CHAPTER 13

READING AND WRITING ABOUT PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACE

Whether we are in bedrooms, bathrooms, coffeehouses, classrooms, stadiums, or record stores, we are always someplace, and understanding our relationship to these places and spaces helps us better understand the world. How? By providing us tools to recognize the way the physical world influences our inner world, the way those constructing spaces might shape us, or attempt to.

In this chapter, we will talk about public and private space, architecture, and design as constructed texts as an entrée into writing about those spaces. What we mean by space is the environment created by human-made activities, including built areas, such as classrooms, stadiums, shopping malls, and dorm rooms. Architecture and design are forces that help construct these places and spaces and give them their particular personality.

In a sense, architects and designers are the authors of buildings and public spaces; they construct these texts through a series of decisions. And if you look around you, not only will you see patterns of decisions made by architects and designers, but you will also see the influence of those who pay the designers and the people who use or live in that particular space.

For example, architects may have had some leeway in designing your classroom, but their decisions about certain aspects of appearance or comfort might have been affected by construction cost, local building codes, and state educational requirements. The kind of institution you attend, whether it is a private or public university or college, probably had some impact on these decisions. The designers and architects were limited by function—putting a fireplace or a kitchen in a classroom would be inappropriate. And the designers were undoubtedly influenced by the period in which they lived; you probably can pinpoint the date within twenty years of construction based on colors, materials, and lighting. For instance, rectangular buildings built with brick or cinder blocks reflect the architectural style of the 1960s and 1970s, whereas a wooden Victorian house was probably built as much as 100 years earlier.

Such decisions also exist in corporate and retail venues. If you walk into a Starbucks, for example, you will see the results of a series of carefully made judgments: the color scheme, the décor and the lighting, the font type of the signs that describe coffee products, and where all of this is placed. It is not hard to gather from these aspects of design

that Starbucks is going for both cool and familiar in its space. They want customers to feel they are not only purchasing coffee but that they are having some unexpressed secondary experience as well. Stores like Anthropologie and Urban Outfitters and restaurants like Rain Forest Café and Hard Rock Café, all use décor, design, and detail to send a message and to create an aura.

Is it one element that creates this aura? No—it is a series of details taken together. Drawing conclusions from architectural decisions and public space is not much different than making these conclusions from reading literature; each has its own grammar, symbols, and themes that we interpret to get a picture of the work as a whole.

Here are some other things to think about when writing about public space and architecture.

There is a difference between public and private spaces, but often the two interact in important ways. We should begin by saying that when we use terms like public and private we are not referring to ownership but to *use*. There are many public places (like publicly owned land) that most people cannot easily access (some federal land for example), and there are private areas that anyone can use (like stadiums and shopping malls).

The distinctions between public and private exist even on a smaller scale, though this not what experts mean when they refer to public space exactly. We think of our homes as private, but if you share a house with one or two or three or even more people, then your private residence will have public spaces, like the living room, the kitchen, the back yard. If you share a bathroom, then that most private of places is also, in some ways, a kind of public space.

The most obvious spaces we share are places that were designed to be shared by the public like parks, quads, commons, stadiums, river walks, markets, beaches, hiking trails, campsites, libraries, and malls. These are designed to reflect our values, interests, and identities. These places are a common ground where our publicness, our civicness is expressed and even celebrated. Public spaces can and often are the social life of a community and a place where individuals connect with other individuals—the very process of which makes a public.

Depending on the space, there are going to be different rules, signs, and messages designed to communicate a variety of things for a variety of reasons. Signs and color codings on a ski slope will have one purpose, those on New York City's subway system will have another, those near the famous Cloudgate sculpture (better known as "The Bean") in Chicago's Millennium Park yet another. A courthouse is another public space, as is the DMV, with many and perhaps many confusing signs. Our behavior in these spaces is manipulated for a reason, and we often rely on time-tested powers of deduction to help make sense of order, procedures, and locations depending where we are. Public spaces rely on semiotics and our collective abilities to decode signs and symbols to ensure safety, utility, and enjoyment.

What makes for enjoyment in a public space? According to the American Planning Association, there are eight criteria for a "Great Public Space":

1. Promotes human contact and social activities.
2. Is safe, welcoming, and accommodating for all users.
3. Has design and architectural features that are visually interesting.
4. Promotes community involvement.
5. Reflects the local culture or history.
6. Relates well to bordering uses.
7. Is well maintained.
8. Has a unique or special character.[1]

As you begin your essay on public (or private) spaces, you might want to keep a checklist of these eight items. How many does your space contain? What is missing? How does the absence of one of these affect the overall enjoyment or utility of the space?

