

Theme Project
Film 107 (UWM)

The purpose of this exercise is to practice attentiveness in an environment and to see what creative potential it may stir. Here 20 places I visited and at the end is a short story inspired by one of them.

1. The Beach

Sand varying from frozen ground to free flying dusting particles that blow across the rest of the frozen surface in rippling waves like that of the clear teal water. Lake Michigan sending an icy breeze through each pore of skin, leaving a feeling of deep cleansing. The waters sound of crystal glass-like shards of ice shimmering with each wave. It is dusk, thus a spectral palate that spans downward from deep blue above, to light blue, to magenta, and finally a red orange sitting across the blade of the horizon. Where the sky meets the water, light is distorted across the distance of atmosphere. Patrons dot the beach, each in their own state of mind provoked by the thick spiritual essence of the waterfront. Some spending time with their pets, some spending time with themselves. Some looking to say hi, some in no thought, yet cognizant.

2. Shopping Mall

Light making its way through odd crevasses that requires one to pause for a moment to see where the window is; a random burst of light from a skylight. Due to the pale surroundings, you seem to not notice when you transition from natural light to florescent artificial light – though you notice once you spend too much time under artificial bulbs and then transition back under the unmistakable sun. The smell is synthetic. There is great space between objects and people – a place that is now of desolation compared to when malls were new and trendy. The sound is dim and sparse with long echoes that have plenty of time to be heard and that crescendo as you walk near the source, which may be a few patrons walking by or the exchanging music emitting from the caverns of each storefront—most music is forgettable and immediately fades to background noise. In spite of what turned out to be a declined attempt, the mall has a faint voice of being pleasant and charming—as this was its design. Ironically like make-up, intended to embellish, though when mal-applied, ends up smothering in misconception.

3. Snow-covered Alleyway

A narrow passage with the back yards of homes to either side. A long urban hallway dotted with streetlights and offhand objects scattered about with deep puffy snow laid atop every surface. A serene silence befalls this place, so quiet you can hear the patter of individual snowflakes falling. Each snowflake in different shape and size dancing with its own personality, elusively bending around your face at the last moment, gently kissing your eyelash or forehead. Each step is like a full chapter of a novel, as time is stopped and still. Air so crisp and clear. In no time you yourself become one with the scene as you get covered thick with snow. The street lights are few, dim and orange, with the city's glow reflecting off the overcast umbrella ceiling of clouds in a deeper and more faint orange. Shadows are strewn from end to end following the entanglement of powerlines lazily from crooked wooden poles. Everything seems to not have been touched since it was put up, and new additions are piled on top or expanded from what was previously there, like a wall outlet stuffed with too many sockets and extension cords. Though

alone, this place is not lonely, as comforting lights shine through the windows of homes. Accompanied by the thought of people at peace reading books or watching movies in the warmth of their home. As you walk, the endless alleyway continues like an urban tunnel not carved by nature but by the practicality of humans. Not a street or a road, but a pleasant place for the aimless to roam.

4. Lake Park

Atop a bluff stretching along and overlooking Lake Michigan. Feeling connected with both the lake and the sky. Clouds move swiftly, revealing sunlight and color between their varying shades of white and grey. The sunlight dips in and out behind the clouds in their quick motions. The shadows of the clouds can be seen crawling across the ground. You're met with a cool shade then a sudden burst of light as each one goes by. Passersby are friendly and often say hello, likely partaking in their daily routine promenade, many with pets accompanying them. An old mystical woman walks slowly, draped in a large colorfully patterned scarf and a deep rose overcoat coat that reaches down to her feet. She is marked with content yet keen expression on her face as she walks by with a subtle acknowledging grin. There are many lakefront objects with details all their own. A bridge with black handrails arching over a forested path below, benches dedicated to loved ones with plaques bearing their names and a loving messages or quotations, a towering monument to a Civil War general, an elegant white French restaurant with pillars, bay windows, and a croquet court outside, and a towering white lighthouse with a matching white Queen Anne style house next to it with a red roof.

5. Old Elementary School Theatre

At the end of long road leading atop a hill sits an old elementary school which houses the town's theatre company. Hanging on the towering vanilla brick walls of the outside of the theatre are large backlit masks of Comedy and Drama, who instill an eerie yet alluring essence of theatre. Once inside, the smell is of old wood. The door handles have decades of wear from many students past, the floors speckle dotted and glossy, and the box office windows resemble a time long past, yet is kept well alive today. Upon entering the auditorium, the lights go dim. The carpet and seats are a deep velvet. The feeling of entering fabled world take hold. The stage the center piece in focus, designed to look like a 1940s New York City household and is lit like a still life art piece. Looking up, the ceiling appears endless. The patrons mosey in with small, quiet chatter among themselves; mostly older folks and a few younger students.

