

A Tale of More than Two Cities

Review of Juhász, Tamás (ed.), *Art in Urban Space* (Budapest and Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary and Éditions L'Harmattan, 2021)

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Wittgenstein used a thought-provoking comparison to describe the structure of language: “Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses” (pt. 1, par. 18). This comparison can easily be reversed: a city can be viewed like a language, with its main and subordinate clauses, its images and metaphors, its subjective locations, and its vivid predicates. In short, you can read the city as a language and you can hear it like a talk or a speech. This is precisely what the authors of this book do. They, on their virtual excursions to old and new cities, choose very specific alleys, nooks and houses in order to read and hear how art has shaped these spaces. The authors do not want to see everything, but, like Clov in Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*, something special: “Any particular sector you fancy? Or merely the whole thing?” (73). They see the particular.

The editor of this remarkable book, Tamás Juhász, a literary and cultural scholar who was one of the organisers of an international conference, entitled “Arts and the City” (Budapest, 2019), has compiled the research-based and elaborated contributions of selected presenters into a reader that is not only worth reading for experts in urban studies but also offers interesting impulses for all those interested in art in urban space. It is to the editor’s credit that the contributions of the participants

from various academic disciplines have been brought together to form a kaleidoscopic collection of texts, resulting in an original and important contribution to this much-discussed topic. His introductory chapter is a theoretically grounded essay on the complex field of the dialectical relationship between space and art. It shows how different strands of theory from Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin to Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Doreen Massey, and Edward Soja have fertilised theoretical thinking about the city, space, and art, and how numerous authors from Malcolm Miles to Cara Courage have focused the theoretical discourse on this research field.

“Disruption” is one of the key terms Juhász uses to reflect on the experience of art in urban space and to demonstrate the possibility of how art can develop a transformative power for inhabitants of a city: by seeing the very ordinary suddenly being transformed into a work of art. “Turning the ordinary into art challenges received notions about the distanced, possibly elitist nature of art and it can help ... narrow the gulf that modernity created between life and art” (Juhász 14).

This book, *Art in Urban Space*, has captivated me so those half-repressed and forgotten memories of my own experience with art in urban space are wrenched from my unconscious and determine my reflection on this book, whose primary aim is to examine art projects in urban space for their transformative power. My own ruminations on art in urban space have so far been rather disorganised primary experiences. The insights I owe to this book are all related to the unavoidable culture shock I experienced when I moved from the small medieval town of Hall in Tyrol to the centre of Vienna. That is the reason why I am writing first about those chapters that are related to this biographical “disruption.” I do not want to imply any sort of evaluation, but only to make it comprehensible how I found my way into this book. I have learned to appreciate it as a valuable enrichment of my ability to perceive and interpret my experience with biographical key events.

As editor Tamás Juhász puts it in his introductory essay, art in space, the shaping of space through art, is “a domain politically demarcated, socially structured and culturally always recreated” (Juhász 14). This is true even for the small town of my childhood, even if it looks like a relic from the High Middle Ages. There happened and still happens what Erzsébet Stróbl reports about the great city of London in the time of Elizabeth I in her contribution to this volume, “The City as Stage: The Coronation Entry of Elizabeth I in 1559.” The city is turned into a stage for a ritual of domination—and for a ritual of jubilant submission for the dominated.

In her text, Stróbl shows the late-medieval or rather early-modern city as the stage for a ceremony whose deeper purpose was to fix the status of rulers and the ruled, but at the same time, by allowing the ruled to present themselves as enthusiastically jubilant subjects in exuberant and costly productions, to convey the feeling that rulers and ruled belonged to the same family. The Corpus Christi processions in my small town were exactly the same, albeit not in the sixteenth but in the twentieth century, with the difference that the centre of the ritual was not an earthly queen but the heavenly king. All citizens were allowed to take part in the ritual and even felt it an honour to dress up in medieval costumes and take part in the staging of this religious event. The citizens of late medieval London and my late twentieth-century hometown were supposed to feel like part of a community thanks to such rituals. Ignazio Silone called this “the warmth of the sheepfold,” the political goal of which is to make people forget the complexity of modern life in a mass society with a high division of labour. Other than the medieval community such a differentiated society based on the division of labour needs the cool “rational agreement by mutual consent” (Weber 212–213) instead of the warmth of community.

