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City – living space and form of life

topics:

- aspects and assessments of worldwide urbanisation
- a structuralist (hermeneutical) “reading” of city structures
- the task of the church in the city

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Most of us come from one of our world’s large towns – each of which has its own individual face. But what is the shared element the large towns of this world have in common? Their level of civilisation? Their cultural potential? Their economic elbow? Their size?

City - living space and form of life is the theme I have been given. There is a dual emphasis in the title itself, so let us begin by attempting to come to an agreement on what constitutes an urban place to live. We will then proceed to the second main section in which we attempt to come to an agreement regarding the urban or town form of living.

The bizarre nature of our task is made immediately clear if we compare two places – one of the smallest towns in Germany and one of the largest in the world. For a long time, Kappeln on the river Schlei up in the North was the smallest town in Germany. It has had a town charter for centuries, yet it has never grown larger than 2000 inhabitants. The largest town in the world is currently Tokyo-Yokohama, with more than 23 million inhabitants. What do these towns have in common with each other? How is it possible to compare them?

On a purely formal, statistical level there are, of course, points of comparison - communal self constitution, dependence on or independence of the surrounding land, relative crime rates, infant mortality per 100 births etc. But it is evident that all of that is comparatively arbitrary. We require first of all to agree at the outset on what makes a town a town. We have to state clearly what it is we wish to know. We have to disclose the academic interests by which we are guided.

The following questions are of primary interest for me today:

First of all, I want to know how we ourselves would formulate and substantiate our praise and our lament with regard to the towns we each come from - differently rooted, as we are, in our respective religious, cultural and national contexts. In doing so, I am starting from the assumption that each of us is able to raise a lament as well as a hymn of praise. What interests me is the variety of perspectives from which cities are experienced and described.

My second academic interest concerns the question of the interrelation between inner and outer spaces, in other words the question of whether a connection exists between the maps of our towns and the maps of our souls.

I intend to disclose my central assumption regarding this question at this early stage. It is as follows: Up until the end of the 19th century, the imagery by means of which emotional experience was visualised in a pre-scientific environment was determined by nature and by a form of village life which stood in close relation to nature. A change of matrix came about with the growing dominance of urban forms of living. The city is now our destiny, with the result that urban structures are increasingly taking over as the *dominant* matrix for subjective, or amateur, self understanding of emotional experience. Should this prove to be the case, then it will have fundamental consequences for pastoral work in an urban context.

Setting out from these preliminary considerations, my paper is structured as follows: I will deal with the complex phenomenon of the city as living space from three differing perspectives – from a literary, from a sociological and statistical, and from a structuralist, hermeneutical perspective:

- The city in lyric poetry – an exemplary controversy from the first third of the 20th century.
- The urbanisation of the world – a social sciences and statistical perspective.
- The city as text – a hermeneutical, structuralist perspective.
- I will close with some hypotheses for discussion.

“Sermon to the City Populace” by Richard Dehmel – an exemplary controversy

The distinguished lyric poet Richard Dehmel, who lived the major part of his life in Blankenese/Hamburg, published the following poem in 1909:

Sermon to the City Populace

*Yes, great cities make you small
With stifled yearning I look
up through thousand human vapours to the sun;
My very father, who, between the giants
of his pine – and oak wood forest had
the appearance of a sorcerer,
becomes between these bragging walls
a mere rustic, aged manikin.
O, let yourselves be stirred, you thousands!
I saw how once, in starlit winter’s night,
between gas lanterns’ gloomy ranks
you wound, like some giant, multitudinous worm,
your way to find escape from your distress;
But then you crept into a rented hall
and heard, through smoke and beer fumes, ringing words
of freedom, equality and suchlike.
Go forth, go forth to see the growing trees:
all firmly rooted, all ready to be cultivated,*

*and each one rears its own way to the light.
But you, of course, have feet and fists,
no forester needs first to set up space for you,
you stand yourselves and set up penitentiary walls.
O go and take yourselves land! Land!
At the ready! Forward/ Advance!¹*

Only a few comments – and no interpretation: Richard Dehmel’s poem “preaches” what has become the classic urban critique of the German Youth Movement of the early 20th century with all the pathos and the high demands of a prophetic sermon – the city makes you “small”, turns the forester ‘walking tall’ into a rustic, aged manikin. The city is extremely unhealthy, indeed, put more pointedly, it is in itself a sickness. It is nature which provides the yardstick for all that is natural or willed by God. Romantic – a Rousseauist way of thinking - *retour de la nature* – in other words, a concept of nature as essentially good is behind this attitude.

