

# Including Film Analysis to Investigate History of Architecture

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper describes a historical research on architecture and city design based on film analysis, and suggests that cinema, as the most influential form of popular culture during the first-half of the twentieth century, provides a critical insight into the cultural impact of both modernism and industrialization in America and Britain. This research also illuminates how dominant discourses of spaces, rooted in old cultural traditions that condemn the metropolis and celebrate the countryside, were systematically distributed through American and British films produced in the 1930s-60s. This study also suggests that commercial films use modernist spaces to portray places of work and productivity, and modernist buildings to represent the twentieth century's image of the poor, but rarely as houses of "healthy" families. For the contrary, American and British films represent domestic spaces as cozy houses, recalling a traditional architectural style of small villages inherited from past centuries. This apparent discrepancy between the discourse of design disseminated by design intellectuals, and the discourse promoted by films, illuminates on the one hand how popular culture contributed to the misconception of the Modern movement in architecture; and on the other hand how the notion of community was systematically associated with low-dense neighborhoods and suburbs close to the countryside, and never with metropolitan spaces, dense public spaces and multistoried buildings.

**KEYWORDS:** Historical research, industrial city, cinematic spaces, popular culture, dominant discourses.

## 1.0 THE GREEN IDEAL: A DOMINANT DISCOURSE FOR URBAN SOLUTIONS

In the context of industrial cities at the beginning of the twentieth century, the "green" assumptions and the idea of open space, sun light, fresh air and parks for the urban masses, seemed to be the best response to crowding into slums of working classes. Put in a very simplistic way, the green argument was used to promote the two main urban solutions developed in the first-half of the twentieth century: the Garden City, and the suburban developments inspired in this model; and the Radiant City, and the urban developments based on high-dense buildings inspired by the Modern Movement.

In America and Britain, the green ideal was not a new concept. It had been supported by European Enlightenment's intellectuals, such as Voltaire and Adam Smith, romantic poets, a large list of nineteenth century artists, and diverse writers and reformers, who pushed the view of the city as full of vice, risk, and crime, and a disappointment of hopes raised by the Enlightenment project (Schorske 1998, 43-9). The Victorian industrial elite adopted a rural nostalgia particularly reflected in literature, with Thomas Hardy's country books as leading examples (Williams, 1973). The celebration of the rural was also evident in the United States: the flight from the city, the role of the highway as a refuge, the claim of man in nature and the emphasis on rural spaces, had constituted a constant theme from Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright (White and White 1982, 333-43). The metropolis seemed to embody all the miseries of modern life, whereas the countryside became an idyllic hope. From the bucolic *Idylls* of Theocritus written in the first half of the third century BC, or Virgil's *Eclogues*, written between 42 and 39 BC, pastoral has been always depicted as an idealized lush, tranquil and cultivated landscape (Gold and Revill 2004, 90).

The green ideal was also a dominant discourse of space promoted by diverse film genres of American and British cinema. From documentaries produced in the 1930s-40s, family dramas of the 1940s, urban dramas of the 1930s and 50s, crime films of the 1950s, to romantic comedies, American and British films seem to communicate a very clear message: first, the

city is necessary for the economic progress, but it is not an appropriate place to raise a family; second, in the city we can not build a real community; and third, true love, family values, and decent life only can be developed in low-dense neighborhoods close to the countryside. These discourses of the city are the main conclusions of a three-year research, which aimed to identify the most predominant urban models and housing models that appear in American and British films produced in the 1930s-60s.

