



PASSAGES: EXPLORATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

by Graham Livesey

ISBN 978-1-55238-675-0

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence.

This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY**:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY NOT**:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.

4 METAPHOR: the NEED for INNOVATION

Not only language but the whole of intellectual life is based on a play of transpositions, a play of symbols, which can be described as metaphorical. Then again, knowledge always proceeds by comparison, so that all known objects are connected to one another by relations of interdependency.¹

The issue of poetics and meaning in contemporary architecture and urbanism invokes, often unknowingly, the actions of metaphor. Metaphor, from the Greek word *metaphora* (*meta*: over, and *pherein*: to carry),² is a linguistic device that is appropriate when considering the interpretation of artifacts. A building can be metaphorical, an object or element can be metaphorical, and cities, in all their immense complexity, can be understood in metaphorical terms. No doubt for some the calling up of metaphor is a romantic notion, verging on the decorative and ornamental. However, as Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated, metaphor operates at all levels of everyday language: orientational (based on spatial orientations derived from the human body), ontological, containing

(marking boundaries and territories), personifiable, and structural. They write that the “essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”³ Most metaphors are so common in everyday use that they have lost their metaphorical power; they are examples of “dead” metaphor, or represent movement from the figurative to the literal.

Metaphor is the most fundamental form of figurative language (along with simile, synecdoche, and metonymy) and implies a transference or a turning of language toward figurative meaning. In other words, “aspects of one object are ‘carried over’ or transferred to another object, so that the second object is spoken of as if it were the first.”⁴ Metaphor has the aim of “achieving a new, wider, ‘special’ or more precise meaning.”⁵ Writers on the subject have attributed various operative qualities to metaphor. Ernst Cassirer states that metaphor is one of the “essential conditions” of speech.⁶ According to Wheelwright, metaphor provides a “unique flash of insight.”⁷ For Paul Ricoeur, metaphor implies “semantic innovation, an emergence of meaning;”⁸ or, out of linguistic discourse arise metaphors that reveal aspects of reality.⁹ Like the writer or storyteller drawing together disparate events into a plot or narrative structure, metaphor, at its most powerful, is a profoundly creative act. The joining of context, creative act, and interpretation operate within the realm of metaphor as a hermeneutic enterprise. This produces both a mimetic and a heuristic

condition,¹⁰ mimetic in that creativity draws from a context, and heuristic because it exposes something new.

Each of the terms used in a metaphor implies what Nelson Goodman calls a "schema." The innovation in metaphor occurs when there is "a transfer of a schema, a migration of concepts, an alienation of categories."¹¹ In other words a schema is imposed on an uncongenial realm, giving rise to conceptual conflicts. Goodman describes this as a territorial invasion, an "immigrant schema" applied to a home realm.

James M. Edie sums up the operational nature of metaphorical expression in the following:

A word is not a metaphor just because it is *used*, though this is a necessary condition; a word becomes a metaphor when it is used to refer with a new purpose, *with a new intention*, to a previously disclosed aspect of experience in order to reveal a hitherto unnamed and indistinct experience of a different kind. The metaphorical use of words thus brings about a reorganization, a refocusing of experience, which continues to grow in complexity with each further use of the word in a distinctively new sense, with each new *purpose*.¹²

Metaphors tend to operate between nouns, whether animate or inanimate; however, they can also work through adjectives and verbs, which provide a more indirect form

of metaphorical expression.¹³ Most powerfully, they act between nouns in various combinations of animate and inanimate couplings: “he is a beast” (animate/animate), “she is a factory” (animate/inanimate), “the city is an old woman” (inanimate/animate), “the city is paradise” (inanimate/inanimate). According to Christine Brooke-Rose, “any identification of one thing with another, any replacement of the more usual word or phrase by another, is a metaphor.”¹⁴ In design it is impossible to avoid metaphorical interpretations of work. During the heroic period of twentieth-century modernist architecture and urbanism, the language of architecture was stripped of its traditional guises and linguistic connotations, to be replaced with a new language and set of metaphorical references. The classical body was replaced by the machinery of modern industry. Today, the metaphorical context presents a multiplicity of possibilities, where new voices and metaphors continue to emerge.

::

The study of metaphor has burgeoned into a significant aspect of philosophy and literary theory, and is covered across the ideological spectrum. On one hand we find pragmatic skeptics who do not believe that metaphors operate,¹⁵ and on the other those, including Nietzsche and Valéry, who have suggested that metaphor expresses “the very structure of reality.”¹⁶ Jacques Derrida has

written on the subject, concluding that metaphors erase themselves;¹⁷ he emphasizes the “limitless metaphoricity of metaphor.”¹⁸ Among contemporary philosophers, Paul Ricoeur has devoted a substantial amount of writing to the subject, including his text *The Rule of Metaphor*, which traces metaphorical operations through classical rhetoric, structuralist semantics, and hermeneutics. His formulations provide a useful background for studying the subject as it might pertain to the construction, inhabitation, and interpretation of cities.

