

# **MEMORIES OF CITIES**

## **TRIPS AND MANIFESTOES**

**Jonathan Charley**

**Studies in Architecture**

# MEMORIES OF CITIES

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# Memories of Cities

## Trips and Manifestoes

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## Preface

Everything always begins with a long hot summer and a confession. It was July 1975 and it was my first job on a building site as a scaffolder's mate. It was the beginning of an accidental career in architecture and building that somehow has continued for nearly 40 years. My confession is that unlike some of my contemporaries, who swear they woke up one day at an impossibly early age with a driving ambition to redesign the world, I fell into architecture almost by default. Like the drunk labourer who, after tumbling three stories from the scaffold, landed at my feet and then got up virtually unscathed, it was a lucky fall, in that architecture rather suited my wayward and diverse engagement with the world. In true renaissance fashion, it has allowed me to play music, read, write, travel, make pictures, design, build and teach. In other words, it has been more of an immersive osmotic field rather than a professional vocation. *Memories of Cities* reflects that scattered life in architecture and collects together nine essays developed over the last eight years that explore different ways of writing about the history of the built environment.

Employing a variety of narrative techniques including memoirs, letters, and diary entries, each essay tells a story about the political and ideological character of buildings and cities. The reason for the diversity of outputs is straightforward enough and reflects the idea that the form in which a story is narrated depends on the subject matter. Each chapter sets out to illuminate key forces that underpin the development of the capitalist built environment and to highlight attempts to forge alternative visions of how buildings and cities might be produced and experienced.

There are four themes that recur throughout the book: capitalism, empire, revolution and utopia. These function like territorial markers; reminders of what drives me and where one day we might drive to. I do not offer any comprehensive theory of capitalist urban development and am not an historian so much as someone who writes about history. But suffice to say that Marxism and critical theory have heavily influenced my thinking and writing and have taken me into intellectual territories that I have found forbidding but exciting.

Thirty-five years ago, when I was first an architecture student, there was relatively little urban and architectural history and theory that challenged how we

might understand the field. Since then, there has been an extraordinary profusion of books on things architectural and urban and especially books with the word 'space' in the title; that strange euphemism for all manner of things and properties. This reflected not only an increased general interest in buildings and cities, but also the increasingly fuzzy boundaries between different disciplines. Social scientists began writing about space at more or less the same time as people from architecture ventured into the world of sociology and the humanities. This was captured by what was called the 'spatial turn,' which set out to give history a more explicit geographical dimension and to remind us that the co-ordinates of human existence were both temporal and spatial.

The changing mood was exemplified by the way in which students of architecture, politics, literature and sociology were reading the same books like Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation*, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, Lefebvre's *Production of Space*, Jameson's *The Cultural Logic of Post-Modernity* and so on. The essays here are embedded in this interdisciplinary cultural shift and as such, draw on a broad range of fields, economic theory, social history, literary criticism, and cultural studies. Although some of this reading was a pleasure, an awful lot of it was tortuous. So much theory and history is dry, leaden, and for me, at any rate, impenetrable. Consequently, one of my biggest concerns in putting this book together has been to produce texts that are enjoyable and engaging to read. How successful I have been in this is for the reader to judge. If I have an aspiration as a 'voice,' then it is to be a polemical essayist who plays with prose without ever losing sight of the truth imperative. On this point the work of writers like Walter Sebald and Norman Mailer have been particularly instructive because of the way they blend politics, history and storytelling, and point to the possibility inferred by the subtitle to Mailer's *Armies of the Night* of 'History as a novel, the novel as history'. Such a proposition intrigues me and I am hardly the first to point out that literature can be as powerful in its critique of social history as the work of the historian, and in this respect it is undoubtedly true that my world view has been formed as much by reading Steinbeck and Zola as Marx and Engels. To which I would always add travelling and looking, those experiential elements in the formation of knowledge that are often overlooked.

