

The Emperor's Dirty Laundry,

or,

A Tale of Seven Cities Remade to Measure

by His Royal Highness in Exile the Once
and Future Autocrat of All the Pachyderms,
assisted by Steven Flusty, 2015 (2010)

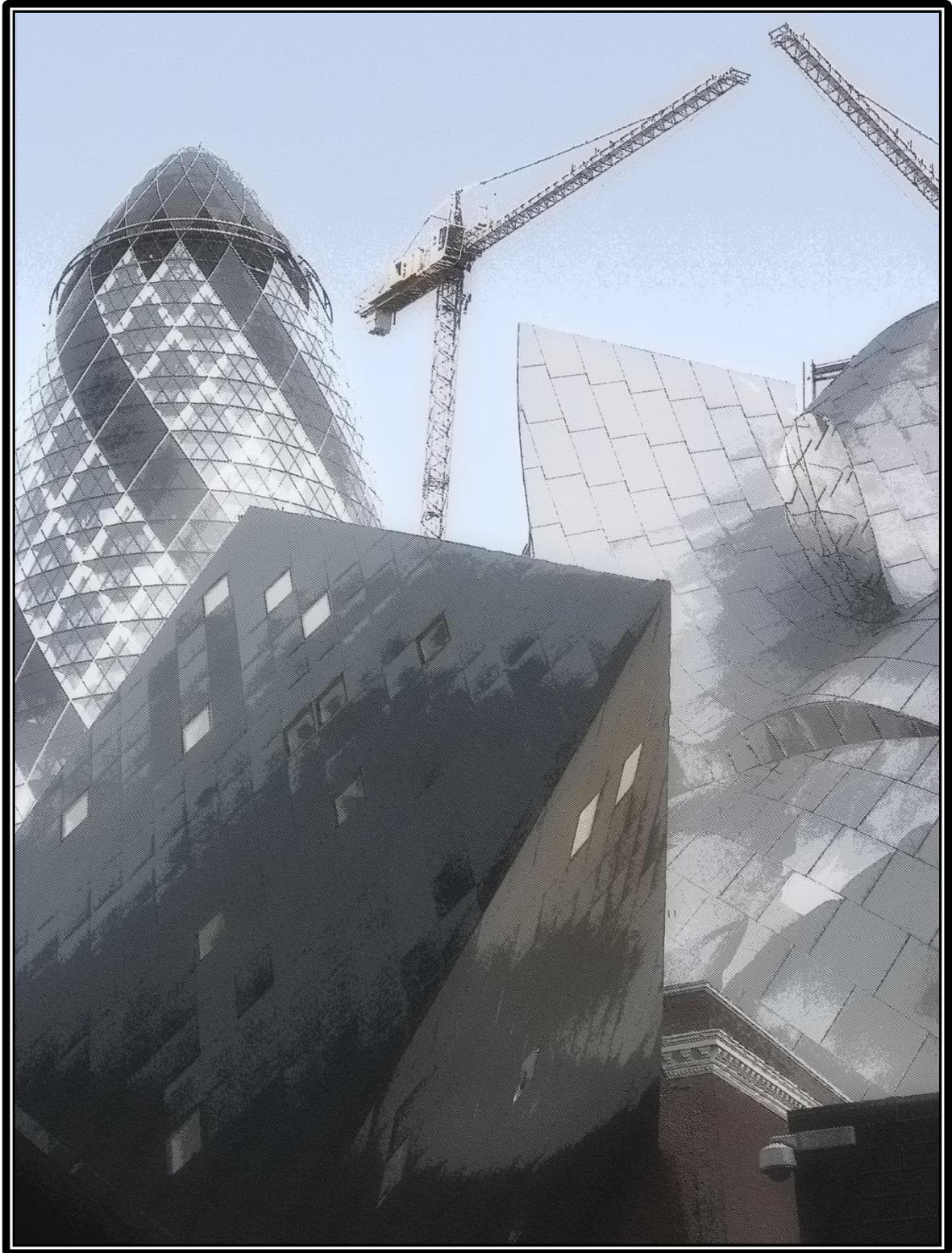
A new edition, ingeniously revised and greatly expanded
from "The Emperor's Used Clothes, or, Places Remade to
Measure" published in *CITY: Analysis of Urban Trends,
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Summary: *Something is stalking the Great Cities of the World. Something unseemly and insidious. Throttling neighborhood streets with young coxcombs and popinjays sporting skinny-legged jeans. Cratering cozily familiar landscapes with shrapnel by Koziol, Alessi, and Philippe Starck. Shivving well-tempered skylines with gigantic (and incontinent) edifices resembling nothing so much as ruptured brass artichokes and crumpled tin cauliflowers. A Great Game is afoot, and expeditioning by intermunicipal subterranean railways, by occasional sundry other conveyances, as well as deep within the bowels of innumerable boutique cafés, this excursionist will not rest until he has arrived at the very source of that Greatness itself.*

Key words: *agave, coelacanth, gunship, imperial, metropolitan, reposeur, samovar*



TO THEIR
MOST IMPERIAL MAJESTIES
THESE DISCOURSES
ARE
RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED



The Storied Ur-Conurbation of Gan 'Edhen

I ask you, gentle reader, to reflect upon what is fast becoming of our metropolises. There was a time when a Great City of the World could be known by the stout forms of three constituents – the counting house, the government house, and the opera house – venerated institutions, each an anchor for the civil deportment of a genteel citizenry. But now we see such touchstones collapsing all about us, replaced by a seemingly omnipresent irruption of tumescent edifices whose very forms dissemble hidden functions in our midsts. Attendant upon these we likewise see the appearance of a new caste of gentry, marked by a shambolic aspect inexplicably at odds with their demonstrated efficacy in wittily embellishing streetfronts and shop offerings, amending land rents and cafés per capita, and through their very presence conferring Greatness upon a city of the world. Inquiries into this efficacy will elicit naught but ironic smirks, as though the mere asking proves the questioner’s risible obsolescence.

But inquire we must.

Our cities now rise and fall in the shadow of luxuriantly grotesque and enigmatic edifices, their denizens a cryptic cabal of ostentatiously dressed-down dandies. There is taint of subtle sedition here, of secret societies and alien influence, of illicit trafficking in the very stuff of Greatness. Clearly a Great Game is afoot, and thus I have resolved to mount an expedition the purpose of which is to locate the source of that Greatness itself. The expedition, for evident reasons, takes as its object those metropolises most newly ascendant by reason of being most sorely besieged. Indeed, until quite recently their very existences were mere rumors, places lost to legend, expunged from any reputable map. But the expansion of airship service, and of the intermunicipal subterranean railways - ‘the Intertubes’ in vulgar parlance – has vouchsafed revelation, and so I sally forth to my first terminus: the city of Cibola. 🗺️



The Former Site of the Temple of State of Cibola.

I sit ensconced in a café, its S+arck designed interior surfaces and fittings filigreed with understated Churrigueresque. At my elbow crouches a Koziol bowl of xocolatl frappe, poised atop caricatured silver clawfeet. That is my *métier*, to *reposez-vous autour* or, perhaps more aptly, *resposez-vous auteur*. I am a credentialed reposeur, sitting ensconced in cafés while texting about what comes within range of sight. It is a job in high demand. In fact, merely advising distant entrepôts on how to attract my sort has become a vocation in itself. It is writ of safe passage to a well-traveled and lavishly-catered life for cadres of self-anointed urban alchemists boasting recipes for transmuting any terra incognita into a Great City of the World. And so I am imported from place to place, myself and my thumb-scrivenings part of the regalia that effects the transmutation and simultaneously proves it has already occurred. Would any Great City, after all, be great to

begin with were we not spreading word of its Greatness or, more deliciously, any laughable lack thereof, far and wide?

What does not come into sight, however, is no less important than what does. The plaza just beyond the café patio – the ceremonial heart of this city of Cibola back when it was the center of a world – was, not long ago, ringed with buildings of uncertain disposition, half completed or perhaps half demolished, rebar jutting from spiraled columns at the top floors. Drifting amidst them one would have found adolescents garbed in frayed hand-me-downs and respirators filled with cobbler's glue, and aging caballeros in black leather chaps and little else. All gone now, likely sent to be rendered into saleable organs and lubricant for industrial machinery. Instead you will find, as in most any city nowadays from Agartha to Asgard, prefabricated lofts concealed behind impeccable new façades. Although here in Cibola, the façades are newly built with subtle evocations of the ornately antique Plateresque style. Their forecourts bustle with fastidiously bed-headed and unshaven dandies, stuffed into reproduction vintage jeans and diaphanously thinned t-shirts bearing artfully faded prints, and a light dusting of tribal people brought in from the countryside for provision of authentic local color.

Across this scene wanders an elderly man, small and slight. He moves from table to table with a modish Alessi whisk playfully formed to resemble a comical waterboarded stickman. His job is to froth patrons' bowls of premium hot xocolatl when they have gone flat. In exchange he gathers small gratuities. I, however, pay him considerably more, an invitation to serve unwittingly as native guide by regaling me with the history of this place. It is, after all, the regrettable but necessary circumstance of my work that with so much transit from place to place, one seldom has the luxury of knowing much about anyplace oneself.

Long gone, he tells me, are the days when you could know a man's place by the abundance and opulence of his piercings. Back then, one could intuit all one wished from the elongation of an

earlobe or the dimension of a labret. The young, in turn, found great pleasure and popularity in finding new and unexpected places to pierce, using materials pointedly selected to strike their elders and betters as common or even unsanitary.

Then the galleons appeared. Their glazed steel bulks devoured the sky as they came ashore to make their way overland with surprising speed, laying dense webworks of the intertubes' pipeline before and behind as they went. But what these sky-scraping factory ships did to space was nothing compared to what they did to time. Silently, they processed it into finer and finer slices and points that found their way into every crevice, crack, pore and alveolus. Surgical masks proved no help, no matter how ingeniously decorated with eagle beaks, jaguar snouts, skeletal mandibles, &c., although the decorating and wearing of masks did provide marks of rank and considerable amusement¹. When the epidemic reached its height, multitudes found themselves lethally afflicted with being too late, entirely out of date or, most deadly of all, just plain backwards.

As the plague subsided, survivors arose to find their world and its wealth – animal, vegetable, mineral, ancestral, deifical and digital – dissected, dismantled, and sucked down the tubes, only to reemerge from the invader's distant workshops as taxidermied divinities, platinum plated bejeweled memento mori or recipes for stuffed gold leaves. The galleons had anchored themselves at the city's heart and ground its monuments, including the personage of the city's Great Speaker himself, to foundational rubble beneath them. Causeways arching gracefully over floating gardens had become expressways bypassing landfill. And where the Temple of State had loomed now squatted an immense edifice that looked like nothing so much as a mangled titanium agave, packed with such few choice fragments of the city's sights, sounds and affects as evaded pilferage. Many of these fragments in turn decayed beyond recognition as the edifice proved

¹ The skeleton remains to the present a source of ambivalent amusement for the locals, commonly depicted in advertising and on protective amulets as riding a combine harvester while glowering anxiously at his pocketwatch.

irremediably incontinent, and were replaced in the exhibition halls and adjacent giftshop by copies cast in cleverly inappropriate materials to quote ironically the originals.

Displaced and disoriented in their own grand boulevards, the Great City of their World now subject to a world of Great Cities, Cibola's survivors necessarily undertook extreme measures to adapt. Over the course of subsequent years, decades, indeed centuries up to the present, the Cibolaros took to masking themselves first in the invaders' gilt-embroidered velvets, and later in their pinstriped woolens. And as the invaders seemed particularly convinced of the civilizing influence of hats², survivors took cover beneath bowlers, boaters, Stetsons, fedoras, porkpies, &c., and, ultimately, baseball caps. Not that the invaders much noticed or cared, and as it turned out each innovation to come through the tubes was already old hat back at its source. And so the survivors cast off each outflow of exported surplus for the next, with only the most provincial of tribal people knowing no better than to don a remnant gilt-embroidered velvet ball-cap.

