



LISTENING TO THE CITY

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The city is a subject that is apparently about everything. It is about climate change and racial tolerance, social justice and economic development, culture and personal memory, national identity and civil liberty. But without some sort of focus, or some framework applied to the ways in which we think about it, the city as a subject that is so all embracing can end up being about everything and so in the end, about nothing. Berlin, an atypical western European city, that, unlike the other places that the Urban Age caravan has examined in the last two years, is attempting to accommodate shrinking expectations, rather than expansion on an explosive scale. Here our ambition is to provide that framework, to move beyond the collection of data, and to put some of our cards on the table.

To help us we have the statistical lessons that we have tried to absorb over the journey charted by the LSE and the Alfred Herrhausen Society. We also have the impressionistic ones we have acquired that can be as important. Personally, I will take with me the view of Johannesburg from the 50th floor of the Carlton Centre, a perfect specimen of an SOM (Skidmore, Owings and Merrill) designed tower of the early 1970s, adjusting to the new realities of South Africa. I will remember the non meeting of minds of Rem Koolhaas and Peter Eisenman, in New York, where they demonstrated the difficulty that architects can have in communicating with a wider audience. I will not forget the sudden silence that spread over a terrace on the Bund in Shanghai when the news of multiple back pack bombs being detonated on the London underground filtered through from half a world away. I will remember the splendour of the room in Mexico City in which we met, built at the turn of the 20th century to house the boardroom of the ministry of public building and works with a grandeur that signalled the ambitions and dreams of a new republic, and now a museum piece. It is chastening, but valuable for a critic to be confronted with how little they really know. I hadn't, before the Urban Age conference in Shanghai understood that of its 18 million or so people, fully a quarter were illegal migrants, or that the city had levels of inequality of an order close to Manhattan's. Impressive, or depressing change for the country that Mao clothed in olive drab. I

knew that Johannesburg was a city shaped by Apartheid, but I hadn't understood what it would mean to try not just to deal with inequalities, but to operate against a background of a Soweto that was deliberately built to exclude the possibilities of urban life. I could not have imagined what it is like for the city's transport officials to work with a suburban rail system which saw dozens of its employees murdered last year until I met one of those officials. And until I had seen white South African planners use the word comrade to describe the black ANC councillors who they worked for in the way that their London equivalents might use the word Mr, I did not really appreciate the nature of politics in that city. Probably I still don't.

Before I went to Mexico City earlier this year, I had not grasped that it was no longer the untameable monster that the world has always assumed. Nor had I considered the significance of the networks linking its street traders with the factories in China supplying them. In Mexico, it was Benjamino Gonzales's brilliant presentation on the Faro community arts project that stays in my memory most vividly. It was flagged up as being a talk about urban spaces. But in reality it was about something more important: self organising urbanity. Then there is that mysterious quality of citiness that the urban age conference has been in pursuit of ever since it first met in New York two year ago. The most salutary lesson from the privilege of being able to plug into the networks that shape a different metropolis every four months, is the understanding that no matter how much the world's cities operate as part of a single global system; acquiring the same kind of landmarks, museums, airports, freeways, and subject to the same quack remedies of tax incentives and marketing programmes, just how different and distinct they remain.

We do not belong to a generation that has the shared faith that the pioneer architectural modernists had when they chartered a liner to cruise the Mediterranean in agreeable comfort, and draw up their vision of what the modern city must be, the charter of Athens. They divided it into functional zones, shaped by sunlight angles. That was a generation that was freed from the

luxury of self doubt. We are not, and that is why we struggle now when we try to find a renewed sense of purpose about what cities should be. We are full of doubt, or at least we certainly should be. We are the witnesses to soured urban utopias that were invented by some of the architects on that liner, and propagated by a political system that measured success in the number of new buildings that it could deliver each month. Politicians love cranes; they need solutions within the time frames of elections. The result is a constant cycle of urban demolition and reconstruction that is seen as the substitute for thinking about how to address the deeper issues. Engels and Ruskin reeled in horror at the impact of urbanisation in 19th century Manchester (a fraction of the scale of that in the 21st century Pearl River Delta). The great German architect, Karl Friederich Schinkel went there to learn the secrets of industrial building you can now see huge areas that were originally built up in the 1880s and demolished in the 1930s, and built up and demolished again twice since then.

