Objects of Urban Security Part II: Emerging Trends

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Abstract

Security *things*—intrinsic aspects of the built environment—offer a way to understand an important subset of life encounters while offering up clues of surrounding social relations and political structures. Security projects inveigle citizens in pursuit of everyday goals. For authorities, they set up special challenges both for gaining public acquiescence and for dealing with those who oppose them. As with all public objects, including those as mundane as trash bins, outcomes—for better or worse—involve specific manipulations and negotiations, material as well as ideological. Especially when justified as "security," they have—we argue—negative consequences on other individual and collective goals. We have detailed this argument in the companion piece to this essay (see Part I: Background & Research Starts by same authors in this volume; see also Molotch, 2012) and carry it forward here toward some larger implications.

INEFFECTIVENESS: WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

Given how little sense they make even within the narrow logic of their proponents (again, as we have elsewhere argued), a good way to view urban security systems is as purification rituals. The dearth of even charges against terrorist intent made in the United States (either at its airports or subways) in the post 9–11 period implies that the vast resources are of no positive use. Some defenders argue that it is the "tough" security setups that have been the reason; they have kept prospective attackers from even making an attempt. But, in other countries subject to terror (Iraq, Afghanistan, colonial Algeria, or Russia), those intent on mayhem switch venues when a given target becomes unavailable. In the US airport case, almost all the security paraphernalia is reserved for the very particular point of the security gate itself. Attackers at Los Angeles Airport and more recently at Kennedy did not target planes; instead, they operated in parts of the buildings unprotected by inspections and did their killing right on site—as would happen with any other location of where public congregate.

The omnipresent and glaring omission in the airport security apparatus that *has* been set up is the line of people *waiting* to go through security. None have been checked at all. Sometimes, there are more people waiting in the line than will ever be on a plane. So, there is, *prima facie*, the irony that security creates a target that otherwise would not be present. There are other ironies as well: making people nervous at all the rigmarole (and barking orders) makes it more difficult, not less difficult, to discern those with bad intentions versus those who are innocent. The US federal government, through the TSA, has spent close to $1 billion training workers to detect "suspicious behavior," with—according to a GAO evaluation—no evidence of success (Halsey, 2013). The TSA-generated confusion may be a reason for misidentification, although any attempt to read bad intentions from bodily comportment is likely a very chancy enterprise. Other aspects of the gauntlet, such as warning signs and announcements to instill security awareness overcrowds the visual and aural environment, plausibly working against real resilience, should a crisis (from whatever source) actually materialize. As enforcement and requirements cumulate (more stuff to inspect, questions to ask, people to single out), the waiting line—and hence the target—grows.

One good explanation for all the hullabaloo is the need to "do something" and show that something is being done. Kerry Frosher was researching her PhD in anthropology while embedded in Boston's emergency response agency at the moment of 9–11 (recall that one of the planes originated in Boston on that morning). She records the utter perplexity of what to do. Yes, it was understood that something momentous occurred and that there was a pressing need to "do something." The emergency workers and their related staffs needed, as she reports, "to get it together," but they did not know what "it" might even be. Human affairs are stuffed with ambiguity and incapacity—people lack sufficient knowledge to figure out what to do, whether in raising children, responding to a delinquent employee, or buying life insurance. Most always, but especially when it comes to matters of security, it cannot be revealed that this is the case. People look to those who are in charge, and this means a turn toward those with at least the trappings of competence. Frosher says it is part of the "I love a man in uniform" syndrome. These uniforms are not simple smocks or overalls, but replete with bars of rank, epaulets, medals, and dangling instruments of seeming capacity, including weaponry. And, there are also the gates, turnstiles, turrets, and ammo that thread through security apparatuses over which such individuals have at least nominal control.

