

Photography and the vicarious experience: implications on urban safety?

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Visibility, Safety, and Photography

The relationship between on one hand, physical factors in the built environment affecting one's visibility, and on the other hand, one's perception of personal safety within that environment, is well-demonstrated.¹ Arthur Stamps has proposed *permeability theory*: "[T]hat enclosure can be conceived as properties of a three-dimensional region of space which affects safety by the degree to which it permits or limits locomotion or perception through itself."² Related to permeability theory is Oscar Newman's theory of *defensible space*. In particular, Newman's notion of *natural surveillance* suggests that if a place is understood by its inhabitants to be watched, it will be perceived as more safe than one which is understood to be unwatched.³ Newman also recognized the importance of *environmental milieu* in the perception of safety, i. e., that people tend to feel safer in a busy commercial area than in an abandoned, empty street.

Secondly, we note the performance of tourists engaged in the production of photographs – a performance which, it is argued, attempts to fulfill a *hermeneutic circle*: tourists, having seen photographs of a remote location in a brochure or online, travel to the place and subsequently proceed to fulfill the desire to photograph it themselves.⁴ The tourist's camera becomes the principal enabling device within this hermeneutic circle,



Fig. 1. The tourist's camera becomes the principal enabling device within a hermeneutic circle.



Fig. 2. Google Street View enables the possibility of photographically mapping out a public street prior to (or even in lieu of) a direct visit.

* This is the author's version of the published paper.

operating to simultaneously reveal the environment in a particular way – it is a portable framing mechanism – even as it inserts itself physically and bodily between the tourist and the environment. As a specific extension of tourist photography enabled by the Internet, consider software such as Google Street View and Flickr, both of which operate to make photographic imagery of remote places available to anyone with an Internet connection. Google Street View, in particular, enables the possibility of photographically mapping out a public street prior to (or even in lieu of) a direct visit. Software such as Google Street View (hereinafter GSV) makes possible two apparently conflicting situations: first, a greater extent of the world’s public streets are now disclosed than ever before; second, there are now a greater number of interfacial filters between individual observers and the direct experience of the place being photographed. In short, because of GSV, it is now possible for a tourist to effectively use Google’s car-mounted camera as an extension of their own voyeurism. GSV is in fact quite carefully struc-

ured so as to conceal the mechanism of its own camera.⁵

Given the demonstrated relationship between the perception of safety and the physical characteristics of the environment, coupled with Newman’s theory of defensible space as it relates to natural surveillance, a question arises which is whether the performance of tourists is itself structured by an apparent need to insert a device between themselves and an environment which is perceived as unsafe. Does the tourist’s camera function, even in part, as a portable safety device, giving them the power to observe while remaining themselves hidden behind a kind of mask? Insofar as GSV infiltrates one additional level or filter between the perceiving individual and the perceived environment, is it simply a contemporary manifestation of the need to watch without being watched – to feel safe in an unfamiliar place? Stated differently, we can ask to what degree is one’s perception of safety within an urban environment affected by one’s perception of self-presence within that en-