*Memories of Cities* gives glimpses, then, of the journey that I have been on in recent years – a voyage of discovery that was both intellectual and material. All of the buildings and cities that I write about are places that I have visited, lived or worked in, and each text is illustrated with images that provide a parallel narrative. With the exception of Brazil, it has been a predominantly European tour, one in which cities like Glasgow, Moscow, Paris and Marseille have loomed large.

The essays are very roughly laid out chronologically in terms of historical time, although some of them naturally enough bounce back and forth. Each of the chapters is preceded by a short abstract that explains their origins and objectives in more detail. The book begins with 'The Glimmer of Other Worlds' that takes the form of an interview about the character of the capitalist city and alternative forms of practice. In a way it functions as an introduction, in that it introduces many of the key themes developed in other chapters. 'Violent Stone' takes us into the heart of the nineteenth century and is put together as a trilogy of short essays about the

dialectical character of one the most pre-eminent institutions of the early capitalist city, the law court. This is followed by 'Paris: Ghosts and Visions of a Revolutionary City', an obligatory and inevitable engagement with a well-worn subject that I try and give a new twist by presenting it as a succession of dramatic 'Acts' that explore the spatial dimensions of an urban revolution. This takes us to the turn of the twentieth century and 'Letters from the Front Line...' that is presented as the notes and letters of a journalist who is witnessing the changing nature of the Russian building industry as the revolutionary idealism of the 1920s gives way to dictatorship. Next comes 'Foreign Bodies', which is the oldest chapter in the book and imagines Marseille and Glasgow as two old men reminiscing and writing letters to each other about their rise and subsequent decline in the latter half of the twentieth century. 'The (Dis)Integrating City' returns to Russia and is one of two chapters in the collection that reflect a shift in my interests over the last five years towards the literary dimensions of the architectural and spatial imagination. It is composed as a series of notebooks and weaves a narrative between the Russian literary and architectural avant-garde in the context of the 1917 Revolution. 'Sketches of War II' is in some ways ahistorical, in that it deals with the antithetical history of architecture as a history of violence and destruction and takes us on a tour of places in which this relationship is acutely exposed. Chapter 8, 'The Shadow of Economic History II' brings us up to the present day, engages with economic theory and places the recent crisis in the building industry in an historical context. The final chapter, 'Scares and Squares II', plays with the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction and journeys through the architecture of utopian and dystopian literature from Thomas More to J.G. Ballard and Philip K. Dick, at which point the journey is interrupted.

As for acknowledgements, my particular thanks, of course, to my long-suffering family, but also to my teachers, friends, students, and unlucky casual acquaintances who have been forced to listen to me and who, in their different ways, have contributed to this endeavour. My thanks also to Valerie Rose and Emily Ruskell at Ashgate for supporting this project. All faults are, of course, my own.

Jonathan Charley

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## The Glimmer of Other Worlds: Questions on Alternative Architectural Practice

### INTRODUCTION

'The Glimmer of Other Worlds' was prompted by my experiences as a teacher attempting to explain to students what the idea of an alternative to capitalist building production might mean. It struck me that one way to address this was to ask a series of questions that are typical of the kind I have received over the years. In effect, it is an architectural and political manifesto that addresses a specific politically engaged meaning of alternative practice understood as anti-capitalist resistance. More broadly, it summarises ideas that I have been preoccupied with ever since I first left architecture school in 1980 and was lucky enough to find work in the firm Collective Building and Design. A cooperative – or more precisely, a self-management collective – I worked there for seven years. It was very much a formative experience and an apprenticeship in how to produce architecture in a different way. I left in part because of a desire to study more seriously the political economy of the built environment, and it was after completing a Masters at University College London that I went to Moscow for a year to begin my research into the history of Soviet architecture and construction. These questions then have been fermenting for a long time. As for the answers, these are works in progress. 'The Glimmer of Other Worlds' was first presented at the Alternate Currents Conference at the University of Sheffield in 2007, and published in the *Architecture Research Quarterly* (ARQ) in 2008.