On the basis of this premise, a polemic is built up against proletarian revolt, which talks of revolution in beer and smoke filled halls, thus only exacerbating the unnatural chaos of the city yet further. The urban critique reaches its peak in the view that the city is not simply a “sickness” in the sense that it inverts all good, i.e. natural standards, but that, in so doing, the city becomes a penal colony: “You stand yourselves and set up penitentiary walls”. Here, Dehmel refers indirectly to a humane asylum practice widespread in Medieval towns – “town air brings freedom” is a saying which still remains popular, and which refers to the legal practice whereby serfs or bondmen were able to regain their civil rights as freemen after one year’s faultless residence within the walls of a town. This humane town concept is inverted to become its own opposite in the conditions of the city, which Dehmel sees reflected in Berlin’s tenement blocks and back yards – the city as a sickness and as a penitentiary.

A whole rank of military commands are lined up at the end of the poem – “Forward!”, “Advance!”, “At the ready!”, “Take yourselves land!”. Dehmel’s sermon, it seems, is ultimately a declaration of war, a call to battle against the cancerous growth of large towns which turn all their residents into penitentiary inmates. Can critique of the city be harder or more drastically formulated than this? It is possible to hear, behind all this, a eulogy on the colonialists, emigrating to America and “settling” in freedom, clearing and cultivating the land. Dehmel’s sermon remained largely ineffective in practice, but it does reflect a pattern in a tradition, similar forms of which are also to be found in Rousseau and Tolstoy, where extremely radical critique of the town was already established. On a literary level, Dehmel’s poem certainly created a *furor*. Rene Schickele wrote an “anti-text” a decade later, which is based directly on Dehmel’s poem. I do not intend to withhold Schickele’s poem from you. Its title is:

City Populace

*No, here’s where you should stay!
In these dejected Mays, in lacklustre Octobers,
here’s where you should stay – the town is where*

¹ *German Urban Lyric Poetry from Naturalism to the Present*. Reclam, Stuttgart 1973, page 211; Dehmel *ibid*, page 58f; Schickele, *ibid*, page 68

*they celebrate the enticing feasts
of power and issue edicts – to make you pale –
of power, which like machines –
if we want it or no – drive us.
Because from here the weapon-laden trains dash forth
on murderous-gleaming rails,
repossessing day for day, the land.
For here is the source of the will,
boiling up in billowing waves, pressed million fold in napes of necks,
which source, in rhythmic million fold of backs
and million fold in to-and fro of limbs
surges, breaking, to the farthest shores.
Here's where you should stay!
In these dejected Mays, in lacklustre Octobers
no-one shall drive you out!
For with the town you shall subdue the earth.*

Here, too, only comments, and no interpretation. Schickele analyses Dehmel's poem politically. He poses the power question. The town, according to his central thesis, is the centre of power. It is this power, and not the town as such, which is oppressive. And those who return to the countryside will never obtain freedom for everyone. Schickele very deliberately takes up the metaphor of the source and of water billowing and boiling up. He is concerned with the brutality of the power-centres in the towns, issuing edicts which steer people and have them under control like machines. Schickele was writing after 1917 and 1918, in other words, after the experience of the First World War and after the Russian October Revolution. And, while the May and October Revolutions are "lacklustre", yet "no-one shall drive you out!", and "with the town you shall subdue the earth."

