Toward Participatory Interpretation: Cultural Geographies of Architecture

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Spanish architect Ricardo Sánchez Lempreave posits that "architecture really belongs to another metadiscipline: Geography."[1] At first glance, this may seem a peculiar assertion: geography and architecture do not often find themselves formally linked by scholars or practitioners working within either discipline. Over the past three decades, however, participatory understandings of architectural space have begun to congeal within the discipline of cultural geography. Integration of the participatory-ethnographic methodologies currently being developed by architectural geographers can enrich architecture as a discipline, allowing architects to engage more fully with the affective nature of their work. To engender interdisciplinary dialogue, this paper highlights the methodologies mobilized by geographers whose hermeneutic research explores architectural meaning through a variety of geographic lenses and concludes by suggesting how these lenses might be applied through a single-building study of the Commons community center (Figure 1) in the of Columbus, Indiana.

SITUATING ARCHITECTURAL GEOGRAPHY

> Architecture, along with life itself, moves alongside of—[and] is the ongoing process of negotiating—habitable spaces. Architecture is a set of highly provisional "solutions" to the question of how to live and inhabit space with others. It is a negotiation with one of the problems life poses to bodies . . . [subject] to the movements of time and becoming.[2]

Each work of architecture serves as a significant constituent element of its cultural and physical contexts. Because of this, an integrative, interpretive reading of architectural spaces and places—spaces and places that constitute much of the physical environment we interact with each day—is important. Such a reading allows for a deeper understanding of the ways our conscious acts of *material and social construction* and *physical and phenomenal habitation* affect, constitute, and reinforce social structures at varying scales. In the 1980s, geographers began calling for unprecedented dialogue between architects and geographers, one which re-visioned how human interaction with the built environment can be enabl*ed* and how it, itself, is enabl*ing*.[3] Among the subjects of this re-visioning should be existing social power structures, as geographers have the tools necessary to take a rigorous look into how such structures are "built" into the literal structures of the buildings that we, as humans, occupy. While the field of architectural theory is robust in and of itself, it is infrequent that theoretical research plays a role in the actual design and construction of architectural pieces. With respect to this, Weisman writes that, "to effectively seek solutions to society's most vexing problems, architecture needs to become a more research-oriented profession."[4] To help infuse architectural practice with meaningful research, I suggest that architectural geographers are able to call upon theoretical methodologies from cultural geography, sociology, urban studies, and environmental psychology to help expose the past *and* inform the future of society's architectural contexts.

Situating the Interconnectedness of Architecture and Social Structures

Related to the notion that buildings are objects of reinterpretation and ever-changing narration, Thrift
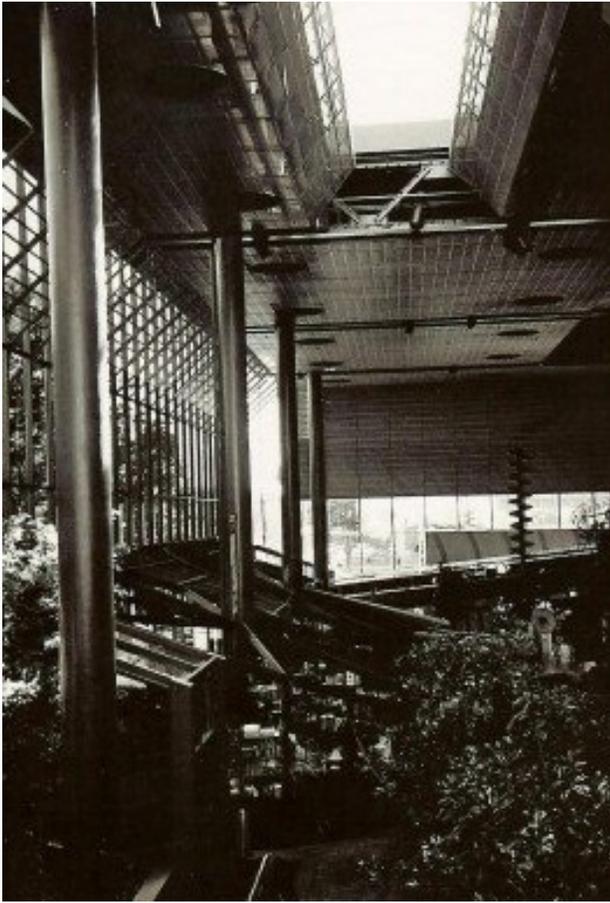
Figure 1: Public space of Cesar Pelli's Commons Mall, prior to its being demolished. Columbus, IN. Author's image.