1.1 'Architects of the world unite'  
Marx in front of the Bolshoi Theatre



## 1

*Can there be a greater spectacle or drama than the seizure of a city during the midst of a major protest or rebellion? St Petersburg, a metropolis framed by a skyline composed of glistening cupolas and belching toxic chimneys, sways with intoxicated expectation that a rent in time is about to appear. The cobbles crack with the sound of falling statues. Horses dangle from lifting bridges. Barricades mesh across streets. A panic-stricken government official searches for his nose and briefcase. Jealous civil servants, Francophile aristocrats, and vengeful generals are feverishly engaged in settling accounts, closing their shutters and securing safe passage out of the city.<sup>1</sup>*

### Q1. What is meant by the phrase alternative or alternative practice?

Alternative or alternate are politically neutral words that suggest something to do with notions of difference, opposites, or choice. Like any words, they acquire their meaning through context and association, such as in the expressions 'the alternative society', 'alternative medicine', or 'alternative technology'. Here I want to deal with a very specific politically engaged meaning: alternative practice understood as anti-capitalist practice. By this I mean a way of doing things, including making buildings, which is not defined by capitalist imperatives and bourgeois morality. This has two aspects: first, in the sense of resisting the environmentally damaging and socially destructive aspects of capitalist urban development; second, in terms of engaging with embryonic post-capitalist forms of architectural and building production.

## 2

*Murderous young men and women are hopping over the walls of back courts and thousands of subterranean proletarians with molten metal teeth pour out of the yards and factories, all of them searching for redemption. It is a perfect stage set*



1.2 'The trickle-down theory of capitalist urbanisation'. Squatter camp, 'Jardim de Paraguai', São Paulo

*for the outbreak of a revolution, its illuminated enlightenment boulevards poised over rat-infested basements. Till the moment before the cannon roars it continues to parade its cathedrals, boulevards and illustrious terraces with a Potemkin-like contempt for the rest of the city. The flâneur, the prince, the banker, and the priest cannot believe that the history of their fundamentally implausible city has entered a new phase in which they will be relegated to bit parts.*

## Q2. But aren't you swimming against the tide, against received wisdom?

We should always be sceptical of received wisdom, or in its rather more dangerous guise, common sense, which is often little more than 'naturalised' ideology. One example of this is the 'common sense attitude' that socialism is finished and that human civilisation ends with the combination of free-market capitalism and liberal parliamentary democracy. It is a conclusion reinforced by the ideological consensus sweeping across the political parties that neo-liberal economic theory is the panacea for the world's ills.

Such 'ideological common sense' resembles a powerful virus that attacks the nervous system, destroying the powers of reason. Such is the germ's strength that it induces a dream-like state of narcosis in the corridors of power. The rallying cries of dissent become ever more ethereal and faint. The memories of ideological disputes about alternative worlds or concepts of society that had dominated political life in earlier generations become increasingly opaque until they take their place alongside the myths of ancient legend. Showmen and peddlers of bogus medicine sneak along the passageways and slide into the vacant seats of philosophers and orators. Investigative journalists and rebel spies cower in the shadows. They are visibly terrified, as if haunted by Walter Benjamin's comment that one of the defining features of fascism is 'the aestheticisation of politics'.<sup>2</sup> Surely this cannot be happening here? But it is, and

in the Chamber of the House applause indicates that the garage mechanics are all agreed, there is no doubt that the engine works. The differences of opinion revolve around what colour to paint the bodywork and which type of lubricant should be used to ensure the engine ticks over with regularity and predictability. This is a profoundly depressing situation and we should neither believe nor accept it.