6. Small Neighborhood

Quiet, peaceful. The air is filled with the sound of singing birds and gentle wind. A distant door close or neighbor walking can be heard. The scent is foresty, nothing is cluttered, the yards are large, well-spaced, and have breaks in the snow cover revealing green grass. The trees are skeletal and aplenty, some spaced out in a pleasant design among the yards, and around the yards are like a small forest. The sunlight grows soft and dim sun as it fades behind the houses and trees across the street. Jupiter and Saturn can be seen peeking out in the sky, followed by the cascade of shimmering stars.

7. Veterans Park

A large park jettison out from downtown. Prairie-like green space, with a few long narrow sidewalks etching their way through to be met with the stark cut-off of the end of the

earth where the water meets. Steel retains the land, reflective of the hand of man, behind is the overarching city skyline. A few dotted benches line the walkway along the waterfront. Looking out is the interior of the breakwater. Facing out, a portside white and green striped tower is on the right and a sign with a red light is on the left, a gateway to the infinitely spanning water.

8. Main Street

Sun aglow, cars slowly pedaling themselves along while people wander about the sidewalks and across the middle of streets. The buildings stand shoulder to shoulder, varying in height like an elementary school class photo. Each with their own personality and color, some with vanilla brick, some red brick, one painted an aquatic green, each with years atop their facade that typically read in years before the 1900s. At times the buildings open up to an alleyway or a small park. Each block having its own new set of intrigue, as many any colorful structures of art and wall paintings surprise you at each corner. Nothing here is tiresome, and the pace is a fair stroll as each block meets you with its own intrigue.

9. Coffee Shop

The doors to the coffee shop are doubled and wide open to the sidewalk. The windows large and filled with signs reading words of acceptance to all (literally, it's a pretty politically progressive place). Inside, close to a scene out of Alice in Wonderland. Doors everywhere, on the walls, in open space creating a divider between the entryway and the dining area, doors used as walls. And from the ceiling are hung old bikes from the 50s and 60s. The simple feeling comes over me of, this place is cool. People seem to be everywhere, talking about everything. All ages, some reading, studying, on a date, out with family, alone. As I grab my coffee and open the doors to the other side of the street, a smiling old lady is behind me and I hold the door for her. She says, "what a beautiful day, isn't that place great? I just love the vibe in there."

10. Record Shop

Walking into a tunnel filled end to end with waist high shelves full of vinyl records old and new. At the end a guy with a beard as long as his love for music spouts, "Hello! Welcome!", then proceeds to go back to peeling through record after record. His fingers tactile and precise, clearly having the habit of doing this for several decades. The smell is of old paper, not much different from a library. After 5 minutes of poking around at records, your fingers grow a film of fine old papery dust, or whatever it might be. Now I feel like I'm in it. I'm invested in being here and then soon enough 20 minutes go by and I have a stack of sonic obsessions saying to myself, "how did that happen?" It's a comforting, yet sometimes overwhelming and draining experience that can leave you in the end tired and with a little less money (depending on who you are and what your objective is in entering the store). Though when at home, when the needle drops to sound a warm crackle and then bring to life the luscious voice of Ella Fitzgerald, you know you have in your hands a little piece of heaven.

11. University Gym

The light is blaring and florescent. The air is constantly in motion, so to keep everything circulated. The whole facility is centered on motion. It is stimulating and slightly cold. Everything feels polyester, the clothes, the padding, the floor, much synthetic materials, replaceable, inexpensive, and resistant to water and sweat. Not far from an operating room. The colors of everything are vibrant and expressive in a different manner, as there is little concern for

consistency, rather, it is function draped in a bright color and pattern of choice. I ask the desk person for a basketball and they reply in a blank expression, “ok”. Of the variety of personalities, many are of this relaxed athlete state. Almost as if they had expended the majority of their energy in high intensity conditioning or play, leaving just a more blank expression for the relatively mundane periods of the day. Smells hit you nearly with each step. Chlorine, air freshener, lemon, this person, that person, dozens of smells of new people constantly passing you. Athletics is a fine way to get to know someone in so many ways, and one of the more subtle (and sometimes not subtle) ways is by their smell. Everyone has their own objective in being there, and the way one carries themselves in a time of physical intensity is a glimpse into their true primordial and personal nature.

