

**The Flaneur Could Not Take the Monorail:
Representing Vancouver in Three Temporalities**

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*In the midway of this life we're partner with,
I awoke to find me in a dark wood,
Where not only was the only way fixed,
It is hard to speak of what it was,
All the exit went waylaid, thick end of ever
Covered trace
Of an even stray path, then up in the rain,
Lo! Skytrain.*

- Gerald Creede, 'Detach'

The inherited narrative that poses the modernist imagination of a city as a rational machine for living, propelled by the dream of development, ran smack into the sensual life of the streets and the unpredictability of everyday life. To negotiate this contradiction of the modernist logic straight-line, and the unpredictability and possibilities of the street, literature and then the visual arts picked up the emblem of the flaneur as the detached yet secretly engaged navigator of the city. Today that modernist dream of the city, and the 19th century device of the flaneur, is further twisted by two recent and very prosaic qualities that are characteristic of the neoliberal city. These twin urban tensions of a containment-security-surveillance complex and a consumption-speculation-expansion complex. This first complex—a containment-security-surveillance complex—worries over the excess of publicness (such as rallies, marches and other forms of civic protest), the production of unruly spaces, and the excesses of life. This complex has expanded, as a counter measure, an industry of surveillance systems and rehearsed police tactics to deal with new social actors and public speech. The second complex—a consumption-speculation-expansion complex—tries to guide the creativity of everyday life into intensified affective relations tied to consumption: publicness is then acted out in consumption and its spaces. In this complex, the heat of everyday life in commerce is drawn off into a turbo-charged capitalism, tied into the whirling speculation of real-estate as well as the shaping of the city as a space of consumption. Of course cities always have been deeply shaped by economic factors, but the intensification today is that cities themselves are used as *an accumulation strategy* rather than the site of economic activity. Hence, cities continually look for ways to expand, either through actual building or through the making of a bubble market and the elevation of real-estate to a key organizing principle of everyday life. This has also altered notions of *home* and *dwelling*, shifting them from more affective relationships to economic imperatives.

In this scenario, the empty apartments in the city I live in are never idle: even as they sit uninhabited they can make or lose money for the owners who have bet, short- or long-term, on the housing market. In this sense, they are neither homes nor dwellings but investment platforms. The dialectical struggle that emerges here is over the production of space by social actors and the conquest of space as a commodity. For Henri Lefebvre this has altered both space and the inhabitant: “He [the inhabitant] is reduced not only to merely functioning as an inhabitant (habit as function) but to being a buyer of space, one who realizes surplus value”.¹ Habit, that squelcher of life and art from the Russian Formalists and their notion of *banalization*, is now figured as the force to resist in the urban, as the Situationist International continually pointed out. This also brings artistic practices directly into the urban dialectic, for art and literature have taken habit and banality as processes to be investigated, reworked, and overturned.

From Place to Process and the Problem of Representation

This shift in urbanization, largely predicted by Lefebvre in the 1970s and wonderfully documented and analyzed since, creates a conundrum in the way that cities are represented culturally. For urbanism, this question of representation amplifies *an illusion* in Lefebvre’s terms: “Like classical philosophy, urbanism claims to be a system. It pretends to embrace, enclose, and possess a new totality. It wants to be the modern philosophy of the city, justified by (liberal) humanism while justifying a (technocratic) utopia”.² This produces a “blind field” in which urbanists, although they “...live it [the city], they are in it, but they don’t see it, and certainly cannot grasp it as such”.³ More than a criticism of planning and the rationalization of the city, Lefebvre points to the impossibility of grasping the city as a totality. This is not due to the city being an ephemeral wonder, but because, Lefebvre argues “In bureaucratic capitalism, productive activity completely escapes the control of planners and developers”, and “Space, as product, results from relationships of production that are taken under control by an active group”.⁴ In this relationship of control and representation, another dialectic emerges, the aspects of life that escape control and those which become banalized.

Earlier Kevin Lynch proposed a rationalized approach to this problem of representation in his classic study of the image and *imageability* of the city. For Lynch,

*Like a piece of architecture, the city is a construction in space, but it is one of vast scale, a thing perceived only in the course of long spans of time. City design is therefore a temporal art, but it can rarely use the controlled and limited sequence of other temporal arts like music. On different occasions and for different people, the sequences are reversed, interrupted, abandoned, cut across.*⁵

1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*. Trans. Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 156.

2 Ibid p153.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid p154.

5 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1960, p1.

