

La Citta Paradiso:

On Civic Ground at Victoria and the Concrete Poetry of Architecture

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In the film *Cinema Paradiso*, just before the tragic inferno that decimates the building, the projectionist Alfredo reflects a film onto the facade of a house across the piazza, magically transforming the Sicilian town briefly into *una citta paradiso*. The semi-Sacred inversion of public space into theatre is of course an ancient characteristic of southern Italian cities, something which Walter Benjamin and the film maker ... described very beautifully in their essay *Naples*: “the most catholic of cities... a grain of Sunday in each week day... etc etc.”

In the film, egged on by the puritanical local priest (the self-appointed censor of cinematic kisses), the attempt by an attendant to make the audience, sat upon their own chairs in the square, to buy tickets is met with confident mass contempt: “the piazza belongs to us”, they haughtily declare. Only the local mad man disagrees, and he is marked as mad by his fantasy that “the square belongs to me.”

The lunatic and the priest attempt to press their claims on the public, but the cinematic audience gathered in the square utterly reject them both, and for a beautiful if brief moment, a secular congregation own it in their participation in a shared spectacle.

I was reminded, watching the film recently, of the passive (thence “pathos”) role of “thereos”, or spectators, in Ancient Greek festivals. As they witnessed and were carried away by these festive events, they made them come alive through their participation in them. The conceptual and actual reality of participation (“methexis”) - in festival - is the basis of theoretical and public life, Hans-Georg Gadamer claimed, something originally understood as “sharing in the meaning of the Cosmos”.

Similarly, the public character of art experience refutes any crude division between active and contemplative life Hannah Arendt declared, just as she insisted, in *The Human Condition*, that it is *The Space of Appearance* that typifies democratic public life and confirms Aristotle’s profound definition of us as “the species that speaks and acts”.

It is perhaps an odd coincidence that both Arendt and Gadamer should emphasise art as a profound demonstration of humankind’s political potential, recalling of course in doing so the exemplary role of cities in Plato’s philosophy. The coincidence can be explained in part by the increasingly central role that art experience played in the later writing of their disgraced teacher Martin Heidegger, who addressed an audience of architects at Darmstadt in ... with Holderlin’s secular-Sacred claim that “full of merit, nonetheless poetically man dwells”. Heidegger describes his ambition, in the preface to *Being and Time*, as seeking to “destroy” Kant’s philosophy, and with it his subjective aesthetics. (I’ve written at length elsewhere about Heidegger’s role in what is now known as “the art world” after the war, and other recent scholarship emphasises his participation in it as a critic and even as the creator of art work (such as the book that he collaborated on with Eduardo Chillida, *Kunst und der Raum*; the *Brunnenstern* sculpture at Todt Nauberg, etc., although as far as I know he doesn’t discuss cinema directly).

In Gadamer’s terms however - in *Truth and Method* and *The Relevance of the Beautiful* - play is the key to understanding all culture as fundamentally generative and redemptive. It is helpful, Gadamer suggests, to see all human life as more or less serious play: from rhythmic bodily movements (with or without balls); to dressing up; to song and dance; to language acquisition; to the theatrical performances of professional life (the costumes and self-conscious roles played by judges, committee chairs, even doctors, etc); to religious festivals (these are all more or less rhythmic and cyclical performances); to the “sacred games of art” (Schiller).

This way of thinking is particularly powerful for design I believe, redeeming architectural creativity from the dead-ends of useless beauty on the one hand, and pointless production on the other.

It also helps us see cities in terms of what Peter Carl calls Civic Depth. Not as public or private ("how much of an apartment is ever really private, including the loo?" He asks in *Civic Depth*, Mimesis:Lynch Architects, Artifice, 2015): but as layers of more or less representational aspects of civic life.

The images I am showing here are of a series of buildings designed over the past decade on Victoria Street, made partly intuitively in meetings or in contemplation, and also as a way to try to communicate something. For example, drawn as a series of more or less public rooms, the interiors and thresholds of Westminster reveal the inter-penetration of rituals and theatrical life into almost every aspect of city life there. In this landscape of playing surfaces the ludic character of civic culture is evident in the recurrence of the festive Gate as an architectural trope - from the facade of Victoria Station (a quasi City Gate) to the baldacchino in Westminster Cathedral, the proscenium arch that frames both inner and faces of The Victoria Palace Theatre, etc. The city appears as both physiognomic silhouettes, armatures, bodily faces, and as a network of horizontal and vertical stage sets, set up for the drama of urban life.

To conclude I would like to show a Short film, *Silver Forest*, named for the eponymous art work which it depicts. The film was made by Tapio Snelman, who, previous to his career as a film maker, studied architecture in London and Helsinki; and by the artist and photographer Rut Bles-Luxemburg, who initially studied political philosophy in Germany. Rut, Reader in Urban Aesthetics at The Royal College of Art, and an old friend, collaborated with my architectural practise on the design and production of *Silver Forest*, and de facto participated also with the wider design team on the creation of a new public space, Kings Gate Walk, that included the landscape architects Vogt; the textile artists Timorous Beasties (who worked with us on the creation of an ornamental cruciform column known as "Birdstane"); and the lighting designers Firefly.

Silver Forest is made of a series of cast concrete panels forming a faux colonnade of quite plain pillars, that frame a grey, variously rough or smooth cast concrete tableaux vivant, 8m tall and 30 meters long. *Silver Forest* forms the new side elevation at the base of Westminster City Hall, and Kings Gate Walk creates a new threshold to the town hall and Victoria Street. Most recently, the space has been amended by the introduction of a memorial commemorating the employees of Westminster council who died fighting in the First World War. Similarly, it has become part of an evolving cultural situation through its role in inspiring the film (which I will now show), which is itself inspired by the poem, also known as *Silver Forest*, written in its honour by the poet Douglas Parks.

This continuous inversion of solid things into words and via light into film, extends into the back and forth rhythms of digital imagery and pixelated concrete pictures of trees, whose texture recalls in turn the bark of the actual trees that populate the space. This process of spatial and material resonance is deliberately exaggerated and amplified in the design, but what could not be anticipated - although it was hoped for perhaps by the designers - was the cultural continuity between those participating in an evolving series of acts of participation in urban aesthetics. These participants include local politicians commissioning new art works, the various artists mentioned above, and also I'd suggest retailers opening new restaurants, as well as the public who use the space each day, the inhabitants of the apartment block, government workers, demonstrating strikers, smokers, etc., etc.

This diurnal and more or less rhythmic process reminds us that the aim of architecture, as an art of the city, might be said to be the creation of Civic Ground.

My teacher Joseph Rykwert suggested in the introduction to the second edition of *The Architecture of the City*, that the city is a sort of "dream".

I'd like to suggest that the film makes apparent that civic architecture can be described, albeit with the risk of some Hubris, as a form of concrete poetry.