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ENCOUNTER POINTS: Corner

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, March 22nd, 2017

About corners as "master figure" of encounter point experience.

The word corner is often used in various expressions that refer to a *constrainin*g situation such as "to be cornered" and "painting oneself in a corner," to an *orienting* location such "at the corner of this and that street," or to a *securing* familiar location such as "… at the local corner store," "around the corner from," etc…

On the other hand, thoughts or images of coziness *and warmth* are usually associated with a protective physical corner of sorts, be it at fireside or in a cozy place such as the classic "breakfast nook," etc.

Gaston Bachelard, in his *La poétique de l'espace*, stipulates on the corners' power to suggest solitude by imaginary association with huddling or cuddling and, as such, to represent the embryonic figure of a room … of a home.

Given the corner's imagined support to an individual's physical security, identity and well being … and the concomitant awareness by that individual of being one with it, the corner can be considered a ***master figure*** *of encounter point experiences.*

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As the French poet Noël Arnaud puts it:

"Je suis l'espace où je suis"

"**I am the space where I am"**

"**Open corner" versus "closed corner".**

To what degree is a corner a "space" to be one with, as the poet senses?

Let us establish a difference here between an "*open corner" one can enter and feel"inside" of and occupy, and a "closed corner" one can only be, and feel, "outside" of, with no space to comfortably claim.*

An *open corner* is the most familiar type: an angle formed by two intersecting walls presenting something like *"welcoming arms"*, while the *closed corner* is its opposite: formed by two intersecting walls presenting something like *a "projecting elbow"*.

Depending on their social context and their physical configuration, these two basic types of corners express opposite relations to space and to others: ***the open corner inviting poetic identification and inclusion while the closed corner seemingly impervious to these relations*** *as illustrated in the following examples.*

In the feature image, a still frame from Antonioni's film **L'Eclisse,* the soldier's position with his back leaning against the edge of a closed corner, together with his posture at half-attention, express e*xpectation* of some desirable contact, e*xposure* to potential undesirable contact and perhaps e*xclusion* from civil contact in general, were it not for *the comforting sociability of the street light!*

In the image below, we have the extreme example of a homeless man hiding his face and squatting in a pathetic begging posture, against a closed corner by the entry to a 24/7 pharmacy. That man stands to freeze by evening at -1F, if not rescued by the Police doing its rounds to pick up such helpless persons. The blind and striated corner wall reinforces its aloofness above little expectation of social generosity, certain exposure to harsh climate and to social marginality if not exclusion.

closed corner mini drama

Corner based encounter point experiences in the public domain.

I wish to discuss here a pair building entrances at a *closed corner*, producing different degrees of an inviting "ante-room effect" experience.

In the **image below,** we see how the building corner façade was hollowed out to accommodate a stair leading to the entry door and, by doing so, producing a convincing entry transition, or "ante-room", inviting the placement of plants and the halloween pumpkin, *creating the occasion for slowing down the process of entering and exiting and allowing time for the various changes in social stance as one enters and/or exits, i.e. the essence of an urban-architectural corner based encounter point experience.*

deep closed corner

In the next image down we see how the State Liquor Store entrance, flush with the building façade closed corner for lack of space, was extended forward with the help of two curved free standing hand rails pointing to a virtual closed corner junction and protecting the entrance from sidewalk cross traffic. This feature produces, compared to the previous example, a much weaker corner-based "ante room" effect because *there is really no time-distance-stair combination to allow experiencing any subtle change in social qualification in entering and/or exiting, ie. to allow for a corner related encounter point experience to occur.*

shallow closed corner

Corner based encounter point experiences in the private domain.

I wish to discuss here two pairs of duplex building entrances allowing, in one of them, to compare the experiences of a closed corner and an open corner entrance.

In the image below showing the entrances to the lower and upper units of a duplex building, the forward extension of the building was used in a telling way: differentiating the door leading to the upper unit by placing it *at the edge of a closed corner*, from the door leading to the lower unit by placing it in a *small by effective open corner.*

In order to sense the difference in encounter point experience proper to these two doors, reflect for a minute on how the itinerary from sidewalk to upper unit entry is straight as an arrow while the equivalent itinerary to the lower unit entry has a intermediate landing from which, upon making the turn away from the sidewalk, one can sense the moment of breaking away from the street public domain and penetrating the building private domain with a door located in an open corner for a richer encounter point corner experience.


closed vs open corner

In the next image, showing two back to back duplex buildings, the single entrance to each building is used by the occupants of its two units. Witness the two mailboxes and the two oval addresses posted at the side of each door!

After walking by the front yard of the lower unit, and past the dominating fir tree, the entrances to the front and back duplexes beckon from two cozy open corners with a modest canopy adding to the sense of having reached a private haven*.

*Let us mention the fact that the two back to back duplexes shown here make up half of a small Viennese-Hoff-like group of four duplexes spanning a half bloc, between two streets, i.e. no backyards here but a generous common funnel shaped circulation space, dominated by the fir tree, providing space and occasions for various social interactions with neighbors and/or visitors making for a rich, closed corners mediated, encounter point experiences.


open corners entry complex

Bibliographical source

Leprohon, Pierre: MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI, The World of Film collection – Simon and Shuster, 1963, pp. 156.

All images credit Maurice Amiel

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