

Poetry of Urban Gestures

Architecture does not have to be a stylistic whim but, rather, can be a territory connected to the immediate and ultimate realities of our lives.

My article's intention is to examine some of the interconnections between the visual arts, literature and urban design, as well as to address the experience with which built-up public spaces can resonate. The desire to discover the unexpected and unfamiliar allows us to "outgrow a purified identity", in the words of Richard Sennett (1992: *passim*), perhaps because we still have a child within us.

Some of the most fascinating and mysterious experiences are perceptions of urban spaces by children. Children are unique in their directness and unspoiled in their honesty. Unfortunately, most children do not record their observations and, eventually, lose their spontaneous reactions to the environment. Their imagination usually has no limits! Imagination leads us towards the innovative, the picturesque, the varied, and the unexpected. One can move along the same route everyday; this route will become familiar, but its familiarity does not prevent the unexpected from happening. Imaginative powers are saved from boredom and are stimulated by excitement.

I will look, among others, at the writings of Franz Kafka, Eva Hoffman and Walter Benjamin, whose sensitivity maintained the vivacity of their childhood experiences in Prague, Cracow and Berlin. A series of paintings by Paul Klee portraying cities will also help to establish connections between the colourfulness of his childhood imagination and visions of the urban environment.

Children perceive without preconceived notions; their responses to the environment flow fearlessly and are not restrictive. Children's honesty can be shocking in its directness. They keep their rendezvous with environments that they live in, or visit, on very different levels to adults. Children do not wear masks.

One day, just after our arrival to Canada, I drove through the suburbs of Calgary with my daughters. They looked through the car's windows puzzled and disturbed. Finally, the younger one, who was only five at the time, asked, "Mom, where are the sidewalks?" Before I was able to answer, the older one concluded, "I do not see anyone walking. They do not want to walk here." True, no one wanted to walk among these spaces that were designed-to-kill experience.

A few years later, my friend's six-year-old daughter told me an interesting story about her journeys that were measured by poems, fragments of books she recited to herself or songs she sang. She was able to find her own path among sterile and tidily built spaces and to fill them with an aura of mystery and adventure. The route the little girl walked from her house was marked by stones, flowers, wild grasses and trees that had miraculously survived the slaughter of developers' ruthless swords. I am not promoting a "back to nature", à la J.J.Rousseau's romantic notion; I am merely acknowledging the fact that even environments built without any vision can be enhanced by imagination. The little girl would find her way guided by fantasy and turn next to the landmarks embedded in her dreams. Every time I recall her story I am reminded of the ways Japanese cities used to be designed: in an organic way that emphasized a sensual connectedness with the environment rather than a linear and oppressively progressive one. It reminds me of "the hidden order" Yoshinobu Ashihara talks about in his books on urban design.

Children should be included in municipal urban design committees and consulted by their members to remind them of the strength of imagination they most likely lost while becoming adults.

In "The Problem of Form" Wassily Kandinsky provides an intelligent and clear definition of children's denial of nonsensical and unimaginative means when he says:

children's drawings have such a powerful effect upon independent-thinking, unprejudiced observers. Children are not worried about conventional and practical meanings, since they look at the world with unspoiled eyes and are able to experience

things as they are, effortlessly. Conventional and practical meanings are slowly learned later, after many and often unhappy experiences.

(Kandinsky 1970: 59)

Kandinsky continues:

But adults and especially teachers make every effort to instill in children conventional and practical meanings. They criticize the child's drawings specifically from this superficial point of view: Your man cannot walk because he has only one leg, or no one can sit on your chair because it is crooked, etc. The child laughs at all this. But he should cry.

