vagrants, prostitutes, wild-eyed men with matted hair and beard who may well be insane."<sup>30</sup> One's perception of the homeless is inherited from the governing forces, and dismissing the unknown as insane is a convenient way to neglect the issue of homelessness. Mathieu mentions the Reagan administration's discussion of the homeless at this time, which consisted of the popular notion that homelessness is a choice. Ed Koch, New York City's mayor from 1978 to 1989, claimed the homeless were choosing this lifestyle in order to receive welfare and better apartments from the government. The image of the homeless as insane also helps explain why they are homeless without questioning the system that has failed them. If the public sees the homeless as having made this choice, as being abnormal and wanting to take the easy route, then the public does not see itself as being like the homeless and as being vulnerable to homelessness.

If those who are not homeless do not see themselves in a binary with the homeless (in which one is clearly superior to the other), what would be found is that the othering of the homeless does not occur out of pure ignorance. If the line between the two groups is not clear, those with stable housing have to face the fear that they too could lose the security they find in having a home. The fluidity of homelessness exists because the state of not being homeless is not clearly defined. It is not defined by home ownership because much of the population rents homes, owes substantial amounts on homes, has houses that are in foreclosure, or has living arrangements with a friend or family member. Even the listed possibilities are not perfectly stable. One may be a single misstep, natural disaster, or company reorganization away from losing the source of funding that provides one with housing.

The binary is also complicated by the fact that the homeless Morton observes have homes, but these are homes that happen to not be protected by the government due the perceived worthlessness of these homes. There are no officials who have orchestrated their construction. In this particular "us and them" binary, can the "them" ever be protected from the perception of accepted

authorities? The homes and communities of the homeless were sometimes destroyed by arsonists and at other times by the orders of city officials as a part of an effort to clean up New York City. Destroying their homes was identical to moving out garbage, and the effort it took to build these homes did not exist because the perception of the “superior” group did not function to recognize the significance of these homes.

Binaries are accepted out of lack of awareness about the other. In an article discussing homelessness and the study of literature, Allen Carey-Webb discusses his personal journey of learning about the complex causes of homelessness and the need for awareness. As a teacher, he decided to focus on homelessness in a college course and noticed the voiceless role of the homeless in books: “...regardless of the genre, we were not hearing the unmediated voice or voices of homeless people themselves. Putting these texts next to one another undercut any one text’s claim to truth, and all the texts, in differing ways, needed to be read as ‘fiction.’”<sup>31</sup> Without disregarding the power of Morton’s work, recognizing that the representation of homelessness in her books is filtered through her privileged position places some symbolic space between the audience and the voices of the homeless.

The difference between the lives of the homeless and those who consider themselves settled also lies in the proximity to the natural world. The material world creates a barrier between the natural and the man-made. The homeless, too, have what they have created with tools or have bought or found in New York. They use objects to accessorize their shelter. Their homes have décor, they have pets, and they plant gardens. Hence, the discrepancy is found in the excess of the material. Is it necessary for a pet to be bought from a breeder or can a pet be a vagabond that one chooses to feed? Is a garden any less of a garden if it is not ornamental? Does the natural world have to be as heavily constructed as people have become? Domestic architecture dismisses such definition of necessities and accessory. The homeless do not claim that they have only what is absolutely necessary, but they do not use nature as embellishment symbolizing wealth.

Examples of home adornment are found in Morton’s photographs of Mr. Lee’s dwelling. Located at the top of the Hill, his home is bound together by knots. The objects secured by the knots include mattresses, cords, and pieces of cloth. Whatever objects he finds during the day, he uses to secure his house in the evening. Morton writes, “Much like his house, Mr. Lee is soft and round and held together by knots. Bits of wire twisted through buttonholes fasten his multiple layers of secondhand clothing.”<sup>32</sup> The characterization of the house as resembling its inhabitant describes the closeness one has to something he or she builds. In 1992, Mr. Lee died in a fire set to his home by an arsonist. The fragments of his destroyed home included “...bundles of charred photographs of Chinese families; handcrafted passports for imaginary relatives, all named Lee; and a large slate inscribed with cryptic ideograms.”<sup>33</sup> In his death, Mr. Lee is still very much a part of his home. In this case, embellishment is very much a gesture of personal

security. The knots held his home together while the passports and photographs were crafted to hold him together on a mental level.