Or so I am told. The tribals in the plaza before me, however, seem to have occupied that vital location knowingly, garbed in velvets of their own devising, heavily embroidered upon with ever more ingeniously tangled pinstripes, motifs giving the appearance of nothing so much as spiderwebs rent and ruptured from within. These they wear with pointed assertion, complemented by baseball caps (in colors specific to their moieties) so undersized as to suggest parody and, perhaps as ancestral homage, by surgical masks ornamented with derisively caricatured likenesses of the invaders themselves. Peering more intently across the vast square, it becomes clearer that these tribals are not just sitting in the forecourts. Rather, they are embroidering, aggressively. Almost as though they are embroidering *at* passersby. And then I begin to discern that some of them are not

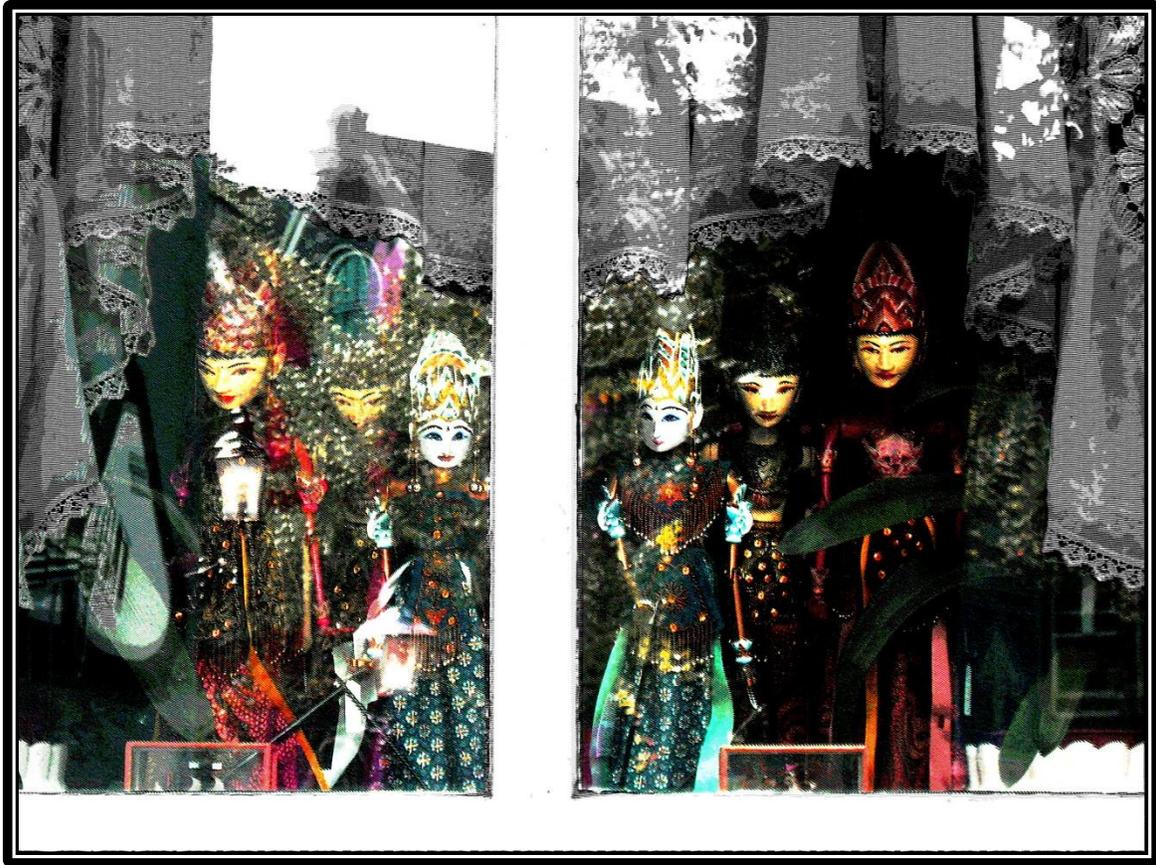
² Long years later and half a world away, the city of Janaidar's ruling junta endeavored to ward off a similar threat of invasion with a diktat proclaiming that "now more than ever it is essential to go on wearing hats."

tribals at all. Rather, their number includes young scions of the city, similarly dressed and masked, and militantly wielding embroidery needles themselves.

I depart directionless, accompanied only by the elder's tale, redacted as an affordable pocket-sized codex conveniently proffered by the teller himself, but upon exiting delicately appropriate the xocolatl whisk as well. There is something ominously amiss about it that belies its gelastic countenance. And its provenance, advertised prominently on the café shop shelves, was the marketplaces of Medina al-Nuhhas. 🐼



The Devouring of the Sky.



A Distant Giftshop's Showcase of Taxidermied Deities.

To say my work consists of sitting in cafés is a disparaging exaggeration. It also entails sitting in tube station waiting lounges, and in the passenger compartments of subterranean carriages. Take the tubes intercity with sufficient frequency, all the lounges and compartments alloy into a single sleek betwixting of pale translucent skins undulating across osseous struts, trusses, pillars, and giftshops, a bardo suspended outside time and space. Aerial travel may well be more romantic, and there remain those affluent few for whom such romance is irresistible. How else would Virgin Tropospheric maintain its airships aloft? But does anybody truly believe their advertisements, touting the superior practicality of reaching any place, anyplace at all, upon the surface of the earth? If a place is not embraced within the tubes' web, after all, can that place truly be said to exist? There is nothing outside the web. Or, at least, certainly not for long. ☹



Al-Nuhhas through Its Preemptively Abandoned Reliquary.

I perch atop a jewel-toned vase-shaped stool that is suspiciously not quite exactly like those by S+arck for Kartell, in a teahouse of great antiquity, or so the refined minimalism of the interior design coyly suggests - incised and scraped away at strategic points to reveal faded

arabesques layered over byzantine mosaic fragments. The tiny, Steuben-esque teaglass in front of me is complemented by a Damien Hirst inspired hubble-bubble in the form of a lung encrusted with black Swarovskoid crystals. Both the chai and the smoke are oversweetly redolent with the



flavor of açai, I find myself missing the distant days of some few months past when pomegranate's sourness was the flavor of choice.

The tearoom is open to a narrow canyon of a street between high apartment walls, choked with similar low stools and tables to turn the entire thoroughfare into a single distended open air café. The walls of Medina al-Nuhhas (or simply al-Nuhhas to the locals), the City of Brass, frame panoramic slices of city – a mountainous heap of innumerable styles deposited in built

strata one atop the other over centuries, all studded with transmission towers that, at regular intervals throughout the day, blanket the city with the sanctified cacophony of simulcast supplications to the divine.

The canyon walls are punctuated with uncountable oriels, covered balconies, and soffits jutting wildly from rooftop terraces. Not long ago one would have seen matriarchs leaning over these, careful not to catch on the splintered gingerbread carvings of the splintering wooden edges, lowering buckets on strings to merchants below. And there were always merchants below, the

vegetable and gas and battery mongers giving way as day wore into evening to song mongers and transvestite sex mongers and ecstatically dancing enlightenment mongers in towering headgear.

But now the cobalt lenses of apotropaic eyes, electronically conjoined to hidden and heavily armed sentinels, glare warily at all such vagabonds. The bay windows and balconies are sealed, scaffolded and safety-netted as their ornamental railings and reliefs are painstakingly restored to original condition and, as at Belovodye and Kêr-Is and any other aspirant Great City of the World, their interiors are transformed into condominiums and serviced holiday rentals. Underneath, fauxhawked popinjays sprawl across every low table, poured into antiquely-styled jeans and prefabricatedly worn t-shirts topped with trucker's caps, pecking at keypads of diverse sorts. Those, and a few remaining matriarchs thoughtfully fingering their iBeads, one of whom has clearly noted I am not local. Sitting down on the stool beside me she orders our teaglasses refilled, makes introduction, and tells me of what she rightly suspects my cursory views can not reveal.

Long gone, she tells me, are the days when you could know a man's place by the shape and size of his hat. There were hats for every occasion and every social faction, with especially elaborate ones awarded as honorifics. Whether conversing beneath the deeply eaved pavilions of the public fountains or cruising through the straits, a true gentleman displayed his headwear proudly and, upon death, even preferred to be buried under a stone replica of the hat he had worn in life. Insofar as a covered head is a mark of civilization, this was the Great City of the World when other such cities had been little more than bare-headed villages. Not to be in and of the city was to be hopelessly jejune; anybody wishing to be somebody took up residence behind the bay windows of the city's timbered escarpments. They came from everywhere and were welcomed, even minorities enjoyed no small degree of suffrage provided they were willing to pay the nominal surcharge and refrain from wearing slippers in colors proscribed their class.

Then, the disbelievers arrived. At first their ambassadors, distinct in the dark velvets of their gilt-embroidered t-shirts and matching ballcaps, were given polite audience in the outermost court of the Federal Palace and then sent on their ways. But in time, embassies followed upon the ambassadors' footsteps, and wedged themselves into al-Nuhhas' summits. Some were built like many-layered glass houses, easy to see out of but as difficult to look into as a hall of mirrors. Others were built like classically columned and pedimented bunkers, windowless Vitruvianized concrete spiked all about with closed circuit observation cameras. And from their embassies the ambassadors watched, scrutinizing the city and its people for any hint of being too late, entirely out of date, or just plain backwards. Meanwhile, there were ever more frequent rumors of steel and glass pinnacles sighted sliding through the straits by day, and of gunships lofting silently overhead by night.

Something had to be done. The disbelievers' eyes would have to be persuaded of, and perhaps even slightly unnerved by, the thoroughly modern civility of the surveilled. And with galleons lurking, perhaps, just offshore, who was to say a little catching up would be such a bad thing? So from the city's heights, the most tastefully sophisticated of makeovers was proclaimed. Dress caftans were remade of velvet and embroidered in gilt, then later remade again in gray wool. The hats of all sizes and shapes that had distinguished one urbanite from the next were banned, and by proclamation the people were united in the wearing of brimmed caps – albeit back to front with the brim to the rear, so as to not interfere with liturgical prostrations.

Once bodies had been so restyled, the spaces of their habitation simply had to follow suit. Divans and poufs were reinterpreted in an international modern style, if not supplanted entirely by the most austere of functionalist furnishings. Mosaic tiled floors were relaid with the most cutting edge linoleum prints. Eventually, entire landmarks were either redecorated from the inside out or abandoned for the construction of less dated edifices. The al-Nuhhasi Shadow of the Divine

himself, shortly before his admittedly reluctant conversion to the far less passé title of President³, had an entire new palace built in the deconstructionist idiom. Even today the willfully fractured geometries of its grand archways perfectly complement the crumpled tulip form of the immense, stainless steel structure adjacent that would have been the palace reliquary, had it not been for the steel's intolerable heat gain in summer and the roof's unanticipated permeability during the rainy season.

The enactment of the makeover proclamation spangled the city's mountainous palimpsest with architectonic novelties. But the fiduciary impacts were more dramatic still, draining the treasury and necessitating external wherewithal if the makeover was to be brought to full fruition. Eventually even the embassies were approached, and proved amenable to supplying the necessary lines of credit or, as in the case of the city's new tube station, to undertaking the construction themselves. And when the treasury was emptied entirely, the ambassadors declared the bankruptcy final and definitive proof of backwardness. Reinforced by galleons just offshore and gunships immediately overhead, they took possession of the city's choicest assets and luxuries in situ, liquidated them, and sent them down the tubes, leaving the remainder to slowly decompose for want of maintenance.

