

Article

Should I Stay or Should I Go? An Analysis of the Selective Permeability of Busan¹

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Abstract: Our task in this article is to investigate selective permeability in the city of Busan in South Korea. Drawing on Gibson's tenet that perception organizes around "affordances" or action possibilities, the selective permeability model suggests that a single setting can be objectively supportive or hostile to different individuals. Embodied pragmatists and phenomenologists influenced Gibson, and we explore how factors like cultural habits, language, gender, age, geographical topography, and built form in Busan combine to alter bodily comportment so that action-closing "negative affordances" can manifest to one individual but not another. This, in turn, may make one stay in or retreat from Busan or places in it. For example, there is evidence that middle-aged Russian-speaking men experience greater safety—and thus freedom of movement—in some areas of Busan, as compared to younger Russian-speaking men, not to mention women. Throughout, we follow Dewey's lead in adopting what might be called "constructive realism," which holds that changes, once introduced to the world by human actors, are concretely there independently of any single observer—a position that weighs against dismissing

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All images in this manuscript were generated/produced by the authors, and this paper received ethical approval from Pusan National University's Institutional Review Board.

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inconsistent impressions of an urban setting as mere psychological projections.

Keywords: affordances, cultural relativism, selective permeability, urban design

In this article, we examine selectively permeable aspects of the city of Busan in South Korea. Based on James Gibson's claim that people perceive in terms of action possibilities or "affordances,"² the selective permeability model holds that a single setting can be objectively supportive or hostile to different individuals. Examples of the phenomenon abound. A stairway may be a viable route for a healthy teen but not a person with mobility challenges. Compared to men, women may find a public transit system threatening because it is more dangerous to them. Some affluent residents have challenged subway expansion into their neighborhoods, with the aim of selectively obstructing marginalized populations from entering.³ The central question in this article concerns how people from various cultures, ages, and genders encounter disparate opportunities or barriers in Busan and thus have reasons for wishing to leave or stay in the city or certain parts of it.

Obviously, the selective impacts of design tie to cultural matters. For this reason, a woman from a heretofore uncontacted tribe might not immediately register signs that a subway system is more dangerous to her than to men, due to the risk of sexual harassment. While past work has addressed matters like this in a general way, our intention is to offer a fine-grained analysis of how factors like culture and gender lead people to encounter objectively different possibilities of risk and safety, opening or closing action avenues. For this, we draw on qualitative observations of Busan as well as data from a multicultural cohort of respondents living there.

Our arguments begin with a review of the selective permeability model and its link to Gibson's affordance theory. Early portions of the article articulate how people from different regions may register and indeed encounter disparate affordances (action possibilities) in the same place. We go on to discuss how the built form in Korea—affected by things like the mountainous topography—leads inhabitants to see the world in ways not typical in the West and how this affects social interactions. We also look at

² James Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979) and James Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).

³ See Sarah Schindler, "Architectural Exclusion: Discrimination and Segregation Through Physical Design of the Built Environment," in *The Yale Law Review*, 124 (April 2015), 1934–2024.

culturally based psychologies, philosophies, and attitudes that people carry with them and how these variations can make parts of Busan easier or more challenging to negotiate. In one area of Busan, for example, middle-aged Russian-speaking men are safer than their counterparts in their early 20s as well as women from a variety of cultures. The situation introduces action restricting negative affordances for some more than others, affecting freedom of motion.

Now, this article targets a special issue on philosophy of the city. So, leaving aside the aforementioned everyday cultural philosophies, how does our work fit the topic? First, though Gibson is remembered as a psychologist, his books address metaphysical and epistemological concerns, for instance, defending direct realism. His writings accordingly have philosophical content. This is more so if one adopts an older understanding of philosophy, which, until about the beginning of the 20th century, encompassed any intellectual pursuit. In line with this, affordances are widely discussed in top philosophy journals like *Mind* and *Synthese*. Something similar holds for selective permeability, which has so far been discussed exclusively in philosophical sources.⁴

Second, Gibson acknowledged debts to American pragmatists,⁵ and he introduced the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to his students.⁶ Though we reference pragmatism and phenomenology sparingly, our analysis empirically concretizes certain claims from these traditions

Third, Ludwig Wittgenstein advises that philosophers ought not to use words in unheard-of ways.⁷ While we disagree with him in cases where one is attempting to move beyond an established universe of discourse, we take a cue from Aldrin Manalastas, who complains about philosophers

⁴ See Matthew Crippen, "Bodies Under the Weather: Selective Permeability, Political Affordances and Architectural Hostility," in *Somaesthetics and Design Culture*, ed. Bálint Veres and Richard Shusterman (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 154–182; Matthew Crippen, "Emotional Environments: Selective Permeability, Political Affordances and Normative Settings," in *Topoi*, 41 (2022), 917–929, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-022-09812-2>>; Matthew Crippen, "Selective Permeability and Situated Cognitive Harm in Multicultural Classrooms," in *Topoi*, published online first (2025), <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-024-10156-2>>; Matthew Crippen, "Selective Permeability, Social Media and Epistemic Fragmentation," in *Topoi*, 43 (2024), 1451–1465, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-024-10104-0>>; Matthew Crippen and Vladen Klement, "Architectural Values, Political Affordances and Selective Permeability," in *Open Philosophy*, 3 (2020), 462–477, <<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0112>>; Matthew Crippen and Dag Munk Lindemann, "Selective Permeability, Multiculturalism and Affordances in Education," in *Philosophical Psychology*, 37:7 (2024), 1924–1947, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2023.2255612>>.

⁵ See James Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, xiii.

⁶ See Shaun Gallagher, *Enactivist Interventions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 49.

⁷ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §133.

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straying into abstract discussions about Hegel and suchlike at the expense of addressing serious social problems before them.⁸ Accordingly, we avoid arcane philosophical garb, for instance, opting to use “social pressures” instead of “social grammars,” which is more cryptic but usually deployed in the literature on selective permeability. We also conceptually clarify (in Wittgenstein’s sense) affordance terminology.

A last point, however, is that aspects of our position are metaphysically rooted. This is especially insofar as we follow John Dewey’s lead in adopting what might be called “constructive realism.”⁹ This is an outlook that holds that changes, once introduced to the world by human actors, are really there independently of any single observer. Aside from us believing in the legitimacy of this perspective, the position has another advantage: it weighs against dismissing disparate impressions of an urban setting as mere psychological projections on the grounds that they arise inconsistently as a function of one’s cultural background, age, gender, and more, which is to say, because of how one is embodied in the world.

Affordances, Normative Pressures, and Selective Permeability

Gibson locates affordances in the environment and says they are conveyed to organisms through energy and chemical arrays (light, sound, heat, food sugars, etc.), simultaneously suggesting that cultural habits and tools can alter the availability of affordances.¹⁰ For example, Koreans and Westerners typically have different stride patterns,¹¹ which may affect walking efficiency and energy use, subtly altering the accessibility of distant locations. Likewise, proficiency or ineptitude with chopsticks can determine possibilities for handling food in a remote Chinese village, just as the Asian squat (see Figure 1) opens affordances for sitting and gathering that are less available to Westerners.¹² These cases stand as instances of culturally based,

⁸ See Aldrin Manalastas, “Is There Still a Place for Us? Beyond Resilience,” paper presented during the *Philosophy of the City Summer Colloquium*, Ateneo de Manila University, Manila, The Philippines (1 July 2024).