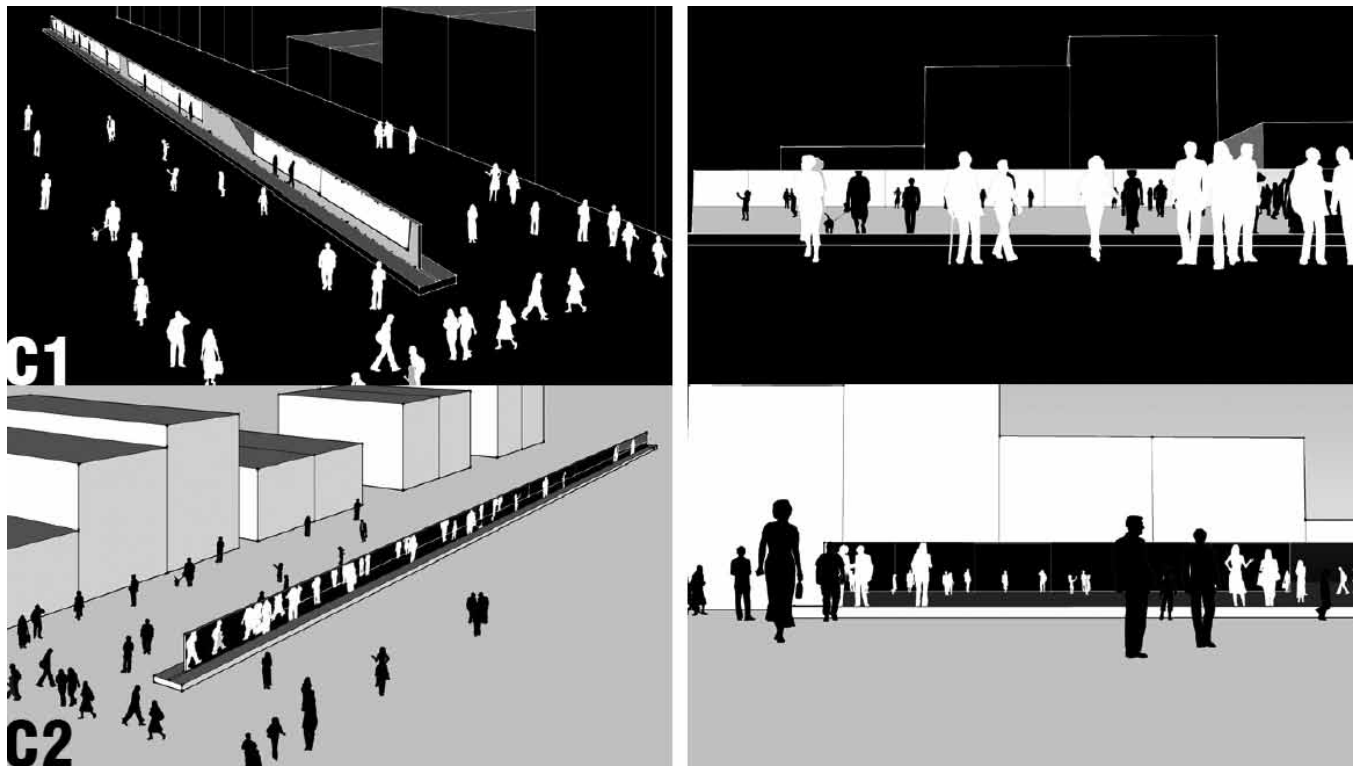


Fig. 3. The long portal.

