

Now, THIS is truly SCARY!

A Plea against Urban Amnesia

"If on arriving at Trude I had not read the city's name written in big letters, I would have thought I was landing at the same airport from which I had taken off. The suburbs they drove me through were no different from the other, with the same little garnish and yellowish houses. Following the same signs we swung around the same flower beds in the same squares. The downtown streets displayed goods, packages, signs that had not changed at all. This was the first time I had come to Trude, but I already know the hotel where I happened to be lodged; I had already heard and spoken my dialogues with the buyers and sellers of hardware; I had ended the days identically, looking through the same goblets at the same swaying navels. "Why come to Trude", I asked myself, "if I had already wanted to leave?" "You can resume your flight whenever you like," they said to me, "but you will only arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by the sole Trude, which does not begin, nor end. Only the name of the airport changes."¹¹

Invisible Cities, 1972. Calvino describes a world of uniformity. While the ease of travel anticipates journeys of discovery, sensation and wonder, the after-taste is that of stagnation. The city of 'Trude' is not only disappointing, it is oppressive, and leaves behind the numbness of repetition. There is an unsettling familiarity in Calvino's haunting realization, "The world is covered by a sole Trude, which does not begin, nor end. Only the name of the airport changes"...

And yet, decades later, world-over, contemporary cities gamble rich histories and extensive cultures to participate in an unthinking surge of escalating aspirations. Urban-fabrics that once reflected a civilization's needs and values, today, become perfunctory environments of contest; architecture becomes a mathematical exercise in density; and the atmospheres of cities, generic entities. 'Life' is lost in the desire for 'lifestyle'; 'home', in the arrogance of the "machine"²⁹. Even as the utopian visions, that disregarded continuity and evolution in cities, find themselves fade into desolate urban-scapes, political vision and economic ambition continue to bestow hopes in the hollow promises of alien influences, still misunderstanding them as catalysts in the transformation of their own urban syntax. Policy becomes DNA and political will, a head-rush, as architecture and urban research fail to impose its own agency on how a city develops. Cities increasingly shed their peculiarities, to embrace the unknown, the foreign, "The Other"³⁰. Following the European

Commission Conference on "smart-cities" in Brussels (2015), Rem Koolhaas wrote, "I had a sinking feeling as I was listening to the talks by these prominent figures (politicians, technologists etc) in the field of smart cities because, the city used to be the domain of the architect, and now, frankly, they have made it their domain. This transfer of authority has been achieved through a very clever strategy... By calling their city smart, they condemn our city as being stupid."⁴ Jane Jacobs, in 1961, questioned, "Why have cities not, long since, been identified, understood and treated as problems of organized complexity? If the people concerned with the life sciences were able to identify their difficult problems as problems of organized complexity, why have people professionally concerned with cities not identified the kind of problems they had?"¹⁵ Are city-identities, truly such mammoth organizations, that any digestion of their aspects into simpler, graspable units is, de facto, impossible?

One speaks about cities having various attributes or personalities, evaluates and judges them, to arrive at favorites and non-favorites, "almost as though cities were like people".¹⁶ Indeed, they have a "spirit", an essence. Urban amnesia in a city maybe defined, as the condition, wherein there is a loss of memory regarding the city's complete past (architectures and cultures), and only an acknowledgement of its most recent pasts¹⁷ in shaping this essence. This results in the neglect of valuable idiosyncrasies that shape the city's character, and consequently in the development of generic built-environments. Where do these gaps stem from? Powerful as they are, in shaping the psychology of the inhabitants, and in holding a community together, identities are predominantly constituted within, and not outside of representation. They arise from the 'narrativization' of the self.¹⁸ They are not merely about what the city is in essence, or how it has evolved to what it is. They are also about how it has been represented, and how that representation bears on how it aspires to represent itself. A city-identity, in its authentic sense, is powerful enough to tackle "the generic"¹⁹. However, its decline separates inhabitants from their deep-structures, and forces them into doubting valuable ethos, or worse, into aping unwarranted models, only because they are better represented globally.

Cities are fragile ecosystems. They exist to perform as physical backdrops for people to live. However, when we dig deeper into their complexities, we realize that the best cities are those that offer experiences beyond mere

physicality. These are the cities that inspire, seduce, and deliver. Throughout time, cities have persisted as one of the most profound reflections of culture. Echoes of civilization, city-identities cannot be planned, but can only be experienced as fluid entities, and can only be understood retrospectively. Today, many cities have already lost their uniqueness to the "generic"⁹. This plea acts beyond the realm of nostalgia or concern, and well into the territory of alarmed urgency. It is a warning sign, for those who fail to understand the delicate systems that they threaten with their uninformed propositions, and yet, possess the audacity and power to thoughtlessly intervene in them. It is a wake-up call for those, who ought to possess the courage to suitably intervene, but fail to voice their opinions in apologetic capacities. It is a demonstration of what we risk to lose, and an evaluation of this against that which we, in most certainty, do not even want in the first place. And above all, it is a request to recognize that it is possible to disentangle the many complexities involved in a city's identity, and that its parts once broken down systematically, become individually comprehensible and graspable, even at the formidable scale of a city. For, how many of us would dream of travels far and wide into city-after-city of undeviating sameness? How many would rather look out of their windows into 10-lane highways than at festive celebrations on the streets? And how many would wish for a future where children can no longer play on the streets, where neighbors barely know each other, and where architecture is an exercise in stacking up match-box models, having little to do with the passion of its creator's handicraft? Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next, with each generation contributing its experience into shaping it and discarding things that are no longer useful to it.¹⁰ So, how many of us truly believe that identity and culture are aspects of the city that we no longer have use for, and can be discarded as unnecessary?

Some might think of this plea as a regressive standpoint. Others, unwarranted nostalgia. But our cities once had incredibly unique atmospheres. They are now critically endangered. "Identity centralises, it insists on an essence, a point"⁹. We must prevent ourselves from losing that point altogether. Of course, it is entirely possible, that this way, we just end up with something of an urban illusion. But as Spiro Kostoff says, "in our time and age, even that, maybe plenty to be thankful for!"¹¹