CHAPTER 2

The Erotics of Space

Lane’s findings on the ill effects of nineteenth-century work would not have surprised John Thayer. Thayer was a Lowell mechanic who petitioned the State Legislature for laws to limit the hours of labor. Signatories believed that existing schedules denied workers time to eat properly, exercise, and improve their minds. In March 1845, a committee visited Lowell, but were “fully satisfied, that the order, decorum, and general appearance of things in and about the mills, could not be improved by any suggestion of theirs, or any act of the Legislature.” Citing the official report, Thayer says that orderliness had nothing to do with it. The “external appearance” of life in a factory town is deceptive, he writes,

It closes the eye of the observer, and flatters the mind to believe that all is well within, and again the distant stranger reads, and by quotation is reminded of the land of song, and the days of young romance, and not only wishes to be in Lowell, but comes; and soon is found a dictated rhyming slave.

The external appearance reminds me again, of a costly temple, the designer of which, after completing the external gilding and beauty, at the expense of others, fortunately died; leaving the beautiful covering a fit shelter for wild beasts, and birds of prey, who there secure a home.¹

Urban appearances are again described as hiding “wild beasts, and birds of prey.” But Thayer reverses the usual assumptions. Order and decorum are not

masks worn by bad people, but by cities themselves; and behind those masks lay not robbery and vice, but planners and owners who embraced order as part of a larger scheme to maximize profits. He also suggests that this scheme involved reading.

Like the anonymous commentator from *The Voice of Industry*, John Thayer complains that a romance of labor masks the cost of overwork. But Thayer’s aim is not to justify rest. Rather, by identifying the cultural basis for this romance in reading and urban design, and by assigning language to it usually used for crime, he marks the questions I address in this chapter and the next: how culture meant to contain crime in fact produced it, and how feelings it prompted carried negative pleasure and spatial ambivalence. Insofar as reading helped rationalize urban life, it was no less material than the town planning and factory management that raised profits by manipulating the space in which bodies produced. Reading generated emotions that policed cities long before the residents of New York and Greenfield formed official constabularies. In addition to higher behavioral standards and new work regimens, crime was reduced by square buildings, straight streets, and fear. But doing so also provided a rhetorical basis for space to be eroticized in negative bodily terms.

Ties between urban planning and capitalism are well established. In many cases, planners were capitalists and their needs determined the operation of towns and factories alike. Lowell’s founders dreamed not of manufacturing that sustained a complex urban society, but “of a group of well-built factories, of a settlement of tidy cottages growing up between them, and of profits resulting from the whole.”3 “We are building a large machine,” one investor remarked in 1823, equating workers with modes of production.4 How this influenced design is not hard to guess: mills were built for regulation. “The superintendent, from his room, has the whole of the Corporation under his eye,” wrote Henry Miles in 1845 about the plan of one company, and this included worker’s accommodations.5 Boardinghouses and production facilities were built close together to minimize time for meals (figure 4). Supervision was not the only way to keep the “large machine” running. Planners took a holistic approach, paying close attention to detail, including visual impression. Mill buildings were square and multi-storied, built using block construction, set on deep foundations, close together, and tightly configured (figure 5). Interiors too were massive

---

Figure 4. Bay State Mills and Boarding Houses, Lawrence, Massachusetts. Courtesy of the American Textile History Museum.

Figure 5. Washington Mills, Lawrence, Massachusetts. Courtesy of the American Textile History Museum. From an original stereocard owned by Robert Vogel.
and systematic, sometimes with machinery built into the superstructure. Beyond technical requirements, scale and uniformity commanded respect. An unadorned style also spoke order and efficiency. Like principles informed the boardinghouses: supervision, organization, solid construction, and plain style. Freestanding units of the 1820s were replaced by taller, more regimented row housing, the “brick forest” that workers walked through each day going to and from their jobs (figure 6).\(^6\)

While factory towns represent an extreme example of urban planning, cutting-edge design and management practices in the 1820s when construction began at Lowell were typical by mid-century. They also moved from rural locations to larger centers where “system” became the rule for successful manufacturing.\(^7\) Also, if industrial design was limited to production facilities, government policy saw to the larger setting. Sympathy between production design and city planning encouraged a turn to the “gridiron plan,” where streets were laid out at right angles to each other, forming the now familiar checkerboard pattern. Named for a medieval torture device, gridirons helped to organize land use in times of rapid urban growth. Cities have used grids of one kind or

---

another for thousands of years. Those of colonial Philadelphia and Savannah were “closed” meaning their limits were clearly marked by boundaries such as thoroughfares. Savannah’s, John Reps writes, “provided not only an unusually attractive, convenient, and intimate environment but also served as a practical device for allowing urban expansion without formless sprawl.”