describes buildings as being built by and capable of building social structures and human agency.[5] The idea that built form and social structures are mutually constitutive has been addressed by several studies over the past decade.[6] Illustrating the interconnectedness between architecture and social structures, Jones writes that that there is an explicitly symbiotic relationship between architecture and the governing *political* and *corporate* interests in any particular setting.[7] In many ways, it is explicit that buildings are shaped by society, insofar as they are created to meet the needs of members of society; however, the myriad ways in which buildings shape social conditions are not as well documented.

Several theorists have described architecture in terms of its ability to rationalize and solidify existing power structures.[8] As a result, it is important to acknowledge that buildings cannot simply reinforce these power structures of their own accord; rather, buildings are conceived of by people—

by architects, developers, and planners—and it is through architects' designs and buildings' subsequent construction that these power structures are reinforced. In reference to this, Bourdieu suggests that it is impossible for architects to practice in a politically neutral manner, because they must conduct their business while under the influence of social power relations.[9] And, so, it becomes apparent that the flow of power through the constitution and re-constitution of the built environment is cyclical in nature—social structures influence the architect, who influences the building typology, which influences social structures, and so-on and so-forth. In this way, it is important to consider what role architecture plays as an influential social product. One way in which these meanings can be uncovered is through examining how buildings act as "objects of (re)interpretation, narration, and representation"[10] of the people and places whose lives these buildings shelter and whose landscapes they populate.

Geographic Approaches to Understanding Architectural Place-Making

Humanistic geographers of the 1970s paved the way for a distinctly revitalized form of architectural geography by allowing the sub-discipline, which previously consisted of quantitatively constructed architectural landscape readings, to be infused with textual readings of architectural contexts. These textual analyses, informed by the humanities' ability to articulate meanings in "both imaginative and material terrains,"[11] enabled architectural geographers to discuss the ways in which "architecture can be a form of code-making, or control."[12] The work of architectural geographers in the post-landscape phase of the discipline was influenced by humanistic geographers' considerations of place-making, such as that of Tuan, who wrote:

> How a mere space becomes an intensely human place is a task for the humanistic geographer; it appeals to such distinctively humanist interest as the nature of experience, the quality of the emotional bond to physical objects, and the role of concepts and symbols in the creation of place identity.[13]

Attempts by architectural geographers to understand how architectural form and *space*-making becomes constitutive of "locale," the material setting for social interaction, and "sense of place," the subjective and emotional connection people have to a place,[14] are important to adding a dimension of depth to discussions of architectural geography. One way to inte-

grate this dimension of depth into geographical considerations of architectural place-making is to conduct a "polyvocal" analysis of architecture, in which more than merely the voices of the planners and architects are taken into consideration. It is important that the voices of those *occupying* the architectural spaces being studied are taken into account. This polyvocal approach, which triangulates accounts of planners, architects, *and* residents/occupants, allows for each architectural place to be situated with respect to its production and consumption, given its specific historical context.[15]

Integrating considerations of *place* into studies of architecture makes way for an acutely phenomenological understanding of the built environment. In a manner similar to Goss,[16] Sime maintains that exploring notions of place and place-making encourages scholars "not only to consider the semiotic meaning of the external façade of buildings, but the meaning of the spaces behind the walls."[17] By extension, McNeill believes that geographical lenses are appropriate for exploring such architectural meaning, because of the rich geographical theory available related to place identity.[18]

The Evolution of Architectural-Geographic Scholarship: 1980s to Today

In the more-than two decades since Goss's first call for the "explain[ing] of architecture as a social product, as the spatial configuration of the built environment incorporating economic, political, and ideological dimensions,"[19] several scholars have emerged in response. Architectural geographers, who have traditionally placed more emphasis on built landscapes than on individual buildings, have much to gain from doing richer—thicker—readings of *individual* buildings.[20] Often well-versed in the theory undergirding such concepts as scale and space, geographers can "link cultural artefacts, individual buildings, with cultural and political practices."[21] Ford has argued against geographers' tendency to study "housing but not houses, retailing but not department stores, quaternary functions, but not skyscrapers,"[22] because failing to focus on specific buildings prevents the development of a deeper reading of the context surrounding the development of each piece of architecture.