Colors and shapes often have symbolic value. Part of the grammar we wrote about earlier (color and shape) helps architects and designers speak to the public in a language they understand, either consciously or subconsciously. Psychologists have shown that particular shapes and colors have psychological effects on their viewers. Designers and architects also draw on traditional uses of color and shape, again, as a sort of grammar of construction. Of course, homeowners may think they choose certain shapes or shades because they look "pretty," or "nice," but what they mean by "pretty" is arbitrary as well. Still, it is very unlikely that the walls in your classrooms are red or black. They are probably also not adobe, wood, or steel. We venture that they are not painted in a checkerboard style or with stripes. Rather, they are probably white or off-white, neutral in some way so as not to distract you from the process of listening and learning.

Combinations of these colors and shapes often form recognizable designs that are imitated repeatedly, especially in regard to public structures that want to suggest something beyond mere functionality. For example, arches, columns, and white picket fences often symbolize ideas that transcend their simple presence—arches and columns have often stood for power and tradition, and the white picket fence stands for tradition as well, but perhaps a different kind of tradition. The Washington Monument on the National Mall in Washington, DC, is, from a functional perspective, a poor use of space. You can't do anything in there. Its significance is symbolic; accordingly, a great deal of thought went in to selecting a design that would signify the values the government wanted. You might ask yourself what values the Washington Monument embodies: Compassion? Triumph? Ambition? Femininity? Patience? As important as the structures themselves are the spaces

1 "Characteristics and Guidelines of Great Public Spaces," *American Planning Association*, n.d.

surrounding the structures. A house with a white picket fence around it is a much different text than a house with a high metal security gate enclosing it.

We associate certain kinds of structures with economic and social class—brick versus mobile homes, skyscrapers versus corrugated tin buildings, strip malls versus warehouses. Buildings and spaces are rarely just buildings and spaces. When it comes to public space, almost nothing is random. So, when you begin constructing your own papers about architecture or space, we recommend that you begin by jotting down notes in your journal about your topic. If you are writing about your campus, try to get at the associations of things like "ivy," "columns," and even the word "campus." Why do colleges often rely on Greek and Roman architectural elements? Why are there so many green and open spaces on so many campuses? Are there reasons, beyond practical ones, why campuses love big buildings? What do these connote? From there, you can begin to unpack the packed world of space and design.

Cost and community preferences often contribute to the design of a public or private space. Although most designers seek to make buildings and spaces both beautiful and useful, there are other factors that often interfere with stated goals. Cost is always an issue—people can only build what they can afford, and some materials are prohibitively expensive for a given function. Design help can also cost money, as does land, construction, and so on.

The surrounding community also plays a role in design. Community standards, often in the form of zoning laws, will have an effect on what something looks like. Zoning regulations determine the use of a particular piece of property and, depending on the locale, can also determine the size and function of what is built on that property. Even politics can help determine how something is designed. For example, at the University of Texas at Austin in the 1970s, a prominent student meeting-place was significantly altered when the administration built large planters to restrict student gatherings protesting administration policies.[2] Similarly, at the State University of New York at Binghamton, a beloved and locally famous open space in the center of campus called the Peace Quad, where students gathered to read, protest, talk, eat, and listen to music, was paved over so that a large new building could be erected in its place. Issues of class and race can also affect public and private spaces. For example, there are very few upper-class communities near industrial plants, nor does one often find a poor neighborhood that has easy access to the attractive elements of a city. Think about where Mercedes dealerships are located. In the same place that you might find the best auto repair spots? Or, think about country clubs versus public golf courses. Wine bars and dive bars?

2 Nicole Cobler, "West Mall's History Molded through Free Speech Demonstrations," *The Daily Texan* 24 Nov. 2013.

In some cases entire communities determine how a city can look. Santa Fe, New Mexico has a city ordinance that requires new buildings to have an adobe look.[3] Hilton Head, South Carolina prohibits certain kinds of signs. San Francisco, California has some prohibitions on large chains and franchises. Houston, Texas has almost no zoning restrictions, which makes it wildly inconsistent from block to block.[4] These communities are particularly aware that how a space looks can affect how we feel in that space.

Space can be manipulative, comforting, or both. Designers have conscious ideas about the world they construct, and they often think about how and where they want people involved with their work. If you have ever found yourself frustrated in a poorly designed building, you may have wondered what idiots designed the place. The design of casinos, for instance, is most interesting. Casinos have no windows and usually only one or two exits, and you almost always have to walk through the slot machines to get to them. Why might this be the case? Increasingly, many art museums make you exit through the gift shop when you have finished looking at an exhibition.

In your life, how do elements of design work? Think about sidewalks. Do they always take you where you want to go? What about doorways? Are they always at the most convenient place? In your own room, think about where you put your desk, your chairs, and your bed: What is your main concern in placing them—your convenience or someone else's? All of those decisions influence those who enter your room. Think too about most classrooms at your institution. What do they resemble? Do they create a certain mood? For example, is talking about a movie or a story different in a large classroom than in a café? Why or why not? Sometimes places are friendly to their visitors or inhabitants; others are less so, either through oversight by designers, or more deliberately, as in the case of the Peace Quad or student protest space at the universities mentioned before.