As far as our interests are concerned, it is sufficient to realise that any analysis of the town without an analysis of social power and authority is naive. Put pointedly, the town conceals many prison walls, namely factories, in which the masses have to bend their backs to the rhythm of the machines, but the city is also the place in which liberation, namely revolution, is organised by the masses themselves – "Stay!" and take hold of (proletarian) power. "With the town you shall subdue the earth".

With regard to certain aspects of town praise and town critique, the two poems are not so far apart at all. The town is the scene of major conflicts. Town life is the more or less organised conflict of various powers with each other and between each other. The winners are the ones who always "have their say". What matters is winning. Only those who have power are free.

Schickele's and Dehmel's political analyses are diametrically opposed. But for both of them, the power or authority question is of fundamental importance. Allow me, in concluding this literary opening phase, to present and read to you a third literary sample - a city hymn in praise of the Berlin of the late 1920s which fits in well with the present day New Berlin feeling. It is by Bruno Schonlank.

The City

*You spring heavenwards,
You extinguish stars,*

*Your atmosphere sings.
The blackened chimneys tower upwards, upwards...
House crouches on house.
My blood is inflamed,
and from night to days
you are in me.
And are in me
when day addresses you
and your pool of light dies.
Drop of blood am I to your wild ecstasy,
Despair to your vague mourning
And jubilation to the drone of your chords.*

Here, a completely different tone is struck. It is necessary to imagine the colourful nightlife of the late 1920s in Berlin. The city as ‘theatrically’ produced frenzy. The nightlife is one “wild ecstasy”, although not always one of ecstatic joy. The city becomes the mythical subject of the poem – that great You, which is “in me”: “Drop of blood am I to your wild ecstasy, despair to your vague mourning and jubilation to the drone of your chords.”

Here, the city has become a mirror of emotional energies. Joie-de-vivre and despair, the awakening day and the dying pool of light. The individual exists “between day and night”. The city as a magnifying glass for emotional forces. The town as a living stage where each and every thing is ‘theatrically’ produced – “My blood is inflamed”.

In order to cool off, so to speak, let us now turn to a completely different approach to urban reality, taking comparatively sober stock from a sociological and statistical perspective.

The urbanisation of the world – a social sciences and statistical perspective.

Imagine for a moment that you are able to observe the earth through a powerful telescope from a space station in orbit around our planet. The course of your orbit is ingeniously calculated to enable you to recognise the world’s largest “mega cities”. Which towns would you see?

The UNO conference Habitat II, the subject of which was towns on our planet, took place in 1996 in Istanbul. For this purpose, 40 of the largest towns in the world were included in comparative statistics for the year 1990 and a prognosis for the year 2000 presented for them. You have these statistics in front of you, along with a ranking of the 30 largest towns in the world.

It is quite impossible to interpret these statistics here, and I am more concerned to draw a new, unparalleled historical phenomenon – namely that of the mega cities – to our attention and to let this impression sink in, so that we can take leave of our Euro-centric perspective with regard to this phenomenon too.

It is only necessary to take a brief look at history in order to recognise the dramatic growth of the new phenomenon of the giant towns. The most ancient of the world’s towns all lay in the Mediterranean area. For a long time Jericho, with its 8000-year history, was regarded as the world’s oldest town. The current estimate speaks of an urban history amounting to ca. 10,000 years. It is difficult to estimate

the population of these ancient royal towns. They probably amounted to something between 2,000 and 10,000 inhabitants. The largest town in the ancient world was Rome, which had a population of ca. 1 million in the year 100 A.D. Rome remained at the top of the league globally until the year 1800, when London's population crossed the 1 million mark. Up until this point, some 15% of the world's population lived in towns, and 85% lived in the countryside. The world population is estimated as having been ca. 1,000 million in the year 1800.

In the year 2000, 3,000 million people – or 50% of the world's population of some 6,000 million - will be living in large towns. There are currently more than 20 giant metropolises globally, each with more than 10 million inhabitants. In addition to these, there are 35 towns with more than 5 million inhabitants each (cf., for example, the population of Norway at ca. 5 million, or that of Israel, at 4.5 million).

