

The porous city as a model for urban renewal

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In 1924 Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis described the environs and architecture of Naples as “porous”, explaining that its built environment resist any fixed or designated functionality. Their description reminds one of the Vitruvian directions for a stage design of the city in both the “comic” and the “tragic” modes, as depicted by Luciano Laurana. Benjamin and Lacis also applied the metaphor of porousness to the Zulu kraal. Porousness is furthermore exemplified by the Oriental bazaar. On the basis of these examples it is proposed that, on a modest scale, this concept could become a model for urban renewal in post-apartheid South Africa.

Key words: Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, Naples, porous city, comic mode, tragic mode, African kraal, Oriental bazaar, post-apartheid city

Die poreuse stad as ’n model vir stedelike vernuwning

Walter Benjamin en Asja Lacis het in 1924 die omgewing en argitektuur van Napels as “poreus” beskryf, waarmee hulle bedoel het dat die beboude omgewing weerstand bied teen enige vaste of toegewysde funksionaliteit. Hulle beskrywing roep die Vitruviaanse voorskrif vir ’n toneelontwerp van ’n stad in sowel die “komiese” as die “tragiese” modus in gedagte, soos deur Luciano Laurana afgebeeld. Benjamin en Lacis het ook die metafoor van poreusheid op die Zoeloekraal toegepas. Poreusheid is ook die uitmuntende kenmerk van die Oosterse basaar. Op grond van hierdie voorbeelde word voorgestel dat hierdie konsep op ’n beskeie skaal ’n model vir stedelike vernuwning in post-apartheid Suid-Afrika kan word.

Sleutelwoorde: Walter Benjamin en Asja Lacis, Napels, poreuse stad, komiese modus, tragiese modus, Afrikakraal, Oosterse basaar, post-apartheid stad

Keeping in mind Walter Benjamin’s¹ statement that “art [and one may add architecture] is not the forum of Utopia”,² it is not the purpose of this paper to present a model for the rehabilitation of cities according to any utopian model. That would merely be an intellectual exercise. Designers and clients of utopian urban models inevitably fall into the trap of building inherently obsolete structures, since resistance to change is a prime utopian characteristic.³ History teaches us that totalitarian regimes idealise architecture for a fixed ideological purpose. Like monuments that express the megalomaniac ideals of regimes that wish to leave an imprint of their supposed grandeur are doomed nevertheless to become defunct, utopian architecture eventually becomes void of meaning when a society changes. Consequently, the urban renewal that I propose is non-ideological and modest in scope, modeled on Benjamin’s description of Naples as a porous city which has the unique characteristic that its architectural spaces resist fixed or designated purposes or functionality.

In the essay *Neapel* [Naples] (written in 1924) Benjamin and his co-author, Asja Lacis,⁴ first describe the natural environs of Naples:

Fantastic reports by travelers have touched up the city. In reality it is gray: a gray-red or ocher, a gray-white. And entirely gray against the sky and sea. It is this, not least that disheartens the tourist. For anyone who is blind to forms sees little here. The city is craggy. Seen from a height not reached by the cries from below, from the Castell San Martino, it lies deserted in the dusk, grown into the rock. Only a strip of shore runs level; behind the buildings rise in tiers. Tenement blocks of six or seven stories, with staircases climbing their foundations, appear against the villas as skyscrapers. At the base of the cliff itself, where it touches the shore, caves have been hewn. As in the hermit pictures of the *Trecento*, a door is seen here and there in the rock. If it is open one can see into large cellars, which are at the same time sleeping

places and storehouses. Farther on steps lead down to the sea, to fishermen's taverns installed in natural grottoes. Dim light and thin music come up from them in the evening.