What is important to know is that your emotional reaction to certain spaces is intended. If you have been to a court, then you know that the heightened judicial bench inspires a bit of trepidation; if you have walked in a particularly beautiful cathedral, the sense of awe you feel is not arbitrary; if you enter the library of an old or prestigious university, you probably experienced a hushed sense of tradition that was designed to be elicited in you when it was still in blueprints. Why do so many fancy neighborhoods have signs or columns or arches or gates as you enter them? Why in early New England villages was the church always in the center of the town? Thus, writing about these issues means that you also need to understand the cultural work architectural and design elements do.

3 Chris Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997).

4 Fernando Ramirez, "The Weirdest Images to Come from Houston's Lack of Zoning Laws," *Houston Chronicle* 19 Aug. 2016.

Users have ways of altering landscapes that can have personal and political implications. One of these ways is through decoration. Humans love to personalize their spaces, whether it is a cubicle, an office, a dorm room, their computer desktop, or their cars. How we inhabit space is a means of establishing identity; space is a text we are always making and remaking. Think about your own spaces. Posters lining a room, particularly in the dorm rooms and bedrooms of your contemporaries, are usually there to send a message—that the inhabitant is a man or a woman, or someone concerned with music, sports, art, fashion, beer, and/or cars. Some rooms scream that the inhabitants are trying to be cool, while others ooze sophistication.

When one gets older, it is usually time to say goodbye to the rock posters, M.C. Escher prints, and the beer ads, but what to replace them with becomes a question all of us grapple with for the rest of our lives. Some people decide they have a style they feel comfortable with and make their decisions based on that; others feel their way through the process; still others delegate their design choices to someone else. However, there are effects from these decisions, whether they are intended or unintended. The space you live in—how you decorate it, your traces within it—is a kind of text that people can (and do) read to understand something about you.

Entities as large as cities can try to influence the way its inhabitants and visitors feel. If you have visited Santa Fe, for example, you know that art is everywhere—in front of the state capitol, in parks, outside buildings, in restaurants, in courtyards, in and outside of private homes. The message this sends is not simply that Santa Fe and its residents like to decorate their landscape, but that it is a place that values art, how things look, and how art makes you feel. Salem, Massachusetts, with its gabled houses, restored wooden buildings, and American colonial feel, strives for what we might call New England charm. The abundance of art sends a message of sophistication, worldliness, and a progressiveness that is welcoming. You may not always be conscious of it, but spaces that pay close attention to design and beauty probably make you feel good.

Of course, there can also be a gap between what the occupant of the space wants to suggest and what is actually suggested—in this way, spaces can be revealing texts. Knowing about space will help you not only be better readers of someone else's space, but may also help you avoid pitfalls of constructing unwelcoming space yourself. You may think that posters of near-naked women reclining on cars are cool, or you may think black mammy figurines are quaint, or you may like photos of guns and hunting, but there will be a sizeable audience out there who might wonder about you and your values based on how you arrange and decorate your space.

Other elements can change the landscape in ways not imagined by designers. Graffiti alters the public landscape, and so does public art. Neglect can change public space, as well as new construction surrounding a previous design. How we use and design space gives some indication of our personality, among other things. Walking

into someone's dorm room, office, or living room gives us a clue of who they are (and who they think they are) (and who they want you to think they are). When you walk into a business, you also receive some indication of how they view themselves. For example, compare the interior at McDonald's to a fancy restaurant, or to a TGI Fridays, Applebee's, or Chili's; the interiors and exteriors are littered with clues about what these places think they are about. Similarly, how do Mexican restaurants tell us that they serve Mexican food? How do Chinese restaurants create an "Asian" setting? Think too about the way movies and television shows set scenes; often the settings of movies give us an indication of how we're supposed to view the characters. In *Modern Family, Big Bang Theory*, or *Friends*, for example, we see the presence of couches, bright lighting, the expensive, clean homes (in the case of *Friends*, far too expensive for New Yorkers their age) as clues to how we are supposed to relate to them. If you ever watched *Roseanne* or *The King of Queens* you see an entirely different representation of private and public space.

Public spaces are especially curious in this way. Dams completely alter natural environments, flooding entire valleys. Roads paved through forests bring cars and tourists and pollution. In urban areas, for example, some public parks have become centers for both drug use and needle exchange programs—no doubt a very different use of public space than was intended. We leave our imprint everywhere. And, just as we make our rooms or cubicles our own, so, too, do we make public space our own—for better or worse.

