

The playground of urbanity

(Surrealism and geography 1: Urbanism)



Niklas Nenzén: The surrealist group in Stockholm investigating an atopos

(let's begin with a slightly older source text)

Poetry of Worthlessness – Worthless places or Atoposes

The foremost purposes of city planning are of course purely disciplinary, but it is based on generalised demands for profitableness against the world in its areal, material foundation. Most of the land is *used*, and serves a purpose in one way or another. Everything is demarcated and categorised, built upon, cultivated, worked, or possibly preserved for tourism or recreation with an ideological purpose; it all has its place and its *value*.

On the other hand, the “non-places” still extant in cities and suburbs gain an ever more important symbolic and poetic meaning: that is, the unused or abandoned interspaces between different planned places. Exceptions remaining or reborn everywhere: hidden corners of parks, odd backstreets and nooks, interspaces between properties, buildings or roads, various pathways and squares left half-ready or abandoned in the quick transformations of urban life. Pedantic city planning creates order much through rejection: an increasing number of places do not fulfill their intended functions. They get demarcated as a vaguely forbidden zone, close upon us but economically dead and therefore often invisible.

The point is of course to prefer the accursed share before all that is enclosed in the service of economical or ideological utility. The worthlessness in itself. And at the same time the picturesque qualities of these worthless places are often striking. But within the frames of our project concerning worthless places that we've been pursuing for some years in the Surrealist group in Stockholm, we try to go further, and through more systematic study we attempt to reveal focuses of resistance where one least expected them.

Many of them are characterised by the fact that odd situations tend to emerge there: one finds strange objects, and becomes witness to – or part of – strange courses of events, that all blossom like mould just because the place isn't pruned, supervised or laboriously restricted to a planned function. Others of these places have no extenuating qualities, and rather get their value from their total worthlessness.

This systematic effort includes not only photographic documentation, classification and speculation concerning origin and development, but also their study by means of various surrealist inquiries and games (among other things revealing subjective obsessions of these places), collecting anecdotes (stressing their possibilities from a social point of view), and their botanical study, which has turned out to be a key aspect.

Inspired by a book on the flora of Stockholm by botanist Per Sigurd Lindberg we have realised what a unique botanical environment the city (and of course above all its worthless places) really is. It has become such an oasis through a number of particular circumstances; of which most can be described as extremely tough environmental factors; drought, pollution, overnourishment, asphalt, concrete, macadam; the extremely high rate of disturbance (wear as well as total reshaping, through building works, repairments, people, cars); and the profuse exchange with other milieus and other parts of the world (through trade, tourism etc.). All these circumstances contribute in making the city a refuge for involuntarily introduced plants, fugitives from cultivations, various weeds and especially a number of less competitive species that thrive here in the absence

of those more competitive species that dominate the natural environments.

Beside the fact that these plants have their own poetry and their particular scientific interest, they may serve as the most concrete aspect of a row of analogous fields.

First the level of meaning: the city gets overgrown wherever the refuse collectors of utility look the other way; what has been abandoned and forgotten gathers in heaps that start to grow in the hidden; a jungle of the strange fruits of the rejected, the revenge of nature or the return of the repressed, a chaos sometimes imaginative and sometimes just disgusting but always strange and profoundly human.

To some extent this is true also concerning the material artifacts, the objects and architecture: the concentrations of garbage, lost belongings, constructions falling apart, solutions having become out of date.

It is definitely true from a social point of view: the homeless, alcoholics, drug addicts, maniacs, curious children, drifting youths, all pay their visits to these non-places to make nonintended use of them and charge them with the excitement of their obsessions. The strange encounters that might result, the strange ways of communication, the strange solutions, in all their nonhandiness ought to be an important element in what really constitutes the social today (not so long ago people used to confuse state with society, but that isn't as easily done today when the state abandons its social or pseudo-social functions one by one).