As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its "thus and not otherwise". This is how architecture, the most binding of all communal rhythm, come into being here: civilized, private, and ordered only in the great hotel and warehouse buildings on the quays; anarchical, embroiled, villagelike in the center, into which large networks of streets were hacked only forty years ago. And only in these streets is the house, in the Nordic sense, the cell of the city's architecture. In contrast, within the tenement blocks, it seems held together at the corners, as if by iron clamps, by the murals of the Madonna.⁵

Benjamin and Lacis then describe the city of Naples in both spatial and temporal terms. They assert that the city is in a continual process of discontinuous transformation: "Porosity is the inexhaustible law of life in this city, reappearing everywhere". He explains further: "The stamp of the definitive is avoided", giving rise to "the passion for improvisation". In Naples, porosity and transience manifest: "Balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stage and boxes." The city is not homogenous but porous in its mingling of private and public space: the home spills into the street. Similarly, it has no temporal fixity. Nothing ever seems fixed so that you can't tell if the architecture is in the process of being built or in decay and ruination because "the stamp of the definitive is avoided".⁶

Without intending it, Benjamin and Lacis' description of Naples seems to conform to a city scene in the "comic mode" for a stage setting, as described by Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (called Vitruvius, active 46-30 BCE), a Roman architect and theorist, and elaborated by the architectural theorist Sebastiano Serlio (1475-1554).¹ The panel entitled *Comic Scene* (figure 1), ascribed to Luciano Laurana (1420-1497),² a Dalmatian architect working in Urbino, is also assumed to be a visual rendering of Vitruvius' description of the "comic mode":



Figure 1
Luciano Laurana, *Comic Scene*.
(Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino).

In the comic scene the settings ... want to be those of private persons such as citizens, lawyers, tradesmen, parasites and other similar people. In the first place the house of the procuress must not be omitted, also the scene must not be without a tavern, and a church (*tempio*) is highly necessary. [There should be] a pierced portico: behind which you may see another house like the first one, the arches of which are of Gothic design. Balconies, some call them pergolas, others balustrades (*ringhiere*), contribute powerfully to the facades because of their foreshortening; likewise some cornices, the details of which jut out from the corner ... are very effectful. Likewise houses with strong outward projections [overhangs?] look well, such

as the Tavern of the Moon... . Especially one must choose the smaller houses and place them in front so that one sees other buildings above them... .⁹

While celebrating the porosity of Naples, [Benjamin] saw a less empathetic side to the city's open-endedness. The opportunities for improvisation and unexpected movement around the city also provided the conditions for the organised crime of the Mafia. Benjamin saw three intersecting networks of power in Naples: the church, the *Camorra* [the criminal world] and the fascist state — the borders all of which were “porous”,¹⁰ that is, open to mutual influence.

These networks of ideology and power turned the city into a “tragic mode”, as described by Vitruvius and depicted by Luciano Laurana in an ideal Renaissance city setting (figure 2):

[The tragic scene] is to represent tragedies. Its settings want to be for great personalities since accidents of love, and unexpected events, and violent and cruel deaths have always taken place in the houses of great lords, of dukes and noble princes or even kings. Therefore, there must be in these stage sets no building which has nothing noble.¹¹



Figure 2
Luciano Laurana, *Tragic Scene*
(Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore).

The above scene reveals one meaningful omission when compared with the previous, that is the central building – the church which implies moral values – has disappeared from the centre and the buildings reveal less porosity, that is accessibility, by being somewhat closed off at street level.

In Naples there seems to have been a remarkable accord between the comic and the tragic modes. There was also a remarkable accord between its natural setting and architecture, an almost mimetic analogy that probably inspired Benjamin to develop the concept of “porosity” in the intersecting social networks of the city to which its built environment is constantly adapted. Even though not described as such by Benjamin and Lacis, a definite sense of place could be discerned in Naples, an insight that predates Christian Norberg-Schulz's description of how architecture “reveals” the surrounding landscape in the built environment of cities.¹² From theories of sense of place one may deduce that it is the tension between the natural environment and human culture that imprints its form on architecture. Regarding the mirror-imaging of culture and the physical environment Boris Uspenskii, Juri Lotman *et al.* have alerted us to the fact that

The mechanism of culture is a system which transforms the outer sphere into the inner one: disorganization into organization... . By virtue of the fact that culture lives not only by the opposition of the outer and inner spheres but also by moving from one sphere to the other, it does not only struggle against outer “chaos” but has need of it as well; it does not only destroy it but it continually creates it.¹³

In all human affairs there is an inevitable dialectic between chaos and order, which renders Uspenskii and Lotman's insight into culture apt in the case of adaptable urban development.