In terms of methodology, the selection of films included only movies in which urban spaces and domestic spaces play a relevant role within the story. An extensive search of films was required, included reviewing more than 300 films and a final selection of 87 films. The selected films were those (1) that set the action in a city, (2) describe how social life of the characters is influenced by the city space, (3) and films that describe a community, which is organized in urban spaces that influence their communitarian life. The film analysis focused on (A) formal aspects, or what kind of urban models and housing models were placed in front of the camera; (B) film techniques, or what kind of dramatic values expressed by camera angles, editing, illumination, etc., were used to tell the story of the film; and (3) rhetorical practices, meaning how the characters of the story described and experienced the spaces that appear in the film. Based on the analysis of these three aspects, the research suggest that the condemnation of the metropolis and the celebration of low-dense communities close to the countryside were dominant discourses, systematically distributed by most of the studied films.

### 1.1 Community is always close to nature

In 1919, the Garden City and Town Planning Association defined a garden City as a “planned town for industry and healthy living,” surrounded by a belt of rural land, which like the whole land was in “public ownership or held in trust for the community” (Purdom 1921, 34). The Association also pointed out that the limited size “makes possible a full measure of social life” (Ibid). The next year the American architects Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, inspired by Howard’s ideas and the success of Letchworth and Welwyn, created the city of Radburn in New Jersey, promoted by slogans, such as ‘a town planned for the motor age’ and ‘a town for children’ (Girling and Helphand 1994, 59-60). The design included the separation of pedestrian and vehicle traffic, superblocs, each one of 23 acres of commonly held parkland, a hierarchical road system with curved streets and cul-de-sac, and common open spaces.

The image of a small town surrounded by rural land, where boundaries between urban space and countryside are blended in a harmonious communion, is the image used by American and British family dramas in the 1940s. American films, such as *It’s a Wonderful Life*, *Magic Town*, *Our Town* and many others, illustrate how the commercial industry of cinema reiterate the connection between honesty, decency, and especially family, with low-dense neighborhoods, single-family homes, traditional architectonic styles, walkable spaces, Main Street, the church, the school, and the drugstore. All these spaces provide a safe environment to cultivate enduring relationships. In American films, family-centered values are also represented through the emphasis on specific styles of domestic architecture.



Our Town, 1940



kings Row, 1942



It's a Wonderful Life, 1946



The Magic Town, 1947



All That Heaven Allows, 1955

In Hollywood films, the rooms of single-family houses are cozy rather than luxurious spaces. Cedric Gibbons headed the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's art department and gained unparalleled recognition as one of the most influential designers during the Golden Age (Wilson 2000, 101). Gibbons was particularly renowned for introducing modern design to Hollywood films, however his use of the term 'modern' does not mean the Modern Movement, but a style inspired on the Art Deco. The domestic interiors created by Gibbons became models that female moviegoers could attempt to reproduce in their own homes (ibid, 110). The country house of the film *The Women* was described in 1942 by the magazine *House Beautiful* as "Hollywood Provincial," and recommended because it "makes such a friendly home" and represented the "American ideal of good living" (ibid, 111). As Wilson notes, Hollywood films have both reflected and shaped American views about modern domestic design, and most of Americans did not want to "start from zero," at least not in terms of architecture (ibid, 159-60).



Dark Victory, 1939



Our Town, 1940



Kings Row, 1942



Meet Me in St. Louis, 1944



Hail the Conquering Hero, 1944



It's a Wonderful Life, 1946



The Magic Town, 1947



The Bachelor and the Bobby Soxer, 1947



Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House, 1948



Father's Little Dividend, 1951



All that Heaven Allows, 1955



Imitation of Life, 1959

In the post-war Britain, and particularly in London, there was a simultaneous desire for radical changes, and at the same time, the aspiration of tangible continuity (Shonfield 2000, 4). The functionalist principles of the Modern Movement established the rules for the new buildings developed between the the 1930s-40s, with extensive examples of social housing. While the Modern Movement aspired to achieve a real social change and a complete transformation of the urban space, the response to the anxieties of people after their cities were heavily destroyed was mirrored with a need to recover old cultural traditions. In terms of architecture,

this attitude was reflected by a revival approach to traditional images of English houses, closer to the ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement. This trend was also expressed through commercial films.