The personal connection between the homeless and what they create continues to reappear in Morton's interviews. Morton does not limit the writing in her book to her own commentary. Doug, a homeless man she interviews, describes the East River dwellings:

You may drive by here and see that they are shabby, but I think that if you look again you see this person took the time to build a place that could be comfortable for himself. If you saw it up close, you could see that we'd turned it into a home. I've come to find out that it puts you more in touch with your spirit, too, because you realize it's not always about the money; it's really about getting an idea of who you are... The person who will take the time to build for himself is the person who still has an interest in himself. And then other people come along and get the idea, and they start building too.<sup>34</sup>

His perception of his state of being is not one of being homeless; rather it is having a home that is constantly in danger of being destroyed. The system's failure was made invisible with further abuse of the homeless. The construction of the residences is not only about the need for shelter but also about the emotional aspect of home creation. The places they build are not typical images of houses, and those who build them do not need to be government recognized residents of these areas in order to consider them their homes. They are their homes from the very beginning; they are their homes because they physically create them and emotionally invest in the process of home building.

## Conclusion

In "Formulary for a New Urbanism," Ivan Chtcheglov, a major figure in Situationist International, wrote: "Architecture is the simplest means of *articulating* time and space, of *modulating* reality and engendering dreams. It is a matter not only of plastic articulation and modulation expressing an ephemeral beauty, but of a modulation producing influences in accordance with the eternal spectrum of human desires and the progress in fulfilling them."<sup>35</sup> In 1953, he perceived people as avoiding reality by allowing technological advancements to get rid of whatever aspects of lived reality they found unpleasant, and throughout Morton's examples, it is evident that the neglected urban population understands what the more privileged inhabitants overlook: space adjusts and, at times, controls our reality, and in giving in to space psychologically, inhabitants can generate ideal environments.

As long as the majority does not subscribe to this vision of architecture, the conflict between the society of the spectacle and the survival of peripheral

groups like the homeless will continue. And as much as the homeless in Morton's books have attempted to piece together the fragments, the identities and possibilities they expressed through space were destroyed. There is a brand of war against establishing a connection to space such as this because without personal investment in space, urban exploitation has no limits. The ideas developed by the Situationist International help understand space as a creative guide that is not only artistic expression, but also necessary for survival. Debord's belief in humanizing the city space is eternally relevant because the environment responds to every human action as an interaction, regardless of whether such response is foreseen.

### Notes

1. Ken Knabb, ed. and trans., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006).
2. Tom McDonough, ed., *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 30.
3. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Simpson, Andrew Utterson, and K. J. Shepherdson (London: Routledge, 2004) 236-283.
4. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1990), 55.
5. Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 85.
6. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 242.
7. Margaret Morton, *The Tunnel: The Underground Homeless of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 27.
8. *Ibid.*, 37.
9. Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 77.
10. *Ibid.*, 82.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Morton, *The Tunnel*, 41.
13. Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 77-78.
14. Morton, *The Tunnel*, 46.
15. Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 92.
16. Morton, *The Tunnel*, 50-51.
17. *Ibid.*, 71.
18. *Ibid.*, 97.
19. *Ibid.*, 143.
20. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990), 226.
21. *Ibid.*, 227.
22. Guy Debord, "Introduction of a Critique of Urban Geography," in *Critical Geographies: A Collection of Readings*, ed. Harald Bauder and Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro (Kelowna, B.C.: Praxis (e)Press, 2008), 23.
23. *Ibid.*, 24.
24. *Ibid.*, 26.

25. Ibid.
26. Margaret Morton, *Fragile Dwelling* (New York: Aperture, 2000), 7.
27. Ibid., 39.
28. Ibid., 50.
29. Morton, *Fragile Dwelling*, 56.
30. Arline Mathieu, "The Medicalization of Homelessness and the Theater of Repression," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1993): 173.
31. Allen Carey-Webb, "Homelessness and Language Arts: Contexts and Connections," *English Journal* 80, no. 7 (1991): 24.
32. Morton, *Fragile Dwelling*, 65.
33. Ibid., 70.
34. Ibid., 80.
35. Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 3.

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