



Urban scripts and contest

Description

My previous post about scripts, language, and AI invites further reflection the role of scripts in the urban context. Theatrical-style scripts encompass the predictable and patterned ways in which individuals interact in urban settings. Think of how passengers might be expected to wait for those leaving the carriage before entering, give up their seat for a struggling fellow passenger, avoid physical contact, etc. There's a practical rationale for such norms of behaviour. Once learned, scripted behaviour patterns facilitate social order and productive interactions.

The concept of scripts in urban contexts aligns with Erving Goffman's idea of *dramaturgy*, where social life is likened to a theatre, with individuals playing roles and following scripts to manage how we appear to one another and how we interact.

Arguably, scripts guide interactions in markets, shops, and workplaces, establishing trust and predictability. They guide behaviour in public spaces, helping people navigate difficult social environments. Such challenges are brought into relief when we travel to places where the customs are different to our own. In fact, urban scripts contribute to the cultural fabric of a city, as they reflect and reinforce local customs, traditions, and norms. Once learned, such scripts also help newcomers adapt to the urban environment and foster a sense of community and belonging. Understanding and following these scripts can help in resolving conflicts and misunderstandings. When people adhere to common social scripts, it reduces the likelihood of friction.

Planners and designers can take these social scripts into account when designing public spaces to facilitate certain types of interactions. For example, the layout of a plaza might encourage social gatherings, while clear signage and pathways in transport hubs ensure smooth commuter flow.

Contested spaces

What I've described so far suggests harmonious social relations, leaving little scope for the formation of productively contested, agonistic urban relationships, explored in a previous post: [Interactive architecture](#). For that we can turn to alternative theatrical analogies.

In a previous post I referred to plays by Harold Pinter: [Cringe and inattention](#). Here's a quote from Pinter scholar Penelope Prentice.

He sounded the realistic speech of ordinary people in spare dialogue rendered poetic and stamped it indelibly his own. His dialogue and its menace, more than any other aspect of his work, have attracted the label 'Pinteresque,' suggestive of 'Kafkaesque,' and his work is distinguished by being more deeply disturbing and unnerving than almost any other contemporary playwright's. Yet his plays are simultaneously counterbalanced with that special delight of a high comic wit and a consistently resonant subtext. What is happening on several levels beneath the surface of the text is often more important than what is occurring on the surface. [3]

There's more to be said about his style and contribution to literature, but I like the 'realism' of pinteresque dialogues, where protagonists do not always seem to attend to one another, and often talk at cross-purposes. These are aspects of everyday conversation that do not fall neatly within the ambit of polite and reasonable conversation. Nor are LLMs tuned to deliver such fractured, agonistic, pinteresque conversation (unless prompted to do so).

While conversing on the topic and in keeping with its unceasing quest for polite rational positivity, ChatGPT even suggests some benefits of pinteresque approaches to urban design: 'They highlight the importance of the unspoken and the unpredictable in human interactions.' The model suggests designing spaces for silence (parks and reading nooks), introducing surprising and incongruous urban elements (e.g. art installations), and places for marginalized communities. This suggests to me a kind of taming of urban conversation, rather than allowing its free play.

Bibliography

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Note

Featured image is by ChatGPT, captioned: Here is an image depicting a post-apocalyptic secluded outdoor deserted urban reading nook. The scene features overgrown vegetation reclaiming the area, broken benches, and weathered books scattered around. The surrounding buildings are in ruins, with cracked walls and shattered windows, and a soft, eerie light filters through the overgrowth, casting shadows over the desolate scene. The nook is surrounded by tall, crumbling skyscrapers, and the ground is littered with debris and fallen leaves, creating an atmosphere of abandonment and quiet desolation.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence

Tags

1. Goffman
2. Harold Pinter
3. pinteresque
4. schank
5. scripts

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