Sprawl characterized “open grids” adopted in response to nineteenth-century growth. Striking were newer cities like Columbus, Cincinnati, Chicago, and San Francisco whose grids expanded with remarkable regularity, yielding to only the most unyielding geography. Most severe, however, was one of the older grids. By mid-century everything north of New York’s lower wards (and Brooklyn, Williamsburg, Hoboken) had become numbered streets laid out parallel at regular intervals (figure 7). In addition to order, the New York Streets Commission was driven by an ideology of republican simplicity that sought to make the most productive use of land through fair distribution and private ownership. The result was brutality rational. Commissioners, Elizabeth Blackmar writes, “abstracted land from its topographical features,” physically removing geographical obstructions or running blindly over top. They rejected European methods to lessen monotony, writing that while “circles, ovals, and stars [. . .] certainly embellish a plan,” they did so at the cost of “convenience and utility.” Open spaces were also unnecessary given that, as an island, open water was always nearby. Odd pieces of land caused by disturbing the grid’s regularity were also uneconomical. A strict grid, it was decided, helped distribute land fairly, move goods efficiently, advance growth economically, and solve the main problem confronting municipalities everywhere: housing. The Streets Commission justified their grid by stating as its guiding rule “that a city is to be principally composed of the habitations of men, and that straight-sided and right-angled houses are the most cheap to build and the most convenient to live in.”


11. Reps, *The Making of Urban America*, 299. Much of the Streets Commission report is reproduced on pp. 297–99. Dell Upton provides this summary: “In short, the grid was understood as a single-order spatial system that eradicated the natural inequalities of topography by providing equal access to every location in it. It was nonhierarchical: the parts were clearly defined, but the connections among them were articulated and flexible, and could thus accommodate an unlimited number of separate networks of meaning and activity. The grid was conceived, therefore, as neutral among users, transparently depicting their relationships, and transparent, as well, in making social knowledge and special access available to everyone” (‘The City as Material Culture,” 56).
This kind of spatial thinking produced cheap, hyper-rationalized housing for urban workers. Overcrowding plagued boardinghouses as builders struggled to keep pace with the population. Houses were repeatedly subdivided, while stables, sheds, attics, and basements were rented for human habitation. In response, cities encouraged the construction of tenements, which given their size and plain, repetitive design were a perfect counterpart to rationalized production (figures 8–9). Indeed, for many working families tenements became the site of this production. If housing in company towns directly extended mill design, workers in cities often produced at home. As late as 1855, barely 30 percent of New York manufacturing occurred in factories. The rest was contracted as outwork or performed for local consumption by small producers.\(^\text{12}\) Citing Blackmar again: "In Manhattan the resource to be tapped was not water power but undifferentiated labor power."\(^\text{13}\) Factory buildings required investment, unlike domestic quarters, cellars, attics, and backyards. The intensive use of space for manufacturing extended to occupancy as well; renting extra space, even workspace, for sleeping brought in extra cash. Doing so provided


\(^{13}\) Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent*, 103.
supplemental income as rents soared due to gridiron economics, which served first and foremost the interests of speculators.\textsuperscript{14}

Planners treated space as part of the integrated logics of capitalist production: “land, too, now became a mere commodity, like labor.”\textsuperscript{15} And like commoditized labor, grids had advocates and critics. Backers praised its order, economy, and egalitarianism, which combined simplicity with sameness: thousands of identical lots with nothing to distinguish between them. As the negative effects of sprawl began to emerge, detractors said grids were not economical (leveling topography was expensive), they were chaotic (no place in a grid was better that any other), slow (in Philadelphia, congestion was extreme), unhealthy (environment was ignored), asocial (few public spaces), not equal at all (commoditizing land made speculators rich), and just plain boring. Visiting Philadelphia in 1842, Charles Dickens called it “a handsome city, but distractingly regular. After walking for an hour or two, I felt that I would have given the world for a crooked street.”\textsuperscript{16}