⁹ See John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Open Court), Chap. 9; and John Dewey, “The Practical Character of Reality,” in *Philosophy and Civilization*, ed. by John Dewey (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1931), 35–56.

¹⁰ See Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Chaps. 4, 8, and 14.

¹¹ See Taebeum Ryu, Hwa Soon Choi, Hoonwoo Choi, and Min Chung, “A Comparison of Gait Characteristics Between Korean and Western People for Establishing Korean Gait Reference Data,” in *International Journal of Industrial Ergonomics*, 36:12 (December 2006), 1023–1030, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ergon.2006.09.013>>.

¹² Crippen, “Selective Permeability, Social Media and Epistemic Fragmentation,” 1155; also see Matthew Crippen, “Enactive Pragmatism and Ecological Psychology,” in *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11:538644 (October 2020), <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.538644>>.

selectively available affordances that Gibson would arguably acknowledge. That said, he does not say much about how culture introduces normative pressures that are functionally akin to affordances. This last idea is key to our account of selective permeability in Busan—and also to our defense of constructive realism. Accordingly, this section lays out links between affordances, normative pressures, and selective permeability, with attention to certain philosophical implications.



Figure 1: Westerner vs. East Asian

To review, Gibson suggests “affordances” as a non-subjective substitute for “values.”¹³ His equating of affordances and values carries the recognition that action possibilities in an environment are not neutral but have potentialities of benefit and injury, which Gibson calls “positive and negative affordances.”¹⁴ Here, an affordance is negative in two related senses: it is hazardous to an agent and therefore reduces freedom of action, at least as compared to a positive affordance. For example, a city sidewalk offers the benefit (a positive affordance) of being able to walk from point A to B. Yet the path does not allow us to travel in any direction. And if we see and avoid negative affordance, such as a ruffian prowling ahead, our directional liberty diminishes.¹⁵

Another point is that Gibson repeatedly calls his affordance theory radical on the grounds that it insists that “‘values’ and ‘meanings’ of things in the environment can be directly perceived.”¹⁶ He adds that “all these benefits and injuries, these safeties and dangers, these positive and negative affordances are properties of things taken with reference to an observer but not properties of the experiences of the observer.”¹⁷ As a realist, Gibson believes that affordances—though related to an individual’s capacities—

¹³ Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, 285.

¹⁴ Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 137.

¹⁵ For a similar example with a cat and mouse, see Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, 146.

¹⁶ Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 127.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

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remain in a setting regardless of whether anyone is there to use them. Seen thus, a sidewalk has properties that afford strolling, even with nobody there to exploit them.¹⁸

Gibson's views are consistent with a third point, which has been introduced already but is worth elaborating on. This is that variations in individual embodiment (e.g., health, tools, cultural habits) can alter susceptibility to environmental pressures, leading people to encounter disparate affordances, and making settings selectively permeable. Psychology experiments indicate that sadness, low blood sugar, illness, tiredness, indebtedness, heavy backpacks, and bad weather—in short, energy-depleting conditions—make hills and stairs look steeper or farther away.¹⁹

Certain architectural features exploit these effects. Designers, for instance, often install decorative curbs, low walls, elevation alterations, shrubs, and changing walkway tiling, which together demarcate space as private or semi-private (see Figure 2). Few are comfortable ignoring these features to have a picnic on a stranger's lawn, but research shows that the

¹⁸ See Harry Heft, "Ecological Psychology and Enaction Theory: Divergent Groundings," in *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11 (May 2020), 991, <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00991>>. Note that the above paragraph explores Gibson's metaphysical realism, not to be confused with his epistemological stance of direct realism. Regarding the latter, Gibson regularly states, for instance, that ambient light hits the eyes in spatial and temporal patterns that directly correspond to environmental layouts. However, in *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, he mentions the "affordance of prey" and "predator odor," which are not given in perceptually registerable patterns that match environmental features in a one-to-one way, with the same holding for many of our examples. (Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, 146) Though outside our scope, this does not refute direct realism altogether even while it undercuts Gibson's version of it, for someone like Merleau-Ponty could argue that there is a background horizon (e.g., background threats, a cultural situation) within which certain realities directly manifest to affected agents.

¹⁹ See Mukul Bhalla and Dennis Proffitt, "Visual-Motor Recalibration in Geographical Slant Perception," in *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 25:4 (August 1999), 1076, <<https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-1523.25.4.1076>>; Fitriana Ekawati, Martin White, and Frank Eves, "Interrupting Pedestrians in Indonesia: Effect of Climate on Perceived Steepness and Stair Climbing Behaviour," in *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20:1 (December 2022), 338 <<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20010338>>; Hao-Zhi Liu, Sheng Li, and Li-Lin Rao, "Out of Debt, Out of Burden: The Physical Burdens of Debt," in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 76 (May 2018), 155–160, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.01.003>>; Cedar Riener, Jeanine Stefanucci, Dennis Proffitt, and Gerald Clore, "An Effect of Mood on the Perception of Geographical Slant," in *Cognition & Emotion*, 25:1 (2011), 174–182, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931003738026>>; and Simone Schnall, Jonathan Zadra, and Dennis Proffitt, "Direct Evidence for the Economy of Action: Glucose and the Perception of Geographical Slant," in *Perception*, 39:4 (2010), 464–482, <<https://doi.org/10.1068/p6445>>.

result can be stronger for the exhausted homeless than for the affluent, who are customarily more welcomed.²⁰

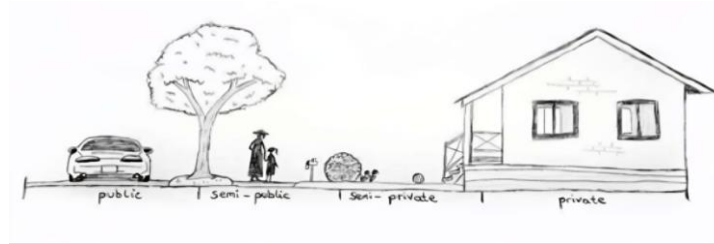


Figure 2: Tacit territory markers.

The same territory markers (decorative curbs, etc.) were introduced to Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2015 (see Figure 3), a few years after the military ousting of Mohammed Morsi, which followed Egypt's 2011 January Revolution. These symbolic barriers stood out more starkly and hostilely to politically and economically depleted locals than to tourists, who *really* were less likely to be harassed by police there.²¹

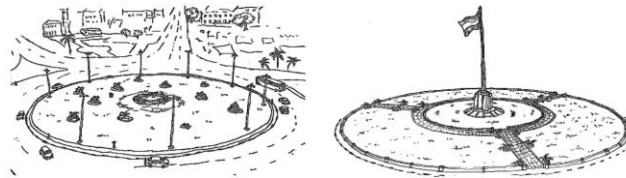


Figure 3: Tahrir Square c. 2011 (left) and c. 2015 (right).²²

The upshot is that without physically preventing access, urban areas can exclude certain cohorts by imposing selectively antagonistic pressures that are functionally akin to or the same as action-limiting negative affordances. Such patterns are common, whether in past racist seating restrictions that Rosa Parks confronted on Montgomery busses or in everyday prohibitions against sipping from a stranger's cup in a café.²³ Violations of social prescriptions—whether these are embedded in Tahrir, Montgomery

²⁰ See Crippen, "Bodies Under the Weather," 154–182.