Statistics can be boring, but we ought, nevertheless, to cast a glance at the map of the world with its 30 largest towns (based on 1990 figures). London ranks 13th, Moscow 17th, and Paris 22th in the list. The Euro-centric perspective, to which I myself naturally am also prone, is quite out of date as far as the future of urban living is concerned. This is made utterly clear if we look at the distribution of these 30 major towns throughout the continents of the earth.

16 of them are in Asia, 4 in South America or Central America, 3 in North America, 3 in Europe, and 3 in Africa. At this point, at the very latest, it should be plainly evident that we urgently require clearly defined terminology and internationally valid categories to differentiate between the specific types and sizes of towns. In Germany, as has already been mentioned, any town with more than 100,000 inhabitants is legally regarded as a city. A further practical differentiation is made between towns with a million or more inhabitants, and the megacities, which each have more than 10 million inhabitants. But these means of differentiation are far too imprecise, as well as working from the assumption that the number of inhabitants is the decisive factor for urban typology – a view which is highly disputed. Are the millions-strong towns London and Peking particularly suited for comparison, simply because they have a roughly comparable number of inhabitants?

Up until now we have pursued two differing perspectives – the subjective one of poetry and the objective one of statistics. Are they complementary? Or do they relativise each other? Or are they on such utterly disparate levels that they have no effect on each other?

Categories such as town and countryside, power-centres and authority, oppressed, normed existence and 'walking tall' - none of these had any role to play in the lists of statistical figures. Even if we were to make the effort to plough our way through the remaining columns of figures, in search of crime-rate or education, for instance, our view of the phenomena would still remain superficial! How, then, are we to find interpretative methods which have a chance of penetrating further into the reality of the matter? Let us attempt a third approach.

The city as text – a hermeneutical, structuralist perspective.

Each town is a text. It has narrative character. The question is, who can and who does read it? You probably know the *bon mot* “History is his story”. Each town – at least this is a Biblical, as well as an Ancient Greek observation – defines itself in its foundation myth. There is no town which is not in a permanent state of change without, perhaps for this very reason, extolling its identity and its permanence in legends, myths and tales. These tales often adhere to ancient buildings, to individuals and to conflicts. But the same is true for the present and for present-day urban changes – communities are continually writing and formulating their self-understanding in the form of symbols, signs and tales. In fact, present-day Berlin, where we are holding our conference, is an impressive case in point. I am not talking about journalists and media experts with their continuously-produced commentaries. Nor do I mean the advertising on the street corner. I mean something more elementary. Each life leaves behind traces. Each trace is an interpretation. And each town is a phenomenally rich treasury of traces. Semiotics talk of sign systems, but for me, that is too formal. Let us orientate ourselves on an example from Berlin.

There is an interesting peripheral aspect which is seldom discussed in the debate about the holocaust monument near the Brandenburg Gate in the centre of Berlin. One particular trace of the darkest period of Germany’s history lay, preserved but inaccessible, in the shadow of the Berlin Wall between Potsdam Square and the Brandenburg Gate – the site of the *Führer’s* bunker in the Chancellery of the Reich. It was from here that Hitler issued his commands. It was here that he took his own life. Both the Chancellery of the Reich and the bunker were blown up and attempts made to level the site out. But anyone who knows where the site was can detect a slightly raised area - this is where the criminal centre of it all was to be found. The traces were there - and at the same time they were covered over. This is the rule, as everyone knows who ever searched for traces such as animal tracks. And those who understand how to read them will find tales and narratives opening up, so that they assume a changed approach to the place in future. They sense that there are no such things as a neutral places, but only those which have been marked or which bear meaning. And so each town has a topography of terror, a topography of pleasure, a topography of cultural and religious expression. All of these traces are no longer present in isolation, but are superimposed on each other.

