

Advance praise for *Why Loiter?*

This short, elegantly written book questions the myth that Mumbai is a paradise for women in public. The authors show that women of different class and cultural backgrounds in Mumbai operate under serious social, political and infrastructural constraints, and that the right to loiter is no more and no less than the right to everyday life in the global city. This book will appeal to social scientists, urbanists, gender scholars and, more generally, to all those who want to take fun more seriously.

—Arjun Appadurai, Goddard Professor of Media, Culture and Communication, New York University

To ask the question 'Why loiter?' is to place the issue of gender and space within the right perspective. Because it goes beyond safety and protection; it asserts women's right to public space, to do as they wish, instead of using it as a necessity for transiting from one point to another. This is the best part of this eminently readable, accessible and informative book—it meshes theory with experience, it is written in a lively style (not always evident in academic writing) and it recounts real-life experiences that will resonate with every woman, regardless of her age.

—Kalpana Sharma, independent journalist, columnist, and author of *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slum*



# Why Loiter?

Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets

SHILPA PHADKE, SAMEERA KHAN AND SHILPA RANADE



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## Prologue

Imagine an Indian city with street corners full of women: chatting, laughing, breast-feeding, exchanging corporate notes or planning protest meetings. Imagine footpaths spilling over with old and young women watching the world go by as they sip tea, and discuss love, cricket and the latest blockbuster. Imagine women in saris, jeans, salwars and skirts sitting at the *nukkad* reflecting on world politics and dissecting the rising sensex. *If you can imagine this, you're imagining a radically different city.*

It's different because women don't loiter. Men hanging out are a familiar sight in the city. A man may stop for a cigarette at a *paanwalla* or lounge on a park bench. He may stop to stare at the sea or drink cutting chai at a tea stall. He might even wander the streets late into the night. Women may not. We argue that there's an unspoken assumption that a loitering woman is up to no good. She is either mad or bad or dangerous to society.

Of course, no one actually says this out loud. But every little girl is brought up to know that she must walk a straight line between home and school, home and office, home and her friend or relative's home, from one 'sheltered' space to another.

This book maintains that all of us, whether we're women or men, regardless of our differences, have the right to loiter. When society wants to keep a woman safe, it never chooses to make public spaces safe for her. Instead, it seeks to lock her up at home or at school or college or in the home of a friend.

student was raped in Elphinstone College in South Mumbai by a group of other students, she was whisked away and never allowed to testify.

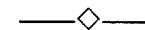
In 2005, more than a decade later, another young college-going girl was raped in broad daylight by a police constable at Marine Drive. The young woman, in this case, after being assured of anonymity, did give evidence to the police that enabled them to prosecute the man, but this was partly due to the huge public outcry following the crime. What is of particular interest to us in this case is that there was a lot of public speculation about her companion, a young boy of the same age. While, on the one hand, the constable had apparently used the fact of her being out with a male friend to threaten her into the *chowki*; her parents almost appeared to condone this act of moral policing when they were quoted in the media, suggesting that their daughter did not know any boys. It seemed more important for them to prove that their daughter's actions had been within *limits* of permissible behaviour than to demand justice irrespective of what she had been doing.<sup>36</sup>

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So it appears as though the privilege of the middle-class woman in public space is only a veneer. The *respectable* middle-class woman is central to any discussion on safety and public space in the city. However, the demand for respectability means that she can only have conditional access to public space. The need to demonstrate respectability in her everyday actions and movements and the focus on sexual safety instead of real safety, actually denies middle-class women *rights* to public space. Furthermore, the insistence on respectability excludes other women who are deemed 'unrespectable' from staking any claim whatsoever to public space.

For both desirable and undesirable female subjects, the

insistence on respectability actively contributes to not just reducing women's access to public space, but also compromises their interests when they do access public space. The inextricable connection of safety to respectability, then does not keep women safe in the public; it effectively bars them from it.



#### 4. Lines of Control

*There was of course, no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment . . . you had to live, did live, from habit that became instinct, in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard . . . every movement scrutinized.*

—George Orwell, 1984

Orwellian dystopias aside, women should come with a 'comfortable-being-watched' gene encoded into their DNA. As foetuses, we are watched carefully for the presence of a penis and some of us never make it past that stage. As little girls growing up, we are watched as we sit, stand, eat and move. We are constantly told how to behave, walk and talk and as we grow older, we are ogled at by men of all ages: uncles, neighbours and strangers alike. So much so, that we learn to watch ourselves and internalize society's gaze, which tells us how we should conduct ourselves as good little women.

This act of constant self-surveillance by women produces what French thinker Michel Foucault calls 'disciplined bodies'. Foucault argues that in spaces like prisons, schools, hospitals and asylums, where people are constantly watched by those in authority, the subjects—inmates, students, patients—no

longer have to be monitored because they begin to monitor themselves. This produces a self-censuring gaze that Foucault calls 'disciplining'.<sup>37</sup>

To fully understand the underlying reasons and implications of this disciplining, we have to remind ourselves that gender is not something we *are* but something that we *do*.<sup>38</sup> Or, as philosopher Simone de Beauvoir famously put it, 'One is not born a woman, but becomes one.' Both men and women learn to perform their gender; boys learn what behaviour is appropriate to them and girls learn what constitutes feminine behaviour. As girls grow into womanhood, the body becomes the central medium through which these unwritten codes of behaviour are transmitted and memorized. The demure lowered gaze fixed at some point on the floor, the acquiescent nod of the head, the feminine swing of the hips, the closely held thighs and the modestly drawn-in shoulders are all written into our bodies by invisible hands and inaudible words so that we start believing that this is the way we are supposed to be. These ideas of appropriate gender behaviour are like mnemonics that we carry along with us lest we forget the realities of being women.

The containment of a woman's body is demonstrated by the very tightness with which she holds herself and moves. The notion that such gendered body language is 'natural' is reinforced by observing other women we encounter. For example, observing men and women in public transportation and on the streets of Mumbai, one notices the tentative and watchful manner in which women occupy public space. In BEST buses, the average woman will occupy the least possible space, rendering herself as inconspicuous as she can. This is often both a strategy to avoid groping hands and a reflection of women's conditional access to public space. On the other hand, the average man will spread his legs out, occupy more than half of a two-seater in a bus and appear to disregard the people around him.

At bus stops and railway stations, a woman will often hold a file, folder or book close to her chest, keep her eyes averted and seem to focus inward rather than outward. Men, on the other hand, stand in postures of control with legs held apart, look around with apparent ease and often occupy additional space with their arms. In every space, except perhaps sex-segregated spaces, men demonstrate greater levels of comfort, indicating a greater sense of belonging than do women.

A woman's awareness of her surroundings and other people in it, on the other hand, is acute. Women's body language inside sex-segregated spaces, like the ladies' compartment in the Mumbai local train, is different from that outside. In this 'space' women seem free to be what they want, sit as they like, even with legs spread out, and drop the masks demanded by the norms of modesty.

The very presence of women in public is seen as transgressive and fraught with anxiety. For women, accessing public space is rarely a simple question of get-up-and-leave. It often involves the performance of unbelievably elaborate masquerades, undertaking complicated subterfuges and employing a range of accessories both consciously and subconsciously. As suggested earlier in the chapter 'Good Little Women', as outsiders to public space, women negotiate access by demonstrating respectability through signs that inextricably link them to the private space of the family and the home and by establishing an unequivocal purpose for going out in public. So long as women are able to convey the dominant narrative of gender—that they belong in private and not the public—they gain conditional access to public space. To signal refusal to adhere to these codes often invites censure, sanctions and violence.

Prominent amongst the signs that women use to underscore their private location are symbols of matrimony worn on the body such as bindis, black-beaded *mangalsutras* around the neck, green bangles and red *sindoor* in the parting

of the hair for Hindu women. These signify matrimony, perhaps, the most telling sign of respectability in the Indian context where marriage is assumed to indicate the safe containment of women's sexuality. Even without the presence of a man by her side, a *mangalsutra* dangling on the bosom of a woman in the local train or bus acts as a 'keep-off-I-am-taken' sign in a cultural context where such signs are easily decoded and give women greater license in public space than they would have without it. In fact, sometimes even women who are not married wear a *mangalsutra*. As one American doctoral student told us, 'I bought a cheap *mangalsutra* to wear when I travel late at night, as people presume I am a respectable married woman and harass me less.' Marriage, especially coupled with appropriate gender performance, often gives women greater access to public space. In comparison, single women tend to be policed much more stringently.

With these symbolic markers, women attempt to construct an image of themselves as models of 'good' Indian womanhood, who are worthy of being out in public and being protected. Such markers can create a bubble of private domestic space around women, even as they 'transgress' into public space. In some ways, it is also an attempt by women to self-police their bodies in public, or more importantly, to ensure that their bodies are 'read right' as being private bodies.

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The demonstration of purpose is another way in which women enhance access to public space while maintaining the cloak of respectability. Women manufacture purpose through the carrying of large bags, by walking in goal-oriented ways and by waiting in appropriate spaces where their presence cannot be misread. Women on their own in parks, for instance, produce a particular type of body language of purpose. They tend to walk a linear path, do not meet anyone's gaze and

often listen to a Walkman or talk on their cell phones. Their attention is directed inwards and they tend not to engage with the outside; the effort appears to be to legitimize their presence by demonstrating that they are walking for exercise and not for fun or social interaction. Similarly, when forced to wait in a public place, women will be careful about the kind of place they wait at, often choosing bus stops and railway stations as waiting points. Tied to these spaces is a sense of legitimate purpose—that of commuting. In other spaces, for women, the 'act of waiting' is fraught with anxiety, for to wait without an obvious and visible purpose is often perceived as soliciting.

