A Global Home for the Civil Savage:
Nature or Constructed Landscape in a Postcivilised Modernity

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If mythology does not exist for civilized man today,[1] how does he locate himself in space, in time and in a continuously meaningful and ordered existence? Order and the search for order is perhaps the most besetting problem of modern intellectuality under postmodern conditions, especially if the rubrics of deconstruction are permitted, but *not in this discourse (for reasons which may be clearer later)*. Order presumes a taxonomy and related definitions, and in the world of architecture and urbanism this is just what is lacking – the desperate plurality and polyvalence of the so-called "environment" presents a struggle to define or redefine the city, the suburb (Ellin; 247), or even the countryside,[2] now generally violated in most viable climatic zones by "development" of some form.

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

In this compass-less wilderness, there is one category or exemplar, however, which has received quite sharp recognition, and should strike with considerable force the fair-minded observer as significant. This is the concept of the world city, or currently more pervasive, the global city which, if ignored by architects and other "visual" critics, has been well discerned by geographers and sociologists since the early nineties. Urban history is characterized by two alternative approaches: it is either assumed that urban development is evolutionary, or that cities follow different paths. The application of this latter division determines that only particular cities are global cities, due to their specific roles as location points and as control points for the world economy and its financial operations. It is surely this last aspect that has ensured the relative silence of the visual critic in the recent debates – "art for art's sake" dies hard. To ignore it, is *a failure to understand the tragic depth of current affairs.*

The foremost interpreter of the global city, Saskia Sassen, has described three disturbing trends in her treatment of these issues. Urban growth has produced small recompense or none for the lowly-waged. Secondly, "a nexus of paranational power" is created by the global city which demotes the great traditional centers of industrial power such as Detroit, Manchester or Osaka. Lastly, telecommunications does not lead to a "new logic of dispersal as in industry; rather it leads to a new logic of concentration . . of wealth in global cities" (Yeager 1996; 14). The exclusion from the center causes severe demographic transformation and dislocation and is a standing critique to our political economy and sense of citizenship, living as we do in cities without real citizenship.[3]

REAL ESTATE AS BUILDER

Further criteria for inclusion or exclusion in the global city category remains unspecified, since so much depends on the politics and policies of the global city. Today Miami has been described by Saskia Sassen as a "primate city," but not having a stock exchange and other market facilities therefore does not count as a global city.[4] Most relevant here is the increased importance of real estate investment and the influence of real estate investors, which can then assume a symbolic aspect due to the predilections of global real estate, swung by issues of public morality and symbolic reforms. Therefore headlines reflecting such concerns are important indicators for global real estate investors, and the competition, for example between two Pacific Rim contenders for such investment, Los Angeles and Singapore, was swung in the latter's favor due to the 1992 riots in LA, such was the damage done to its urban image.

In this kind of politics Singapore is singularly successful, as its leaders insist that its Confucian values promote economic growth. This is medieval city-pride writ large, for other cities in the same league are used not just as a model for new ideas, or as sources of experiential lessons, but as "legitimation for certain meanings," so that Singapore can rival Hong Kong's high real estate prices, justifying its own by saying that Hong Kong's are even higher. On the other hand, this Asian city-state's plural ethnic ideology, quite innovative and a distinct break with the single-ethos of the old nation-state, is accompanied by a diversity of residents and nonnationals who could question the Chinese ethic of Confucianism, unless this Asian philosophy becomes "transnational" or "ecumenical" as did Platonism in the Western and Islamic Middle Ages.[5]

Further characteristics of the global city have been recognized which are more architectural. The first is the operation of global actors to create the international image of the city, for example the architect Stephen Holl in Helsinki, or Cesar Pelli's specialist design services in London, or the magic touch of Olympia and York[6] in New York before their Canary Wharf fall in London's Docklands. The second is the spread of similar methods of finance and construction – in Docklands the British construction industry was passed over in favor of mostly German suppliers, on grounds of efficiency and cost. A third characteristic we have already seen – foreign investments/global real estate, and the fourth is the recognition of "buildings as signs." This concept relies on the crude exploitation of the developments of post-war architectural modernity, and three different sign *values have been proposed – trophy buildings, exclusive buildings* and image buildings (Crilley, 1993). Irrespective of such determinations, or rather in-determinations, Baudrillard has already observed that

