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Haste: the forgotten virtue

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It is "a beauty that comes from order found, not order given, as if its permanent harmony existed precariously in a transient and unpredictable world."

Joshua Taylor quoted by John Yau in
A New Context for the "Matter Paintings" of Antoni Tàpies

Permanent harmony, of the kind alluded to by Joshua Taylor, may not seem the relevant issue to a discussion of haste as a device in the meaningful evolution of cities. Yet transience and unpredictability are salient attributes, even charms, of dense urban landscapes. Forms and landscapes repeatedly overlaid by alternative, often competing, agendas and worn with different patterns of use, enrich the visual environment through diversity. But it is a diversity which often occurs unexpectedly or incidentally rather than consciously, such as on the dock edge at Sir John Roberson's Quay in Dublin [fig1], where existing remnants are appropriated and renewed in a manner which leaves traces of former use intact more through neglect than agenda.

There are cities, which despite a multiplicity of intervention, have very precise and definitive readings as urban forms, achieving a level of harmony. Sometimes because of the preponderance of period architecture or definitive sense of scale such as in the case of Paris, or the resonance of the topographic in the city's structure as in Edinburgh, or even something as simple as organizational layout manifested in Chicago. In contrast much of the urban fabric of Dublin, until very recent years, stands in defiance of any strategy that is decisively intellectual, continuous or legible. Despite attempts at authoritative planning in its history, the fabric, even along the historic Georgian corridors, is incomplete and contingent on local circumstance. This uneven fragmentation exists to such a degree that the image of the city is at best ambiguous, dense with unequal layers of alterations. Legibility finds no foothold here, but transience and unpredictability have particular relevance and

establish a peculiar and unexpected alliance with a harmony of a different kind, one which implicates memory. For within this unequal and ambiguous terrain there lie a profusion of moments where fractions of historic fabric are appropriated into later work, or left abandoned, which are evocative rather than didactic of the historic life of the city. These intersections of past and present, which coincide in fleeting and inexplicable ways, induce a form of imaginative engagement that keeps the city past, present and future fluidly entwined.

Recent urban development in Dublin, particularly that of the Docklands, eschews the humble lessons found within this existing fabric. Although conscious regard has been shown to historic remnants of this heroic industrial landscape these elements are neither appropriated as useful nor abandoned to be reinterpreted at will but rather described and valued as singular moments or fields of memory and through preservation made static and empty of meaning. The resulting landscape lacks both the fluidity of time and necessary ambiguity to inspire curiosity or the imaginations of the passer by. The hypothesis then is that there is value to be found in what is often unvalued in urban design or in common thought, elements or moments of inconsistency, fracture, or dissonance in the urban fabric.

It is useful to momentarily frame this argument around some of the ideas expressed by the painter Dubuffet, as his work and ideas have a certain resonance with the theme. Quintessential images from Dubuffet contain both elements of the ordinary and the overlooked and are cast in the paintings in an ambiguous texture to force a reconsideration of both. His intentions are to question the value of the notionally beautiful in an effort to celebrate the unforeseen beauty of the despised. And he does this through using techniques of ambiguity and haste to provoke us into reaction.

"...I intend to sweep away everything we have been taught to consider - without question - as grace and beauty; ...to substitute another and vaster beauty, touching all objects and beings, not excluding the most despised - and, because of that, all the more exhilarating. The beauty for which I aim needs little to appear - unbelievably little. Any place - the most destitute - is good enough for it. I would like people to look at my work as an enterprise for the rehabilitation of scorned values. And, in any case, make no mistake, a work of ardent celebration."

Dublin, despite the indelible mark of the river Liffey, the inscription of its central core by canals and the abundance of Georgian facades eludes simple readings because of the abundance of fragmented, occasionally incoherent, and often ill defined moments which trace through its evolution. The result, though uneven, circumstantial and elusive, embodies the very essence of Dubuffet's agenda regarding the notionally unattractive and the value of the ambiguous.

The value of ambiguity, and the relevance of Dubuffet's argument, in the context of cities calls into question how historic remnants are understood, bringing us face to face with the issue of memory and, in particular, collective memory. Aldo Rossi has described the city as our collective memory, as a container of sorts. But how in fact does this operate most poignantly? Through the dedication of certain buildings or monuments as untouchable while the remainder of the city continues in its state of flux? Does the singling out of specific elements in fact salvage the past or remove it from our daily consciousness? George Perec describes in his *Species of Spaces* an intuitive attitude which begins to approach a truth regarding our memory and the role in which the urban environment plays in acting as its container or, perhaps more specifically, as a mnemonic device;

I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin:

My birth place, the cradle of my family, the house where I may have been born, the tree I may have seen grow (that my father may have planted the day I was born), the attic of my childhood filled with intact memories...

