A Story of Disgust

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Introduction

November 12, 2005: At 8 o’clock on that Saturday morning, I began the eight block walk to a Baptist church in the Northside neighborhood. The first three blocks took me through the city’s resurging downtown. I then moved past the brick and stone of a private college and well-appointed historic homes. As I got closer to the church, the landscape subtly shifted — weedy lawns, chipped paint, strewn trash — accompanied by the not-so-subtle demographic shift from white to black. The purpose of this journey was to attend a meeting at the church. The meeting had been called by the local city council as a public discussion of impending physical changes to the surrounding neighborhood. The neighborhood’s public housing project was going to be demolished through a grant from The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and there was concern about the spatial, social, and economic impact on the neighborhood as a whole. I joined a number of architects, city council members, housing authority employees, public housing residents, and community residents on the metal folding chairs in the church basement.

Throughout the day, the conversation tacked between differing opinions regarding the design of
these landscape changes and their potential economic impact on the low-income, African-American neighborhood. The divergent opinions were given coherence by the emotion of disgust. Revulsion for the existing landscape of weedy lawns, chipped paint, and strewn trash structured the terms of the debate and the proposed solutions; the specific characteristics of disgust gave the discussion a particular logic.

According to psychologists, disgust is characterized as a rejection (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 577). The emotion is a defense against the physical or psychic incorporation of an object deemed repellent or contaminating, acted out through distancing oneself from, expelling, or cleansing the offensive object (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 577). During the meeting, disgust for a particular aesthetic of landscape constructed the perceived problem: the landscape was the key obstacle standing in the way of neighborhood economic revitalization. Aesthetic revulsion also structured the solutions offered by two different groups, one consisting of officials – the architects, city council members, and housing authority officials – and the other of community residents. The officials suggested cleansing the landscape through demolition and reconstructing something ‘attractive’ in its place, while residents sought to clean up the existing landscape. This meeting shows how emotional responses to landscape do political and economic work. The divergence between the two groups reveals a different intensity of disgust that comes from a different relationship with the neighborhood.

Background

This city recently received a HOPE VI grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. HOPE VI is a program that alters or demolishes severely distressed public housing projects and replaces them with a new landscape based on the planning principles of New Urbanism: small scale developments of single family homes and townhouses, replete with sidewalks, front lawns, and porches. The city’s grant targets a public housing development in the Northside neighborhood, a historically African-American section of the city situated directly adjacent to downtown.

Having been approved by HUD, the design of the new public housing landscape in the Northside was already established. However, one question remained – how the roads from the revitalized public housing site would connect to the existing road network outside of the HUD project area. The design sent to HUD proposed a boulevard extending through the western half of the site, connecting to a main artery into downtown. As the roads currently exist, the Northside is isolated from this important entry into the heart of the city. The proposed boulevard would create what the architects described as a “grand entrance” to the Northside that would “re-connect the site to the surrounding neighborhood, contributing to both the physical and psychological reintegration of the site into the greater community.”

The Story

At the Saturday morning meeting organized to discuss the proposed boulevard and “grand entrance”, the officials and residents articulated their positions through emotional reactions to landscape. There was a distinct difference between the way officials and residents of the Northside talked about the “grand entrance”. Officials tended to speak from a detached position of disgust for the existing landscape. In the meetings and grant application, the architects described the “grand entrance” as “attractive” and “positive”, as a “new image” for the Northside, strongly implying aesthetic revulsion for the existing landscape. In meetings with the residents the officials’ reasons for promoting the grand entrance shifted slightly from those outlined in the grant application. In the application quoted above, much was made of the physical and psychological integration of the Northside into the rest of the city. This integration was attached to the pride and identity of the neighborhood, whereas the discourse in the meetings with community members primarily centered on economic revitalization: the new image of the Northside would bring outside investment to the area. Residents of the neighborhood, however, viewed this grand entrance with suspicion. They saw the houses it would knock down, the traffic it could create, and they doubted that the grand promise of economic revitalization would actually come. The residents said they did not want any change in the road configuration.

The officials’ focus on outside investment proved to be the most explicit expression of disgust. A city council member explained why the grand entrance was crucial to the economic revitalization of the Northside, noting specifically the importance of Second and Jones Streets, the old commercial core of the neighborhood. He said the entrance was a “must...because a whole lot of people don’t give a damn about [Second] Street...If you keep [Second] Street...looking the way it looks. Come on! Who are you going to get to invest if [Jones] looks the way it does?” (Anonymous). The economic logic in these statements is structured by disgust, expressed as aesthetic revulsion: no one will invest in this area because they are repulsed by the way it looks.