What Lynch catches here is the how the temporal aspect of cities—whether they emerge from urban design or whether they evolve from a Lefebvrian dialectic—is uneven and cut across by layers of development, the interventions of social actors, and the stuttering of urban processes. In keeping city design separate from architecture, Lynch hopes to keep this process open, not terminating in “a final result, [but] only a continuous succession of phases”.⁶ Unfolding the city over time, and moving closer to Lefebvre’s term of *urbanization*, Lynch opens a tension within the representation of the city *as process*. But, through *imageability* Lynch gives us a “a concept...[that] does not necessarily connote something fixed, limited, precise, unified, or regularly ordered, although it may have these qualities”.⁷ Through the case studies of the experience and image of cities (in particular Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles) Lynch turns to the techniques of “field reconnaissance and citizen interview” as well as photographic recognition tests, actual trips in the field, and by numerous requests for directions made of passers-by in the streets”.⁸ From this fieldwork, and from his proposal of the city as a multitemporal process, Lynch’s imageability catalogues a more subjective experience of the elements of urban space—from edges, paths, districts, nodes, and landmarks, a shifting image builds up.

Shifting from Lynch’s sixties cities—before the explosion of urban upheaval and before the intensification of urbanization brought on by the acceleration of globalization—to today, the image of globalized cities becomes even more vexing, and the temporality of urban space even more layered. More layered because the creative destruction of the urban territory is felt in a deeply material manner, and more vexed because globalized cities also fall into what Slavoj Zizek locates as a “‘danger’ of capitalism”. Writing on urban violence in Paris and New Orleans (in France’s fiery fall and in the days of devastation after the flood of New Orleans of 2005), Zizek argues that, capitalism, through globalization, is “depriving the large majority of people of any meaningful ‘cognitive mapping’”.⁹ Crucially for Zizek, the inability to map one’s position within global capital is not ontological, but produced by capital’s production of space and spatial relations. This establishes a scalar dialogue with Lefebvre’s accusation that urbanists cannot grasp the city, despite being in the midst of urban processes, because urban life itself, despite the determinations of capital is always in excess of a complete image and of complete understanding. For Zizek, it is global capital that has overturned a grasping of totality, fractured the possibility of Fredric Jameson’s unfinished concept of cognitive mapping; but for Lefebvre—true to his wild dialectics—the complexity of everyday life resists such a mapping.

The Question and Spaces of Representation

An aesthetic or artistic question rises of the difficulty of grasping, mapping or even codifying urbanism today: Has this work of cataloguing and representing urbanization and the city moved from urban planners to artists? Has the *imageability* of the city passed over to artists whose aesthetic practices can grasp the contradictions and overlapping temporalities of urbanization? But the dark side of these questions suggests that urban planners are merely technocrats for urban development programs, that they have no plan for the city other than to strengthen it as an accumulation strategy, that their social imagination is to manage the inequities of the neoliberal city rather than to imagine an equitable city. But on a productive aesthetic side, these questions suggest a shift in the *knowledge* of the city and a complication of the ideological act of representation.

6 Ibid p2.

7 Ibid p10.

8 Ibid p15.

9 Slavoj Zizek, “Some Politically Incorrect Reflections on Urban Violence in Paris and New Orleans and Related Matters”, *Urban Politics Now: re-Imagining Democracy in the Neoliberal City* Ed. BAVO, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2007: 12-29 15.

Peter Lang, arguing that “new urban conglomerates” today “defy[...] any of the standard formulas underlining the late modern rules of urban determinancy”, arrives at such a role for artists: “The new breed of multidisciplinary artist is a far more prescient gauge of the dramatic transformations affecting society than his or her more rigidly focused professional counterpart, and clearly serves to instigate a debate on the subject of the contemporary city and its impact on new forms of cultural behavior”.¹⁰ It is important here to not propose artists as a transhistorical instrument for gauging urban life—such as the device the flaneur turned into—but to catch the alteration, over the last half-century, of the shape of urbanism itself and how it has become both increasingly unruly and difficult to represent, map cognitively, or be fully known. At the same time, cities do expand and mutate under new sets of determinants, and new technological mediations; but the dialectic of determination, and of the twin tensions I outlined at the beginning of this essay, have shifted the representation of urban processes from the planner to the artist.