In the 1940s, British films represented common middle-class families in suburban neighborhoods with townhouses and cared gardens. Examples, such as *Million Like Us*, *This Happy Breed*, and *London Belongs to Me* represent this trend. Gardens are an important part of British tastes, but also the way that middle-class families can differentiate from the overcrowded slums, characterized by lack of greenery, communitarian facilities and modernist aesthetics. As James Maude Richards argues, the Englishman's passion for gardening may be seen in other places than suburbia, but only suburbia, is where an Englishman can exercise his passion (Richards, 1973).

### **1.2 The city: a place to work but not to raise a family**

American and British films produced in the 1930s-60s tend to represent big cities as places to work and run important business, necessary for the productive growing of the country, but completely inappropriate to raise a normal family. Diverse film genres, such as urban dramas, crime films, family dramas, and romantic comedies, systematically associate dense urban spaces with suffering working-class, selfish interests, hedonistic attitudes, poverty, delinquency, dysfunctional families, or at least, sexual temptations. In these films, communitarian and moral values cannot be supported by the metropolitan life.

Many commentators find clear associations between films that use the city as a main backdrop and certain recurrent themes, characters, and pro-filmic features. Vivian Sobchack, for example, argues that there is a type of Hollywood film obsessed with the dark city, which represents a crowded and impersonal modernity with spaces that invite casual and impermanent relationships. These spaces refuse to support traditional moral values, any establishment of family life, and by opposition, emphasize types of spaces such as the nightclub, the bar, the hotel room, the roadside cafe, the bus and train station, and the wayside motel (Sobchack 1998, 130). In relation with the themes, Larry Ford argues that films that portray the metropolis have recurrent crime plots, and usually feature a psychological drama in which normal people are drowning ever deeper into a very personal, isolating nightmare (Ford 1994, 123). In the cities of crime films, there is a moral and ethical ambiguity in the sense that everyday people may gradually become criminals (ibid).

American and British crime films of 1940s-50s are clear examples of how the dense and impersonal city seems to be the only scenario in where the racketeering and the crime in general can be developed. American films such as *The Asphalt Jungle*, *The Naked Street*, *The Street with No Name*, *Dark City*, *Panic in the Streets*, and many others, clearly portray the city and the streets as dangerous places. In these films city spaces are the background of criminal acts, an uncertain environment in where true love, family values, community values, and optimism are absent. Romantic encounters are ephemeral and with tragic ends. The night prevails over sunlight, sadness over happiness, and evil over good.



Scarlet Street, 1945



The Street with No Name, 1948



Panic in the Street, 1950



Dark City, 1950



The Asphalt Jungle, 1950



Where the Sidewalk Ends, 1950



On the Waterfront, 1954



Down Three Dark Streets, 1954



Naked Streets, 1955

The American urban dramas about troubled kids of the 1930s are a distinctive genre that portrays the urban poverty of slums located in inner zones of the city, especially after the Great Depression. Examples, such as *Wild Boys of the Road*, *Boy of the Streets*, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, and *Boys Town* present the city streets as schools of delinquency, in where vulnerable kids have no choice but to become future criminals. In these films families are dysfunctional, parents seem to be absent, so kids are always in the streets, learning from negative role models and cultivating dangerous associations. Interior domestic spaces are practically invisible, and street spaces are dense, dirty and dangerous. Kids are always in troubles, they are fighting and policemen watching and controlling the street form part of the townscape, creating a sort of unsafe atmosphere in any corner of the street.

British films also portray troubled youth. In the second-half of the 1940s, the film *Odd Man Out* is about a gang who belongs to the IRA and become idols and models for the kids of the streets. British films, such as *Violent Playground* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* represent an excluded working-class youth, who grew up in the industrial city and their dissatisfaction with the urban environment is translated into a rebellious and defiant attitude, which leads them to commit criminal acts.