To write: to try meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive; to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave some where a furrow, a trace, a mark or a few signs.

Perec, *Species of Spaces*

Perec describes to us a desire for a place, apparently, of stasis. An attic from which to retrieve, where one can find comfort in things known, to assure oneself of the validity of one's memories, perhaps of one's life. The power of his description lies in its very simplicity, in the commonality of it. That this indeed is a primary need for us all. To be able to recognize ourselves, to verify our lives, in the fabric of space which surrounds us.

From this deep-rooted need to remember springs our desire to arrest the development of our cities, to designate facades, to immortalize, and immobilize, fragments of the city fabric. To guard, protect, restore and generally forestall the moment of inevitable change. But is it in this act of creating a false stasis that we undermine the very nature of memory, and with it disable, to some degree, the quintessential aspect of a collective life called 'the city'? In the very act of holding on do we inadvertently alter the very thing we attempt to save, reducing it to mere shadow of itself, a sign

pointing elsewhere in time, a time beyond any living memory, so that memory loses its foothold and we are left holding a representation of the past rather than a repository of the life of a city?

It is in his parting words to us that Perec betrays that very image of stasis. In the act of describing the nature of this apparent truth he reveals the inherent weakness in his argument, or perhaps more pointedly, the misapplication of the understanding revealed. ...to leave a trace, a mark... Because our memories accumulate, acquire weight and density and complexity as we age. And so is it with a city.

The passage of our lives, of our collective life, leaves in its wake traces, thus a life becomes in fact an act of marking. But this mark of passage is in itself the very thing which forever alters the beloved piece. Yet without it the city contains no vestiges of our passing, of the tree planted at Perec's birth or at ours. The marking is an essential act of making memory, of making history. Thus the power of the singular remnant is in fact less than the transformed and adulterated remnant which attests to a passage of time and multiple lives. So this too is part of that primary desire, the need for accumulated memory.

As Habraken tells us, the field is always in flux, at least in a city that continues to thrive and live. Thus in some sense all change is good in that it adds weight to the density and complexity of the city fabric. Cities, at their most evocative, are heterogeneous in their nature, places of multiple juxtapositions, places where the sheer density of difference and ambiguity of reading creates the uniqueness which attracts people to their centre. But that diversity and complexity does not stem solely from the new but rather the relationships developed between old and new. Thus the naiveté of the extreme positions regarding historic fabric; that assuming a tabula rasa, while it may manifest Habraken's state of flux, will fail to achieve complexity by denying other agendas, by denying history; while on the other end of the spectrum the designation and arresting of change in urban fabric, be it a single building or a neighbourhood, will deny the nature of accumulated memory and lose significance for the average citizen as its associations with contemporary society fade.

Thus what we seek is a compatible marriage of the two, where past and present can coexist and through their association create diversity and retain meaningful associations. The strategy we seek may in fact be manifest in the existing fabric of Dublin itself and the manner in which it has developed. The fact that it has been overlooked is indicative of the limited definition of beauty, which Dubuffet so actively rebels against proclaiming the beauty of the discarded and rejected instead. Much of Dublin's fabric is dismissed in a similar manner, for failing to conform to limited conceptions of value and beauty.

It is a city which until recently had avoided the pitfalls of separating the past into special compartments to be guarded from the compromising effects of change while the remainder of the city is cleared and rebuilt. Instead it offered a vision of appropriation of the past by the present to continue a dialogue between the two where neither reigns supreme but rather is adulterated by the other. These intersections compel us to engage with the memories of the past not as remote and unrelated abstract knowledge but as contemporary informants in our daily existence. And the often ambiguous form of the reconciliation of the two, or more, accretions create a condition which captures our attention and compels our imagination in a manner that keeps the city memory actively engaged, actively transforming.

Returning to Dubuffet for his insight regarding the imagination of the viewer, or in our case the passer by, we find a similar attitude towards imaginative engagement. Dubuffet often uses the image of a table in his paintings, his table in fact, but painted in an ambiguous fashion. It is the very commonness of the artifact, which elicits a reaction, a flood of memories. But the viewer is also enabled, through the very indefiniteness of the image, to impress upon it his own thoughts.

"...any place in this world is peopled by a swarm of facts, and not only those which belong to the life of the [table] itself, but also, mixing with them, others which inhabit the thought of man, and which he impresses on the table by looking at it." ⁱⁱ

The power of art has been described, and is elicited in this description, as lying in its ability to produce empathy in the viewer, or, in other words the enabling of emotional projection. But architecture has at its root a deeper sense of purpose and economy, less related to poetics and more to survival. Thus empathy, an emotional projection, although possible may not be the significant issue. Rather it may lie in its power to inspire curiosity, or imaginative conjecture. Hertzberger also alludes to this attitude towards situational curiosity in his early work, which sought to provide ambiguity and incompleteness in architectural form to act as stimulants to the users imaginative, and physical, possession of the spaces.