Since it is fairly legitimate for women in Mumbai to go to school or to work, women often use their location as students or workers to access public space. In other ways too, women legitimize their presence in public space by exploiting acceptable notions of femininity such as those which connect them intrinsically to motherhood and religion.

For instance, the study of a large public playground in Kalachowki, a mill district in east Mumbai, shows that the low wall around the ground is largely occupied by men, often lounging around with friends or alone, at all times of the day, except around the time the school flanking the playground closes for the day and mothers coming to pick up their children take over the edge. These women often come much before school is over and sit around talking animatedly in groups or pairs. Many of them seem to have come earlier just to be able to spend some 'official' time in public space with friends.

Women also use religion, and more specifically, religious activities and functions for which it is relatively easy to get family and societal sanction, as opportunities to enhance their access to the public. The demonstration of devotion and religiosity becomes an important marker of respectable womanhood.

Visits to temples, dargahs and churches provide women a legitimate and everyday access to the world outside their homes. Sometimes, it even offers them the chance to break with protocols of time and space—such as walking on Mumbai streets barefoot at 2 a.m. on a Tuesday morning to be at the Siddhi Vinayak temple at Prabhadevi for the first *arti* at daybreak. Religious yatras and festivals may punctuate some women's lives in significant ways by allowing special forms of access. This might mean a chance to beat your chest and wail mournfully on the streets during the *taziya juloos* on the tenth day of Muharram or a chance to walk uphill to Mount Mary's church during the week of festivity in September. Or even the prospect of dancing with gay abandon under a starlit sky during Navratri. Women strategically use all these opportunities to expand their access to public space, their religious beliefs or lack thereof notwithstanding.<sup>39</sup>

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To access public space then, women are expected to conform to the larger patriarchal order by demonstrating respectability and legitimate purpose. If women are seen to misuse the 'freedom' granted to them or to inadequately perform their roles as 'good' women, then the weight of the watchful gaze becomes visible in the shape of articulated codes relating to dress, norms of behaviour and modes of acceptable conduct. The less women appear to conform to unspoken norms of respectability, the greater appears to be the need for explicitly articulated codes. These codes are enforced at various levels by the family, community and even the state through implicit and explicit boundaries that delimit women's access to the public.

Most girls will remember the lines of control that were increasingly put in place as they grew older—as their brothers'

worlds expanded, theirs contracted. Daddies imposed the curfew, mummies made sure you sat with your legs crossed, *bhaiyas* saw to it that you came home straight from school, aunties commented if you romped around like a 'tomboy', and uncles reported seeing you with a stranger.

Logic would suggest that women feel safest and will have most access to public space in the spaces most familiar to them. While women often record feeling physically safer in their own neighbourhoods, which are known to them and where they are known, this does not, however, translate into increased access to public space. In fact, spaces in which women are recognized as wives, daughters and sisters are often the most restrictive. Women who are seen as transgressive—usually single or divorced women, or those who openly flout social norms—are subject to hostility and harassment much more in their own neighbourhoods than outside where they are comparatively anonymous. Clearly, for women who do not conform, the spaces where they ostensibly belong are the most discomfiting.<sup>40</sup>

It is not surprising then that in our research many women from different kinds of neighbourhoods, across class and locations, said that they were more likely to retaliate to an act of sexual harassment in a neighbourhood which was not their own. One woman in Andheri said that she would 'hesitate to make a scene in an area where I am known because people will talk'. She articulated what many other women across the city suggested implicitly: they feel more assertive in spaces where they are anonymous. Thus, rather than empowering women, the presence of insiders (and the pressure to demonstrate respectability: 'good women ignore sexual harassment') can actually prevent women from acting in their own defence. This is often tied to the notion that women invite trouble or are in some way to blame when harassment takes place. Creating an environment where women are forced

to manufacture respectability might actually reduce women's capacity to defend themselves.

It is comparatively heterogeneous spaces that engender the greatest capacity to access public space. Single women who live on their own in Mumbai, away from families, are often the ones who articulate the greatest degree of unmediated access to public space. This comes not from a sense of safety—for as women on their own they have few support structures—but from the diminished need to manufacture respectability. This is not intended to romanticize the lives of single women in Mumbai who have to often negotiate suspicious landlords and the judgemental scrutiny of neighbours and housing colony managements who are intensely curious about whom they meet and how late they return home from work. The demand for women's safety then is inevitably articulated in terms of surveillance and protectionism and contributes to reducing rather than expanding women's access to public space.

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Dress codes that outline what women can and cannot wear are another example of such explicitly articulated regulatory codes of behaviour. In fact, when there are visible public attacks on women, the discussions inevitably focus on how the women could have prevented it. Clothing is the first target: its length, width, cut and even colour are debated in the blame game of national sexual politics—many colleges and universities across the country have instituted dress codes. In most cases, girls are prohibited from wearing jeans and sleeveless tops. In some cases, uniforms are prescribed for college students!<sup>41</sup>

It is a well-acknowledged fact that adhering to conservative dress codes does not provide safety—women in saris, salwars

and even *burkhas* are also at the receiving end of sexual harassment on the street. What does change, however, is the crowd's perception of the woman. Often, those women who are seen as respectable acquire a greater legitimacy when they protest against sexual harassment and tend to get sympathy and help more easily.

Articulated codes also include those from religious communities. For instance, Muslim women have been at the receiving end of quite a large number of such codes. These regulatory codes, called fatwas in order to provide them with apparent religious backing, are handed out at the whim of local priests. Increasingly, in Mumbai and areas around, such fatwas and diktats are being issued through pamphlets and Friday sermons by local mosques. Many of these fatwas relate to women, specifically to their movement outside the house, such as visiting restaurants on their own and observing *pardah*.<sup>42</sup> Such explicit codes reinforce the implicit rules and self-policing that women practise, and further limit their mobility.

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Given that the price of transgression is often violent—ranging from social ostracism and restrictions on mobility to physical assault and even murder—women's apparent conformity to the codes of conduct is strategic. Many women, however, may covertly resist these norms. Openly challenging the lines of control would mean declaring outright war, an action that might actually further restrict their access to public space. When women follow the written and unwritten codes of gendered behavioural conduct, it does facilitate a certain kind of access to public space. For instance, playing the 'good little woman' often allows young women from conservative families to access educational and work opportunities, which

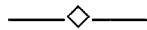


might not have been open to them otherwise. These strategies then sometimes allow women to expand the boundaries of access both geographically and temporally.

Yet, these acts of negotiation for women are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they allow women to expand their access to public space, making them more visible in public, which in turn works towards legitimizing their presence in public. On the other hand, this access remains circumscribed because by acting in coherence with dominant gender structures, women reinforce them. Wearing symbols of matrimony might allow access through respectability, but it remains in the discourse of protectionism rather than rights. In other words, women endorse the same structures of discrimination that make their access fraught in the first place.

Women push the boundaries in various ways: cajoling, threatening, inventing convoluted stories and lying in a bid to increase their access to the public, even when they do not use explicitly feminist language. These acts of 'rebellion' do contribute to pushing women's claims to occupy public space. At the same time, these performances also put women into neat pigeonholes, which might work against their making other, more radical claims to the public. Seeking access as visibly respectable and feminine women also excludes all those women who do not wish to be 'feminine' or 'respectable' in their dress and demeanour.

In the short term, tall tales and elaborate masquerades might allow us to seek pleasure in public space. In the long run, however, what we need are not covert strategies, but the demand for unconditional access to public space so that women may walk freely any time and anywhere in the city.



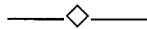
## 5. Consuming Femininity

If there is a space where the otherwise frustrated question, 'Where are the women?' does not need to be asked, it is the modern shopping mall. You only have to walk into a mall on a weekday afternoon to see them. They are out there: window shopping, buying, eating lunch, drinking coffee or just strolling around. They are in the stores trying out clothes and making up their faces, and also in the food courts and fancy up-market restaurants, talking, laughing and gesticulating expansively. There are also college girls and professional women grabbing a bite in their lunch hour or sipping cappuccino in coffee shops, looking very much like they belong. One finds women here at night as well, though not in the same numbers, eating, drinking and looking very comfortable. Overall, women's body language in malls demonstrates a sense of belonging that is not really visible in other kinds of public spaces.

In these new spaces of consumption that have mushroomed all across urban India, middle-class women are not just welcomed, but ardently wooed. Malls go out of their way to entice women consumers—often with a designated women's day in the week where free makeovers and gifts are on offer. Similarly, one sees women in discotheques and pubs, places where they are not just tolerated, but actively desired. Many discotheques and pubs will permit single women or all-women groups, but will not do the same for men. In a consumption-driven economy, shopping is an act that is both respectable and respected because consumption demonstrates power. The buyer therefore occupies a privileged position. While many women find pleasure in these spaces of consumption, access to these spaces demands a demonstration of their capacity to buy.

name of beautification has its devoted fans, particularly among the middle classes. Middle-class citizens' participation in transforming these spaces reinforces their sense of entitlement on the city. Ironically, the more middle-class citizens assert their citizenship, the less these spaces are available for 'those others' who can ill-afford to buy access into private spaces of recreation.