And contemplating the main tendencies of the development of urban flora: 1) disturbance and overnourishment, 2) indiscriminate internationalisation, 3) the mass immigration and dominance of the less competitive, they might prove to be key aspects not only to modern urbanism but to late capitalist society in the entirety of the imperturbableness in its disintegration. This would of course include revolutionary possibilities. Never underestimate the worthless.

(1997, printed in many places, under different titles and in different languages)

In what sense is surrealism urban? (sketch)

Surrealism is indeed a fundamentally urbanistic endeavour, not at all in that it would be inconceivable in a rural setting or uninterested in extraurban environments (as the situationists tended to be), far from it, but in that some urban attitudes lie at its core.

1. Urban identity

Based on flow, overflow, absurdity, on both fast variations and real ambiguities concerning responsibility versus irresponsibility, and loneliness and company. Fundamentally urban is that more or less dynamic notions of cosmopolitanism-humanism-liberalism-individualism-selfrealisation replace the static notions of kin,

trade and caste and “place in the order”. Family is distinctly inurban, freedom of association/organisation exclusively urban; only in an urban setting can nonconformism, radicalism, divergence and refusal be a point of departure and not have a fulltime defensive occupation!

2. Fundamental heterogeneity

- a) of people in terms of demographics (age, origins, occupations, attitudes & behavior)
- b) of environments, architecture and atmospheres (from luxurious and/or official to shabby/decomposing or unstructured/wild along different axes)
- c) of supply of commodities, entertainments, information and signs

The urban environment provides not just a wide variation but is dependent on a deeper sense of heterogeneity in a lot of factors (many of these are occasionally empirically weak, which is experienced as distinctly inurban and smalltownish (which is a personally important to me as I am working in a horrible narrowminded-conform conservative university small-town, parading as Sweden’s fourth largest city but lacking all sense of urbanity).

3. Abundance

- a) of signs (nivellation of signs)
 - b) of encounters (flexibility, anonymity, abundance of encounters)
 - c) of possibilities (chaotic patterns, unpredictability, abundance of signs)
- providing a ceaseless and in itself meaning-generating flow, within which we make associations and selections making up poetry and chance phenomena, and eventually situations (in the sense of the situationists), opportunities where the usual inauthentic habits and reactions obviously not are valid anymore and the field of possibilities therefore suddenly vastly opens, which might be socially explosive.

4. Mobility

The city provides a concentration not only of people and messages but also of structures (architecture and city planning), all of which makes a unique background for psychological mobility and dynamism. The possibility to move between different spheres of heterogeneity, which is the hedonistic pleasure of all urban walkers, and provides the basic psychogeographical data for anyone interested in such questions. As an experimental setting, this is incredible: any random walk will provide you with a chain of messages (anarchistic knowledge) and potentially make you lose your way (with some sense of danger but usually not mortal danger). There is a text about this (walking and happiness from a surrealist perspective) which the author has been trying to translate for quite some time but just never got enough time...

The city is also the only environment where we have trustworthy public transport, making it possible to extend this mobility, go far on sudden associations and clues, into surrounding areas and ambiances; in a convenient form which itself provides exposure to new people, new possibilities, new atmospheres to savour and/or interpret.

Three fundamental negative corollaries of surrealist urbanity:

* No family

* No regular hours fulltime job

* No car for regular transport

(Having to deal with only one of these factors, it is very often possible to design a personal compromise that makes many aspects of urban lifestyle still available, but anyone leading a life circumscribed by more than one of them usually finds himself/herself excluded from embodying true urbanity)

Or is surrealist urbanity/walking just bachelor bohemism?

No, I don't think so. Isn't bachelorism an individualistic organisation of comfort? Isn't this opposed to flexibility and true curiosity? Isn't bohemism primarily the absence of planning and commitment? Aren't both opposed to any systematic experimentation, and thus the very opposite of surrealism?

