

The Private Self

The 'private self' is perhaps the culprit of the modern city. It is quite possible that the citizen resents congestion as much as he/she wishes to be seduced to the public. It is a necessary ambivalence in human nature-- the public and the private. Both, as impulses, as seek equilibrium, or at least a healthy dialogue. The equilibrium is offset by fear, by exhortations towards safety, media intimations of danger, distrust in what we have come to term the negotiations of the sexes, etc.; in fact our public lives have become "negotiations", and our private lives become things to negotiate carefully into the public, by the well earned settlements of cynicism in an age of failed authority, non-credible institutions, and the tacit acknowledgement that greed is the zeitgeist of the 21st century.

The private self is easily aggrandized. It is, after all, the child in us that needs protection, it is the space in which we formulate our main-stay against confusion; it is the nerve zone of skepticism that reminds us of what is familiar and what is foreign. It is the space we carry with us as we walk down the street. It is the space we extend by rendering it virtual with e-mail and interface with networking that replaces "working with". The private self is nemesis of the city; yet sees the city as nemesis; and at the same time uses the city to hide in, to maintain its privacy, by the containment of self in condos, by the boundary-making of bylaws, regulation, and privacy guidelines. The protection of the rights of the citizen is the industry of the exoneration of the self, a self so private that it must legislate a rationale for not being public. The rights of the individual are too often a notion that the "private self" champions in the effort to keep the individual "solitary". Solitary is what the individual does not always wish to be. Yet the "private self" constructs and plans a city that ensures the solitary.

It is a mixed message that the individual gives himself/herself in today's "urban". The public and the private are oppositional; and consequently public space and private space are in opposition. The idea of negotiated space is the sad arbiter of both. It replaces the graceful movement from public to private and back again, the art of which belongs to the citizen. And begins in the citizen. The dynamic of public space and private space is not configured in urban design or city policy, until the citizen configures these contradictory desires, and makes an art of their apparent paradox.

Pier Giorgio Di Cicco
City of Toronto Poet Laureate