Porous urban structures are those that do not resist change or the interaction of functions. Such structures are able to accommodate the complexity of modern life and its rapidly changing

patterns of behaviour than built environments characterised by inflexible infrastructures. In the case of societies in which activities are rigidly delimited, change — if any — occurs at a much slower pace.¹⁴ It thus seems logical to assume that unchanging order in modern societies will increase monotony, which is indeed the burden of many metropolitan environments. Therefore, it is postulated that urban environments may escape the evil of monotony — both in a physical and psychological sense — if they are designed to induce free social interaction. One may, therefore concur with William Michelson's statement: "If we ask specifically what it is that occurs in designed environments, the most immediate answer is behavior. Hence a first question to ask of any potential or recently completed environment is how it provides the opportunity for specific sets of human behavior."¹⁵

It is indeed true that an environment can not provide infinite opportunities for various sets of human behaviour. This is best illustrated by means of a comparison with language: In any language there exist words with multiple meanings, but not any word with an infinite number of meanings. That a word should have many meanings does not prevent its having a single one at a time when actually used. One has only to be sure to use it in an unequivocal way. Similarly an environment may be multifunctional in a limited way, inviting different sets of behavior in various circumstances. However, in multicultural societies, where norms regarding how people deal with one another vary, "specific sets of human behavior"— quoting Michelson above — may not be easy to achieve in designed environments. Interpersonal, spatial norms in settings such as schools, libraries, hospitals, shopping malls, etc. have many implications, depending on whether people identify with the symbolic properties placed within them as preconditions of their behaviour.

It is suggested that urban public spaces should be porous, not utopian in the sense of representing a specific ideology by means of the incorporation of the symbolic properties of that ideology. Porous spaces furthermore implies that they could be invaded by people for constantly changing purposes. The city may, as Lyn Lofland so succinctly stated, "also be, for those with knowledge and skills to make it so, a setting for adventure; a place to confront new and diverse people and situations; to try out new and diverse identities."¹⁶

Not only the city of Naples is an example of porosity, but also the Asiatic bazaar. A bazaar is a marketing system operating within a permanent market centre, characterised by the "diversification and multiplication of roles on all levels (merchants, traders, lenders, brokers etc.)."¹⁷ Since it is situated in a designed environment, it resembles a porous city, containing spaces with functional flexibility, facilitating a variety of behaviour related to commercial and social activities. A most appreciated characteristic of the bazaar, such as the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, which, until recently, contained the world's largest covered shopping area. It comprises labyrinthine vaulted passages which intersect and seem to obscure openings to the outside, but affords the visitor an experience of discovery of varied spaces as well as an aesthetic experience in the pleasant sensing of the displayed artefacts: of their textures, forms and colours. The open-endedness of the bazaar affords shoppers with a large degree of variation in the experience of spaces and an opportunity for the exploration of the variety of exhibited wares, which is preferable to a monotonous arrangement of enclosed shops that restricts viewing and participation in the creation of the hustle and bustle of a market-place.

Looking at the traditional way of life of Africans, it is clear why Benjamin also applied his notion of porosity to the African kraal: "What distinguishes Naples from other large cities is something it has in common with the African kraal; each private attitude or act is permeated by streams of communal life."¹⁸ This statement requires that the layout of the traditional kraal (also referred to as a village) be investigated. Typical examples in Southern Africa are those of the Sotho and the Zulu.

I. Schapera, an anthropologist, describes the Sotho village as follows:

In all three Sotho sub-groups, we find true village life... . In Basutoland, these villages (*metse*, sing. *motse*) are small, rarely having more than 250 inhabitants and mostly not more than a score. The inhabitants of a *motse* are mostly relatives... . Each close group of relatives builds its huts around the *lesaka*, or cattle kraal, so that in a large village the individual groups can be distinguished by the little paths separating the different hamlets from one another, while the character of the whole as a unity is revealed in the common *khotla* ... which is, as a rule, to one side of the village and usually has a tree for shade. This *khotla* is the common gathering place of the men, and the centre of the village administration and control.¹⁹

The description of the Zulu village is by Eileen Jensen Krige:

The Zulu village, like Zulu architecture ... is more or less circular in form. It is built on ground sloping towards the main entrance, which usually faces the east, so that the chief hut, besides being at the top end, is also on the highest ground, overlooking the rest of the kraal. In the very centre is the cattle kraal. Here are kept the treasured cattle of the village, and here the grain is stored in underground pits. The cattle kraal is the Zulu temple, where the spirits of the ancestors are thought to linger, the place where sacrifices take place... . The fence of the cattle kraal ... is made of closely packed stakes or wattled branches... . Besides the main entrance ... there are two smaller entrances to the cattle kraal... .