MF

Note on urbanity and travelling

from a central european travelogue contributed to this year's SLAG surrealist game festival (2008)

/.../Travelling receives a difficult status in surrealism, since surrealism has developed a certain sense of nivellation, not in the sense of global modernisation or of early civilisation effort, that everything is expected to adapt to an enlightened standard, but quite the opposite since surrealists apply a sense of generalised exoticism and expect strange and alien things to emerge even in their own home quarters. So what is then remarkable about travelling? As long as you remain in cities, the most remarkable thing is perhaps how great the similarities are. Well, different cities have different things to offer, but more or less the same methodologies can be applied in all of them, and similar spectrums of encounters and ambiances are available in all of them (with significant local specialities). Major european cities, which is the ground which surrealism sprung from, can be mistaken for one another, and are each loveable in this anonymity-specificity. Just like friends./.../

MF

Towards the solidification and relativisation of atopus theory

Erik Bohman & Mattias Forshage

Surrealists as urbanists

Nothing could fool us to think that the city is a familiar place. Urbanity is a system of the dynamism of cramping things together, and its most interesting parts will remain those which grow in its interspaces, bud off from its inner limbs, retain its difficultly charted characteristics. There are, of course, all-too-familiar patterns and all-too-obvious conscious motives, of those who want to control the others and those who just want to be left alone. But the unknown always remains a distinct possibility in urbanity's collaging of people, physical and mental environments and thus of social relations in general. And where the unknown emerges, there is always the potentiality of poetry.

Early surrealist investigations into urban flow led to the development of concepts such as **objective chance**. But most of the arsenal of methods, games and perspectives was never systematised into a particular theory. It was to a large extent up to the surrealists' prodigal children the situationists to cast it in pseudo-academic terms with the theory of the **dérive** and the theory of **psychogeography**. These were later recuperated into surrealism, and the surrealists' own investigations of urban environments were refuelled. In this new wave of exploration, additional new perspectives and concepts emerged.

One concept which gained some popularity in the previous decade was that of **worthless places** (*atopoi* or *atoposes*, literally meaning non-places – *atopoi* being the greek plural which the Leeds surrealist group insisted on, *atoposes* the ridicule-anglification first utilised by the Stockholm group who introduced the term). It was used in print first in the "Geografi" issue of *Stora Saltet* (1995). A brief summary of the subject by MF from the "Upphittat" (found objects) *Stora Saltet* was subsequently published in english in *Manticore* (as "The poetry of worthlessness"), in Spanish in *Salamandra* and in Czech in *Analogon*. Recently another piece, putting the concept to concrete work, was printed as "Explorations of absence" by the Leeds surrealists in *Phosphor* #1 (2008).

(In the meantime we had found some Plato quote including the term, and not too distantly Roland Barthes had called love an atopus; only recently however it was pointed out to us that in Greek it is the common word for something absurd in the mathematical-logical sense. There has also been some internal debate whether the concept was closely related to Foucault's idea of *heterotopia*, but its affiliations on a purely theoretical level is not of particular importance for a concept we now address as an analytical tool.)

Other surrealist groups pursued their geographical investigations in other directions. The Paris group maintained focus on objective chance and analogical geography in the "Géographie passionelle" issue of *S.U.R.R.*, the Madrid group together with individuals elsewhere developed the concept of "exteriority" for epiphanic experiences of sensory presence at certain border locations. Some of these groups were

never particularly interested in, or impressed with, the concept of worthless places. This is of course conditioned by differences in direction and local traditions, but a certain role could also be assigned to differences in conspicuousness and function of the locally available such sites.

In this text, we would like to sketch some of these differences in conditions while restating the basic background of organising urban space, and restating, perhaps even forwarding, some principles and perspectives for surrealist investigations into urban geography.

