

Concluding Keynote to the International “Walk21” Conference (The Design Exchange, October 3rd, 2007, Toronto)

I am delighted to have been with you last couple of days. I hope your stay in Toronto has been hospitable and serene. Toronto has to thank you for helping invigorate our city with the pedestrian ethic. Your witness in the accomplishment of a sustainable Toronto is much appreciated. Your inspiration has matched our own initiatives, with the Toronto Pedestrian Charter and our commitment, indeed Ontario's commitment as articulated by Waterloo, Minto and other municipalities, in strategies that address safe routes to school, traffic signal changes, new public realm offices and “pedestrian first” policies.

I want to thank Bob Davis and the Public Consultation office and The Transportation Office and the City of Toronto for their hosting of this conference and the many contributors, too many to mention, not the least of which were the many volunteers that ushered us in our seminars and travels.

I come to you from the creative cities agenda. It's been my premise, as Poet Laureate of the City of Toronto, that until all citizens see themselves as creative in the building of communities, families, neighborhoods and in the design of their city, we will not have prosperous and sustainable cities. Like creativity, sustainability is a way of life, a way of thinking. And the pedestrian agenda is central in seducing the public towards an ethic of sustainability. For a culture is a way of thinking, and until all citizens share in a way of thinking called creative citizenship, we won't have sustainability, livability, or for that matter, great art. I have been flitting about last few days attending as many of the events as possible and, as official commentator, have been asked to offer my observations. Allow me to share them with you.

On Tuesday morning, Jim Walker candidly revealed the inadequacies of research and execution, pointing to the need for more participation by all public sectors as well as the need for better user surveys and more consistent quality of data--the efforts of the Road show and models like London's Romantic Ribbon Project are invitations to lure the public into what Catherine O'Brian termed a "footprint of delight". It is by that measurement that the public will be persuaded to walkability. For her notion of "sustainable happiness" is the kind of thinking that will glamorize our strategies and make them meaningful. Notions such as Bronwen's "don't close the roads", "open the streets", alert us to the importance of infusing the agenda with a vocabulary of delight, and not just an inventory of mandates. The efforts of planners and designers like Robert Freedman, Bruce Appleyard and Daniel Sauter go a long way in addressing the issue of designs for walking. The quality of streets, pedestrian priority areas, landscaping, parks and way finding, in our discussions, met with the concerns of the handicapped and the socially excluded and the sensitive needs of children in an urban environment. From the many case studies on interaction and with the help of international transportation experts, observation tools lacking in previous discussions were revealed. If indicators for the quality of life were missing in earlier dialogues, seminars like “Spiritual Landscapes”, “Livable Streets” and “Public Health and Urban Design” provided clues for those aspects of livability that involve the physical *and* the metaphysical health of the urban. Indeed, Hans Monderman took the discussion to the psychology of social capital, suggesting that issues such as excessive risk consciousness and hyper-regulation were at the root of public space disorders. His notion that the self-consciousness of a politically correct society is inhibitory to the casual intelligence that public space requires was insightful to many of us.

His invocation to common sense was especially attractive. The elementary sometimes escapes us in our strategies and our well intentioned data collecting. It's good to be welcomed back to the elementary. And walking is *elemental*, in a time when simulacra and virtualities and transcodings are taking the place of lived experience. The world is being downloaded and uploaded. And physical experience, the somatic experience, civil encounter, is giving way to simulated experience, screen experience, e-mail experience. More on that later.

I think the pedestrian experience must soon, will soon have its hay day, if the discussion amounts to the untenability of continued motorized growth. Only a madman or the self-absorbed can resist the reality that within five to ten years urban traffic will be paralyzed, thanks to the pitfalls of former planning and owing to the vast numbers of global pilgrims seeking an urban quality of life with vehicular freedom. This conference and previous conferences have well documented the unfeasibility of an urban world over-run with cars or other energy wasting contraptions. Having said that, is sustainability all we are championing? What is our philosophical affection for the pedestrian experience, for the walking experience? Is it merely about reducing our metropolises to a human scale?

Such conferences can't be just about the joy of walking, the health of walking, the exercise of walking, the restoration of our senses to the environment, the sensitizing of ourselves to our habitat as a means of restoring reverence and relationship with the air we walk through, the ground we walk on, the landscapes we visit. All well and good, no one would dispute this, not even those who enjoy the panoramas of a pleasant drive along the lake, through mountains. All means of transportation yield their own aesthetic, beyond convenience and efficacy. Walking however is different, because it is simply something we do with our bodies, without artificial intelligence, without mechanism; it is somatic experience without mediations. Somehow to move slowly is perhaps a virtue, and not *virtual*. Perhaps the world is abbreviated at fast speeds, perhaps the body is the measure of the earth, and to remove oneself from the gauge of body experience is to step outside the lived-in world. In an age of technology and the digital, we have to figure out if our drummer is the speed of light, or the speed at which we walk. We wonder if the natural cycles are foreign to us, the more we absorb technology. No wonder the eco-system rebels, when our rhythms are not those of natural cycles, but of algorithms of the mechanical and digital.