²¹ See Matthew Crippen, "Contours of Cairo Revolt: Street Semiology, Values and Political Affordances," in *Topoi*, 40 (2021), 457–458, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-019-09650-9>>.

²² Note that Tahrir was redesigned again in 2020.

²³ See Matthew Crippen, "Enactivism: A Newish Name for Mostly Old Ideas?" in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (published online first, 2024), <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-024-10019-6>> and Jonathan McKinney, "Ecological Enactivism Through the Lens of Japanese Philosophy," in *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11 (July 2020), 4–5, <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01347>>.

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buses or a café—exist independently of any single human and can have *real* consequences like bodily harm, aligning with Gibson’s realist stance.

Of course, Gibson does not offer the final word. A more recent embodied view is enactivism. Usually presented as cognitive science but mainly developed and defended by philosophers, enactivism asserts that we do not have representations of a pre-existing world in our minds; rather, our actions bring forth or enact a world,²⁴ that is, an ecology with properties having “no non-experiential, physical counterparts.”²⁵ For example, in the case of Tahrir, an enactivist might say that a depressed mood brings out foreboding qualities that are not there for a cheerful tourist. Similarly, Egyptians may amplify the ominous atmosphere by virtue of their cautious behavior around the Square, much like how a depressed mood can emerge because somber individuals struggle to move forward.²⁶ Thus, the originators of enactivism favor constructivism over Gibson’s realism, explicitly criticizing the latter.²⁷

However, enactivists and Gibsonians often deploy similar examples, such as describing how palpating a sponge brings out its softness. This is unsurprising since both emphasize action and that an environment’s perceptual aspects are products of relationships, with this following, for example, from the fact that a pond avails different behavioral options to humans and water striders. Dewey advances the same view, adding that even so-called primary properties—like length—depend on an object’s velocity relative to an observer.²⁸ His aesthetic work makes it clear he would similarly grasp the competing ways that ebullient tourists vs. depleted Egyptians would have registered Tahrir in 2015. His aesthetic work makes it clear he would similarly grasp the competing ways that ebullient tourists vs. depleted Egyptians would have registered Tahrir in 2015. He would not reduce the matter to subjectively varying impressions. He would instead regard the differences as total outcomes that follow from how people’s embodied conditions in the world relate them to things that affect them,²⁹ including the broader political situation, which exists independently of any single person. Furthermore, enacting a safe or ominous atmosphere through assertive vs.

²⁴ See Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

²⁶ See Matthew Crippen, “Anticipating and Enacting Worlds: Moods, Illness, and Psychobehavioral Adaptation,” in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (October 2023), <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-023-09934-x>> and Matthew Ratcliffe, *Experiences of Depression: A Study in Phenomenology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁷ See Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, Chap. 9.

²⁸ See John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1929), Chaps. 5–6.

²⁹ See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 250.

hesitant behavior concretely alters realities, especially if one consequently stands out less or more to security.

Taking these points together and following what Dewey says about realist vs. constructivist disputes, we reach a startling conclusion: constructivism does not obviate realism because changes in the total configuration, once introduced, really are there in the world.³⁰ We will return to this claim in our discussion of Busan, to which we now turn.

Normative Pressures and Spatial Governance

So far, we have seen that bodily comportment, architectural design, and social pressures enact spatial governance by imposing selectively present negative affordances. Whether it is Busan's infrastructure corralling residents into gender-typical roles or the city's buses imposing challenges on elderly residents, socially buttressed (constructed) pressures exist independently of any single agent as unforgiving realities with which people must contend. Indeed, confronting them, to requote Gibson, can mean encountering "safeties and dangers," and thus "positive and negative affordances."³¹ This section explores how Busan's physical landscape interacts with the deeply intertwined cultural psychologies and philosophies that shape people's encounters with their surroundings.

As an opening illustration of how culture introduces selectively imposed action-closing constraints, let us consider Dewey's reflections on his multi-year visit to China and Japan in the early 20th century. He highlighted the dense population, and that people rarely left their communities. The consequent feeling of being under the nearly constant scrutiny of familiars contributed to a public sense of self.³² Dewey noted the recent introduction of railroads,³³ which expanded mobility. However, cultural understandings of the self do not instantly adapt to such changes. Even today, Asian regions remain crowded and our data show that practices remain in place that accentuate public understandings of self. For example, one of our respondents mentioned that school pupils receive higher shoe boxes for better grades. Many others talked about linguistic etiquette. In Korea, this involves carefully aligning one's speech (e.g., verb conjugation) to publicly locate one's relative status within social hierarchies, a norm likely influenced

³⁰ See Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, Chap. 9.

³¹ Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 137.

³² See John Dewey, "Chinese Social Habits," in *Characters and Events*, ed. by Joseph Ratner (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), 111–21.

³³ See *Ibid.*, 221.

by the nation's Confucian heritage.³⁴ All this jointly contributes to a public concept of self, hence by a sense of being scrutinized by others, amplified by the heavy stress on propriety. Together, these factors supply a partial explanation for certain urban behaviors in Busan and other Korean cities—for instance, the fact that locals almost always obey crosswalk signals, even when roads are devoid of cars.

Interviews that we conducted with people living in Busan (mostly detailed later) supply additional examples of how normative pressures generate negative affordances or something akin to them. Many were studying in English in a country where that language is not the norm. Some observed that learning the local language not only opened action avenues but also closed them. One student fretted that becoming literate enough to read “no entry” signs on Busan's Mountain trails added obstacles functionally akin to fences. Others talked about how increased language proficiency amplified tacit demands that they follow difficult regional customs. Here, the greater pressure to conform made previously welcoming spheres selectively difficult to negotiate. Consider a Muslim interviewee living in Busan. After she became fluent in Korean, expectations rose for her to remove her hijab, eat pork, and drink alcohol. What might account for these changes?

Most obviously, the woman's facility with Korean allowed locals to comment directly to her. However, other interrelated factors are at play. First, the woman appears to have been treated as less of an outsider; and second, Koreans (and East Asians) are philosophically inclined to view choices and actions as situationally prescribed, in contradistinction to the idea that people behave according to internally held and relatively fixed principles.³⁵ This helps explain why the Muslim respondent recounted some Koreans saying, in a rather innocent and perplexed way, that she was not in her home country

³⁴ See Tomasz Śleziak, “The Role of Confucianism in Contemporary South Korean Society,” in *Rocznik Orientalistyczny/Yearbook of Oriental Studies*, 66:1 (2013), 27–46, <<https://bibliotekanauki.pl/articles/707562.pdf>>.