Recognition of worthless places

The emergence of worthless places in urban environments depends on several conditions. Their recognition typically focuses on either of three approaches.

a) that of poetic phenomenology - keeping up the vigilance towards spots conveying a distinct feeling of being out of control and having a distinct diffuse potential (if such a seeming contradiction is excused), of having a hidden history, a hidden usage or a hidden future in the realm of collectivisation and realisation of desires. This is straightforward to apply, but not in a strictly intersubjective way.

b) that focusing on usage (in terms of sociology, ethnology or behavioral ecology) - tracing spots which are generally used in a non-regulated way for activities not at all intended by owners, city planners, entrepreneurs, architects - which people individually or collectively snatch and exploit for various needs. This is obviously the most difficult criterion to apply, since we have no particular interest in acknowledging thousands of semi-secluded spots where males sometimes urinate... we want perhaps to be able to distinguish between using the same spot for a wellbehaved rendezvous or consumption of drinks and entertainments offered on one hand, and on the other hand a non-regulated nothing-buying hangout... and we would possibly like to be able to somehow define non-usage, abandoning to spontaneous decay, as a special category of unintended usage...

c) that of economic history, which allows for the most rigorous definitions - recognising spots of non-productivity in economic terms in the middle of a generally high-productive city-planned area. Being a formal and not a qualitative distinction, this criterion has the advantage of pointing out unexpected and inconspicuous places. On the other hand, it will also cover phenomena which don't interest us in themselves. Still, the determination will then sometimes require vast knowledge in local history and economy, and in practice, even with this criterion, the most obvious instances are *diagnostically* spotted via one or several of the following:

1. poetic suggestions in accordance with the first approach above,
2. artifacts giving a clear indication of popular usage: such as displaced chairs and sofas, toys, abandoned clothes, notes and drawings, porn magazines, condoms, bottles and beercans, abundance of cigarette butts or garbage in general, etc,
3. an abundant flora of fast-growing, easy-dispersing, more or less globalised, ruderal plants, indicating that no one manages or tidies the spot.

It should be remembered that within surrealism, such a concept with a rigorous definition, is a mere tool for poetic investigation and not something interesting in itself. The gap towards academic cultural geography is still wide. The point here is not

refining the concepts, comparing it with other concepts, and debating its merits and failures, the real question is to what extent it actually sharpens our vigilance for the active contradictions and poetic possibilities in the urban environment.

There is a certain correlation between the explanatory power of a concept and how discriminately it is applied. Therefore we here stress certain objective characteristics of *atopoi*, insisting that the concept will not be obviously applicable to the same extent on a global scale, and that local factors will make it more or less interesting.

Value production in urban settings - In the lapses of accumulation

The decisive regularities conditioning the distribution of sites of value in the capitalist city give us a methodological starting point from which we can approach the question of the spatial distribution of worthlessness. Here the object is not one of exploration, for which such a method would prove all too general and lacking in inspiration. Rather, it lets us avoid a couple of not-so-productive interpretations of *atopoi* and their relationship to the capitalist city, culture or whatever might strike the fancy of anyone prone to thinking in abstracts and unmediated totalities. We are prepared to posit the existence of a certain break between the patterns of distribution (or production by chance) sketched herein and the unlikely but constantly reoccurring product. This break is not to be understood along the lines of those pairs of opposites that pretend to say something very profound while hiding difference, particularity or reserving room for them squarely on one side of the opposition. The critique of civilization that proceeds from the *a priori* positioning of "culture" and "nature" teaches us nothing and substitutes experience with moralist still-lives. Not in opposites but in living contradiction do we hope to find those sparks of wonder that illuminate the fragility of the present order of things.

The capitalist city is by and large determined by the processes of accumulation and the contradictions inherent in these processes. These imply a tendency towards general urbanisation while effecting local processes of de- and re-urbanisation and a (more or less) dynamic redistribution of people and sites of value according to the needs and limits of accumulation. The ability of capital to impose an urban dynamic governed by its voracious appetite for surplus value is checked by the continual struggle waged in a variety of forms between those who are its agents and those who suffer its consequences. The immense number of contradictions arising from the conditions of the modern city are breeding grounds of the marvellous.

