



Urban Margins : An Architectural Narrative

Manhattan's expansion is limited by its context; for decades its growth has been upward and inward. It fills the remaining gaps and leftover spaces in its own fabric. As time presses on, this layered context grows in density, accumulating a thickness around the alley, the fire escape, and the rooftop. As Manhattan continually rewrites itself and adds to its layered densification, these negative spaces remain as thin slips of invisibility, a dispersed catalogue of marginality within the island. They are relics of the city's past, urban memories which are at once soft and hard, illusory and corporeal, storied and earth-bound. By resisting the city's tendency to stifle, one can gather these moments of Manhattan's past, and channel the interplay of space and narrative.

Within Manhattan lay attributes unique to these attenuated moments. The alley is a crevasse, carving its way through the growth of the city. The depth of this chasm creates a labyrinth of outdoor hallways, lines of deep shadow etched by light. This negative space is lined with diverse events and private spaces just beyond sight, their existence hinted at by traces of echo, steam, or refuse strewn along the alley's axis. The fire escape is parasitic in nature. Possessing a thin, wiry tectonic, it desperately clutches the wall of its thick, masonry host. It is purely functional in its skeletal connection from rooftop to sidewalk, offering redundancy in the case of an emergency. At times, the column of platforms becomes a vantage point to the city below, at others a stage on which to be seen, illuminated by the raking light from above. The rooftop is an end condition, a U-turn space. It floats atop a labyrinth of program, offering an isolated connection with the city. This isolation offers a finality to those characters seeking a dramatic ending, an outlying platform far above the city; a plane of fatal attraction.

Settling into these gaps are characters and actions that favor furtive qualities. These pockets offer anonymity in Manhattan's busy strata, providing a veiled platform for story lines to play out. These narratives take cues from the physical qualities of the alley, fire escape, and rooftop, recounted in cinema as a dark slip for the meeting of two lovers, a couple's high-wire escape from danger, or a mistress' suspicious leap from above. These three plots take place in one such narrative, as a sequence of events moving from Grand Street to 14th Street. It begins with a group of friends sitting at dinner. As a few step into the alley to smoke, they recount a series of dreams, in the shape of a tryst, an escape, and a fall. These sequences feed a narrative influenced by the qualities of the marginal space they occupy.

As the dream sequences progress, in a reciprocation of the influence of space on narrative, spatial elements in the dream begin to take shape in the restaurant. The narrative elements of tryst, escape, and fall activate slips of reality, blurring the active/passive role of narrative in these marginalized spaces. The lessons of the margins direct the narrative, but equally so, the narrative reconfigures the space of the margins. The restaurant becomes as real, and as fictitious, as the recounted dreams. The restaurant moves towards the program of experience, a promenade of the senses. The final design becomes an embodiment of the stories being told, a nostalgic machine reifying moments of Manhattan's past based on its marginalized contexts, enticing its patrons with a walk through their own tight knot of fantasy.