To be endemically confronted, by every moldered wall and teetering archway, with the great fall from worldliness of one's own Great City would seem cause for great discontent. And there are indeed some who continue to insist upon, and lobby for, readmission. But others have found themselves possessed instead by a resiliently bittersweet love of evanescence, patiently savoring the melancholy of decay and creating anew with its revenants. The matriarch, for instance, recasts it into jewelry. She presents me a ring she has forged herself of scrap metals and embossed,

³ A gracious sovereign even in his delimited condition, he himself commemorated my arrival by presenting me his own Zippo lighter, bearing his personal calligraphic sigil, and for a most reasonable price following only the most decorous of haggling.

in a pidgin of local and ambassadorial tongues⁴, with a concise paean to the powerfully abiding presence of things long gone. Nor, I realize, are the vintage jeans of these dandified Musc'ad-Dins reproductions at all. Rather, they look to have been carefully excavated, recuperated and reconditioned, just as their trucker's caps have been in many instances padded to achieve prodigious widths and exceptional heights. And the wearers themselves are perhaps not so much pecking at their keypads as they are vibrating or even bouncing, as though ready at any moment to burst into ecstatic dance. Distracted, I neglect to notice my own purloinment of the hubble-bubble I had used, its bottom stamped as made in Shangri-La. 🍷



An Exorbitant Architectonic Novelty

⁴ Only these latter dialects being commonly referred to by the locals as languages, having come well-equipped as they did with armies and navies or, more recently, stock exchanges.

I am prone, it seems, to unfair exaggeration. For instance, it may well be true that given enough time en route all tube stations meld into one. And since their earliest incarnations they have as a species tended towards enduring morphological similarities, glazed skins stretched over sterile tortuous guts. But build it larger, prettier and, most important, more distinctively, and more will come. And so here a new station's trusses are arrayed to resemble a clockwork coral reef, there a verdant oasis in a cyclopean Wardian case, countered by another elsewhere splayed like a mechanical dragon in repose, &c. Akin to those in my own position, the small handful of itinerant station builders live like pashas and are upon occasion even formally awarded the title, commissioned by sovereigns the world around to create grand vestibules that confer upon a city its Greatness at its own doorstep. 🐉



The Enclosures of Shangri-La, Ante- and Post-Modern.

I posture stiffly on a Southern Official's style armchair reinterpreted by S+arck in transparent polycarbonate, and sip a lapsang souchong latte dispensed from a neoprene-wrapped Eva Solo samovar. The gray stone of the surrounding courtyard has been newly repointed and hung all about with olive green curtains, the wooden stairways and upturned cornices winkingly repainted in contrasting red. The courtyard's ornamented minimalism accentuates a cleverly dispersed mélange of heroically realist chinoiserie collectibles, their eclecticism at odds with the uniformity of the foppish clientele's greased shag-cuts, precisely gauged facial stubble, and

obligatory antiqued jeans⁵, relieved only by a smattering of local personages in anticly printed pajamas.



I ask the proprietor, a former state geomancer with a long goatee artfully grayed to suggest venerability, about the provenance of the collectibles, and he tells me they were all possessions of the courtyard's resident family when the space was conveyed to him out from under them. I wince, and he elaborates by way of both illumination and, I suspect, justification.

Long gone are the days when you could barely know a person's place, men and women alike side by side in identical button-front pajamas and caps to match. Not that time and style stood still. Sartorial change accompanied each change of administration – from long sleeves to short, stand collars to fall, more pockets or less, black to gray to blue or back again, a brimmed cap or a beanie. But the changes applied to all, albeit more masterfully tailored in finer materials for officials.

Courtyards, however, were another matter. The vast plateau of the city of Shangri-La, or Kalapa to its natives, was thick with gray stone enclosed courtyards, and courtyards within courtyards. You could know an individual's and family's place alike by the size, condition and furnishing of their courtyard. Great lineages of administrators boasted vast expanses of self-consciously selected and preciously manicured heirloom ornamentals, whereas those of lesser

⁵ The frequency of such Jack-a-dandies' co-incidence with spaces of titivation has come to strike me as uncanny, and it is my conviction that subsequent inquiry into possible directions of causality will, if sufficiently resourced, prove most fruitful.

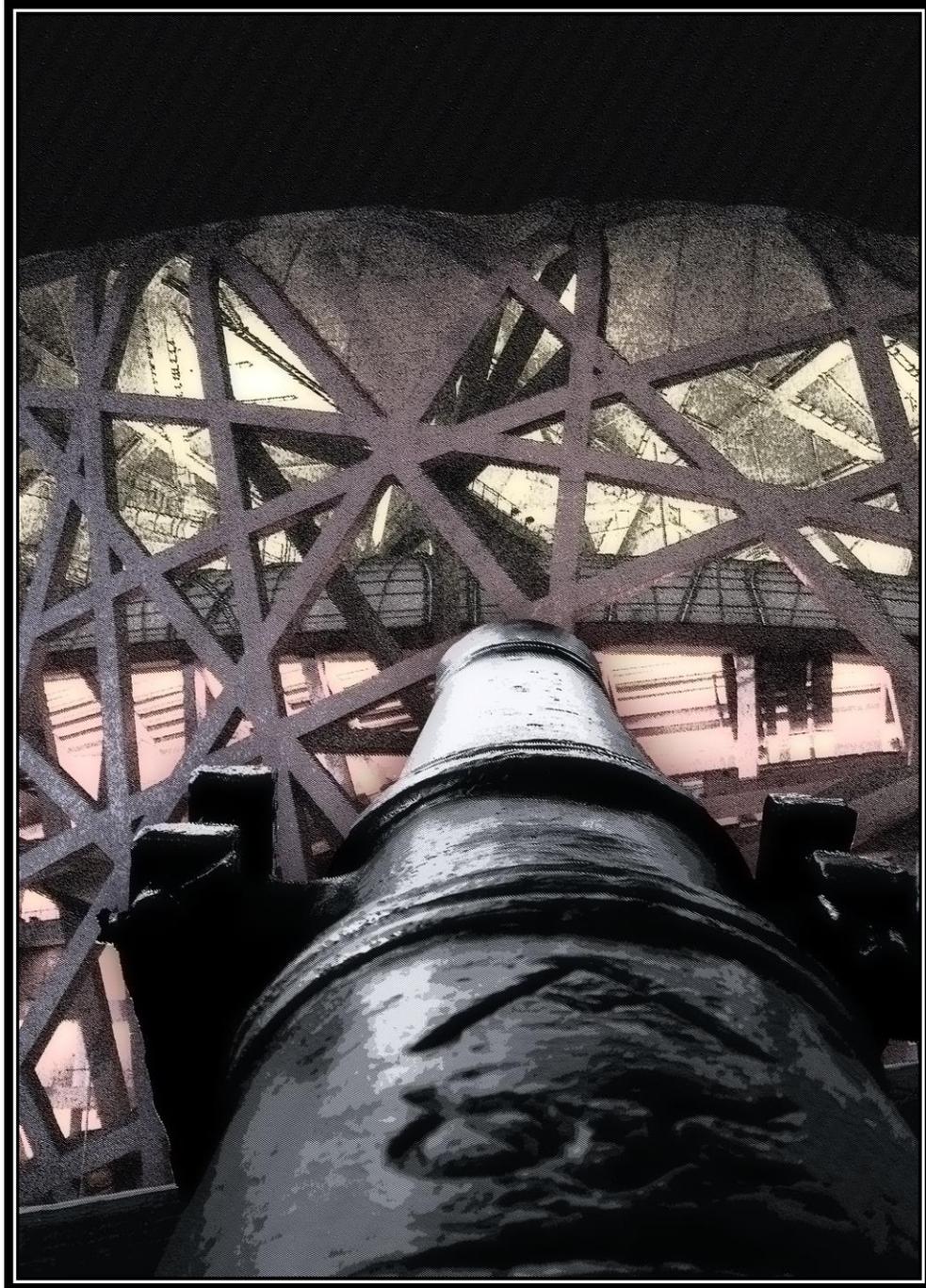
descent tended more towards compact arrangements of old rubber tires and corrugated cardboard in desperate want of recycling. And a neighborhood's place could be known alike. Each district of the city was, as it still is, favored with its own garden park – a courtyard for the masses complete with miniature menageries inhabiting miniature palaces sited amongst miniature seas, miniature mountains, and miniature golf courses (the last most often to be found, by dint of self-evident geomantic rationale, in near adjacency to the requisite animal sacrifice pavilion). They were a delight to all, their general confinement to official use notwithstanding.

Until the ghosts⁶ came. Their galleons scraped deep scars across heaven as they anchored on the coast, and traded voraciously for teas, motherboards, high-performance athletic footwear, silk, &c. But the ghosts had little of interest to exchange in return, other than their own promissory notes. In time, of course, those notes had to be paid, and when that time arrived they insisted on making repayment in nicotine, caffeine, high fructose corn syrup, &c. Addiction, after all, being a great guarantor of market stability. These terms of payment having been refused, the ghosts responded by delivering lessons in civility that took the much commemorated form of gunships thoroughly incinerating the city's garden parks from overhead⁷, although not without exhibiting the common decency to first perfunctorily loot their contents.

Subsequently imported cases of soft drinks and cartons of cigarettes notwithstanding, the ghosts met only inconstant success in expanding their anchorage more than briefly, and in time retreated back offshore or even withdrew their flotillas entirely. In tandem the city experienced paroxysms, waxings and wanings, but prospered more often than not, and eventually the officials decided Shangri-La was fit to assume on its own terms its place as a Great City of the World, neither belated nor out of date nor, most importantly, backwards at all. And so they set to

⁶ The correct rendering of this term from the local tongue as “westerly ocean's and airways' alien ghost devil folk”, while more thorough, loses a certain concision in translation.

⁷ This perhaps having served as originary inspiration for the oft-quoted local proverb “modernity grows out of the barrel of a Gatling gun”. Also, see appended plates I and II.



Ghostly Instruction Delivered in a Garden Park Pavilion.

the acquisition of everything necessary to style the city for the world, and its citizens as worldly. In this the ghosts were exceedingly useful, given both that they already had Great Cities of the World, and not incidentally a great deal of outstanding indebtedness to repay for it.

The ghosts' most gifted master builders were imported en masse, bearing schemes from home enlarged and elaborated into the most experimentally grandiose of tessellated, disequibrated, even impossibly curvaceous of edifices. Along with a design for an opulently serpentine tube station, of course. Improbable as they were, work commenced on all, excepting one scheme for a Palace of Culture in the gigantic form of a mutilated anodized aluminum lotus, still under study for its seemingly evident unsuitedness to inclement weather.

To build, however, there must be space, a conspicuous absence amidst the labyrinth of courtyards nested so densely each within and beside the next. So by official mandate vast swathes of the city were reduced to rubble and the rubble leveled flat, and residents exiled by official pronouncement to identically featureless concrete tenements newly built just beyond and beneath the pale of urbanization. Not that the city entire was demolished. Many courtyards were adopted by the presiding officials themselves, and sensitively restored to pristine condition for the appreciation of sufficiently cultured persons.

To build, there must also be muscle, all the more when there is so much to build. And to this end, a system of *corvée* was discretely instituted. By official decree young able-bodied peasants were compelled to build Shangri-La's Greatness, first driven into the city and impressed into construction gangs, then driven back out again once the job was done. A Great City of the World, after all, is no place for backwards and benighted peasant conscripts.