(Ibid)

Kandinsky was not the only artist who considered children's fantasy to be crucial for human perception of the environment. Kandinsky's colleague, Paul Klee, was quite intimately involved in studying children's art based on some memories of his childhood. He established important connections between honest, direct, poignant perceptions and a free form of expression. Klee was able to maintain the child within, which is a very rare and refreshing quality. This is revealed in his use of colour, the compositional relations and intimate size of his works. He courageously rejects oppressive monumentality and, in the age of monstrous measures, he provides the viewer with something familiar and touchable. The pulse of reality is filtered through a kaleidoscopic prism. There is an evocative intensity and fun, coloured by the innocence of his sense of sight. The ambiguity of presence and absence augment the mystery and the aura of secrets yet to be discovered.

Klee's *Hammamet with the Mosque* (1914) is a work where the playful translation of temporal elements creates a magical balance embracing myriad polyphonic movements. The grid-system of the composition also recalls musical notes. The texture of the watercolour paper, fused together with the pastel tonalities of the paint, enriches the sense of the temporal. Cities, too, can be characterized by temporality, there is usually nothing static, fixed or monotonous in the spiral of urban life. Life on streets and squares vibrates. There are people and magical passages, colours and textures, smells and sounds... Everything to be discovered! One does not need to see it all; one needs to feel what is revealed. As Paul Klee said in *Creative Credo*, "The goal of art is not to reveal the visible, but to reveal the invisible".

The scale of most of Klee's artworks which are renderings of cities is small, immediately capturing attention and creating a charming and intimate ambience of inclusion. The size of the *Hammamet* (20x15cm) reinforces inward vision and allows the beholder to wander through streets capturing the mysteries and magic behind each soft edged corner. The brilliant translation of a vast city into the intimacy of a minute work challenges predictable views of reality. Klee abandons hierarchical relations in his works; foreground and background are blurred consciously to introduce the desire for a search beyond the visible. To be on the edge of appearances and telling the moment becomes Klee's credo.

There are quite a few works by Klee whose origins go back to his childhood and the enchanting moments when he and his grand-mother illustrated some of the fairy-tales she used to tell him and to which he listened with delight. His playfully nostalgic *Tree House*, from 1918, has the ability to transport the viewer into a garden and tree house. This is a refuge, an oasis within the city. Goblins and fairies seemed to inhabit this tiny work that encloses us within its brightness of being.

Dream City possesses the tense and luminous qualities of a dream. It is twice the size of *Hammamet with the Mosque*, but its scale is amazingly touchable and it becomes extremely invigorating. The multitude of layers of watercolour washes create the unforgettable pulse of the secret city, simultaneously emerging and disappearing. It is as if, out of his dreams, Klee constructed an alternative, ultimate world of and for his imagination.

In the *View of G.*, from 1927, the space is as vast as if the city's labyrinths had opened their gates. The journey seems to be less obstructed than the *Dream City* with its ambiguous veils and light canyons of streets. One travels differently here, but the charm of discovery is not abandoned. The houses have individual personalities. They look with their window-like-eyes, inviting and laughing. The red, slightly crooked clock-tower provides momentum here and it is a reminder of the passages of time to which children can be so oblivious.

In 1918 Paul Klee wrote a poem and in the same year the poem became a painting. *Once They Emerged from the Gray of Night* appears as a sequence of musical notes, as a moment that immerses itself in music. Lines here become what Klee referred to as "absolute spontaneity" and "without analytical accessories"; his straight lines have so much dynamism, so much energy and rhythmic vividness. It is fascinating to discover so many temporal qualities in Klee's oeuvre. Is it possible that it

is because of the artist's reduction of formal devices? Or is it because of the immense influence of music on Klee's art? Probably both. Klee played music, knew how to listen to it and sometimes even danced. Georg Muche, who worked with Klee and whose studio was next to Klee's at the Bauhaus, wrote:

One day, I heard a strange, rhythmical stamping of feet. When I met Klee in the hallway, I asked him 'Did you hear that odd noise just now?' He laughed and said: 'Ah, - did you notice? That was not supposed to happen! I was painting and painting and suddenly, I do not know why – I had to dance. You heard it! That is a shame. I never usually dance.'

