

Seats for “living together” in the city¹

[Şehirde birlikte yaşam için koltuklar]
[Des sieges pour “vivre ensemble” en ville]

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Abstract

The French word *urbanité* does not only define the character of the city as opposed to rurality, but a courtesy, a politeness, a sociability. In order to understand this value, which is considered a property of the city, the observation can take place on the scale of urban planning, architecture or even urban furniture. This article focuses on the *micro* scale of urban design, and in particular on seats, to observe their form and distribution in public space. It draws its first elements from an ethnographic walk in Bordeaux and then characterizes these seats in public space that determine interactions between “individuals with” (Goffman, 1973) before proposing several criteria of this “living together”. The discussion is based on central concepts for semiotics and design: the framework of practices (Fontanille, 2008), factitivity (Greimas, 1983), affordances (Gibson, 1979; Norman, 1988; Deni, 2005) and adjustment (Landowski, 2006) considered as a general framework.

Keywords: Semiotics, design, interactions, public space, seats

Özet

Fransızca *urbanité* kelimesi kırsallığın aksine yalnızca şehrin karakterini tanımlamakla kalmıyor; aynı zamanda kibarlığı, nezaketi, sosyalliği de tanımlar. Kentin bir özelliği olarak kabul edilen bu değeri anlamak için kentsel planlama, mimari ve hatta kent mobilyaları ölçeğinde gözlem yapılabilir. Bu makale, kentsel tasarımın mikro ölçeğine ve özellikle de kamusal alandaki biçim ve dağılımlarını gözlemlemek için koltuklara odaklanmaktadır. İlk unsurlarını Bordeaux'daki etnografik bir yürüyüşten alan bu çalışma, “birlikte yaşayan” bireyler (Goffman, 1973) arasındaki etkileşimleri belirleyen kamusal alandaki bu koltukları karakterize etmekte ve ardından bu “birlikte yaşam” için çeşitli kriterler önermektedir. Tartışma, göstergebilim ve tasarım için merkezi kavramlara dayanmaktadır: pratikler çerçevesi (Fontanille, 2008), olgusalılık (Greimas, 1983), olanaklar (Gibson, 1979; Norman, 1988; Deni, 2005) ve genel bir çerçeve olarak ele alınan uyum (Landowski, 2006).

Anahtar Kelimeler: Göstergebilim, tasarım, etkileşim, kamusal alan, koltuklar

Résumé

Le mot *urbanité* ne qualifie pas seulement le caractère de ville par opposition à ruralité, mais une courtoisie, une politesse, une sociabilité. Pour saisir cette valeur considérée comme une propriété de la ville, l'observation peut emprunter l'échelle de l'urbanisme, celle de l'architecture ou encore celle du mobilier urbain. L'article s'attache à cette échelle micro du design urbain, et plus particulièrement aux sièges, pour observer leur forme et leur distribution dans l'espace public. Il puise ses premiers éléments dans une promenade ethnographique à Bordeaux puis caractérise ces sièges de l'espace public qui déterminent des interactions entre des « individus avec » (Goffman, 1973) avant de proposer plusieurs critères de ce

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« vivre ensemble ». Cette discussion se fonde sur quelques concepts centraux pour la sémiotique et le design: le cadre des pratiques (Fontanille, 2008), la factivité (Greimas, 1983), les affordances (Gibson, 1979; Norman, 1988; Deni, 2005) et l'ajustement (Landowski, 2006) considéré comme un cadre général.

Mots-clés: Sémiotique, design, interactions, espace public, sieges

1. Introduction

The word *urbanity* does not only qualify the character of the city as opposed to rurality, but a courtesy, a politeness which, according to the Larousse dictionary, “results from the usage of the world” (our translation). While it implies a natural affability, it also indicates a quality that is constructed over the course of interactions, likely to be related to the inhabitant’s experience of the city. How may this urbanity be grasped and, since we can see both of its aspects, how can the city foster the quality of urbanity and modify the very experience to which it gives rise? To grasp the constructed value which urbanity represents, observation can use multiple scales, that is, the *macro* scale of urban planning that organizes urban spaces and inserts buildings, the *meso* scale of architecture that conceives and builds said buildings, and the *micro* scale of design that focuses on urban furniture made up of objects conceived at the scale of the human stature. These items of furniture are designed in view of their encounter with the body – they beg for contact, so to speak – unlike the artworks distributed throughout public space, which withdraw into themselves and keep the observer at a distance (Beyaert-Geslin, 2012). Among such furniture, seats in any case enjoy a particular status because their privileged contact with the body – which they more or less espouse, by virtue of ergonomic privilege – make them into casts, or doubles, similarly to the corporeal metaphors that determine their forms: in other words, they constitute symbolizations of the bodies of the city dwellers (Beyaert-Geslin *ibid.*) and, when they are made to form assemblages, they become symbolizations of forms of life.²