³⁵ See Incheol Choi, Richard Nisbett, and Ara Norenzayan, “Causal Attribution Across Cultures: Variation and Universality,” in *Psychological Bulletin*, 125:1 (1999), 47–63, <<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.1.47>>; Li-Jun Ji, Yanjie Su, and Richard Nisbett, “Culture, Prediction, and Change,” in *Psychological Science*, 12:6 (November 2001), 450–456, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.00384>>; Shinobu Kitayama, et al., “A Cultural Task Analysis of Implicit Independence: Comparing North America, Western Europe, and East Asia,” in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97:2 (August 2009), 236–255, <<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015999>>; Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, “Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation,” in *Psychological Review*, 98:2 (1991), 224–253, <<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224>>; Michael Morris and Kaiping Peng, “Culture and Cause: American and Chinese Attributions for Social and Physical Events,” in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67:6 (1994), 949–971, <<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.67.6.949>>; Harold Stevenson and James Stigler, *The Learning Gap: Why Our Schools Are Failing and What We Can Learn from Japanese and Chinese Education* (New York: Summit Books, 1992).

and therefore did not need to wear a hijab or avoid pork and alcohol (even though her home country does not force any of these matters). The upshot is that cultural and linguistic integration into Busan did not just increase the possibilities of actions but brought out normative pressures that made it more difficult for the woman to navigate city life.

Now, cultural philosophies and psychologies function not only as drivers of urban life but as products of it, effecting the selective manifestation of affordances. As a preparatory step in defending this proposition, we will first review what psychologists have said about East Asia.

One robust finding is that East Asians excel at registering overall contexts.³⁶ This is compared to Westerners, who focus on isolated foreground objects. Recent eye-tracking studies on infants and adults corroborate this, though within-cohort variation occurs as a function of the specific region of Europe or Asia.³⁷ A related result is that Easterners are better at drawing lines proportionally to different-sized shapes, compared to Americans who are more adept at reproducing absolute lengths³⁸ (see Figure 4). East Asians tend to tolerate contradictions more than Westerners, both in the world and themselves and they often expect circumstances, like personal fortunes, to reverse.³⁹ Chinese children learn verbs much faster and nouns slightly more quickly than English and French speakers.⁴⁰ During a certain developmental

³⁶ See Aysecan Boduroglu, Richard Shah, and Michael Hove, "The Cultural Context of Attention: Holistic Versus Analytic Influences," in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 32 (2009), 94–101; Takahiko Masuda and Richard E Nisbett, "Culture and Change Blindness," in *Cognitive Science*, 30:2 (March–April 2006), 381–399, <https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0000_63>; and Takahiko Masuda and Richard Nisbett, "Attending Holistically Versus Analytically: Comparing the Context Sensitivity of Japanese and Americans," in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81:5 (November 2001), 922–934, <<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.81.5.922>>.

³⁷ See Solveig Jurkat, et al., "Cultural Similarities and Differences in Explaining Others' Behavior in 4- to 9-Year-Old Children from Three Cultural Contexts," in *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 53:6 (2023), 659–682, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/00220221221098423>> and Alžběta Šašínková, et al., "Exploring Cross-Cultural Variations in Visual Attention Patterns Inside and Outside National Borders Using Immersive Virtual Reality," in *Scientific Reports*, 13: 18852 (2023), <<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-46103-1>>.

³⁸ See Trey Hedden, et al., "Cultural Influences on Neural Substrates of Attentional Control," in *Psychological Science*, 19:1 (2008), 12–17, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02038.x>> and Shinobu Kitayama, Sean Duffy, Tadashi Kawamura, and Jeff Larsen, "Perceiving an Object and Its Context in Different Cultures: A Cultural Look at New Look," in *Psychological Science*, 14:3 (2003), 201–206, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.02432>>.

³⁹ See Julie Spencer-Rodgers, Melissa Williams, and Kaiping Peng, "Cultural Differences in Expectations of Change and Tolerance for Contradiction: A Decade of Empirical Research," in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14:3 (August 2010), 296–312, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868310362982>>.

⁴⁰ See Shannon Yee, "Is Noun Bias Universal? Evidence from Chinese and Korean Compared with French and English," in *Studies in the Linguistic Sciences: Illinois Working Papers* (2020), 32–44.

window, Chinese infants focus more on actions, compared to object-oriented US infants.⁴¹

So, what do these results—which tie to relational emphases found in Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and other Asian philosophical outlooks—have to do with cities? One connection is laid out by Miyamoto and colleagues, who investigated whether differences in East Asian and Western affordance detection correspond to variations in local architecture. To explore this, they sampled photographs from US and East Asian cities. The researchers found that the latter were usually more visually complex, for example, with less clear distinction between foreground and background objects, linking this to studies reported above on the context orientation of East Asians.⁴²

Now, these design choices may partly reflect the cultural psychologies and philosophies of decision-makers. But in Busan and many other East Asian cities, the mountainous topography and limited space relative to population necessitates certain urban features. It is largely because of these constraints that roads and buildings in Busan often sit on different levels, with the latter densely packed in non-aligned directions. This generates high visual complexity with relatively few focal points, reflecting the less object-oriented attentional styles of East Asians (see Figure 5). The complicated arrangements in Busan additionally create a sense of the city organically morphing around oneself, an effect amplified by winding street layouts that resemble unpredictable trails, along with the mist that frequently cascades down mountains. These perceptually dynamic aspects parallel another finding discussed earlier: East Asians are attuned to change and often anticipate sudden reversals in fortune.

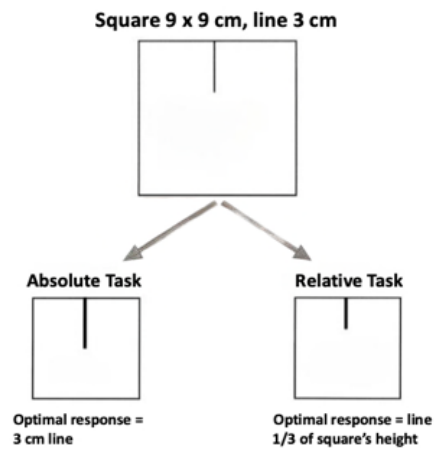


Figure 4: Absolute vs. relative task.

⁴¹ See Sandra Waxman, et al., “How Early Is Infants’ Attention to Objects and Actions Shaped by Culture? New Evidence from 24-Month-Olds Raised in the US and China,” in *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7 (2016), 97, <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00097>>.

⁴² See Yuri Miyamoto, Richard E. Nisbett, and Takahiko Masuda, “Culture and the Physical Environment: Holistic versus Analytic Perceptual Affordances,” in *Psychological Science*, 17:2 (February 2006), 113–119, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.0167>>.



Figure 5: Photos of Busan showing high visual complexity and buildings at different angles and heights.