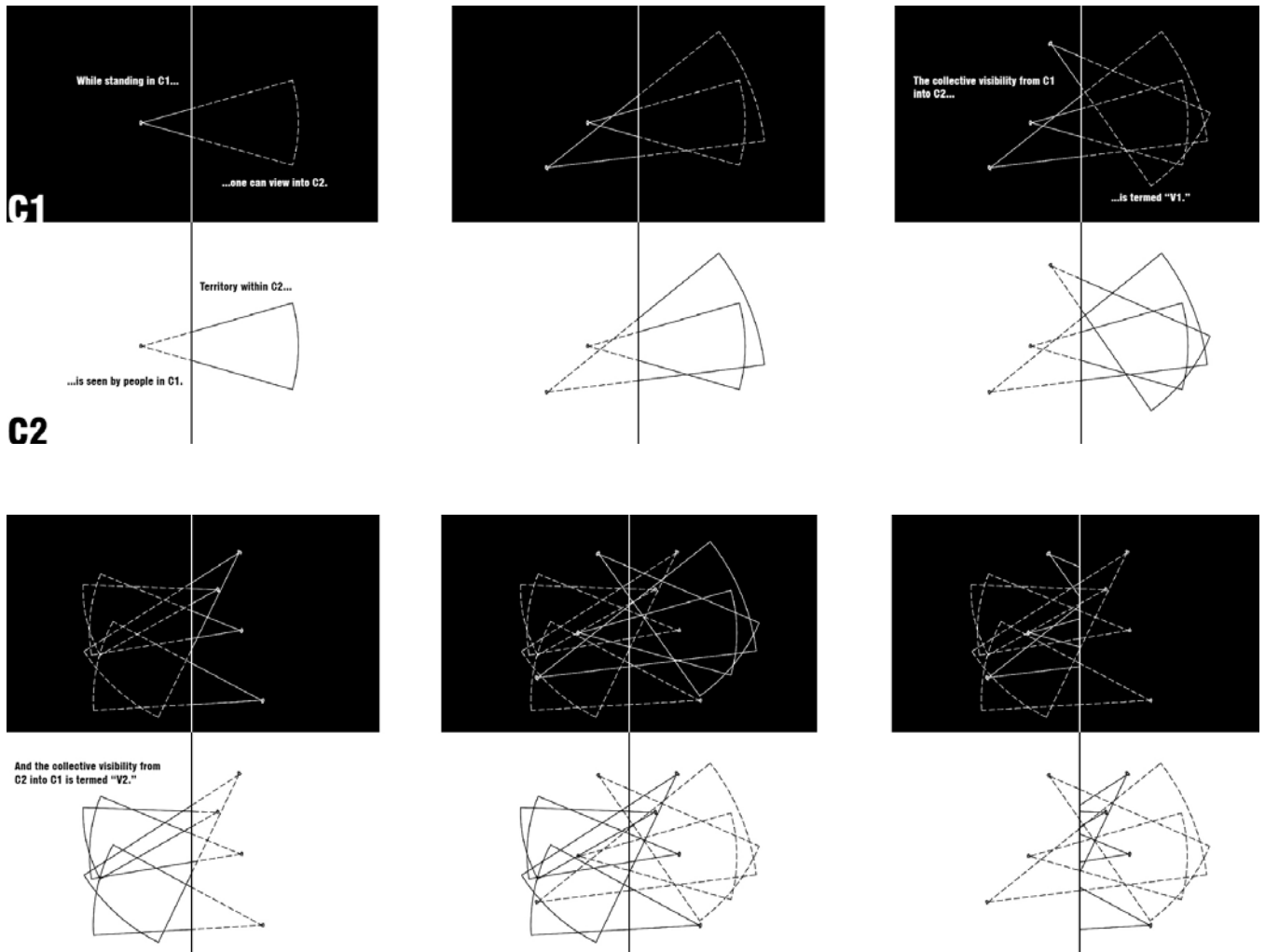


Fig. 4. How does the architecture of the long portal affect the perception of safety in its environment? Does the fact of being visibly watched from a remote location affect perception of safety?

environment? In particular, how does one's perception of safety through GSV differ relative to the perception of safety held by a camera-carrying tourist stationed in the environment? And finally, how could architecture itself reinsert itself within this discussion?

An Urban Device

Suppose that in each of two cities, a raised platform is constructed along the median of a public road in a busy commercial area. The platform is publicly accessible to citizens. Along the center of

the platform, a 2-meter-high wall is constructed, the surface of which on both sides is a flat video/sound display. Recording devices for video and sound are embedded within the wall. Thus, the wall functions as a two-way perceptual device effectively creating a visible and audible portal between the two cities (i. e., "telepresence").⁶ We will call this combined platform-and-wall assembly the long portal. Assume for argument that one of the cities is local (we call it C1), and the other city is remote (we call it C2). In C1, people standing along either side of the long portal can see into C2, and vice versa. More specifically, any person standing in C1 and looking at the long portal can

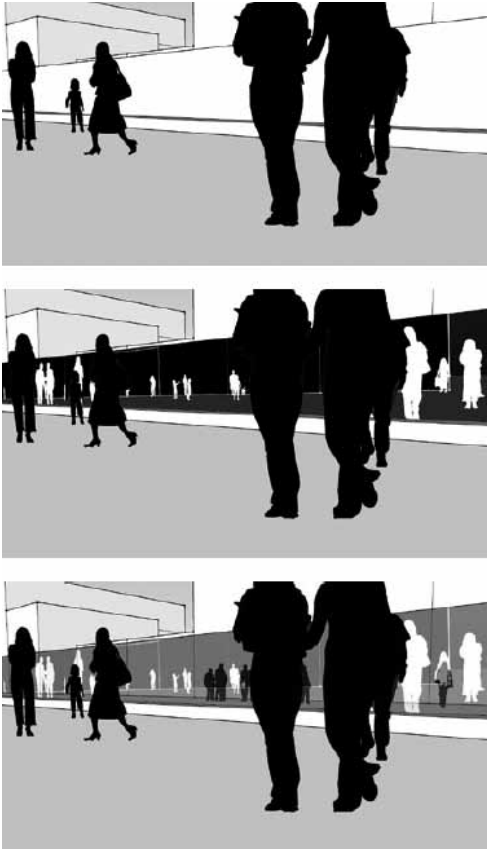


Fig. 5. Opacity and reflectivity.

see into C2; the sum of all such gazes into the long portal – the collective visibility from C1 into C2 – is termed V1. Symmetrically, the collective visibility of persons from C2 into C1 is termed V2. The long portal operates something like the remote view provided by GSV, though for the present we are assuming it is fixed in each of two specific urban locations, providing people in C1 the ability to view into C2. At the same time, because the device is two-way, people in C1 are under the observation of people in C2. Definitions having been established, we can now ask: How does the architecture of the long portal affect the perception of safety in its environment? Is the perceived safety of persons in C1 affected by V2? In other words, does the fact of being visibly watched from a remote location affect perception of safety? While the situation could be seen as similar to the presence of security cameras in otherwise unguarded locations, we note the significant difference that V1 can be