How are these seats organized in public space? What is their contribution to urbanity, to that value of “living together” (Barthes, 2002), which contradicts the earlier proposal by Benjamin (1929) according to which the street is the “apartment of the collective”, with public benches being “boudoirs” for the masses? The models constructed for the seats of the home cannot be applied in full, especially because public space is from the onset offered to a collective, to “individuals with” as Goffman (1973, p. 35) calls them, making the minimal seat unit to be the bench rather than the chair. How is public space made to be shared? Semiotics may find support in design for observing how seats determine interactions and for identifying the conditions of urbanity. The study begins with an ethnographic (Lévi-Strauss, 1958) and anthropological promenade in Bordeaux, and then, in a second step, characterizes the seats in public space that determine interactions between “individuals with” (Goffman, *ibid.*). Thirdly, it mobilizes some major concepts of semiotics and design so as to outline the two facets of the practice of seating, before, finally, applying the concept of adjustment (Landowski, 2005) to the study of public space and identifying several specific figures.

2. Ethnographic promenade in Bordeaux

Let’s begin by taking a look at Bordeaux’s hyper-center, regarding which a first observation imposes itself: benches are very rare. In addition to the group of four seats turning their backs to one another in front of the Museum of Aquitaine, the only assemblage found, located on rue Porte Dijeaux, presents an original method of assembly. Chairs are juxtaposed and arranged on a low concrete wall, while others are isolated or scattered across a small square and placed facing one another. The shape of the seats remains invariable however and issues a precise invitation to the body: to sit. On the other hand, secondary programs are precluded: face-to-face dialogue, but especially lying down, which the row of chairs nevertheless seems to favor. One could put forward the idea of a factitive hierarchy, with a main action program and secondary programs. Here, it is the activity of contemplating the crowd that is favored by a singular arrangement: the seats are distributed perpendicularly with respect to the direction of pedestrian circulation, reproducing the alignment seen in the villages of yesteryear, with their inhabitants taking out their chairs at the end of the day and placing them next to their neighbor’s so as to enjoy the spectacle given off by the passers-by and allowing for the lateral circulation of speech.

² For Branzi (2013 [1977], p. 340), whereas the urbanistic models of modern cities have failed, the chair represents the only theoretical model of the composition of the home. He comes to define the home as that which ‘surrounds’ the chair, the latter being “the smallest perfect, totally controllable structure, and an ideological copula of the universe, a place of dynamic rest (the sitting position) and a model for understanding the architectural revolution” (our translation). The link between the seat and urbanism is not explicit, which does not prevent us from considering the urban seat as a symbolization of the city itself. See also, regarding this central role of the chair, the introduction in *La casa calda* (1984).

The location where seats are to be found within the public space also retains our attention: apart from the scene on Rue Porte Dijeaux, there are no benches on the commercial arteries, but rather assemblages on the outskirts of the hyper-center. The goal could be to “externalize” resting so as to eliminate any obstacle to the flow of passers-by on the pedestrian streets and to extend the city center according to a principle of colonization, confirming the uncertainty of its occupation, expanding the territory to the full extent of its limit, thereby “territorializing” it. The Place Gambetta garden square, redeveloped in 2021, carries out such externalization, but does so nestedly, creating an outer space within, if you will, being located at the periphery of the hyper-center. Thus, it makes the link between the commercial area and the bordering axial road. The suture it creates conjures the risk of an “urban divide,” which is a permanent fear of urban planners (Lussault, 2007).

The garden square is enclosed between two rectilinear pedestrian axes and converging axial roads. On this intersection, it deploys a curve-shaped structure, one which is at the same time convex and concave. It is surrounded by a low stone wall whose height corresponds to that of a seat. This very “affordant” low wall, structured according to two different heights, is shaped into rows of seats forming staggered lines and allowing for dialogue while permitting various bodily postures and configurations into gatherings. The low wall of the perimeter extends into the garden, where it encloses massifs. This supplements the benches which constitute the urban furniture as such. Two types of seating with different materials may thus be distinguished: stone for what could be called “seats by assignment”, these representing “occasional affordances” (Beyaert-Geslin, 2021)³, and wood/metal for the actual intended seats, representing “institutional affordances”.

The light-colored stone extends the material of the square’s buildings, whose facades have been lightened by sandblasting, forming a continuity with the architecture, while the wood/metal links to the urban furniture. Thus, the garden refers, through its materials, to two scales of the city: architecture and design. The stone also introduces within the history of the city a sense of permanence, of historicity, of paradoxical inscription since it is realized via a renovation, corroborating the spatial linkage by means of temporal suture. This is another manner of conjuring up the “urban divide”.