The planned holocaust monument by Peter Eisenmann is directly adjacent to the site of the Chancellery of the Reich. The suspicion readily arises that here, by means of this central memorial in Berlin, the murder victims are to be belatedly given back their civil rights, thereby exorcising the looming shadow which even a mere heap of rubble in the immediate vicinity is still able to cast. At any rate, the aim is to prevent the *Führer’s* bunker becoming a centre for Nazi pilgrimages. While on the subject, the prison in Berlin Spandau in which the *Führer’s* deputy, Rudolf Hess, was imprisoned until his death, was blown up after he died. New buildings have been erected on the site. There should be nothing to bear witness to this prison or to this man. Here too, in my opinion, the justified fear of possible Nazi tourism had a role to play. Both of these examples not only bear testimony to the difficulties involved in reading tracks and traces, even if they are (supposed to be) covered over. They also testify, so to speak, to a “mythical” element behind town planning. One of the intentions behind erecting the holocaust memorial at precisely this site, I suspect, is to “exorcise” the Nazi shadow of Adolf Hitler.

The attempt to “read” a town as a “text” would then also be concerned not so much with reading it neutrally as with becoming aware of it – the town – as a mirror of emotional life forces which, depending on the school we adhere to and the terminology we use, we would term the death impulse and the life impulse.

If only we were to read the places we live in just as the archaeologists read Jerusalem or Rome!

Our towns are worlds of living and dying, built up layer upon layer. Beneath us, the levels of history are to be found, and the future will one day cover over our layer and our traces with new plans, signs, and traces. History is a resilient material. It is impossible to be rid of it. Just as consciousness is a single – relatively thin – layer within the much larger unconscious, so too, the currently valid structure of a town is only a single stratum or layer between the debris of the past and that of the future.

It is said of Hitler’s master architect Albrecht Speer that he not only drew up plans for Hitler of the New Berlin which was conceived of as the centre of the “thousand-year empire”. He had also prepared some sketches of how buildings such as the vast “People’s Hall”, which was to be erected in the centre of Berlin, would one day - after thousands of years - still bear witness as magnificent ruins to the splendour of the Third Reich for eternity. Hitler was furious (the conversation took place during the Second World War) and rejected the ruin sketches as an outrageous impertinence – “These edifices will remain standing for eternity!”

This story tells something of the dialectics involved in searching for traces. It provides hermeneutics with which to read a town. Towns are constructed worlds of living and dying. They are desires which have taken form, but they are also imprecations, they are curses and conjugations. They are constructed dreams as well as nightmares. Whereby it is important not to think in alternatives, but to use a species of additive dialectics in our attempts at decoding.

Once it is accepted that we always have built the niches we inhabit on top of earlier historic worlds of living and dying, then that alone ought to make plain that each town bears, within itself, multifarious history and interpretation, hidden as well as manifest, and fascinating as well as horrifying. The “text” of a town, in other words, is neither unequivocal nor merely ambiguous, but polyphonic, many-voiced. Yet it is not arbitrary.

It is therefore also possible to speak of a “musical score”, which we would have to reconstruct as the inner code of urban living or which, as far as the present is concerned, we would require to construe as an open ended process. Fundamental questions relating to constructivism, de-constructivism and hermeneutics ought to be discussed at this point, but they shall have to be omitted here.

Let us remain on the practical level. There is a decisive tool which assists the art of reading a town. It is a question of finding exemplary sites in the town, the piled-up layers of living and dying in which are able to tell of past hopes and fears, prides and pains, and by virtue of which they ‘provoke’ and inspire not only the invention of present-day tales of the good life and of warding off evil, but also the consequent translation of these dreams of the better life into stone, i.e. into buildings.

As far as I am concerned, such exemplary sites include churches, town halls, monuments, graveyards, but also hospitals, schools, in short “public buildings”. Such places are of prominent importance in the analysis of a town. They contain

within them the memory, the conscience and the aspirations of a community, as well as its sorrows and its failures.

Such buildings can be read as sites of concentrated symbolism in which the town as living space has especially found a characteristic form of life which can help us to decode the ABC of the town. The specific identity of a place is literally saved by such concentrated and usually highly symbolic buildings. There is a highly interesting theory, according to which historic or religious 'primeval' sites - when linked in line with each other - together represent a specific identity code for a certain district or a certain town, thus literally keeping that which is specific about this particular living space (its profile) "alive", in other words protecting and preserving the genius loci (Neddens).