This turn opens the modes of representation of a city to a wide field of artistic and aesthetic approaches. The explosion of urban art seeking to represent an urban imagination and processes of the city—from site-specific work, new genre public art, to research-based work and the mass of photographic strategies—is a dynamic symptom of this. In his works *One second of a possible future/monospan twin ride* and *the view from now/downtown parkade*, Dublin-based artist, Dennis McNulty delves into the aesthetic representation of Vancouver through the use of three different aesthetic interventions. Crucially, these works approach the problem of the representation of space through three temporalities: A possible future drawn from the archive of city planning; an unstable linguistic landscape of the present; and the complex overlapping time of the shifting of urban economies from industrial to real-estate via idleness (or from production to speculation). But I have been too passive in my verbs here, for no representational act merely *approaches* a city—rather such an act is more actively *generative* of the city. Artistic practices then are spatial practices in the way that Andy Merrifield invigorates Lefebvre’s term: “Spatial practices invariably relate to *perception*, to people’s perceived take on the world, on *their* world—particularly their everyday world. Spatial practices make sense (and nonsense) of everyday reality, and include routes and networks, patterns and movements that link together spaces of work, play and leisure”.¹¹ Merrifield’s emphasis on perception and movement is canny in relation to McNulty’s work on Vancouver, for the three temporalities that these works produce through the representation of space are largely based on various perceptions of movement. But, grasping the city through uneven and overlapping temporalities, *One second of a possible future/monospan twin ride* and *the view from now/downtown parkade* also play off of a relationship of *movement* and *development*.

10 Peter Lang, “//” *Urban Ecology: Detroit and Beyond*. Ed. Kyong Park, [place]: Map Bok Publications 2005, p11.

11 Andy Merrifield, *Metromarxism: A Marxist Tale of the City*, London: Routledge, 2002 p90.

One second of a possible future/monospan twin ride revolves around a 1957 plan for a monorail in Vancouver's downtown by the architect and designer Wells Coates. Despite his participation in CIAM and an important role in British modernism, his enduring designs (for instance the "D-handles", which you probably used opening a door today) and the Isokon Flats in Camden, an important contribution to British modernism, (inhabited, at one point, by Walter Gropius), Coates certainly remains under-recognized internationally and almost unknown in Vancouver.¹² In 1957 Vancouver was still a rough, material town, a city standing on an economy based in fish, lumber, mining, ship-building, and manufacturing. Coates' design of a raised monorail on an inverted T of cast concrete which made the trains appear to float, would have been extremely space-aged at that time. Which is perhaps why it was never built. Even today a monorail is emblematic of a nostalgic and unrealized technological future: that is, the monorail is a temporally tricky image of a future that is still in the past. But Coates' proposal was actually a practical solution for its present. In the late 1950s Vancouver was actually dismantling its urban transport: its two interurban train lines and the streetcar system were shut down in September 1958.¹³ Coates' monorail would have filled the time span between, when there was no rapid transit in Vancouver other than busses and the brief moment when there was a monorail. Ironically, the only monorail that Vancouver has had—which ran as a temporary amusement in movement from May to October, 1986 and was built by the Swiss company with the appropriate name of Von Roll—was on the grounds on Expo 86, the global mega-event that was to bring Vancouver into the future by opening it to the new impulses of globalization. That is, it was to bring Vancouver out the world of resources and *stuff* to a world of the buying and selling of space.

Ironically, for a city that had denied such an innovative and beautiful transportation system as Coates', Expo 86's theme was transportation. This set off a rush to provide the city with an actual rapid-transit system. As a result the Skytrain was hastily built—at first a one-line transit system raised on concrete tracks that gave it its name (a name suitably mocked in Gerald Creede's poem "Detach" which echoes Dante to invoke the humour of naming a raised transit system Skytrain: "... then up in the rain, / Lo! Skytrain.").¹⁴ Curiously, even though Skytrain was an emblem of the arrival of a new form of global modernity for the city, the Skytrain's lines partially overlap with the interurban train line that ran from 1902 to the late 1950s.¹⁵ With this type of spatial layering of the city, which Lynch was concerned with as well, the question of the difficulty of the representation of urban processes is again raised. To this McNulty has added an extra conundrum: How to represent an aspect of the city that was imagined, planned and proposed but never realized? This is also a temporal question: for Coates' monorail represents the modernism and a possible future that Vancouver never had. This modernism, drawn from the lost archive of city planning, arrived belatedly, exactly at the height of corporate postmodernism (so shingly represented by Vancouver's waterfront architecture) with Skytrain, due only to the global push of Expo 86.