Visions for cities tend to be the creation of the boasters. City builders have always had to be pathological optimists, if not out and out fantasists. They belong to a tradition that connects the map makers, who parcel up packages of swamp land to sell to gullible purchasers, and the show apartment builders who sell off plan, to investors in Shanghai who are banking on a rising market making them a paper profit before they have even had to make good on their deposits. There are visions of cities as machines for making money, if not for turning the poor into the not so poor, which is what attracts the ambitious and the desperate to them in the first place. But there are other less tangible kinds of visions too that no city can do without for long. In the end it is the vision of what a city is that gives it a shared sense of itself. A city is an a la carte menu, that is what makes it different from a village which offers so much less in the way of choice. A positive vision of urbanity has to be based on ensuring that more and more customers can afford to make the choice. Those who seek to understand the contemporary city have a lot to learn from novelists, and film makers. Architects and city planners are story tellers too, coming up with a narrative long before they ever build anything. They offer a story, or more often, a myth, of community, or of greenness: an image of modernity, or of tradition. It is the literary view of the city from Dickens and Zola onward that allows us to understand its nuances of light and shade. They help us understanding the flawed but rich nature of city life that does not survive the conventional response to urban reality, which is to try to sweep the dark underbelly of the city away. To sweep

away the darkness is to risk the collateral damage that will destroy the very qualities that make a city work. It is to turn a city into a village, which is no place for the dispossessed and the ambitious, desperate to escape from poverty.

In London the Urban Age discussed the area known as the King's Cross railway lands, a gash in the urban fabric that has never healed since the canals and railways tore into it at the start of the 19th century. It reflects the reality of city life in the most brutal and extreme form. Hookers and addicts share the pavements with the commuters, skirting the vast swathe of canals and sheds, trapped between the Euston Road, and the residential streets of Camden Town. It is undergoing a paroxysm of development that irresistibly recalls the feverish transformation of this very piece of land portrayed by Charles Dickens in *Dombey and Son*. Dickens captured the surrealistic dislocation of houses left stranded by railway embankments, and roads that lead nowhere. Almost the same thing is happening again. The huge glass and white steel box tacked onto the back of Victorian St Pancras Station, designed to handle the high speed rail link to Paris and Brussels is nearing completion. It represents a construction project that matches those of the Victorians, in its scale if not in its confidence, or architectural ambition. Negotiating the area, you thread your way through new viaducts that erupt from the mud, past tower cranes, and ancient warehouses and gasometers. The landscape is by turns pastoral, and derelict. As it is now, Kings Cross is a mud splattered, anarchic mess that reveals the shifting tectonic plates of urban life. The new Kings Cross will be a polite, comfortable place for commuters to drink café latte on their way from the train to the office. But it is unlikely to be a city in the sense that Dickens or Zola would understand.

In Mexico, it was Benjamino Gonzales's brilliant presentation on the Faro community arts project that stays in my memory most vividly. It was flagged up as being a talk about urban spaces. But in reality it was about something more important, possibly self organising urbanity. Or that mysterious quality of citiness that the urban age conference has been in pursuit of ever since it first met in New York two year ago. Urban space is something that Mexico City makes you aware of in some provocative and unexpected ways. The sheer size of the Zocalo, reminding us of the Aztecs who laid it out, and its mismatch with the colonial architecture that forms its rim catches you by surprise. It makes you think about Mexico's original builders, and their continuing, if sometimes submerged presence in

the colonial period. When you come to think about it, the Zocalo is a public space defined as much by absence as presence. The Zocalo's continuing uses are also political. Demonstrators form up outside the offices of the federal district administration, their banners fixed, under the shadows that enormous national flag, demanding to be heard. You could see another kind of public space in Mexico presented in some of the diagrams seen in our sessions on mobility and transport. Professor Bernardo Navarro Benitez's uncanny diagrams looked like organic crystal forms, or art works, that seemed to be trying to tell us something important about how space works, how space can be brittle, and fibrous, complex and multilayered. They looked almost like the circuit boards for Mexico City, the machine code revealed beneath the pixels on the surface. The nervous system underneath the skin.

It wasn't quite the same kind of space as that explored by Hermann Knoflacher with his provocative pedestrian walking machine, and its wry demonstration of the destructive capacity of the car, or the layer upon layer of bus circuits, and parking lots for the National Autonomous University. Diagrams that tell us why a University city is not yet a city, precisely because it is too easy to map its movement patterns. The diagrams are all telling us something important about the city, and how it moves. And of course public space without the possibility of movement in it is like a dead butterfly in a specimen case. Because movement means access, which is the real issue about space. And as the Zocalo tells us, in Mexico, London, Berlin, Shanghai, Johannesburg or New York, space is as much about the symbolic and the theatrical as it is to do with the technical. There are other kinds of vision that start, as so many urban visions have done with an attempt to deal with the pathology of the city, modernism after all was probably as much about notions of hygiene as anything else. The city is a complex interaction of issues and ambitions that are shaped by the everyday choices of its citizens as much as by their political leaders, and their officials. The development of a city involves oil companies and car builders, as much as the financial institutions that make house building possible. It involves the law, and investment regimes, as well as such apparently simple ideas as being able to take a breath of air without worrying about the harm its going to do us, or our children. A city is a vision as well as a mechanism, in the sense that Bogata's bus lanes represent easy movement for the masses, as opposed to a regulatory system to force through change on private car drivers. But given the costs and obligations that come with the privileges of urban life, a city is also a test of the limits of the power

of persuasion, as opposed to compulsion. And in the end, a genuine city can only be about the persuasion and not the compulsion.

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