What we would like then are open spaces that are not maintained through the tenuous and contested division of people into 'us' and 'them', desirable and undesirable. What we want are open public spaces in the city that are welcoming to all manner of people and remain so because they evoke in them a sense of belonging and responsibility, and underline their undifferentiated claim to the city.



## 12. Designed City

In an exercise we conducted in architecture colleges, students were asked to trace the path they would choose while negotiating a fictitious street. The street is edged on one side by a park; its adjacent footpath neatly fenced on both sides and lined with trees. It is the kind of textbook-perfect edge urban designers dream of creating. On the other side of this hypothetical street is lower-middle-class housing—with household activities spilling out unevenly onto the street—the nightmare of city planners. Ironically, an overwhelming majority of the female students who took the exercise concurred that they would choose to walk on the residential edge, despite its messiness, because it appears friendlier and safer. A tree-lined fenced footpath with low visibility, they argue, would make escape difficult in case they were harassed.

Besides, given that it is primarily men who are socially sanctioned to 'hang out' at public places, parks are often predominantly 'male spaces'. So, even those who choose to walk on the park edge prefer to do so along the road rather than within the fenced-in footpath, lest they be heckled.

As women, it is clear that they prefer to walk on the more 'chaotic' edge of the street. Our question then is as architects or urban planners, which edge would they design? And there is silence—the beautiful silence of irony hitting home. The moral of this story is that architects, as well as other design experts or spatial technicians, very often design in and for an imaginary context that is determined by aesthetic values where concerns such as safety and comfort are not only secondary, but sometimes even irrelevant to the process of design.

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Usually, material environments in cities—which range in scale from large buildings to details such as fencing, paved footpaths, benches, lighting—are just considered a backdrop against which social drama is played out, or at best, a reflection of society as it is. The proactive role of the built environment in producing social experience is rarely acknowledged.<sup>56</sup> When it comes to the affective sense of safety or comfort in a particular space then, it is most often defined in terms of the people who occupy the space rather than a product of the particular attributes of the space itself.

However, as much of our research has shown, this is far from true. The students at our course in the architecture college did an assignment that we titled 'Safe/Unsafe Spaces', where they were asked to identify two spaces from their everyday experiences, one which they would define as safe and the other as unsafe, and to map these spaces through drawings, paying particular attention to the physical/material

aspects of the space.<sup>57</sup> Students realized that in spaces they used regularly, they sometimes subconsciously chose to take detours which were many times longer—and more cumbersome than the most convenient route from one point to another just because the shorter route was not comfortable. And much of this had to do with how the space was constructed in terms of its enclosure, visibility, light and scale. In general, spaces without visual connection (where you could not look at or be looked at by others outside the space), narrow enclosed spaces which did not allow escape in case you were accosted, and spaces with poor lighting were found to cause the most anxiety amongst women users and created a sense of unsafeness and discomfort. These street experiences that generate feelings of safety and comfort make a huge impact on women's everyday relationship to public space and the role of the material aspects in facilitating or impeding this experience cannot be underestimated.

When it comes to women and public space, the answer to the sceptical question 'Can design really change society?' must be a qualified 'Yes'. While 'bad design' of public spaces might not directly cause verbal or sexual assault, the inverse does hold true. Design can go a long way to make a space inviting to women and discourage situations where women get harassed. Similarly, while design by itself might not be able to create an equitable and welcoming public space for women, it can create the situation for change to happen and reinforce it when it does.<sup>58</sup>

As often happens, business practices have been quick to realize the crucial role of design to the desirability of spaces. In a context referred to earlier, when the two prominent coffee shops in a hip Mumbai suburb were sought to be closed down, alleging that they were used as places to solicit by women sex workers, one of these coffee shops issued a statement stating that the design and ambience of its space was such that it

actively discouraged 'sleaziness'. The statement read: '[as a] friendly neighbourhood café . . . Our outlets are brightly lit and are designed with transparent glass walled entrances to provide a sense of openness and security to our guests. The ambience is far from being sleazy.'<sup>59</sup>

This claim is unanimously supported by their customers. Many middle-class women say that they feel comfortable in these spaces—in that here they could wait for a friend or have a solitary mug of coffee (though usually accompanied by a book or a magazine). This is borne out in an exercise called 'Putting People in Place' that we conduct during our workshops, where participants are asked to locate a variety of people in an ambiguously tagged neighbourhood 'tea shop'.<sup>60</sup> Whether participants locate women in this 'tea shop' or not depends on what they imagine it to be. Those who imagine it to be a roadside cutting-chai stall never locate women inside it; those who perceive it to be an Irani café conditionally locate some women inside it; but an overwhelming number of those who imagine this to be an upmarket coffee shop unhesitatingly place women inside it.

The reasons for this are obvious. First, there is a class restriction on who can be in the coffee shop. The bright lighting invokes the respectability of the day (even at night, which contrasts with discos that are dark even during afternoon jam sessions), which combined with the innocuousness of coffee (as compared to alcohol) creates a space that presents itself as unthreatening. Coffee shops are respectable then in a way that bars or lounges might not be. The expansive use of glass in the design of these spaces contributes significantly to this sense of comfort.

Glass creates an illusion of publicness—even as the lighting inside creates a sense of both transparency and intimacy. It creates not just the illusion of access, it also offers up the assumption of transparency: the illusion that whatever

happens inside is an open book. The use of glass as the defining feature ironically renders the space of the coffee shop, simultaneously both, public enough *and* private enough to be respectable.

Glass, used here to lure certain customers, particularly respectable women, also works as an effective barrier—its very brazen openness working to keep away the undesirables, particularly the lower classes. Sometimes, the inhibiting presence of the glass barrier extends to the space immediately outside it as well. In many of these coffee shops, the seating spills outside the glass barrier. However, though one sees poor people and sometimes beggars on the footpaths outside, there is an invisible line that demarcates these class-defined spaces that they do not breach.

Mall design is similarly characterized by the use of glitzy transparent barriers that both invite some people and keep out others. Malls, in addition, also have security guards whose very intimidating presence regulates the kind of people who feel able to enter such spaces. These spaces also mimic each other in design, creating a sense of familiarity—once one is acculturated into the codes of one mall, it is not very difficult to navigate another. They generate a sense of familiarity that is both circumscribing and reassuring at the same time. No wonder then that many middle-class women we interviewed referred to the mall as a ‘public’ space where they frequently hung out. However, as discussed earlier in the chapter ‘Consuming Femininity’, keeping out those deemed threatening does not take away the pressure on women to reproduce the structures of both femininity and middle-class respectability in these new spaces of consumption.<sup>61</sup>

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One key obstacle in the good design of public spaces is the assumption of a neutral universal user of space. More often

than not, particularly in the absence of a unique client as is the case for urban-scale projects, designers and planners assume a generic user of the space. Unsurprisingly, as we have argued before, this ‘neutral’ user is usually male.<sup>62</sup>

However, different bodies have different needs and experience the same space differently, depending on their gender, class, age, sexuality and physical ability. These different identities not only determine how you sense the space, but they decide whether or not you can access a space in the first place. By treating men as generic human subjects and all others as specialized sub-groups of this norm, design often tends to fundamentally discriminate against a majority of its users.

The exemplification of difference-blind design is the public toilet discussed in the chapter ‘Peeing’. The question that feminist architects and designers constantly face is: will we be accepting and perpetuating difference if we design differently for women? In other words, can one design for safety without accommodating, and, therefore, accepting the conditions that create discrimination in the first place? And then, it is really possible to design in a way that is sensitive to everybody—won’t some group or the other *always* be left out? It’s a valid question. It may never be possible to always cater to everybody, but perhaps, if we stop designing in a way that consciously excludes certain people, chances are that it will make the space more inclusive. Making the city safe for older women would make the city safe and accessible for others too. For instance, better street lighting, lower bus steps, paved sidewalks, broad, unchipped steps on foot-over bridges and usable public toilets would not just benefit children, the physically challenged and women, but also all men. Moreover, referring to our understanding of ‘formal equality’ versus ‘substantive equality’, one needs to also see difference-sensitive design as a provisional step aimed at bridging the gap between theoretical and actual equality. This requires minimal monetary investment and importantly, a commitment to making spaces

more accessible through intent and design.

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Design in urban public spaces is not just relevant at the micro level to individual parks and toilets, but also at the macro level to the overall planning of the city. Over the past few years, Mumbai has been steadily undergoing a makeover into the global image of streamlined order: gleaming steel and glass skyscrapers, air-conditioned office spaces, flyovers for snazzy cars, and pre-packaged recreation. These developments are constructing a new geography of the city where streets are conduits for speedy movement, neighbourhoods become gated communities of contained order and public spaces merely lost opportunities for more development. This short-sighted, bottomline-focused thinking is slowly making the city into a cluster of islands of sanitized exclusivity. In this situation, public space is reduced to leftover space, its value limited to connecting private spaces or enhancing their value. As people feel decreasing claim over public space, increasing policing is required to maintain it.