All the great humanist criteria of value, all the values of a civilization of moral aesthetic, and practical judgment, vanish in our system of images and signs. Everything becomes undecidable . . . [and] . . . is based everywhere on the principle of neutralisation and indifference. This is the genaralised brothel (chaos) of capital . . . of substitution and interchangeability. (quoted in Smart, 1992, 125)

CITY AS LANDSCAPE

Another intriguing attempt to qualify the current urban scene is that of Sharon Zukin and her "landscapes of power," found in, say, either Detroit or Disney World (Zukin, 1991).[7] Here all the resources that we can appreciate at even a higher level in the global city are gathered together, and such "landscapes of power" are emblematic of the great attractions of Westernisation from the island of Manhattan to the now ubiquitous Disney Worlds, and their spawn, in which may be included gentrified districts. However as a contrast to the landscapes of power, Zukin proposes that of the "vernacular," where her imagery becomes confused. What is left to the vernacular is the older parts of the city, in most cases the relicts of the pre-industrial town. The irony of these "remaindered" districts, threatened by rezoning and defended by conservationists, is that in urban terms, they sustain the nucleus and visual power of the global city center, as it is only from such low-rise positions that the viewer can properly survey that same center, the same condition of sight in terms of dimensions that were the typical conditions of the older metropolis (Mazzoleni 1993; 297). The ancient city was always set apart from its surroundings, "within it [the city]'s order and a mutual structured dependence between the parts is created, in both a functional and a symbolic sense" (ibid.; 293).

Fig. 1. The remaining lowrise shophouses at Boat Quay, characteristic of colonial mercantile life in Singapore, allow the new financial centre to be appreciated with a measure of human scale and relevance. Courtesy R. Ian Lloyd Productions, Singapore.
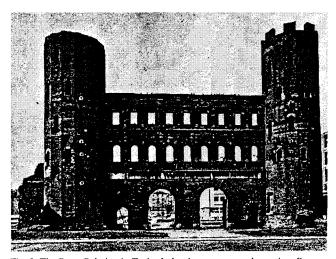

Fig. 2. The Porta Palatina in Turin, Italy, the gateway to the ancient Roman city. The gate with walls conceals what is beyond yet manifests to the exterior an analogy of the content of the city, something now impossible to recreate under modern conditions. Courtesy Bruno Balestrini, Milan.

This uneven figurative language – "landscape of power" vs., "vernacular," indicates a motif of doubt and therefore raises certain questions about the achievement of the global city and our urban condition generally – who is it for, and how can it be a "landscape"?

ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE DEHUMANIZED

Who, then, is the inhabitant of the global city? The American philosopher Michael A. Weinstein has redefined the debate over modernism/postmodernism that permeates current cultural studies, by arguing that our current era is neither modern or postmodern, but "postcivilised" (Weinstein; 1995). This is because our culture has become so dehumanized that

> We live now in an environment that is saturated with the results of past demands – for example, nuclear weapons and power plants, toxic waste dumps, racist and sexist ideologies, expressionistic art, advertisements, psychotherapies, welfare systems, narcotics, and acne medications. Any of these can be altered, new objects can be created and old ones destroyed or rehabilitated, and sets of them can be coordinated into new complexities, but they cannot be unifies coherently on the whole and they cannot be referred back to a primary nature. So it becomes time to treat culture as a wilderness replete with perils and pleasures, to take a step beyond Ortega's "dehumanization of art" to the dehumanization of culture as a whole." (ibid.; 98)

And who is it for, this dehumanized culture? For Weinstein it is for his "civil savage," the direct inheritor of the gradual transformation of man from the late Middle Ages until today. This is a story often retold, from the division of precept from concept in Cartesian rationality, to Kant who as Max Weber had it, "despite his positing a God to balance the moral bankbook, could finally proclaim only that the self should strive to be good, without any grounds for confidence that reality was on its side" (ibid.; 26). With the death of God in the nineteenth century, no further prohibitions on conduct pertained; "This is the conclusion of the newly uncivilized self who stares into the abyss of desire, wrenched by moral nihilism . . . The motto of the civil savage is: Everything is possible, nothing is necessary" (ibid.; 27).

