For a number of years I have been involved in research on how to reconceive the body as socio-cultural artifact. I have been interested in trying to refine and transform traditional notions of corporeality so that the oppositions by which the body has usually been understood (mind and body, inside and outside, experience and social context, subject and object, self and other – and underlying them, the opposition between male and female) can be problematized. Corporeality can be seen as the material condition of subjectivity, and the subordinated term in the opposition, can move to its rightful place in the very heart of the dominant term, mind. Among other things, my recent work has involved a kind of turning inside out and outside in of the body. I have been exploring how the subject’s exterior is psychically constructed; and conversely, how the processes of social inscription of the body’s surface construct a psychical interior: i.e., looking at the outside of the body from the point of view of the inside, and looking at the inside of the body from the point of view of the outside, to reexamine the distinction between biology and culture and explore the way in which culture constructs the biological order in its own image. Thus, what needs to be shown is how the body is psychically, socially, sexually, and representationally produced.

One area that I have neglected for too long is the constitutive and mutually defining relations between bodies and cities. The city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality: the built environment

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provides the context and coordinates for contemporary forms of body. The city provides the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies: it is the condition and milieu in which corporeality is socially, sexually, and discursively produced. But if the city is a significant context and frame for the body, the relations between bodies and cities are more complex than may have been realized. My aim here will be to sketch out the constitutive and mutually defining relations between corporeality and the metropolis.

It may be useful to define two key terms: body and city. By ‘body’ I understand a concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves, and skeletal structure, which are given a unity, cohesiveness, and form through the psychical and social inscription of the body’s surface. The body is, so to speak, organically, biologically ‘incomplete’; it is indeterminate, amorphous, a series of uncoordinated potentialities that require social triggering, ordering, and long-term ‘administration’. The body becomes a human body, a body that coincides with the ‘shape’ and space of a psyche, a body that defines the limits of experience and subjectivity only through the intervention of the (m)other and, ultimately, the Other (the language- and rule-governed social order). Among the key structuring principles of this produced body is its inscription and coding by (familially ordered) sexual desires (i.e., the desire of/for the other), which produce (and ultimately repress) the infant’s bodily zones, orifices, and organs as libidinal sources; its inscription by a set of socially coded meanings and significances (both for the subject and for others), making the body a meaningful, ‘readable’, depth entity; its production and development through various regimes of discipline and training, including the coordination and integration of its bodily functions so that not only can it undertake general social tasks, but also become part of a social network, linked to other bodies and objects.

By ‘city’, I understand a complex and interactive network that links together, often in an unintegrated and ad hoc way, a number of disparate social activities, processes, relations, with a number of architectural, geographical, civic, and public relations. The city brings together economic flows, and power networks, forms of management and political organization, interpersonal, familial, and extra-familial social relations, and the aesthetic/economic organization of space and place to create a semi-permanent but everchanging built environment or milieu.

I will look at two pervasive models of the interrelation of bodies and cities and, in outlining their problems, I hope to be able to suggest alternatives.

In the first model, the body and the city have a de facto or external relation. The city is a reflection, projection, or product of bodies. Bodies are conceived in naturalistic terms, pre-dating the city, the cause and motivation for its design and construction. More recently, we have heard an inversion of this presumed relation: cities have become (or may have always been) alienating environments that do not allow the body a ‘natural’, ‘healthy’, or ‘conducive’ context. Underlying this view in all its variations is a form of humanism: the human
subject is conceived as a sovereign and self-given agent who, individually or collectivity, is responsible for all social and historical production. Humans make cities. Cities are reflections, projections, or expressions of human endeavor. On such views, bodies are usually subordinated to and seen as merely a 'tool' of subjectivity, self-given consciousness. The city is a product not simply of the muscles and energy of the body, but of the conceptual and reflective possibilities of consciousness itself.

This view has, in my opinion at least, two serious problems: first, it subordinates the body to the mind while retaining their structure as binary opposites. Second, such a view only posits, at best, a one-way relation between the body or the subject and the city, linking them through a causal relation in which body or subjectivity is conceived as the cause, and the city, the effect. In more sophisticated versions of this view, the city may have a negative feedback relation with the bodies that produce it, thereby alienating them. Implicit in this position is the active causal power of the subject in the design and construction of cities.