The capitalist city is a structure made out of a number of heterogenous elements. Its development is not a one way street, neither does it develop in a smooth frictionless manner. The tendencies and countertendencies that give rise and direction to the deployment of urban spaces can only result in an uneven development. Just as the global economy simultaneously accumulate massive material wealth and an even more glaring (spiritual, material) poverty, so does the city.

The *atopos* might be defined negatively as a place that doesn't lend itself to a) production of commodities, b) circulation of commodities, c) reproduction of labour power or d) the reproduction of those apparatuses necessary to secure the conditions of accumulation on the level of society (police, state initiatives, etc). A purely negative definition this far - as a place devoid of value, a lapse in the circuits of accumulation.

Such a definition stops short of the aims of surrealist investigation and leaves the place itself a blank, since the same concepts that lets us grasp the patterns of distribution have nothing or very little to say about it. We can go one step further: the definition will rather give us hints as to where and under what conditions one can expect the emergence of atopia.

The creative destruction through which city development unfolds have an almost inevitable tendency to produce temporal lapses just at those places where economic growth is most apparent, such as in the process of *gentrification*.

Typically in a modern city there will be a dynamism of worthless places which can be described in foucauldian-autonomous terms: on the one hand gentrification and various urban development schemes; the infinite struggles to increase profit, utilising any old and new means of disciplining, exclusion and appropriation; on the other hand popular usage, countering and competing with gentrification by way of various non-regulated non-commercial useless usages. This should preferably be studied empirically, but it can be assumed that there are always struggles occurring. Places will fall out of order and be reintegrated at a certain pace, which will be different in different cities and different parts of the cities at different times. Acknowledging worthless places a little too publicly will usually lead to their reintegration (if not for direct exploitation then for the ideological exploitation resulting from open recognition of their eventual picturesque qualities). Few largescale triumphs for the popular side are possible within the given socioeconomic order (and will probably often count as steps in a social revolution), but the struggle is perpetual and will produce a variety, at any given moment, of worthless places for leisure and play, indicating the impossibility of total control, inspiring surrealist usage of urbanity and the dreaming of yet unknown senses of urban life.

We recommend some of our enthusiastic friends of the ultraradical variety some caution: city planning cannot be monolithic and is usually not pursuing a hidden agenda. City planning is the chaotic outcome, suboptimal from all viewpoints, of compromises between various concerns and interests; fulfilling a function that is – among other things – disciplinary on the whole largely because this is the involuntary sum of the competitive commercial, political and popular interests. A lot will be about facilitating work and work transports, and offering occasions for entertainment and isolation, based on the joint interests of the capitalists of reproducing labor power and of the people of having at least some fun and getting left in peace to at least some extent. There are always conflicts of usage but also conflicts of planning, and thus small and large spots which fail to conform to intentions or where intentions fail to resolve themselves – the city is a dynamic arena and this has always been obvious to its surrealist users. There are not so few good intentions in some of the political planning, which is then always implemented in a coopted and coopting way but which may simultaneously allow for independent popular possibilities. In fact, various philanthropic and social-liberal ambitions are at least as historically important in city planning as the all-too-often cited examples of purely repressive concerns. Hausmann's avenues and the metaphor of Bentham's Panopticon should at least be accompanied by the various utopian-socialist, early-ecologist, radical-egalitarian, mystic-esoteric etc traces. Sometimes these could challenge the limitations of philanthropic liberalism when taken literally.

Parameters of worthless places

Several types of conditions govern first the emergence and maintenance and second the recognition of worthless places in different parts of the world. Both are very dependent on 1) the general degree of urbanity, 2) the general level of order and orderliness, 3) current local land prices and other market particulars and exploitation conditions.

The general degree of urbanity conditions the availability of worthless places. The denser and more heterogeneous the population, and the larger the overall accessibility via sidewalks and public transport, the more opportunities for an atopolis to emerge, and new social practices.