To deepen further the meaning of the civil savage, his individuality invites a short exploration into philosophical or cultural anthropology, a discipline that among other things celebrates human diversity (Kottak 1996). The foundational aspects of the civil savage have been unwittingly established for three centuries and more in Western civilization, all with paradoxical or questioning attitudes which have now become diffused through translation and by other media in literate cultures world-wide today. Dr. Faustus personifies the magus/artist/scientist, tragic hero of post-Renaissance science (Watt 1996; 3-26), and Don Juan is his alter ego in interpersonal and sexual relations (ibid.; 27-89). Don Quixote underlines the paradoxes of historical progress and changing manners and sensibilities (ibid; 90-119), while Robinson Crusoe symbolizes the new world of privacy first for the English "milord" (ibid.; 141-192) and then for everyone today witin a reasonable income. The Yogi and the Commissar are complementary faces of enlightened power first identified by Albert Camus (1953), and informs the totalitarian tendencies found in every political action today, to some degree. The Local Hero[8] is an entrepreneurial figure who rises on dubious qualities of achievement and efficiency; the Cultural Nomad his educated counter-part who is emancipated by global travel and ethnic superiority. Other lesser types may be found, such as the Ethnic Artist, either lauded for his post-colonial authenticity, or marginalised as he approaches the centers of modern art (Jordan 1995). In all these modalities of the civil savage, the professional aspirations of the modern architect and real estate investor can express themselves in a diversity of ways, echoing the plurality and at the same time, the isolation that modernity and its products seem to guarantee.

CITY AND LANDSCAPE AS CONSTRUCTED NATURE

Now, we return to our other question, how is the city a "landscape"? Already we have seen the term "landscape of power" to describe modern urbanism, especially that of the global city, and it is my contention that this figure of speech is not a metaphor, but an ironic statement of reality. There is a constant convergence since the late Renaissance between the rationalization of nature and the naturalization of the visual world, so that the former, nature, becomes appropriated as a social construct, and the latter, the visual sense and its productive powers, is solely identified in the manipulation of the "elements" of such a purified, emancipated nature, eventually indistinguishable from consciousness itself (Evernden 1992). If man is master of this nature he is responsible for it, a fearful task: if he is but a part of it, he is then in a relationship of sacral worship of something he claims to fully understand, as a modern scientist (McKnight 1989).[9] In either case there is no sense of distance from this nature, this landscape, equal to that which was embedded in his ancient relationship with a *kosmos* which contained Classical gods and was governed by fate, or a *mundus* which itself was a Creation, imbued with the signatures of their common Divine Master, Himself separate from His Creation. All this is forgotten, and our social construction of nature is the content of our manipulations as urbanists, as the title of Tom Turner's manual declares without any literary play – *City as Landscape: a post-postmodern view of design and planning* (1996). Despite the author's position in a London school of architecture, "design and planning" replace the ancient discipline on the strength of an oh-so-contemporary "view," referring to procedures of projectivity, systematic mapping and the sensibility of the panorama, all instruments of both incipient and fully-fledged modernity.

DEHUMANIZED ARCHITECTURE

The greatest claim of modern architecture – that it is the "science" or discipline of space (remember Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*), betrays its failure of understanding and empathy with our shared existence in clear terms. The destruction of our participation in "place" along with the disappearance of Aristotelian physics (the "why") in favor of "the global absolutes of Space and Time" has a primary claim on our intellectual attention as Edward S. Casey has repeatedly made (1993, 1996), and the struggle to overcome the isometric interpretation of so-called "Euclidean space"[10]

Fig. 3. Bugis Street, Singapore. A street with a dubious reputation has been sanitised and transformed while keeping the shells of the shophouses. Courtesy R. Ian Lloyd Productions, Singapore.

for the "'multifarious between' envisioned by Heidegger's evolving discussion of place serves to underscore the inclusiveness of implacement once it is grasped as the opening of the Open, the very Clearing that makes room for the manifestation of being and the fourfold" (Casey 1996; 335).[11] This struggle has now entered a new phase as the character of the local is challenged by the place-absorbing power brought about by the dislocation effects of globalisation which we have already seen.