The compulsion to "do something" and the turn to materialization to show that you have, derives from the organizational exigencies that Frosher came upon. Budgets can be spent on *things* that can be measured, tested, and witnessed. They also often have some theatrical advantage, although they do

not, in our view, stem merely from that fact. Instead of being part of some deep plot, they are more likely driven by the need to assure organizational responsiveness in an otherwise inchoate circumstance. Some people register enthusiastic approval at the evidence that something is being done, with their own inconvenience clear-cut evidence of that fact. Some (and we do not know how many or exactly what type they are) express satisfaction, at the airport security, for example, in "doing my part." At the organizational level, contracts can go out and constituents' firms can be rewarded; campaign contributors' investments can reap its rewards. A training program in, say, how to evacuate passengers from a smoke-filled train is not ever very easy to witness much less marvel at; it goes away at the end of the day—quite likely a long-term benefit for train travel safety, but not so useful for showing off power to repel.

A common feature of cities is the existence of what Callon (1986) refers to—in a different context and for a different analytic point—"obligatory passage points." They can occur as inadvertent outcomes, pinches in the street and sidewalk layout where the street narrows or two buildings leave only a narrow slit between them. These sediments were configured for reasons buried in history. Sometimes, beggars or street vendors avail themselves at these spots to ask for money or proffer wares. In security operations, authorities *enact* such points, *de novo*, and make them unavoidable. So, the security gate, in this sense, can be understood as an opportunistic move to create a choke point where none would otherwise be. Indeed, one can think of the airport security gate as being put into place, *because it is possible to do*—and in this way not find it such a mystery that they persist even when useless. At minimum, we could say, they operate as purification ritual, again in the Mary Douglas sense of purification, to demarcate the clean area from the dirty.

This phenomenon raises as a more general issue: the variable nature of passage points, whether for security or not. How do they emerge in the first place; what is the rationale (if any) for their construction; and how are they sustained or overturned by those who encounter them? And what, if any, is their role in screening out human and nonhuman contaminants and creating cultural and material variations in the nature of places? Future research, guided by inspection of security systems, might help answer such questions.

STASIS: COMPULSIONS FOR DURABILITY

Among the more radical ideas coming out of actor-network theory (ANT) studies is a questioning of artifact intransience (Ingold, 2007). From other intellectual traditions, ethnomethodology most prominently (Garfinkel, 1967), we learn that all objects derive meaning only from context and as context shifts, so does the meaning of the thing, the idea, the utterance, the

whatever. All objects, physical or symbolic, exist through a kind of tacit conspiracy to treat them as "fact" rather than as what they are, which is radically contingent (Pollner, 2010). The basics of science teach that physical existence of any material or thing is itself unstable; laws of entropy never cease, and their consequence is ongoing, emergent, and invincible. In various realms, this betrayal of immutability creates analytic and practical problems that, by necessity, get noticed. Museum conservators, for example, now grapple with the transience of all objects under their care, even "age-old" works of marble and gold. This also includes, more conspicuously and ironically, works in which ephemerality was intrinsic to their original creation—such as those made of foodstuffs or papier-mâché. Given the princely sums sometimes paid for them, they cannot easily be left to disappear even if that was what they were meant to do.

As with the expensive works of art, ephemerality is particularly nonadmissible in regard to security regimes. The instruments of security must, as a practical matter, be granted their facticity. The particular model or type of gizmo can and should be replaced by a succeeding one, but security regimes as both a moral and material force, need to be honored in their basic form. What is that basic form? As we have noticed in this and our earlier essay (Part I: Background & Research Starts in this volume), they tend toward a command and control ensemble, not—by way of possible contrast—a support and facilitative human ensemble. So, at the airport security gate, there are no helpers. The equipment does not compensate with helping through its design. There is no way to roll a suitcase onto the conveyer belt without hoisting it yourself, no special compartments for coins or change, no footrest when untying shoes: not much evidence of anything such as product design or civilian-type systems analysis is around.

Security repertoires, usually so wooden and authoritarian, are taken by their sponsors to emerge from necessity, and modifiable only through similarly fixed procedures. The constituent elements are not a matter of taste, whim, or debate, and not open to *ad hoc* adjustments by those without official standing to intervene. Mol (1999) introduces the concept of an "ontological politics," which she defines as attention to the ways that what we take as the real world is constantly and actively reshaped by our practices. Security systems operate through ontological politics that, their creators and managers insist, is settled: they are often presented as an absolute, a priority that cannot be "compromised" even as other system properties—comfort, timeliness, pleasure, and even profitability—do not enjoy such insulation.

