

Mapping Desire

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In 1967, the British artist Richard Long went for a walk. He was hitchhiking from London to his home in Bristol, when he came to a field near Wiltshire. Before him lay an expanse of feathery meadow grass edged by a forest of trees. Long bee-lined for the woods, traversing the field in a straight line. He turned around and retraced his steps. Then he did this over and over again, back and forth, until the upright grass bent under the weight of his body, until sunlight caught the trampled blades in a silvery glow. He snapped a black and white photo and called it “A Line Made by Walking.”

Long’s line is ghostly, a chalky gash in a pristine field. That the line ends at the distant stand of trees adds to its haunting quality. Stumble upon this path and imagine your curiosity. Where does it lead? Who walks it and why? What exists just beyond the place where the line bifurcates the woods?

Walk Baltimore city today and you see hundreds of similar lines, a web of them composing an unintentional earthwork. A rutted trough triangulates an empty lot; a bony finger of blanched earth hooks around a concrete wall. The trails represent the geography of human footfall and they map many things. One marks the shortcut to a bus stop. Another makes visible the need to circumnavigate a barrier. Yet another proves a sidewalk failed to predict the path of pedestrians.

A French philosopher once dubbed these desire lines, and the term has become shorthand for urban planners and designers. For some in the planning profession, desire lines are an assault. They represent a digression from the official order of the city—the intentional infrastructure—and they must be prevented. Fences, thorny-shrubbed borders, gates, berms, all go up to insist people move as prescribed.

I seek out these desire lines. I write about architecture and cities for a living, but I am not a critic of stone and mortar. I do not parse aesthetic. Rather I tease out the hidden, the obfuscated. I am a detective, investigating the effect of edifice, of urban plans, of policy. You might ask: Why pass the grandest architecture, the lauded buildings, to look instead at the quotidian? Why consider the monotony of a cinderblock wall, or the ruptured shrapnel of an impassable sidewalk, and the paths that splinter off of these?

Because desire lines act like contrails of human existence. They have a story to tell.

Desire lines are sometimes, as the name suggests, born of desire. Wanting a faster route from one point to another, for example. But just as often, they are born of necessity. They are the result of being invisible, of being on the periphery, of not being taken into account by those who created the urban grid, or the transit system, or the housing model. Donald Norman, the director of The Design Lab at University of California, San Diego, describes desire lines in his book *Living with Complexity*. “When a desire line destroys the pristine plan, it is a sign that the design did not meet human needs,” he writes.

Desire lines, then, are a twinning: The overlooked needs of a people conjoined with the official, infrastructure of a place. Here is the wall. Here, too, is the path you must take if you are not one of those offered entry to the space behind the wall. The line represents the way many live in Baltimore—outside the official construct of the city.

“We’re here,” the lines say, though. “We still exist.”

Some desire lines are prevalent enough to be seen by satellite. Imagine the energy of human exertion required to walk a path large enough to be seen from space?

Now what if we could similarly see the invisible energy of human exchange in Baltimore, the way we see the physical desire lines? What if we could trace and map the “desire lines” created as work-arounds for those subsisting outside the official structure of economy? The hack cab. The barter system. The home school. The illegal squat.

And how might Baltimore's visible desire lines act as markers for other kinds of invisible lines?

The legacy of redlining. Of zoning lines.

Of gerrymandering and the school district.

In Baltimore, as in cities throughout the country, centuries of public policy and lending practices defined the lines of where people could or could not live, eat, go to school, walk. When, in 1917, the Supreme Court made it illegal to segregate residential neighborhoods, Baltimore helped pioneer other ways to keep blacks and Jews from certain neighborhoods through things like restrictive covenants in deeds. The divisions between race and class, written in the buildings we construct and the sidewalks we trowel, and the streets we pave, and the walls we erect, the walls not always being literal, of course, but clearly, oh so clearly, explicit. "The problem of the Twentieth Century," W.E.B. Du Bois famously wrote in 1903, "is the problem of the color-line."

Last April, the students of Baltimore left school and cut paths across grass and asphalt to find the public transit lines that would take them home replaced by a line of police. What followed was a split in the seam. The edge between the official order and the order struggling to be seen and to be heard, frayed. The line could no longer hold.

There are urban legends around desire lines. One tells of a city, somewhere in Scandinavia, where planners tracked the paths of citizens after a freshly fallen snow and then used the resultant lines to inform a better layout for a public park. Another claims enlightened planners laid out sidewalks following desire lines. They waited, the lore goes, until the buildings of a new development had been occupied for a year and then they went back and placed sidewalks along the paths that resulted from people walking. "I am suspicious of such stories, even though they are frequently told to me," Norman writes in *Living with Complexity*. "Why? Because it is far too sensible, far too human-centered to have actually been practiced. I haven't ever found direct evidence: only someone who knew someone who heard that story."

Still, these legends persist, even after Norman and others debunk them. It's a wonderful sentiment, isn't it? Those in charge of our cities honoring not the infrastructure of the expected, but the order of the everyman. A city where we listen and see and understand first, and then we build. Imagine, these legends say, a city built on empathy.