The huts of the village are all built between the fence of the cattle kraal and the outer fence... . Round the [main] hut are the huts affiliated to the Great Wife... . The sons staying on in the kraal have their huts near the gate ... and often there is a special hut for the adult girls and another for the boys. In aristocratic kraals it was customary for the head of the kraal to have a private hut. ... In royal kraals there was ... a night-watchman, whose hut was ... beside the gate, and whose duty it was to guard the kraal against intruders generally bent on immoral purposes. The main entrance of the Zulu village is exactly opposite the entrance of the cattle kraal. It is the only entrance for strangers and retainers and is closed by night... .²⁰

The conclusion may be drawn that the African kraal has a practical and symbolic²¹ layout; it is neither enclosed totally like a medieval city or totally open-ended like modern Western metropolis, for example the Kwandebele kraal, which should more appropriately be called a homestead, in which there are enclosures within an enclosure that nevertheless relate to the totality as an interconnected system (figure 3).

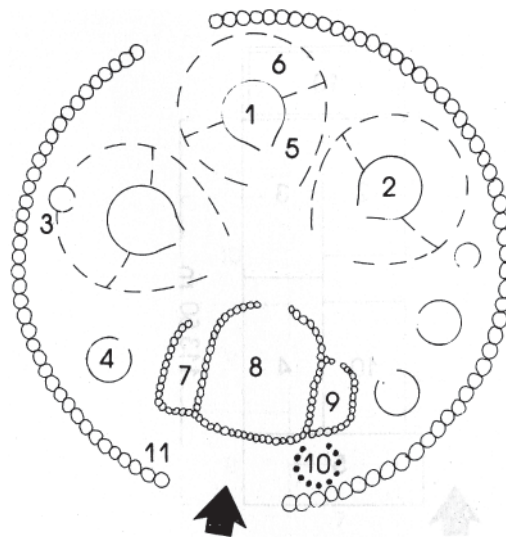


Figure 3

Diagrammatic layout of an *imizi* (a Kwandebele homestead).

The numbers represent the main spaces: 1 Main house for the senior ranked; 2 The third house; 3 The second house for the junior ranked; 4 Boy's house; 5 Front courtyard; 6 Rear courtyard; 7 Men's court; 8 Kraal for cattle; 9 Goats; 10 Calves; 11 Main entrance
(Courtesy of C.J. van Vuuren 1985: 69).

In South Africa some interesting questions may be raised about the relation between historical (diachronic) and structural (synchronic) accounts of social life. By this I mean that the traditional tribal life of the rural black population has irredeemably broken up and urbanisation

has become an irrevocable process in the whole of Africa where, for decades, the rate of this process has been the highest in the world. In South Africa this implies that not only great numbers of people swarm to metropolitan areas, but that rural people are becoming urbanised in a psychological sense, adapting to existing cities planned by whites on the basis of Western models. In reality cities in South Africa developed capitalist structures, especially in terms of land ownership and zoning laws, requiring strict differentiation between different sectors such as the central business district, industrial areas and other urban activities related to economic production and employment. Most notably, a strict distinction was enforced between places of work and residential areas. In this the rules of rational capitalist planning and the theories and techniques of planning as applied in the United States of America, has been emulated, even though ironically, according to Anthony Catanese it “has the worst record of success”.²² In South Africa however, a unique ingredient was added to its techniques and theories of planning, with even worse success than in the USA. With the exception that the residential areas for whites and non-whites (of all races) were strictly segregated, South African cities reflected elements of colonial and third world planning, but also gave rise to a unique kind of city that entrenched the continuation of the segregated city (that existed until 1948) and the apartheid city (after 1948), until the segregated part ultimately became a separate city, for example Soweto, outside Johannesburg.²³ This development proves the old adage that “the planner proposes, the politician disposes”.