12 See Elizabeth Darling, "Wells Coates: Maker of a Modern British Architecture", *Architectural Review*, September 2008, p81-87. Anecdotally, while I was searching for the book that Coates' daughter, Laura Cohen write *The Door to a Secret Room: A Portrait of Wells Coates*, a local used bookstore owner told me that he had no material on Coates but that a several architects in town were doing research on Coates and were hoarding research material on him.

13 Lance Berelowitz, *Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre., 2005, p.77.

14 Gerald Creede, *Ambit*. Vancouver: Tsunami Press, 1993.

15 See Berelowitz, op cite.

To represent the city and the movement of Coates' monorail through city space, McNulty takes an image drawn by Coates, and used in his research report on the monorail plan, and pushes this architectural drawing through the frame. This sequence of twenty-four drawings, which forms part of a piece entitled *one second of a possible future/monospan twin ride*, mimics the motion of the monorail but the image itself simply passes through the frame. The cityscape in Coates's drawing is dominated by one building looming in monumental perspective: a sleek tower that was once the B.C. Hydro headquarters designed by Thompson, Berwick, Pratt in 1955 and a "testimony to the high ideals of modernism".¹⁶ Today, the signature office tower of the electrical company that was state-run but is now partially privatized, was retro-fitted as apartments and renamed The Electra. Its apartments circulate through Vancouver's real-estate market, changing hands as space and the idea of living is magically turned into capital. In this frame, McNulty's representation of the modernism that was never to arrive—the monorail and its sense of mobility and futurity—passes by the modernism that moved from the state to the market. The movement in this drawing then is not just the clean representation of the monorail cutting sharply through the cityscape, but it also gives us the elements of a movement from a Keynesian welfare state to a neoliberal state, and from a publicly owned industry that produces something socially necessary (electricity) to a privatized economy that produces immaterial surplus value. In terms of artistic representation, McNulty's use of Coates' architectural renderings *mimics* movement yet provocatively *represents* another more obscured form of development and transformation.¹⁷

The second temporality of *one second of a possible future/monospan twin ride* is constructed from a soundwork rather than images. Yet this soundwork also strains at spatial representation. Devised as a soundtrack to the images of Coates' monorail, this work is narrated by Karen Kelm who was the official voice for Skytrain's original line, the Expo line, but whose calm announcements were replaced as the system expanded with other lines. Kelm worked for B.C. Transit at the time and was conscripted for the job because she had some theatre experience. Yet, Kelm's voice may have been one of the most familiar of all public voices in the city—her affectless voice announced each stop ("The next station is [pause as the computer selects the appropriate station] Stadium") up and down the line from Waterfront to New Westminster. McNulty's approach to debanalize both Kelm's voice and the Skytrain ride itself was to have her narrate a dense soundtrack edited from McNulty's field recordings of his travels along the Skytrain lines and his walks through the stations and their vicinities. Kelm, listening to McNulty's recordings of the sounds of the stations, the whirls and clicks of the Bombardier-built trains, and the voices of the passengers, attempts to create a linguistic-visual image of the ride: her attempt is necessarily speculative as she guesses what the sounds could be, as a result (and in combination with the soundtrack's layered editing) each articulation is abrupt or unsure. What does it mean, in terms of representation, to have the steady, assured yet disembodied voice of a transit system brought back into the spaces and sounds of that system and to try to recreate it? In terms of the tension between urban designers' representations of the city and artist's representations of the urban, this soundtrack is directly shaped by the voices, movements, and bodies of the citizen/inhabitants using the Skytrain. Kelm, the voice that represented predictability, here is thrown into another register by the uncertainty of urban movement and life. Unlike the surety of the old station announcements, here Kelm makes perceptual leaps (through McNulty's editing): "Boarding the train...clicking sounds all around doors close...an engine accelerating train moves away outside...something's coming...slowing down at an outdoor station...foreign language—an accent! ...teenagers joking around..." This soundtrack also throws off the flaneur as an artistic device for it is not a 19th century idling walk, nor a Situationist derive designed to overcome the city's overly administered spaces through an excess of purposelessness, but a temporally askew narration between the future that Coates imagined and the present (his future) that the city has.

16 Berelowitz, op cite, p203.

17 Another tension in the series of images is the car that also passes through the frame. Coates' design would not have been rejected, nor the interurban lines and the streetcars disassembled, if the private car had not become the kingpin of all planning.