After the many seductions, logical and visionary, have been played-- I shall make a plea for the salvific aspect of the act of walking. Yes, salvific. Not just to save the environment, but to save ourselves, and not just by regarding the environment. We will not save the environment until we have found a reason for living together. Until we discover civic care in each other, until we restore the city to its definition as a place of unexpected intimacies, not just as a place of amenities, convenience, business and entertainment, we will not have sustainability. For sustainability is about replacing an ethic of entitlement with an ethic of sufficiency. And sufficiency is what we find in each other. In an era that glorifies independence and even interdependence we are shy of admitting the awful truth: that is, we are **dependent** on each other, not by connectedness, but because we are, as David Suzuki suggested, one body, breathing the same air. It is not cars that are the enemy of the pedestrian. The enemy is the absence of civic communion, the lack of empathic citizenship, our inability to see cohabitation as that place where we enjoy ourselves, by enjoying others. For the value of the pedestrian experience is in its exploration of the world; more importantly, the intimate exploration of others. Even as I say that, we know that negotiated space is the arbiter of both pedestrian traffic and vehicular traffic. All human traffic is under siege, because it is becoming increasingly purposed, guarded and negotiated. The body is not just a means of locomotion. It is our chief means of restoring a city to its *raison d'être*, its purpose. And that purpose is *civil encounter*.

Walking is the choreography by which we discover another human being. If that sounds facile, I will suggest to you, that the real enemy of sustainability is the contemporary zeitgeist of

withdrawal. People are withdrawing, behind computer screens, television screens, blackberries, text messaging and yes-- even cars are a means of withdrawing into a private space, in the same spirit in which people are retreating from porches and backyards; it explains the canyons of isolating condos and the choosing of surveillance over civil liberties. This is the psychological hinterland that rivals urban sprawl. We have addressed strategies for creating public spaces that invite the pedestrian. We have not addressed the illness at the core of social capital in our time. Civic trust has been corroded. So that you have pedestrian friendly environments in all cities, with no one on the streets after 8pm at night. We all know these places. Our cities are becoming disinhabited, even when the streets are safe and landscaped; gentrified neighborhoods are no more interactive than the brown fields and cloverleaves they replaced. The problem is not, fundamentally, to get people to slow down, or to move without being toxic to their environment. The problem is to make people aware that anonymity is as toxic to the ecology of heart, as hydrocarbons are toxic to the atmosphere. The problem is how to restore intimacy, curiosity, trust and play into the happenstance encounter of citizens, in an era when the happenstance and the unpredictable are a threat.

Walking is the eloquent and sane plea for the restoration of inter-civic trust. When all the cars will have been taxed or tolled on their way to the cities, when bike paths and parks will have reconfigured our neighborhoods, when safe and cleaner transportation has cut emissions, a fundamental question will remain. Is the safe city, the sanitized city, the sustainable city, the same as the livable city. The livable city is not a place where people walk purposively, negotiatedly, time-tabled for event and recreation. The livable city is a place, not where one is free to produce one's destiny alone, but a place where one discovers one's destiny through others. Looking, feeling, touching, exchanging glances, words, conversation, smiles. These are the signs of a pedestrian city that has graduated to being a human city. Lest we think that these elements come reflexively with good design, I invite all of us to look at our municipalities, and truly ask if civil encounter is mainly eroded by bad construction, or if something resists the encounter of person and person besides cars and bad urban planning. The truth is, when people don't like each other, they design ugly things. When they like each other they create the beautiful, the shared space, and design becomes a "*gift*".

If all we want is clean and well designed cities, it will likely come to pass. But in the long run, to save the environment means that will want to save the environment not just for ourselves, but for each other. And to reverence each other means that will have to discover each other. To have created the public forum for encounter is not to have inspired a reason for public encounter. We need the vocabulary of seduction that will keep people from being distracted from each other.

To put it simply, civic nature has become suspicious of civic space. Crime, terrorism and market exigencies are in part to blame. Lack of cohesive communal values contributes. Lack of civic and regional identity is partly to blame. Information technology offers a privatized strategy for avoiding or negotiating encounter, and puts connectedness in place of intimacy. Intimacy is the domain of bodies meeting, on the street, on a park bench, at a kiosk. The agenda of walking must deal with the multi-faceted reasons why people resist walking, even when the urban design allows for it.

The first thing you notice when visiting a new city is not the amount of pedestrian traffic, but the alchemy of citizenship evident in the space between people. When that alchemy is attractive, motorists and commuters have a desire to abandon their trajectories and join in the experiment of physical encounter. For the quality of life is not just a manufacture, it is an invitation that is irresistible if the citizens take delight in each other. It is the "footprint of delight". The global citizen is hungry for delight and our only resource is the curiosity that citizens have for each other.

The strategies for such delight, I offer to our collective imagination. Behind those strategies, I know, is the hope that we will successfully re-inhabit our cities, by restoring the body to the citizen, and thereby recover the civic body as an expression of the civic soul.

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