Ricoeur makes a distinction between narrative and metaphor that is vital to our discussion. Whereas narrative addresses action and the temporal dimension, metaphor tends to operate in the material world of human construction; while linguistic, it is eminently about the world of things.¹⁹ Metaphor claims to yield some truth about reality.²⁰ Ricoeur suggests that metaphor operates between semantics, imagination, and feeling. Examining Aristotle’s definition of metaphor reveals the importance of contemplating similarities and the “picturing function,” or the connection with the imagination. Another aspect is the figurative, which gives discourse the “nature of a body,” making discourse appear.²¹ In the rhetorical tradition of persuading and pleasing, metaphor functions by “giving appropriate names to new things, new ideas, or new experiences, or to decorate discourse....”²² As a semantic innovation metaphor must make sense:

The *maker* of metaphors is this craftsman with verbal skill *who*, from an inconsistent utterance for a literal interpretation, draws a significant utterance for a new interpretation which deserves to be called metaphorical because it generates the metaphor not only as deviant but as acceptable.²³

What role does imagination play in this operation? Ricoeur suggests three steps. Firstly, “imagination is understood as the ‘seeing.’”²⁴ This is insight which is both “a thinking and a seeing”;²⁵ it reveals the proximity of the terms brought together in the metaphor. This results in new kinds of assimilation through seeing likeness “in spite of and through the differences.”²⁶ Secondly, there is the pictorial or figurative dimension of imagination, or the “borderline” between the verbal and the image. Thirdly, there is what Ricoeur calls the “suspension” or “the moment of negativity brought by the image in the metaphorical process.”²⁷ This opens up the function of reference in poetic discourse and the proposition that there is “a suspension and seemingly an abolition of the ordinary reference attached to descriptive language.”²⁸ Here, the role of imagination is vital to the metaphorical process. In other words, poetic or metaphorical language employs a complex strategy in order to reveal the deep structures of reality. Borrowing from Goodman, Ricoeur affirms the productive aspect of metaphor suggested in the above quote discussing the making of metaphors.

Ricoeur proposes that feelings “accompany and complete imagination”²⁹ in the same threefold manner. He argues that the concrete nature of metaphor comes from the linking of the cognitive, imaginative, and emotional aspects of metaphor.

In other writings Ricoeur examines the innovative dimension of metaphor. In language he notes that words often mean more than one thing, and that through the operations of sentences the creative dimension of language appears. In metaphor a “semantic clash” occurs that “creates a new situation,”³⁰ or a new meaning. Therefore, metaphor alters our perceptions and provides new insights, expanding the operations of language. From this brief review of Ricoeur’s theories of metaphor we can suggest that metaphor is powerfully useful in understanding the city.

::

A metaphorical description of a city provides a convenient way for citizens and outsiders to understand the city, which “as a whole, is inaccessible to the imagination unless it can be reduced and simplified.”³¹ A host of metaphors have been applied to cities throughout history. For example, metaphorically, a city “may be termed or compared with a factory, a madhouse, a frontier, a woman....”³² The metaphorical descriptions of a city evolve with the changing history of the city;

a once-thriving city can descend into ruin, with the consequential change in expression that goes with it. Individual landmarks can provide the symbol of a city: the Eiffel tower in Paris, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, the Opera House in Sydney. The skyline of New York, famous the world over, provides a metaphorical and recognizable image of the city, one which invokes the density, energy, and magnificence of New York.

Some cities enter cultural mythology, while others do not capture the imagination; they lack striking features or qualities. The overall structure of the city has typically been constructed along symbolic or metaphorical lines; symbolic if transcendental, metaphoric if worldly. Since the emergence of cities several thousand years ago there has been a steady shift from the sacred to the secular, or from the symbolic to the metaphorical. We can distinguish three periods in the evolution of the Western city: the premodern city (cosmos/philosophy); the modern city (science/industrialism); and the postmodern city (communications technology).

