

The *Where* and the *Who* – Identity and Sites in the Eighteenth-Century City of London

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger study on the connection between identity and space in the eighteenth century, analyzing the way people living in that age constructed who they were by getting associated with and interacting within certain locales that were fashionable at the time. Besides scratching the surface of reality and going beyond the appearance of such spaces and what went on in them to uncover the actual state of affairs and the rationale behind every one of them, our study shows the indelible connection between identity and space. It points out and explores the way the former depends on the latter to a greater extent than we are aware of or ready to admit to.

Keywords

identity, space, appearance, politics, entertainment

Life in the crowded city of London, where people's priorities were maintaining and increasing their financial welfare, would have only meant daily turmoil without public places in which activities of all sorts were carried on regularly. The agitation of the metropolis induced a feeling of isolation that had to be eradicated; the need to relate and to belong, to share and be included found its expression and solution in such public places as coffee houses, clubs, pleasure gardens, societies and associations, the theatre, the opera; ancient institutions such as the Church or the Court played their part in keeping national consciousness and identity alive and strong.

Before analysing the specificity of the sites that I have mentioned above, it could be interesting to look at how a building as such, and architecture in general, were perceived in the eighteenth century, in order to gain some perspective on what the city looked like back then and what principles and ideas shaped up the vision on what was considered as "the ideal" in architecture at the time.

Early in the eighteenth century, the status of the architect suffered some positive changes, as it turned into a profession acknowledged as such and independent from aristocratic patronage.

Towards 1750, the architect was the head of a team that comprised masons, carpenters, joiners, plasterers and unskilled labourers, and amateur architects appeared. Such resonant names as Andrea Palladio, Christopher Wren, John Evelyn and John Wood were already well-known masters in the domain by the end of the eighteenth century. Andrea Palladio interpreted Vitruvius – an architect who had lived and worked under Caesar; Palladio was interested in the principles that stood at the basis of any architectural design at the time.

One of them, known under the name of *convenience* or *convenance* (until 1759, when Sir William Chambers introduced the term “character” for it) was concerned with the matching of the external appearance to the status or temperament of the owner (Varey 1990: 20). Palladio was the one who pointed out that a building had to match not only the condition of its inhabitant but also the location, the place where it was to stand. Moreover, Palladio insisted on the harmony that had to govern the relation of the parts with the whole and with each other, condition that was also known as *ordonnance* (*ordinatio*, as Vitruvius had called it) (22). These rules are more concerned with the function of a space; Christopher Wren’s building upwards (as well as the landlords’) was dictated by financial reasons; this architectural style favoured material gain, as rents could rise without acquiring new land, and profit was made in an economical way. Individual building and town planning were based on symmetry and uniformity, space was thoroughly put to use and any constructions that suggested disorder, fragmentation or dispersal were unacceptable.

This excessive concern for order and harmony in design, for combining the parts into wholes came from a long tradition of thought that laid emphasis on the relationship between mathematics and architecture. The Pythagorean view on harmony as a result of geometrical proportion and his correlation between musical and spatial harmony were adopted by Palladio and made fundamental to architecture. The theory of correspondences opened new perspectives; in this light, the building, seen as a microcosm, was a part of the macrocosm and had to harmoniously fit in the overall design of the grand architect – God Himself. Part-whole correspondences were found at different levels, not only between one building and the world, but at the scale of the construction itself, or the construction in relation to the city, or even the human being in relation to humanity:

The repeated emphasis on that total effect of order and regularity led directly to the argument that architecture – the art of designing wholes – is a divine activity and that God is not just a creator, but specifically an architect, a designer of universal harmony (52).

In Britain, the idea of the divine architect was supported by the Cambridge Platonists (whose representative, Henry More, highlighted another correspondence: that between the soul, architect of the body, and the Soul-Divine Architect and the world) and by philosophers like the Earl of Shaftesbury or John Locke. A writer who designs his literary world of imagination resembles an architect. This spatial thinking that sought to establish correspondences was fruitful in the eighteenth century, providing not only a model that could be applied virtually in every domain of activity, but also a perfectionist tendency in the mentality of the time.