Thayer and Dickens register the same contradiction between handsome appearance and blighted reality. Thayer interprets it not as an aesthetic failure, but a management ploy meant to better exploit workers. But if labor reform was his aim, aesthetics played an important role, and not only in spatial planning. Like the \textit{Voice of Industry}, Thayer includes reading in the fraud, specifically \textit{The Lowell Offering}, also a worker-run periodical, but one famous for celebrating life in the mills. Thayer equates \textit{The Lowell Offering} with streets whose order and decorum maintain the romance of labor (figure 10). Lowell’s “order and appearance is not without design,” he writes,

\begin{quote}
no more than the continuation of the Lowell Offering, which emanates from the city of spindles, and which declares itself edited by operatives employed by the mills. This unfortunate publication roves over the country even to other lands, bearing on its deceptive bosom a continual repetition of notes, less valuable to the reader than to the writer, but destructive to both; leaving behind
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{15} Lewis Mumford, \textit{The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects}, 421. Upton treats the city grid as a form of management meant to “create the ideal urban society by guiding citizen’s actions into socially beneficial channels” (“The City as Material Culture,” 56). Upton links the grid not to new forms of production, but to the design of schools and prisons (cf. “Lancastrian Schools, Republican Citizenship, and the Spatial Imagination in Early Nineteenth-Century America”).

\textsuperscript{16} Charles Dickens, \textit{American Notes}, 89.
the abuses and downward progress of the operatives, the very part which becomes their life, liberty, and greatness to give to the world, even if they were compelled to write and record with blood from their own veins.17

Not all workers shared this view. When Thayer circulated his petition in 1844, many refused to endorse it, preferring longer hours to lost wages. He understood this, to a point; yet beneath the pleasing aspects of such life, laid the ill effects of overwork. Thayer also seems to have appreciated the advantage of a romance of labor for women (“less valuable to the reader than to the writer”), where the alleged rewards of mill life allayed the ongoing belief that their proper sphere was the home. The Lowell Offering had other benefits too. Like strict rules for boardinghouses, it reassured a public uneasy about large numbers of young women working far from the protection of their families. That they worked in cities made it worse, and not only because of the view that circulated in crime literature. As we will see, if reformers like John Todd and Henry Ward Beecher also spoke of romance in places like Lowell, theirs was more gothic than idyllic. Women played two roles in these accounts: naïve girls who yield to the seducer’s arts, or harlots who, once seduced, led young men on the “downward course.” An anomaly of urban writing, The Lowell Offering treated single urban women as neither the victims nor the perpetrators of crime.

The effect of such reading on sexual relations I treat later. Here the erotics are spatial. Unlike Foster, Thayer’s indictment bears little celebration; and Lowell’s “wild beasts, and birds of prey” did not strike him as crookedness that relieved “distractingly regular” American streets. They still may have served that purpose, giving Thayer the same sense of something “going on” that Carpenter missed when he visited home. But he expresses none of Foster’s leering titillation in revealing the dark side of city life. Indeed, if he had, he would be less useful as a producer of it. New York by Gas-Light would seem an obvious place to examine the eroticizing of antebellum streets; yet the very enthusiasm that recommends Foster makes it doubly difficult not to turn city crime into work. Writers like Thayer, Beecher, and Todd resist positivizing in the degree to which their interest in catastrophe opposed their fervent wish to reform. Beecher and Todd sought to internalize the micro-regulatory equivalent to new work regimens, the gridiron plan, and other forms of material rationalization that encouraged men like Carpenter to produce more and faster. Thayer opposed these measures, at least insofar as they represented labor conditions he deemed unhealthy. But in doing so, he generates the same romance of inflated urban danger. In its more coercive forms, reading that circulated this romance

shows stress similar to that caused by straight streets and over work—and with its own desire for crookedness. Reading meant to contain this desire preserved it in an often tortured fascination with the very activities it condemned.

To seek negativity in the work of reformers genuine in their commitments to change, we must revisit the productive view of city reading. Henkin and others are right to argue that reading helped to resolve problems of city living. However, it did this not by giving readers control of cities, but by constructing cities to control them. A primary motive for such reading was the need for a new kind of labor. Heavily capitalized, machine-driven production required workers who were focused and temperate, who arrived on time and performed long hours of repetitive labor. Shifts in labor needs led directly to common school education, where discipline to sit still and obey was as important as what children learned while doing it. This is not to dismiss learning. Literacy provided the basis for technical training more efficient than the older artisanal instruction. It also pro-