For example, many North American cities have such a lack of urban density that the concept often will appear to lack application there. Whenever a city is planned under no shortage of land, and driving a car is the normal way of moving in the city rather than walking or using public transport; there will be an abundance of interspaces between all things and no obvious contrast between useful and useless land. When such a concentration is lacking, the flow of messages and chance encounters central to surrealism's appreciation of urbanity, is often decreased to non-urban levels. That certain places are put to popular perverse/detouring usage when decaying under such circumstances too is obvious nevertheless, and proven for example by some of the places found and photographically documented by Eric Bragg in the northern California countryside, but they may perhaps not be best described with the term atopoi or best understood in the framework of urbanity.

Order and orderliness is a crucial factor, but primarily on the level of conditions for discovery of such places. In a city where city planning is partly chaotic, where land market is relatively anarchic, where a major segment of the population lives in poverty or outside conformist lifestyles, where cleaning, public order, construction and renovation tasks are slower or less ambitious, where general mentality is less orderly: worthless places will probably be more abundant but far less conspicuous. And as much of their surrealist function lies in their contrast action they will also often be less interesting.

Market particulars are also crucial for the abundance and the conspicuousness of worthless places. Growing populations of course promote higher land prices, but exploitation rate is also dependent on general income, living standards and the availability of resources for exploitation, and on particular characteristics of entrepreneurs and landlords (oligarchies, mafia, superstitions, political and transnational economical involvement etc). Where the economy and thus the physical shape of the city is more "dynamic"; the worthless places will be less stable, quicker to emerge (drop out of control) but also to disappear (become reintegrated).

This is even more important when it comes to cities in the southern hemisphere or where very large parts of the population is poor: the pressure on available space is great but the capacity to pay for it is low, putting market mechanisms out of use and accentuating social contradictions, and creating a situation where whole neighborhoods and sometimes even whole parts of countries can assume the characteristics of worthlessness. Or the contrast will be organized along other scales or parameters than that of surface area.

There are also the remarkable particulars of for example the great stalinist cities of East Europe, where a certain megalomaniac totalitarian regime has been replaced by regimes with distinctly other primary mechanisms of disciplining and social control.

These huge squares and avenues, which made ideologic sense and were practically used for propagandistic parades (and for good old hausmannian riot control), have now become senseless. And in the instances there is no capital available for new exploitation of them, they remain basically remain; vast, often ghostly, worthless.

The mapping of such differences will increase our understanding of the fundamental and local differences in possibilities connected with organising of space, (and might facilitate communication between surrealist activities in different places).

The surrealist perspective

Surrealist interventions both theoretical and practical in the area of urban investigations are paralleled by those of others. There are tendencies among academics (in cultural geography, sociology, anthropology, economic history, human ecology, etc etc), subacademics (postmodernists, the art world), activists (struggles for "new commons" and against commercial/policary control, auto-reduction, squattings etc), subactivists (postsituationists, post-live-role-players) and common boyish adventurers ("urban exploring", parkour), which may be more or less identical in single approaches. The surrealist project might be characterised primarily by the concern for the poetic experience and its phenomenology AND the insistence that this poetry is not primarily subjective, "pure" or religious in nature but dynamic and immanent. On the other hand, surrealists insist on the significance of considering circumstances giving rise to poetic phenomena, to acknowledging several concerns (including the psychological, mythological, scientific, utopian, political, historical) and their mutual conditioning. In this case, if anyone need formulae easy to memorise, we could say we insist on the Empirical, Epistemological and Emancipatory concerns of surrealism.

It is necessary empirical in its focus on poetic experience, but also in letting this experience emerge more distinctly by giving the possibly relevant circumstances in a documentary or (as Breton liked to evoke from Freud) clinical way. This documentation and curiosity for paraphernalia will allow for many new connections and spontaneous criticisms as well as for letting anecdotes take part in larger patterns, unlike those accounts which immediately – spontaneously or laboriously – transforms concrete experience into intoxicated fairytales.