12. Downtown Street

Shafts of light peak around the corners of buildings. The sound is a mellow drone peaked by noises of vehicles and people talking. Oddly barren, lingering remnants of a previous lively civilization, and a hasty attempt to reconstruct it. Old buildings modeled after European styles that have aged well and emit a timeless warmth of welcoming and world of detail to admire. Swirling lines of consistent patterns that embellish edges, playful and expressive geometry, columns, statues of mythical figures, function elegantly combined with aesthetical form. In contrast, a giant black box, filled with more boxes, vainly attempting to make its own expressive statement. Though when done right, the clear large panes of cleverly cut glass reflecting the clouds and surrounding trees so to passively and modestly say, “don’t mind me, look around”, is in itself a welcoming statement in the newer technologies of architecture.

13. Symphony Orchestra

A deluge of delight upon entry of the doorway. A narrow and long entry foyer that is an exhibition of art deco. Giant beveled mirrors cut into quadrants surrounded by walls of chestnut marble with white streaks scribbling through, a smooth deep orange floor, and narrow chandeliers. Looking at such giant mirrors is like looking into a window of a different world. At the end on the second level is a round protruding balcony with ornate nouveau webbing. Everyone’s attitude is in some variation of awe and happiness as they make their way through the complex and towards their seats. The auditorium then goes to a more baroque style with giant vertical paintings of serene scenes that travel along the sides of the theatre, surrounded by a multitude of swirling embellishments. And at the center the stage. As the music begins the whole atmosphere reveals its true design, that of pure auditory joy. Everyone’s expression is unique, some contemplative, some smiling, some rhythmic, and some bored.

14. Grocery Store

A familiarity that travels back to my earliest memories with my mother when I was a child. The slow pace and gallery of interesting looking produce, meat, and boxes. A giddy mood provoked by the multitude of options in satiating myself. Like a chemist in a lab thinking of all the combinations of ingredients, flavors, textures to eat. Having a moment to not take for granted the fact that so much of the food is from all over the world, and arrives conveniently on a weekly basis. How impressively expansive commerce spans, all around the world. Others clearly thinking the same, pensive wearing an expression that says, “what do I feel like for dinner?”, or “will this go with that?” Or perhaps cooking for friends thinking of what they like. You can learn a lot about someone’s personality and what they have planned for the near future simply by

peaking in their shopping cart. It is inspiring as well. Once I run out of ideas of what to cook, I might snag a passing glance at what someone else is buying. Of course, of someone who looks like they're a good cook. There's sometimes the ones who are professionals, with a cart filled with fresh vegetables and fruit, good proteins, spices, and things you didn't even know existed. Then there's the one with five protein bars and a frozen pizza. Surprisingly, the common grocery store doesn't smell much. Unless there is a bakery, then that's just simply heaven.

15. Rooftops

Matte black tops with puddles of water pooling indicating sagging areas of the roof. The tops of buildings look so incredibly different from the front, almost like it is a buildings version of a naked underbelly. Some of them lucky to have to have patios. Sitting on a rooftop is a liberating feeling. It's out of the common ordinary, it's a grand perspective both internally and visually as it almost always reveals an amazing view since you're so high up, the danger of it makes you feel alive, it's a great place to have some sort of feeling and it almost never disappoints. There's the pulling temptation to hop from building to building, which is sometimes possible. Space disorients as some buildings feel within reach but really they are hundreds of feet away. Civilization looks so small as the world begins to look so large.

16. Flying an Airplane

An introduction to three-dimensional space. Up, down, left, right, to, fro. Ignition, the stationary blade in front of you all of a sudden turns to a rotating blur as the whole aircraft lurches in a slight counter-clockwise motion, settling into a steady vibration. Mild exhaust fumes enter the cockpit as the side window is open. The aircraft comes to life. Avionics on, set, altimeter, set, radio on, check ATIS – the headphones fill with the steady professional voice (the pilot voice) of the tower reading off the day's weather reports. More checks, more comms. Run up. "November 2490 Yankee taking off on runway One Three. Push throttle wide open. The plane lurches left due to the centrifugal rotation of the prop, but it is immediately anticipated and countered with right rudder. We roar up the runway and a few seconds later hit 80 mph and pull slightly back on the stick, sinking into the seat as the plane pops up airborne. Flaps up, climb, bank slight left to heading 045, climb. At 5,000 feet, the air is smooth. Gliding with slow and gradual banks left and right, feeling your weight shift as the world turn around you. Pitch up and feel twice your weight, pitch down and feel weightless. The air picks you up and drops you as the atmosphere shifts like flying through the vectors of a chaotic and complex ever-changing mathematical system. The ceiling is the endless void of stars. The floor, there is none. Traveling miles in seconds. Calm and precise. Flying is a sensational ballet.