A second, also popular, view suggests a parallelism or isomorphism between the body and the city, or the body and the state. The two are understood as analogues, congruent counterparts, in which the features, organization and characteristics of one are also reflected in the other. This notion of the parallelism between the body and the social order (usually the state, but clearly there is a conceptual and historical linkage between the state [the domain of politics] and the city [the polis]) finds its clearest formulations in the seventeenth century when the liberal political philosophers justified their various allegiances (the divine right of kings, for Hobbes; parliamentary representation, for Locke; direct representation for Rousseau, etc.) through its use. The state parallels the body; artifice mirrors nature. The correspondence between the body and the body politic is more or less exact and codified: the King usually represents the Head of State; the populace is usually represented as the body. The law has been compared to the body's nerves; the military to its arms, commerce to its legs or stomach, and so on. The exact correspondences vary from text to text. However, if there is a morphological correspondence between the artificial commonwealth (the Leviathan) and the human body in this pervasive metaphor of the body politic, the body is rarely attributed a sex. What, one might ask, takes on the metaphoric function of the genitals in the body politic? What kind of genitals are they? Does the body politic have a sex?

Again, I have serious reservations with such a model. The first regards the implicitly masculine coding of the body politic, which, while claiming it models itself on the human body, uses the male to represent the human, in other words, its deep and unrecognized investment in phallocentrism.

A second problem is that this conception of the body politic relies on a fundamental opposition between nature and culture, in which nature dictates the ideal forms of culture. Culture is a supersession and perfection of nature.
The body politic is an artificial construct that replaces the primacy of the natural body. Culture is moulded according to the dictates of nature, but transforms nature's limits. In this sense, nature is a passivity on which culture works as male (cultural) productivity supersedes and overtakes female (natural) reproduction.

A third problem concerns the political function of this analogy: it serves to provide a justification for various forms of 'ideal' government and social organization through a process of 'naturalization'. The human body is a natural form of organization that functions not only for the good of each organ but primarily for the good of the whole. It is given in the functional 'perfection' of nature. As a political and hence a social relation, the body politic, whatever form it may take, justifies and naturalizes itself with reference to some form of hierarchical organization modelled on the (presumed and projected) structure of the body.

In such models, which underlie certain conceptions of civic and public architecture, and even more, town planning, there is a slippage from conceptions of the state, which, as a legal entity, raises political questions of sovereignty, to conceptions of the city, a cultural entity whose crucial political questions revolve around commerce. As such, their interests and agendas are separate and at times in conflict: what is good for the nation or state is not necessarily good for the city; conversely, the city may prosper while the state is at war. The state functions to grid and organize, to hierarchize and coordinate the activities of and for the city and its state-produced correlate, the country (side). These are the site(s) for chaotic, deregulated, and unregulatable flows. (The movement of illicit drugs is simply one trail through underground networks of exchange that infiltrate and permeate the city's functioning. The movement of commodities, and of information, are other trails). The city (or town) is formed as a point of transit while the state aims to function as a solidity, a mode of stasis or systematicity:

The town is the correlate of the road. The town exists only as a function of circulation and of circuits; it is a singular point on the circuits which create it. It is defined by entries and exits; something must enter it and exit from it. It imposes a frequency. It effects a polarisation of matter; inert, living, or human – it is a phenomenon of transconsistency, a network because it is fundamentally in contact with other towns. ...

The state proceeds otherwise; it is a phenomenon of ultraconsistency. It makes points resonate together, points ... of very diverse order – geographic, ethnic, linguistic, moral, economic, technological particulars. The state makes the town resonate with the countryside....

... the central power of the state is hierarchical and constitutes a civil sector; the center is not in the middle but on top because (it is) the only way it can recombine what it isolates through subordination. (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 195-7)
The statist representation of the body politic presumes an organized cohesive, integrated body, regulated by reason, as its ideal model. Such a model seems to problematize this cohesive understanding of the ordered body, and to produce instead a deranged body-image, a body frantic to be linked to and part of the network of flows, a body depleted, abandoned, and derelict insofar as it is cast outside these nets (Lingis 1994). The state can let no body outside of its regulations: its demand for identification and documentation relentlessly records and categorizes, though it has no hope of alleviating such dereliction. If the relations between the body and the city are the object of critical focus, the body itself must shake free of this statist investment.

If the relation between bodies and cities is neither causal (the first view) nor representational (the second view), then what kind of relation exists between them? These two models are inappropriate insofar as they give precedence to one term or the other in the body/city pair. A more appropriate model combines elements from each. Like the causal view, the body must be considered active in the production and transformation of the city. But bodies and cities are not causally linked. Every cause must be logically distinct from its effect. The body, however, is not distinct from the city for they are mutually defining. Like the representational model, there may be an isomorphism between the body and the city. But it is not a mirroring of nature in artifice; rather, there is a two-way linkage that could be defined as an interface. What I am suggesting is a model of the relations between bodies and cities that sees them, not as megalithic total entities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or micro-groupings. This model is practical, based on the productivity of bodies and cities in defining and establishing each other. It is not a holistic view, one that would stress the unity and integration of city and body, their ‘ecological balance’. Rather, their interrelations involve a fundamentally disunified series of systems, a series of disparate flows, energies, events, or entities, bringing together or drawing apart their more or less temporary alignments.

