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reading diary urban poetics

The readings delve into the many sides of how cities and their inhabitants are shaped, one becoming the extension of the other. The readings explore matters of time, commerce, light, architecture, segregation, nationality, growth, decay, fashion, and hygiene as influences on the urban phenomena.

Cities have always been great centers of trade and commerce. The mixture of people from far and wide brings a diversity in goods. But it also brings about a mixing of cultures which arouses enormous desire within the human spirit: to understand a tongue different from one's own, to taste spices that are foreign to the palate. Calvino speaks of this in *Invisible Cities*. The city of *Despina* appears to the land bound as a ship and the sailor as a camel. In this way the city becomes the other. But these desires can also be co-opted by elites to subjugate the citizens. In *The Possibilities of the Impossible*, we are told near the end of the article that the desire to possess and accumulate good for fashion can be used to syphon wealth from those blinded by fad. Interestingly enough the author feels that men are much more vulnerable to this than women. Women tend to accumulate goods to redistribute them altruistically for the good of a family or community thus are less likely to lose sight of social realities. But in order for trade and commerce to exist in its current form, temporal and spacial constructs must exist. *Money Time Space and the City* looks closely into how money has become the central organizing force in the urban experience and how this has created great rifts. Money is an abstraction, but at the same time it has become the measure of all things. People's labor has a value, the land they own or rent is valued, yet how can one objectively value such things? How can one person's time, for example a CEO's, be valued thousands of times that of a farmer. This system in its attempt to quantify all things and provide a universal means of exchange becomes unstable and contradictory. The decisions made in the interest of continual expansion have the cost of creating a large class of poor citizens who feel dehumanized and who become disillusioned by the injustice and prevarications of the ruling elite. This injustice by the elite towards the destitute can easily become a rationalization for criminality. The response by the elite to this is usually stricter forms of observation and control and prescription to ideologies which dehumanize the poor. This has taken many shapes. *Night Fall Fear in the Street*, by Wolfgang Schivelbusch chronicles the relationship of urban lighting to aiding the agenda of the constabulary. Night curfews and various lighting regulations become a form of power for the rulers which not only permanently changed the nocturnal environment of cities but also aid in the surveillance of the citizenry. Other forms of control and segregation are discussed in *The City: The Sewer, The Gaze and The Contaminating Touch*. We read how the ideologies of cleanliness and hygiene breed institutions of social abuse. One could be detained for being "diseased" much in the same way a person traveling at night without light was vulnerable to arrest. The poor's lack of ability to maintain ideals of cleanliness became reason for the elite to dehumanize destitute citizenry farther by claiming that their filth was sign of morally and spiritual inferiority. These led to a increase of segregation and caused a fear of becoming tainted by "filth".

However in facing the injustices of the elite, which are the root causes of decline, poverty and degradations to one humanity other forms of human experience are born. Facing the tragic fall of the once great city of Istanbul, we are told the story of a painter and a struggle to find an authentic voice coming from within. In Kinshasa we hear of how spontaneous communities arise out of the struggle in trying to use dysfunctional infrastructure. We see how reclamation and repurposing becomes an essential part of urban survival and displace traditional urban planning and design. Television sets still occupy rooms even though the power necessary for there functioning is lacking. Objects become symbolic of a past that no longer support their function. Kinshasa is shaped more by the ideas and needs of the inhabitants than by the constructions of edifices. In fact in landscapes of urban decline, it is the spaces between the

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decrepit structure where we observe actions of debate, business, and maintenance.

I wish to mention some of the ideas which come from my own observations and how the readings have influenced these. The car has fundamentally changed cities. This is perhaps most noticeable in the western US where metropolises like Phoenix were designed and built around the car's ability to travel great distances in short periods of time. The relatively large and by comparison to the rest of the world rich middle class of the US enabled urban planners to design cities around the car. The outcome of these designs is cities which hardly have centers. It is more like many small "towns" forced together by interstates, highways, and broad streets. Yet none of these islands functions as a town. People have to travel to work, to buy food, and to socialize. The pedestrian becomes a foreign body, dehumanized by the total lack of concern for foot travel in urban construction. In fact, one must commit a crime to walk across the US purely on foot as there is not a legal way to walk across mighty bridges which have devoted six lanes to car traffic, but not a single passage for pedestrians. People exist in the bubble of the automobile spending hours to travel to and from work, errands, and leisure. The access to freedom and convenience that the car brings to its owners comes at the expense of creating urban paradigms which destroy community, imprison people in cars for long periods of the day, and create the necessity of huge energy consumption that is not only unsustainable but has led to a growing gap in wealth and a destruction of a once affluent middle class. In addition, elite preference in the maintenance of roads and other pro-automobile policies over other infrastructure and social concerns has led to major decline in cultural wealth, physical health, and happiness. The lack of social centers, civic communion, and the rise of forms of isolated entertainment (tv, internet based socialization) have led to levels of social misery and depression that have become the prey of widespread state sanctioned pharmaceutical medication.

The car also disembodies us. One can lack physical agility, grace, and power in themselves, but can buy a car which has all three. The car becomes one's vessel. As the residents of Kinshasa sculpt and decorate their bodies thru intense exercise and adornments, the residents of many American cities hot rod, custom paint, and groom their cars obsessively.

The city is inseparable from its residents. The shape of both are reflected in the other. Of all the myriad factors which shape the city the most important is our connection to ourselves and how this sculpts our connection to others. The unreconciled issues rooted in conceptions of personal inadequacy leads to greed and shadenfreude which reflects outwardly creating forms of control, abuse, subjugation, and neglect. These practices create infrastructures which corrode humanity, isolating and segregating people. Understandings of self which are grounded in conceptions of altruism, love, and beauty counter oppression and lead to emancipation, repossession, art, and culture. A constant expansion and contraction exist between these two major engines of change which I see being the core shaping our experience as technologically advanced social animals living upon a finite earth.