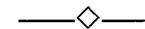
The primary strategy for achieving this image of the global city is that of segregating spaces for different people and activities. All diversity is attempted to be contained into a singular image of the built form, exemplified by vertical towers. Defining urbanity in this one-dimensional manner ignores the inherent plurality of the city as reflected in its diverse built environment.<sup>63</sup> In the last few years, moreover, critical policy decisions and amendments in development regulations have sought to erase the existing urban fabric and drastically reduce the quality and quantity of public space.<sup>64</sup>

This tunnel vision of the city is unfriendly to women at multiple levels. For one, zoning spaces on the basis of use into residential and commercial areas is detrimental to women's mobility. Our research shows that women have

more access to public space in mixed-use areas, where shops and business establishments are open late into the night, ensuring activity at all times. Second, vertical development often means a detachment from the ground. In comparison to low-rise horizontal urban forms, the public spaces of a vertical city are less friendly and safe, particularly for women.<sup>65</sup> And third, when public space falls off the agenda in planning, what is left becomes increasingly privatized, policed and often fraught with risk. Contrary to common sense notions of urban 'beautification', clean lines and peopleless streets do not equal comfort or safety for women who often seem to prefer a degree of chaos, ambiguity and multiplicity to univalent notions of cleanliness and order.<sup>66</sup>

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The first impulse of design based on 'rational' modernist principles—as is prevalent even today—is to reign in chaos and enforce a visually clean order on the lived messiness of the city. Flexibility and creativity in the use of public space that is a departure from its apparent intended use—an absolute bane of planning professionals—is actually a mark of its success.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, designers see the everyday spatial negotiations of people in the city as mundane impediments in the path of pure design, instead of being its very purpose. What is needed then, is not a call to sacrifice aesthetics at the pragmatic altar of safety and accessibility, but a new aesthetics of inclusiveness, where right of access of all defines what is good design and what is not.



## 26. Why Loiter?

As we collectively produce our cities, so we collectively produce ourselves. . . . [If] we accept that 'society is made and imagined', then we can also believe that it can be 'remade and reimagined'.

—David Harvey (2000)

'Why would you want to loiter?' we are inevitably asked in tones that range from incomprehension to horror.

As educated, employed, middle-class, urban Indian women (rather like the desirable-ought-to-be-good-little-women we write about), when we express a desire to seek pleasure in the city by loitering, it might seem strange to some. It might seem as though (a) as beneficiaries of the women's movement, who have access to education, healthcare and employment, *we are asking for too much*, (b) given that most women in India don't have access to even basic facilities, *we are being frivolous*, and (c) our desire to loiter is peculiar, for, in any case, *loitering itself is an offensive activity*.

For some reason, nobody likes loitering. In fact, the state disapproves so much that it actually legislates against it. The Bombay Police Act, 1951, has a clause that reads: 'Whoever is found between sunset and sunrise . . . laying or loitering in any street, yard or any other place . . . and without being able to give a satisfactory account of himself . . . shall on conviction, be punished . . .'

*Lukkha*, *lafanga*, *vella*, *tapori*, *bekaar* are words from various Indian languages; they are, without exception, uncomplimentary terms used to describe the act of loitering or the lack of demonstration of a visible purpose. When we think of people loitering in Mumbai, the image it conjures up is of crowded, messy and difficult-to-navigate street

corners, the smell of cheap tobacco, the sight of paan stains, the sounds of boiling tea and unmodulated male voices. Etched into our imagination is the vision of the unwashed male masses, unmistakably lower class in attire and demeanour.

This connection between loitering and lower-class men in some part explains why loitering is considered an anathema, particularly for women. Another reason, as we have argued earlier, includes the desire to pre-empt all risk, which at its most benevolent is intended to protect women, and at its worst, to control women's sexuality by restricting movement. Other reasons, as we shall argue, are linked to the desirable image of the global city—ordered and controlled—and the exalted position accorded to productivity in this city.

So why is it that we want to loiter and why do we think it will make a difference? What do we mean by loitering and why do we insist that it not be seen as an illegal act, but as something significant that celebrates the urban experience? Why do we exult in the disorder that loitering apparently creates and make the demand that everyone should be able to loiter, even those perceived to be 'dangerous'? How will loitering through the physical occupation of space impact our cities and make them more liveable?

In this final chapter, we will try and lay out why we think loitering holds the possibility of not just expanding women's access to public space, but also of transforming women's relationship to the city and creating a more inclusive urban environment.<sup>1</sup>

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As we have argued so far, despite the fact that in contemporary Mumbai certain women are a desirable presence in the public, especially in their roles as professionals and consumers, women have only conditional access and not claim to city public spaces. Economic and political visibility may have brought

increased *access* to public space, but this has not automatically translated into greater *rights* to public space for women. The Mumbai woman still has to demonstrate visible purpose and respectability *each separate time* she steps outdoors. This model of respectability, framed as it is in terms of a patriarchal sexual morality, automatically excludes those women who are deemed 'unrespectable', not only from staking any claim on public space, but also from the conditional protection conceded to 'respectable' women.

Most discussions on women and public space tend to focus on questions of *safety*—and specifically, *sexual safety*—rather than those of *access*. Women's exclusion from public space is closely connected to the presence of undesirable 'others' in the city. It is then, ostensibly, to protect women that others are barred from accessing it freely. These supposedly 'dangerous' others include lower-class and Muslim men, sex workers, hawkers and other marginal citizens. At any given time, the claims of one group can be held up against the other, ironically rendering both as outsiders to public space. In this tableau, no matter how it is played out, women always remain outsiders, cast either as vulnerable 'good' little women in need of rules and boundaries or as transgressive 'predatory' women who threaten social order.

Across the city, different women with varied desires have to manoeuvre their way through a minefield of dos and don'ts to access their bit of pleasure in the public. In the long run, however, covert strategies can only take us so far. So long as women's presence in the public space continues to be seen within the frame of public and private, and within the interwoven hierarchies of class, community and gender, an unconditional right to public space will remain a distant dream. If what we want eventually is unconditional access to public space based on articulated rights of citizenship, then we cannot shy away from making a political claim.

It is to this end that we make a case for loitering as a

fundamental act of claiming public space and ultimately, a more inclusive citizenship. We believe the right to loiter has the potential to change the terms of negotiation in city public spaces and creating the possibility of a radically altered city, not just for women, but for everyone.

#### Why loitering might work where other strategies fail

Our desire to have all people loiter is not rooted in any altruism, but in the simple understanding that no one group can claim access for itself without claiming it for *all* others. The competing claims to public space of different groups are founded on the parochial and discriminatory classification of people into 'desirable' and 'undesirable' persons, and based on their being identified as male, female or transgender, rich or poor, upper or lower caste, young or old, Hindu or Muslim, Christian or Sikh, Jain, Buddhist or other, able-bodied or not, heterosexual, lesbian or gay. These oppositions underlie further divisions on the basis of occupation, geographical location, appearance and morality. In the battle for public space, these groups are artificially pitted against each other, cast them as either vulnerable or dangerous. *What if* all these people were out there? On the streets? Apparently *doing nothing*?

Loitering is significant because it blurs these boundaries—the supposedly dangerous look less threatening, the ostensibly vulnerable don't look helpless enough. *What if* there were mass loitering by hip collegians and sex workers, dalit professors and lesbian lawyers, nursing mothers and taporis, Muslim journalists and north Indian taxi drivers, visually-challenged management professionals and street hawkers, garbage collectors and heterosexual, brahmin bureaucrats. If these juxtapositions seem contrived, it is only because we have grown used to the hierarchies that divide us. They have become 'normal'. This scenario might seem to be anarchic, but within this apparent chaos lies the possibility of imagining and creating a space without such hierarchies or boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

Loitering by diverse groups then has the capacity to decisively disrupt this taken-for-granted segregation of people into categories and makes these divisions not just redundant, but also ridiculous. If we accept that all people have the right to loiter, then cities will allow for a novel diversity that might be messy in appearance, but is actually comfortable because people's claims to be in that space are secure.

For women, such a space of ambiguity can be powerful. Since the very act of being in public without purpose is seen as unfeminine, loitering fundamentally subverts the performance of gender roles. It thwarts societal expectations and enables new ways of imagining our bodies in relation to public space. This can be very liberating since any performance of femininity is otherwise inadequate to counter their out-of-placeness.<sup>3</sup>

In a relative sense, the female body, which is expected to be located 'properly' in the private space of the home, has the greatest potential to disrupt the structures of power in public. The bubble of private respectability that women are expected to cloak themselves in cannot withstand the act of loitering because the two are based on contradictory imperatives—the former, one of maintaining privacy even in the public, and the latter, that of taking pleasure in the public, of celebrating the very publicness of public space. When women choose to take pleasure in public space, it challenges the division between private and public space, and therefore, between respectable and non-respectable women, thus undermining the illusion of privacy that women are expected to perform.<sup>4</sup>

The loiterer maps her own path, often errant, arbitrary, and circuitous, marking out a dynamic personal map of pleasure. The loiterer is independent, free-spirited and carries only the responsibility for herself. In this sense, loitering also has the potential to create a new sense of everyday embodiment—where one might stretch one's body rather than contain it, where one's body language might express pleasure



in public space rather than an awareness of its boundaries.<sup>5</sup>

This opens up a plethora of possibilities: imagine varied street corners full of women sitting around talking, strolling, feeding children, exchanging recipes and books, planning the neighbourhood festival or just indulging in some 'time pass'. Imagine street corners full of young women watching the world go by as they sip tea and discuss politics, soap operas and the latest financial budget. Imagine street corners full of older women contemplating the state of the world and reminiscing about their lives. Imagine street corners full of female domestic workers planning their next strike for a raise in minimum wage. If one can imagine all of this, one can imagine a radically altered city.