This approach could be expanded to our understanding of memory, and further, to the positive appropriation of both the noted and rejected pieces of heritage in our cities. When described and valued as singular moments or fields of memory and preserved they are made static and empty. Useful as a decorative stage set for tourism but lacking the necessary ambiguity to stimulate our curiosity or imaginative conjecture. But once appropriated as salvage material, with its only value described as purposefulness, the pieces engaged, modified and reused together with elements abandoned in situ, incorporate into the new city fabric and allow fragmentary moments of the past to

engage with the present. These intersections of past and present can coincide in fleeting and inexplicable ways which compel us to engage and project into the fragment imaginative conjectures, even potentially fictional histories, but nevertheless a form of creative engagement that keeps the city past, present and future fluidly entwined.

Thus the house wall whose only remaining usefulness was its capacity to bound space, is shorn of its interior, blocked up and rendered to find new life as a garden enclosure, yet in the wake of haste left with the ghostly outlines of its former life [fig 2]. It is moments such as this, moments of unforeseen and incidental beauty, which serve to compel the imagination of the passer by. So that the strategy we seek would reject the explicit and the didactic and look instead to a form of appropriation which both retains the contours of history but in a manner open-ended enough to stimulate curiosity and imagination, the active participation of the viewer. A condition which would waver uncertainly between two or more meanings thus demanding a resolution from the viewers' imagination, as it offers none itself. Dubuffet often uses this device in his work to this end, forcing the choice, or non-choice, of interpretation upon his viewer.

Thus the wavering, the doubtful, the shifting between meanings can be the prod to our reluctant engagement, as the uncertainty forces us to project reconciliations - reconciliations often based on imagination rather than fact. And this is not strictly an issue of historic reuse and modification where different agendas are set up in defiance of one another in the same field. The desired uncertainty could engender much the same effect as Dubuffet's work, to engage the imagination to reconcile, if it can, the lack of clarity. Surely moments such as these could create a more compelling urban landscape than the buildings and territories which are so carefully orchestrated to ensure harmony, singularity and an absence of doubt. But these moments are rarely the result of one hand, and clearly embody multiple ideas or forces which contend with one another for primacy in the making of form and thus, ultimately, in its reading. Yet to achieve the necessary balance of uncertainty these competing require sufficient integrity and meaning to both resist one another, to maintain a degree of autonomy or recognition, as well as to mutate into a third inexplicable or unrecognized state, as in Dubuffet's Landscape with two personages where lines of different order intertwine to create an ambiguous terrain, yet all the while being apparent one from another.

Examples of the intersection and subsequent mutation of different orders abound in the common Dublin landscape, particularly in cases of appropriation of historic artifacts. The edge condition at the Grand Canal basin [fig 3] for instance is a chance encounter between the order of the road and the order of the ground plane of the house and pedestrian, both insistent in their existence and forcing an ambiguous moment to occur where the level of the ground becomes questionable. What is true

ground and fabricated ground? The potency of these moments is based on the purposefulness and meaning of the various orders. Yet the commonness of much of the urban fabric means that embodied meanings are often overlooked or undervalued due to other more intellectualized agendas.

The canal basins of Dublin, as well as the docks themselves, have established patterns of occupation and building which are often subtle and overlooked yet quintessential to the nature of the landscape. On the Grand Canal basin for instance, traditional warehousing aligns itself tight to the waters edge, leaving but a few feet of indeterminate space between building face and quay edge. Though the meaning of its scale is now elusive, it is powerful because it is abnormal to common experience and obviously critical to the manner in which storage sheds related to ships, as it is a scale that repeats itself continuously throughout the dock landscape. Despite their apparent replication in the new development now underway in the form of cafes, the placement of these new buildings bear little appreciation for, or understanding of, the singularity of their predecessors. If the most provocative quality of these warehouse buildings is the peculiar scale of space described between quay edge and building face, the cafes in their turn, though nominally presuming to evoke the memory of these artifacts, fail to capture the potency of these buildings through their misunderstanding, or perhaps neglect, of the question of scale. Thus what had been a narrow band of indeterminate space is doubled in scale and the direct relationship between inner warehouse and quay edge is ignored in favour of turning the entrance to face the length of the quay rather than its edge. Resulting in a space with neither a clearly inscribed meaning nor any potency to inspire memory, association or curiosity.

