

Social Transit
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Columbus Circle. 59th Street and Broadway. New York City. Perhaps the only roundabout in the Borough of Manhattan. Overseen by the gaze of Christophero, "The First Italian-American," who spoke of a round world - round, like this circular roadway. An exceptional space, it conducts the passage from one distinct civic realm to another: from the workaday world of Midtown, to the bourgeois domestic blocks of the Upper West Side. It can appear confusing; this interconnection of too many avenues with a major street, but it has permission to be confusing. The wide entrance to the Central Park offers ample resting space, and essential vista, for reorientation. This circle is a true gateway: a valve.

"I was looking for a place where everyone could come together and that was it- 59th Street and Broadway," says Ray Simmons, Director of Operation Prison Gap. Each weekend his organization transforms Columbus Circle, seizing upon its predisposition to function as a gateway. The Circle is used as the dispatch point for more than forty buses, which run weekly from New York City to various facilities in the New York State prison archipelago. This is quite in keeping with the Columbus Circle's traditional role as an internal valve. Operation Prison Gap allows for non-driving urbanites to cover hundreds of miles to see loved ones. The frantic pace of prison construction over the past three decades resulted in a network of high-security housing projects, which, albeit separated by dozens or even hundreds of miles, are an integral part of the fabric of the metropolis.

Columbus Circle is a strange sort of spatial hyperlink, for journey to the abstract space of an abstract element of the city. Moving north along the coursing Hudson River. Past billions of years old rounded hills of Catskills, across clay flats and sand flats, to the younger, pointed Adirondacks - is it really travel? Through valleys cultivated for ten thousand years by the Five Nations. The buses branch: some head east towards Lake Erie, through the old sea level "Gateway to the West," to Auburn or Cayuga, or beyond. They soldier on to Niagara Falls in the land of the Tuscarora. Some head north, scaling and crossing Adirondack foothills, with their precious high catches of water - to Dannemora, the town built, medieval, in the shadow of a wall, where the sharpshooters will always have the best view of Lake Champlain. Or further, to the frigid winds of the St. Lawrence Plain, to Malone and her three sets of homogeneous boxes- her "prison cluster." What would we call this motion, where a body leaves New York City and arrives strangely within that same New York City?

The ghetto environ spreads across the landscape: equivalent to the seamless and homogeneous passage made by the business flyer from hotel to rental car to airport to office.

The Columbus Circle dispatch is proof that actual people with actual social needs can form a particular space and that such meaningful locations are expressions of collective will. A self-organized system, the dispatch bears much resemblance to a third-world bus depot. Nothing is set in stone, and while it may appear quite chaotic, the chaos is just that: appearance. The order is unwritten: fluid and human.

Fully encumbered with several bags and a small daughter, a young mother emerges from a taxicab. In a self-organized space, each body takes space and makes openings momentarily, for those bodies around it. Her visible urgency creates an opening around her path through the densely packed sidewalk. Momentary passages are created, not only around the running mother, but also for the hawkers who pace back and forth, selling batteries, socks, hats and gloves. There is a steady stream of theatergoers crossing the space. They are bound for stages a few blocks away. Some are knowing, curious or oblivious to the manifest purpose around them.

Most riders do not run so frantically. They have tickets, advance ordered, and know the departure time. Their only task at Columbus Circle is to ask the dispatchers which bus is their route. Beginning its trip out of town, the buses creep counterclockwise along the western arc of the circle. Dispatchers, clad in suits and coats, call out in singsong the viscous names of destinations:

Attica! Wende! Buffalo! Attica! Attica!
Woodbourne-n-Sullivan! Woodbourne-n-Sullivan!
Clinton-n-Altona! Clinton-n-Altona!
Franklin-bare-hill-upstate! Franklin-bare-hill-upstate!

Round the circle the buses go, gaining momentum, shooting east to the FDR, or south along Broadway, a conduit to the distant extension of the city. The citizens inside will spend a day or a few hours with their confined loved-one. Conversations will cover a million different topics, business, to the Yankees and Jets, to relations, to love, to weather, to kisses, to interior decorating, to reports from the block, to stories of horrific incidents inside.

Returning to Columbus Circle, stepping out of the bus, the gateway announces homecoming to the solid city, the social city. There is a possibility that urban form can still be a social manifestation rather than a bureaucratic imposition.

When asked how he received permission to use Columbus Circle from the city, Mr. Simmons says, "There was never any need for permission. We just started, right from the beginning in August of 1975, from 59th Street and Broadway, and no one has ever hassled us for using it." END