Surrealist perspective is fundamentally directed towards producing new knowledge, not seeking to merely confirm preconceived views. It addresses the unknown in a manner which trusts its productivity, and does not treat it religiously as if it was something fragile. Systematically, ludically and/or intuitively it raises new questions, devises new methods and introduces experimental alterations. It could not be satisfied by our own emotional responses themselves, savouring ambiances like the kick-seeking youth or the sensible dandy flaneur, or by quasitheoretical efforts making up names for phenomena without defining them by any other criteria than this emotional response, or the arbitrary applicability of abstract opposites (such as in the art sphere, the new age sphere, popular psychology, poor structuralism etc). It could also not be satisfied by the repetitive formulation of fundamental questions, as typical for postmodernism, conceptual art in general, and most of contemporary so-called political art, which claims to criticise things by merely thematising them, and repeating the very same questions over and over again. They stop short of ever devising a methodology for actually investigating the thing. This particular antimethodological stance of always

formulating questions in an "eternal", unanswerable way is one of the many obvious strategies of pure obscurantism within those dominant sectors of art which are unable to address the unknown in a more substantial, creative, actually exploratory way.

In fact, the atopos theory as naïvely conceived could be formulated in scientific terms as resting on the assumption that there is a negative correlation between the economic productivity and the poetic productivity of a place. And as this is empirically testable it is not just an assumption but a hypothesis, even if its rigorous testing is not among surrealism's first concerns. It does relate back to something fundamental within the concept of the poetic. However, we are not so sure that this hypothesis is very useful. Instead of that correlation we are inclined to suggest a tentative positive one: Poetic productivity will, on a statistical level, be positively correlated with local steep gradients in economic productivity. Along these slopes come tumbling, and accumulating, not only various discarded objects (mostly all kinds of garbage but also antiquities and utilitarian objects detached from context) as well as persecuted persons, plants and animals, and repressed behaviors, stories and contradictions. The friction in such movements will create sparks illuminating the atmosphere of possibilities concentrated at such sites.

Finally, the surrealist perspective is based within the demarcation line introduced in Marx's famous eleventh Feuerbach thesis, interpreting the world with the overall objective of transforming it. This is both in immediate terms, planting seeds of radicalising social exchange with such a place as a nexus, and communicating-challenging individual poetic experience with ludic means, and in the long term, as one area of investigation and intervention among many pointing towards future realisation of generalised poetry in radically changed and self-governed social circumstances.

(published in *Hydrolith* 2010)

A tale of a few cities

Just having returned from Wien (Vienna) I am somewhat enchanted by the surrealist possibilities of that city. With surrealism's perspectives on urbanism, "the surrealist possibilities of a city" is not just the case of differentiated personal sensibility towards the spirit of the place. It is that to some extent, but it is also concretely manifested in the degree of condensation and contrast, spatial and social heterogeneity, signs of expectation, overlaying, dynamism of spatial phenomenology, and overall ambiance. Of course, pursuing a collective surrealist activity is fundamentally about revealing the surrealist qualities of your immediate environment; any surrealist grouping will enhance and make explicit the process of disenveloping the surrealist sense of the city they are in.

So this is not quite what I am talking about here. I am talking about which places will offer a temporary visitor the most distinct signs and ambiances suggesting this particular sense of possibilities.

In this sense, my personal favorite candidates for surrealist cities in Europe are Wien, Berlin, Budapest and Helsinki. Of course they are cities that appeal to me personally, but I do think that they all have a specific objective sense of suggesting hidden possibilities that is central to surrealist urbanism.

And I have to contrast this against the perpetually cited surrealist aspects of Paris, Paris which many people consider as the Capital of Surrealism mainly because surrealism originated there and it has for long times been an important organisational center. Of course, if you live in Paris, and Paris is where you take your daily and nightly strolls, your drinks with friends, your intoxicated trajectories, your everyday conflicts and wonders, you will necessarily see and disclose surrealist aspects out of that psychophysical environment.