In addition to the material variety of the benches, there is the variety of their forms. The contour’s low wall is deployed over on one or two levels, and the wooden benches are provided either with or without backrests. Accordingly, these wooden benches receive users of different ages and with varied practices. Older people appear to seek out benches with backrests, while younger people look for those without. The former, who favor long stations, engage in contemplation and conversation – programs requiring coordination between the multiple subjects.

The benches without backrests lend themselves to extremely varied postures and practices.⁴ One can lie on them, converse face to face and, exercising the “subterfuge” dear to de Certeau (1990), turn one’s body to face the lawn, for example. A sort of mini amphitheater formed by concentric low walls may serve to house performances but also a variety of postures and programs exploiting its function. The creative invitation to stage oneself is thus double: through spectacle and through the choice of posture. The garden acts as a small theater where one contemplates the choreography of bodies.

³ Laudati (2015, our translation) evokes such a contravening practice: “A place arranged with benches encourages passers-by to stop and sit down. However, a passerby may decide to sit on the front doorsteps of a house rather than on a bench. In such case, the usage foreseen by the designer does not correspond to the usage chosen by the agent”.

⁴ Like Ryckwert, it seems necessary to relativize the notion of comfort which is “a complex notion that varies from one person to another, from one social group to another and, for the same individual, from one period of life to another”. This notion furthermore undergoes “abrupt variations, independent of our physical constitution, closely determined by the fluctuations of fashion” (Ryckwert 1965, cited by Midal, 2013, p. 228, our translation).



Figure 1: The peripheral low stone wall allows for multitiered seating.

The diversity of possibilities for seating (occasional or institutional affordances, presence or absence of backrests, tiered seating, etc.) evokes a de-categorization, a hybridization or a polysemy authorizing the most diverse appropriations, achieved through an interpretation of the form and an inscription of the self (Basso and Leguern, 2018). The versatility of uses opens up the possibility for improvisation subjecting the seat to varied temporalities, with prolonged stations for the benches with backrests, and shorter ones for the stone benches (Beyaert-Geslin, 2012).



Figure 2: Backless benches lend themselves to a variety of practices.

This versatility seems to be a condition of urbanity. Indeed, public space must not only guarantee everyone with the “right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1968), but must be suitable for actors who assume diverse and intermittent thematic roles. It must be adaptable to the uses required by these multiple dimensions and to the polysemy of a world that means something different in function of the whole range of identities it comprises. The city dweller, who can be assimilated to the passer-by, to the wandering *flâneur* dear to a whole genealogy of writers of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries (in particular Baudelaire, 1857 and 1869; Benjamin, 1924-1939 and 1929; Hessel, 1929; Debord, 1956; and Ardenne, 2002), indeed engages in diverse programs

differentiating between various “aspects” of the city.⁵ The actions performed and the seats that host them introduce contrasting rhythms, constituting a prosody of sorts. While they segment and aspectualize urban routes, these various supports for action also provide for self-awakening, awakening to the other and awakening to the city by instituting a field of presence, a scene around the subjects. Actorial diversity and pragmatic versatility are enhanced by the relay function that it plays with respect to urban means of transportation. The square hosts a bus stop, a bicycle parking, a scooter station, is located alongside the road where cars circulate, and is even embellished with an amusement ride for children.

In addition to the benches, we must not neglect the alternative resting place that is the lawn, which, when the weather is good, welcomes users for extended periods of time. This additional space allows for long pauses, intermissions between the various “moments” of the city. The use of the lawn also introduces a kind of departure from the logic of public squares and from its principle of “all or nothing” (Goffman, *ibid.*). For the city dweller, it is a way of renouncing the struggle for places (« *la lutte des places* », Lussault, 2007), and, for the homeless, of escaping incrimination, more or less. This shows the range possibilities for improvisation offered by the Place Gambetta garden and its way of serving one’s “right to the city” (Lefebvre, *ibid.*). Through all the variations proposed, it illustrates such versatility as it profiles a model user (Eco, 1979), a *persona* with multiple and changing profiles. The whole difficulty could therefore be summed up in this question: how can we guarantee the versatility of uses of a public space that is subject to competition?

Let’s now turn towards the Saint-Jean train station, also recently redeveloped. The space on the ground floor is structured by wooden benches that form several small islets, while the underground space is structured around a large central islet. Another difference relates to the organization of the ground floor, which allows for perpendicular placement, unlike the centrifugal, radiating organization of the large islet at the underground level, which directs one towards the stores located around it. On the ground floor, the benches are distributed at the main hall’s entrance, whereas the basement islet is part of an almost enclosed space (if we exclude the opening towards the underground parking lot) that is reminiscent of an “airlock”, constituting an intermediate stage in the route leading to the station’s platforms.



