

Public Transgressions

ALEX ARBUCKLE

I miss my dogs. Even though I took a spontaneous bus trip home just last weekend to see Jet and Lucy, their fuzzy mugs are already fading from my memory. Jet, a poodle, is almost twelve years old. His black hair has faded to silver, his eyes have gone milky, and his hips keep giving out. Lucy, a feisty, squirmy little white runt, had a seizure a few days before I visited. Our last dog died from seizures. So now I sit in the cold on a piss-drenched bench in the Washington Square Park dog run, all alone, reaching out to pat canine strangers that trot by me. I try to remain invisible. I'm hoping none of the dogs' owners realize that I am here without a dog, that I am here only to elicit companionship. I hope I don't get kicked out. I didn't read the rules of the dog run, but I'm pretty sure that by being here alone, I'm subject to criticism for misusing this public space.

I can hear the lively sounds of a four-piece jazz band coming from the other side of the dog run's chain-link fence. From my position, I can barely see the heads of the musicians rising over the lip of the great, empty fountain where they've set up. The bass player, trumpeter, guitarist and singer are all crowded together on the pedestal that houses the central jets of the fountain, facing out to the four corners of the park as if they're performing in the bowl of a great arena. In the warmer months, this fountain would be gushing water—a well-engineered place for people to cool off, splash around, take pictures. But when the temperatures dip below freezing, the fountain cannot serve its purpose. Yet people find a use for it. Band shell, ball field, roller rink—the users of the park breathe life into an ostensibly useless structure.

It's the people, not the park itself, that make Washington Square Park an attractive place. Sure, the great marble arch at the north end is magnificently picturesque, and many of the passing tourists simply snap a photo of it and move on. But the inhabitants of the park, the regulars—not my walk to class, not even my doggy issues—are what bring me back time and time again. There's the pale, filthy "pigeon whisperer," always seated on a bench on the western walkway, covered in cooing birds. There are the "drug dealers," men

in heavy parkas urgently whispering “smoke smoke” to passersby—their titles must be put in quotations because they are rumored to be undercover narcs dealing under the NYPD’s surveillance. There’s the accordionist in the home-made Boba Fett mask who plays theme songs from video games and always gets a dollar from me, and there’s the a cappella group that always gathers a large and appreciative crowd under the arch on sunny afternoons.

The park’s attractive vibe, created by people, has been around for a while, though not as long as you might think. The site, which lies just east of what used to be Minetta Brook, served as farmland, a public burial ground, and a military parade ground before being turned into a public park. In 1892, the arch was erected to honor the centennial of George Washington’s inauguration. For the first half of the twentieth century, the park’s character was nothing like it is in the present day. For many years, Fifth Avenue did not stop at the park; it ran right through the arch and around the central fountain. The fountain, now used as a gathering place and an impromptu concert hall, was once a traffic-choked rotary. But when infamous city planner Robert Moses and the forces of urban renewal threatened to increase traffic through the park and even run an elevated train line through it, the nearby residents fought for its preservation. Led by Greenwich Village activist Shirley Hayes, the “Save our Square!” movement eventually succeeded in closing off the square to all auto traffic, clearing an area for people to use as they pleased. The park became famous as a mecca for folksingers, Beatniks, and various sub-sects of the ’50s and ’60s counterculture. Through use, it attained a mythic character that lingers—and continues to be revised—today.

Not all public spaces seem to be so organic. In her essay “Design and Discipline: The Legend of an Urban Park,” Blagovesta Momchedjikova examines the origins and present state of Robert Moses’s failed masterpiece, Flushing Meadows Corona Park. Covering a massive 1,255 acres in the geographical center of New York City, Moses’s magnum opus was built over a vast dump, used during two World’s Fairs and kept as a public park, but today stands nearly empty and unused. Momchedjikova explains how the park—vast, flat, uncomfortably rectilinear—was a product of Moses’s efforts to impose his own conception of “ideal order” on the city (215). Like all public spaces, the park is designed to support its intended purpose: recreation, or more specifically, Moses’s program of “rest through exercise” (212). Moses felt that public parks should be places for “active, wholesome play,” rather than contemplative strolls (213). Not surprisingly, few people ascribed to Moses’s philosophy, and the park remains disused. Personally, I prefer Central Park. My first visit there this fall was spectacular—it was the first time I’d

seen terrain in weeks. I sat at the foot of a rocky outcropping and watched a turtle sunbathe for nearly an hour. It was exactly what I needed—a bucolic oasis inside the city, not a synthetically planned “recreation area.” Momchedjikova contrasts the desolation of Corona Park with a small patch of no-man’s land just outside its northwest perimeter that’s full of people picnicking, playing sports, and socializing. The local residents have appropriated this space to serve their own needs, rather than the needs Moses—or anyone else—could impose on them.

Though Momchedjikova casts Moses as a kind of tyrannical mad scientist, we must remember that as a city planner, he faced a difficult dilemma: defining recreation, and in turn defining a space. When taxpayers’ dollars are spent on urban development, everything must be constructed with a purpose, a definition. This is not to say that structures must adhere to their original intended uses, though. Today’s Washington Square Park is vivacious, well-known, and well-loved, yet it has nothing to do with honoring our first president. It has amicably separated from its distant history in favor of a new life for the people of today.