Among the first to fully embrace such "thick" readings of architecture, Lees explores the controversy surrounding the Vancouver Public Library building, by considering the heated political context that framed the selection of its design and the built spaces that resulted. Lees' methodology is built around what she believes critical architectural geography might mean in the 21st century:

> If the aim and object of a more critical geography of architecture must be to engage with those embodied and socially negotiated practices through which architecture is inhabited, its understandings cannot be produced through abstract and a priori theorizing. Rather, understanding comes out of active and embodied engagement with particular places and spaces.[23]

This statement is significant, because it places the researcher as an active participant, in an ethnographic sense, within the context of the building being considered. In essence, the researcher's voice becomes one more voice to be considered within a polyvocal analysis. This situates the researcher as one of the elements constituting the meanings held within the space, itself. The character of each space is not static—each carries with it the pulses, joys, worries, and tensions held by its occupants—each space "becomes alive and integral, inextricably connected to and mutually constitutive of the meanings and cultural politics being worked out within it."[24] Lees demonstrates that the "active and embodied engagement" with unique places can aid in deciphering these interlocking meanings and cultural politics.

Following Lees' call for active and embodied engagement, Jenkins explores the building located at 11, Rue du Conservatoire in Paris, France as a means to reveal the relationship between this building's interior and exterior spaces and the permeability thereof.[25] Jenkins draws upon Hillier and Hanson's "social logic of space," which provides a framework for assessing building 11's permeability based upon whom and what has access to various elements of the building.[26] Jenkins furthers this notion of access and interconnectedness by utilizing actor-network theory to situate building 11 and its constituent elements as nodes on a complex network that renders the building, "part of a potentially unstable and changing web that cuts through relationships at a distance."[27] Examples of some elements that comprise this web are less-tangible, such as technology, space, and time, and more concrete, like people and other buildings. The intricate balance of all of these elements, or nodes, on the network allows the building to exist as it does. As each node changes, the

character of the network itself changes, ultimately altering the building's identity as a node on this ever-evolving network. In this way, each building is not the formulation of an architect acting alone, with a team of contractors doing his or her bidding. Instead, each building exists as a product of its social and material circumstances. This conceptualization allows for the notion of "the architect" to be problematized, ultimately situating the architect as "a mythical figure in the story of a building."[28]

Among the scholars to follow Jenkins are Imrie,[29] and Kraftl and Adey,[30] who speak less to the meanings of the built environment as a whole and more about the "architects" who draft the construction documents that inform to much of the built environment. Imrie's and Kraftl and Adey's studies make significant efforts to tie such theoretical issues as embodiment and affect to the constraints put in place by architects' built designs. Imrie explores the ways in which architects attempt to relate the human body and forms of embodiment to their final architectural designs by interviewing a number of practicing architects and architectural educators throughout the United Kingdom. He concludes that there is a "dominance of bodily reductive conceptions"[31] within the field of architecture—including architectural education and practice—which beg the "(re)centring of the 'social' at the fulcrum of design theory and practice, whereby the aesthetic and the practical, the subject and the object, and the body and the mind are brought together."[32] Imrie's recommendation that "the 'social'" be placed at the center of architectural theory and practice may seem intuitive, because inherently social beings live and work within these spaces; however, as one of his interviewees stated "the human subject is rarely made explicit [in the architectural design process], it's assumed that we're all the same."[33]

While Imrie calls for architects to pay attention to how their work *affects* the way bodies interact in architectural space, Kraftl and Adey's study addresses how architects "preconfigure, limit, and engender particular *affects* to accomplish very particular goals,"[34] ultimately encouraging certain manners of inhabitation. To arrive at this conclusion, Kraftl and Adey mobilize in-depth interviewing strategies, informal interviewing, observant participation, photographic study, and archival research to construct a polyvocal analysis. They point out that the architectural design of a particular kindergarten room

is layered with the kindergarten teacher's material labor, including making the room ready for playtime and preparing the space for lunch. This teacher's actions imbue the room with "the affect of homeliness."[35] Kraftl and Adey seem to be able to isolate a number of affects that are produced into a sort of *architectural space + user + greater context = affect* equation. While they focus their attention on as-built spaces, they ultimately call for further inquiry into the processes of architectural design and construction in order to aid in the exploration of the "multiple political, affective, and material ways in which architectural spaces are and should be constituted."[36] Kraftl, himself, has produced two single-building studies—one of an alternative school in Pembrokeshire, UK[37] and another of the Hunderwasser-Haus in Vienna, Austria.[38] Kraftl's exploration of the alternative school reveals how frequently "un-noticed practices are involved in the construction, constitution and evocation of idea(l)s like childhood."[39] Similarly, his study of a social housing building, the Hunderwasser-Haus, which has become a mass-tourist attraction, reconciles the "meshing of the spectacular with the mundane," and Kraftl suggests that it is important to study the "geographies that we take most for granted."[40]