Figure 3: On the ground floor of the station, users seat themselves at the extremities of the bench.

On the wooden benches on the first floor, backrests and cushions individualize seats, and at the extremities, bare bench sections are separated by wooden slats serving as *boundary markers*. A supporting backrest, as a device, suggests a level of comfort superior to that provided by the parts of the bench that are devoid of it, and it accentuates the affordance, the invitation to sit. As a result, these seats are occupied in priority. Shelves and reading lamps diversify the practices available by providing a few elements of comfort. Furthermore, small coffee tables and stools placed between the benches introduce a reassuring sense of privacy, conferring a feeling as if one was “at home” (Aurel, 2011).

⁵ These “moments” of the city also correspond to “moments” of the body. According to Le Corbusier, there are indeed several “ways of sitting” (to talk, to “expatiate”, to relax, which also follow the hours of the day). See Le Corbusier (2013 [1920], p. 90).

The spatial distribution of travelers is particularly noteworthy because it seems contrary to any sense of conviviality. Unless they are in groups, such as families for instance, users preferably occupy the seats furthest apart from each another and systematically turn their backs to one another, as similarly observed by Deni (2001) regarding the compartments of Italian trains where passengers prefer window or aisle seats over middle seats. On the underground level floor, the wooden slats acting as *boundary markers* individualize the seats, and the discontinuity marked by this relief is opposed to chromatic continuity which, on the contrary, confirms a collective status.

Can these benches be qualified as multipurpose? On the ground floor, accessories (shelves and lamps) certainly invite to diversify the actions and add to the possibility for conversation from the positions of the perpendicularly placed benches. On the other hand, the backrests as well as the wooden slats prevent from lying down. On the underground level, users place themselves side by side or turn their backs to one another, although a possibility to lie down depthwise does remain – though this would be a hypothetical and highly uncomfortable position. In their positions, the travelers looked as if they were on starting blocks, ready to take off... The space is not versatile but finds its finality in a single action program: preparing oneself for the journey before heading towards the platforms.

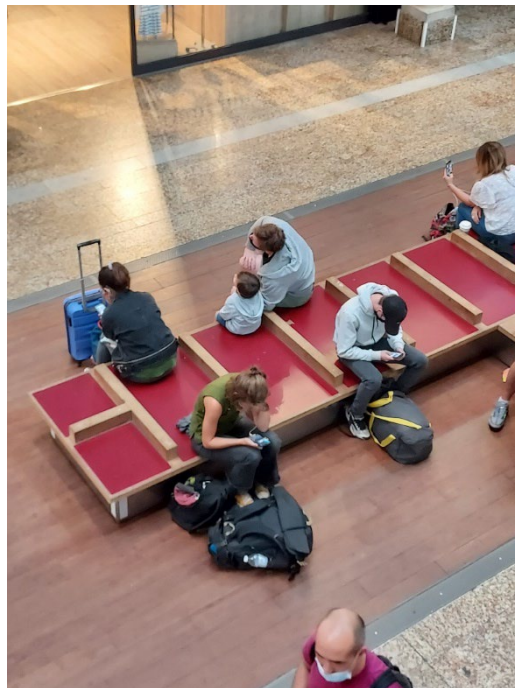


Figure 4: The central islet at the underground level of the Bordeaux train station.

The comparison with the device constituted by furnishings on the ground floor leads us to question the function of the backrest and of the accessories in relation to the opening of one's bodily posture towards one's fellow users. The endocentric posture of the users is indeed striking. Almost all of them are hunched over, absorbed in using their smartphones, with their noses hanging over their knees. It is a contemporary version of the absorption described by Fried (1990), a posture characteristic of paintings of the second half of the 18th century depicting the enclosing of a scene around oneself. It would be interesting to question the role played by digital technologies in this withdrawal of the body, by comparing it to the posture of students in lecture halls who are now also arched over their computers, as Serres (2012) has noted. At home, the introduction of digital technology has led to the hybridization of seats (daybed, fainting couch, reclining sofa, etc.) which adapt to more or less "softened" bodies, immersed in consulting e-mail or watching films. This de-categorization of seats has been accompanied by a despecialization of the rooms of the house: one may consult one's email in the kitchen just as readily as in the living room or in the bedroom (Beyaert-Geslin, 2012).

At the train station, it is as if consulting one's smartphone imposed itself as an alternative to the main program, unless it has now become the sole alternative to all of our programs of action... Some features of the seats, firstly the backrest, could nevertheless contribute to the avoidance of the smartphone, by opening up the turtle-shell posture of the body and making it available to interaction and to the use of other objects, as well as to alternative practices. The designer's contribution to this opening could be decisive.