For decades equity and social justice has demanded that blacks establish themselves in South African cities as responsible urban men and women. However, in the process of transformation for black South Africans the lesson from Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is confirmed, that being-in-the-world “is concerned with the character and conditions of knowledge and experience. Integral to the evocation of this experience are negative experiences: stress, contradiction, struggle, despair, breakdown, and so on. This negativity mediates the transition to new shapes of knowing.”²⁴ A transformation of the habitual life-world for another can never be without physical and mental problems since

each type of culture has its corresponding type of “chaos”, which is by no means primary, uniform and always equal to itself, but which represents just as active a creation by man as does the sphere of cultural organization. Each historically given type of culture has its own type of nonculture peculiar to it alone.²⁵

In modern times all cities contain pluralistic or multicultural societies of competing and opposed interests. With all the odds seemingly against a South African multicultural city based on previous racial divisions with its various modes of order and chaos, how could it facilitate the forming of an identity and made accessible to people who represent diverse interests and/or cultural groups? One way that has been experimented with is to attach decoration in the traditional style of ethnic groups onto buildings otherwise constructed in the Western manner, notably the Constitutional Law Court Building in Johannesburg. Even Kenzo Tange warned a long time ago that “It is an unforgivable error to attempt to justify such practices [fake decoration] in the name of the philosophy of coexistence.”²⁶ The deeper need is the recognition of the plurality of values in a society in flux.

It is a truism to state that architecture needs to be experienced and modern architects have been relatively unsuccessful in playing the role, as Steen Eiler Rasmussen would have him do, to be “a sort of architectural producer, [to be] the man who plans the setting for our lives”.²⁷ One new shape of experience of the dialectic of order and chaos could be modeled on the porous city. To establish a methodology it is suggested that an unusual hierarchy be determined in the city in need of renewal: that of change without structural damage. To be eliminated immediately are structures that will forever resist change, as stated in the beginning of this essay: architecture and monuments dedicated to some utopian ideology. Then places with fixed functions with a

varying degrees of flexibility or porosity. And so on until one arrives at open spaces void of symbolic furnishings which may be totally porous, but not of any social value.

Architecture should not be defined as a final, fixed product. Let us attempt a more inclusive definition in which architecture becomes part of the planning processes that produce shelter for people and control the quality of adaptive, continuous environments. In short, architecture constructs realities for diverse people. Therefore research is necessary to understand “labour” and “work” as practices that are culturally embedded in specific social contexts, from the particular points of view of the people acting in these contexts and how they collaborate to construct their realities socially. Notable in this regard is Max Weber’s presentation of modern society as “a process waiting for content to come from the choice of its citizens”.²⁸

Instead of considering cultural diversity the plurality of economic and other interest groups, let us be pragmatic about why citizens in third world countries now choose to live in cities and consider the basics of human life on which its survival depends. Seen in this light, cities are places where people come to work for the sake of the ever-elusive good life. In the resulting chaotic situation architects may find themselves at a loss to create workplaces for people who come to make a living if the government has no extensive master plan for the growth of cities, but merely hope that the creation of greater density will somehow solve the problem.

In no city, and that includes Naples, space and time are fixed. Howard Caygill comments that Benjamin’s essay “forces philosophy to recognise that the experience of the city perpetually challenges and undermines the categories that are applied to it — even those of porosity and transitivity.”²⁹ However the truism should be kept in mind that the visible architecture in cities of tomorrow will be that of the past, a statement that was phrased succinctly by Walter Benjamin: “Past things have futurity.”³⁰ He also observed this in the urban setting of Naples where porosity also refers to “a permeation of one thing by another, a merger of, for example, old and new...”.³ Applied to renewal in architecture the great Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti’s attitude to the medieval city, be it Florence, Rimini or Mantua, springs to mind, “in which he sought to create an ideal not through demolition but rather through reordering existing buildings and urban spaces”.⁴ Therefore it may be postulated that the redevelopment of existing buildings and urban spaces could well be a meaningful practice in post-colonial times.