But the people of the present are also picky and unpredictable. Wandering east of Washington Square Park on a sunny day, I found a spot in which the people of the present were conspicuously absent. It was Cooper Triangle, a lonely little piece of geometry wedged in the place where the Bowery diverges into Third and Fourth Avenues. Lingering in the shadow of the old Cooper Union building, it also seems threatened by the brand-new, bombastically modern Cooper Union building across the street. After cautiously hopping my way across a series of narrow concrete islands buffeted by rushing tides of traffic, I beheld the Triangle in all its modest glory. Enconced by an ancient wrought-iron fence with a single gate, the small park contains a few decrepit benches and a gleaming marble and bronze monument to businessman/politician/philanthropist Peter Cooper. As I walked through the gate, I noticed that the park was deserted, save for a statuesque homeless man hunched on a bench. It was lunch hour on a warm day, and I wondered why this park wasn’t filled with picnickers like Washington Square would be.

There are reasons. Washington Square is a sizable space that dominates the narrow streets and inconspicuous buildings around it; Cooper Triangle is hardly noticeable, jammed as it is between wide, high-speed arterial streets and much more impressive structures. Washington Square is easily accessible from all four sides and all four corners; access to Cooper Triangle, located in a mostly commercial area in the East Village, requires a daredevil dash across

three lanes of traffic. Cooper's funerary monument is dwarfed by the marvels of engineering and architecture that his Union has produced. The arch, though hardly used to celebrate Washington, continues to draw the imagination, secure in its grandness. Cooper Triangle is empty, tomb-like, frozen over, clinging to an antiquated purpose better served by the neighboring structures. It is difficult to imagine the place as anything but an awkward wedge.

Perhaps if it were more accessible or inviting, Cooper Triangle could become what Jonathan Lethem calls a "functional ruin" (73). Lethem applies this term to Brooklyn's Hoyt-Schermerhorn subway station in his essay "Speak, Hoyt-Schermerhorn," in which he supplements a historical and textual review of the station with personal meditations on its place in his memory. After describing how the station's unique "ghost platform" took on a new life in films such as *The Warriors* and *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*, Lethem describes the ways in which the subway station acted as a teaching tool for him. The sordid stories accumulated in the tunnels painted a picture for Lethem of a "reckless, wide-open" world of crime, fear, misfortune, adultery, and death (75). But Lethem makes an important distinction: it wasn't the station itself, "an indifferent home to clockwork chaos," that molded his worldview; it was the way people behaved in the crime-ridden station—with suspicion, caginess, and contagious unease (73). He learned from the "successive human moments" that form the "density of meanings" in the station—its *vibe* (78). Purpose does not exist without people, nor does the transcendence of purpose. It is only through the tides of time and humanity that a site becomes meaningful.

In the past few years a new activity has emerged that subverts and redefines the purposefulness of sites altogether: *parkour*, also known as freerunning or tracing. In a 2008 YouTube highlight reel posted by a New York City group of teenage parkour practitioners called The Twisted Traceurs, they make their way through parks, playgrounds, apartment building courtyards, and other public locations by running, leaping, vaulting, flipping, rolling, spinning, and surmounting obstacles in a deft and daring style. Kids with names like Dave and Gilbert topple the established uses of their environment and recast it for their own purposes. A flight of stairs becomes a launching pad. A bike rack becomes a stepping stone. A picnic table becomes a challenge. Through their daring practice, the Traceurs give new meaning to everyday structures, and also create new avenues of memory—*that picnic table is where I tried and failed and tried again; that wall is where I faced my fears; that rail is where I got this scar*. The last few frames of the video show the Traceurs

training in a gym. They work with diligence, determination and discipline. They work with passion and honesty. Their subversion of public space is not simply an act of spontaneous youthful rebellion, but an act of self-creation. In finding a new purpose for a site, they find purpose in themselves.

What they do in the gym is interesting, but not nearly as spectacular or exciting as what they do in the outside world. In the gym, they're doing what they're supposed to do; in public places they're misbehaving. They do not accept the implicit social contract or acquiesce to the quiet wishes of architecture. They cartwheel over any designer's notion of "social control" and leapfrog over the strictures of public decorum (Momchedjikova 211). Like a dogless man in a dog park or a motionless man on the hectic Hoyt-Schermerhorn platform, they elicit attention, or perhaps negative attention, surmounting established purpose and protocol—for deciding not to stay invisible.

Cooper Triangle may be a forsaken site, but Peter Cooper's statue would be great for wall flips—and now that I think of it, it is a perfect spot to get away from people. There's really no such thing as "using it wrong," to use Lethem's phrase (79). The Washington Square Park dog run, on paper, is a fenced-off, grassless area for neighborhood residents to unleash their dogs. But for me, it is a therapist's couch, a friend's shoulder, a mouthful of chocolate. It's a public space where I can worry about Jet and Lucy and wait my turn to scratch a feisty puppy behind the ears and rub its belly.

WORKS CITED

- Lethem, Jonathan. "Speak, Hoyt-Schermerhorn: Doom and Romance on a Subway Platform." *Harper's Magazine*. Dec. 2004: 73-79. Web. 22 Feb. 2010.
- Momchedjikova, Blagovesta. "Design and Discipline: The Legend of an Urban Park." *Writing the Essay: Art in the World, The World Through Art*. 8th ed. Ed. Darlene A. Forrest, Randy Martin, Pat C. Hoy II, and Benjamin W. Stewart. New York: McGraw, 2009. 209-16. Print.
- New York Parkour The Twisted Traceurs*. Perf. Dave, Gilbert, Tony, et al. TwistedTraceursMedia. *YouTube*, 10 July 2008. Web. 23 Feb. 2010.

134 - MERCER STREET