

Mobile Homes & Subway Origami

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It's a blurring of the line separating public and private space... There are women who paint their nails and those who strip them of paint with cotton balls soaked in pungent polish remover... And then there are the clippers, a class of men and women given away by the unmistakable ping in otherwise silent subway cars. Emilia Kelley...watched a woman finish clipping her fingernails only to move on to her toenails one summer morning on the Red Line. 'She slipped off her shoe, pulled up her foot and started clipping away' (Layton, quoted in Letherby & Reynolds 2005:168).

in recent years, I've spent a good deal of time studying routinized forms of mobility... above all else, commuter activities on local trains. One thing which has surprised me is how readily commuters seem to be able to make themselves at home on a rush hour train. They may arrive panting on the platform moments before departure time, or they may stand there daydreaming for five to ten minutes waiting for the train to arrive, but whatever the case, once on the train the rhythm of their commute changes as do the activities they engage in. Rather than being incarcerated in a seat, as de Certeau described the situation (1984:11), this is the point at which I would argue that the micro-processes of home-making are activated. Borders are quickly erected, and flexibly defined personal spaces are established.

Closed eyelids, open newspapers, worn earphones, are all effective barriers to the surrounding world, but this is the last line of defense. There are both subtler and more complex processes at work here. As Deleuze and Guattari have pointed out when reflecting upon the notion of home, and processes of home-making, "...home does not pre-exist: it was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space. Many, very diverse, components have a part in

this, landmarks and marks of all kinds” (1987:311).

But it’s interesting to observe how these processes of homemaking take shape in different context. In Boston, for example, the majority of MBTA subway stations feature a Dunkin Donuts at the entrance. Morning commuters file by with a newspaper in hand purchasing coffee, donuts and muffins on their way to the trains. This routine may run “as if on autopilot” as Highmore phrases it (2004:310), but in order to achieve this flow, commuters have already memorized portions of Dunkin Donuts menu – prices included. They have developed a feel for how long a line of customers will take to serve. They check their watches and look for information about coming trains. They may not be able to tell you in words how long it takes to serve a customer, but as they check their watches they are half consciously making rather exact calculations. How efficient or inefficient is the sales clerk today? Do the people in front of me look like they know what they want, or are they going to stand there for a few seconds indecisively? How many minutes and seconds are needed to get to the train from here? For some this might be a moment of stress, but for others it’s just about timing.

The trains themselves feature a limited number of hard plastic seats, and a wealth of hand straps and poles to hold onto. Simultaneously eating a donut, drinking a cup of coffee, and reading the *Boston Globe* in this environment requires the mastery of a number of skills that are different than those used to navigate the subway station. Rather than opening the newspaper like they might at the kitchen table on a Sunday, commuters have somehow learned and mastered a form of subway Origami in which they fold the paper in

upon itself – converting the rather large and floppy format of the *Globe* into a small rigid book-like block that is folded in such a way that they can read articles column by column through simple twists and turns of the page. Periodically holding onto a hand strap with the left hand, bag between their legs, they now eat, drink and read with the right hand. And even as commuters become increasingly packed together the morning meal ritual remains largely uninterrupted.

The situation is somewhat different in Southern Sweden. Dunkin Donuts has not yet arrived, instead the station entrances are lined by paperboys (and girls) competitively trying to hawk one of three different free morning papers. Commuters make eye contact with the person handing out their paper of choice. No words are exchanged as the paper (folded in this context into a baton like object) is handed off to people who don’t break stride.

On the platform, people have obviously developed preferred places from which they await the train. The objective here is to guess where the train doors will stop and open, while simultaneously having a feel for how full different cars on this train might be. These trains feature padded and upholstered seats with retractable trays; they lack hand straps, or poles to hold onto for those who might have to remain on their feet. While Boston’s commuters generally expect to stand, the success of the Southern Swedish commute is entirely dependent upon one’s ability to quickly find a seat and claim it. Indeed, when one of the local newspapers ran a critical series of articles on the state of the commuter services in the region, the newspaper was immediately bombarded by readers’ complaints – and their number one complaint

was the lack of seating that forced many people to stand on their way to and from work. The commuter rail authorities responded by lengthening the trains, providing much more seating.

The rush for seats still exists, but once seated, the tempo of the commute shifts again as new boundaries are constructed, and different sets of activities are engaged in. All of this may seem rather trivial, but this is serious business in the course of everyday life. Indeed, the degree of significance that people invest in the most banal of commuting routines is most dramatically illustrated by the rather extreme step the small rural town of Åtvidaberg took in the winter of 2006. After a period of continuous bickering (which at times escalated into outright fist fights) amongst elderly commuters over who had the rights to claim specific seats and places on the public buses, politicians felt that the situation had quite literally gotten out of control – so they suspended the bus services indefinitely. In Åtvidaberg, the bus ride into town was much more than an instrumental means of moving around. The passengers riding the bus often knew one another, taking a seat in this context was a political act in the constitution of one's self identity vis-à-vis everyone else – and a matter of such importance that at least some found it to be worth fighting over. To some extent, it might be argued that

this is one of the points at which the border between that which is trivial and that which is of utmost importance becomes complicated. We may take our daily routines for granted, but as it turns out, they are rather important to us.

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SUMMARY

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Commuting is not the form of mobility that people first speak about when referring to life changing events, or key moments in the constitution of their cultural identities, but it is here, in mundane moments of mobility (and immobility) that people develop both a cultural and corporal perception of the state of their lives and the world around them. This article briefly sketches out some of the cultural dynamics embedded in the routines of commuting.