#### Why it's worth the risk

Loitering is perceived to be risky because it is often cast as dangerous and anti-social in some way. Interestingly, it is also illegal in many countries; good citizens are expected not to loiter, but to go about their work in an orderly fashion. Good citizens are then rewarded with the promise of protection in public space which is denied to those who loiter. This is even more stringently applicable to women who are forbidden from taking risks of any kind. When women demand the freedom to take risks instead of the guarantee of safety, we are implicitly rejecting this conditional protection in favour of the unqualified right to public space.

We would like the right to choose to be able to go out at any time of the day or night or to choose to stay in. In some ways benevolent paternal protection is simple—it lays down the boundaries and all one has to do is skilfully negotiate them. Losing this protection, however conditional, will mean that one is compelled to take decisions and make choices whose outcomes we might have little control over. However, freedom from protection will also mean freedom, not from the male gaze or the threat of physical assault, but from having

to consistently manufacture respectability in order to be worthy of protection. The right to risk is unconditional. The right to risk knows no temporality, no codes of conduct and needs no symbolic markers to define one's worthiness. The right to risk chooses freedom over restrictions *and* seeks freedom from restrictions.

We acknowledge explicitly that with freedom comes responsibility. The demand for the unconditional right to take risks in lieu of protection places the responsibility squarely on women. Our desire then is to replace the *unchosen risk* to reputation and the *unwanted risk* of loss of respectability with a *chosen risk* of engaging city spaces on our own terms. Yes, there is street harassment, and yes, there is violence against both women and men. The fear of violence in public space is legitimate and cannot be merely wished away. At no point are we ignoring or even minimizing the violence, both sexual and non-sexual, that might potentially take place in the public and lead to physical as well as psychological trauma. Even as we ask for women's right to engage risk in public space, we do not disregard the responsibility of the state and its mechanisms of law and order in dealing with public violence. Instead, we suggest that they deal very firmly with the aggressors of that violence and not tie up the victims of violence in endless blame games, inane dress codes, and relentless moral policing. The woman who seeks the simple pleasure of a walk by the seaside at night is in no way responsible for an attack against her. In another world, this would not be a risk, but given that it is a risk in Mumbai, and in several other Indian cities, the least one can expect is unequivocal justice if one is assaulted. The least one can expect is that the assailant be punished without collateral emotional damage to the victim. The least one can expect is to not be held responsible for that violence.<sup>6</sup> The least one can expect is an acknowledgement of one's right to walk on the beach, stroll on the waterfront, laze in the park without question.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, however, we also need to recognize another kind of risk: that of the loss of opportunity to engage city spaces and the loss of the experience of public spaces should women choose not to access public space more than minimally. By choosing not to access public space without purpose, women not only accept the gendered boundaries of public space, but actually reinforce them. This renders women forever outsiders to public space; always commuters, never possessors of public space.

The right to risk is not merely abstract. From the perspective of the city, it must be mirrored in the provision of infrastructure. While the decision to take certain risks must be chosen, risks must not be thrust upon women by inadequate or miserly planning.

Infrastructure is central to access. The state and the city's role in the provision of infrastructure like public transport, public toilets and good lighting are integral to the success of the larger claim to public space. Public space, then, does not mean empty space devoid of infrastructure and facilities, but a space that is thoughtfully designed with the intention of maximizing access. Not just functional spaces like train compartments, bus stops and toilets, but also spaces of pleasure like parks and seaside promenades are significant to creating accessible cities. For it is in these spaces that the joy of being in and belonging to the city is shared and communicated.

While we must lobby for an infrastructure that will make it possible for us to take risks as citizens, at the same time, the demand for infrastructure that reduces risks should not provide the grounds to indict those who choose to take other kinds of risks not dependent on infrastructure. The presence of well-lit streets in the city should not mean that women found in dark corners should be deemed unrespectable or blamed if they are attacked.

Choosing to take risks in public space undermines a sexist structure where women's virtue is prized over their desires or

agency. Choosing risks foregrounds pleasure, making what is clearly a feminist claim to the city.

### Why loitering is feminist

Pleasure, in and of itself, is low on the list of priorities of not just city planners, but also feminists. Feminists are often wary of demanding pleasure as it might be seen as frivolous or worse irrelevant to a discussion on urbanism.<sup>8</sup> Loitering then is not very likely to find a place in a feminist list of demands. The desire for pleasure, especially in a context where people are poor or face violence, is often seen as suspect. In keeping with this strategy, feminist engagements with city public spaces have focused on eliminating the risks of violence as far as possible. Many feminists fear that if pleasure gets on the agenda, women will lose the ground we won with so much effort and difficulty.

However, the struggle against violence and the quest for pleasure cannot be separate things. The quest for pleasure actually strengthens our struggle against violence, framing it in the language of rights rather than protection.<sup>9</sup> The 'right to pleasure' must always include the 'right to live without violence'. The struggle against violence as an end in itself is fundamentally premised on exclusion and can only be maintained through violence, in that it tends to divide people into 'us' and 'them', and actually sanctions violence against 'them' in order to protect 'us'. The quest for pleasure on the other hand, when framed in inclusive terms, does not divide people into aggressors and victims and is therefore non-divisive.

We believe that in the twenty-first century, the only kind of feminism that is likely to be exciting is a feminism of inclusion. As feminists, who have benefited from the struggles of our fore-mothers—for the right to political representation, to education and economic participation—we stake our claim to take the struggle further. We seek to claim not just the right to work but the right to play—the right to unadulterated unsanctioned pleasure.

Bringing pleasure into the centre of the discussion might also then be a viable strategy to make feminism relevant again. In the undergraduate courses and workshops we conduct, our final sessions always focus on imagining a utopia. Students read Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* and are asked to imagine their own vision of a dream world for women.<sup>10</sup> So far, each time, we have found ourselves facing a completely silent group. *They cannot imagine another world.* This alternately bewilders and depresses us—for being over a decade older than them, we still nurture fantasies of a utopian city.<sup>11</sup>

There is an increasing sense among upper-middle-class young people today that to seek utopia is naïve and unsophisticated, that in a global world, we may simply buy our personal utopias whether these are expensive real estate or designer shoes. Furthermore, gender-based utopias uncomfortably conjure up that most maligned of labels: feminist. This discomfort is rooted in a perception of feminism as somehow joyless. The terms of definition our undergraduate participants in workshops use are inevitably negative—'man-hating', 'anti-beauty', and 'anti-family'. As feminists, we know these are simply not true. But at the same time, it is also not untrue that after decades of struggle, while many women can today compete with men in the workspace, when it comes to pleasure, the battle has barely begun.

— A discussion on pleasure is deeply relevant to contemporary feminism. When in these same classrooms we mention the possibility of loitering, the desire to hang out without purpose, the right to take risks, the young women suddenly sit up and begin to pay attention. They don't think, even for a moment, that we are being frivolous or peculiar. And they certainly don't think we are asking for too much.

If we recognize the desire for pleasure as legitimate, it creates a space that is outside of consumption to discuss desire and pleasure. If we take pleasure seriously as a component of

freedom and liberation, it allows us to engage head on with the aspirations of young urban middle-class women, who believe that gendered restrictions are irrelevant to them.

### Why loitering should matter even to those who are not feminists

Pleasure is relevant not just to feminists, but to everybody who inhabits this city. Over the last decade, Mumbai has become a less safe city for women in people's perception. In reality, the city has become unsafe not just for women, but for everyone. This loss of safety is integrally linked as much to the urban planning policies of the city, which exclude all those defined as outsiders, as it is to actual instances of violence. As historical evidence shows, attempts to cleanse and sanitize cities have often had the opposite effect, of making cities even more fraught, violent and unsafe.<sup>12</sup>

The global claims of Mumbai are still new and fragile, and, therefore, to be guarded zealously. One of the ways these claims are often buttressed is by a clear definition of spaces as being inside–outside, public–private, and recreational–commercial. Loitering disrupts this imagined order of the global city. The act of loitering, in its very lack of structure, renders a space simultaneously inside and outside, public and private, and recreational and commercial, producing a constant state of liminality or transition. The liminality (in-between-ness) of loitering is seen as an act of contamination, an act of defiling space. Loitering is a reminder of what is perceived as the lowest common denominator of the local and thus is a threat to the desired image of a global city.

Loitering as an act is about the purposeless occupation of public space—something that precludes the possibility of creating sanitized homogenous spaces. It is precisely this ambiguity that makes loitering potentially liberating. Loitering ✓ mocks the authority of any one group of people to determine the future of the city by speaking with multiple visceral bodies

and through the indeterminate nature of the identity of the loiterer.

Loitering is also a threat to the desired visibility of capitalist consumption in that there is no recognizable product—if a beverage is being consumed, it is likely to be unbranded, roadside cutting chai (three-quarters of a cup of tea). Loitering is located firmly outside the global market of packaged consumer products. In a scenario where all modes of recreation and fun are increasingly being privatized and come with a price tag attached, loitering challenges the unspoken notion that only those who can afford it are entitled to pleasure.