While Stróbl’s description and analysis of Elizabeth I’s Coronation Entry facilitated the understanding of my small-town experiences as a stage for the production of false consciousness and its political significance, Jasamin Kashanipour’s text, “Narratives of Urban Life: An Anthropological Study of Artification as a Form of Critique,” inspired me to analyse my culture shock in more detail. Referring to Richard Sennett, she draws a picture of the big city as an organon of diversity: there people “pray in churches, mosques, synagogues or temples, they stand or kneel with folded or crossed hands, sit or lie with arms raised to heaven, whisper and bend back and forth with heads covered ... The polyphony of numerous languages ... fills the streets, alleys, restaurants, houses, stations, and trams” (Kashanipour 168). The city is an intercultural mixing machine. I had reckoned with that in my head, but I had never taken part in such a machine. All of a sudden, I had to inscribe myself in this infinitely diverse life. And I began to suspect that it was actually this diversity of people who breathe life into the city of Vienna and relate in some way to its architecture, its streets, monuments, parks, shops, and sports fields that made Vienna more attractive to me than all the old palaces and monuments. I began realising that this diversity was the real work of art. But Kashanipour also opened my eyes to a scene whose existence I had hardly noticed before since it is more or less invisible to the average citizen. This submersed scene is committed to art,

in some way similar to Camus in *L'Homme révolté* (1951), as a revolt against the absurd life in neoliberal capitalism. With the help of two case stories, theoretically based on Adorno and Rancière, she shows how art-related engagement turns into resistance against a society that appears to be completely free, but is in fact ingeniously monitored and disciplined.

These two texts by Stróbl and Kashanipour were my “open sesame” for the whole book. They really made me curious about the other articles. And there was still a lot to discover. The novelist Sarah Butler’s subtly crafted text at the end of the book proved very helpful for my understanding of the city as language in the reversal of Wittgenstein’s famous dictum of language as a city, quoted at the beginning of this article. At the same time, her text is an example of the role that literature can perform in composing a theoretical text. Her article might just as well have been at the beginning of the book because on the one hand, she discusses quite fundamental issues such as homes as shared spaces and power inequalities, and on the other hand, she sensitises the reader to a kind of writing that sounds like a program for narrative anthropology of the type Clifford Geertz describes in his book, *Works and Lives* (1988), on the anthropologist as novelist. She suggests not only considering physical actions for the creation of space: “we might also consider language and narrative—how we create homes ... Through the everyday conversations we have, with shopkeepers, neighbours, fellow dog-walkers or pram-pushers” (Butler 249). She refers to John Berger, who considers the creation of a mobile and symbolic home through language and culture. This recalls Michel de Certeau: “The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered” (de Certeau 97). Sarah Butler’s text impresses because she relates critical reflection and literary writing so that they illuminate each other. She is a literary writer, but her way of combining knowledgeable theorising with literary writing in such a way that a textual fabric emerges from it seems to me particularly suited to preserving the particular rather than making it disappear into the general: something Theodor W. Adorno had pleaded for all his life.¹

In the following, the individual contributions are discussed in the order chosen by the editor. The first section, “Public Art Considerations,” begins with two texts on art forms that transcend the framework of the traditional understanding of art and intervene directly in the social life of a city. This is especially true of the Heidelberg Project, to which Holly Lynn Baumgartner devotes an essay that

1 Cf. Adorno, Theodor W. *Einführung in die Dialektik*. 1958. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2022.

is well worth reading. This project is a work in progress, in which a completely marginalised and run-down living environment in Heidelberg Street, Detroit, has been shaped by a resident artist, Tyree Guyton, over decades of hotly contested work into a much-regarded place and is still being further developed. It has become an internationally known and respected example of participatory street art and community art.

The second text, in which the author Gizela Horváth reports on street art, uses case histories to show how art cannot merely be marvelled at from pictures on the white walls of a museum, which she understands as the “banishment” of art: “art thus isolated is the privilege of the few, it has lost its connection to people and to life itself—which, after all, happens outside the museum walls” (42). With the example of Banksy’s art as well as two case histories, one from the Romanian city of Sibiu, European Capital of Culture 2007, a second from Oradea, a quiet and picturesque city near the border with Hungary, Horváth clearly shows when and why some works of street art can become an integral part of the everyday life of an urban population so that it is in the interaction between street art and the inhabitants that the actual work of art emerges. For her, the famous Banksy is a kind of role model for the way street artwork. It is the product of an unauthorised artistic action that risks being stopped by the police. Therefore, it has to be done quickly. That is why Banksy invented the technique of working with stencils. His aim is to be noticed “in a world which is still, or even more than ever, a ‘society of the spectacle,’ (Debord 2010) where the spectacle functions according to the rules of economy” (Horváth 44).

In her theoretically well-founded text, Adrienne Gálosi shows that public interest, which is necessary for art in public space, is increasingly manipulated by authorities and powerful organisations. According to Gálosi, this leads to a normalisation of art. Her de Certeau-based critique of flagship architectural projects, which are often only “part of the array of lifestyle marketing,” is particularly impressive. She criticises this aptly. In this way, she helps me to better understand my irritation and unease in the face of the colossal buildings by the architect Santiago Calatrava in Valencia, for example, in which one gets the impression as a human being that one is actually superfluous. This applies, as I have experienced myself, not only to the Ciudad de las Artes y de las Ciencias, but to similarly self-important buildings in many cities around the world. Such architecture does not want you to interact with it as a subject, because it is self-sufficient. With such monumental architecture, a city presents itself as a location competing for tourists in the age of globalisation:

“By erecting new museum buildings, a city can become part of the global art circuit” (Gálosi 65). I suggest calling such artificiality as opposed to art. To put it simply, it excludes while art includes.