Additionally, distances in Busan that can now be crossed in a 10-minute car ride were difficult to traverse before tunnels were built in the latter half of the 20th century. The past situation helps to explain comments from our interviewees, who mentioned distinct dialects and prejudices among neighboring provinces and cities, especially among older generations. Multiple respondents noted that K-dramas regularly have criminal groups using the Busan dialect, also portraying it as the language that the poor and uneducated use.⁴³ They elaborated on how factors like these can create selective barriers for people from Busan. Some interviewees observed that a Busan accent might make it difficult to interact in workplaces where many speak with Seoul accents; or how international students who have learned Korean with a purportedly educated Seoul accent can find it difficult to navigate Busan. Some said that a romantic partner from South Jeolla—the province adjacent to the one Busan is in, South Gyeongsang—might be rejected by grandparents. In addition to the mountainous topography, factionalism may have roots in ancient conflicts between jurisdictions. Recently, uneven economic development favored South Gyeongsang over South Jeolla. The former is not only where Busan is located but also the birthplace of military dictator Park Chung-hee, whom residents in South Jeolla’s capital city, Gwangju, revolted against in the early 1980s.⁴⁴

⁴³ A parallel in Western entertainment is the *Lord of the Rings* movie and TV franchise: orcs have a Cockney accent, whereas the heroes usually speak in what has historically been called the “Queen’s English” or BBC English.

⁴⁴ See Se-Woong Koo, “The Potent Force of S. Korea’s Regionalism,” *Korea Exposé* (27 April 2017), <<https://koreaexpose.com/potent-force-koreas-regionalism/>> and Won Bae Kim,

These considerations raise an obvious point: that a city cannot be adequately understood if it is examined in isolation. The workings of Busan relate to its mountains, the Korean language, and the population density of the country and the fact it is dominated by Seoul, including its dialect. Additional factors outside the scope of this paper are that Busan is a port city, that it is strategically important enough that the US has a naval headquarters there, that it is very close to Mainland China and Japan, that South Korea contends with saber-rattling from North Korea, and the list goes on. This highlights the messiness of philosophizing about cities. Speaking more generally, Dewey summarized the point thus: “There is never any... isolated singular object or event; an object or event is always a special part, phase, or aspect, of an environing experienced world—a situation.”⁴⁵

Cultural Permeability and Blindness

It is almost a truism to say that the social and physical structures of living arrangements are not separable and that they affect people’s psychologies and what they deem to be possible or permissible in each situation. Echoing Michel Foucault’s account of disciplinary power, one might say that certain affordances are delineated not only through brute force or laws but by habituating individuals to norms that internalize spatial constraints that become parts of their lived reality.⁴⁶ Yet what happens when a person’s norms conflict with those of a city space? In this section, we address this question and its bearing on the selective permeability of Busan.

Human interactions obviously shape identity, whether this is understood at an individual or collective level. Such interactions serve as media through which people acquire normative habits and learn to navigate societal structures. Together, this contributes to the existence of cultural affordances, that is, possibilities of action that people encounter in the niches they collectively enact,⁴⁷ which are almost invariably selectively restricting. Furthermore, people who are not affected by hostile barriers tend to be blind

“Regionalism: Its Origins and Substance with Competition and Exclusion,” in *Korea Journal*, 43 (2003), 5–31, <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203084373-8>>.

⁴⁵ John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938), 68.

⁴⁶ See Michel Foucault, *Surveiller Et Punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975).

⁴⁷ For example, Maxwell Ramstead, Samuel Veissière, and Laurence Kirmayer, “Cultural Affordances: Scaffolding Local Worlds Through Shared Intentionality and Regimes of Attention,” in *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7 (July 2016), 1090, <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01090>> and Tibor Solymosi, “Against Representation: A Brief Introduction to Cultural Affordances,” in *Human Affairs*, 23 (2013), 594–605, <<https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-013-0151-3>>.

to them. This is illustrated by men's lower sensitivity to the negative impact that certain urban settings have on women. A comparable case is older people's inability to hear the noxious effects of an ultrasonic buzz—known as the Mosquito—that businesses use to drive unwanted youths away.⁴⁸

With the Mosquito, information is present but selectively available, and something similar typically holds in sociocultural milieus. What we here call “cultural permeability” allows different experiences, norms, meanings, and affordances to come forth depending on people's enculturated habits. Thus, as Manalastas asserts, what we register in social situations is conditioned by what our own culture lets us see.⁴⁹

Cultural permeability manifests in a variety of ways. A gesture that is friendly in one country can provoke aggression elsewhere.⁵⁰ Coins look larger to the financially distressed than to the affluent classes.⁵¹ An accent can be present in two populations but only heard in those identified as foreigners, which may relate to the fact that dominant groups can selectively identify marginalized individuals as threatening.⁵² Relatedly, online communities sometimes deploy selectively decipherable terms—called “dog whistles”—that have been compared to the Mosquito.⁵³ For instance, “Skittles” and “Skype” are racist codes used in hateful posts.⁵⁴ More positively, one of our respondents talked about internet slang that is used in China to evade censorship algorithms.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ See Crippen and Klement, “Architectural Values, Political Affordances and Selective Permeability,” 471.

⁴⁹ See Manalastas, “Is There Still a Place for Us?”

⁵⁰ See Meijing Li, “Cultivation of Cross-Cultural Awareness in College English Teaching,” in *2015 International Conference on Social Science and Higher Education* (Paris: Atlantis Press, 2015), 493–495.

⁵¹ See Jerome Bruner and Cecil Goodman, “Value and Need as Organizing Factors in Perception,” in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 42:1 (1947), 33–44, <<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0058484>> and

John Dawson, “Socioeconomic Differences in Size Judgments of Discs and Coins by Chinese Primary VI Children in Hong Kong,” in *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 41:1 (August 1975), 107–110, <<https://doi.org/10.2466/pms.1975.41.1.107>>.

⁵² Cf. Nancy Niedzielski, “The Effect of Social Information on the Perception of Sociolinguistic Variables,” in *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 18:1 (1999), 62–85, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X99018001005>> and Sophie Trawalter, et al., “Attending to Threat: Race-Based Patterns of Selective Attention,” in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44 (2008), 1322–1327, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.03.006>>.

⁵³ See Crippen, “Selective Permeability, Social Media and Epistemic Fragmentation,” §4.

⁵⁴ See Jenifer Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), Chap. 2.

⁵⁵ For example, 河蟹 (river crab) replaced the similarly sounding word 和谐 (harmonious), which was formerly deployed to connote a topic that might be censored until the term itself led to that outcome. (The reason the 和谐 became a euphemism was that the need for social harmony was a commonly cited justification for censorship).

In Busan, one finds a comparable situation in that physical structures and slang both have selectively decipherable social significance. As an



Figure 6: Depiction of a typical DVD room in Busan.

example of the former, consider DVD방 (*bang*), which translates to DVD rooms. To many, the idea of going to a venue that has DVD movies may seem odd given the format is borderline obsolete. So, what purposes do DVD rooms serve? In a country where young people usually either live in compact flats with their parents or in gender-segregated dorms, these venues have features that afford sexual intimacy for younger couples. Each room has

a wide bed, suitable for two. Usually, there are toothbrushes, tissues, wipes, and other hygiene elements like mattresses with water-resistant surfaces that can be sponged down (see Figure 6). And the cost for several hours of use is roughly equivalent to an hour's pay at Korea's minimum wage. A complication, however, is that foreigners can be blind to the social meaning of DVD rooms. Indeed, both a Western woman and man on our research team found themselves in uncomfortable predicaments when, not knowing the social implications, they agreed to visit these places when invited by those who were familiar with the local normative customs surrounding DVD rooms.