Ultimately, the space that surrounds us says a number of things about that particular location—who inhabits that space, what the space is used for, and how we are to read that space. Additionally, we can discern a great deal about what kinds of spaces or buildings are important given the amount and kind of space devoted to them. As you read this chapter, think about how certain spaces force you to interpret the world in a certain way, and as you write your papers, work on combining your own observations about spaces with solid research so that your arguments are strengthened by two kinds of authority—subjective experience and objective data.

Technology Has Changed What We Think of as "Public Space." When we wrote the first version of this book back in 2000, we might not have thought of the internet or your laptop or a phone as public space. But the popularity and penetration of social media has changed what we think of as "public" and what we think of as "space." Facebook is now a kind of public space—as are Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and Tumblr. In fact, the whole notion of *posting*, is, at its core, about making things public; the term comes from the physical act of mailing or putting up posters. In this way, they make a claim for a type of spatial representation.

These spaces are also aware of design and utility. If Facebook was not easy to use, it would not be so popular. Cyberspace is all about ease, pleasure, and efficiency. We hang

out online, we shop online, we look for romantic partners online, we play games online, we even have long conversations online because they are often easier than doing the physical equivalent. The internet and other social media sites have become a new commons.

But like any public space, cyberspace and the internet have their issues. There is crowding, rudeness, bullying, arrogance, and simple annoyance. Facebook has created an entirely new ethos about how we communicate, share information, and divulge information. People now announce divorces over Facebook, as well as new jobs, harassment, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, sexual desires, outrage, dissent, and fear. As many of you have experienced, people seem more willing to express themselves publicly in a cyberspace like Facebook than in an actual physical setting like a car or a restaurant or a café.

How people choose to represent themselves—both in written language and in visual language (emojis, photos, stickers)—can say a lot about them but also, perhaps, what they think of you. In our chapters on fashion and gender we talk about the composition of the self, and this extends to the space of the internet. Indeed, reading others in cyberspace is itself a complex process of decoding, and writing about how cyberspace and public space interact and intersect will prove one of the most intriguing activities over the next several decades.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN WRITING ABOUT PUBLIC SPACE

Features: How does the space integrate with building design, scale, architecture, and proportionality to create interesting visual experiences, views, or interaction? Does it facilitate multiple uses? Is it accessible via walking, biking, or public transit?

Design and accessibility: Does the space reflect the community's local character and personality? Does it foster social engagement and create a sense of community? Does it encourage interaction among a diverse cross section of the public? Is it safe? Is it well signed? Is it fun?

Shapes: What are some of the dominant shapes you see in a public space or building? Do they symbolize anything to you? Are they supposed to? Do they remind you of other shapes in other spaces? How do the shapes relate to the space's use?

Colors: What are the dominant colors? What emotions do they evoke? Why? How would the space or architecture change if the color changed? How does the color relate to the space's use?

Size: How big is this place? How does this affect the way you view it, and the feelings it inspires? Is there a way to change the size to evoke different feelings? In what ways do the space's or architecture's size relate to its use?

Use: What is the use of this particular space or architecture? How do we know from the elements you see? Do you see unintended uses that might result from this construction? Do you see an emphasis on practicality or ornament in this space?

Interaction between architecture and space: How do the two work together? What elements in the architecture affect the way the space is constructed? Are there ways of changing this interaction?

Overall beauty: What is your general view of the place's beauty? What standards or criteria do you find yourself relying on?

Emotional response: What is your overall emotional response to this place? Why? What elements contribute to this response? What elements could you change that might provoke a different response?

Overall statement: What do you think this space or architecture says? What is it trying to say? How might any gap between what it says and is trying to say be bridged?

A QUICK GUIDE TO WRITING ABOUT PUBLIC SPACE

A few things you might think about as you write your paper:

Define your space: Figure out exactly where you are writing about.

Note materials and colors: Writing about public space is often focused on the details, and these details often give some insight on the intentions of the designers.

Observe how people use the space: Observing and thinking about the ways people use a space—perhaps in unintended ways—can help us to understand whether the space works or in what ways it works.

Brainstorm/freewrite about the space either at the space or soon after visiting.

Getting your impressions down early makes it easier to write.

Think of a thesis and paragraph ideas before starting to write. It will make the first draft easier.

PUBLIC SPACE: THE GENRES

Personal Narrative

Relationships to space can be personal. In fact, Yi-Fu Tuan, a geography scholar, believes that relationships make space into place; in his view, spaces become places when they become imbued with meaning.[5] So one possibility is to write an essay on how a space that seemed abstract to you became someplace familiar.

5 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997).

First choose your place and write about how you encountered it.

Then write about how you experience it now.

To make it an essay that has a wider audience, you have to explain why people might care about what you have found. You can do this through a number of ways, including writing about how your relationship with a place might relate to others by their affiliations.