Wild Boys of the Road, 1933



Boy of the Streets, 1937



Dead End, 1937



Boys Town, 1938



Angels with Dirty Faces, 1938



Odd Man Out, 1947



Boy of the Streets, 1937



Dead End, 1937



Angels with Dirty Faces, 1938



One Third of the Nation, 1939

The common characteristics of both American and British films, is that the metropolis together with poverty, seem to be the reason why young people become engage in criminality. All these films present on the one hand, the criminalization of the metropolis, and on the other, the pastoral power as a way to salve individuals and transform them into good citizens. In *Boys Town*, a dedicated priest builds a community for city kids in the middle of the countryside. The rural life, the gardens, the nature and the discipline are the key elements to rehabilitate hundred of trouble kids.



Boys Town, 1938

In *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, the city is linked with criminality, materialism, and consumerism, while nature is systematically associated with liberation and love. In this film nature functions as a trigger of conscience, as the instance of reflection and deep though. While Colin runs through the open fields analyzing his criminal past and taking decisions for the future, the only moments of happiness that Colin remembers are portrayed by natural landscapes.



The Lonliness of the Long Distance Runner, 1962



The Lonliness of the Long Distance Runner, 1962

Other British films, such as *Love in a Dole*, the Hardcastles, a struggling working-class family that live in an industrial slum of Salford is portrayed as suffering people that survive within a extremely adverse environment. Sally, the daughter, falls in love with the socialist agitator Larry, and their romantic encounters are framed in bucolic landscapes, far away from the city. When Sally goes for the countryside for first time, she comments, "Here is so lovely, make me see things different; I never want to come back." In *A Taste of Honey*, the only time that Geoffrey kisses Jo and asks to marry is when they leave the city, the cement environment and goes to the countryside. In *It Always Rains on Sunday*, the only time that the urban townscape shifts to a natural and bucolic landscape is when Rose's daughter, Vi, goes with her boyfriend to the countryside to spend a quiet day together. In American films, such as *Our Town*, *Kings Row*, *The Magic Town*, and *All That Heaven Allows*, only to mention few examples, romantic scenes are always framed in natural landscapes.

The apartment, as the most distinctive housing model of inner zones of big cities, is never associated with positive or happy characters. Especially in American films, with the exception of luxury apartments inhabited by billionaires, apartments are spaces that serve to portray stories of poverty, crime, violence, adultery, and drug abuse. Examples such as *Scarlet Street*, *The Apartment*, and *Any Wednesday*, tell stories about extramarital encounters and easy women that occur in metropolitan apartments.



Pillow Talk, 1959



Come Blow your Horn, 1963



The Apartment 1960



Sex and the Single Girl, 1964



Who is Sleeping in My Bed, 1963

In *The Lost Weekend*, an alcoholic writer experiences his worst crisis in the claustrophobic space of a New York apartment. The apartment is also the refuge of excluded people; besides the poor, apartments are homes for minorities, immigrants, and anyone who do not fit entirely into the productive society, such as artists, divorced, and playboys. In *Two for the Seesaw*, a divorced man and a little known artist, share their sorrows in decadent apartments that evidence deteriorated walls, and provisory decoration. From *Dark Victory* to *Come Blow your Horn*, when frivolous characters that refuse any commitment decide to put their life on order and get married, they always leave their apartments and the mundane city life to start a family in the countryside or the suburbs. From comedies to crime films, apartments seem to be useful as transitory solutions, but never as proper places to raise a family. Films, such as *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House* and *Don't Eat the Daisies* are examples of families with children that live in apartments but their main objective is move to the countryside.