### 3

*A detailed map of the city is laid out on the table. Hands sweep with a dramatic blur across the streets and squares. One of them picks up a fat pencil and begins to draw on the paper. The fingers compose two circles, one at a 500-metre radius from the Winter Palace the other at a 1,000 metres, and proceed to plot a series of smaller circles indicating the key places and intersections to be targeted in the coming insurrection. Strategic crossroads, the railway stations, the post and telegraph offices, bridges, key banking institutions and the Peter and Paul Fortress – the map of the city becomes a battle plan.<sup>3</sup>*

#### **Q3. But this is all politics, what about architecture?**

There are exceptions, but historically architects have tended to work for those with power and wealth. It was in many ways the original bourgeois profession, so we should not be surprised that many a professional architect is happy to be employed as capitalism's decorator, applying the finishing touches to an edifice with which they have no real quarrel. As for the would-be rebel, even the architect's and builder's cooperative fully armed with a radical agenda to change the world for the better is required to make compromises in order to keep a business afloat. All alternative practices working within the context of a capitalist society still have to make some sort of surplus or profit if they are to survive in the market place. This said, there are ethical and moral choices to be made. It would be comforting to think that the majority of contemporary architects' firms would have refused to design autobahns, stadiums and banks with building materials mined by slave labourers in 1930s Germany. How is it, then, that seemingly intoxicated by the promise of largesse and oblivious to the human degradation and environmental catastrophe unravelling in the Gulf, architectural firms are clambering over bodies to collect their fees from reactionary authoritarian governments and corrupt dictators who deny civilian populations basic democratic rights?<sup>4</sup> Why is it that so many firms, in order to satisfy a 'werewolf hunger for profit', are happy to ignore the labour camps holding building workers in virtual prison conditions? There is no polite way of describing what amounts to amnesiac whoredom. But on this and other related matters the architectural and building professions remain largely silent, an unsettling quiet that is paralleled in Britain by the absence of any socially progressive movement within the architectural community that questions and confronts the ideological basis of the neo-liberal project.



1.3 'Architects, don't work for repressive regimes and dictators'.  
Third Reich Air Ministry, Berlin

#### 4

*Tearing up the theatrical rulebooks on the relationship between actors and audience, workers transform the steps of the Winter Palace into what looks like a set from an Expressionist film. A giant three-dimensional version of Lissitsky's print, 'Red wedge defeats the whites', a collision of cubes, pyramids and a distorted house are constructed to camouflage the pastel blue stucco facade. This is the stage on which the revolutionaries re-enact the occupation of the Royal Palace and the arrest of Kerensky's provisional government on a nightly basis with a cast of thousands. Something special had been unleashed. It makes perfect sense. 'We workers will no longer listen to our bosses in the factory, so why should we listen to them in the art salons and galleries? Away with the grand masters, away with the worship of experts, art into life, art into the street, the streets are our palettes, our bodies and tools our implements.*

#### Q4. But isn't the Left dead and aren't you trying to raise ghosts and spectres?

There is perhaps an element of necromantic wishful thinking. It is probably true that the Left in Europe, despite the anti-capitalist movement, has scattered, punch-drunk and still reeling from the ideological battering ram unleashed against it. Like whipped autumnal leaves spread across the fields after high winds, it waits for a rake to pile it into a recognisable and coherent shape. But new alliances form at the very moment when all seems lost. The reclamation of the lost, buried and hidden is the subject matter of archaeology. But we also need to conduct a careful archaeological dig to reclaim the oft forgotten historical attempts to forge an alternative to capitalism. Central to this project of rebuilding opposition is to rescue the word socialism from its association with the violent state capitalist dictatorships of the former Soviet bloc. With careful scrapes and incisive cuts our archaeological dig reveals a library full of eminently modern and prescient ideas like equality of

1.4 'Architect,  
are you?' Graffiti,  
Glasgow



opportunity, social justice, the redistribution of wealth, the social ownership of resources – concepts that are easy to brush off and reinvigorate. The excavations continue and we discover that anarchism, far from its infantile representation as an ideology of chaos and disruption, offers other extraordinary ideas that can be added to the library index. Infused by a resolute defence of individual liberty, it speaks of self-management, of independent action, of autonomy, and of opposition to all forms of social power, especially that wielded by the State.