Figure 10. *Merrimack Mills and Boarding House, Lowell. Frontispiece from The New England Offering (April, 1848). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.*
vided what Charles Loring Brace called “influence,” which sought, as one Low-
ell school committee put it, to “shut out” the “baser passions” in favor of more orderly sentiments. Such influence figures materially in an 1863 tract entitled, *Tramps in New York*, when the narrator describes Sunday school taught in “the mechanics’ wards” by a policeman, who “when duty calls him to ‘mix in’ with the brawls of parents, [. . . ] goes armed with attractive little books wherewith to influence the more youthful members of the family.” Taming the passions occurs more directly a few pages later when another teacher deals with agitated students by “putting them through a series of maneuvers with their hands and arms, which [. . . ] produced the desired result of keeping them comparatively quiet for some time after.” Reading was at the center of the quieting project, however. In labor leader Steven Simpson’s words, education “reclaim[s] them from all temptations of degrading vice and ruinous crimes. A reading and intellectual people were never known to be sottish.”

Many saw a larger crisis than the need for more disciplined workers. Writing in *The Young Man’s Friend*, Artemus Muzzy identified “a spirit of anarchy in the very midst of us, which makes us tremble for the weal of our institutions.” Muzzy’s panic stemmed from the scale of changes to which Americans were adjusting. This included geographical dislocation that threatened traditional means of social control, family supervision in particular. Employers addressed anxiety about young workingwomen with rules and regulations, both in textile mills and in domestic service where many also found jobs. More disturbing was the large number of young men moving to towns and cities, where increasingly they were unsupervised in their free time. On the “large and increasing class of apprentices,” one commentator remarked, “what shall [. . . ] prove a substitute for the parental eye, and council, and affectionate, watchful care? What shall guard from moral peril, the untried, inexperienced youth, and direct him safely? How shall he rectify the evils of his own heart?” The answer

---


24. “Apprentice’s Remembrancer,” 53–54. Richard Robinson, the young man charged with
to these questions was, not surprisingly, “The BIBLE.” And certainly many were distributed for this purpose. But the disciplinary turn to reading was far more general. A wide range of reform literatures sought to improve young men and warn against vice. In *The American Mechanic* and *American Working-man*, Charles Quill spoke to men engaged in manual occupations. Sermons, lectures, memoirs, biographies, sentimental literature, cheap classics, and other “well selected books” were thought to refine and socialize. Libraries made these materials available, and schools made sure they were read.

Cities were the locus of anxiety, and not just for parents. Assigned the topic “Whether the influence of cities and large towns be injurious to the morals of a community,” Cambridge student Levi Newton writes, “I took the affirmative as did most.” People didn’t just behave badly in cities, they were compelled to do so by what they encountered there. Caution was spatial, as John Todd writes in 1850:

> The moment the inexperienced youth sets his foot on the side-walk of the city, he is marked and watched by eyes that he never dreamed of. The boy who cries his penny-paper, and the old woman at her table professedly selling a few apples and a little gingerbread, are not all who watch him. There is the seducer in the shape of the young man who came before him, and who has already lost the last remains of shame. There is the hardened pander to vice who has as little remorse at the ruin of innocence as the alligator has in crushing the bones of the infant that is thrown into his jaws from the banks of the Ganges: and there is she—who was once the pride and the hope of her parents—who now makes war upon virtue and exults in being a successful recruiting-officer of hell.

Todd’s method was not complicated. Amid the orderly symmetries of the city, danger lurked. Fear provided self-regulation in a space where traditional controls no longer worked.

---

28. Cities were presented as no less dangerous for women, although their warnings tended to emphasize sexual vulnerability. A typical example, “Dangers of the City,” begins: “Many the daughter, who was once the pride of fond parents, and a star of attraction in the domestic circle, in [*sic*] to-night
Threatening violence was the primary tactic in antebellum reform, regardless of the audience addressed or wrong corrected. But Todd’s caution was not without ambiguity. In the drift from a bland street scene—a boy hawking papers, an old woman selling gingerbread—to the violent, sensual language that reveals hidden danger, exhilaration belies rectitude, while also proceeding from it. As lurid as anything in New York by Gas-Light, the catastrophe Todd locates behind dull urban surface naturalizes anxiety; it also generates his prurient engagement with it, which by the end resides somewhere between loathing and ecstasy.