One of the most animated places in the city was the coffee house, which represented first of all a place of gathering, of enjoying conversation over a cup of coffee – the drink that gave the name of the locale and which became fashionable in the eighteenth century. Coffee houses were extremely useful, not primarily as places of entertainment, but as goldmines of information. One could read newspapers, receive or send letters while being filled in the latest gossip by his acquaintances. Coffee houses were frequented by males who got the chance of meeting and chatting with other representatives of their occupation. They found out about opportunities or got in contact with their competition. Business could be run from coffee houses.

Politics was a hot subject and each visitor could amaze his listeners with his knowledge of the facts, with his sparkling wit and genius in finding solutions for all crises. The dark side of these discussions, which would often turn into ardent debates, was that the need to impress exceeded the sincerity of the speaker and more often than not completely unauthorized opinions were presented as hard facts. Even scandalous pieces of news that were mere inventions were frequently introduced in the most passionate speeches as undeniable truths.

The Chinese philosopher in Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World* accuses the gazettes of publishing unverified information:

they only collect their materials from the oracle of some coffeehouse, which oracle has himself gathered them the night before from a *beau* at a gaming table, who has pillaged his knowledge from a great man's porter, who has had his information from the great man's gentleman, who has invented the whole story for his own amusement the night preceding" (Goldsmith 1878: 92).

This passage points to the credibility of some of the information that ran in coffee houses (especially that concerning politics). However, what exactly people talked about is less important than the feeling of togetherness and pride that these conversations provided. In agreement with people's interests, there were specialized coffee houses, where one domain of activity was in attention: "Lloyd's" for trade, "Batson's" for medical practice, "Bedford" and "George's" for literature.

One was not a fully-fledged gentleman unless he was a club member. The very definition of a gentleman is a "clubbable person" (Porter 1990: 156). Clubs openly differentiated people according to their status, social category and position. Although in 1748 the only existing one was "White's" in St. James's street, soon afterwards the British world saw an invasion of them. There were clubs for doctors, lawyers, thieves, prostitutes. There were private aristocratic clubs, "box clubs" for lower orders and also Black people's taverns and meeting places. Some were political associations, like "Calves' Head", that cheered the Whigs or the Tories, the Hanoverians or the Jacobites; others were "fraternities" of trade, on the freemasonry model. More special or odd entitlings reunited eccentric people who were fond of their less common name and habits; the Lunatick Club that opened in 1763 is a suggestive example. The need to be part of such groups that were recognized and respected by society can be explained by the desire to fabricate an image for oneself and legitimise it, to construct an appearance that was meant to attract attention and ensure the recognition of identity and status.

A place English people were very fond of was the pleasure garden, to which access was not restrictive, as it welcomed humble visitors too. For a small admission fee, one could take long walks and admire the surroundings, as there was natural ornamentation (the vegetation, which was cut in particular symmetric arrangements), waterworks, lights that were switched on at night. Landscaped gardens

exhibited grottoes and hermits' caves, which were occasionally populated by live hermits, to the delight of the passers-by. Visitors could also have tea and enjoy some delicacies while listening to music.

There were more than sixty-four such places in London – an impressive number of them. Important people went to Ranelagh. Rotunda was luxurious: it had three floors, the first one occupied with boxes; the second had boxes equipped with movable lattices in case privacy was needed and the third was a gallery where an organ and a choir contributed with music to the atmosphere of elegance and sophistication. Probably the most famous pleasure garden, mentioned as the representative example in most literary works, was Vauxhall. The Chinese philosopher's acquaintances are mocked at by Lien, as their interests in visiting the garden are neither the lights, nor the waterworks (a comical and ironic remark hints at Mrs. Tibbs' natural aversion to water), but showing off in public and ogling. Their eagerness to rent "a box where they might see and be seen" clearly points to that, as well as to a desire to be included in the fashionable segment of the English society whose representatives are interested in such elegant outings (Goldsmith 1878: 203). Lien's naïve remark that "The people of London are as fond of walking as our friends at Pekin of riding" (202) is actually meant to state the opposite, namely that one cannot actually be that fond of strolling aimlessly in a garden just for the sake of fresh air and that there must be another reason behind such public celebrations in places like Vauxhall. Their hidden purpose is in fact posing.