That challenge is the recognition and sustenance of the numinence of place linked to the "ethnical domain" of Susanne Langer (1953; 94-100), wherever it is found in the defiance of "transnational space," recognized by the urban geographers as a product of the global city (Yaeger, 1996: 16-17).

As architecture is an extension of embodied notions, sensibilities or concepts (since ideas are inaccessible in any immediate way), then architecture is also "*a metaphor of the body,* a modality that the body expresses to symbolize itself" (Mazzoleni, 289). This permits us to *see architecture not as a individual and collective body* (ibid.). Thus Mazzoleni rightly upbraids Mies van der Rohe for his remark, "Structures in Concrete are, in essence, skeletal structures . . . Thus *buildings, skin and bones*" (ibid.; 290).

This is all part of the rationalized nature and the constructed landscape that constitutes today the "landscape of power," and the convergence of these possibilities has long been with us.

In the last century two of the great figures of architectural thought fought over the meaning of conservation, but "almost exact contemporaries strongly opposed to each other, Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc
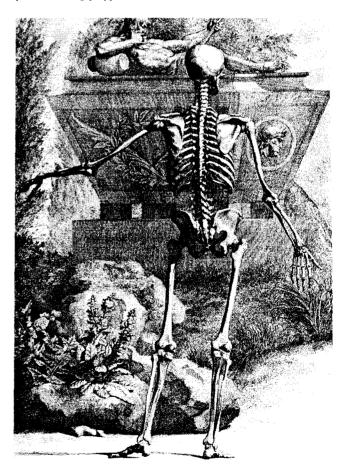

Fig. 4. "The Skeleton, Back View," from *Tabulae Sceleti et Musculorum Corporis Humani*, by Bernard Siegfried Albinus, reprinted in *Albinus on Anatomy, With 80 Original Albinus Plates*, by Robert Beverly Hale and Terence Coyle, (New York, Dover Publications, Inc, 1988) p. 31. Courtesy Dover Publications, Inc.

Fig. 5. The Matterhorn, famous peak in the Pennine Alps of Switzerland. Courtesy Swiss National Tourist Office.

yet shared interests to an uncanny degree" (Middleton, Watkin, 1977,379). One of the most striking of these was in respect to the Alps: Viollet-le-Duc published *Le massif du Mont Blanc*, which was "the spectacle of the mountain as it once existed, hard and neat and new, . . . a gigantic restoration study" (ibid.).

While Ruskin despised restoration, he too spent much time contemplating and sketching in the Alps. In the age of the panorama, this provided the ultimate panorama, defiantly nonhuman, for these historians of culture. The final step in this convergence is the demand for the perfect building[12] made by Gropius and the Bauhaus (Harries, 1983). Where was such a model of perfection to be found? – hardly in the celestial perfection of the superlunary world of Aristotle, the highest part of which was the "natural" abode of the angels or in historicist reconstructions of past achievements so important for the neoclassical and romantic vision.

The totalising romantic visions of nature were now subsumed into a new doctrine of elemental design, which at the level of application in city tower-blocks and guided by the hidden hand of the market, becomes the simultaneously organic and rational vista of mid-century Manhattan, with the World Trade Center and the World
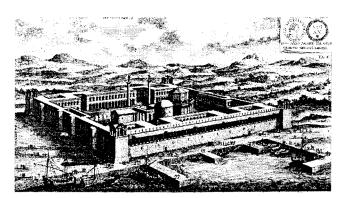

Fig. 6. Fischer von Erlach's "Palace of the Emperor Diolcetian" at Spalato, *Entwurf einer historischen Architektur, Vienna,* 1721, p 73. Archaeology and exploration converged to support increasingly authoritative visions of the past, which become formulas for the future, no matter how badly they are understood or transmitted.

Fig. 7. Hugh Ferris, "The Chrysler Building." *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1986 edition, Princeton Architectural Press). Solid "skin" clothes the "skeleton" which emerges at the top and thus encompasses the reductionist "language" of constructed nature/landscape of the city. Courtesy Princeton Architectural Press.