Loitering also disrupts the image of the desirable productive body—taut, vigorous, purposeful—moving precisely towards the ‘greater global good’. In a time when the performance of a consumerist hyper-productivity is becoming deeply significant in global-aspirational Mumbai, the choice to demonstrate non-productivity can be profoundly unsettling. Loitering is a threat to the global order of production in that people are visibly doing nothing.

Loitering can have no purpose other than pleasure. Since loitering is fundamentally a voluntary act undertaken for pure self-gratification, it is not forced and has no visible productivity. Thus, loitering as a right implicitly assumes that everyone has the right to pleasure. The presence of the loiterer ruptures the controlled socio-cultural order of the global city by refusing to conform to desired forms of movement and location and instead, creating alternate maps of movement, and thus, new kinds of everyday interaction. It thwarts the desire for clean lines and structured spaces by inserting the ostensibly private into the apparently public. Loitering as a subversive activity, then, has the potential to raise questions not just of ‘desirable image’, but also of citizenship: Who owns the city? Who can access city public spaces as a right?

### Why loitering is central to citizenship

Access to public space often reflects a person’s location in the hierarchy of the city. The upper-class executive in his air-conditioned car may never actually access public space, but his right over it is unquestioned. And then there are those like migrant labourers, who have little choice but to be in public space, sometimes to even live in it, whose rights are easily revoked and sacrificed at the altar of safeguarding ‘law and order’.

Our understanding of loitering in public space is based on the right of each individual, irrespective of their group affiliations, to take pleasure in the city—as an act of claim and belonging. This is, however, not a notion that is located in a crude understanding of capitalism where each individual maximizes her pleasure in the city leading to the greater happiness of society.

When we ask to loiter, the intent is to rehabilitate this act of hanging out without purpose not just for women, but for all marginal groups. The celebration of loitering envisages an inclusive city where people have a right to city public spaces, creating the possibility for all to stake a claim, not just to the property they own, nor to use the ownership of property as grounds for being more equal citizens, but to claim undifferentiated rights to public space.

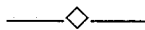
From our perspective, citizenship of a city is a visceral thing—just as adult franchise marks in one tangible sense belonging to a nation, so we claim that the right to physically occupy city public spaces is a tangible sign of city-citizenship. We believe that for women to truly claim citizenship, we must be able to claim public spaces with our bodies, by writing our claim everyday through our movements.<sup>13</sup>

For women the right to loiter represents the possibility of redefining the terms of their access to public space, not as ‘dependents’ seeking patronage, but as citizens claiming their rights. Unlike dependents, citizens are recognized as

contributing, productive partners and therefore, while they are subject to state law, are nonetheless able to claim unconditional rights based purely on the fact of their citizenship. This means that the state's responsibility to protect its citizens' right to be in public space must be independent of the individual citizen's class, caste, religion, gender, age, sexual-orientation, physical ability, clothing, behaviour and perceived morality. It is as much the responsibility of the state to protect the right of the street-walker to public space as that of the upper-class corporate executive. Similarly, it is as much the responsibility of the state to protect the right of the migrant worker to public space as that of the middle-class woman homemaker.

It is this unconditional access to public space that is fundamental to changing women's relationship to the city. This will change not just women, but also the city transforming both in ways that we cannot even entirely imagine.

It is only when the city belongs to everyone that it can ever belong to all women. The unconditional claim to public space will only be possible when all women and all men can walk the streets without being compelled to demonstrate purpose or respectability. Women's access to public space is fundamentally linked to the access of all citizens. The litmus test of this right to public space is the right to loiter, especially for women across all classes. Loiter without purpose and meaning. Loiter without being asked what time of the day it is, why we are here, what we are wearing, and whom we are with. That is when we will truly belong to the city and the city to us.



## NOTES

### PROLOGUE

- <sup>1</sup> The project produced a video documentary on women's hostels in the city, titled *Freedom before 11*, directed by Radhika Menon and Roseanne Lobo in 2004, a documentary on public toilets titled *Q2P* directed by Paromita Vohra in 2006, and an audio documentary on college dress codes titled *And then they came for my jeans* . . . recorded by mass communications students of SIES College in 2005 under the supervision of Sameera Khan, Shilpa Phadke and Anita Kushwaha. The project also included a full-fledged travelling photography exhibition on women and public space titled *City Limits*, curated by Shilpa Phadke and Bishakha Datta, with four young photographers (Karan Arora, Neelam Ayare, Roshani Jadhav and Abhinandita Mathur) in partnership with Point of View, a women's media collective in Mumbai ([www.pointofview.org](http://www.pointofview.org)).

### CITY LIMITS

#### 1. Why Mumbai?

- <sup>1</sup> The *ridha* is the distinctive style of veiling used by the Dawoodi Bohra Muslim community—a combination of a loose, long pastel-coloured skirt, a short frilly cape and a hood or bonnet covering the hair.

<sup>34</sup> As reported in *Indian Express, Mumbai Newslime*, 13 March 2006/14 March 2006; *Times of India*, Mumbai, 14 March 2006.

<sup>35</sup> It is estimated that about 75 per cent of all rapes take place within the family, as the then home minister Shivraj Patil told the Lok Sabha, with parents and close relatives often being perpetrators of the heinous crime (*Times of India*, 19 March 2008).

<sup>36</sup> See Phadke (forthcoming).

#### 4. Lines of Control

<sup>37</sup> Foucault's notion of 'disciplining' draws fundamentally on a conceptual prison type called the panopticon, proposed by political theorist Jeremy Bentham. The panopticon comprised a central tower and cells around it—from where the 'watcher' can see all the cells but prisoners can neither see him nor each other. Bentham argued that once the prisoners become aware of being watched, they internalize the omniscient gaze and don't need to be actually watched anymore.

Foucault's analysis has been interestingly harnessed by several feminist scholars such as Susan Bordo, Jana Sawiki and Sandra Bartky, among others, to examine how particularly women's bodies are disciplined. Bartky's (1988) analysis of ways in which women's bodies and faces are shaped and ornamented, in the context of western cultures, demonstrates eloquently how these 'disciplines' operate to normalize certain ways of being 'women' thus rendering other interpretations unviable and suspect, to say the least. She identifies three disciplinary practices which 'produce a body which in gesture and appearance is recognizably feminine'. These include: those that aim to produce a body of a singular shape and size, those that work towards determining the gestures, postures and movements of this

body, and those that dress up the body. Bartky suggests that modern disciplinary power regulates women without violence or public sanctions, by centring normative femininity in a woman's body—specifically its assumed heterosexuality and appearance.

Iris Marion Young, in her essay 'Throwing like a Girl' (1990) argues that ways in which women use and look upon their bodies is distinct from the way men use theirs. While 'the masculine body moves fluidly and confidently', 'the feminine body uses limited movements' that is marked by an under-confidence in the capacity of her body and in an exaggerated fear of injuring it. Young argues, 'Not only is there a typical style of throwing like a girl, but there is more or less a typical style of running like a girl, climbing like a girl, swinging like a girl, hitting like a girl . . . For many women as they move in a sport, a space surrounds us in imagination that we are not free to move beyond; the space available to our movement is a constricted space' (146).

<sup>38</sup> This is suggested by scholar Rosa Ainley (1998) who further argues that gendered space must be seen as a constant *process of becoming*. Here one might also invoke Judith Butler's (1990) conception of gender as being a 'regulatory fiction' in society (Butler 1990). 'Feminine' and 'masculine' codes of behaviour have to then be relentlessly performed and regulated because anybody that attempts to transgress the boundaries of appropriateness threatens to disrupt this social order.

<sup>39</sup> Historically, too, women have claimed public space at ritual celebrations. For instance, see Sennet's (1992) description of the Adonia festival and Ehrenreich's (2006) exploration of Maenadism, both in ancient Greece. Closer home, in Hindu mythology, the god Krishna is reputed to have charmed women into leaving their homes at night to find him. At the same time it must be noted that even within these spaces of ritualized celebration, there continues to be

an insistence on women performing normative femininity.

<sup>40</sup> See Phadke (2007a).

<sup>41</sup> In 2006, Tamil Nadu's Anna University imposed a dress code on 231 engineering colleges that fall under its purview, banning jeans, sleeveless tops, tee-shirts and tight-fitting clothes. The move was supported by players across the political spectrum—from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to the Periyarist Dravidar Kazhagam (PDK), the Paattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) and the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI). Around the same time, Orissa became the first state in the country to introduce a 'uniform dress code' for college students. Not only did the state ban college students from wearing sleeveless tops and tight jeans but they also instituted uniforms—which have been specified as salwar-kameez for girls and trousers and full-sleeved shirts for boys (*Hindu*, 6 September 2005). In Mumbai, the Vice-Chancellor of Mumbai University called a meeting of college principals in July 2005 to discuss a possible dress code for colleges though eventually nothing concrete materialized from it. For a discussion on dress codes, see Phadke and Khan, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Technically, fatwas are legal opinions to be issued only by a high priest; in reality they are being issued by all kinds of local maulvis. Women's groups, such as Aawaaz-e-Niswaan, report that fatwas have been issued in various parts of Mumbai including Malvani (Malad), Jogeshwari (East) and Cheetah Camp on shunning dancing, singing, haldi/*mehendi* ceremonies, video shooting, and photography during wedding celebrations. In fact, some fatwas dictate that priests should not solemnize such 'joyful' weddings. If a family defies the fatwa then the priest is required not issue the *nikahnama* (marriage certificate) and the local masjid is directed not to bury the dead from that family.