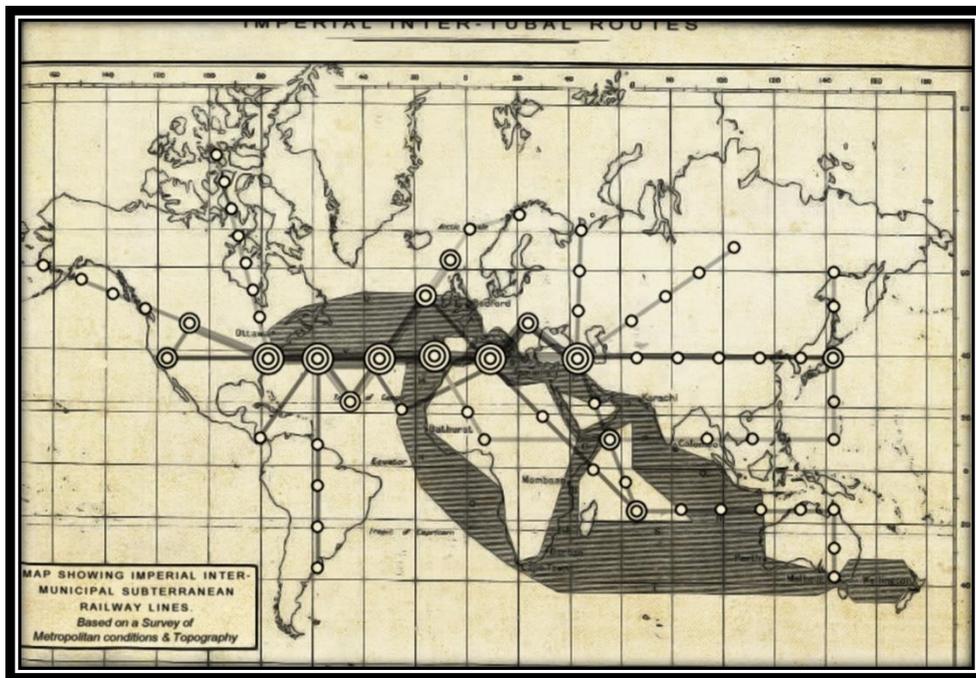
With all the monumental artifacts of *au courant* urbanity now irrupting from out the gray stone matrix of the city's vast plateau, officials have begun settling into their commandeered courtyards to savor their hard earned leisure. A growing number are even having their regulation pajamas retailored in pinstriped gray, and going entirely bareheaded. But it seems, as I survey the courtyard all about me, they look with mounting unease at the more colorfully clad *enfants terrible* in their midst, taking pajamas printed with polychromatic "Louie Vitton" monograms and "Nkie"

swooshes for excessively outré, uncultured, perhaps even insinuating solidarity with the Nkie and Rebok clad corvée laborers just beyond the walls. Which, the proprietor whispers, is precisely what they are intended to insinuate. Perhaps this is why closed circuit surveillance cameras surmount the courtyard wall, directed both outside and in. By all indications, the officials must be very afraid.

Be that as it may, I despair aloud at setting my next course by such querulous gallants, let alone pocket codices or xocolatl whisks or rhinestone-encrusted hubble-bubbles. To which the former geomancer cocks an eyebrow and replies, obliquely, “Ah yes, all made here, export quality. For Avalon.” 🍷

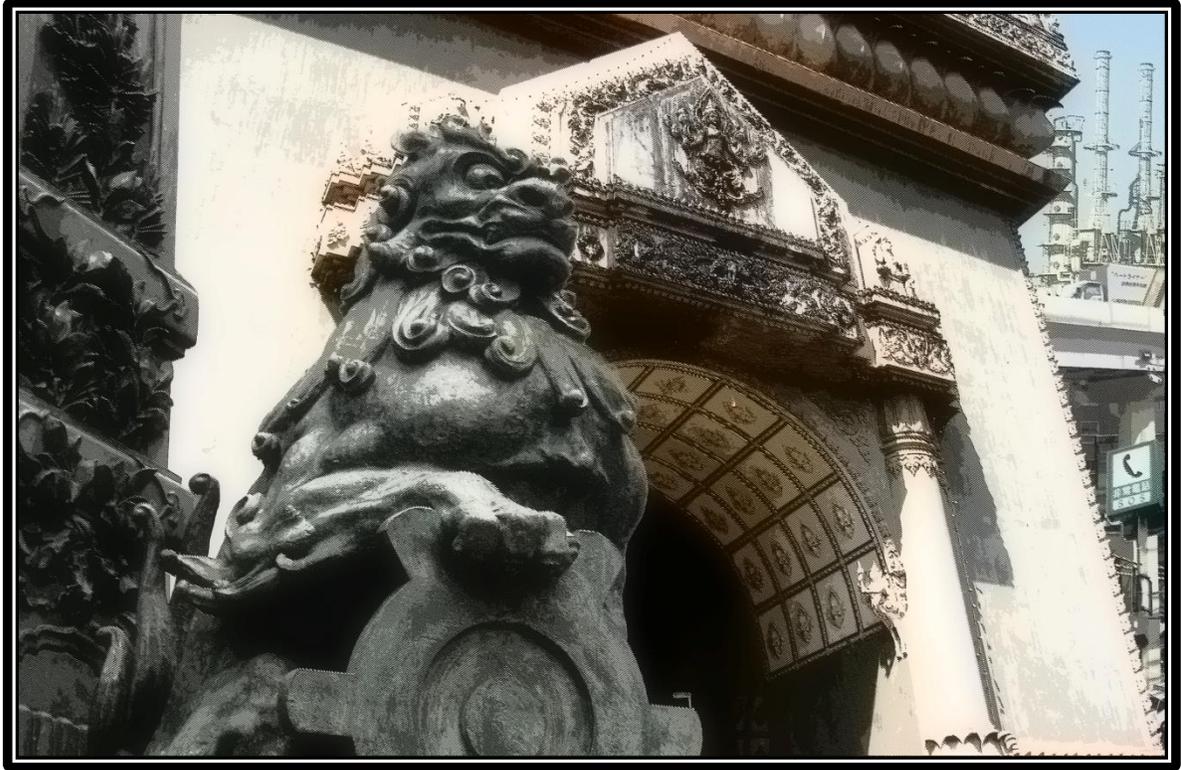


It is said⁸ that a Great City of the World in want of a grand tube station shall likewise want for Greatness and the world. The inverse of this, however, I have found to be entirely another matter. Many is now the time I have, in transferring from one carriage to another, briefly exited the hygienically uniform bowels of the tubes in search of sun and wind, neither artificial nor recirculated, only to step out into frigid tundra or foetid swamp. Such is the happenstance leaving of our passage, a scratch-cradle of meridians drawn between terminal destinations, indifferent to the terrain of their own mutual crossing. And for every crossing a station, each a shining opportunity for local chieftains and warlords to amend their tent-strewn steppe or bungalow-choked mangrove with causeways, conning towers, mooring masts, duty-free malls, &c. Cast abruptly skywards to loom over stoop-shouldered yurts or spindly-legged stilt huts, such vast agglomerations of glazed steel tracery yield cities where there are none, so as to make a name for themselves and scatter it amongst those abroad upon the face of the whole earth. ☹



A Scratch-Cradle of Meridians.

⁸ In the broadsheets of the Rockmen's and Excavators' guild, most prominently.



Memorials to the Anticipated Triumphs of the "Let's Forward" Decree.

I squat upon a patchwork mat, before me a plank set atop a balding tire. From off this I sip murky tea directly out of a screw-topped half-liter bottle, and gaze across a no less murky river. A dive, it would appear on casual glance, cobbled together from dispossession, divestment, and wartime stringency. But in fact, the mat is tiled of silk brocades painstakingly gleaned by FLOR from the estates of this city's most dissolutely spendthrift suzerains, the plank Bang & Olufsen's graft of data ports and infrared links to endangered old-growth teak, the tire a rim of black sheet steel delicately laser-etched by Studio Tord Boontje with belts of entwined naga silhouettes plying transoceanic shipping routes. The archly subversive bottle is glass handblown in Chihuly's own studio, and the reedy murk within only the uppermost of first bud leaves hand-picked by the most meticulously trained of imported lemurs, blended with the finest kelps harvested by the agile tentacles of no less thoroughbred octopuses. Only the nostalgia for a simpler age of threadbare

necessity is what it appears, but pendant upon imaginings of those too young to have themselves survived from off of newly minted ruins.

The river too is artifice, continuously regurgitated to meander between brocaded silken banks, as might be expected in a delicately rusticated transit salon newly suspended by S+arck amidst the airship anchorages high atop the tube termini of the city's central station. And as might be expected from so lofty a perch, the ingenuity of this bardo's furnishings is inevitably eclipsed by the vistas beyond. Assiduously ill-groomed maccaronis, an aerostocracy garbed in deliberately retrograde touring accoutrements, jockey for tables nearest the perversely miniscule opalescent portholes⁹. Over objections, I have preempted one such table for myself - those with my credentials are, after all, uniquely qualified to divine from so elevated a perspective all that is worth knowing of a place. The city of Traitrueng obligingly unscrolls its palimpsest beneath me, but vexes with its cacographies. Leaved thickly one atop another, shreds of steepled shrine and castle keep relict marginalia in a dense collage of godowns, punctuated and struck through with high glazed turrets, swathed in a mucilage of corrugated fiberglass market stalls and bound with the illuminated knotwork of expressways writ over long-desiccated rivers. Although merely passing through en route to Avalon, I come nonetheless prepared, in this instance with the guidebook authorized by the local Ministry of Savage Enlightenment – a garbled translation of the institution's true name no doubt, given the logical absurdity of enlightening anything savagely – and thoughtfully provided by means of automated periodical dispensers throughout the station.

This is not the Traitrueng of romantically exoticized imaginings, I read. Long gone, the guide informs me in charmingly fractured language, are the days when you could know a man's place by the elegant complexity of his layered brocades, the circuitously elaborated gentility of his

⁹ Picture windows being confined exclusively to the floors of the open-plan lavatories, providing both spectacular views and expedient drainage directly to the streets far below.

speech, the caliber of his finely damascened sidearms and the number of manufactory-floor villeins who bore his tattoo upon their persons. Within these manufacturies the latest varietals of polished grains, of crossbred garlands, of infused whiskies and spiced cigarettes and sundry other household necessities were assembled en masse and ensouled by the city's shamans. Traitrueng's castes of significance were thus ensured sufficient nourishment, entertainment, and social advantage to require little congress beyond the city's gates, necessitating that imported diplomats and the occasional misrouted outsider¹⁰ cluster at river's edge, keypads in hand, to pilfer bandwidth from metropolitan Bhogavati on the opposite bank (much as Bhogavati augmented its own Greatness through periodic pilferage of Traitrueng's citizenry, counting houses, and athletic associations; and Janaidar of Bhogavati's; &c.). And such clockwork playthings as might still be lacking could be had from the sole galleon suffered upon occasion to anchor on Traitrueng's furthest edge.

So the coming of outsiders was unremarkable. The sudden arrival of an armada of them, however, overshadowed by a swarm of gunships escorts and demanding immediate and indefinite moorage, was another matter entirely. A matter to which sidearms offered no effective rebuttal regardless how numerous, finely damascened, highly calibered or, in a last desperate effort, shamanically ensouled. A matter that refused resolution even when Traitrueng's creative castes, as show of hospitality no less than for the novelty, augmented their brocades with evocations of the outsiders' somber velvets (albeit embroidered with motifs of gilded tentacles interwoven atop naga scales) and took to growing muttonchops or mighty handlebar moustaches – an admirable accomplishment given the local propensity towards glabrescence.

And so a tenth of the of the city was ceded as harborage to the outsiders, who proceeded to pilot their galleons on a roundabout course that effectively sequestered a quarter of the city

¹⁰ The more previously commonplace term, outrageous big-nosed redheads, now being regarded as sorely impolitic.

while leaving half again as much scoured bare in the vessels' wakes. And worse, they still had not even dropped anchor.