17. Downtown Street Pt. 2

Like a city of an age that hasn't long passed. Old warehouse buildings full of character in each brick, laid by a skilled hand. Looking down Broadway Boulevard in the winter afternoon when the midday sun is low. The facades, each distinct with marks of their creator yet uniform in row, possess a golden glow. The fire escapes and ledges stretch long shadows. Sentimental, reminiscent of times when these charming designs were commonplace. When the street was a market, packed with people, horse drawn wagons, trollies, and hugged by a river full of steam ships. These buildings breathe.

18. Downtown Mall

An older building with heavy turn of the 20th century French architectural influence. A large hallway of skylights and a statue of the man the building is named after at the center of a winding staircase. The building is oddly repurposed, with apartments and a tennis court, like looking into human exhibits in a zoo. The building is themed with a four leaf clover, and the interior has been carefully detailed.

19. Public Market

Walking from front to front, a host of smells. Some of barbecue, chocolate, bakery. It's a pleasant walk knowing you are surrounded by decent food. The workers having a hundred personal interactions on a daily basis. Every new customer special and with their own desires.

20. Park on the Bluff

A park that is a massive plain of green grass that upwardly slopes to the top of a bluff overlooking the city. The sun is in the middle of the sky and the city has a haze over it, making it look as if it is a city in the clouds, or not real at all and is a distant illusion. The drove of the city can be heard, like it is a mechanical beast that looms over the landscape. A factory of ants at work with a whole world of purpose and thought within each of them.

Interpretation — Theatre

Ghost Light

Cherise is a daughter of a poor family that lives in the small coastal town of Wake Bay. One night while walking down main street with her family, she meets her first glimpse of the glamorous shining bulb lights of the local theatre marquee. She asked her parents what this place is and they told her it's a theatre, eventually taking her to a show and not thinking much of it, as it is something that was always around since they had grown up. Whilst seeing her first musical performance, she was entranced by the beautiful sound of the actors' voices, the music from the small orchestra, and the otherworldly setting of the theatre. Being a rather shy girl, she didn't know what to do with her experience, and afterwards thought about it over and over again. Eventually she took action and decided to go back, again and again, sneaking into the shows as she couldn't afford the box office tickets, falling ever more under the spell of the music and the stories.

Terry Anderson, the theatre's owner, began noticing Cherise sneaking into shows and offered her to help out with maintaining the theatre for a modest pay and free admission to all shows. He welcomed the girl, as he sensed her enthusiasm which was something that was difficult to come by in the small town. This greatly excited Cherise and she eventually found the theatre to be her home. Terry, who Cherise calls Mr. Anderson, was a witty old man at this point in his life. He shared with her many stories of the theatre, how he inherited it from the man who built it long ago, as well as stories from his past when he was an actor that toured Europe.

While diligently working, Cherise quickly grew aspirations to become a performer. The feeling of standing on stage was transcending for her, and she could only dream of what it would be like to sing and act standing before an audience. Upon sharing her dreams with her family, her parents, older brother and sister gave her little support, telling her she wasn't talented and to 'do

something useful' like become a doctor or a lawyer (this was the shared sentiment with many in the town, who saw the theatre as a waste of space compared to more 'expansionary developments'). Her little brother is her only supporter in the household. He loves to hear her enthuse about her experiences and dreams, as it made both of them very happy.

Mr. Anderson often sent Cherise home before close so she wouldn't get home too late, but sometimes she had to stay late to help out. Each night as he closed down the theatre, he made sure to place and light the theatre's ghost light center stage. After some time, Cherise took notice of the ritual and asked Mr. Anderson about it. To which he replied, "It may be the most important part of keeping this theatre alive. This light is why there is magic still here." Cherise was amused and couldn't tell whether to take Mr. Anderson seriously about what he said, as was often the case with many of the things he would say.

As the months went by, Cherise began to grow more confident, gaining more responsibilities at the theatre and even helping out with some of the performances backstage. She would hum and sometimes sing the songs of the traveling plays, musicals, and orchestras. Some of the actors and actresses took notice to her voice and expression and thought she was charming. They would sometimes play with her and giving her little tips.

Late one night, Cherise is left responsible for closing the theatre. She knows well by now the routine of it from both observing and being shown by Mr. Anderson. Cherise makes her final checks and then walks on stage to place the ghost light.

She places the light center stage. She takes the bulb in her hand and reaches up to fasten it in the top. As she turns the bulb the light illuminates. And after this very moment, as she is facing out towards the empty seats, she hears a faint voice whisper over her shoulder...

... sing

Cherise is startled white, and leaps down from the stage, she sprints up the center aisle and straight out the doors of the theatre leaving them wide open. Continued...