## 5. Consuming Femininity

<sup>43</sup> Discussions around consumption are often polarized between a defence of its pleasures and a critical assessment of its capacity of co-option. Some feminist scholars in the 1990s have focused on women's agency and the pleasure in consumption, a pleasure that was sometimes read to have sexual overtones that might transgress defined boundaries of appropriate feminine behaviour. What these arguments suggest is that women's access to public space and participation in consumption should be seen outside the discourses of capitalist oppression and 'false consciousness'. Others argue that if these mall spaces are not spaces of false consciousness, and we do not believe they are, nor are they spaces of unmitigated agency. For a complex discussion of women, shopping and consumption, see Bowlby (2001), Friedberg (1993), Domosh and Seager (2001), McRobbie (1997), Morris (2000), Pollock (1988), Radner (1999), Walkowitz (1992), Wilson (2001), Wolff (1985).

<sup>44</sup> We use 'habitus' as suggested by Pierre Bourdieu to refer to a socialized subjectivity, a way of theorizing the socially produced self and of understanding how social relations become constituted within the self, but also how the self is constitutive of social relations. Though for our purposes we refer to 'habitus' in relation to the body, the term extends beyond embodiments to include attitudes and tastes as well as often carrying with it the weight of individual and collective history.

<sup>45</sup> See Phadke (2005a).

<sup>46</sup> The new spaces of consumption, while problematic in themselves, are also not entirely unthreatened. Chennai, for instance, has seen the rise of a debate around concerns of couples kissing on dance floors in a discotheque and of women drinking at a fashion show. This has led to a discussion on the purity of Tamil culture and the role of women within it. This is interesting given that these are

- No commercialization through ads/posters/banners or in any other manner is permitted on the fence or inside the Maidan.
- No cattle, horses, stray dogs etc. are allowed in the Maidan.
- Anti-social activities are strictly prohibited.
- Consuming liquor or other intoxicants is strictly prohibited.
- Gates of the Maidan are closed from 10.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m.
- No hawkers and peddlers are allowed in the Maidan.
- Littering, spitting and other acts of nuisance are prohibited in the Maidan.
- No organized activity, show or event is permitted.
- No loudspeakers.
- No morchas, processions or meetings are permitted.
- In general, except cricket no other organized activity is permitted.
- Users of Maidan do so at their own risk.

<sup>54</sup> Like the Oval, the Horniman Circle Garden has also been 'beautified' as part of the conservation movement in Mumbai. Similarly fenced and gated, the garden is further densely planted with multiple kinds of shrubs and climbing creepers along with some fine old trees. While it is an excellent example of landscaping, it cuts complete visibility from the streets outside. Even within the garden, plants create visual partitions between spaces. Such a design encourages a more languorous use rather than active sports of any kind. As such, women—whom our research has demonstrated cannot hang-out in public space without purpose—are fundamentally discouraged from using it. Men, on the other hand, are found making the most of what the gardens have to offer—having lunches, chatting, playing cards and even having their afternoon siestas. Even if women were to overcome social stigma and access the gardens to hang out alone, the visual disconnection of the inside with the outside and the multitude of men there makes it difficult for them to do so.

<sup>55</sup> Urban designer William H. Whyte notes that, 'So-called "undesirables" are not the problem. It is the measures taken to combat them that is the problem. The best way to handle the problem of undesirables is to make the place attractive to everyone else' (quoted in the Project for Public Spaces, <http://www.pps.org/info/placemakingtools/placemakers/wwhyte>, accessed in December 2008).

An example of this in action is the Dufferin Grove Park in Toronto. Imagine this—you step out of your door, walk to your local park, knead some fresh dough, pop it in the communal oven, and within minutes you have freshly baked bread or pizza ready. By installing a wood-fired community oven, this Canadian park encouraged all kinds of people, including lower-class families with children, to use it. By making the park a space populated by all kinds of people, they effectively decreased the possibility of unwanted activities such as drug use in the park ([http://www.pps.org/topics/affiliated/a\\_woodfired\\_communal](http://www.pps.org/topics/affiliated/a_woodfired_communal)). This is just one example of how a park was creatively made more inclusive and welcoming to the community that lives around it.

## 12. Designed City

<sup>56</sup> Such a passive view of the material environment has not been consistent through history. Historically, an articulation of the transformative potential of material culture in general and material space in particular, began in the late nineteenth century with the Arts and Crafts movement in reaction to the perceived decrepitude of industrial society. In the early twentieth century, the design of the built environment was attributed with the ability to almost single-handedly change society. Architectural modernism in particular was fuelled by a belief in such an achievable utopian social ideal which a socially engaged



architecture would bring about. In the 1960s, this Modernist utopianism (best known through the work of Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe) along with its companion ideals of humanism and universal idealism were critiqued severely by emerging paradigms of thought, for being univalent and insentient to the complexities and contradictions of lived experience. Architecture since the Modernists has been diffident about its larger social relevance. However, it is important to understand that critiquing the megalomaniacal belief in the omnipotence of the material environment does not mean that it has no power or ability beyond reflecting/ following the evolution of the social structure.

<sup>57</sup> The elective course 'Interrogating the City: Gender, Space and Power' was conducted for fourth-year students at the Sir J.J. College of Architecture, Mumbai, from December 2004 to April 2005.

<sup>58</sup> There exist successful examples of change brought about where cities have taken designing for safety seriously. One such example is that of the Metro Action Committee on Public Violence against Women (METRAC), founded in 1984, by the council of metropolitan Toronto. Consisting of eighty all-women members from across disciplines, METRAC has developed a comprehensive and multi-disciplinary approach to women's safety which has more importantly shifted the locus of knowledge from technical specialists to the users themselves. For example, in a study of High Park—the city's largest park—METRAC prepared an extensive report based on an active engagement with women park users. Amongst the factors they considered were lighting, sight/visibility, entrapment possibilities, ear and eye distance, movement predictors (such as pathways and tunnels), signage information, visibility of park staff/ police, public telephones, assailants' escape routes, maintenance levels, parks programming officials and

isolation, the most critical single factor. See <http://www.metrac.org>.

<sup>59</sup> *Daily News and Analysis*, 31 May 2006 and June 2006

<sup>60</sup> Exercise designed by Shilpa Ranade. See also Ranade (2007) and Phadke, Khan and Ranade (2005).

<sup>61</sup> In our ethnographic studies of coffee shops, we found that women on their own chose to sit in very specific places: usually at the edges of the shop facing the street with their back to the wall. Women often instinctively protect their backs and locate themselves where they can see people approaching them. This is interesting given that all women interviewed unanimously said that they do not feel the threat of harassment inside coffee shops though of course 'sometimes people stare inside as well'.

<sup>62</sup> One of the reasons that much of our public infrastructure is designed taking men as the universal/neutral ideal is that there are not enough women in decision-making bodies at various levels of design, be it governmental bodies that make city-level design decisions, architectural firms in private practice or product designers who design street furniture/graphics. Even women who belong to these professions often feel the pressure to underplay their identities as women while projecting a 'neutral' professional front which more often than not mirrors and reinforces the male-centric work ethic and perspective on design. This absence and reluctance on the part of women translates into their special needs being grossly overlooked.

Architect and teacher Neera Adarkar recounts ironically the horror her students display at being asked to design a ladies' compartment in a local train. As a result, of such sentiments on the part of not just students but urban planners and designers as well, the design of various infrastructural facilities that do exist, fail to provide for the specific needs of women.

<sup>63</sup> Srivastava et al (2004) contend that defining urbanity in

only one form—as multi-storeyed apartment blocks—is an impractical and unidimensional way of understanding the city. It is rooted in the conceptual inability of planners to accept diverse ways of being urban. They suggest that slums generate a diversity of built form and they deserve special attention by urban planners who should look at them more in terms of being ‘housing solutions’ rather than just problems.

<sup>64</sup> Examples of this are the Supreme Court judgements related to the redevelopment of mill lands and recent amendments to Development Control rules 33(7) and 33(9). In 2006, the Supreme Court overturned an earlier ruling by the Bombay High Court that determined the share of the mill lands between private and public interests. Consequently, instead of having to share a portion of their entire parcel of land with government bodies—with possibilities for creating open public places—the mill-owners were allowed to retain all the built-up areas for sale, and share only the remaining open spaces, thus drastically reducing the land available for the public. In late 2008, the Supreme Court once again overruled the Bombay High Court and upheld amendments to the Development Control rules 33(7) and 33(9) thereby opening up the way for the redevelopment of a substantial pool of old cessed buildings. Environmental and planning activists argue that this makes a virtually unlimited Floor Space Index (FSI) available to the builders and will severely overload the existing infrastructure as well as adversely impact the quality of living in the city by depleting its already scarce open spaces.

<sup>65</sup> The Centre for Enquiry Into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT) (2006) study of the resettlement of a slum community in Mumbai shows that even the simple change of moving people from the horizontal structure of a slum to the vertical structure of an apartment block redefines the public-private dichotomy of space. The corridors and

stairwells of these buildings are often unlit and unlike the older settlement patterns discourage social interaction and thus, reduce its sense of safety. The space beyond the building itself is similarly an anonymous no-man’s land, making it unsafe for women. The connection between the home and the outside world thus becomes fraught with anxieties and fear so that women prefer to stay indoors. The study shows that women’s access to education, work and healthcare, and their participation in public and community life is then adversely affected by the resettlement.