Photo Essay

One of the great things about having phones with cameras is the ability to take photos as you encounter worthy subjects. Using cameraphones to document a place as a means to writing about it can be useful.

Photo essays can be about one place—a classroom, a university building, a restaurant, a bedroom, a car—or they can be about a series of places—stops on a road trip, gyms or fitness centers, supermarkets, convenience stores. They help document a place, but such documentation also needs your interpretations; good photo essays have an argument.

In a photo essay, you need 1) a subject, 2) different images of the same place or images of a variety of places, 3) text to accompany photos, and 4) an argument.

1. When taking photos, make sure you take many versions of the same place. Professional photographers take hundreds of photos of their subjects; a dozen or so for each of your subjects will work.
2. Make sure you keep notes about *when* and *where* you took the photo, as well as *what* the subject is.
3. Privacy law is very forgiving to photographers in the United States; photographers can take photo of almost any subject as long as they or it are in public view, including private buildings as long as they are visible from a public perspective.[6] So don't worry about the *legality* of taking photos. Instead think about the ethics around doing so, which centers around one large question: does this person want her or his photograph taken? Does the person know he or she is being photographed? Will they be harmed if the photo is public?
4. You can use Microsoft Word or PowerPoint or the web to make a photo essay. The web also has a number of services that allow you to easily construct a photo essay.
5. The most important thing in a photo essay is that it has a definitive point or argument that an audience can understand. The thesis can be subtle or broad, but it definitely has to exist.

Space/Building Analysis

When architects and designers make buildings, they want them to say something. Sometimes this message is visible boldly as in a skyscraper or more subtly in the shapes of rooms or the amount and content of windows or the types of sinks in a bathroom.

6 Bert P. Krages II, "The Photographer's Right," *Bert P. Krages II*, http://www.krages.com/phoright.htm.

Both architectural critics and casual observers may have opinions on what the architectural message is or whether the architect has achieved her aims. You can also perform this work by making an argument about a building or space on 1) what you think it is trying to say and 2) what it actually says.

People differ on how important authorial intent is when analyzing a text; some think it's important to figure out what an author says, while others think that the text itself and what it says is more important. Like many critics, we think that *both* are worth considering: a space or building contains elements that its author or authors may not have considered, including developments after a building was planned or constructed, nearby spaces and/or places, unexpected uses for the space/place and so on.

To write about a building or space, first take notes. What does the building look like? What part of the space are you writing about? What colors and shapes are most prominent? Are the ceilings tall? What architectural details stand out? This notetaking has two purposes—one is to construct evidence for your paper, and the other is to help you actually come up with an argument.

Once you take notes, see if there is an argument to make or at least a question to ask of the building (beyond "what is this building trying to say?"). Then begin writing. Once you are a draft in, think about your argument again, and revise your paragraphs according to the argument.

Researched Paper

Writing about a space or place through research is similar to the process of analysis—finding a space or place or building, taking notes on it, and coming up with an argument. The difference is finding a research lens or angle (see pp. 35–36) to examine the space. Some angles could include race, class, and gender; others might include sustainability; further research might be on the type of space/place/building, for example on universities, convenience stores, and so on.

Once you have figured out the research angle and the text, focus on making sure readers can see the building or space through your description, that the research angle is well defined, and that you relate the text to the research angle. If you were to write about your cafeteria for example, and chose your postmodern architecture as your angle, then you write a paper that first describes the cafeteria, explains what postmodernism is, and then shows how the cafeteria fits into this category. Or using the same text, the cafeteria, you could research what designers are taking into account when designing them, and see if your cafeteria fits in that category. Or you could write about gender and race, and whether the cafeteria has aspects that seem particularly male or white.

In all of these cases, description is really important; you should be careful to show as much or more as you tell.

OTHER ESSAY IDEAS

Building as Analogy

Find a building you want to write about. Does it remind you of something besides a building in 1) its physical construction; 2) the emotional response it encourages; 3) its purpose; or 4) its structure? In what way are these disparate elements alike? Different? What does the analogy in general say about commonalities of texts generally?

Emotional Response

Walk around a building or a public area such as a mall or your school's common area. What do you feel? What about the place makes you feel such an emotion? Are these effects intended or unintended?

Commercial versus Artistic

What dominates this particular building or space—its artistic aspects or commercial ones? Or do the two work together?

Your Favorite Place

If possible, analyze a place you feel close to and figure out why you feel that way. Is there a theme attached to this place? How would you describe the décor? The architecture? Do you feel that your attachment to this place—or places like it—is unique?

Does This Building or Space "Work"?

Find a place—do you think it succeeds on its own terms? What are its terms—what criteria is it trying to fulfill? Does is succeed? Why or why not?

The Person from the Space

Go to an office or a dorm room or car, or some place that "belongs" to someone. What can you tell about this person from the space? How did you arrive at your judgments? Are there other ways to interpret the information?