Premodern cities, such as the ancient Greek or medieval city, are powerfully symbolic in that there exists strong transcendental or cosmological connections in their structure and institutions. In the late stages of the Renaissance, a preoccupation with the symbolically perfect, or ideal, city developed. However, metaphorical notions also appeared during the Renaissance: the city as a body³³ and the city as a house. The latter is to be

found in Alberti's fifteenth-century text on architecture, in which he writes: "... in the City itself, so in these Particular Structures, some Parts belong to the whole Household, some Uses of a few, and others to that of a single Person"³⁴ and "... a House is a little City."³⁵

The Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism brought dramatic transformations to the city. The social and technological upheavals changed both the real and the metaphorical structure of the city as urban alienation grew. The modern industrial city has been described by many in mechanistic terms. In the foreword to his book *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning*, published in 1924, Le Corbusier opens with a polemical metaphor: "A town is a tool."³⁶ This union of town and industrialization is consistent with other famous mechanistic metaphors employed by Le Corbusier and others in the 1920s. Like the house, the city is a machine. Le Corbusier also writes: "The street is a traffic machine; it is in reality a sort of factory for producing speed traffic."³⁷

The development of endless contemporary or post-modern urbanism, enhanced by electronic technology and increasing globalization, has led to a city which is fragmented and decentralized. Metaphors drawn from contemporary technology are often employed: "force field city,"³⁸ or "the airport as city square."³⁹ In North America the suburban shopping mall is being replaced by the "power centre," a fragmented collection of large and small retail and fast food outlets surrounded by parking, a term that metaphorically describes a new typology.

::

The American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson explored recurring themes in his writings that addressed American urban metaphor. M.H. Cowan traces these themes: the frontier city, the new city, the city of God, the city of Man, and the organic city. Each of these informs the evolution of North American cities in the modern period and the collective understanding of the city. The frontier remains part of the mythology of North America, evident in the brash expansionism of cities across the continent. The new city often recalls or imitates a European precedent, often plainly named after an existing European city. The utopian religious desire to build a New Jerusalem in a New World, to escape from persecution, underlies the city as "The City of God." "The City of Man" describes the classical ideal, which powerfully inspired American politics and aesthetic culture. Finally, "The Organic City," the city united with nature, versus the industrial city, captures the hold that the pastoral ideal has had over the North American city since the eighteenth century.⁴⁰

During the nineteenth century the city evolved from a static system into one in constant flux. The structure of the city was radically altered by the industrial, social, and economic revolutions of the period. The metaphor of the magnet drawing people to the industrial cities was powerfully appropriate. The debate between the city and the country became polarized, particularly in the English-

speaking world. In America, the Midwest became the mythical heartland of the nation, and rural virtue was pitted against what was perceived as the urban decadence of cities like New York and Chicago. The domestic and communal aspects of the provincial town were actively promoted: "... the small city can boast of home-like surroundings and friendly atmosphere, in an invidious contrast with the larger urban centers."⁴¹ The following quotation describes, in metaphorical language, a view of the emerging industrial city that would be widely exploited in American literature of the period:

[The city] was a Babylon, a den of iniquity, the breeding ground of sin and evil and the temptress of the good Christian. It was the home of the infidel... It was a bloodsucker which strangled the farmer... The city was un-American... It robbed him of what was promised ... it stole from his children....⁴²

The large city as a melancholic and destructive environment that pits the withdrawn individual against the passionate mob and the inhuman forces of government and industry is found in Dickens, Poe, and Kafka, to name only a few authors who have explored the industrial urban world. Here many metaphorical descriptions of the city can be applied: the city as purgatory; the city as prison; the city as betrayer; the city as wasteland; the city as seductress. A famous example is Thomas Jefferson's

oft-quoted remark that “cities are sores on the body politic...”⁴³ Inversely, the industrial city was a place of economic and cultural opportunity, a chance to escape the parochialism of the country and town. In the large cities fortunes could be made, intellect and creativity could expand, and cultures could intermingle.

The city was the great mart not only for one’s produce, but also for supplying one’s consumption needs.... The city was the fabulous place.... It was the place of maximum opportunity....⁴⁴

The North American city typically embodies notions of progress, the frontier as a noble condition, and regional distinctions. Biological metaphors also abound that deal with growth and structure. The distillation of various factors – spatial, geographic, economic, social, cultural, formal – provide the basis for a metaphorical description of a city.⁴⁵ The city of Chicago is described as a hodge-podge, an approach to growth characteristic of most American cities. Chicago is a city oscillating between “gigantic enterprise and tremendous violence.”⁴⁶ Energy, drive, innovation, and progress create a “herculean business enterprise.”⁴⁷

::

The metaphors that can be applied to cities and their elements are numerous and intriguing: organic (biological, bestial, and anthropomorphic), technological (mechanical and electronic), linguistic, literary, religious, economic, political, formal, communal, and architectonic. Metaphors inform the everyday city, and the mythic or ideal cities of the imagination. Over time there has been a shift from the symbolic or transcendental to the metaphoric or immanent. Each provides meaning through transpositional linkages, one to an overriding order (e.g., cosmos), the other to a cultural or linguistic context. The shift from the stable symbolic systems of the premodern world to the endless flux of the postmodern is reflected in a symbolic evolution from the city as a body (premodern), the city as a machine (modern) to the city as an ever-shifting network or web (postmodern). The city as corrupt versus the city as an ideal will also continue to inform the interpretation and ideology of the city. Nevertheless, certain metaphorical structures have provided continuity across history: the city as a body, the city as a house, the city as a machine, and the city as a labyrinthine network. Here, these four metaphorical descriptions of the city will be briefly examined, metaphors that are historical, but which still have currency.