(Duchtig 1997:56)

Kafka's *Notebooks and Loose Pages* recall his early experience of Prague; a mesh of mysterious literary architecture fuses with the tangible; the transformed city emerges. The city that becomes both the cage and the refuge of a child. Kafka writes with absolutely dramatic intensity about his everyday walk to school from Minuta House, where the Kafkas lived, to the old square, under the shadows of the castle...and back again. This circle contained and embraced his life.

Kafka's walks were coloured by his expectations of meeting an anarchist! Prague, like many other European cities in the nineteenth century, witnessed anarchist acts. Anarchists became almost mythical figures, subjects of stories and dinner conversations. The most famous anarchist in Bohemia was Rapachol. Kafka writes with delightful excitement at the possibility of meeting Rapachol on his walk to school. To his distress, Kafka never met Rapachol, but the singular possibility of seeing him behind a street corner made his everyday walk far from trivial.

For Eva Hoffman the circle containing her whole life was in Cracow. Her book *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* is united by three chapters: Paradise, Exile and The New World. Hoffman's parents left Cracow and Poland in the 1950s. She was eleven when her paradise, the heart-beat of her city, her universe, were left behind in Cracow. She writes:

Cracow to me is a city of shimmering light and shadow, with the shadow only adding more brilliance to the patches of wind and sun. I walk its streets in a state of musing, anticipatory pleasure. Its narrow byways, its echoing courtyards, its jewellike interiors are there for my delectation: they are there for me to get to know.

(Hoffman 1989:38)

She felt safe in this enclosed circle of her city-paradise:

Age is one of the things that encloses me with safety; Cracow has always existed, it is a given, it does not change much. It has layers and layers of reality. The main square is like a magnetic field pulling all parts of the city together. It is heavy with all those lines of force...”

(Ibid 39)

There is no explanation when it comes to definitions of paradise. Paradise seems to escape logic and its receipt. Paradise like dreams and like children’s own stories, exists beyond prescribed reality. Cracow of the 1950’s became Eva Hoffman’s eutopia. While in Vancouver she revisits Cracow of her childhood memories:

The *Planty* are another space of happiness, and one day something strange and wonderful happens there. It is a sunny fall afternoon and I am engaged in one of my favorite pastimes - picking chestnuts... The city, beyond the lacy wall of trees, is humming with gentle noises. The sun has just passed its highest point and is warming me with intense, oblique rays. I pick up a reddish brown chestnut, and suddenly, through its warm skin, I feel the beat as if of a heart.

(Ibid 41)

Nothing will replace the intense warmth of chestnuts found in Cracow.

Hoffman’s book is even more intriguing if one acknowledges the fact that it was written in English, the author’s second language. Hoffman’s fluency in capturing the nuances of her life in the city of her childhood transcends any communication barriers and proves her insightful imagination. The verses are not lost in translation, they break through and shine.

In *Berliner Kindheit*, Walter Benjamin remembers his life as a little boy in Berlin. Most of Benjamin’s memories contemplate his walks in the city. His favorite walks are along Lutzkanal and on one of the islands on the river. In the island’s park one was only allowed to move along the pathways, except if one was a peacock. Peacocks could move freely on the island. Benjamin’s dream was to become a peacock or at least to find a peacock feather. He never found one. Some of the images recording his moves are “rendered” in blue, a truly appropriate colour for mnemonic writing. Blue appears as a dream-like screen that simultaneously unites and separates the past from the present. Hans Christian Andersen made the children of his tales dream in azure seraphin because blue is a colour that moves effortlessly from reality to dream and back. And...one day,

the chief gardener of Paris decided to breed a blue rose. The rose has been named after Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of the enchanting *The Little Prince*.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and Paul Klee have perceived their environment with similar non-limiting freshness through which one can rediscover the city of one's childhood. Paul Klee's "Red Balloon" is a small work that allows the imagination to flow above the city; it denies gravity and adds wings to one's dreams. Fantasy without borders, the invisible city becomes visible to the little prince within us.

Alberta College of Art & Design, Canada

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