A comparison of English pleasure gardens with similar spaces in the Chinese tradition points to the superiority of the Oriental garden, as a place "uniting instruction with beauty", where the general design always serves a didactic purpose (135). To an exotic landscape with hermits in caves (which undoubtedly brings a picturesque surprise element to the general effect), Lien Altangi opposes the fine moral of his gardens at Quamsi, where a visitor may choose, once inside the garden, between the left gate of vice, which is made more appealing by the presence of beautiful nymphs, and the right gate of virtue, guarded by dragons and serpents; this visitor will notice that the road through the left gate, that seems so promising at the beginning ends up in a labyrinth, whereas the right gate, whose appearance is scary and announces a rough way, leads to a wonderful

realm. This Chinese garden teaches one that appearance can be deceiving and that the easiest way is not also the best. Didacticism is the main concern in Chinese philosophy and it is present in every thought and activity, even in the conception of the design for such a decorative place of recreation as a garden.

The middle years of the eighteenth century saw the emergence of a series of societies and associations inside London and outside it. They came as a reaction to the infiltration of French fashion and habits of living that were considered excessive and therefore damaging to British identity. It was also a period of agitation, as war was about to break out and any foreign influence was seen as a potential threat. These societies were mainly an assertion of Britishness; they sought to rehabilitate identity and culture, to resurrect self-awareness and national pride. Many were creations of the trading community and therefore represented an attempt from their part to control the public sphere, but these associations also showed the collaboration between traders and the representatives of the higher classes of aristocracy, as, in their vast majority, these were sponsored by members of nobility (often enough directly by the king, as in the case of the Marine Society, whose supporters were George II and the Prince of Wales). These societies bore testimony to the patriotism of their founders and members and helped to the advancement of women who were allowed to subscribe and in this way moved from the confinement of the private sphere to a public space, taking part in activities of national relevance. This type of commitment from all people, which meant a kind of collaboration that disregarded class distinctions or gender discrimination, points to how important national identity and safety were to the British.

These associations sought to discover and reward any product of national conception, to show that the British ones were more valuable and of higher quality than any of foreign origin. The Society of Arts, founded in 1754, pleaded that the products of textile industry should be dyed in Great Britain instead of being sent for that to a foreign country. In 1757, the society established prizes for the growing of oaks, chestnuts and elms, as well as for fir trees coming from Scotland in the following year, as timber was needed for shipping. It was not only the encouragement of national production that they set as an objective, but also the promotion of talented fellow countrymen – they offered prizes for children artists and sculptors.

A more xenophobic association was The Laudable Association of Anti-Gallicans, founded in 1745, whose main purpose was to put a stop to the increasing French influence in British territories. They went as far as appointing a priest to preach against the French four times a year. Their nationalistic rather than patriotic orientation is less visible in the motto "For our country" but rendered clear in their practice and purpose: "to discourage by precept and example, the importation and consumption of French produce and manufactures, and to encourage, on the contrary, the produce and manufactures of Great Britain" (Colley 1994: 89). In 1756, with the outbreak of war, cultural and economic nationalism intensifies.

"The theatre is a privileged place in the 18th century" (Lewis 1941: 75). It seems to have supremacy over any other way of entertainment, as, besides offering an opportunity for ogling – the eighteenth-century society's favourite activity – it also provides snobs with an excuse to perform it under the mask of cultural interest. Performances do not exceed four hours and are carried on indoors in the evening. The interior of the theatres was designed in such a way as to ensure separation of members of different social classes: their spatial distribution – the poor in the upper rows and the rich close to the stage, in the pit, favoured the latter. The ones that occupied the higher position in society were spatially below their inferiors in a theatre, as they sat in the lower rows. The representatives of the economically disadvantaged ate fruit, read the presentation of the play noisily, whereas their betters studied each other through spectacles in a more orderly but also hypocritical behaviour.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the theatre saw some improvements: Garrick introduced the French technique of lighting the stage from behind the scenes; sets became more elaborate and so were costumes. A bell could be heard during the last scene of every act, a sound that was used to warn that music was ready. The curtain was raised and lowered during the play.

Even on stage, dress did not lose its main characteristic – that of being a code, as it indicated the importance of each character. A woman that played an empress or a lady of nobility would wear black velvet and the train would be very broad, in agreement with the status of the character she interpreted; these trains had four corners and were carried by young boys. Dress was the simplest and quickest means for sending a significant amount of information on a character.