Since urban renewal is an incessant world-wide process, it should be taken as a challenge to determine how the present process of decline and renewal can be turned into a process of renewal. South Africa’s cities may benefit by becoming more porous, that is more like the idea expressed in Vitruvius’ comic mode instead of the present trend of becoming more and more claustrophobic and closed up in a kind of tragic mode. As a model for urban renewal in South Africa architects may well reconsider the ancient urban ideal of porousness, requiring that we redefine it in a critical way, since Benjamin reminded us that Naples could facilitate both socially valuable events and the *Camorra*. Accommodating porousness demands a rearrangement of the given, that is of the existing urban fabric; as an innovative ideal it requires the manipulation of existing, seemingly outdated built environments. More aptly, this manipulative intervention implies an interweaving of the past and the future. This can be done by identifying historical places of excellence that still draw people together and to develop these with modern amenities. Such renewal processes imply design procedures of selective demolition, selective alteration and selective enhancement of historic urban environments to recreate places with multivalent functions but a sustainable sense of place.

Bertolt Brecht,³³ a friend of Benjamin’s, famously said that it may be a mistake to mix different wines, but old and new wisdom mix admirably. Urban designers and architects may also hope that their renovations to existing cities and buildings may result in an admirable mix of the old and the new.⁵

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin (1892 Berlin, Germany - 1940 Port Bou, Catalonia) was a German-Jewish Marxist cultural and literary critic, essayist, translator and philosopher who also wrote extensively about art and architecture.
2. Quoted from Detlef Mertins (1998: 125).
3. I borrow this idea from Ruth Eaton (2000: 129).
4. Asja Lacis was a Latvian communist who had a love affair with Walter Benjamin.
5. Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis (1924/1978: 165-66).
6. Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis (1924/1978: 165-66).
7. See folio 25 (recto and verso) in Santaniello (1980).
8. See Kemp (1991: 249-51).
9. Quoted from Richard Krautheimer (1948: 330).
10. See Howard Caygill (1998: 123-24).
11. Quoted from Richard Krautheimer (1948: 330).
12. See Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*.
13. Boris Uspenskii, Juri Lotman, *et al.* (1973: 2).
14. Marcel Hénaff (in Baker 1998: 9) states: "Primitive societies lend themselves particularly well to [a structuralist] approach simply because their forms of organization are precisely, and most importantly, not only stable but tend constitutively toward stability." He continues: "Moreover, in these societies, activities are limits and integrated. In the first instance there is resistance to change; in the second there is limitation of complexity."
15. William Michelson (1975: 6).
16. Lyn H. Lofland (1973: 158).
17. Charles T. Thompson and Marilyn J. Huies (1968: 225).
18. Howard Caygill (1998: 124).
19. I. Schapera (1957: 88).
20. Eileen Jensen Krige (1950: 42-3).
21. The symbolism is explained in some detail by Adam Kuper (1980: 5-23).
22. Anthony Catanese (1974: 17).
23. See R.J. Davies (1982: 59-72).
24. Simon Lumsden (2001: 126).
25. Boris Uspenskii, Juri Lotman *et al.* (1973: 2).
26. Kenzo Tange (1978: 4).
27. Steen Eiler Rasmussen (1959/1968: 10).
28. Max Weber, quoted from David Kolb (1986: 237).
29. Howard Caygill (1998: 124).
30. Walter Benjamin (1914/1977).
31. Gilloch 1988: 25.
32. Hart 1994: 13.
33. Bertolt Brecht (born Eugen Berthold Friedrich Brecht, 1898-1956), a German poet, playwright and theatre director, was a life-long committed Marxist.]
34. A referee of this article commented:

Report: The porous city as a model for urban renewal by Estelle Alma Maré

This paper takes its bearings in Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis trip to Naples after their initial meeting in Capri in 1924. Lacis was a Bolshevik theatre director and actress and became Benjamin's prime liaison with the then seven-year old revolution. Their working collaboration was fraught, as was Benjamin's rocky attraction to the actress and sometime journalist.