While Kraftl explores the significance of two unique buildings with respect their abilities to constitute and evoke particular socially constructed ideals, Adey explores the balcony portion of the Liverpool airport in terms of a broader range of characteristics.[41] Choosing to focus on just one space within a large, heavy-use building, Adey addresses, with relative depth, issues of mobility, visuality, sensation, transportation, and identity, with respect to this very particular place. Additionally, Adey traces the history of airport design, linking the roots of the "spectacle of flight" to Nazi propaganda that sought to reify German national identity."[42] Airports are configured, to this day, as spaces that enable people to watch the "theatre of the air."[43] By situating airports as being both socially and materially constituted places to "view from,"[44] not merely symbolic spaces, Adey reveals that:

> …the architectural geography of the airport balcony served to distribute and mediate different arrangements of people, things, objects, planes, seats, wind and more. Watching entailed a form of 'collective individuation'[45] of all these things that were incorporated together, 'fused' as *context* to the viewing experience.[46]

At any given moment, all of the constituent elements of and in the space serve as both context and player, influencing each unique viewing experience. Adey focuses here on airport balconies, however, it seems that the study of various types of public spaces—train stations, community centers, parks—merit similar consideration to see how different arrangements of space "distribute and mediate" their "people, things, [and] objects."

Applying geographic lenses to a single-building study in Columbus, Indiana

In concluding this essay, I would like to briefly outline a domestic single-building study, in order to engender dialogue regarding the direction architectural geographic study might take in the United States. The proposed study is focused on a privately funded civic space—the Commons community center—in the small town of Columbus, Indiana. The Commons was designed by Cesar Pelli and completed in 1973. Pelli, named one of the ten most influential living architects by the American Institute of Architects, also designed the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lampur, Malaysia, the International Finance Centre in Hong Kong and the World Financial Center in New York. His Commons community center is of particular interest, because in 2007 it was demolished in its entirety, save for a series of overhead roof-bearing trusses and a few other structural elements deemed "salvageable" by the new architects. The Commons was not demolished because it had been deemed structurally unsafe or materially unhealthy to occupy by local inspectors—the community simply decided that the Commons, in its original form, was no longer meeting the needs of its occupants.

After a series of town hall meetings, the community decided to rebuild the Commons as a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-certified building. Because of a grant program funded by a local Fortune 500 company that pays architects' fees for public buildings, the Commons was not the only building in Columbus designed by a "famous" architect. Even so, it is still surprising that the community decided to demolish a structurally sound building which saw more than 300,000 people pass through its doors each year[47] and to which such a notable name—that of Pelli—was attached.
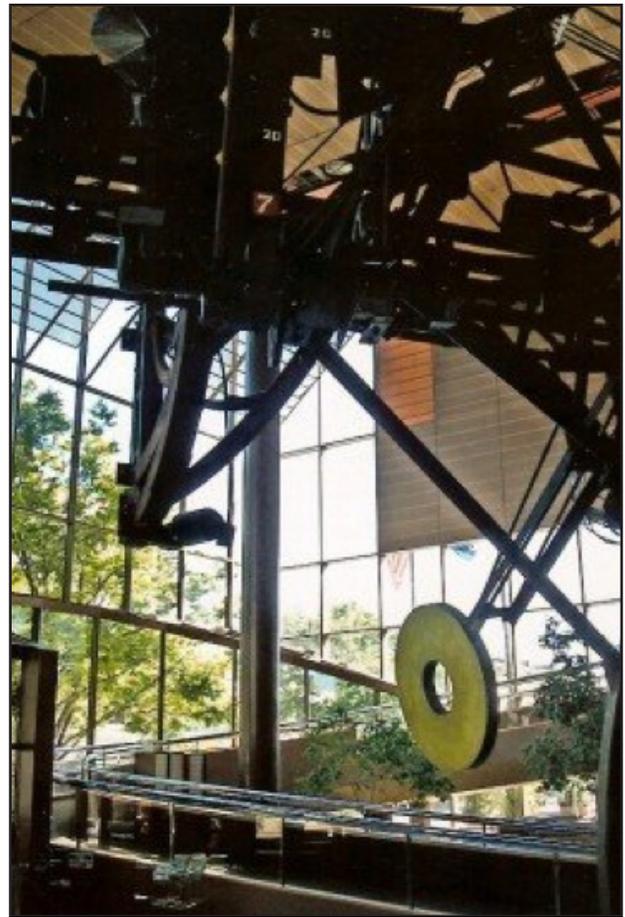

