REAL CITIES
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Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagorias of City Life

STEVE PILE
For Tommy
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Introduction
in which we explore how to explore
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Introduction: what is real about cities?

Often enough, it can seem that what is real in cities is all the material stuff of life: buildings, infrastructures, money, labour processes, schools, housing, hospitals, consumption, and so on. This was not a mistake made by Robert Park, a leading member of the Chicago School. While attempting to define the essence of cities, he observed that:

The city [...] is something more than a congeries of individual men and of social conveniences – streets, buildings, electric lights, tramways, and telephones, etc.; something more, also, than a mere constellation of institutions and administrative devices – courts, hospitals, schools, police and civil functionaries of various sorts. The city is, rather, a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature. (Park, 1925a, page 1, emphasis added)

Robert Park was not impressed by the idea that the city could be defined solely by its physical or institutional forms. Nor is it simply a set of administrative devices that involve courts, hospitals, schools, the police, bureaucracies and city government. What is vital about cities is that they bring together people in such a way that this makes a difference to what goes on between them.1 Whatever it is that makes a city a city, it has much to do with their social processes, their customs and traditions. The city does not just express itself in the buildings, the streets, the traffic that seem to define it, but in the ways in which people live, work, trade; their customs, habits, pleasures, crimes, angers. From this perspective, Park’s statement that the city is a state of mind must be taken seriously.2

What makes the city a city is not only the skyscrapers or the shops or the communication networks, but also that people in such places are forced to behave in urban ways. For some, this involves an ever-increasing pace of life, the necessity of blocking out most of what goes on in cities, and a mental attitude based on calculation, rationality and abstract thought. In many ways, this implies that city dwellers are ‘locked down’ emotionally: reserved, detached, distant, calculating. On the contrary: I argue that what is
real about cities is the sheer expressiveness and passion of its life, even in its most boring, or most objective, forms. What I would like to do in this book is play with the notion of what is considered real about city life. Not by specifying ‘The Real’ or by attempting to make ‘The Real’ more real, but instead by loosening and expanding both what we think is real about city life and also what we are prepared to take seriously in city life. For me, this means that more attention has to be paid to the city’s state of mind.

Indeed, it can sometimes seem as if the city’s state of mind – its sentiments, its attitudes, its sense of self, its mood – gives it a specific character all of its own. What is real about cities, then, is also their intangible qualities: their atmospheres, their personalities, perhaps. As graphic novelist Neil Gaiman observes,

Each city has its own personality, after all. Los Angeles is not Vienna. London is not Moscow. Chicago is not Paris. Each city is a collection of lives and buildings and it has its own personality. (1993a, page 18)

Something about city life lends itself to being read as if it had a state of mind, a personality, as having a particular mood or sentiment, or as privileging certain attitudes and forms of sociation. It is quite clear that New York is not New Orleans, that London is not Singapore, that Paris is not Berlin. For sure, this has something to do with the buildings: with their built form, the super-structures and infrastructures of the city. For sure, it has something to do with the way people live their lives in cities, with their cultures and customs, with how they treat strangers, with their differences and indifferences. Yet, it is an odd thing to assume that cities have their own personality or state of mind. Surely, cities are far too chaotic and disorganised to be thought of like this; even those that are highly ordered. These commonplace experiences of the personality of a city may feel real, yet also they are phantasms that vanish as soon as light is cast upon them.

As I see it, this familiar experience of cities as being indefinably distinct from one another has something to do with the imaginary and emotional aspects of city life. In *Imagining the Modern City* (1999), James Donald makes a strong case for thinking about the ‘structures of feeling’ that comprise city life. He reveals these through explorations of a range of cultural phenomena, from cinema to city plans, to notions of urban citizenship and ethics. For him, the key to cities is that they have to be lived in, made habitable, *haunted* even. In Donald’s work, as with my own, the analysis of the real of city life is expanded to include the shadows, irrationalities, feelings, utopianisms, and urban imaginaries. Donald makes clear that urban imaginaries are both emotional and unconscious, for example, when talking about the urban uncanny (1999, pages 69–73) or the city as a dream factory (pages 86–91). For me, this implies that the images and representations of a city have much to do with how they feel, their personalities.

Perhaps these urban imaginaries can be collated, put together, to provide an account of the differences between – the individual personalities of – cities. However, this would be to overplay the ‘individuality’ of cities, as if they existed in splendid isolation from one another and as if the development of their ‘personality’ somehow owed nothing to their relationship to other places, other times. To get at the circulation of urban imaginaries, it will be necessary to track ‘things’ (by this I mean any object of consciousness, including fantasies, ideas, information, and so on) between and through cities. For sure, this will include images and representations, but as they connect to their emotional qualities.