Hookup culture in Busan (and other Korean urban centers) can similarly deploy codes that are opaque to visitors not familiar with the situated "language game," the term here used in Wittgenstein's sense.⁵⁶ The scenario parallels the selectively indecipherable social significance of the DVD rooms. For example, asking somebody up to a flat for instant ramen often implies more than just that. Koreans at least usually grasp this, but non-locals may not. Another example is that Korean men almost exclusively reserve the question—"Are you open-minded?"—for foreign women, who



Figure 7: Signage in Busan Restroom

⁵⁶ See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §21-28.

usually will not, unless already familiar with local conventions, grasp that the query is not about their interest in philosophical debate or novel experiences. Instead, it is an insinuating question about whether they are open to hooking up.

Other cases of selectively available information in Busan are more straightforward, as with the signage sometimes found in public toilets. Consider the signs in Figure 7, which almost anybody not versed in the Korean language would take as indicating that smoking is not permitted.

But in fact, the writing at the bottom indicates toilet paper should be put in trash bins and not flushed (because of narrow piping in many of Busan's buildings).

Culture, Selective Permeability, and Mobility

Mobility-based selective permeability is obvious to nearly anybody who has witnessed someone in a leg cast struggling with stairs. While this section highlights comparable instances in Busan, the main goal is more focused: to demonstrate how physical design—inherently shaped by cultural influences—intersects with societal values to generate mobility-based selective permeability in Busan.

A preliminary point is that artifacts are inherently imbued with social norms.⁵⁷ For instance, the polished wood or marble of some banks signifies the values of reliability and wealth, inviting affluent people in more than those of modest means, who are usually less welcomed.⁵⁸ Given that Gibson expressly equates affordances to values, and given that an agent registers beneficial or hostile values depending on how she is embodied in the world, all of this fits nicely with the selective permeability model, which presupposes the same tenets.

Looking at Busan specifically, the streets often lack sidewalks. Also, due to the shortage of space, buildings can jut out unevenly, so that a sidewalk ends on one side of the street to continue on the other side (see Figure 8). When combined with the hilly terrain, Busan can be selectively difficult for those with limited mobility.

⁵⁷ See Batya Friedman, Peter Khan, and Alan Bornin, "Value Sensitive Design and Information Systems," in *The Handbook of Information and Computer Ethics*, ed. by Kenneth Einar Himma and Herman Tavani (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2008), 69–101.

⁵⁸ See Rajiv Shah and Jay Kesan, "How Architecture Regulates," in *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 24:4 (Winter 2007), 351, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43030813>> and Crippen and Klement, "Architectural Values, Political Affordances and Selective Permeability," 463.



Figure 8: Sidewalk ending on one side of Busandaehak Street and beginning on the other side due to projecting buildings.

Some of Busan's design quirks are artifacts of the Korean War, which saw a large influx of domestic refugees entering the city, leading to shanty towns on mountainsides. These temporary dwellings later became permanent. As a result, certain neighborhoods climb up onto steep slopes and feature extremely narrow and winding paths instead of roads, making these areas accessible only to foot traffic or else sometimes smaller vehicles.⁵⁹ Along with these parts of the city, there is another thing that is old: Busan's super-aged population.⁶⁰ Given this, Busan's well-developed and affordable public transportation system is critical. However, the transit system's viability is limited not just in the urban spaces described above but also insofar as its buses have stairs at their entrances and exits. This situation can be hard for people with mobility issues, which disproportionately include the elderly.

We now turn to gender-based mobility issues, which exemplify how—through social conditioning—culture intersects with physical design to render urban space selectively permeable. While we will shortly examine

⁵⁹ See Yon Jung Choi and Connie McNeely, "A Reinvented Community: The Case of Gamcheon Culture Village," in *Sociological Spectrum*, 38:2 (2018), 86–102, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2018.1430635>> and Sreenidhi Konduri and In-Hee Lee, "Rethinking Sense of Place Interpretations in Declining Neighborhoods: The Case of Ami-dong Tombstone Cultural Village, Busan, South Korea," in *Societies*, 13:2 (January 2023), <<https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13020030>>.

⁶⁰ See Oh Seok Kim, et al., "Depopulation, Super Aging, and Extreme Heat Events in South Korea," in *Climate Risk Management*, 38 (2022), <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crm.2022.100456>> and Kee Whan Kim and Oh Seok Kim, "Super Aging in South Korea Unstoppable but Mitigatable: A Sub-National Scale Population Projection for Best Policy Planning," in *Spatial Demography*, 8 (2020), 155–173, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40980-020-00061-8>>.

cases of this in Busan, we start with some general points about cities and Korea.

First, gendered aspects of design are often implicit yet no less detrimental in consequence. For example, a dominant form of fee collection on subways used to be tokens. This was suited to those with two trips a day—to and from work. The arrangement was less ideal for those who travelled with multiple purposes. Historically, this has often been women, who may start by dropping kids off at school, then going elsewhere for groceries, and so on.⁶¹ Challenges like this typify how physical infrastructure bears the imprint of social values.

Second, it is worth noting that in Korea, “feminism” is widely and unfavorably (mis)construed, to the point that some of our interviewees, despite strongly advocating for women, expressed concerns about being publicly identified with the term. Often, however, Koreans are unapologetically antifeminist. For example, President Suk Yeol Yoon—who declared martial law in December 2024—made it central to his successful election campaign that he would abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.

What we want to highlight is that cultural values that are to varying degrees hostile to women are embedded in Busan’s infrastructure. An instance of this is that diaper changing tables are almost exclusively located in women’s restrooms and are accordingly inaccessible to men. The social pressures here are multifaceted. On the one hand, men encounter something functionally akin to a negative affordance should they wish to use a changing table. On the other hand, the spatial hierarchies ensure that the burden of work falls disproportionately on women and reinforces the social prescription that this is how it ought to be.

While most of the women we interviewed reported feeling extremely safe in Busan’s public areas, this does not mean the city is without problems. Line 1 on Busan’s subway grid accordingly has cars that are designated for women only during busy times of day to mitigate, for example, unwanted sexual attention. While the measure itself contrasts the earlier mentioned antifeminist attitudes, common reactions from men do not: they regularly complain that the subway arrangement is unfair to them.⁶² Perhaps protesting the arrangement, our research group has noted men sometimes ignoring the designation. Additionally, though, ‘women-only cars’ are often more crowded than other areas, with standing room only when seats are free in

⁶¹ For example, Duangporn Prasertsubpakij and Vilas Nitivattananon, “Evaluating Accessibility to Bangkok Metro Systems Using Multi-Dimensional Criteria Across User Groups,” in *IATSS Research*, 36:1 (July 2012), 56–65, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iatssr.2012.02.003>>

⁶² E.g., Jin-a Lee, “‘Women-only’ Subway Cars Get Test Run in Busan,” *Korea Times* (16 June 2016), <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/12/113_207188.html>.

mixed parts of the train. This suggests that a significant number of women experienced mixed-gender cars as hostile, also undermining men's complaints about "unfairness."