Figure 2: View of the Commons Mall's "Chaos I" sculpture, before the Commons was demolished. Columbus, IN. Author's image.

The ideas behind this research were formulated in their most nascent form in the summer of 2005. At that time, I was working at the Columbus Museum of Art and Design, located on the second floor of the Commons. Each day, as I entered the building, I heard children playing on the largest indoor play structure I had ever seen, birds flew overhead, eventually nesting in the row of indoor trees, the kinesthetic two-story Jean Tinguely sculpture, Chaos I (Figure 2), clanked through its daily rotations, while local musicians practiced on the stage, and the smells of brewing espresso and Subway sandwiches wafted from the food court. Natural light flooded this three-story volume, spanning a city block. At night, the glossy red trusses supporting its roof system glowed with round vanity bulbs placed every foot-or-so, sparkling through its glass skin onto the street.

Unless there was a community event—and they were not infrequent—the Commons was never "packed," but always occupied. It was also made available for rent to private parties, which enabled a diverse range of activities to occur within its walls. The eeriest experience I have had began one day as I walked into the southwest entrance of the Commons, and immediately began hearing a series of shrieks and intermittent wailing, accompanied by children's laughter. The very large atrium area was cordoned off with tall, white fabric sheets, so I couldn't see what was happening; however, I could hear dozens of pained voices beyond the "wall." I walked to the east side of the building and sat down. About ten minutes later, a Sikh funeral procession began making its way out of the cordoned-off area, out of the building, and down Washington Street. Then, it hit me: in the same space, at the same time, separated only by fabric sheets, dozens of children played on the indoor play structure, people sat and ate their Subway sandwiches for lunch, and funeral attendees mourned. I was immediately intrigued by this building's capacity to unite such a variety of activity, emotion, and cultural norms under one roof at one time.

In 2006, public discussions regarding the renovation of the building began. As an avid fan of the building's spatial character (Figure 3) and flexible use, I was happy to attend these discussions. I knew about these meetings, because I worked in the Commons; however, I wondered if all interested parties had been informed that they were happening. Later on, I received a survey via e-mail that asked for basic input regarding uses for the renovated building—should it have a bowling alley? Should it cater to the after-school teen crowd? Should it increase retail space? Again, I wondered who had received the survey—I received it because I had attended the earlier discussions. Eventually talk regarding renovations shifted to discussions about demolition and re-building. It was determined that all but the most basic structural elements of the building would be demolished, paving the way for an "improved",[48] LEED-certified space. At the time, I wondered, will Sikh funerals also be allowed in this new, improved space—or do they not suit the identity of the building and the identity that Columbus is hewing for itself?

My early questions have now given way to a research project that seeks to understand how the

Figure 3: Corridor of Pelli's Commons Mall. Columbus, IN. Author's image.

"renovation" strategies applied to this particular building relate to the production of the identities of people as "citizens of Columbus," their affective place-making strategies, and the power structures articulated within the community. By extension, I ask, who is accessing this public architectural space and how is this access mediated by the aforementioned power structures? In essence, this study pertains to people, place, power, and buildings.

This people/place/power/buildings study seeks to articulate how the affective natures of each version of the building were planned for, or predetermined, and, if they were not planned for, how they otherwise came into being. This provides significant insight into the architectural design process, and its ability to accurately predetermine—or not—affective experience across a diverse body of occupants. Additionally, this particular re-building project is being carried out, in part, in the name of pro-

moting sustainable practices, as evidenced by the proposed LEED-certification of the new Commons. Enthnographic inquiry of key actors on the Planning Commission, the architects, and community members will allow me to determine local conceptions of "sustainable" practices and technologies and their intended means of implementation by this small, industrial Midwestern city.