Sharon Marcus argues that the apartment functions as a micro-cosmos of the city. Its capacity to make urban and domestic spaces continuous, because its impossibility to fully separate the city from the home, allows the apartment as vantage points for visual observation and exhibition, nodes of commercial and sexual exchange, and settings for the sensory overload and chance encounters associated with crowds (Marcus1999, 12). The apartment living that possesses blurred frontiers between the public and the private space appears as a foreign

lifestyle for common middle-class families, especially for Americans, who celebrate the self-contained communities as the most appropriate context to raise a family. As Pamela Robertson notes, the apartment offers a vision of home centered on values, such as visibility, contact, density, friendship, mobility, impermanence, and porousness, which sharply contrast to more traditional views of home as private, stable, and family-based (Robertson 2010, 5).

### 1.3 Modernist buildings are for the poor

During the 1930s-40s, American and British authorities took advantage of the popularity of cinema, using documentaries to promote radical changes in towns and housing models. In these films, urban planners presented governmental initiatives, such as the slum clearance program and the construction of new neighborhoods to relocate slum dwellers. Unlike commercial films, Documentaries of the 1930s-40s helped to introduce the new aesthetic of the Modern Movement in architecture, providing rationalistic explanations about the convenience of new materials, new techniques of construction, and reinforcing the idea that the new architecture was conceived for the health improvement of the population.

However, the distinctive modernist image of social housing projects, with their multistory buildings and open collective spaces, which strongly contrasted with the single-family homes and low-dense neighborhoods of the middle-class, also served to position the modernist aesthetics as the new image of urban poverty.

The Modern Movement in architecture, commonly recognized for its 'urban imagination' and principles, such as rational zoning land-use, separation between home and workspace, and emphasis on transport systems, saw the models of massive housing as a way to achieve a social transformation, however in America and Britain, modernist high-dense solutions were mostly used to implement social housing for the poorest sectors of the population, rather than a solution for the middle-class. In economical terms, high-dense apartments built with prefabricated techniques were a cheaper solution than extended suburbs that implied more portions of land, more investment in roads, power and sanitary lines. In this way, the green ideal embodied by suburban solutions close to the countryside, low-dense neighborhoods, cared garden and single-family homes were the choices of the American and British middle-class, leaving modernist buildings for social housing and former slum dwellers.



### Conclusion

While architectural historians, such as Henry Russell Hitchcock, Nicolai Pevsner, and Siegfried Giedion, wrote the first "official" history of the Modern Movement in architecture, celebrating modernist projects and influencing many generations of architects and scholars, modernist-housing solutions were barely promoted by the commercial cinema in the first-half of the twentieth century. During several decades, American and British films used modernist spaces to portray places of work and productivity, but rarely as places in where normal families live. This apparent discrepancy between the discourse of design disseminated by intellectuals of the design field, and the discourse promoted by cinema, suggests that the analysis of



architecture and city design in films is a valuable way to investigate how popular culture have discussed city spaces and domestic spaces.

This study also demonstrates that big cities are systematically represented as spaces of risk and vice, and the notion of community, presented as the most fundamental value of a healthy society, is never linked to metropolitan spaces, but systematically associated with small towns, low-dense solutions, suburban developments and rural communities. This dichotomy suggests that American and British cultural identities, in which urbanization and industrialization were crystallized in modernity, differ from other cultures, such as South European cities and Mediterranean cities, based on old urban identities and the understanding that cities are spaces of culture, memory and virtue. These differences of cultural backgrounds are also illustrated by zoning land use. While European cities combine residence with economic and leisure activities at walking distance, American cities separate residential neighborhoods from central business districts and recreational spaces.

Cinema has served to create meanings and values associated with spaces, affecting the way designers and everyday people perceive spaces and define preferences. The historical analysis based on dominant discourses distributed by popular culture suggests a reflection on our understanding as designers of city spaces. Are we really designing our cities, and thinking about the best solutions, or are we operators immersed in a dominant discourse and our designs respond to that? Are high-dense solutions and apartment living places full of negative values, and the politics of dispersion the only way to create communities? The analysis of films serves to be aware about how dominant discourses of space create cultural frameworks that influence the preferences of both designers and users.

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