This position was echoed by one of the architects who commented that “there are certain things [Second] Street brings to the table...the name alone deters development” (Anonymous). This quote, however, also implies fear, an emotion that was not prevalent at the meeting but one that is directly associated with the Northside. In the spatial imagination of the city, the Northside is the place you shouldn’t go at night (or day) – it is a place of crime, drugs, and poor African-Americans. The words “Second Street” deter development because of the images of disgust and fear they conjure – an aesthetically revolting landscape intimately tied to notions of crime, danger, and ‘those’ people. This backdrop of
fear amplifies the separation engendered by disgust. Fear is “the concrete and sudden danger of imminent physical harm” (Lazarus 235) and is associated with escape and avoidance (Ohman 89).

The articulation of disgust at the meeting, with its backdrop of unarticulated fear, had an impact on the design of the road network and the solutions proposed. As described above, disgust is associated with specific actions: distancing, expulsion, cleansing. Disgust provides a distinct solution to the problem at hand: cleanse the landscape by replacing it with an “attractive” grand entrance. For the officials, disgust serves them well politically. It offers a visible, tangible, and not overly complicated solution. It also allows the officials to remain outsiders, not recognizing their own role in the problems of the Northside.

If other emotions were at work, such as distress or shame, the solution might not be so simple and so focused on aesthetics. Shame and distress are emotions of connection. Interest in, enjoyment of, or attachment to a situation or object is the necessary precondition for the experience of shame or distress. Shame and distress represent the disruption of interest, enjoyment, or attachment and spur the individual to revive or repair the connection. As Tomkins describes the process, “[s]hame enlarges the spectrum of objects outside of himself which can engage man and concern him” (226) and “distress can continually enlarge the commitment to objects which can concern the human being” (54). Guided by shame or distress, the questions might be different. Instead of ‘how do we get outsiders interested in this area by cleaning it up,’ officials might ask ‘how do we help the community revitalize this disinvested area?’ This is the question residents asked at the meeting. They were troubled and bemused by the insistence that this particular change in landscape would solve their problems. As one resident put it, "[Let's] use what we already have - the streetscape works" (Anonymous).

It is important to note, however, that the residents are not indifferent to outsiders’ opinions or to the possibility of aesthetic change. First, they know outsiders view their neighborhood with disgust. The residents often say at public meetings ‘we are people, just like you’ in an attempt to counteract the disgust which casts them as less than human. Disgust is often associated with animals and has a long history of being used to dehumanize groups of people by associating them with animality (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 584-85): thus the residents’ insistence that they are people. Second, the residents do not like the way their neighborhood looks. They, however, expressed a desire to embellish the existing landscape. Residents do not want the neighborhood changed; they want the same houses and streets to simply look "prettier". In other words, they want aesthetic change to come from within the community, not to be imposed from outside as the officials propose.

The intensity of the residents’ disgust differs from the officials’ because of their relationship to the Northside. They live in the Northside and have strong personal ties to the neighborhood, softening the detachment characteristic of disgust. The solutions sought by the officials and residents, then, reveal their different social and spatial positions: the more intense detachment of the officials comes from their position outside the neighborhood while the residents, as insiders, negotiate both revulsion and attachment.

Conclusion

By the time the meeting ended night had fallen. As I headed off on foot, a housing authority employee stopped me. Are you going to walk around here at night? Aren’t you frightened? No, no, no, I’ll give you a ride. It’s not safe.

The acknowledgement of emotion after the meeting speaks to a larger phenomenon: the events at countless meetings such as this one are often told without any recognition of emotion. Yet it is the emotional reactions of everyday life, such as an aesthetic revulsion to ‘ugly buildings’, that not only fuel, but also structure economic and political discussions and decisions. The emotional interactions between people as they discuss seemingly emotionless topics such as the economic revitalization of an urban neighborhood, say something powerful about how the decision making process works, people’s relationships to different spaces in the city, and their relationships to each other.

Postscript: After receiving community input, the architects have been working on a new design, one that tries to adhere to the original road configuration, but incorporates the appropriate “viewsheds” to achieve a feeling of “grandness” that the architects value. Their new design has yet to be unveiled.
Notes

(Endnotes)


2 I am reluctant to identify the city because my fieldwork is preliminary and exploratory. I also want to emphasize how the emotional dynamics at work in this city, while certainly a product of the local context, are not confined to this particular place.

3 All neighborhood and street names have been changed.

4 One could argue that distancing was at work in the years preceding the HOPE VI grant. Before the area was slated for revitalization through HOPE VI there was very little interest in the area: in fact, the city was deeply divided along racialized spatial lines. The Northside existed as a world apart from the rest of the city.

5 I suspect that residents feel shame and distress, characteristic emotions of connection. Research to date, however, has not directly asked residents how they feel about their neighborhood.

Works Cited