The city's Exalted Gatekeeper himself, long thought a puppet of neighborhood leigelords and their generals¹¹, seized the initiative with issuance of the "Let's Forward" decrees, proscribing anything too late, out of date, or just plain backwards and mandating progress for all excepting, of course, the leatherworkers, mutagenic waste handlers, and similarly untouchable castes. Suzerains and villeins alike were enlisted for the city's immediate intubation, then intrepid explorers camouflaged in the best pinstriped woolens and sent down those tubes to discover just which direction 'forward' might be. Streets and alleys were first festooned with talking wires, then spiked instead with cellular relay towers pleasingly concealed as pipal trees. Manufacturies worked through the nights as expeditions' specimens (and even personal souvenirs) refluxed out the tubes to be improved upon, reproduced, and promptly ensouled, thus giving birth to roving troupes of solid-state gramophones, digital kinetoscopes, microwave heliographs, &c. These in turn found shelter in the ephemerally béton brutalist warehouses and makeshift market halls that germinated in the voided wakes of passing galleons. Traitrueng overtopped the very now, the entirety of-the-moment and the fully forwards by days, weeks, even months, raising commemorative monuments in indigenized muscular Gothic to its impending successes and rendering its own creations obsolete at the moment of their production. Yet none of it abated the outsiders' demands, if anything they had become measure-for-measure more insistent, and still their galleons gouged deep furrows through the city.

¹¹ Literally an ensouled poppet, as rumor has it, although the guide assures he is a most hospitable one pleased to host flawless automated demonstrations of ritual song and dance dedicated to the spirits of ancestral engineers and ergonomists, and at no charge to wayfarers. This I found to be accurate in the breach, as His Exaltedness' shamans compel upon departure the purchase of extravagant battery-operated talismans against obsolescence, travel interruptions, low rates of investment return, &c. To date, however, my talismans have worked faultlessly.

In the midst of these events arrived a report from an explorer dispatched to the outsiders' very hearth, making plain at last which way was forward. To wit:

“Long gone are the days before the outsiders raised themselves from nothing to sup upon stuffed gold leaves while they platinize the dead. Or so they would believe. Yet here the evidence is all about that their xocolatl, their samovars, their very Greatness is not of their own devising but has been gathered only lately, and that from distant shores. Why mightn't others do as well?”



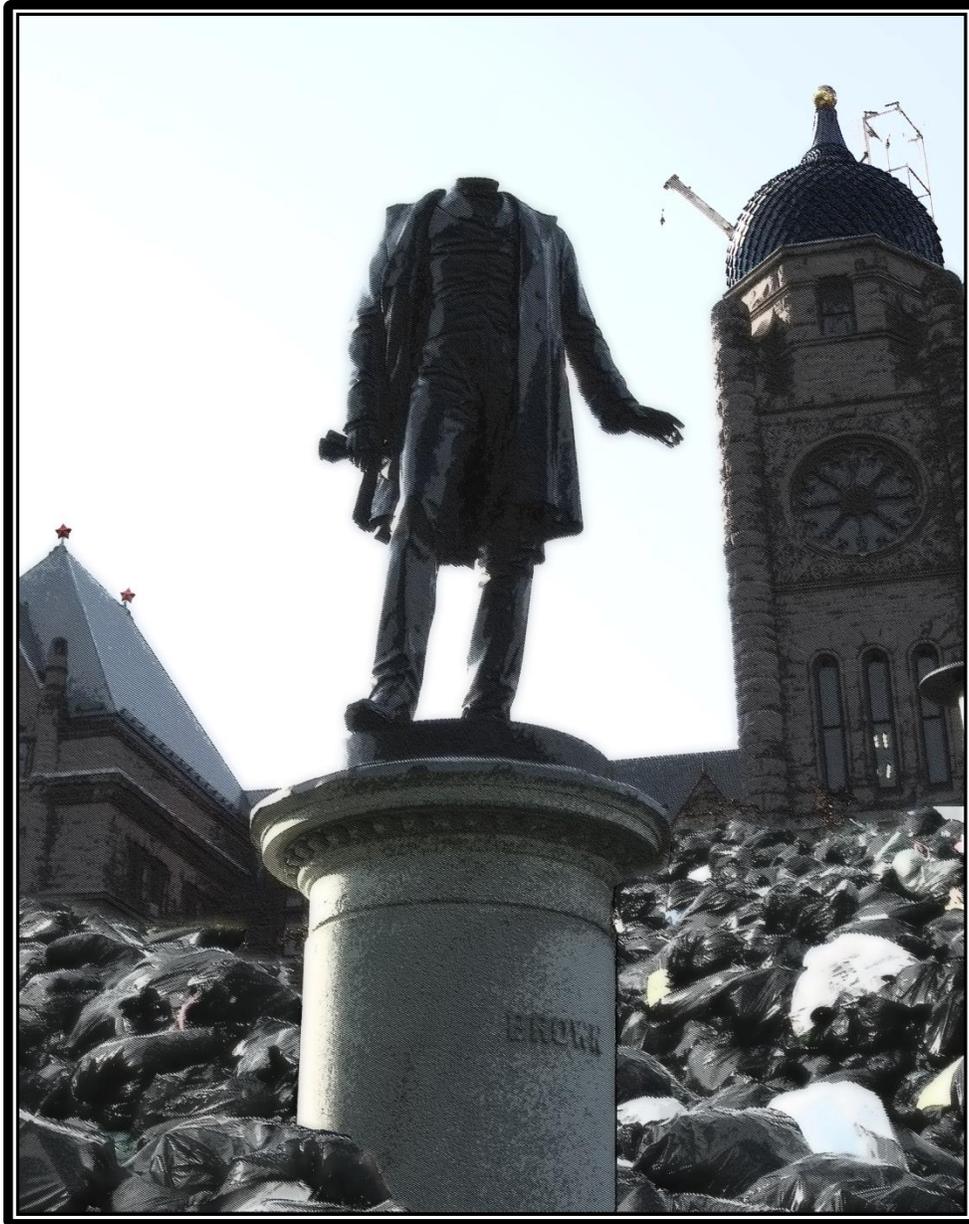
His Exaltedness' Flagship.

Production commenced immediately on His Exaltedness' own galleons and gunships, wrought in the chicest idioms of structural expressionism and blobisimus respectively, each further ahead of its time than the last and all thoroughly invested with only the most indignant of souls. Why should Traitrueng want for taxidermied deities, bejeweled hubble-bubbles, lapsang souchong

lattes? The outsiders would be driven from a Traitrueng made great again, great enough to liberate poor backwards Bhogavati as well, then Shangri-La, then Janaidar, and farther horizons still, even should they need be - with only the greatest of regret, of course - razed in the doing. And so, let's forward!

The guidebook concludes on this clarion's call, leading the reader to postulate the final victory. And inarguably Traitrueng has prospered. But a downward glance reveals fresh bare gashes dredged across the city, and newish tenements that erupt from out what appear as nothing so much as lately blasted craters. Nor, dropping another coin into the thermal-imaging spyglass mounted to the saloon wall, can I miss the shambling indigenous galleon boilers and limping airship engines. They march obstructively along the expressway amidst ragged phalanxes of abandoned household commodities, servomotors grinding angrily, in protest against their premature obsolescence. Backpack-beladen macaronis watch the event enraptured, indeed such processions are sold to them as preeminent sights of interest. But the locals, evident at this distance by the logos of their employers embroidered prominently in gold across their pinstriped sack suits, avert their gazes compunctiously and move on. 🍷

I could text of many more cities. I am, after all, given writ of passage to one after the other and a generous stipend on the promise I will do precisely that. They believe their fortunes depend, at least in part, upon my doing so. Cities where you could once have known a man's place by the fullness of his beard, or by the print on his skirt, or by the number of husbands his wife had acquired. There is, however, space for only so many ciphers in one text, and only so many cities that have recompensed me adequately to warrant my full promotional mention. And besides, my thumbs grow weary. So I will conclude instead from a mother city, a mother of cities, a place to which all tubes must lead – great Avalon herself. 🍷



The Mystery before the Viceroyalty.

I sprawl across a seat that, beneath its cigarette burns, missing leg, and impastos of duct tape, must once have been S+arck's plasticized reimagining of an overstuffed club chair. Within arm's reach, dense veils of acrid smoke disgorge from the exhaust stacks of a continuous procession of motorcarriages. I squint through the miasma and over the lip of a beaker filled with pre-soddened tea leaves, warily served me by a Cibolaro expatriate, that in bone china would make for

a delicately subversive recasting of a crumpled disposable plastic cup. Except that it is, in fact, merely plastic, creased by repeated use. Arrayed in single file along the meager sidewalk is a motley assortment of similarly distressed furniture occupied, as in any City of the World, by shambolic young fribbles intent to the exclusion of all else upon their keypads. But unlike elsewhere, they display a refreshing if perhaps unintended honesty – their jeans and t-shirts faded, frayed and peeled with mere neglect, their hair lank and faces stubbled from simple inattention.

There may have been a time when things were otherwise, but I am at a loss to know. Those about me admit no recognition of any past, nor for the most part of strangers in general, responding to inquiries with silent disacknowledgement or, at most, a glare of withering disapproval. Which is not to imply an utter dearth of intercourse, as with repeated queries into the provenance of my al-Nuhhasi ring; my Belovodyite aeronaut's pocket chronograph; even the pince nez I acquired shortly after my arrival here in Avlun, its narrowly slit lenses relieving the city's drab grey skies and indistinguishably grey skyline with the semblance of a simulated horizon. My responses, however, consistently incite from the Avlunians what seem looks of jealously resentful hunger.

This is not what I had expected from Avalon, that mother of cities, but then again this is not the Avalon I had expected. It is, in fact and quite literally, a different one. Avalon the mater polis had many provinces, built in each an Avalon of its own, and it is to one of these – Avlun to its locals -- I erroneously booked passage. I would have rerouted on the spot, were it not for the fact (as the borderguards irritably informed me) that Avlun takes a dim view of illicit emigration. My departure would require a writ of exit, the provision of which was beyond their authority. To which was added, with utmost conspicuousness, disdain for any who would wish to leave so Great a City of the World.

Attempts to locate where writs of exit might be obtained have proven fruitless, as for instance along the sidewalk café where my inquiries briefly break the tatterdemalion jackanapes from their sullen caffeinated silences into brusque insistences, verging upon hysteria. Avlun the loyal, doting scion of Avalon's shining shores; Avlun the tolerant, safe haven for the exiles of the world; Avlun the egalitarian, its hospices open to even the lowliest of laborers come their appointed hour; Avlun, Great City of the World! Would I prefer to be amongst the pestilential hordes of Shangri-La, knee-deep in the gore of insurrection that fills Cibola's streets, drowned within poor inundated Atlantis' deluged halls? Would I prefer to be too late, entirely out of date, or just plain backwards?

These intonations seem surpassing strange. In part, try as I may I recollect no plague in Shangri-La, nor blood-bathed revolution in Cibola. But that aside, even the most perfunctory glance along this very street reveals a tide of bagged refuse rising against the most generic of boxy cement buildings - a precious few having at most addenda like crystal keloids or biopsied tin tumors of dubious climatic suitability belatedly affixed with grudging expediency to update their façades - all plastered thickly with wheatpasted broadsheets. The entire fluoresces luridly in the glare of outsize praxinoscopes projecting slogans urging resolute commitment to drudgery, propriety in deportment, and the maintenance of 'mental hygiene', interspersed with rudely animated advertisements for expired commodities 'coming soon'. I bemusedly remark aloud upon the oxymorons of desultory and emulated Greatness, only to elicit those disapproving glares, followed by resounding silences that abruptly deny my very presence.