The audience made or destroyed the play; their judgement, which was sometimes on the spur of the moment, created the reputation of a particular representation. Their liberty in manifesting their likes or dislikes went as far as booing or catcalling. Otherwise, their appreciations were completely circumstantial, dictated by moods. The presence of the trunk-maker, who sat in the upper gallery, marking the moments when applause were expected by knocking upon the benches, is suggestive as to how qualified the members of the audience were in passing judgements on the quality of the play. Sometimes this dictator of taste (whose skills were also more than questionable) had to knock more than once to provoke the claps. An incident that proves how powerful audiences were in those times is the riot that broke in 1763 at Covent Garden when the managers tried to do away with the practice of spectators entering the theatre to attend the representation at the end of the third act at half-price. None of the rioters were pursued for disturbing public order or punished.

By the second half of the century, documents on the age speak of “less bombast” in theatrical performances (72). It is interesting to look at some *loci communes* that characterized such performances before the time when the change towards simplicity occurred. Evidence of such common places is provided by number forty-four of *The Spectator*, which contains an enumeration of the most employed such devices (Allen 1965: 90-3). In terms of character, such plays would prefer as their hero an insolent young man who proved excessively (and sometimes unnecessarily) courageous (or foolish), ready to dare any man to competition and fight. Another figure that was certain to move emotions and commonly seen in tragedies was the disconsolate mother with a child in her arms – maternity in misery touched the coolest hearts. Among the actions that would create a successful scene were the butchering among people or the use of the handkerchief: the audience would not know that a touching scene was unfolding in front of their eyes unless such a sign of distemper appeared in the hands of the actor. There was a manifest preference in the audience for the supernatural: “A spectre has very often saved a play”, especially when it appeared in a white bloody shirt (90-3). As to what device was preferred in such representations, the *deus ex machina* type of descent of a god from mysterious heights, accompanied by lightning and thunder would create a lot of excitement among the viewers.

Such testimony reinforces the idea that the theatre laid emphasis on the act itself and not on the scenario or, as Goldsmith's character points out ironically, on the "moving of passions", its goal being to "keep the audience alive"; the play was made up of no other plan, so, in Lien's opinion, it would be simpler to eliminate the words that over-solicit thinking and exhaust the audience (Goldsmith 1878: 216).

All these considerations offer an idea about how the theatre was before and after the mid-century, when the changes that occurred improved the quality of performances. The public, however, remained the sovereign in deciding what plays were good enough to represent an evening's entertainment. The theatre and the opera (in spite of the performances of the Italian and English *castrato* being unappealing sometimes) constituted the main attractions.

The church as a site could be rather desacralized. Before describing what happened in this locale for prayer and meditation, it would be suggestive to mention the fact that at the time the institution itself had fallen into some disrepute. The Whigs believed that the Church no longer functioned as a mediator between people and divinity; moreover, instead of reinforcing belief, it represented, in their view, an artificial, intruding presence between the congregation and God. Great thinkers such as Shaftesbury pleaded for the supremacy of civil authority over the Church. Priests failed to be messengers of spiritual perfection. In *The Citizen of the World*, they are presented as an assembly of gluttons waiting for their annual country tours when the inspection of their "temples" is only seen as an opportunity to feast and drink; temperance is foreign to these representatives of the church, as their corpulence is not an effect of a sedentary life, nor their silence a proof of modesty or wisdom, but the results of gluttony and, respectively, of dullness of spirit (180). They preached with a lot of "vehemence", as they seemed to find fury more convincing than humble devotion; a priest was more a menacing presence, mounted above the crowd at the height of his pulpit, than a soothing father (Allen 1965: 98). The image of both the institution and its officials was blemished.