The culture that foreigners bring with them into Busan generates selectively present negative affordances. The issue of traffic in Busan serves to illustrate this point. On this topic, a Korean wiki (나무위키 or *Namuwiki*) cites "the terrain and difficulty of the road," along with "the dangerous and bad driving habits" as "reasons why [...] people from other regions break out in a cold sweat."⁶³ The situation may be exacerbated by the fact that Korean car windows are tinted at levels that are impermissible in many Western jurisdictions, thereby limiting various forms of visual communication that can occur at intersections and elsewhere on roads. Now, most foreigners primarily deal with traffic as pedestrians. Their experiences with Busan traffic are often shaped by the automobile driving norms of their home region: those from places where drivers are more orderly or less aggressive (e.g., Germany and Paraguay) reported feeling quite apprehensive about the traffic. They find it more difficult to navigate, with their actions accordingly restrained by dangers or negative affordances on the roads. But people who have lived in places like Cairo—known for its lack of crosswalks, signals, and all-around traffic chaos—reported finding Busan very easy to negotiate.

Another place that our data show culturally-based permeability is the Texas Street area near Busan's central train station. Since the late 19th century, this neighborhood has been Busan's Chinatown. After World War II and during the Korean War, it became a gathering point for US soldiers. Local merchants adjusting accordingly.⁶⁴ Later, increasing numbers of people from Soviet or former Soviet Bloc states (Central Asia and Russia) filtered in, with restaurants and bars catering to this cohort, whose members often run them.⁶⁵ Texas Street is also known for its sex workers,⁶⁶ a profession that is illegal in Korea.

⁶³ "Busan Metropolitan City/Transportation," *Namuwiki* (last modified 2 December 2024), <<https://en.namu.wiki/w/%EB%B6%80%EC%82%B0%EA%B4%91%EC%97%AD%EC%8B%9C/%EA%B5%90%ED%86%B5>>.

⁶⁴ See Wi-ji Choi, "Texas Street at the Gateway to Busan?... 'Historical Sense Must Be Preserved,'" *KBS News* (13 December 2023), <<https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/mobile/view/view.do?ncd=7841230>>.

⁶⁵ See Yong-seok Noh, "부산역 인근 '텍사스촌'의 형성과 러시아어권 이주민 유입 연구 // Study on the Formation of 'Texas Village' near Busan Station and the Influx of Russian-speaking Immigrants," in *민족문화논총 // Ethnic Culture Review*, 82 (December 2022), 353–384, <<https://doi.org/10.15186/ikc.2022.12.31.14>>.

⁶⁶ A US government website for naval personnel in Busan mentions prostitutes and expressly forbids sailors from visiting Texas Street from the hours of 17:00–05:00. See Official Website of the United States Government, "Regulations,"

Texas Street's richly layered milieu consequently exemplifies cultural permeability. This means that the area provides different experiences, meanings, and affordances depending on people's culturally ingrained habits. In particular, Central Asian respondents highlighted several ways that culture, age, and gender intersect to make Texas Street more emotionally ominous for some Russian speakers.

First, interviewees explained that certain Russian-speaking aggressors in the area perceive younger men as easier targets. Respondents suggested this perception is based on the idea that middle-aged men have more wherewithal to defend themselves. Regardless of whether this assumption is true, if younger people are targeted more, then Texas Street is inherently more dangerous for them and thus has more negative affordances. Furthermore, if younger Russian speakers are more susceptible to this than those unfamiliar with the language, they may behave more hesitantly. Thus, in the same way that acting like a tourist makes one more vulnerable to touts, apprehensive comportment may selectively increase the presence of negative (dangerous) affordances.

Second, interviewees noted that younger women are prone to receiving unwanted attention on Texas Street, which was assessed as more dangerous to them than men from any culture or age. Slightly older women—particularly Russian-speaking ones—were said to be harried less due to their more assertive comportment. While younger women may be targeted for other reasons, we note that neither higher age nor conservative dress makes one immune to harassment, as evidenced by our own observational work—not to mention convictions across jurisdictions for sexual assaults on elderly women. As one respondent summed up: “Dangerous men tend to target other men when there is something specific they want from them—maybe they were offended by their behavior or something else. ... Rarely do they target men for no reason. ... Women, however, often fall victim to unpleasant comments or even actions without having done anything.”

Together, the observations about Texas Street reiterate Manalastas's earlier-cited observation: that we are conditioned by what our own culture allows us to perceive. Additionally, however, the cultural permeability here is such that people do not encounter the same affordances. For instance, younger and older Russian-speaking men not only experience the setting differently; the former also seem to encounter negative affordances (dangers) that are less present to their older Russian-speaking counterparts.

<<https://cnrk.cnrc.navy.mil/Operations-and-Management/Regulations/>> (accessed 19 December 2024).

Socio-physical Grammars and Selective Perception

The international cohort of women that we interviewed almost unanimously indicated feeling safer in Busan than in their home cities. This does not, however, mean that none identified problems, as seen in the discussion of Texas Street. In this last section, we take for granted that many urban environments are selectively hostile to women because of unwanted sexual attention and do not dwell on this much. Instead, we elaborate on how women's cultural backgrounds lead them to see the same area in Busan as more or less dangerous. We also give attention to how perception of risk can sometimes contribute to the enactment of unsafe places, increasing negative affordances for women.

Note, then, that cultural permeability is once again evident, with our data confirming that perceived safety in Busan varies depending on how dangerous a woman's home country is in comparison. For instance, one woman from Latin America reported that in her home city, she would plan daily routines with the goal of avoiding sexual assault. Others from certain parts of Central Asia made a similar point, albeit indicating the perils were less extreme. Although women from Northern Europe also experience sexual aggression, they reported a better situation in their nations. Not surprisingly, then, while women from all three cohorts experienced Busan as safe, this perception was more pronounced for the first two groups than for the third.

Several women we interviewed expressed feeling less safe in neighborhoods with smaller buildings situated on irregular, non-grid streets with minimal lighting, particularly at night. Some also mentioned feeling uncomfortable near male dormitories at Busan's largest university, Pusan National University. One such dormitory is located at the edge of the campus, atop a hill bordering a forested mountain area. Here, the mildly threatening atmosphere stems not from specific incidents but from the location's isolation. Although there are some security posts and CCTV cameras, respondents voiced doubts about their ability to receive timely help if anything were to happen.

CCTV cameras are ubiquitous throughout Busan, including on university campuses. To emphasize their presence in an area, large indicators are often projected onto sidewalks or streets. Emergency buttons, sometimes placed nearby or integrated with the cameras (see Figure 9), can be used not only in cases of assault but also for medical emergencies or other urgent situations.