The city as a body, a metaphor powerfully subscribed to during the Renaissance, is still valid despite the technologies that have extended and altered the body. Elaine Scarry writes that there is a direct correlation

between artifacts and the body; this suggests that the city, no matter what other dimensions govern its structure, is a bodily extension.⁴⁸ In the classically perfect body that provides the basis for the Renaissance city, portrayed by Francesco di Giorgio, we progress through the various parts of the body representing the organization of the city. The heart of the city comes to mind, and the qualities associated with the head, each carefully located. In the eighteenth century, the psychological or emotional body comes to prominence, and will play an important role in the exploration of the emerging industrial city. The body as a slave to industrialization, a product of capitalist production, is evident in the writings of Karl Marx. The networked city of the second half of the twentieth century exploits the inner workings of the human brain and nervous system, an electronic model that enables the displacement of the material city. Today, the contemporary body is defined by modern medicine, warfare (e.g., the Holocaust and Hiroshima), means of production, the media, and communications technologies.⁴⁹ Each of these provides a metaphorical link to the contemporary city.

The city as a house has also maintained a strong presence in the evolution of the Western city: the city as a place that one belongs to as a "citizen," the idea that a city provides comfort and protection. Alberti employed the metaphor, as has the late-twentieth-century architect Aldo van Eyck, who has written: "... a house must be like

a small city if it is to be a real house – a city like a large house if it is to be a real city.”⁵⁰ The domestic view of the city is clearly evident in the Anglo-American cultures, which place tremendous emphasis on the house, at the expense of the city. While the city as a whole is no longer house-like, the notion of domesticity is a powerful force in the shaping of suburbia.

The city as a machine emerged coincidentally with the Industrial Revolution. New technologies produced a radical redefinition of the economic role of the city, and also the very structure and internal operations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century cities. The role of infrastructure and mechanization added new dimensions to the city, notions of efficiency, mechanical imagery, and function emerged, as they did in architecture. The modernist city derived much of its design from the industrial machine as a metaphorical model. The legacy of the modern industrial city underpins the post-industrial city that has emerged in North America since the Second World War.

The image of a network, web, or force field is now often used to depict the contemporary city. By now almost meaningless through overuse, these terms describe the emphasis placed on communications, providing some structural and existential insight into the city. Many contemporary metaphors used to describe both cities and architecture are taken from the computer industry, which in turn has borrowed its terminology from other

disciplines. Like all such descriptions, these metaphors can go unchallenged, providing a simplistic vision of a complex condition. Certainly there has been an etherealization of the city,⁵¹ with less emphasis on the shape of the city. The loss of recognizable shape in urban development means that many traditional metaphors applied to the city no longer work.

::

It is impossible to understand the human mind or human behavior except by making a metaphorical detour, not through the human body, but through the objects in the world which first polarize the human bodily activity and enable the self to experience itself as distinct from the world, by reciprocally endowing the world with human characteristics and itself with the characteristics of experienced objects in order, then, to rediscover these characteristics as its own.⁵²

In the epigraph Michel Leiris defines metaphor as a transpositional play between objects, through language, that helps language to provide an interconnected context for meaning. The city cannot easily be reduced to simple metaphors; however, the well-used metaphors of the city explored above offer both a means for understanding cities and images of the city that provide existential orientation.

The innovative, or creative, aspect of metaphor provides new insights into the nature of cities. The role of metaphor also extends to the structure or shape of individual elements or buildings within the city. Metaphor restores imagination to the city. Within the overall structure of a city there are the numerous constructions and spaces that comprise the fabric of the city. The attachment of metaphorical meaning to an urban structure, object, or space is vital to recognizing the structure or shape of a city; "Recognition of shape is vital to the identification of cities."⁵³ The architect gives a building metaphorical potential, which changes or is reinterpreted over time. Metaphor asserts the reality of an object. A poet gives new life to symbols by recontextualizing them; metaphor has become the symbolic dimension in the city.

The structure of a city and the buildings, spaces, and technology that comprise this structure are latent with metaphorical description, both banal and innovative. This is the hermeneutical dimension of artifacts, the "conflict of interpretations" vital to understanding the contemporary world. The ability to give and hold metaphorical meaning is a necessary aspect of any urban structure, and it behooves planners, politicians, architects, urbanists, activists, and developers to understand this. New metaphors that describe contemporary cities provide collective insight into how cities operate and can be understood.



Montreal, 1985, Graham Livesey