As for what happened inside the house of God, it was far from an ideal situation. The members of the congregation would engage in all sorts of activities that had nothing in common with pious feelings. The church was a place that offered them an opportunity for socialising and show-off, as their regular behaviour included ogling,

gossiping and even hunting for romance under the protection or pretence of religious fervour. Some could even fall asleep, not in a trance or a dream of illumination, but simply out of boredom. The church had once been erected out of the need to pray and seek spiritual access to the divinity, in times when faith was still untinged. The eighteenth century, however, witnessed a crisis of faith. This change was also noticed by writers and philosophers, who chose to describe people's reactions in church and what going to church had been reduced to in an ironic or even sarcastic tone. Addison noted in number fifty of *The Spectator* the naïve, honest observation of a foreigner, an Iroquois chief who was amazed to find in the church a desacralized place:

It is probable that when this great work was begun, which must have been many hundred years ago, there was some religion among this people; for they give it the name of a temple, and have a tradition that it was designed for men to pay their devotions in. [...] But upon my going into one of these holy houses on that day, I could not observe any circumstance of devotion in their behaviour (98).

The last space to be discussed, the Court, was the home of the monarchy and of the highest nobility, whose representatives occupied the top position on the social ladder. It was a place where the codes of dress and behaviour were stricter than in any other milieu and where luxury, ostentation and etiquette marked every event.

Before King George III, British kings had not asserted themselves as impressive monarchs, they had not attracted equal public attention. In other words, they suffered from “a failure of nerve and from a lack of dynastic confidence and continuity” (Colley 1994: 198). The royal image was shady or even inexistent. Short reigns compromised the monarchical psychological influence on people, as monarchy lacked substance and was practically invisible in this way. Money was scarce and none of the kings ventured to build a royal residence. Hence, the court that should have inspired cultural and political stability resembled more an elusive centre. The beehive model of the French court at Versailles ensured royal image and authority, but was also space-consuming and product-consuming – something that did not match the restrictive spatial politics of the British majesty.

Besides the monarchs' reserve to use financial resources to improve a fading royal image, there were other reasons for the court's not being a visible centre, for its failing to constitute the focus of attention. On the one hand, it was not independent from the city – self-sufficient as it should have been; whenever the Georges wanted to be entertained with watching a play, they had to leave their court and go to London to the theatre. Secondly, its being situated amidst so many amusements: the opera, the theatre, clubs and pleasure gardens, where people could be centres of attention themselves, instead of mere observers, stole some of the attention due to sovereignty. Finally, prestige was not only granted in the shadow of the court; one did not necessarily need to enjoy the approval of the king in order to promote a play, a book, a performance; majestic graces were dispensable. The Duchess of Queensberry's behaviour supports this idea: she raised subscriptions for John Gay's play *The Beggar's Opera* and even when the king forbade her presence at the court and the Duchess's husband responded with a letter committing *lèse-majesté*, she could still enjoy her society and the play has remained as famous in history.

George III changed the image of the monarchy and the court. He ordered constructions, first in cosmopolitan, then in Gothic style, which revived the memory of medieval times when the chivalric code was subordinated to an unquestioned monarchic power. His illness attracted people's sympathy, which also meant their attention. He also used a few tactics to promote a royal image that could no longer be subject to degradation. He connected royal celebration with the inauguration of places that would serve public welfare. Examples are provided by Linda Colley, who also points out to the strategy that was used by the monarch to impress the people and rehabilitate royal image:

Edinburgh commemorated George III's Jubilee by extending the docks at Leith; Birmingham by unveiling its first ever public statue; Rrichard Westmacott's bronze monument to Horatio Nelson; Oswestry marked the day by christening its new gas lights and Bangor in Wales opened a public dispensary (222).

Another factor was royal mobility, which served royal proximity; the monarch had to be seen in his grandeur in order to impress; also, spatial extension of royalty or the illusion of that (which proper mobility could ensure) gave the impression of extension and

reinforcement of power. All these tactics ensured the promotion of royal image and authority. George III made the monarch the centre of the Court, and, by improving on its image, he actually managed to rehabilitate the Court as the centre of attention and as a microcosm in itself, symbolic of the powerful British Empire.

This paper has sought to analyse the most prominent sites in the eighteenth-century London, connecting their appearance and the way people made an appearance in them with a means to build identity. As we have seen, the demonstration goes to the manner in which people “saved face” and constructed their image by making themselves visible in fashionable locales, with the connotations of which – power, culture, good taste, wealth – they got to be associated. In this way, we have demonstrated that (presence in) certain spaces helped to the construction of identities.

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