

# The Cosmopolitan Canopy

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## Background

Strongly affected by the forces of industrialism, immigration, and globalism, the city of today is more racially, ethnically, and socially diverse than ever.

- Profound cleavages divide one element from another and one social group from another.
- There is a pervasive wariness toward strangers, particularly anonymous black males.
- In places such as bus stations, parking garages, and public streets many pedestrians move about guardedly, dealing with strangers by employing elaborate facial and eye work, replete with smiles, nods and gestures geared to carve out an impersonal, private zone for themselves.
- Defensively, people “look past” or “look through” the next person, distancing themselves from strangers and effectively consigning their counterparts to a form of social oblivion.
- Yet, numerous public spaces within cities offer a respite from this wariness, settings where a diversity of people can feel comfortable enough to relax their guard – places like Philadelphia’s Reading Terminal Market (a collection of vendors and eateries).
  1. In this relatively busy, quasi-public setting, under a virtual cosmopolitan canopy, people are encouraged to treat others with a certain level of civility, or at least simply to behave themselves.
  2. Here, people often do tend to acknowledge one another’s existence in some measure – at times approaching one another to talk, to laugh, or share a story.
  3. As people become intimate through shared experiences, certain barriers are prone to be broken.

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## Reading Terminal

The Reading Terminal is an institution in Philadelphia, and has always been known as a place where anyone could expect civility.

- The Terminal is a neutral space in which people who behave civilly, whatever their ethnicity, will not be scrutinized as would happen in an ethnic neighborhood if an unknown person were to come through.
- As visitors to the Terminal stroll up and down the aisles, stopping at various shops and kiosks, they experience other people, and they generally seem to trust what they see – there is a feeling of being involved with the others (mostly strangers) present here.

- When taking a seat at a lunch counter, people feel they have something of a license to speak with others, and others a license to speak to them.
  1. The author, an African American, was tapped on the shoulder by a total stranger, a “red-faced” Irishman, asking about the score of a basketball game – not something that would occur out on the street.
- What is so striking about sitting at a lunch counter in the Reading Terminal is that in this setting, a white man with white supremacist friends is able to have a frank conversation with a black stranger.
- In these settings people engage in *folk ethnography* and formulate or find evidence for their *folk theories* about others with whom they share the public space.

**Note:** Philadelphia holds numerous other examples of spaces under the canopy such as fitness centers, waiting rooms, multiplex theaters, indoor malls, and sporting venues.

### The Cosmopolitan Canopy

Typically, under the canopy, within the exterior walls or prescribed street boundaries the atmosphere is usually calm and pleasant, as a diverse mix of people go about their business on “good behavior” and working to be “nice.”

- Many visit not only for instrumental reasons like shopping or eating, but also for the experience of being among social types they believe they are likely to find in these neutral social settings.
- People can engage in practical and expressive folk ethnography as they “people watch.”
  1. They can eavesdrop and collect stories that they might relate to friends.
  2. They can interact with complete strangers, expressing themselves through face and eye work – smiles and frowns punctuated by a critical commentary of grunts and groans and outright talk.
- In time, their accumulating observations feed both prejudices and truths, affected by their own identities, about the others they encounter here.
- This complex process affects how they view and define this place and other interesting aspects of the city for their local social networks, while inspiring *folk notions* about “how people are” and “how things work” – they may reinforce persistent stereotypes or uncover unexpected truths about others.

- People are inclined to fit together all they hear and observe in an intuitive and inductive process, creating a mental picture of the nature of the setting and of certain kinds of others.
  1. They engage in this folk ethnography to navigate uncertain terrain and to make sense of their social habitat.
  2. The more intimate the space under the canopy, the more chance for up close “fieldwork” – a place like a jazz bar and more generally Starbucks and McDonalds are examples of the more intimate spaces.

**Note:** Essentially, cosmopolitan canopies allow people of different backgrounds the choice to slow down and indulge themselves, doing their own ethnography, testing or substantiating stereotypes or prejudices or, rarely, acknowledging something new about the other.

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**Public  
Transportation**

The cosmopolitan canopy can be mobile, as in the case of public transportation, which in Philadelphia is always a racial experience. The code of civility can break down in various ways on public transportation.

- People occasionally complain about seating or loud music and can be offended by one another.
  - In particular, when race and gender come together in the presence of the anonymous black male, the ideals of civility are severely tested.
    1. He is the last person others will sit next to – the younger and more “ghetto” he looks, the more distrust he engenders.
    2. He feels he is disliked by whites and he develops his own sense of group position vis-à-vis the wider society, especially whites.
    3. Black men engage in folk ethnography, talking among themselves and developing strategies for avoiding such arbitrary treatment and salvaging their self-respect.
  - Some black men have taken to devising tests they use on whites who might face the prospect of sitting next to them.
    1. They sit in the aisle seat and sprawl to make it more difficult for someone to want to get past them.
    2. Someone who does “run the gamut” may be judged acceptable as a white person and the black man may well engage her or him in conversation.
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**Conclusion**

As urbanites encounter people who are strangers to them, not just as individuals but also as representatives of others they may know only in the abstract, they can in some way be affected by the encounter.

- They may develop new stereotypes or reinforce those they already have, although, through constant exposure, such environments tend to encourage common everyday urban civility for others who are different from oneself.
- When people are exposed to other people in civil urban settings, under the cosmopolitan canopy, they have a more grounded knowledge of others than was possible without such experience.
- In this way, the generations establish new social patterns and norms of tolerance and encourage everyday common civility, if not comity and goodwill, among the various groups making up the city.