Even in repressive contexts, there is some need for "buy in" from affected public, and in this fact we can glimpse a larger point about security systems. In contexts resembling the contemporary United States, we can imagine a continuum of affect, reaching from outright opposition (and vandalistic

reprisal) through a midpoint of indifferent adaptation to—at the other end of the spectrum—actual *care*, to use Mol's term once again. At times, people do anonymously take action to maintain, preserve, and enhance public infrastructure, including security systems, whether the objects are officially designated as "security" or not. Precisely because nothing is absolutely stable and that all elements of all systems are subject to unpredicted events and happenstance, human monitoring is necessary. Sometimes, societal responses depend on hitting the right balance: a few CCTV cameras may make an area feel safer for rest and play, but the presence of many such instruments may leave people feeling unwelcome or under threat (Golubchikov & Badyina, 2006, p. 209). Or, it may depend on wider variations in place, time, and individuals. Some people return their grocery carts to the proper holding station in the parking lot instead of leaving them to run loose into traffic and other people's paths. Some places and cultures have more of this "other-regarding" behavior than do others, or on one type of artifact practice than another. We can only speculate on variations in the degree to which citizens accept or resist elements put there "for their own good." Studies could usefully compare people not only in different cities within the United States, but also across the world in terms of public attentiveness toward maintenance of the infrastructure and the people who work with it.

Some individuals are sufficiently alienated from extant security arrangements that they really do become resistors, in material terms. They might vandalize out of political or ideological positions. Others do it to showoff for friends or for financial gain. By putting chewing gum into the money slot of the metrocard machine, sellers of "black market" metrocards can generate a local monopoly because they provide the only way to access a ride. Some people, when frustrated by a faulty or demeaning implement, blame themselves (their "clumsiness") or direct their frustration against the artifact ("damn thing") or perhaps blame other users, or the sponsoring agency or business they see as behind the problem. At the extreme of the contemporary Middle East, it is doubtful that very many Palestinians blame anyone but the Israeli authorities for the walls that restrict their movements—but even here there may be some who view it differently.

Seen this way, systems for security are secured at least in part through the buy-in of the populations around them. As with other public objects, security instruments benefit from community acceptance and mutual protection of their functioning. Opening up the security agenda along these lines might expand civilian reach into militaristic realms rather than what has been the reverse, the militarization of what used to be civilian arenas. Again, this invites using infrastructure as a base for study of comparative politics. In other words, the study of urban security objects is at once a necessary adjunct

to making decisions about effective security systems, and also, as we again repeat, an intellectual tool for understanding larger dynamics.

In an era when terrorist attacks are few but massively destructive natural disasters can—and do—happen, the material–social conjuncture becomes front and center. Future studies of the urban security object should thus take the wider catalog of disruptions into account and the material tools set up to deal with them. So, for example, we have two recent US cases where "nature let us down," as it used to be said, and massive human failures occurred. Hurricane Katrina's 2000 deaths and billions in losses came from, first off, the eighteenth century settlement of modern New Orleans beyond the high ground of what is now the French Quarter. Building the dikes, levees, and pumps gave the illusion of safety but actually lessened it (Freudenburg, Gramling, Laska, & Erikson, 2009; Kelman, 2003). Hurricane Sandy's losses of life and property were similarly artificial in the fact of human settlements placed too low to the water and important infrastructure built in the wrong way or in the wrong place. Massive power outages plunged Manhattan (and much else) into darkness, eliminating virtually all elements of the security infrastructure. Without power, most everything goes—the locking mechanisms, alarms, elevators, even lights—which perform a psychological if not actual security function in their own right. The 9–11 attacks, not natural at all of course, knocked out the city's emergency response center, "centrally" located adjacent to Ground Zero, uselessly packed with the tools of coordination and control. In such circumstances, objects of security fail to secure and humans are left to their own devices.

In important ways that were discovered, people do indeed manage to a certain degree, but typically in spite of security systems, not because of them (see Solnit, 2010). World climate change now escalates the problem of human–material interaction as the mother of all security questions: who will protect the materiality from itself? The study of the urban security artifact in an increasingly securitized and technologized world can potentially illuminate this ultimate quandary of duality—and perhaps point toward directions for remedy.

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