The Common Element

Compare similar spaces. What makes them similar? What are their differences? What do their differences or similarities say about this type of space?

Your Campus

Your campus is a probably a compelling public space. If it is a public institution, then it is both a public space and a space for the public. Walk around your campus, paying attention to its entrances, its signs, its means and manner of communication. What messages does it send? Does your campus make an argument?

Cyberspace

Take the instructions we gave you for reading built public space and apply those to cyberspace. Offer a semiotic reading of Facebook or Tumblr or Instagram. Or a chat area of a video game. How does a website try to be a public space? What does it do to invite you in and make you feel at home?

Additional Essays

- Write an essay on your favorite (or least favorite) building in the town where you live. What values does the building have?
- Write a paper in which you compare an older building (built before 1920) with a building built more recently (after 1960). How do the two buildings create values? How do they send messages about their contexts?
- Write a paper in which you examine two very different spaces, like a town square and a college campus, or a playground and a bar. How do the spaces compare? How do they differ?
- Take some photographs of areas you think are particularly rural. Now give close readings of the photos in which you demonstrate how and why these images evince ruralness.
- Write a comparison/contrast essay in which you decode some of the images from this essay with some of the images of street art and urban landscapes. How are urban and rural vistas different? Are there any similarities?
- Find some old representations of rural landscapes—paintings, drawings, photographs—and write an essay in which you unpack the associations you have with the iconography of rural areas.
- Find an environment where gender and space interact. What about the space you describe makes it connect to the particular gender?
- Think about other public spaces or buildings where separation of people into genders, races, or classes is built into the design. (Hint: Think of places where people spend more or less money to sit in different places.) Write a paper that addresses this question.
- Look at several dorm rooms or apartments of friends both male and female. Write a short paper that discusses which elements in particular define these spaces as particularly male or female.
- Look at other things that are gendered, such as advertisements, clothing, and cars. How do these gendered texts compare to the gendered spaces you described earlier? What elements do designers of any text use to designate gender? Write a paper that ties gendered space to another gendered text.
- Take some photographs, but as you are doing so, document what you are thinking about while you take them. Write about this experience.

- Give a semiotic reading of your campus. You can either read the campus as a whole—making an argument that it sends a specific kind of message—or, you can read a specific part as a microcosm (a small thing that functions as a symbol or encapsulation of something larger).
- Write an essay on how the commercial and the educational merge at your institution.
- Does your campus have commercial enterprises run by outside vendors? Are there advertisements in rooms, in dorms or on campus elsewhere? In what ways does that affect the campus atmosphere, if at all? Does it detract from the stated mission of your university?
- Find some aspect of your campus that seems nontraditional in its construction or use and give a reading of that space. You might consider off-campus housing, a virtual classroom, a space that merges with the community, or even a new dorm. What makes this place nontraditional?
- Write about the college campus as a public place. What makes a campus public? Should a private university be a public place?

RESOURCES

There are a lot of resources about public space and architecture online, but there may be a divide between organizations that regularly cover these subjects, which include the *New York Times*, *Slate*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and many other outlets, and advocacy organizations or practicing architects or planners. This division may make sorting out information that is useful for a writing project a bit more challenging. Two sites, the *Atlantic*'s City Lab and Citiscope, both cover urban architecture and public space regularly.

Books

These are books that you might find useful for research or just for expanding your knowledge about public space and architecture.

Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein. *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*. This book explains the concept of grammar as it applies to building.

Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. This book explains how a government administrator can not only have an enormous impact on the public space and architecture of a city but also on its people.

Grady Clay, *Close Up: How to Read the American City*. The book talks about some of the things you need to know in order read and interpret the city.

Richard Florida. *The Rise of the Creative Class And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. Florida is an often-cited expert on the move back to cities by young professionals.

Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life*. This book explores gender and housing.

Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. This book explores the history of suburbia in the United States.

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs's book is a classic—many of her observations about city life in the 1950s and 1960s have been shown to be true.

Peter Katz et al. 1994. *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*. This book was one of the first to talk about ways of revitalizing housing and community in the city in the post-1970s downturn in urban living.

Setha M. Low and Neil Smith, eds., *The Politics of Public Space*. This collection explores the politics of public space.

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*. This is one of the first books to celebrate non-classical architecture as interesting, relevant, and good on its own terms.

SAMPLE ESSAY

Consider the Moon Pie: Reading and Writing about the Road

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American popular culture is obsessed with the road, as witnessed by the enormous output of writers and movie-makers across time and place. Such works range from the Jack Kerouac classic *On the Road* to Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *The Road* to movies like *Thelma and Louise* and *Easy Rider* and the Bob Hope–Bing Crosby road movies (e.g., *The Road to Rio, The Road to Morocco*), not to mention John Ford's adaptation of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Earlier works that focus on movement could also be classified as road narratives; they include diaries by those crossing the Oregon Trail, letters by African American migrants from the South to the North, and accounts by Native Americans regarding the Trail of Tears; even many narratives by the Puritans have elements of later conceptions of the road in them. When reading these accounts, we often get a sense of both identity and continuity that mark movement in the United States.