3. Practices and interactions

This little excursion has made it possible to sketch out a set of specifications for the construction of a truly urban space. It allows the description of places (de Certeau, 1990) defined by objects arranged in a certain way. More exactly, it puts practical scenes into relation with objects by underscoring an interdependence evoking Fontanille's (2008) framework of practices. These scenes show the unfolding of particular practices, ones that are polyvalent (the garden square) or more or less specialized (the train station) according to the shape of the seats and how they are gathered. The possibilities for improvisation profile a model city-dweller, a persona with multiple and intermittent identities, but they also maintain some reservations with respect to a persona defined by a fixed identity, that of the homeless.

Such exclusion is achieved through the prevention of the reclining position, which not only enforces self-presentation, a social comportment that is, moreover, precisely graduated in the home by the different seats (Beyaert-Geslin, 2012), but also the city's designated cadence. Indeed, if seats lend themselves to varied action programs, of which the duration will vary in accordance with the extent of contact with the body (Beyaert-Geslin, *ibid.*), those forming part of urban furniture always subordinate their usage to an activity: taking a break between two errands (in other words, consuming), checking one's messages, waiting for a friend, etc. They invite us to linger, but not for too long. The sharing of the city is therefore not only spatial, but also temporal. It imposes a syntony, a rhythmic agreement between the inhabitants, thereby confirming the exclusion of the homeless.

This trajectory has kept a number of theoretical frameworks in the background. The construction of practices (Fontanille, 2008), already mentioned, underscores the interdependence between the object's planes of relevance and the practical scene: urban scenes demand certain forms of seating that determine them in return. A landscape can be offered to contemplation from the position of a public bench, but the reverse is also true: a bench is enough to designate, to frame a landscape. Two other concepts also impose themselves: the concept of factitivity as defined in semiotics and the concept of affordances as applicable to design. Factitivity (*causing-to-do*, *causing-to-know*, *causing-to-believe*) inherited from Greimas (1983), initially elaborated to account for a relation between two subjects, was applied to the object-subject relation by Deni (2002 and 2005) who specifies the way in which objects may put bodies into action (Beyaert-Geslin, 2017). This concept makes it possible to describe strategies that mobilize modal competencies by putting forth possibilities and impediments (*being able to do/be*, *knowing how to do/be*, and *having to do/be*; *not being able to do/be*, *not knowing how to do/be*, and *not having to do/be*), and subsidiary schemes (such as *being able to not do/be*, *knowing how to not do/be*, *having to not do/be*). The apparatus of modalities thus makes it possible to describe the precise strategic guidance of the bodies of city dwellers, a polyvalence associated with a subsidiary opening up of a space of negotiation between the protagonists so as to coordinate compatible practices. The framework of affordances as provided by design, based on the proposals of Gibson (1977) and Norman (1988 and 2005), concerns the invitations made by the objects to the body. This framework presents itself as a sort of catalog of the localities of the object that make it attractive to the user.

These two frameworks are well known and do not require further comment, otherwise than to emphasize their complementarity. Factitivity describes the institutional side of design, the manipulation of a modal competency by the territorial authority that administers the urban space and delegates its development to the designer and to the urban planner, while affordances describe the attraction that the city dweller's body experiences. Together, they represent the two sides of the usage of urban furniture, *polis* and *polites*, or *civitas* and *civis* in the words of Benveniste (1969).

This double play of forces (between strategy and tactics; between multiple tactics) can be schematized as per the diagram below, which brings together several theoretical frameworks so as to map the two aspects of the seats and scenes. On one side, factitivity describes: 1) the activity of the addressor-manipulator who plans the placement of the scene in the city, 2) the organization of the collective, and 3) the shape of the assembled seats. On the other, affordances account for the attraction that is exercised at the levels of: 1) the seat, 2) the collective, and 3) the scene. On both sides, strategy and tactics are shown to have a direction. Institutional action is conducted starting with the choice of location for the scenes so as to meet urbanistic requirements (keeping them removed from areas of high traffic, in particular), while tactics concern the seats as well as the scenes towards which the city dweller is directed, thus following these two directions.

Between these two planes of relevance (Fontanille, 2008), a collective clause must nevertheless be introduced, constitutive of public space, that of Goffman's "individuals with" (*ibid.*, p. 35). The public space is above all collective. Entering it means, for the individual, confronting the plural or even multitudes. Insertion within a

group is thus a protection for the individual, as also observed by Goffman (*ibid.*) who notes the considerable latitude of groups in choosing the places where they sit, isolated individuals being rather subject to suspicions of invitation when taking a seat here or there (I would add *a fortiori* if they are young women). This suggests that individuals constitute affordances for one another, which nevertheless exposes them to the risk the other may represent.