Uncertain of where next to proceed I stand immobilized at kerbside, attracting the attention of a passing hackney carriage. The hackman, a tawny Quiviran, asks after my destination and, slyly, I respond merely that I must go secure a writ. He motions me inside and we are off, the hackman discoursing all the while (as is the wont of those who ply his trade) upon the passing

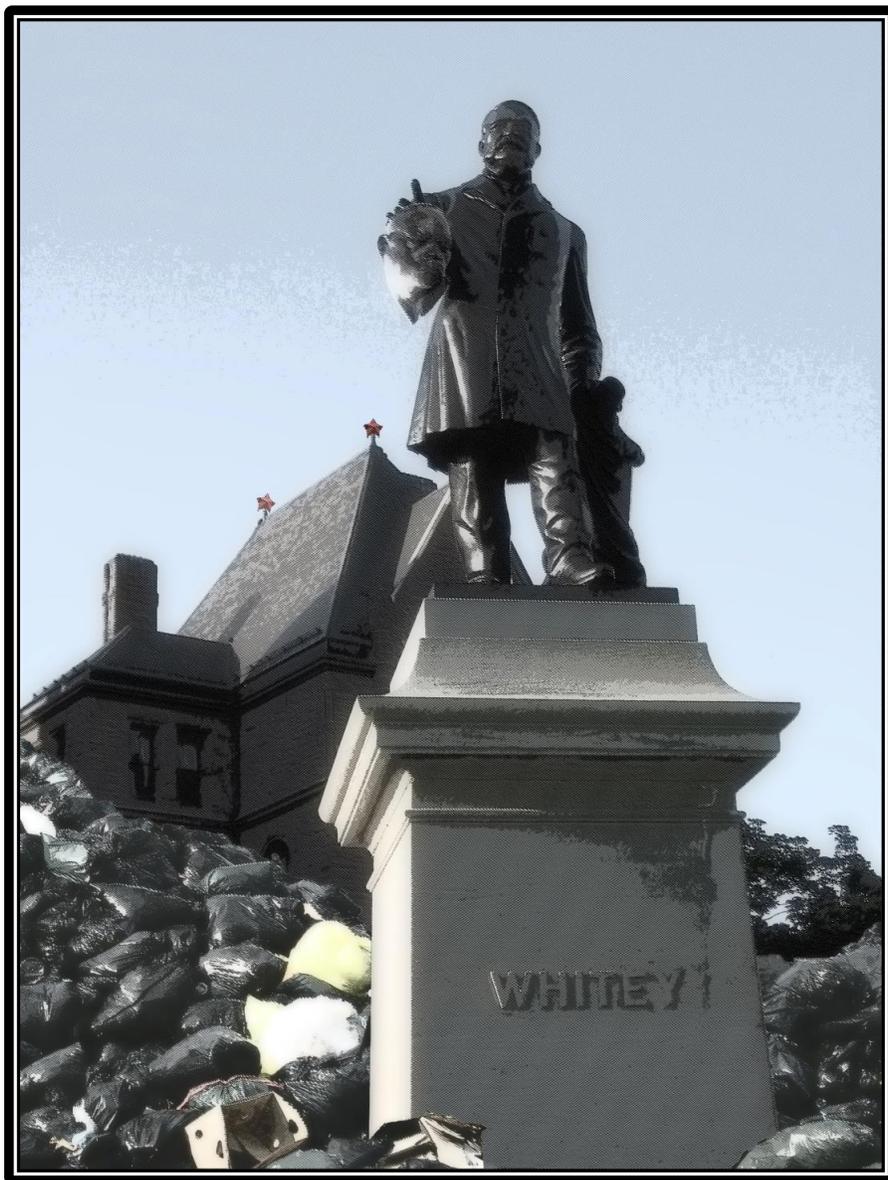
scenery. A dank and weedchoked park incites the tale of Avlun's inauspicious foundation upon an implacably sucking mire. A moldering triumphal arch collapsed across a derelict airship hangar yields the story of how distant Avalon forsook this backwater to its own devices. A team of Atlanteans picking through refuse bags evokes a lengthy explication of how the wendigo¹² now subsist from off such flotsam, jetsam, and castaways as wash up from off of passing galleons or (and here he winks mischievously at me) stumble misrouted and lost from out the tubes. And arriving at what the hackman announces as the Palace of the Viceroyalty, he chuckles at the monumental statue on front, mysteriously headless. Ironically appropriate, he asserts, as no king in living memory has noticed to appoint a viceroy here.

My meeting with the factotum to the aide-de-camp to the undersecretary to the Avlunian viceroy is brief, after so lengthy a pursuit. Costumed like a mothballed Avalonian diplomat – all faded indigo velvet and peeling gold appliqués - she proclaims Avlun's affluence, hospitality, heroic egalitarianism, &c., remonstrates my desire to depart, and advises with the faintest hint of menace that her government believes one such as myself would do well to instead remain and thumb-scriven of the city's Greatness for all the world to read. I wryly suggest my audience will certainly be most favorably impressed should I report on a detritivorous city slowly sinking into its own paludal miasma, and would no doubt book passage without delay. She fixes me with the glare of disapproval, contemptuously stamps a writ of exit and, before ignoring my presence entirely, summons a Janaidari crusher to see me roughly out the door.

The hackman has awaited me, to continue with his tour. A distant, concrete phalanx of crumbling dormitory towers elicits the history of how the first Atlantean refugees to drift ashore were barracked in those frigid exurban barrens and compelled, as they still are, to work the refuse harvests. And in the neighboring donjon I would find indentured Janaidaris contracted as security

¹² The Quiviran term for settlers, of derivation unknown to me.

guards and, adjacent that, disappeared Cibaleto restricted to servitude in bistros. And what of your Quivirans, I ask, to which he answers that his people did not arrive at all. They were here when the wendigo arrived, and would remain once the swamp had finished swallowing them back down again. At which he pilots us around to the palace's backside, and cocks his head at a second monument – the gargantuan bronze of a dignified Avalonian triumphantly holding aloft before him a severed human head graced with distinctly Quiviran features. 🗿



A Mystery, Solved.



A Desert Idyll in the Shadow of the Barzakh.

Do please forgive the terseness of my tone and the violation of my narrative's symmetry, but present circumstances preclude elegant thumb-scrivening. I find myself wedged tightly between

many score of fellow travelers, all of us balanced precariously on crisscrossed tarpaulins and blankets precariously securing mounds of antiquated heliographs, tinned and salted meats and, most vitally, innumerable ladders and knotted climbing ropes and grappling hooks and decrepit oil-stained pneumatic sledge hammers &c. All in turn pile impossibly high atop a motley conveyance assembled of a ramshackle Daimler heavy industries chassis studded with enormous bald tires, tractor treads, sputtering engines and flagging sails. We crawl across a pale scarlet desert accompanied single-file by a baker's dozen of similar conveyances equally overloaded, parallel to a towering agglomeration of thorned hedges, chainlink fences, stone palisades and concrete ramparts festooned with concertina wire and extending viciously beyond the range of sight before and behind. The Barzakh, the drover calls it, his tone a combination of awe and contempt.

This is the storied, endlessly sprawling ur-conurbation of Gan 'Edhen, or Iram of the Pillars Great and Worlded to its locals before they disparagingly rechristened it as Hûrqalyâ. It bears, however, no resemblance to the effulgent depictions on the ancient cartes postales. I would scarce have ventured here myself, were it not for my belated discovery that the Avlunian authorities counterbalanced issuance of my writ of exit with a vindictive failure to return my reposeur's credentials and, thus, my original writ of passage, depositing me sans papiers and baggage here beyond the Barzakh, where the tubes do not deign to reach. I have since acquired a wardrobe comprised of oversized "Hûrqalyâ B" grade hand-me-down garments, their printed CK, D&G and A&F sigils so faded as to be barely discernable, one of the wide-brimmed woven telephony-wire basket hats so favored by the sun-scorched Iramites, and a battered qalamdan of mesmeric ink requisite to forging a new writ of passage. I can only hope that latter will suffice to pass inspection.

Our caravan trudges across endless fields of ruddy salt, strewn about irregularly with toppled stumps and capitals that were once the city's pillars and, occasionally, by the jagged skeletons of derelict galleons assiduously dismantled and scavenged by the Iramites to construct

and maintain the very same conveyances upon which we ride. These galleons, the caravan drover relates as he warily coaxes the protesting engines, once carried Iram's bountiful pomegranate harvests far and wide, and bore back Greatness on the return voyage. Then, when the orchards devoured the last of the water and turned the fecund soil to thick slabs of salt stained ruby with residue of grenadine, the galleons enthusiastically carried those off as well, until there was nothing left to bear away at all (de trop kidneys, corneas, partial pancreases &c. bound for the "crimson market" excepted).

The Barzakh arose soon after, incised across the denuded landscape layer by layer under wary armed guard, its proclaimed intent to interdict the petty smuggling of such reddened salt

slabs as remained. "Blood salt", the Great Cities' most greatly worlded luminaries called it with newfound distaste, a rationale scarcely to be believed as no such slabs remained to be smuggled. Now the remnants of Iram traffick exclusively in surplus Cibaleros, Janaidaris, Atlanteans, Bhogavatis, &c., and in me, all seekers of our own imagined Gan 'Edhens.

Our itinerary brooks no deviation. The days are passed in transit beneath the Barzakh's shadow, swaddled and hunched against the perpetual stinging pink dust,

music made upon relic keypads and by the oral beating of boxes our sole diversion. But at night we pause furtively, eluding eyes both stationary and airborne, human cargo taking up ladder, rope and



hammer to assault the Barzakh under cover of darkness and, perhaps, claw passage through. Some succeed. Others do not. And now, at last, my turn has come. The drover wishes me safe passage, and presses a rosary of upcycled mechanical detritus into my hand. I make selam, hoist a pneumatic hammer, and set to work. 🐾

Insofar as the tubes' meridians forge a single city out of many, it is no surprise that there are neighborhoods of bright lights, good reputation and better repair, and conversely there are those of lesser reliability that the visitor is best advised not to enter unawares. But to have been deposited beyond the tubes' pale entire and obliged to claw one's way back is another matter entire, one surpassed in its unspeakable indelicacy only by the blunt existence of such a netherworld in the first accounting and, grimmer still, by the dread fact of its unenviable and compulsory inhabitation. All efforts to becalm my sorely frayed composure so as to ponder this revelation in philosophical detachment, however, are sorely frustrated by the overhead ticker display's announcements of repeated boarding deferments, each an insult heaped atop the injury of a journey already so cruelly disrupted. I force my attention instead to the brobdignian television in the station's nearest tavern, displaying a sporting match between Atlantis and Shangri-La. Broadcast from Shangri-La's new stadium – a vast nickel-plated carbon fiber phoenix's aerie wedged high between the city's tallest peaks, the Shangri-Lanians play archaically as set forth in their sacred texts. I am told the Atlanteans would win easily, securing a slot against Ker-Is in the semifinals, were it not for their chronic postdiluvian dearth of practice grounds and, exacerbating the matter, what appear to be the initial effects of high altitude oedemata. But in truth I would find the sport of little interest, were it not providing welcome distraction from the nearby ragamuffin clamorously playing at *Grand Theft Vimana: Lankapura Stories*. Indeed, the tavern's offerings may well be all that preclude the necessity of summoning a surgeon to extract the gaming engine from the urchin's nether-regions. Even the most freshly abjected fugitive from Húrqualyâ may be certain that from any bardo there must be, inevitably and ineluctably¹³, rebirth into the world, but it is now apparent there can be no certainty how prompt that rebirth will be. 🐼

¹³ This despite multifarious, and wholly preposterous, legends of travelers condemned, for reason of expired or misvalidated writs, to ride the tubes eternally: cf. "*The Rime of the Frequent Flyer*" by this author.



The Hortus Tyrannicus.

I sit in a translucent white polycarbonate Louis XVI chair at a translucent white acrylic table in the form of a floating tablecloth, and peruse the voluminous menu at an open-air café subtly themed for the Levantine gauchos of the late Baroque. Hot xocolatl is available, as is scented chai and lapsang souchong lattes alongside matcha smoothies and rooibus cremosas, and sheesha in every flavor available for extraction the world over. For a surcharge, it can be had with a side order of frankincense, or amethyst dust, or platinum shavings. More solid fare is available as well – porcus troianus, kavun dolmasi, turducken, a comprehensive selection of fine viands doubly and even trebly ensouled by means of the latest technological ingenuities, provided they are stuffed into

yet finer fare, and then into finer still. And there is even coelacanth poke or white rhinoceros foie gras to be had as an appetizer, if inquired after with discretion.