Thus the potency of the scale is lost due to a misreading or too casual reading of the existing forms, and a space, which if made public, could be powerful for its very eccentricity, is lost. A more generous, yet expedient reading of these edges may have salvaged these moments through reuse of foundations. And this introduces the last critical element to the strategy of ambiguity, that of expediency or haste. For expediency can be, and often in Dublin's history was, a companion of purpose and has a habit of leaving behind considerable traces of history inadvertently in its wake. An expediency based on concern for only that which affects its internal working, dropping any pretence of other interest out of the picture entirely.

Likewise with our painter, Dubuffet, who rejoices in the making of very hasty paintings. In his world haste is regarded as something of a virtue. Its value, it appears, lies in the very rudimentary, blunt, yet vaguely ambiguous character it creates. The result escapes the trap of formalism through haste, captures the essential again through haste, and by virtue of its clumsiness inadvertently creates a tension of uncertainty which 'forces the imagination' to function more vigorously, according to Dubuffet.

In architectural circles haste is considered an anathema, a curse. It is imagined to be the domain of the developer and sloppy tradesman perhaps to the sad reproach of us all not to mention the certain destruction of our urban landscapes. Yet haste, when left unattended by better-minded citizens and uncoloured by ulterior motives, may be the very thing which inadvertently saves the city history from certain, and various, death.

The sloppy concrete render job slashed to avoid cracking is a ubiquitous image in the Dublin landscape, one despised by its inhabitants as a reminder of the quality and preoccupation of their tradesmen. [fig 4] Yet by casting aside one's pejorative assumptions regarding haste, it's beauty becomes apparent through it's rendering of light and evocation of both the tectonic of the material and the hand of the maker. All things to delight the eye and the imagination. All achieved through a preoccupation with the economic, the expedient, the purposeful while eschewing the taint of any other agenda.

The city of Dublin is replete with such unexpected moments. This perhaps is most especially true in the manner of its appropriation of existing elements. Alterations done to architectural fabric in an expedient fashion, which acknowledges only its immediate agenda, will often inadvertently and carelessly salvage, reuse, or simply leave unaltered urban fabric in a way which saves the history of the city both from demolition and from pretension. Thus the Liffey quay walls retain vestiges of their former use as docklands through the simple act of abandonment while the ground plane above holds memories of former rails, which, though removed, have left scars in the cobbles through hasty infill as opposed to the careful resetting of stone. In stark contrast to this compelling beauty the current design agenda is to carefully erase all traces and markings to replace them with, not only rigorously prescribed territories of sitting, walking, cycling, but to go so far as to create false traces. A venture that not only strips the site of its history, of its ambiguity and its potential for conjecture, but spends considerable time, money and effort to do so. A more expedient gesture would have been to simply overlay the trees, light standards and benches on the existing ground plane thereby adding to its density rather than stripping it of all meaning.

What could possibly be the virtue in the incidental, erratic, eccentric and fragile moments we have considered over the more serious and considered, and certainly not hasty, efforts at conservation of singular, noteworthy pieces of architecture? Because of their very commonness they have been granted the freedom, through disregard, to mutate and gather accretions. To gather markings of the passage of time, thus marrying the past to the present in intimate and unexpected ways, holding the ephemeral shreds of memories together in an ambiguous balance of sorts. This after all is the essence

of the city memory, that it is an accumulation of the tracings of lives left behind on its surface, not the immortalization of singular moments in time. And the resulting complexity holds in common with Dubuffet that very quality of ambiguity, of memories half recalled, of images almost recognized, which compel our imaginations to engage with the world around us.

Thus the key to an adept response to history seems possible, even preferable, through an appropriation of the potentially useful, combined with the abandonment of the peripheral and merely decorative...a severe and utilitarian reuse which does not have a higher objective of organization on any ideological terms, either conciliatory or through a didactic juxtaposition of elements. Salvaging of historic fragments for purposeful reuse gives the city fluidity in its history and image as opposed to a static re-presentation of its apparently meaningful epochs. It is a strategy which can result in density, ambiguity and, occasionally, moments of incidental beauty. Or as Joshua Taylor would have it, *a beauty that comes from order found, not order given, as if its permanent harmony existed precariously in a transient and unpredictable world.*ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Jean Dubuffet, *Landscaped Tables, Landscapes of the Mind, Stones of Philosophy*, in Peter Selz, *The Work of Jean Dubuffet*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1962, pp. 63

ⁱⁱ Jean Dubuffet, *op. cit.*, pp. 72

ⁱⁱⁱ John Yau, *A New Context for the "Matter Paintings" of Antoni Tàpies*, www.seacex.com/documentos/tapies_06_contexto.pdf, 28 August 2004