But it is another thing for visitors. Many people come to Paris to experience a surrealist city. Indeed, most neighborhoods in Paris do carry a load of anecdotes in surrealist historiography and mythology. There are memories of Breton's walks with Nadja, of the surrealist group's interventions and experiments for many decades, there are all kinds of souvenirs of things integrated into surrealist mythology such as the rich traditions of alchemy, of late 19th century occultism, of early 20th century popular culture, of dada, lettrism, situationism, pataphysics, etc; there are souvenirs of the french revolution, of the Paris commune, of May 68, etc.

Not only did these things actually occur right there, but they have also been commemorated, giving names to streets and squares, cafés and statues, etc. The shops, galleries and museums are full of actual references to our chosen heroes. Placenames will be easy to associate with titles of well-known works, and the poetic aura of these names will be lying near at hand since, for us outsiders, so much of the french we know is primarily associated with this poetry and these works rather than with any everyday use. Anywhere you go, if you find a square with a remarkable ambiance, you will very often learn that André Breton already mentioned it in a poem, and if you see a strange gargoyle, you will very often learn that Man Ray or Brassai already photographed it.

The place is so abundantly colonised with anecdotes, with reified pieces of history, and then on top of that seasoned with an overflow of empty references, that it is far more a museum of surrealism than a surrealist city. It gives rise to a feeling that there is nothing to discover, it's all written out for you. It might be possibly to indulge in this, in some cases of recently arrived enthusiastic young surrealists who are happy to see traces of real surrealism recognised as real in the official world and the physical environment, and who will anyway just use them not as pillars in a lithified tradition but as glowing suggestions and hints that make stepping-stones in their own appropriation of surrealism as a shared and personal mythology - for those people, traditional surrealist Paris might still make sense. And of course anyone who is attentive could eventually make some original observations revising or adding to the already almost map-filling color-coding of surrealism-codified corners of Paris.

But most of those who hail surrealist Paris are external surrealismophiles (academic, arty, or fellow travellers) who will find this abundance of references to surrealism so blissful, and whose appreciation of such references might stand in exact proportion to their own inability to discover the surrealist aspects of things for themselves. Preferring the pre-labelled surrealist city before having to exercise any imagination and enterprise

any investigation of ones own. Often a certain surrealismophilia of that tinge will prove to be nothing but culture-loving nostalgic francophilia in general, nicely arranging the facets of classic modernism into the big history of western society's art, with a certain predilection for the picturesquely radical and romantic - which is all clearly the opposite of the thorough radical departure and nonconformism central in surrealism itself. But worse for us, it will also be the form in which many of our most eager sympathisers will be happy to consider and consume surrealism as something titillating and even deeply felt - but only not dependent on ones own creative, demanding and risky participation and reinvention.

If we go back to my personal quartet of suggested surrealist cities, Wien, Berlin, Budapest and Helsinki, it is striking that neither of them has ever had a proper surrealist group in spite of a rich presence of avantgarde and radical movements in general. It is also, perhaps, notable that they all lie east of a line dividing Europe in halves.

(And indeed, if we would extrapolate from this crude geographical division, we could try to count in Bucuresti, Praha, Brno, Bratislava, Beograd and Athina in this eastern axis, most of which have had a strong (brief or enduring) surrealist presence historically, and one of which (Praha) is indeed often cited as emblematic for surrealist urbanism along with Paris. I don't know. The only place of these that I've visited - so far - is Bucuresti, and I certainly don't mind recognising a particular surrealist potential of that city.

And what would become of the western axis? it would also include London and Bruxelles, which are another two of surrealism's historical capitals, which most people would agree are largely boring cities, as well as Madrid, Barcelona and Lisboa, about which there are probably very conflicting views available. But no, I do not want to make a big issue out of these axes, it was just a simple thought experiment.)

I would just like to advocate discovering surrealist aspects of cities rather than consuming surrealist aspects of cities. (And I dream of eventually becoming a satellite member of surrealist groups of these four cities so as to be able to explore these surrealist aspects of the cities more substantially than a casual visitor may.)

Mattias Forshage