Every table is occupied by young coxcombs, fixated upon their sundry keypads, who not long ago would have complemented their carefully neglected coifs with vintage seeming jeans and wryly adopted trucker's caps. And there remain a few of these old skool swells, these incoyables classiques. But even they are now supplementing their wardrobes with opulent and abundant piercings, ever larger and more elaborate millinery, and pajama tops in black or gray or navy blue. And velvets embroidered with ornate gold pinstriping seem to be making recent inroads amongst the better traveled. Uncertainty as to what may be just ahead of the curve, and what if anything will remain there, commingles with an improvident reluctance to commit to anything at all.

The selfsame profligate confusion teems across the façades adjacent. The walls of Avalon's venerable grand arcade, this fountainhead of civitas, have over time become encrusted with strata of silvered and gilt bas relief, surmounted with carefully verdigris'd copper plates, interrupted by overlapped platinum scales, all wittily gouged by slivers of corten steel cascading patinas of ochre down frontages studded with a glittering profusion of Swarovski crystals and vigilant electronic eyes. Over and beyond these, visible through the rhodium ribs of the arcade's glazed vault, irrupt the upper reaches of later constructions: an enormous obsidian tesseract, pierced by minute pearlescent portholes; a colossal array of interleaved gunmetal screens, continually shuffling themselves in clanging retort to the sun's progress; an immense and gibbous upended oviform, clad in uncounted threads of saffron sandwiched between diagonal panes of glass; &c. Amidst these, fretwork gantries spike the sky, their attenuated arms swinging to and fro, feeding nascent edifices with precious metals and the rarest of endangered hardwoods.

Such surfeit of cacaphonic luxury somehow now strikes me, unprecedentedly and inexplicably, as an odious assault, and I hasten away down an allée of victory columns newly

bristling with surveillance cameras – perhaps great Avalon entire has been paranoiacally ensouled? – towards the quiet of the Hortus Tyrannicus. The city’s most beloved of verdant retreats, the Hortus was once no less a facility for advanced research and popular instruction, as industrious in its practicality as it remains calming in its sepulchral dignity. Here, as the interpretive placards exhaustively relate, Avalonian alchemists and apothecaries combined extracts and concentrates refined of megaflores gathered (at the cost of many peoples’ lives and limbs) from the half dozen corners of the world - *Pontificatus romanicus*, *Hegemonicus americanus*, *Celestialis mandatus chinensis*, innumerable cultivars of *Pharaohnicus aegyptiacus*, &c. - to derive tinctures, philtres and physics that would be transplanted to the furthest provinces, hybridized and sublimated to those new and distant climes, and reintroduced back home again. For want of which, we would find ourselves today without everything from airship fuels and explosive ordinance to pomades for the hair and the acids employed in the subtle distressing of denim.

Looking through the aeonian pinnacles of the Hortus towards the incorrigibly metamorphosing masts, spires and smokestacks of the city beyond, I am surprised to find myself vaguely struck not by the obvious and oft-remarked contrast - the putative chasm betwixt that which remains as was and that which is forever yet becoming - but by the resemblances. That chasm, it seems, dissembles and conceals – but what? Is it that Greatness is merely donning, at the earliest possible moment, however perfunctorily, precisely the prescribed accoutrements? Is it what must be cast off and demolished to give such prescriptions for Greatness way? And from whence, precisely, does all this Greatness come to begin with? If only I could put my finger on it. I finger my Iramite rosary and survey the twilight distance for answers, where the sun’s dying embers glint back violently from off yet another newly arrived armada of ponderously laden galleons moored across the city. Then, deep beneath me, the tubes rumble, go still, and rumble again. And from that chthonian growl’s sympathetic echoes deep within the distended belly of every galleon there arises,

in all-pervasive chorus, a disagreeable answer to my queries, one redolent with the acrid stench of Cibola's despoliation and the desolation of Iram - Greatness is constituted of nothing other than its own extraction, condensation and terminal transmigration, invariably under jealous guard, and in so being paradoxically diminishes its source, its intermediary, and its recipient alike. ♡



Galleons Moored in the Sunset.

For the Further Consideration of the Interested Reader

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The Author

Appended Plates

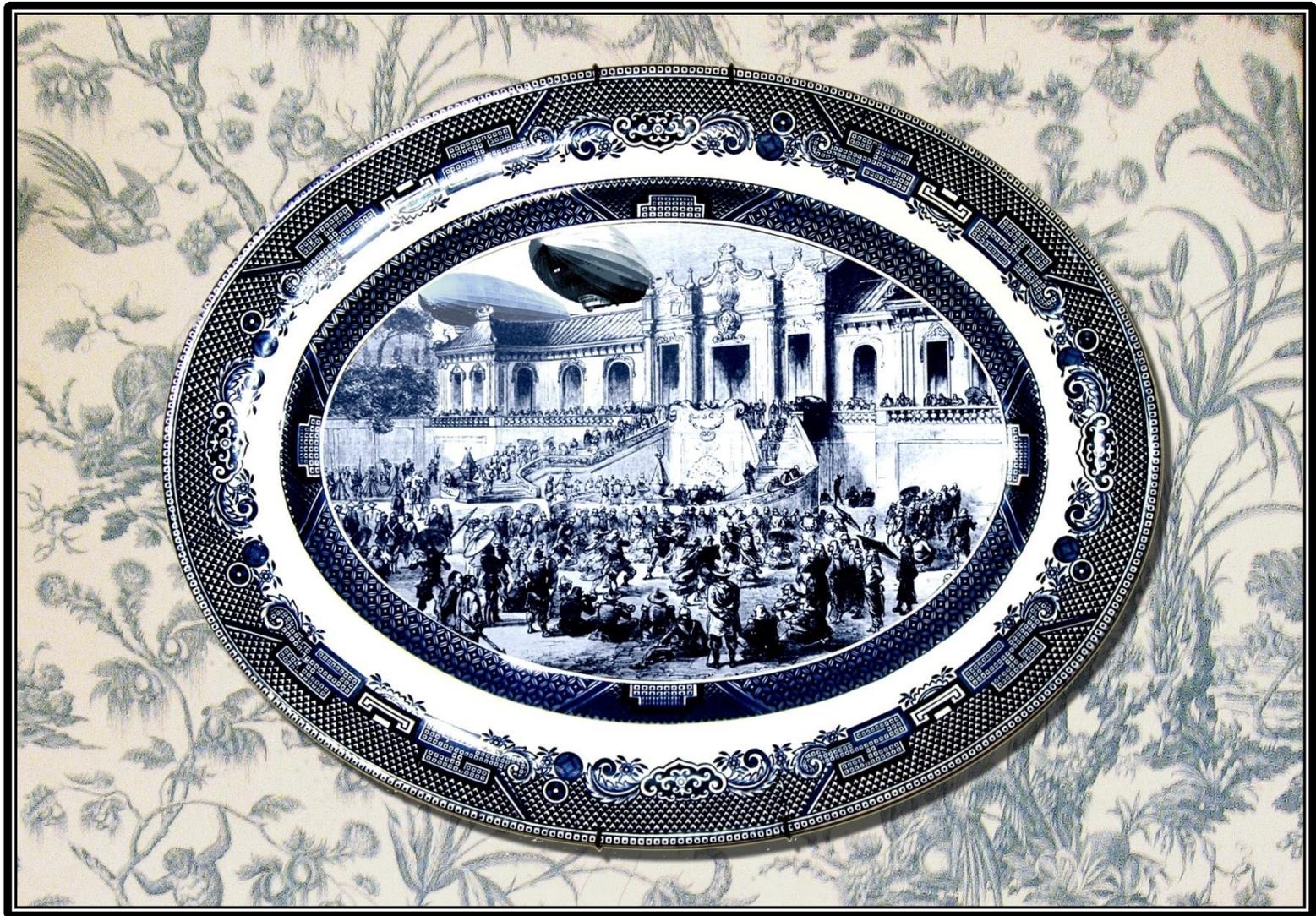


Plate I, from the Spode 'Lessons in Civilization' Commemorative Series – 'Defloration of a Garden Park'



Plate II, from the Spode 'Lessons in Civilization' Commemorative Series – 'Revenants of a Park Pavilion'

Commentary

A Poetic Urbanism:

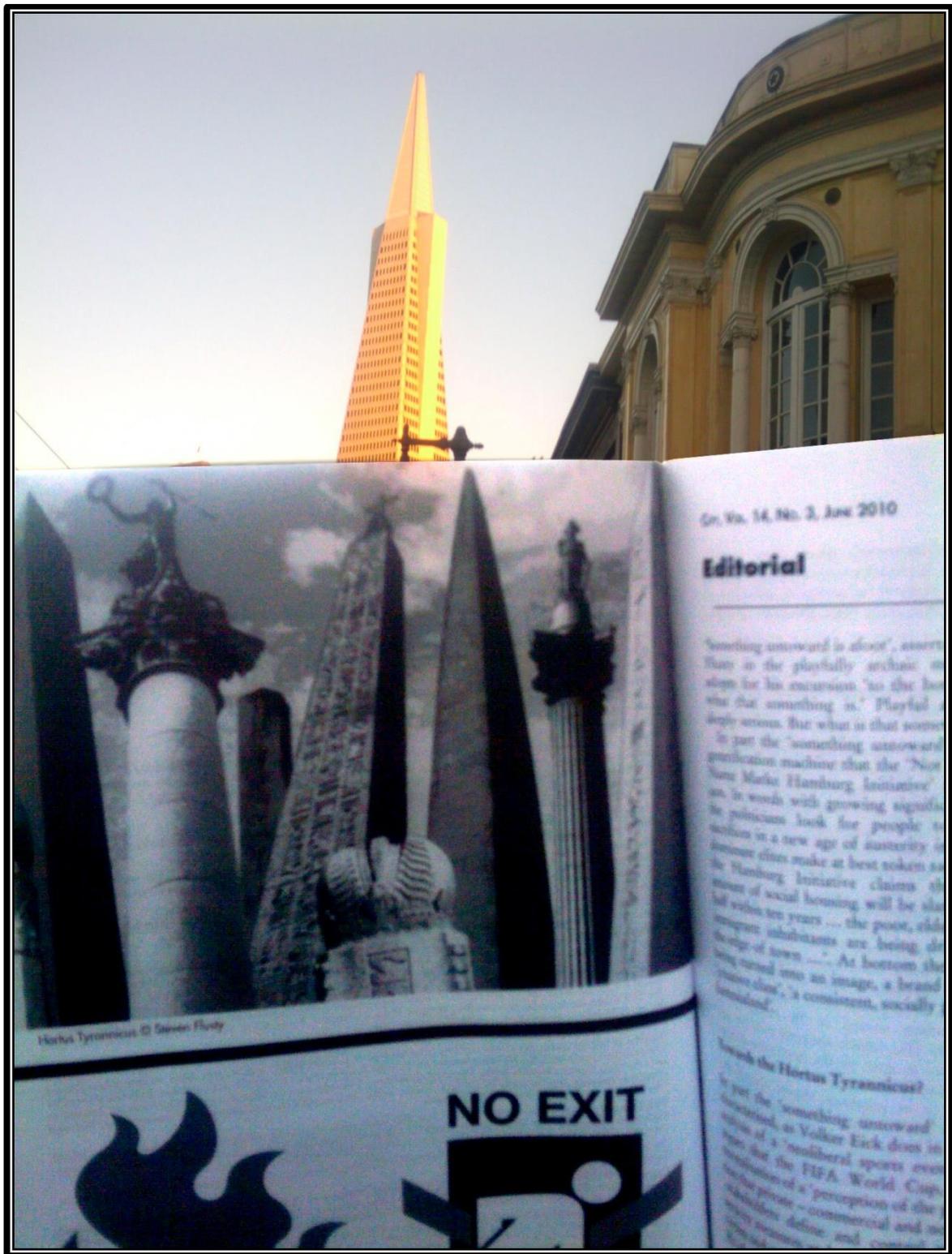
Recreating Places, Remade to Measure, but from the Inside Out.