<sup>66</sup> For instance, in the city state of Singapore we found precisely the clean lines and well-designed spaces of policy-maker’s dreams and while public space was relatively ‘safe’ it was also strangely sterile. As one woman we spoke to put it, ‘Public space here is completely devoid of any erotic possibilities.’ It was as if making the space clean and sanitized of dangers had also erased the pleasures and risks that people may have desired. (Research conducted during an Artist in Residency Programme under the International Symposium on Electronic Arts, at the National University of Singapore, Singapore.)

<sup>67</sup> The emancipatory possibilities of everyday human actions to creatively re-imagine social spaces, are alluded to most evocatively by de Certeau (1984). ‘The goal,’ he writes, ‘is not to make clear how the violence of order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of “discipline”’. The proposition of de Certeau allows us to imagine social structures ‘from below’ so to say, opening up a critical methodology for de-materializing socio-spatial structures and suggesting a subversive potential of human actions.

and provide warning signals at appropriate places. The Act also calls upon the government and local authorities to provide ramps, Braille symbols, and auditory signals in elevators of public buildings, hospitals, primary health centres, and other medical and rehabilitation institutions. But, tragically, over a decade later, we are no way close to a more accessible public space.

#### 25. Can Good Girls Have Fun?

<sup>17</sup> These are stereotypes of possible women in Chembur that point to some codes of gendered conduct, but nonetheless, are as always partial descriptions.

### IMAGINING UTOPIAS

#### 26. Why Loiter?

<sup>1</sup> See also Phadke, Ranade and Khan (2009).

<sup>2</sup> This idea is not as far-fetched as it might first sound. There are some occasions that approximate such spaces. For instance, the mixture of crowds at a one-day cricket match or more recently, the 20/20 matches where a large number of different people come together appear to blur class and ethnic boundaries to some extent. This space is often more notional than real for the stadium might not be a very friendly space to women. Recollect, for instance, the college students who were sexually harassed in the celebration following India's win in the 20/20 World Cup 2007 on 26 September 2007. Unfortunately, none of the girls who were molested outside Wankhede stadium registered a complaint and the police did not probe the matter any further despite media pressure.

Another such space that creates a sense of connection of a notional shared space is Bollywood, particularly in the past decade as the divide between high culture and popular

culture has dissolved to a great extent and Hindi films have acquired a certain kind of cultural legitimacy. Of course, at this point, one has to imagine these notional spaces being actually transformed into real public spaces where people might find the capacity to if not share connections, to share space based on a collective notion of collective rights.

Loitering can thus be imagined in the mode of Foucault's notion of a heterotopia; as a space that coexists with the space of the everyday but where the hegemonic structures of the everyday are suspended. Loitering is both a physical as well as a mental act, something that is not just executed by the body but produces and is made possible through a different kind of subjectivity.

<sup>3</sup> 'Gender Performativity' is a term coined by feminist philosopher Judith Butler. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed attribute of a person, or something that is real in itself. Gender, rather, is created by the everyday repetitive performance of acts that produces the effect of a stable gendered persona. For more, see Butler (1990).

<sup>4</sup> It is this quest for pleasure that the Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women, a Facebook group formed in opposition to the attacks on women in a pub by the Sri Ram Sene in Mangalore, addressed in their mandate when they 'refused' to play the role of the 'good women' and claimed the right to fun for its own sake. This group at its finale numbered over 50,000 members, and built up to almost frenzied proportions with the media both in India and abroad giving them wide publicity. Not surprisingly, the Facebook group was hacked into several times.

It is the same vision that propelled the irreverent campaign called the Pink Chaddi Campaign which emanated from the Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women, which exhorted women to send the Sri

Ram Sene pink chaddis (underwear) for Valentine's Day to indicate their disdain for the brand of culture-policing they endorsed.

- <sup>5</sup> Women's sense of frustration at having to watch themselves all the time was reflected in an online blog campaign 'I Wish, I Want, I Believe' (February 2007) run by the Blank Noise project, which campaigns against sexual harassment on Indian streets. One respondent wrote: 'I wish to . . . just be myself . . . not think about who's watching me . . . if I want to just sing to my heart's content . . . swing about and walk the streets . . . laugh . . . express myself . . . without anybody misconstruing anything I do or say!!!!' Another fantasized: 'I wish I could go to a tea/naan/cigarette stall at any time of day or night and not have only men flock around it and make me feel like I am intruding on their space.' (<http://blanknoiseproject.blogspot.com/2007/02/wish-list.html>, accessed in August 2007).
- <sup>6</sup> When we say 'not to be blamed for the violence' we include those times when women were out to just have fun. When we say 'not to be blamed' we include not just moral judgements but also those based on rationality which say—'but how stupid, what was she thinking of going out so late,' or variations on that theme. In the recent case of the sexual assault of a young international student in Mumbai by six men (2009), the question was often raised in conversation of the young woman's 'stupidity' in going to an empty flat with six men. Here it is important to point out that many other women (and men) have done similar things without adverse outcomes. The problem must be located not in the woman's desire to have fun, but in the men's plan to commit a crime.
- <sup>7</sup> Given recent fears of terrorism and increased concerns relating to security in public places (which terrorists usually target in order to create widespread panic and to draw

immediate attention to their cause), our vision to make loitering more acceptable may seem far-fetched. The immediate response to terrorist acts in public places (such as the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, chiefly targeting hotels and restaurants) is heightened security and surveillance measures. However, it is at such times that the need to reiterate the citizenship inherent in loitering, an act of both belonging to the city and a celebration of the pleasures afforded by the city, is the most important. If we choose surveillance and restrictions over access, then we allow the forces of terror to succeed in building a city of fear.

- <sup>8</sup> The contemporary women's movement (post-1970s) successfully focused on issues of violence against women bringing about changes in the law. It succeeded in bringing to the foreground issues of rape, dowry deaths, female foeticide, among others. The anxiety with regard to pleasure is then often related to the fear that if pleasure gets on the agenda, it might derail the struggles and undermine the righteous and moral grounds on which the women's movement has fought for women's rights. As a result, even within the women's movement, women do not place themselves or their desires centre-stage because this might be tagged as selfish, self-serving and divisive.
- <sup>9</sup> We are aware of the limitations of using the discourse of rights in this argument given the feminist critique of rights as being individualistic, reifying liberalism and often reflecting existing hierarchies of all kinds and thus limiting the terms of the debate. This critique is both valid and very valuable. At the same time, the language of rights is also a powerful tool to promote greater inclusion and participation in quest of a more egalitarian citizenship, not the least because it has a wide acceptability and for now is perhaps the best way to articulate both the entitlement to be free of violence and the claim to pleasure.

<sup>10</sup> Sakhawwat Hossain (1905) paints a world, 'Ladyland' where women rule in ecologically friendly cities and men are cloistered in *mardanas*. —

<sup>11</sup> The only exception to this was a workshop we conducted for Muslim women in May 2009 at a women's library in Mumbra in Thane district, just outside Mumbai city limits. Here the young women, many of whom wore full burkhas were full of ideas of *their* utopias. One of them wanted to walk out on the streets at 1 a.m. Another wanted to use a local park which from her description was well designed (being open on all four sides) but was always peopled by men and boys while her friend wanted an open sports field where women could learn all sorts of games. One girl said she'd like to spend time in the local market without having to run home in a hurry. And another one emphatically declared, 'We want to occupy as much space in public as men do.' These were young women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five who negotiate hard with their families for every extra bit of space that they are allowed to access.

<sup>12</sup> In *City of Quartz* (1990), Mike Davis paints a dystopic vision of a deeply segregated Los Angeles, where attempts to cleanse the city of its undesirable elements actually created insurmountable divisions between people and spaces. The city, parcelled into privatized islands of gated-spaces, has become so alienating and violent that a semblance of urban order could only be maintained by repressive policing and a further reinforcement of spatial boundaries. See also the work of Appadurai (2000), Mitchell (2003).

<sup>13</sup> The potential in loitering might be visualized as an extension of the power of walking itself so eloquently imagined by de Certeau (1984) whose vision of walking as being simultaneously an organic act of belonging and a subversive engagement with the city informs our idea of loitering. For de Certeau, as people walk they reinscribe the city again

and again, often in defiance of established patterns of urban order, each time differently making new meanings. Walking, according to him, is fundamentally an act of 'enunciation' through which the city—and, in effect, social order—is personalized, and in the process, altered.

Besides de Certeau, ideas of the Situationist Internationale (SI) and its key figure Guy Debord continue to influence attempts to repersonalize the urban experience. Situationist philosophy is fundamentally rooted in a critique of the dehumanized capitalist city and a focus on everyday acts as key producers of urban experience. At the core of the Situationist vision of the city is the approach to urbanism as a practice rather than a discipline. Influenced deeply by this philosophy is the field of psychogeography, which combines the subjective and objective knowledge of the city. A key strategy of exploring the city for the Situationists and in psychogeography is the *dérive* (drift) which Debord explains as: 'In a *dérive*, one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. . . .' (Knabb, 1995)

The very reality of the city then lies in its performative nature, in the random and everyday movements of people who create it in the very process of inhabiting it.