## 5

*Comrades, take the time to read, digest and enjoy the declaration on land. Savour these words, 'the landowner's right to possession of the land is herewith abolished without compensation.'<sup>5</sup> Does that not sound magnificent? It is not poetry in the sense of Pushkin or Lermontov, but it possesses a timeless lyrical quality. We have achieved something that no other people in human history have managed. We have socialised the land on behalf of all of society's members at the same moment as occupying all the key buildings of the state and capitalist class. It is an act that, if it were to all end tomorrow, would nevertheless resound through the ages like the tales of Homer and Odysseus.*

**Q5. But I've heard it all before, capitalism this, capitalism that, shouldn't we just accept that the best we can do is to ameliorate the worst aspects of capitalist building production? I can see why one might become anti-capitalist, but shouldn't we learn to accept that's just the way the world is?**

That is indeed how the world is. The question is, do we think it should be? Is the capitalist system really the best way of handling human affairs and organising how we make and use our buildings and cities? It is true that capitalism has proved to be remarkably resilient and even in moments of profound economic crisis, has



1.5 'The miraculous appearance of no place like home'  
Billboard, Glasgow

managed to restructure economic life so that capital accumulation can recommence. Yet it remains dominated by the contradictions that arise from a social and economic system based on the private accumulation of capital and the economic exploitation of workers. It is a 300-year old history disfigured by slavery, colonial domination, socio-spatial inequality, and fascism – scars that are viewed as aberrations arising from some other planet, rather than what they are, structural features of capitalist economic domination. Despite this history of social and psychological violence, we are told that the organisation of a mythical free market in land and building services and the relentless commodification of all aspects of the built environment are the best ways of building our villages, towns and cities. Simultaneously, attempts to provide a critique or offer alternative models for social and economic development are dismissed as the utopian dreams of the sleeping dead.

## 6

*What we have achieved through our proclamation represents a continuation of the struggles of French revolutionaries to give the idea of a commune, and of communal property, a modern urban character. And they in turn were indebted to English revolutionaries a century before. It is comforting to think that a full 265 years before our declaration on land nationalisation, the Diggers, as the militants liked to call themselves, intended once and for all to 'level men's estates'. On a spring Sunday in 1649, a small band of revolutionary soldiers declared the abolition of the Sabbath, of tithes, magistrates, ministers and the Bible. Proceeding to dig local wasteland collectively, they loudly proclaimed that it was not a symbolic action but a real assumption of what they considered to be their rightful ownership of common lands. It was a radical vision of the future in which neither God nor powerful property owners had a place. Agricultural production outside London would have been collectivised in the common interest and a programme launched to build schools and hospitals for the poor throughout the country.<sup>6</sup>*

1.6 'Exploding  
myths – don't  
believe the hype'  
CCTV camera,  
Glasgow



**Q6. So what are the main contradictions within the contemporary built environment that we should try and tackle?**

A by no means exhaustive list might begin as follows: 1) The private ownership by capitalists of the means of building production; 2) The unstable character of urban development and the employment insecurity of workers that results from the endemic cycles of boom and slump within the building industry; 3) The history of 'geographical' uneven development and socio-spatial inequality; 4) The divisive patterns of social segregation that result from the privatisation and fortification of land and buildings; 5) The way in which the commodification of everyday life exacerbates our alienation from nature, each other and the products of our labour; 6) The subordination of social need and the environmental destruction caused by capitalists prioritising profits over all other requirements and desires; 7) The tendency towards the homogenisation of architecture as building producers economise so as to maintain the rate of profit; 8) Ever-increasing levels of spatial surveillance and control designed to create a 'purified city' and ensure that the process of capital accumulation remains uninterrupted. All of these characteristics and others that we could add to the list are accepted as a price worth paying and would have been more than recognisable concerns to social commentators 100 years ago. (It is worth remembering that in the nineteenth century, the construction industry was one of the test beds for laissez-faire economics.) The purpose of criticism then is quite simple – to challenge capitalist hegemony and to open up the imagination to the possibility of a liberated concept of labour and space.