



PASSAGES: EXPLORATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

by Graham Livesey

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INTRODUCTION

The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps, in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture.¹

An examination of the various meanings attached to the word “passage,” found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, reveals a set of interrelated definitions that have direct relevance to an exploration of contemporary urban structures. According to the dictionary a passage is that “by which a person or thing passes or may pass; a way, road, path, route, channel; a mountain pass; an entrance or exit.”² This noun definition is admirably complemented by the verb form of the word, which states that passage is the “action of passing; going or moving onward, across or past; movement from one place or point to another, or over or through a space or medium; transition, transit.”³ Therefore, the word “passage” unites both an action of movement with the constructed entity; it is the defined linear space through which people, products, and

information may pass. Appropriately, the word also refers to a portion of a text or speech.

The following comprises eight interrelated essays that explore a series of topics as they relate to the contemporary city. They examine the global urban landscapes that have emerged since the Second World War. Sprawling cities, such as San José (California) or Calgary (Alberta), are defined by unbounded low-density development that is traversed by freeways, flight paths, and communications networks connecting elsewhere; traditional urban structures are virtually absent. The dominance of modernist space has radically challenged the role of architecture in the global city. The first two essays examine these fundamental topics. The next group of three studies linguistic structures (narrative, metaphor, and gesture) that define and express the contemporary city and which are necessary for recording, describing, and communicating. The final group of writings looks at formal structures (points, lines, and surfaces) that comprise a city and contain an enormous amount of knowledge and potential. Each essay presents background material on the topic and moves toward one or a number of pertinent ideas about the topic and its relationship to the city. A montage of ideas are presented that attempt to describe aspects of the operation of contemporary cities; in no way is this intended to be an exhaustive or detailed study.

The essays are largely theoretical, and in most cases do not provide extensive historic examples or background.

The outlook of these writings has evolved from the pessimistic to the cautiously optimistic, from rejecting the landscapes of the contemporary city to examining them on their own terms. The intent of these writings is to strive for a greater understanding of the environments we build and inhabit. The essays are informed by the work of a number of key writers. In the first case are those who have addressed the contemporary city specifically, including Kevin Lynch, Robert Venturi, Richard Sennett, and Albert Pope. In the second case are a number of thinkers, primarily philosophers, who explore material that has been important to specific topics. These include Michel Butor, Paul Ricoeur, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel de Certeau. While there has been something of a shifting evolution in the essays, there has also been a concerted effort to seek linkages between the topics. Finally, I employ the historic periods of the premodern, modern, and postmodern throughout the text. Each of these periods has its own operational logic,⁴ and each is present to one degree or another in contemporary cities.

Contemporary cities cannot be taken for granted; they are complex and rapidly evolving entities. Our understanding of urban environments must continually be challenged as part of an ongoing process of interpretation.



Chicago, 1981, Graham Livesey