The city in its particular geographical, architectural, and municipal arrangements is one particular ingredient in the social constitution of the body. It is by no means the most significant (the structure and particularity of, say, the family is more directly and visibly influential); nonetheless, the form, structure, and norms of the city seep into and affect all the other elements that go into the constitution of corporeality. It affects the way the subject sees others (an effect of, for example, domestic architecture as much as smaller family size), the subject’s understanding of and alignment with space, different forms of lived spatiality (the verticality of the city, as opposed to the horizontality of the landscape – at least our own) must have effects on the ways we live space and thus on our corporeal alignments, comportment, and orientations. It also affects the subject’s forms of corporeal exertion – and the kind of terrain it must negotiate day-by-day, the effect this has on its muscular structure, its
nutritional context, providing the most elementary forms of material support and sustenance for the body. Moreover, the city is also by now the site for the body’s cultural saturation, its takeover and transformation by images, representational systems, the mass media, and the arts – the place where the body is representationally reexplored, transformed, contested, reinscribed. In turn, the body (as cultural product) transforms, reinscribes the urban landscape according to its changing (demographic) needs, extending the limits of the city ever towards the countryside that borders it. As a hinge between the population and the individual, the body, its distribution, habits, alignments, pleasures, norms, and ideals are the ostensive object of governmental regulation, and the city is both a mode for the regulation and administration of subjects but also an urban space in turn reinscribed by the particularities of its occupation and use.

Now, to draw out some general implications from this schematic survey:

First: there is no natural or ideal environment for the body, no ‘perfect’ city, judged in terms of the body’s health and well-being. If bodies are not culturally pregiven, built environments cannot alienate the very bodies they produce. However, what may prove unconducive is the rapid transformation of an environment, such that a body inscribed by one cultural milieu finds itself in another involuntarily. This is not to say that there are not unconducive city environments, but rather there is nothing intrinsic about the city which makes it alienating or unnatural. The question is not simply how to distinguish conducive from unconducive environments, but to examine how different cities, different socio-cultural environments actively produce the bodies of their inhabitants.

Second, there are a number of general effects induced by cityscapes, which can be concretely specified in particular cases. In particular, we can say that the city helps to:

1. Orient sensory and perceptual information, insofar as it helps produce specific conceptions of spatiality.
2. Orient and organize familial, sexual, and social relations insofar as the city, as much as the state, divides cultural life into public and private domains, geographically dividing and defining the particular social positions individuals and groups occupy. Lateral or contingent connections between individuals and social groups are established, constituting domestic and generational distinctions. These are the roles and means by which bodies are individuated to become subjects.
3. The city structure and layout also provides and organize the circulation of information and structures social and regional access to goods and services.
4. The city’s form and structure provides the context in which social rules and expectations are internalized or habituated in order to ensure social conformity or, failing this, position social marginality at a safe distance (ghettoization). This means that the city must be seen as the most immediate locus for the production and circulation of power.
And third, if the city is, as I have suggested, an active force in constituting bodies, and always leaves its traces on the subject’s corporeality, corresponding to the dramatic transformation of the city as a result of the information revolution will have direct effects on the inscription of bodies. In his paper on ‘The Overexposed City’ (1986), Paul Virilio makes clear the tendency in cities today towards hyperreality: the replacement of geographical space with the screen interface, the transformation of distance and depth into pure surface, the reduction of space to time, of the face-to-face encounter to the terminal screen:

On the terminal’s screen, a span of time becomes both the surface and the support of inscription; time literally ... surfaces. Due to the cathode-ray tube’s imperceptible substance, the dimensions of space become inseparable from their speed of transmission. Unity of place without the unity of time makes the city disappear into the heterogeneity of advanced technology’s temporal regime. (Virilio 1986: 19)

The implosion of space into time, the transmutation of distance into speed, the instantaneousness of communication, the collapsing of the workspace into the home computer system, will clearly have major effects on the bodies of the city’s inhabitants. The subject’s body will no longer be disjointedly connected to random others and objects through the city’s spatiotemporal layout; it will interface with the computer, forming part of an information machine in which the body’s limbs and organs will become interchangeable parts. Whether this results in the ‘crossbreeding’ of the body and machine – whether the machine will take on the characteristics attributed to the human body (‘artificial intelligence’, automatons) – or whether the human body will take on the characteristics of the machine (the cyborg, bionics, computer prosthesis) remains unclear. Yet it is certain that this will fundamentally transform the ways in which we conceive both cities and bodies, and their interrelations. What remains uncertain is how.

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FEMINIST THEORY 
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