Financial Center as the later complementary symbols of modern and postmodern excess on the way to the global city. As our veritable wildernesses disappear from the face of the earth, we remake these truly artificial ones in their stead.

RECOVERY OR RECONSTITUTION

While the human scientists may concern themselves with policy,

artists, architects and critics have to think about a more concrete future. Suzi Gablik and David Ray Griffin among other contemporary Americans have been active in seeking a way out of the Postmodern scenario, or at least to bring the modern to an end. Generally there is a consensus among these like-minded critics of culture that there is no going back, no attempt to re-employ the historicist strategy, for not even the Pope himself (not that he might wish to) could restore a traditional cosmography, the only ground on which such a restoration could succeed. What seems more fitting is the possibility of **reconstitution**, that is a recognition of the things that matter in all their manifold meanings, some of which we have remarked on above – the numinence of place, the power of imagery, the primordial stratum of life which is "partly translatable into language or narratable in story" (Mazzoleni 287), the celebration of the "prose of the world" of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as an arena for further participation and creativity. Three strategies are suggested here to terminate this exploration of our urban culture and condition.

The first of these strategies is **magical realism**. While this movement is associated with Latin America's most famous writer Gabriel García Márquez, magical realism owes its roots more to the visual world of the Baroque, the festival and Carnival, and Expressionism (Zamora 1995), than is apparent from its literary attainments. The philosophical character of Carnival questions the cultural values of established authority and allows such a polarity to mix with the unoffical in response to the human need to dissolve borders and boundaries, even those of life and death, and hence the sense of the grotesque (Danow, 1995, 23-25). It is also important to realize that its social relevance is maintained through its "intersection of myth and history, where myth is also conscious" (Angulo 1995; xi). Despite the subjectivity of its greatest exponent's novel, *Cien años de soledad*, it represents "a world in microcosm,...[where is] erase[d] the thin line between objective and subjective realities" (Klein, 1882, 200). By the more relaxed and interpretative recourse to the "ethical domain" we can create like García Márquez "through the humanistic and universalizing elements of myth, imagination and aesthetic perception, an original vision of man and his world" (ibid., 201). The full consequences of these possibilities have never been realised except by a few exponents lying outside the scope of this paper.[13]

Fig. 8. Gaudí assisted by Jujol, roof to the Casa Batlló, Barcelona, 1904-6. Between the carnavalesque and the grotesque, the richness of magical realism (here the back of the monster killed by the spear/turret of St. George) offers a lively alternative to the reductionist formalisms of later modernity. Courtesy F. Català-Roca, Editiones Polígrafa, S. A., Spain.

My second proposal is to mobilize the existence and **power of the fragment** in a positive sense (Vesely, 1996), and not in the negative sense of "design element." The fragment was an aspect of Renaissance and modern connoisseurship, but also firmly fixed as a contemporary emblem of nostalgic art appreciation in general. In the eighteenth century the fragment and the ruin were part of an historicist campaign to advance towards an Enlightenment Utopia. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the dominance of fashion has combined with the Romantic concept of the fragment as a miniature work of art, expressing a totality in reduction – *pars pro toto* (Gusdorf 1982; 448). Our modern museums and galleries are vast "cathedrals" of fragments, as most pre-modern works of art have been wrenched from their context. Given the Romantic *Weltanschauung*, the perduring but most authentic sensibility of art to which we are heir, and forsaking the Classicist and historicist insistence on periodization and misplaced decorum, a new imagination – the "multifarious between," that intersection of history and myth – might come about with direct relevance to our social and individual being and sense of cosmic order. It is appropriate here to remember that for Aristotle, art was the actions that allowed man to bring nature to perfection, and here nature in its material appearance was at an ontological distance and therefore requiring effort to bring to its potential fullness.