The premiss of their article is the search for a materialist model of urban life, avoiding the pitfalls of utopian planning (partly exemplified in Melnikov and Tatlin) and the looming return of Bourgeois Victorian gravitas that marked the Stalin era.

Benjamin's search for materialist models in which to expand upon the different potentials of the Bolshevik revolution included his more famous essays on production in the epic theater of Brecht.

Held in common in Benjamin's writing of the 20s is the view that a new communist society, then under construction (and tragically unaware of the travails it would face in the 30's) had to equally avoid revolutionary idealism and mere bourgeois realism. The theatre of Brecht was not a new type of theatre but was a 'correction' of the theatre of Ibsen or Strindberg by clearly revealing the actions of production, the calculated backstage artifice, involved in its making.

Similarly porosity acts as a notion not easily assimilable to the bourgeois fetish of style (cf the Vienna Ringstrasse pilloried by Loos) or to the exemplifying , idealist and thematic use of production in constructivist and suprematist architecture.

It is interesting to compare Benjamin and Lacis description which opens Mare's discussion with the similar descriptions by Adrian Stokes of the material imagination of the renaissance city (cf Stokes --the Quattro Cento, and the Stones of Rimini) begun roughly contemporarily with Benjamin and Lacis piece .

Both writers share a more immediate debt to Pater's limpid and ambiguous descriptions but more fundamentally to Ruskin, who devised the rhetorical gambit of balancing natural descriptions with fundamental qualities of architecture (cf The Stones of Venice) Porosity is one of the transfers between natural properties and tectonic qualities and it remains on the border of natural and architectural description throughout Benjamin and Lacis's use of it.

Benjamin and Lacis extend this ambiguity in the well known topos contrasting the stage with actual life. Mare elaborates this through Pollio and Serlio's evocation of city in the life as a *mise en scene* , literally into a tableau by Laurana. The traditional contrast between tragedy and comedy in theatre soon qualifies the theatrical and pictorial similes and brings home the important fact that Benjamin and Lacis do regard Naples as a set for an imagined post-revolutionary kind of conviviality. Their set is however Brechtian in its flexibility, sustained ambiguity and ease of modification .- reinforcing the sense that Benjamin's writings of the twenties ought to be read as a whole- exploring a 'constellation' or ensemble of issues relating to socialist public life across a wide range of pretexts

It is striking that Benjamin invokes the organization of tribal life as part of his *vervremdung* of Naples from typical descriptions of urban life in Europe. Naples is a notoriously poor city in Italy, bypassed by urbanization in favour of the opportunities of the north and remained under feudal organization the longest. Nevertheless this very lack of capitalist modernization combined with the lack of former feudal prestige makes Naples a potent window onto a populist city- too poor for the pretence of Vienna, too new to for Florence's authority as monument .

It is interesting that Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer- another figure like Benjamin doomed by Nazism- found in American black gospel services a model of what he thought early Christianity had been and what modern Christian community ought to be. Perhaps a study is waiting to be written on the africanised image of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* in German interwar social critics.

It is striking that the common fund of Victorian architectural prose would flow from Ruskin via Pater to Proust in France and finally to Bachelard (who famously uses architecture to develop a Ruskinian imagination or poetic focused on substance and quality), to Benjamin and Lacis in Germany (who would develop a Marxist reinterpretation for the city as allegory) and to Stokes in England who would create an idiosyncratic Kleinian psychoanalytic transformation of this legacy which would prove so significant to Wollheim, its last and greatest 20 c heir .

Mare's work brings a freshness and lack of prejudice to the discussion of Benjamin, a quality sadly absent from the entangled cabalistic wars of position that mark Benjamin scholarship .

The notion of porosity, like all Benjaminian ideas, is deliberately crafted into ambiguity and does invite its contemporary exegesis through application in architecture .

Perhaps Mare could write a sequel comparing Benjaminian porosity with the urban notions the Situationists - Lefevre, Constant and Debord? In any case, the work is provocative, refreshing and fruitful with new directions for enquiry and definitely deserves a place of prominence in this publication and a wide readership.

Stylistically I have no qualms whatsoever with the piece.

Jean-Pierre de la Porte

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