The third temporality that McNulty constructs, is also done through research, site selection, and sound in the work *the view from now/downtown parkade*. But this temporality is nearly glacial in terms of urban process and globalization: it is the slow swing from an industrial waterfront to a speculative waterfront, from a working dock to a post-port real-estate zone of cheap post-modernism and “preserved” heritage buildings, ...and with a market, always with a public market and ample parking. The waterfront on the Fraser River in New Westminster, a former city now integrated into the suburban texture of Vancouver where *the view from now/downtown parkade* was situated, represents this transition, this creative destruction punctuated by moments of optimistic development and demolition and then periods of rusty stalling. The layers of developmental miscalculations and miscues by city planners and small-time developers are literally stacked side by side and on top of each other on this waterfront: the unused industrial spaces hover between the working-dock past and the limited imagination of waterfronts today which rely on public walkways and condominiums. In New Westminster this decay also includes a paddle wheeler that was once a casino when gambling was the only imagined economic engine; a postmodern public market with pink and teal details, including the perplexing po-mo use of industrial scale pipes merely for ornamentation; and a two-story public parkade that separates the downtown from the waterfront and shrouds the waterfront street in darkness. The parkade is largely unused, and persistently rumoured to be slated for tear-down or redevelopment (as a farmers market, naturally). On this unloved structure that could stand as one of that city’s industrial-modernist monuments, McNulty set up a mobile sound unit from the back of car and staged a proprioceptive electronic sound-work that echoed through the minimal and narrow parkade overlooking the wide Fraser River. The relationship between the digital scratches, tweeps, droning, and bleeps (reminiscent of the Mego Record artists such as Jim O’Rourke and Fennesz) and what Stuart Hall described as the slow rusty sound of deindustrialization is a relationship that again steps into the conundrum of representation of urban processes. Can sound, unfolding as it does in time, represent an urban process? Or, with less directness, is Dennis McNulty’s site-specific sound piece an *objective correlative* of this movement from working-docks to post-fordist development failure? The answer lies closer to the impossibility of representing a process which is spread across spatial scales—from the extremely local to the scale of global finance—and moving through a complex temporality in which its present is the least valued. The difference here from the problem of representing the city due to its spatial complexity that confronts Lynch in 1960, or the lack of a means for “cognitive mapping” due to the decentering effects of globalization that Jameson and then Zizek cite, is that the uneven process of the place—suspended between a predictable future of development with preserved heritage buildings and a slowly decaying present—is much more difficult to represent than the actual physical space. Industrial waterfront, even in transition, is easy to stabilize with photographs that catch the scale and textures of steel, concrete and timber. Given this, the digital sounds bouncing off of the analogue parkade, as tug boats pulled log booms upriver, at least debanalized the *present* of the waterfront.

These three components of McNulty's Vancouver project can be framed within Lefebvre's shift, as Merrifield puts it, "from 'things in space' to 'the production of space'".¹⁸ The representation of 'things in space' is straightforward—any number of representational strategies can show us the material *thingness* of things; artistic practices also metaleptically turn any commodity into a thing that has a depth and complexity beyond its surface.¹⁹ The production of space, as I've argued, is much more difficult to represent as it is both temporal and spatial. McNulty's three temporalities are all spatial and they are all attempts to represent the imagination and production of space at various moments. By bringing *one second* of Wells Coates' future—captured in the enduring emblem of futurity, the monorail—forward from the forgotten archive of city planning, McNulty chose a canny entry point to the various temporalities of Vancouver. Coates is an unknown urban futurist in Vancouver, yet his plan was echoed when the city was jumped-started into the imagined future of global capital by the mega-event Expo 86. In this way, McNulty's works get into the layered histories of the city through its planned, unplanned, and *unbuilt* possibilities. And, as I proposed earlier, with the complexities of urban territories understood as in excess of planning, and with the current crisis of planning in Vancouver (despite its marketability) where private developers have shunted aside public planners, an *artistic representation* of the city has the possibility of being a counter-representation. *One second of a possible future/monospan twin ride* and *the view from now/downtown parkade* enter the problem of representation in order to trouble three temporalities and how they haunt the production of space in Vancouver today.

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18 Merrifield, op cite p89.

19 Here I am borrowing from Bill Brown when he writes: "above all, I am interested in the metaleptic effect whereby institutions don't preserve art but rather, through the act of institutional preservation, create art" ("Objects, Others, and Us :The Refabrication of Things," *Critical Inquiry* 36 [Winter 2010],193). At a lower level than the institutional creation of the art object from objects, the production of things that lay out their detailed surfaces is the strategy of many artists.