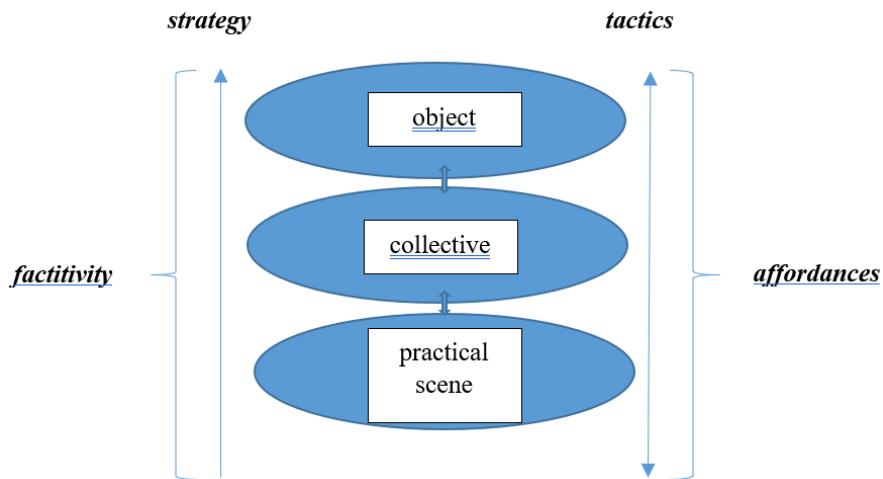


Figure 5: The negotiation between strategy (factitivity aspect) and tactics (affordances aspect).

This diagram, which brings together the two instances involved in urban life, planning and usage, leaves one point unresolved. Instead of confronting a single strategic instance with a single tactical instance, it should in fact restore the multiplicity of tactical instances, all of which strive to construct that which is their “proper” (de Certeau, 1990). These tactical interactions do not bring together subjects and objects (seats), but a very large number of subjects for whom the objects are the supports of urban practices that must be negotiated collectively. On the one hand, the institution imposes a rule and constructs a “place” defined by a certain order of relations (de Certeau, *ibid.*): this is the strategic dimension. On the other hand, city dwellers negotiate with one another, each seeking to build one’s own “place” amidst the shared space: this is the dimension of multiple tactics. All of these interacting forces make the city into a place of dissensus that exemplifies the controversy of public space. These tactical interactions are an essential element of the definition of urbanity, of the “good usage” of the city.

It is now time to return to the observations collected during our walk in Bordeaux to try to understand how users organize their practices around urban seats. It will be a matter of giving a more precise account of interactions and practices, these forming two familiar theoretical frameworks, so as to see how the objects that are the supports of practices determine interactions.

4. From urbanity to adjustment

From the onset, the concepts of strategy and of factitivity resonate with Landowskian *manipulation* (2005). However, far from being the sole prerogative of institutional instances, this intentionality also appears at the level of usage, as shown by our users in Bordeaux, whose postures determine those of others, not to mention that they also evoke, through their recurrence, the *programming* and comfort of routine.

Our observations have revealed behavioral stereotypes, that is, regular, routine behaviors that influence one another. In fact, they evoke the figure of *adjustment* insofar as they reflect a position taken by one user with respect to one or several others, but they could just as readily be considered as ways of avoiding adjustment, of avoiding any encounter, and of protecting oneself, furthermore, from the vagaries to which the city exposes us.

These new figures transform that of *adjustment* (Landowski, 2005) into an all-encompassing category that accepts declensions, unless, conversely, they may instead be seen to reduce its scope so as to circumscribe a pure and true form that may be called “*conversational adjustment*”, all the while offering themselves as negatives (as counter-adjustments, non-adjustments or anti-adjustments). Considered from the perspective of this second option, they reveal the depth of the risk carried by adjustment when inscribed within public space. They hence underscore the instability of the balance between abandonment and control, specifying its risk of

failure and the ways of conjuring it, and they allow us to understand how the public space maintains the user on this narrow edge.