As these examples illustrate, the road in American culture is well traveled. Accordingly, in writing about such a familiar and mythic place, one might feel insecure about the ability to say anything new—such a feeling applies not only to the road—but also other familiar topics as well. One way to approach such a subject is to simply discuss what we see; taking what we observe and analyzing it rather than worrying about trying to understand all of a subject is a way around this issue. It does not mean ignoring context, but it does mean relying on one's power of observation as the *primary* source of content. In other words, we can write our own road stories.

In the summer of 2007, I drove from Connecticut, where my parents live, to Santa Fe, New Mexico, making several stops along the way. I took photographs at every stop I made in an attempt to document what kinds of messages we encounter as we drive across the country. Following are some examples of photographs that make some statements about the road, my encounter with it, and perhaps some larger truths associated with travel as well. I should note here that these photos are just a few of the hundred or so I took, and that my goal in writing about the road was to combine my photography with analysis; such an approach requires *choosing*. Had I been required to write about

all my photos and all my stops, there is no guarantee that I would have been able to come up with a coherent narrative.

My approach also reflects a particular way of traveling across the country. Some like to move slowly, stopping at tourist destinations along the way, or pacing themselves by traveling only a short way each day. Some like to motor down the interstate in RVs, whereas others stick to the "Blue Highways," the national and state highways that preceded the Interstate, as termed by William Least Heat-Moon. And some like to travel like I did this time, at a hectic pace, marked by stops to visit friends, but with very little interaction with the culture beyond the road itself. Regardless of whether one stops to get to know a people or a place, signs, buildings, towns, people, and even the landscape seem to want to be looked at. Indeed, why would anything constructed near or along a road want to be *ignored*? Because traveling along a road presents a myriad of semiotic moments, traveling by road is always accompanied by a perpetual act of reading. In making this journey I found that I was reminded how much consumption was part of travel, how variable and dominant the landscape is on the road, and how signs marked the landscape in a variety of ways. But I also found that my interpretations seem unstable in that they seemed to come from this particular trip (and reading of such).

CONSUMPTION

FIGURE 13a

Food is an essential part of travel. Westward travelers used to have to pack supplies in order to make the journey, though very quickly markets were created to cater to travelers. Now, we have convenience stores and travel stops. For many travelers, the accessibility of food of both good nutrition or less so is an enjoyable part of venturing across the country. Consider the (Fig. 13a) Moon Pie. It is not a national brand; you can find it mostly in the Midwest and the South, and so a hardy traveler venturing forth is buoyed by the find of this delectable mix of banana-flavor coating, cakelike filling, and marshmallow. (It is funny, too, that it bills itself as "The Only One On The Planet!" given the fact that one chooses one Moon Pie among a display of many.) I also like the universality of the moon in the Moon Pie—the sky is one constant in traveling, and often a way of marking one's progress across the country is by the different views we have of the sky and the horizon.

Although it is often home to the delectable Moon Pie, the travel center itself (Fig. 13b) goes beyond the convenience and corner store in that it is also a center of

FIGURE 13b

symbolic consumption. Until recently, most were associated with one gasoline brand and that's it. But here we see the trend of collaborating with other national brands, in this case, Dairy Queen. This particular center is devoted to nostalgia—note the Route 66 sign, which refers to the most romantic of former roads that was consonant with the first wave of pleasure road trips out west, as well as the path for migrants from Oklahoma to California during the Dust Bowl. Originally cutting a path from Chicago to Los Angeles, Route 66 has been replaced by I-40. You cannot see it well, but Phillips 66 is behind the 1950s-inspired sign. This particular sign intentionally evokes the romanticized image of Route 66 that writers like Lisa Mahar document. (Note, too, the faux space-age arrow seemingly straight out of the 1950s, an arrow that was supposed to signify progress. Now it points back to itself; it's a symbol of the future that harks back to the past.)

The travel stop is also a monument to American commercialism. Here, more than 100 bottles of electrolyte drink are displayed in a scene that seems a form of deliberately constructed commercial beauty. My own view here is mediated by the photographs of Andres Gursky, particularly his *99 Cent*, a photograph of a convenience store in Los Angeles. The bigger question is: can anyone be *that* thirsty? But the prominence of these drinks also might signal the transition to the Desert Southwest, where people worry about dehydration.

To me, the Moon Pie, Route 66, and Gatorade drinks in figures 13a–13c form a triptych of road consumption, symbolizing the plenty one can find on the road, as well as the way images speak to us in unexpected—and sometimes unexpectedly beautiful—ways.