My last strategy conforms to the stabilization of our built world which must come about, in other words the end of development. Great opportunities lie in the imaginative exploitation of brown sites linked to other considered attitudes to imagery, accommodation and densities. Such attitudes can described as "upgrading" as in Singaporean housing policy since the early nineties, but I prefer the term **"colonization."** This is truly a process of "concrete critique," a local or applied revisionism, that of course any owner can impose on his property. Our history both building and urban, is replete with the most amazing examples[14] – from the Romanesque to the Gothic, and from the medieval to the Renaissance and Baroque that any number of instances could be piled up: the important feature of them all is the layering and erasing of continuous building campaigns, sometimes now disguised beneath nineteenth-century attempts to impose a period strait-jacket upon them.[15] The dead hand of Neoclassical rigour and revival pedantry is paradoxically too much alive even today.

CONCLUSION

The social possibilities of magical realism combined with combinative richness of the fragment and urban colonization should inform a higher artistic dialogue than ever undertaken through the emancipated, tired and flat experiments of twentieth century modernism. If the description "experiment" here sounds unjustifiably harsh, it is only consistent with the ethos of empirical positivism which nourished its spirit, a spirit that is still servile to an overweening and apparently unavoidable international globalism with always questionable, and sometimes always, negative attitudes for our global well-being.

NOTES

[1] Since learned books are written about *modern myths*, these can hardly be described as myths ontologically understood, which are the repository of truth for the illiterate or at least, those who do not choose to transmit what is important by writing. Real modern myths must be isolated to be understood, and have nothing to do with the transcendent order and meaning of traditional myth; see Watt, 1996.

[2] "The distinction between the suburbs and countryside were rendered obsolete with advanced industrial capital" (Ellin, 247).

[3] The medieval city was a sworn association of citizens as a whole, and therefore a corporation, a unique practice which has been extinguished by the Renaissance nation-state. This status was celebrated in the slogan, *Stadtluft macht frei*, "City air confers freedom," from the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. See Engin F. Isin, *Cities without Citizens: the Modernity of the City as a Corporation* (Montreal, New York: Black Rose Books, 1992).

4   For this and other evaluations relevant to South American cities, consult the WWW, "Saskia Sassen."

5   Plato entered the oral tradition of Eastern Islam as "Platon," a great artificer, etc., well-known down to today in e. g. Afghanistan: conversation with Prof. Bashir A. Kazimee, Washington State University School of Architecture.

6   Olympia and York are one of a growing number of globalised property developers with interests on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as in Moscow and Tokyo (Crilley, 128).

7   The direct image of landscape applied to the strictly architectural context – *burölandschaft* – was significantly generated by "the cybernetic idea of the office" as "superseded Taylorism," (Duffy 1980; 274-5).

8   I owe the term to Darrel Crilley where he identifies the "Myth of the local hero" with the manipulations of public opinion in East London for the construction of Canary Wharf (Crilley, 131).

9   In the Faustian pact with regard to the command of knowledge linked to nature, the corollary to the identification of all truth with mathematical physics and experiment, is that nothing can fail to be understood, at least as to "How." It is the privilege of the ancient and medieval metaphysician to retain answers to the question, "Why." See Evernden, 1992,

10 Since the early seventeenth century, apart for very few traditional and scholastic polymaths, the cosmological implications of Euclidean doctrine passed from view in favor of mercantile and other applied interpretations (cf. author's unpubl. doctorate, "Geometry and Light in the Architecture of Guarino Guarini," Cambridge University Library and the British Library, 1991).

11 Heidegger's famous fourfold – the gods, the sky, the earth and man, does not need a pre-Socratic source, but is equally accessible in the *cursus philosophici* of the Baroque, which the German philosopher knew quite well, as a commentator on Leibniz.

12 Since in physical terms "complete" means "perfect," I extend Harries' understanding in this way (Harries 1980).

13 "For my intitiation into the relationship of magical realism and design, I am indebted to conversations with Prof. Joseph Burton, Director of the Clemson Architectural Foundation, the Daniel Center, Geonoa, Italy (Clemson University, S. C.), and the hospitality of the Centre when I was hosted in 1996 and 1997.

14 "The science of art, it is its history" quoted by Gusdorf (1982).

15 An interesting instance of urban diversity inside an inner-city enclave with unified ownership but with government and private sponsorship is the recent development of Temple Bar, Dublin, Ireland, a paradigm of urban colonization.

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