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Summary: This commentary offers a reflection on Steven Flusty's piece *The Emperor's Used Clothes, or, Places Remade to Measure* in *City* 14:3. It is argued that Flusty uses the imagination as a methodological device for transforming our understanding of the urban experience and, in doing so, invites a comparison with the English Romantic poet S.T. Coleridge. In addition to outlining stylistic similarities in their work, this commentary argues that Flusty's analysis of the generic development of cities globally offers an example of how Coleridge's theories of the imaginative faculty can be applied today. Extended from their origins where they offered analytical insight into the processes of poetic writing, Coleridge's theories are shown, via Flusty, to be of value in augmenting our comprehension and representations of contemporary city life.

Key words: Coleridge; Imagination; Fancy; Corporate Architecture.



Pyramid scheme, by Dean Martelli: a reader in San Francisco who stepped out of City Lights bookstore with a copy of *City*; opened it to one of the illustrations, looked up as he did so, and snapped the resultant juxtaposition with his cellphone camera.

Meanwhile I do not deny that it is helpful sometimes to contemplate in the mind, as on a tablet, the image of a greater and better world, lest the intellect, habituated to the petty things of daily life, narrow itself and sink wholly into trivial thoughts. But at the same time we must be watchful for the truth and keep a sense of proportion, so that we may distinguish the certain from the uncertain, day from night.

(in Coleridge 1997, p.504)¹⁴.

Steven Flusty complements his critical travelogue (2010) with an ongoing reflection on the role of the researcher as urban detective, perhaps along the lines of a character in a Dashiell Hammett novel. We follow the central character, the ethnographer, delving beneath the surface relics of the S+arckscapes that have accompanied the rise of the Creative Classes across continents, in order to describe the architecture and surveillant spaces of economic globalisation, testify to the fate of sub-cultural forms and fashions in its wake and offer a reflection on the imprint on local cultures of colonial ventures, past and present. Other literary comparisons come to mind when reading this novel work. In its cautionary tone and catalogue of places visited, scenes sighted and voices heard, there is an echo of Bob Dylan's narrator in *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*. Its contemplation on the aesthetics of contemporary civilizations and cultures recalls Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours*, reminding us of the disappointment experienced by his anti-hero Des Esseintes on preparing and then retreating from a journey to London, due to the disjuncture between the city of his imagination and the reality.

For me, *The Emperor's Used Clothes...* most strongly evoked the poetry and philosophy of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. As a leading figure in the tradition of English Romanticism, a collection of writers defined (in part at least) in terms of a reaction against processes of industrial urbanisation, Coleridge may seem to be an anachronous figure to bring to a discussion of

¹⁴ This epigraph is a translation of the Latin Preface to the later version of Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which was itself adapted by Coleridge from Thomas Burnet's *Archaeologiae Philosophicae* (1692). The original Latin inscription reads as 'Juvat, interea, non diffiteor, quandoque in animo, tanquam in tabulâ, majoris et melioris mundi imaginem contemplari: ne mens assuefacta hodiernae vitae minutiis se contrahat nimis, et tota subsidat in pusillas cogitationes. Sed veritati interea invigilandum est, modusque servandus, ut certa ab incertis, diem a nocte, distinguamus' (in Coleridge 1997, p.167).

contemporary city life. However, this commentary will outline some comparisons between Flusty's piece and Coleridge's work which I hope will be fruitful in articulating the need for an imaginative and poetic understanding of urban life to counteract the current makeover of cities, 'remade to measure' according to the architectural grammar of global capitalism. Flusty's text presents an itinerary of mythological cities in order to explicate the contemporary re-fashioning of cities globally according to a Western model of corporate commerce and its associated buildings and spaces (those 'tessellated, disequilibrating, even impossibly curvaceous of edifices', etc. (2010, p.255)). It records the shadows drawn over local experiences of space and time by the 'glass and steel bulks' (p.247), relics of the new colonial projects of economic globalisation. Through the testimony of local voices, it draws a Coleridgean distinction between the ambivalent benefits of the processes of *Civilization* and the threat these can pose to more localised experiences of *Cultivation* or, to use a more colloquially understood synonym, *culture* (see Williams 1983, chapter 3). This is achieved by imaginative passages of text that paint alternative portraits of urban culture, offering vernacular accounts that act as counterpoints to the discourses of direct foreign investment and the aspirations of city officials to position their places as part of the World City network. Flusty's piece challenges us to re-frame our interpretations of the contemporary city with a greater aural, olfactory and haptic sensitivity, so that we might better represent its people and its poetry.

The title of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is appropriated by Flusty in the marginalia of his article, where a forthcoming work, to be entitled *The Rime of the Frequent Flyer*, is mentioned. However, even before this carefully placed 'clue', the relevance and influence of Coleridge can be detected throughout the text, and can be seen to work at several different layers or levels. To begin with, at an immediate level, the archaic language and the erudition in evidence suggests the Coleridge of *Kubla Khan*; that poem and Flusty's article share a visionary form and starting point in the decree of 'stately pleasure dome[s]' to be built, whether in Xanadu on the

orders of Kubla Khan or, in *The Emperor's Used Clothes...*, according to the wishes of the city boosters, bureaucrats and monarchs of Cibola, al-Nuhhas, Shangri-La, Traitrueng and Avalon. *Kubla Khan*, although a poem that resists a definitive interpretation, has been explained as an 'allegory of [the role of] the imagination in the process of creating a work of art' (Holmes 1982, p.83), concluding with an argument for the protection of the Poet and the insight s/he can offer in the re-imagination of the natural world – 'For he on honeydew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise'. Flusty's piece proposes a somewhat less heroic, wry assessment of the ethnographer, nourished by the 'scented chai and lapsang souchong lattes' encountered along the way (2010, p.262), but there is an argument that the insight into the city offered by the narrator in *The Emperor's Used Clothes...* is analogous to that of Coleridge's Poet in re-creating, re-animating and re-enchanting the objective world through the subjective act of re-imagining that world¹⁵.

The role of imagination in Coleridge and Flusty will be discussed in more depth below, but to conclude the comparison with *Kubla Khan*, both writers provide authorial commentaries, written in a very different prose style, that frame the visionary extracts and add depth and interest to the pieces. For Coleridge, this is the biographical account of the genesis of his poem which acts as a preface to the piece; for Flusty, these comprise the reflections that conclude each city portrait, written at a distance from the previously described places, composed in the stations and spaces of mobility en route to the next destination. His piece is episodic and thus has a rhythm of its own; each city portrait follows a particular pattern of scene-setting and description of the cultural quarters and their constituencies of the uniformly dressed technophiles, followed by testimony from other local voices on the re-fashioning of the urban fabric and concluded by the author's

¹⁵ In addition to the text, the images remind us of Rimbaud's direction for a poetry arrived at through 'a prolonged and deliberate disordering of the senses' (Holmes 1982, p.72).

commentary. This episodic structure suggests further comparison with some of Coleridge's most famous poems. The importance of testimony throughout the piece (the evocation of place brought through the accounts of the elderly man in Cibola, the al-Nuhha matriarch, the café owner in Shangri-La, the Traitrueng guidebook and Avalon's cab-driver) brings to mind the narrative of the Ancient Mariner mentioned above; the combination of description and authorial reflection recalls the structural symmetry and meditative qualities of Coleridge's series of 'Conversation Poems' (most perfectly achieved in a poem such as *Frost at Midnight*).

At the most profound level, the comparison between Coleridge and Flusty is focussed on the pivotal role of the imagination, and its importance as a methodological device in transforming our subjective perception of the objective world; it is worth recalling here the sub-title of Flusty's *De-Coca-Colonization* is 'Making the Globe from the Inside Out' – not bottom up, but *from the inside out* (2004). As Coleridge outlined in his *Biographia Literaria* of 1817, the potential of great poetry was tied to the imaginative capacity of the Poet and his/her ability to re-animate that which a lesser poetry can only describe. Imagination, Coleridge contends,

dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead (Coleridge [1817] 1983, p.304)

As Holmes puts it, in order to 'understand such-and-such a thing... you must make it *come alive* in your mind – you must *imagine* it for yourself' (1982, p.49). Against that, Coleridge posits a lesser type of poetry based not on the imaginative impulse but rather on the use of fancy, which he defines in terms of only 'fixities and definites' and comprising 'a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space' (Coleridge [1817] 1983, p.304). Fancy is a mechanical, remote mode of representation that does not move beyond the application of generic principles and does not rise above the descriptive, whereas the imagination offers the possibility of re-enchanting an

objective reality, even if familiar to us. Here is not the place to outline the long tradition of conflating the two terms (see Brett 1969), but rather to transpose Coleridge's distinction to Flusty's discussion of the contemporary urban fabric.

In distinguishing between the generic cityscapes found throughout industrialised and industrialising nations (Koolhaas [1994] 1998) and different, historical forms of urban life, Flusty's focus on the built environment calls into question the complicity of architects and designers and their role in furthering the cultural hegemony of Western capitalism and commoditised forms of life. It brings into question the merit of the new models and designs they import (the palaces 'built in the deconstructionist idiom' (2010, p.252) and the surveillance creep that accompanies their re-modelling of the urban landscape) and, in doing so, re-activates and extends Coleridge's distinction between *Fancy* and *Imagination*, from a theory of poetry to a general principle of artistic creation. In contrast to the generic, ultimately fanciful, designs of architects and tastemakers imported worldwide without sensitivity to the extant urban fabric, Flusty's article demonstrates the necessity of imagination as a method or technique for transforming our relationship with the city and presents itself as a palimpsest in which the ghosts of cities and cultures past can be traced to re-enchant the present.

Coleridge coined the word *esemplastic* to underscore the potential power of the imaginative faculty in poetically re-shaping the internal understanding of the objective world and re-creating one's relationship with external reality through the exercise of subjective insight. The word is defined as 'to shape into one' (Coleridge [1817] 1983, p.168), or to cast an organic whole from disordered, disparate elements. One is reminded of the concluding passages of Flusty's *De-Coca-Colonization* and their reference to Subcomandante Marcos's diagnosis of 'the problem of the world which globalization pretends to construct: the pieces don't fit' and the need 'to make a new world, a world where many worlds fit, where all worlds fit' (1997, in Flusty 2004, p.209).

Whither the esemplastic power in order to transform and enrich our experience of the city today? Architecture and design can of course leave a physical imprint on the landscape and so re-arrange our visual perception of a place. But there is more than one sense at play in the experience of places and buildings (Pallasmaa 2005). There is precious little lyricism to be found in the generic cityscapes of the contemporary metropolis, and so we must look to other arts and other crafts.

In a letter to William Southey in 1802 Coleridge stated that a great poet must be in possession of a remarkable sentience:

for all sounds, & all forms of human nature he must have the *ear* of a wild Arab listening in the silent Desert, the eye of a North American Indian tracing the footsteps of an Enemy upon the Leaves that strew the Forest — ; the *Touch* of a Blind Man feeling the face of a darling Child.(Coleridge [1802] 1956, p.810)

In short, he must be able to experience and activate meaning at the level of many senses. From this description of the constitution of poetic facility we can draw lessons on the capabilities needed to outline alternative and renewed approaches to, and understandings of, the urban based on more than a visual sensibility (Zardini 2005). In its attention to detail, as befits an ethnographic account, to the tastes, smells, talk, sights and scenes of cities past and present, and his ability to transform these disordered impressions into a composite portrait of another type of urban culture, Flusty's *The Emperor's Used Clothes...* offers an exemplar on how imagination can be used to critique and enrich our understanding of the world around us. It provides an illustration of Walter Benjamin's notion of a 'tactile appropriation' of the built environment ([1936] 1999, p.233) and points the way to a much needed, more poetic urbanism.

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