This project supplements our understanding of how architectural planning and design strategies have an affect at various scales—that of the individual, family, and community. To be able to answer these questions, I must conduct an ethnographic, poly-vocal analysis[49] that includes the voices of a broad spectrum of community members, members of the City Planning Commission, and the architects—including the architect of the original building, Cesar Pelli, and the architects of the redeveloped Commons, Koetter Kim & Associates. Additionally, I will map the building according to its connections to its greater environmental context, utilizing actor-network theory[50] to evaluate its relationships to various elements within the community, including technology, diverse populations, transportation systems, space and time. Furthermore, I will mobilize non-representational theory, which asks that human and nonhuman entities be considered in terms of their practices, rather than in the semiotic, or symbolic, sense,[51] to look at how these elements—people, technology, transportation, space and time—operate with respect to the Commons. My use of both actor-network theory and non-representational theory will be supplemented by my ethnographic inquiry, personal observations, and access to public records.

Each of the above research tasks and questions will inform my final analysis of how this particular building relates to the production and perpetuation of the identities of people who consider themselves "citizens of Columbus," their place-making strategies, including sensitivity to issues of sustainability, and the power structures articulated within the community.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the past three decades, architectural geographers have progressively honed their use of key geographic concepts, such as mobility, identity construction, place, and space to illuminate specific aspects of the built environment in new and meaningful ways. Geographic research methodologies can make a positive contribution to the ways architects conceptualize occupant participation within the intricate environments they design. By mobilizing these geographic concepts, architects can further enrich the ways in which each building interacts with its social fabric. After all, as one recent architectural dictionary puts it, "Architects who are not geographers no longer exist for us."[52]

ENDNOTES

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2   E. Grosz, *Architecture from the outside: Essays on virtual and real space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 148.
3   J. Goss, "The built environment and social theory: Towards an architectural geography," *Professional Geographer* 40 (1988): 392-403, and J. Sime, "Creating places or designing spaces?" *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (1986), 49-63.
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5   N. Thrift, "On the determination of social action in space and time," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 1 (1983), 23-57.
6   The idea that built form and social structures are mutually constituted has been addressed by several studies, including:
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7   P. Jones, "Putting Architecture in its Social Place: A Cultural Political Economy of Architecture," *Urban Studies,* 46 (2009), 2519-2536.
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10   Gieryn (2002), 35.

11   A. Blunt, "Geography and the humanities tradition," in *Key Concepts in Geography*, Eds. Clifford, N., Holloway, S., Rice, S., and Valentine, G. (Sage: London, 2009), 66.

12   P. Kraftl and P. Adey, "Architecture/Affect/ Inhabitation: Geographies of Being-In Buildings," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 98 (2008), 214.

13   Yi-Fu Tuan, "Humanistic geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 66 (1978), 269.

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15   M. Llewellyn, "Polyvocalism and the public: 'Doing' a critical historical geography of architecture," *Area*. 35 (2003).

16   Goss (1988).

17   Sime (1986), 50.

18   D. McNeill, "Skyscraper geography," *Progress in Human Geography*. 29 (2005), 41-55

19   Goss (1988), 394.

20   Lees (2001), 51-86.

21   Ibid., p. 78.

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23   Lees (2001), 57.

24   Ibid., pp. 70-71.

25   L. Jenkins, "Geography and architecture: 11, Rue du Conservatoire and the permeability of buildings," *Space and Culture,* 5 (2002), 222-236.

26   B. Hillier and J. Hanson, The *social logic of space.* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984) in L. Jenkins, "Geography and architecture: 11, Rue du Conservatoire and the permeability of buildings," *Space and Culture,* 5 (2002), 222-236.

27   Jenkins (2002), 232.

28   Ibid. and see also: A. Saint, A. *The image of the architect* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), in L. Jenkins, "Geography and architecture: 11, Rue du Conservatoire and the permeability of buildings," *Space and Culture,* 5 (2002), 222-236.

29   Imrie (2003).

30   Kraftl and Adey (2008).

31   Imrie (2003), 47.

32   Ibid., 64.

33   Ibid., 57.

34   Kraftl and Adey (2008), 213.

35   Ibid., 220.

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50   Jenkins (2002).

51   Thrift (2008).

52   Gausa (2003), 256.