The second section of the book, “War, Travel and Resistance,” is devoted to texts that show the city as the site of an art that critically comments on social change. This is further accentuated in the commentaries of writers who comment on war-related decay and destruction. Ágnes Zsófia Kovács writes about travel literature: “Observing Ruskin’s Venice: Edith Wharton’s Journeys into Art History in Italian Backgrounds (1905) and Italian Villas.” She shows in her text how American author Wharton characterised Italian villa art at the beginning of the twentieth century. Wharton referred in her first book to John Ruskin, the influential English universal artist and art critic who was close to the Pre-Raphaelites. In terms of content and form, she was influenced by his writing on art, especially his precise visual observation and his great respect for buildings of the Gothic and the early Renaissance. Later, however, Wharton distanced himself from Ruskin’s views, especially his lack of appreciation of the Italian Baroque. At the same time, however, he remains her model for precise visual observation.

In her contribution to *Art in Urban Space*, Teodóra Dömötör looks beneath the surface of a short story by Ernest Hemingway, which he called “A Very Short Story.” She shows how gender issues had a great influence on the perception of the city by US American authors in the 1920s, and how Hemingway’s childhood experiences in particular are reflected in this text. This “very short” short story is a well-chosen example of how the deep structure of the text reveals Hemingway’s rejection of the big city, where emancipated women dominate men. Below the story’s surface one finds the resonating fear of Moloch city, of the city castrating men.

Finally, Michael Collins addresses two types of cities in his essay on cities in the Second World War: the city at peace and the anti-city, the city at war, which is eaten away by bloodthirsty propaganda and the consequences of war. He refers to texts by Walter Benjamin, Albert Einstein, Bernardine Evaristo, V. S. Naipaul, Komunyakaas, and others that reflect on the psychological, political, military, and economic consequences of the fall and rise of such anti-cities.

Jasamin Kashanipour’s “Anthropological Study of Artification as a Form of Critique” is an anthropologist’s view of art in urban space. Her ethnographic approach deals with the perspective of the people who are directly involved in the process of making art.

The book's third section, devoted to London, is all about the capital of the United Kingdom, formerly the capital of a vast world empire. It begins with Erzsébet Stróbl's deconstruction of a pompous ceremony at the beginning of modern times, the splendid show on the occasion of the coronation of Elizabeth I. In this section, Dóra Janczer Csikós writes about "The Bad Taste of Town." The subject of her interest is William Hogarth's print, "The Bad Taste of the Town" (1723/1724), a biting satire in the form of a picture about the cultural topography of London, and the "bad taste" of its inhabitants, which became visible in "the changing social activities and cultural practices of the early eighteenth century" (Janczer Csikós 214).

About a century later, as we learn in Éva Péteri's article, "More than a Cityscape: Ford Madox Brown's *Work*," Ford Madox Brown took up Hogarth's legacy as a critic of the society of his age, the Victorian era. Again, as with Hogarth, it is the city that he critically examines in his artworks. His paintings celebrate the industriousness and vigour of the canal workers, who are representative of the willingness of wage earners to perform demands by the just emerging capitalism of the industrial age. The members of the upper class, on the other hand, are presented as idlers whose greatest vice is social ignorance. Madox Brown draws a particularly interesting comparison between the class antagonisms of humans on the one hand and dogs on the other, who, according to Madox Brown, know no class consciousness and no exclusions.

The volume concludes with Sarah Butler's text, "The City as Home," an artful interweaving of personal observation, theoretical analysis, and literary writing. Particularly noteworthy is her reference to daily rituals with which people inscribe themselves in the urban fabric. They do this not only with physical activity but also through their everyday conversation. "Home can also be found in language and culture" (249), Butler notes.

This book is well-suited for readers who want to understand art in urban space not only from the perspective of a single discipline but also multi-dimensionally. Above all, it offers more than an introduction: it gives a deeper insight into urban research from the perspective of researchers who define art in the broader sense of the word. Anyone who wants to sharpen their view of their own city will definitely expand and deepen their perceptual grids by reading these texts written by experts in different cultural and social sciences. The book is a kaleidoscope of well-written and significant articles that enrich the current discourse on art in urban space.

A TALE OF MORE THAN TWO CITIES

A short critical epilogue: It might have done the book well, if more texts from the perspective of city dwellers had shown the reader how people, particularly inhabitants of the places described in the book, experience in their everyday life whatever the theoretical experts perceive from the outside. I also miss looking beyond the borders of the Western Hemisphere to get a perspective on cities in other regions of the world. For me, these were above all Iranian cities like Yazd or Kashan, where the artful connection of city, space, and everyday life is a cultural matter of course. On the other hand, by reading these texts, I have learned to discover new dimensions of living with art in space, not only in the small town of my own childhood and youth but in all the cities where I have lived for a longer period. For this, I am particularly grateful to the book.

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