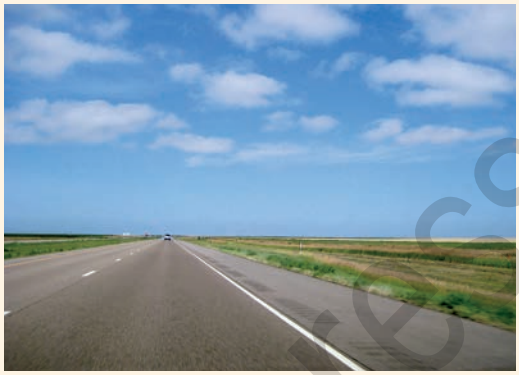
FIGURE 13c

LANDSCAPE

Roads frame landscapes by guiding travelers through a particular area; they then become part of what they frame, as the associated parts—guardrails, medians, exit signs, and others, not to mention the podlike businesses that surround the exits—become part of the landscape itself. In other words, the discussion about landscape actually began in the previous section. The road's landscape is also framed, however, by the response of its travelers. For some, highways are anonymous, empty routes that exist only as means of travel to one's destination. For others, seeing unfamiliar landscapes, even if they bracket a long, relatively unchanged road, is part of the exploration of travel.

A familiar landscape to one traveler might be exotic to another. Witness my own traveling through the mid-section of the country. For those who grow up on the coasts, the sheer flatness and vision of the land can be both breathtaking and, in the case of weather, a little frightening. Shown are two shots taken from the road—the first (Fig. 13d) driving north in Arkansas, and the second (Fig. 13e) on I-70 in Kansas.

For me, someone who grew up in Connecticut, where the horizon is hidden by trees, the big sky and flat plains are fascinating and beautiful. They suggest the openness so commonly associated with the West and westward expansion, a hypnosis-inducing means of crossing the country. But to others, they are just the background of daily living. When I was in graduate school in Texas, I took my first journey across West Texas on my way to Colorado to visit a friend. I was buoyed by the beauty of landscape throughout my travel, but I thought the cotton fields outside of Lubbock were



FIGURES 13d & 13e

particularly beautiful. I expressed this thought to a clerk at a convenience store, who demanded to know where I was from.

"Connecticut," I said.

She responded by saying something to the effect of "It's beautiful there. This is ugly."

SIGNS

Signs are literal markers on a highway, telling its travelers what to do (drive a speed limit, slow down, change lanes) or where to go (St. Louis, Exit 287, north). But signs are also signs of a different sort—they can be unpacked to show some of the idiosyncrasies of road travel. Fig. 13f, taken off I-70 in Utah, illustrates the many possibilities one might choose to view the landscape. Standing in the rest area, an arbitrary location carved out in this case to view the scenery, there is no possibility that one will go the wrong way. So when looking backward, I was struck by the repetition of a sign that seems superfluous in contrast to a "beautiful landscape."

FIGURE 13f

FIGURES
13g, 13h
& 13i

For those who find direct religious expression difficult to process, landscape combined with religious signage sends several coded messages. Is the sign in Fig. 13g referring to the afterlife, or this particular place? Is Hell an emotional state, or a destination? Maybe this sign is also about travel of a different sort.

And then we have signs that reveal much about the country we live in, such as the Homeland Security sign taken in a rest stop in Richfield, Utah (Fig. 13h). Such a sign could reveal the political leanings of the owner—not necessarily a statement of risk.

The signs in Fig. 13i suggest a great deal of options traveling across the country, a mix of various routes, subroutes, and in the case of Route 66, historic or even nostalgic routes. When approaching this intersection, knowing how (and not only where) one is going seems imperative.

FIGURES
13j & 13k

And then we have these signs marking a bathroom in Utah (Fig. 13j), signaling the sort of universality of highway travel—bathrooms where distinction is both signified by inclusion of all three possible restroom symbols (and certainly a throwback—the symbol for the women does not reflect any sort of standard of female dress in the twenty-first century).

Although this is not actually a street sign (Fig. 13k), the bear and the hedges do reveal through a close reading some of the concerns of this rest stop in Grand Junction, Colorado. The bear is native to the area, but also a symbol of wildness and, more important, of nature itself. In a way, so are the hedges next to the bear, on top of a constructed stone wall, in front of manicured grass. But taken together, they suggest a manicured nature, perhaps the nature that travelers prefer to encounter. Taken as a whole, this photograph also reminds the traveler of his or her own home as well as the pull of nature.

Another trip down another road might engender an entirely different semiotic experience and a different interpretation. The cultural and visual rhetoric of the road is always active, although because it is stationary, it may feel passive. However, we are the ones for whom the road and its many texts are designed. Paying attention to the various associations bears, signs and products carry may help us understand how the road tries to determine its own interpretation.