Figure 9: CCTV projections (left) and emergency button with camera (right).

The extent to which CCTV cameras and emergency buttons alleviate women's anxieties and enhance perceived safety appears to depend, at least partially, on cultural background. Among native Koreans, we found a consistent demand for preventative CCTV measures. This may be attributed to Koreans' stronger sense of a public self, as previously discussed in the context of shoeboxes and Dewey's observations about East Asian cultural dynamics. However, a few foreign respondents raised privacy concerns. Some also perceived CCTV cameras as ineffective and did not feel that the cameras enhanced their access to certain areas. In fact, some Westerners remarked that the implied need for such surveillance measures contributed to a menacing atmosphere.

Here, it is worth considering a warning from William Whyte: that "places designed with distrust [often] get what they [are] looking for."⁶⁷ Whyte illustrates this concern with an example of how the introduction of security features to a New York City Plaza drove away regular users, ultimately making it more appealing to drug dealers. Our interviewees made several observations that, taken together, underscore a similar point. First, the most dangerous environmental factor for women is the presence of men. Second, spaces devoid of women can feel and *be* more threatening. For example, a North African respondent noted that the risk of verbal harassment and sexual touching in minibuses in cities like Cairo increases as the number of women riding them decreases. As this occurs, fewer women opt to ride, *further amplifying the risk*. This is a case where the perception of a hazard—a very real one that no woman should face—objectively exacerbates the danger. This aligns with enactive cognitive science, which, building on phenomenology, suggests that cognition does not passively mirror a pre-

⁶⁷ William Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington, D.C.: The Conservation Foundation, 1980), 61.

existing world but actively constructs it through embodied interaction. As discussed previously, hesitant or assertive bodily comportment can shape emotional atmospheres and here the *warranted* avoidance of an area *really* increases both the danger and hence the hostile aura. Merleau-Ponty captures part of this when he observes: “Our natural attitude is not to experience our own feelings or to adhere to our own pleasures, but to live in accordance with the emotional categories of the environment.”⁶⁸

To return to Busan and areas in it with CCTV cameras, these locales are sometimes devoid of women—and often men—at night. The lack of foot traffic is likely not caused by the cameras but is rather a reason for their installation. Still, the potential for security features to inadvertently decrease women’s safety by driving them away and thereby enacting a space that *really* is more conducive to predatory activity is a consideration for urban planners. This raises a broader question of constructivist-realist aspects of urban design. Following Gibsonian realism, a setting’s function is shaped by its material structure and its embedded normative values, both of which exist independently of any single human agent. Yet as enactive constructivism suggests, places are also co-constituted by how individuals navigate them. The absence of women in certain areas of Busan is not just a passive response to perceived danger—it also enacts that danger by *reconstructing* the social *reality* of the space.

A further dimension to this narrative is that foreign women may have a good reason for feeling less reassured by CCTV cameras than Korean women. Although the risk of assault in public places is very low in Busan, institutional sexual harassment is a problem in Korea, and is, for example, selectively worse for non-unionized employees working in Busan’s transit system.⁶⁹ An advisory from the Canadian government likewise affirms Korean police “may not always respond adequately to reports of sexual violence and harassment.”⁷⁰ Some interviewees living in Busan had anecdotes in this direction. For example, they mentioned knowing a foreigner who was justifiably criminally prosecuted for harassing a Korean. However, a European student was sexually assaulted (forcibly kissed) in a club and then followed in the street until entering a police station, where she was told there was nothing that could be done since she was a foreigner.

⁶⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 442.

⁶⁹ See Joonhee Park, “The Effects of Regular Employment for Non-Regular Workers: A Case Study of Cleaning Workers in the Busan Metro, South Korea” (MA Thesis: Pusan National University, 2016), Chap. 4.

⁷⁰ Government of Canada, “South Korea Travel Advice,” (last updated 19 December 2024), <<https://travel.gc.ca/destinations/south-korea>>.

With others, Jane Jacobs has stressed not only that there “must be eyes upon the street,” but that they need to belong to what she calls “the natural proprietors,” that is, people who care about the locale and feel licensed to intervene.⁷¹ While an extended sociology of Korea is beyond the scope of this article, some scholars have noted that older generations of Koreans tend to avoid interfering with outsiders. This behavior has been linked to a historical context in which communities were collectively rewarded or punished, fostering a focus on policing members of their own group while ignoring others.⁷² Also, within living memory, Korea was comprised of fairly isolated villages⁷³ separated by mountains, and in-group bias may be a partial artifact of this. Whatever the reasons, it seems that individuals from different parts of the world face varying obstacles or negative affordances, not solely due to the cultures they bring with them to Korea and Busan. Another contributing factor appears to be the selective way in which locals assert a sense of proprietorship over those around them.

Conclusion

Recently, the notion of selective permeability has been used to articulate how different affordances manifest as a *function of culture* in digital and educational spaces. Strangely, however, the selective permeability model has not been used for an extensive analysis of multiculturalism in cities. This is odder still because the model originated in philosophical work on urban geography and cities are preeminent engines of multiculturalism. Our aim in this article was to address this gap and to add something beyond mere speculation by empirically examining how people from different cultures encounter Busan.

We began by reviewing and philosophically exploring the selective permeability model and its connection to Gibson’s affordance theory. Drawing on cultural psychology, which ties closely to regional philosophies, we articulated how individuals from different cultural backgrounds may encounter varying positive and negative affordances within the same

⁷¹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 35.

⁷² See Boye Lafayette De Mente and Laura Kingdon, *The Korean Mind: Understanding Contemporary Korean Culture* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2018), 31–32.

⁷³ See Sungjo Kim, “Urbanizing the Countryside: The Developmentalist Designs of the New Village and Farmhouse in 1970s Rural Korea,” in *International Journal of Korean History*, 25:1 (2020), 193–232, <<https://doi.org/10.22372/ijkh.2020.25.1.193>> and Hyejin Wang and Chad David Anderson, “History of Korean Urban Development,” in *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*, ed. by Ali Farazmand (Cham: Springer, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66252-3_3817>.

environment in Busan, making the city easier or more challenging to navigate.

After this, we explored three interrelated points. First, we discussed how social significance can be selectively perceived based on an individual's cultural background, resulting in a single space not appearing the same to all people. Second, we highlighted the intersections between culture and mobility in Busan, noting, for instance, that middle-aged Russian-speaking men may experience greater safety—and therefore greater freedom of movement—on Texas Street compared to younger Russian-speaking men. Third, we analyzed the interplay between gender and culture, both of the individuals affected and those around them, considering how these factors combine to shape whether Busan is perceived as welcoming or hostile, particularly for women.

Throughout, we advanced the idea that socially constructed space selectively imposes obstacles that are real for some people but not for others, depending on individual variations such as culture, age, and gender, which influence bodily comportment. An obvious conclusion is that individuals encounter different opportunities or barriers in Busan. For this reason, they may choose to leave or stay in the city or certain parts of it.

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