I cannot expound this theory in detail here, but it is plausible *ex negativo*. - In the 1960s, new housing schemes and high-rise ghettos were "thrown up" throughout the western world, leading to orientation difficulties on the part of residents due to their visual uniformity and monotony. Everything was standardised and identical. There was no single house, no single block of flats with an individually recognisable text. Vandalism quickly became established. Graffiti appeared everywhere. And once again it had become possible to describe where you were: "I live in the house with the black-and-yellow dragon at the entrance. Press the burnt button in the lift. That's the 7th floor. Go towards the potted palm. That's where I live."

Could it not have been possible to achieve this desire for the concrete "legibility" of my house entrance by means of town planning more geared to human needs? It is, of course, and post-modern architecture is an answer to the functional urban development of these decades.

The hermeneutics for "reading" a house, a street or a district are everywhere analogous. - We first require exemplary code breakers in order to discover the ABC, and not only local traditions and individual persons, but also exemplary sites or situations which cry out to be "read" can assist us in doing so.

The town as a form of life and the role of the churches – some concluding theses

1. The city is our fate. There is no longer any 'Isle of the Blessed'. Communication technology and entertainment electronics (TV, PC, mobiles, fax, Internet, etc.) have made of us all inhabitants of virtual metropolises, no matter where we live.
2. Every town is becoming a sub-branch of the global village. In reality, the one world has open borders. And so the opportunities and the problems of all corners of the world spill over medially, emotionally and mentally into the remotest village.
3. Globalisation not only renders the globe smaller and more comprehensible. There will also be an increase in forms of resistance to global trends. In the ideological sector this is fundamentalism. (Nationalism can be interpreted as regional fundamentalism).
4. Cities are stratified spheres where village, small town, city and metropolitan structures overlap. These are matched by emotional, social and mental orientations of varied scope. (With the mind of a cosmopolitan, the heart of a villager, the actions of a petty bourgeois etc.)

5. Emotionally speaking, we are still very much strangers, insecure, out of our depth and homeless in the “global village”. Nevertheless, the global village is increasingly becoming the matrix of emotional conditions. The homelessness of the “cosmopolitan” renders him vulnerable. Since autonomy is growing increasingly difficult, there is a desire for “obsession”, to surrender one’s individual self, to submerge oneself in collectivity.
6. The role of religion as a “transportable homeland” will become increasingly important, while the influence of Protestantism with its ethical orientation on an autonomous subject (conscience) will wane.
7. The city is a complex, polyphonic score/text, which, in principle, is analogous to an “emotional landscape”. This is the moment of truth of the polis concept with its referral correlation between kosmos and psyche (kosmos, polis, anthropos).
8. The simultaneousness or synchronism of all epochs in a town landscape with its more or less repressed or consciously present traces corresponds, in its synchronism and in its repression, to the “emotional diary” of individual biographies.
9. Urban or city experiences can cause emotional traumatisations to break out anew, but they can also be balm for certain wounds.
10. Just as human beings undergo change throughout their life, so too towns are to be regarded as “living entities” which undergo change. A “finished” or completed town is a dead town. A measure of the vitality of a town is seen as being its ability to “self-transcend”, i.e. its ability to grow, both outwardly and inwardly.
11. The question thus arises of identity amidst so much change. The search for identity as a never-ending process? Can a town “die” as a person does – or is the “processal” eternity of a town a new metaphor for human changes up to and beyond death?
12. Churches are “time houses”. In them, past, present and future are symbolically present in equal degrees. They are likewise “world houses”, since all four points of the compass are gathered in them – East (orientation towards Jerusalem) and West, North, South. They are memories and expectations (hopes) which have been given structure and shape. They are “clearing points” of the soul, points of asylum for repressed emotions and for the literally persecuted, places of remembrance and workshops for the town of the future.