At the station of Bordeaux, we observed the distance that the users waiting on the benches would keep between one another. They adopt, as far as the density of the crowd allows, a diametrically opposed position with respect to any previously seated user, imbuing distance with a meaning of separation but also of bodily removal. This behavior represents an adjustment in the sense that it achieves the adoption of a relative position, while negating any possibility for an encounter. It is, in short, a *negative adjustment* in the sense that it averts conversation while mirroring spatial coordinates at a distance. At the train station, the use of a turtle-like posture caught our attention. It consists in withdrawing into oneself, in consulting one’s smartphone, which staves off any other form of interaction. The figure of the turtle is often reinforced by the positioning of one’s travel bag under one’s knees, thereby sheltering it with one’s own body while somewhat widening one’s personal space (it can be used as a footrest, for example). In some cases, an item of garment, especially a raised hood or collar, will accentuate the sense of protection and enhance one’s focus on one’s smartphone. Described in terms of conversational adjustment, this would represent instances of *counter-adjustment*. Such observations run the risk of neglecting a fourth figure whose manifestation is more diffuse. It employs a model borrowed from botany, more specifically, from dendrology, called the “shyness of trees” or “crown shyness”. As per this phenomenon, described namely by Francis Hallé (2005), the trees of certain species maintain between one another or between their main branches a distance of ten to fifty centimeters called “shyness gaps”. This fourth figure represents an adjustment because the form assumed by the one shapes itself as a negative of the other, while maintaining a respectful distance seeking to avoid any of the annoyances and encroachments or violations of space mentioned by Hall (1966) and graded with precision by Goffman (1973, p. 57): excessive proximity, insistent gaze, noise, etc. This gaze respecting a minimal amount of distance furthermore evokes the form of similitude that Foucault (1966) calls *emulation*, which lets the subjects in presence foresee a possibility to construct themselves by adopting a mirrored stance or even to “grow” through respectful exchange.

These four figures can be schematized together in a square whose main interest is to underline, through complementary oppositions, the strength of the negative, and thus the power of the risk entailed by adjustment in public space. Landowski (2005) has detailed the general principles of adjustment, making it the central point of his theory of interactions. It is based on an aesthetic and non-modal competency, and consists in feeling, sensing and making the other feel, entailing an opening of the self and the co-construction of meaning through exchange, which brings it into the “constellation of adventure” (Landowski, *idem*, p. 72). The diagram below reproduces, but in an inverted manner, the deixis of adventure and caution, rescaling them so as to take account of the openness to the unknown that public space involves. Adventure is more adventurous there, one might say, this encouraging towards even more caution.

In our schema devoted to public space, adventure can be concretized through verbal conversation but also proceeds by all kinds of “conversational” rituals, negotiations of the gaze and of gestures (the concerted placement of legs and elbows) which authorize the true sharing of space.

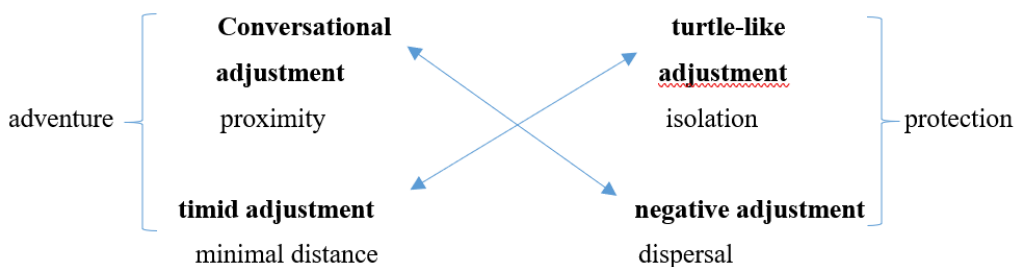


Figure 6: The forms of adjustment in public space

This framework breaks down the conception of distance, which takes the form of dispersal (negative adjustment), of isolation (the turtle-like posture), or of respectful distance (timid adjustment), and it does so by mixing literal and figurative meanings, corresponding to physical and moral conceptions. The distance is initially determined by the institutional body which has the status of addressor-manipulator and, through the layout proposed, establishes a proxemic framework in which to insert oneself as a user. Following Hall’s proposals (*ibid.*), distance thus presented takes the form of a structuring datum that adds to its spatial meaning the various resources of “ruses” (de Certeau, 1990) – the turning away of the body, the recourse to items of

garment, the distancing of the gaze, etc. – which may be used to compensate for the constrained narrowing of space. *Timid adjustment* denies all these subterfuges by the establishment of a protective distance which makes it possible to acknowledge the confrontation without abandoning oneself to the risk posed by the other.

The orientation of the body enables a form of requalification of distance. *Negative adjustment* operates by means of detour in seeking a symmetrical position; assuming a turtle-like posture makes it possible to escape the gaze when one is constrained to proximity; *timid adjustment*, for its part, consists in espousing the form of the other, as if to form the negative image of a mold, which entails the maintenance of a face-to-face position.

What is at play in all these oppositions is the contrast between an intention to achieve a state of disjunction and the union inherent to the act of adjustment. The resulting tension questions the status of the other party. Negative adjustment and what is achieved through the turtle-like posture indeed tend to reify the other user, considered essentially as a point-body (Fontanille, 2011) occupying a certain position in space. Timid adjustment and conversational adjustment, on the other hand, transform this point-body into a subject, a person, and such transformation plays out between various subjects, be they between a *he* and *she* or several of them, between an *us* and *them*, or between a *you* and *I*, as elaborated through conversation. Timid adjustment introduces the respectful deferent nuance of someone envisioned in the third person (Benveniste, 1974), raising the other above the status of person all the while preserving oneself from falling into an *I-thou* configuration.