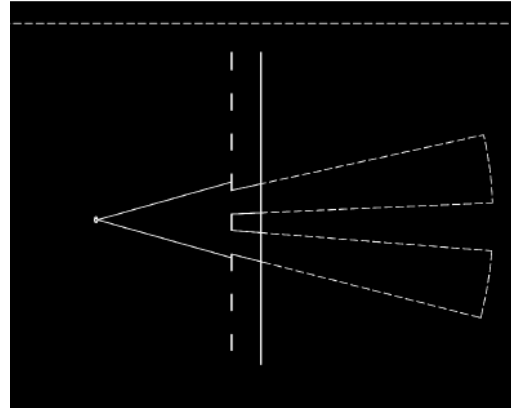
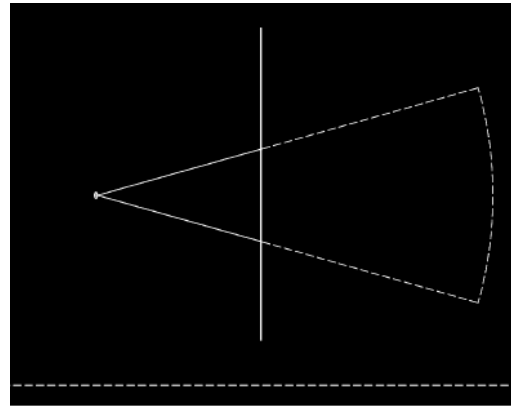


Fig. 6. Occluding features.

expected to have a precisely symmetrical effect on the perceived safety of persons in C2.

Some implications on the architecture of the long portal are as follows:

Opacity and reflectivity. Suppose that it were possible to dynamically adjust the opacity of the long portal, from 0% (completely transparent) to 100% (completely opaque). Adjusting the opacity to less than 100% will necessarily affect V1, because the visibility into C2 is confounded by the visible presence of persons in C1 who are standing behind the screen. Similarly, if the long portal is partially reflective, the visibility of the remote city is confounded by a mirroring effect.

Occluding features. Walls constructed on the platform in either city, whether permanent or movable, would affect V1 insofar as it is shaped