Todd’s advice took part in the same exchange called for by the Voice of Industry—and Thayer, who represented workers who would also have spent free time on amusements and trashy reading. Todd would hardly have admitted his “interest” in crime. But figured into his account of the dark underside of everyday urban life were precisely the complaints of workers, which he resolves in nonproductive terms. Todd’s excitement occurs against a backdrop of legitimate enterprise, street vending, which like mill labor appears lifeless and unappealing. He also generates this excitement by way of the very rhetoric he uses to contain it. Neither Todd nor those his language aroused were driven by the desire to escape productive constraint; rather, the practice of constraining defined and propelled violation. “The unremitted toil of thirteen long hours” demanded dissipation. In naming and measuring urban risk, Todd was appalled, but also excited.

Once again, Bataille’s is one of many attempts to theorize nonproductive desire. Yet in whatever fixed frame we regard it, this desire is rooted in the specificity of time and place: the rationalization of antebellum cities, including immense pressures on those who lived in them to behave, conform, and indeed produce. Because reading used negative rhetoric to bring these pressures to bear, it was an obvious place to complete them. Prurience in writers like Todd gave way to astonishing violations in fiction by Lippard and others. And as the principle object of constraint, the urban body was the main target. Drained of “vital energy,” this body thrilled to anticipated danger. Fear, titillation, anger, disgust: all served readers who were increasingly denied such feelings by rationalized urban life.

Like Todd, Beecher located the crisis in cities, although his enthusiasm placed him closer to Lippard as a purveyor of negative reading. His widely circulated sermon “The Strange Woman” concerns prostitution, a crime he regards as synonymous with city life. Beecher impresses this view on read-

---

ers by leading them through an allegorical “house of Pleasure,” where five “wards” symbolize the experiences that await those who yield to the harlot’s charms: Pleasure, Satiety, Discovery, Disease, and Death. “There is no vice like licentiousness, to delude,” he warns, and once past the pleasant front garden and satisfying first ward, young men “fall headlong through the rotten floor.” Delivering “The Strange Woman” the first time at a Christmas Eve service, Beecher attacks with stunning ferocity.

Ye that look wistfully at the pleasant front of this terrific house, come with me now, and look long into the terror of this ward. . . . Here a shuddering wretch is clawing at his breast, to tear away that worm which gnaws its heart. By him is another, whose limbs are dropping from his ghastly trunk. Next swelters another in reeking filth; his eyes rolling in bony sockets. . . . Clutching his rags with spasmodic grasp, his swollen tongue lolling from a blacked mouth, his bloodshot eyes glaring and rolling, he shrieks oaths; now blaspheming God, and now imploring him.29

Page after page like this suggests that Beecher too was seduced by the language of admonition.

More important, he suggests how such language projected city crime onto the gridirons and brick forests of urbanizing America. Standing at the threshold of Death, Beecher reminds readers of their corrective purpose and pities them for having to witness such horror.

Oh! that the young might see the end of vice before they see the beginning! I know that you shrink from this picture; but your safety requires that you should look long into the Ward of Death, that fear may supply strength to your virtue. See the blood oozing from the wall.30

Americans hardly needed encouragement to look. Beecher’s spellbinding performances made him one of the most popular reformers of the day. This popularity, along with the vertiginous sensuality of his language, suggests intrigue amid the deference and justification that prepared readers for the scene before them. Preaching and writing at the very limit of what his audience would bear, Beecher played to their ambivalence, the fact that they read him not despite the pain he inflicted, but because of it. Complicity did not negate the disciplinary aim of “The Strange Woman,” or its success. Gazing across the threshold of the

house of Pleasure, readers observed horrors that reinforced that threshold as a taboo. But by witnessing, by having crime identified and its wrongs measured against their own bodily interests, they were also thrilled.

Beecher placed urban readers at the threshold of danger each and every day. Secure, respectable, able to work and to perform other duties, the inhabitants of American towns and cities were nonetheless intimate with that which, while hidden by “external appearances,” was still “going on.” Reading made urban Americans aware of city crime, threatened by it, even complicit as cohabitants with those who lived in serene disregard of productive rule. Foster produced like apprehension with *New York by Gas-Light*, his reform agenda justifying forays into forbidden realms where he identified activities like rape and prostitution as commonplace. Doing so set thresholds that readers were in danger of crossing every time they stepped onto their streets. These thresholds supplied distance and legitimacy; and where crimes lurked, they were indeed hidden by order and decorum. Conversely, crime secured the value of order and decorum, which by turn made crime noxious, and thrilling. As reading, this thrill was bounded by practice. As city living, it infused a thousand everyday acts of walking, standing, loafing, and otherwise inhabiting city space.