The objects showcased through distance also differ. While distance eliminates the body of the other from one's field of presence, it widens the gaze and carries it afar, thus enabling it to wander from one object to another, disposing it to inner reverie. The turtle-like posture, on the contrary, concentrates one's attention upon the closest objects making up personal space, only branching out more or less towards the periphery of the screen of one's smartphone. Timid adjustment places the subject on the narrow edge where the other user transitions from a status of subject to that of object. Minimal distance allows one to both feel and to cause to feel, all the while construing the other as an object offered to view. Such ability to observe, to scrutinize the other at a short distance, could moreover optimize the conditions of adjustment. While it guarantees some reservation in view of protecting oneself, timid adjustment indeed enables to keep "an eye" on the other who is made into an object of admiration or to be emulated, all the while nevertheless maintaining a certain ascendancy over such other.

Can the adjustment between strategy and tactics be better parameterized? Between the city's descending and ascending viewpoints? The comparison of the scenes taking place in the garden square and those taking place in the train station revealed differing practices that may be linked, on the one hand, to the greater or lesser openness of the spaces (outdoors in the case of Place Gambetta, semi-open onto the outdoors in the case of the train station lobby, indoors in the case of the station's lower tier) and, on the other hand, to a hierarchization of actions with respect to a main program. In Place Gambetta, the strategic openness of the practices stems from the versatility of the seats, authorizing a diversity of postures; in the station lobby, it is ensured by the accessorization, which only introduces gestural diversity, these being two different ways of "giving leeway", of allowing improvisation. One can thus correlate the opening of space and the opening of the body, and the enclosure of space with the closing off of the body, and associate them, as the study of our urban scenes suggests, with greater or lesser pragmatic finality. Strategic enclosure (which introduces manipulation and programming) directs users towards their usage program, which is to take the train.

5. Conclusion

This double-pathed enquiry into public spaces of Bordeaux, firstly among different concepts of the recent history of semiotics, has left several points unresolved. To begin with, it would be useful, taking account of the various subjectivities and thematic roles at play within the city, to test the limits of the distinction between strategy and tactics. What presents itself as a tactical discovery for the traveler in a train station may indeed serve as a strategy for a thief, for example. The reference to urban proxemics could also integrate a cultural dimension, which is central in Hall's book (*ibid.*). While the public spaces of the city already attest to the cohabitation of cultural communities, the public space of the station is characterized by the passage of travelers having the most diverse identities. This diversity affects the perception of space and of its affordances, raising a discussion surrounding the distinction between tactics and strategy and questioning the very means by which spacing is approached. The contributions of Hofstede (1981), in particular those concerning the relationship between individualism and collectivism, could also add to this cultural discussion. By focusing on semiotic epistemology, bringing together the theoretical frameworks engaged for the study of interactions and practices and thereby grounding them within a field, this study has nonetheless highlighted the convergence of such propositions. It has shown the transformative function of distance which transfigures the other, as an object of

spectacle who becomes able, upon the city user's initiative, to achieve the status of subject. Distance is primordial, and the responsibility of the institutional body as addressor-manipulator seems to be to ensure the conditions of interpersonal distance, with the city dwelling user retaining the ability to reduce this liminal distance so as to chance an encounter. Public space is an adventure ground, confronting the city dweller with the unknown, imbuing interaction with a greater sense of "risk" and therefore rendering it more valuable.

This double-pathed trajectory, engaged through the lenses of both ethnography and semiotics, also provided a few causes for astonishment. First of all, it makes public space into a great theater where one offers oneself to the glance of the other all the while most often composing, paradoxically, an anti-theatrical scene, one that is closed upon itself. Secondly, it contradicts the commonplace conception of urbanity, which is largely confused with proximity, with closeness. The "proper usage" of the city would consist in living in close contact, thus confirming the permanent concern of urban planners and of political authorities to reduce an "urban divide" more or less understood as a "social divide". Yet, the condition of urbanity seems, on the contrary, to be spacing. According to Heidegger (2007, p. 21), "[i]n each case, clearing-away brings forth locality preparing for dwelling". Therefore, within one's allocated space, all and sundry could find a dwelling. Should we be surprised by this secret rule? After all, as Arendt (1995, p. 33) points out, politics originates in the interpersonal space where it is constituted as a relationship. For that matter, a characteristic strategy of totalitarian regimes is to reduce social and cultural distance, to reduce spacing. The main condition of urbanity is thus distance indeed, which does not exclude establishing proximity and even makes it into a full-fledged adventure.

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