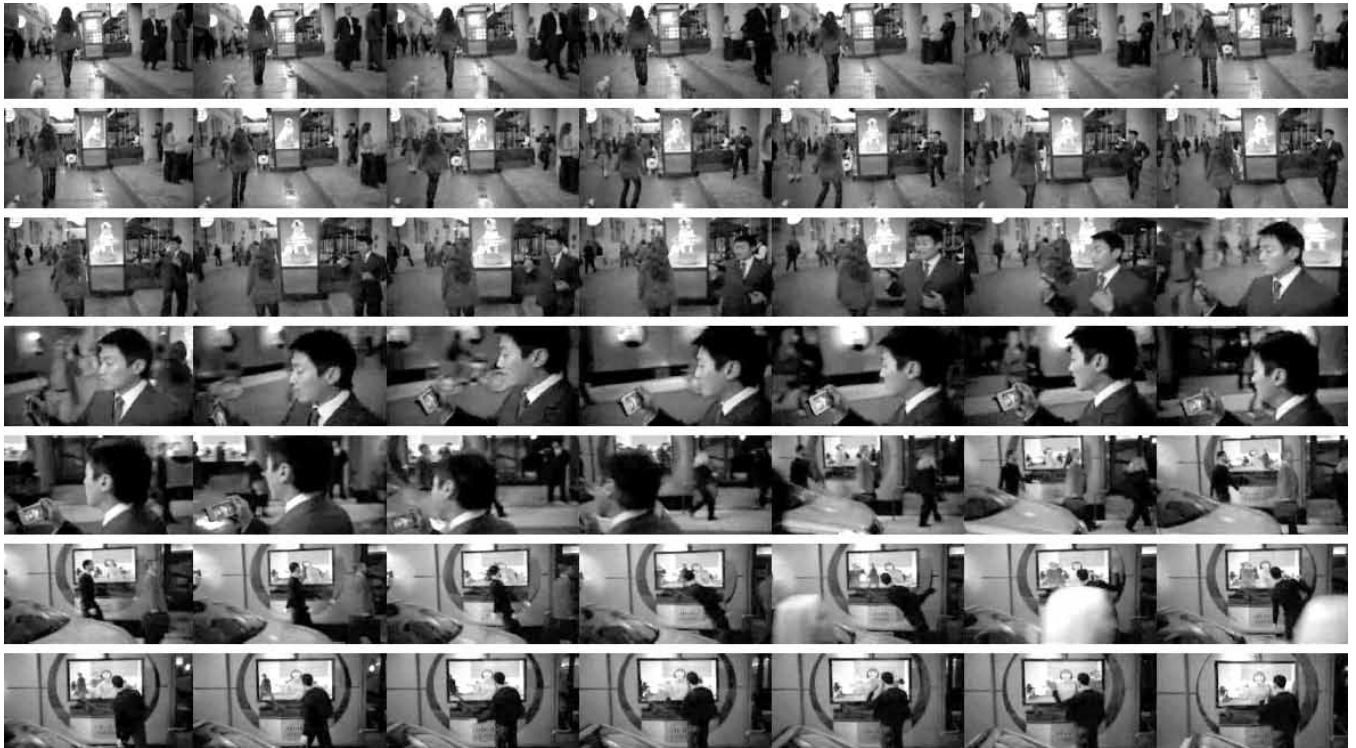


Fig. 7. Do devices such as those in the Cisco advertisements have predictable effects on the performance of people in public spaces?

by surrounding features in the environment, i. e., provided these features occlude the view of the wall from within the city. V2 is also affected, in a way providing walls for people in the local city to hide behind.

Mobility. We note parenthetically that GSV is often perceived by citizens as a threat to privacy and even to safety within urban environments.⁷ Suppose instead of being permanently mounted on a long platform, the two-way video devices of the long portal were themselves made mobile, embedded (say) on the surfaces or roofs of urban trains or taxis. Unlike the one-way mobile camera used by Google, such mobile devices would operate both as surveillance devices and as video screens. Images of passing trains in C1 could appear on the sides of trains in C2, reminiscent perhaps of the experience of viewing a subway train within a darkened tunnel pass one's own train. Could such mobile devices alter the perceived threat of the GSV camera car?

Discussion

Would the long portal, if it were actually constructed, have an overall effect on the perception of safety in either C1 or C2? According to Stamps's permeability theory, the degree to which the environment permits perception through itself should be expected to affect the perception of safety. And according to Newman's theory of defensible space, we should expect that if the long portal were linked between a very busy area in C1 and a less busy one in C2, that the perception of safety in C2 would increase.

Would the long portal have an effect on the performance of tourists and the production of photography? Consider the series of television advertisements for Cisco titled "Welcome to the human network," in which real-time two-way video devices are embedded within interiors and urban environments. The advertisements imply the possible effects which such embedded devices have on passersby or participants, who are necessarily in a

different relationship with these devices than are people who rely on similar technology to support prearranged business meetings. Do devices such as those in the Cisco advertisements, or such as the long portal, have predictable effects on the performance of people in public spaces? Do such devices themselves operate as tourist attractions?

What role does architecture itself have to play in the construction of safety as it relates to the construction of images? To the degree that we acknowledge the perception of safety to depend on physical characteristics of the built environment, a hypothetical device like the long portal, even as it enables a new kind of linkage between people and places, is nevertheless provocative of very old questions about visibility, safety, and photography, as these are affected by architecture. Rather than increase the filtered distance between perceiving individual and perceived environment, such devices promise a unique structure for immediate perception. Thus, devices like the long portal promise to recover architecture's role in facilitating both the construction of images and the construction of safety from a heavily mediated world.

Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Michael Benedikt, "To take hold of space: Isovists and isovist fields," *Environment and Planning B* 6 (1979): 47-65; Laura J. Loewen, Gary Daniel Steel and Peter Suedfeld, "Perceived safety from crime in the urban environment," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 13 (1993): 323-331; Arthur E. Stamps III, "Enclosure and safety in urbanscapes," *Environment and Behavior* 37 (2002): 102-133.
- 2 Arthur E. Stamps III, "Isovists, enclosure, and permeability theory," *Environment and Planning B* 32 (2005): 735-762.
- 3 Oscar Newman, *Defensible space: People and design in the violent city* (London: Architectural Press, 1973).
- 4 Jonas Larsen, "Families seen sightseeing: Performativity of tourist photography," *Space and Culture* 8 (2005): 416-434; John Urry, *The tourist gaze* (London: Sage Publications, 2002).
- 5 Mike Christenson, "Google Street View and the transition from the unknown to the known," publication forthcoming.
- 6 Marvin Minsky, "Telepresence," *Omni* (1980): 45-51.
- 7 Refer, for example, to Ben Leach, "Couple who sued Google over Street View photos of home lose privacy case," *Telegraph.co.uk*, February 19, 2009. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/google/4695714/Couple-who-sued-Google-over-Street-View-photos-of-home-lose-privacy-case.html> (accessed January 29, 2010).