

It's Not The End of the World but You Can See it From There

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Published

2012

Conference Title

Semi-Detached: Writing, Representation and Criticism in Architecture

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It's Not the End of the World but You Can See It From There

SALLY BREEN

'It's not the end of the world but you can see it from there.' My father used to say this phrase often. We'd pull up to a house that didn't quite meet his precise expectations, an aesthetic which leaned towards a kind of suburban outdoor perfection – bright green lawn edges done to within millimetres of life, garden beds rimmed with concrete delineations, everything clipped, hosed down and beaten back into control; or I'd hear that phrase as we rolled through a suburb at home or interstate, which dad would declare a mess, all the decay and abandonment evidence of a lack of control, of effort.

Not the end of the world. But you can see it from there. A declaration of disappointment; a phrase that comes to mind when I think of the relationship between architecture and literature. This might surprise – structurally, aesthetically and even philosophically, the

connections between the two vocations are tangible. Writers and architects are both inherent scholars of the city; they take the city's pulse, they are the wanderers and dreamers, whose visions manifest in works which, in some cases, can come to define that city, spatially, figuratively and imaginatively. How far for example is Dickensian London from Norman Foster's London, or Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles from Frank Gehry's, in the public imagination. All of these names conjure experiences, images, textures, vistas and public sites, whether they are real or imagined. What is curious then, is the exception to this sense of connection between the makers and the interpreters of cities flares up in the narrative content. It's a question of perspective.

Writers have often loved living in cities and been associated with them even if their locales were more often

than not in the seedier fringes, the underground dens, warehouses, jazz bars and less officious facades of the cities they inhabited. When various urban cultural movements erupted in the 20th and 21st centuries the presence of writers and cohorts of artists and musicians could not be separated from the streets they played in. Surely the desire to be in these cities was often (and perhaps still is) generated by these associations. For many people Warhol's New York, for example, acted as a powerful counter brand to an increasingly consumerist American life in the 'burbs, but then became a brand itself, counter-appropriated by advertising, design and architecture into a 'New York loft lifestyle' replete with Edie Sedgwick prints. A cycle of capital in the city, many writers and artists continue to be wary of. As William S. Burroughs once suggested: 'A paranoid is someone who knows a little of what is going on.'

And in the bohemian, teeming San Francisco? Now synonymous with the beat generation, whose unwilling poster boys were Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg – these writers came to represent a sense of freedom from and refusal of conservative life, whose one-time presence in that city now helps sell cheap beer and coasters in fake saloons. These were writers who sought to tear down the political and corporate structures that built the cities the broader culture decided they defined. When Jack Kerouac was interviewed on the *Steve Allen Show* in 1959 and was asked how he would describe 'beat', he shrugged and then replied, 'Well, sympathetic', suggesting that the American culture he was operating in largely wasn't. 'All our best men,' he said, 'are laughed at in this nightmarish land.' His wingman, Burroughs, agreed:

There is simply no room left for freedom from 'the tyranny of government' since city dwellers depend on it for food, power, water, transportation, protection and welfare. Your right to live where you want, with companions of your choosing, under laws to which you agree, died in the eighteenth century

with Captain Mission. Only a miracle or a disaster could restore it.

Across the Atlantic a similar big city mythology had manifested and played out. Woody Allen's recent film *Midnight In Paris* draws on the creative loop that happens when many of us conjure Paris in the early 20th century. Just like Allen's transported *flâneur* it is not hard to imagine Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry Miller and Ernest Hemingway drinking wine, dancing on tables and arguing in the now infamous Café de Flore. A romantic vision of Paris perhaps, one we can access only now in cinematic or literary dreams, but one that continues to roll out as a real and potent signifier in western culture (and if the popularity of the Café de Flore and the price list suggests, in tourism). You pay four times the price for a Caffé Americano just for the privilege of imaging where Hemingway might have nearly shot a guy.

The difference is a writer's *l'amour* for a city does not necessarily extend to literary depictions of it. Nietzsche once said, 'An artist has no home in Europe except for Paris', which is of course as much of a lament as it is a celebration. When writing and architecture meet on the page the mood is often uneasy because literary and philosophical writers like Burroughs, Miller and Nietzsche were often pitching against the spin – distrustful, circumspect, paranoid. Traditionally, many great cities have come under attack in literature more than they have been celebrated.

In Leo Tolstoy's St. Petersburg the tensions between the old Russia and the new are played out, critiqued, subverted – the idiocy of new statesmen pushing papers, and policy more than the plough, his real heroine not Anna Karenina who, disgraced, is unable to bear her isolation and confinement. 'What is the city', Shakespeare said, 'but the people'. Lonely and without a position in society, Anna turns inward and eventually throws herself

under a train (the train being a symbol throughout *Anna Karenina* of encroaching and relentless progress). Lenin and Kitty are Tolstoy's real heroes; the relatively innocent couple who defy urban progress and seek a more earthly, spiritual connection to each other, in the country. And while Tolstoy does not romanticise the rural – the problems of farming are present in the book also – the city, Tolstoy seems to be saying, may be a place of heady amusement, great debate, art, but more often this noise results in a confusion of intent, between all the voices and all the things – enough to confound a man from a truer sense of himself and deny a woman like Anna Karenina altogether. A place where Lenin never feels comfortable.

Classically, writers and poets reserved poetic reverie for nature, or for the symbolism of the sensual, whether human or natural, they saw in the world. They yearned for sensory experiences. Classically writers have distrusted cities and therefore urban critique is built into the writer's poetic DNA. Henri Rousseau, the French philosopher and novelist whose works were said to have inspired the French revolution, saw 'Cities as the abyss of the human species'. Lord Byron wrote that 'High mountains are a feeling, but the hum of human cities torture'. Keats, in *Sonnet 14*, says:

To one who has been long in city pent
'tis very sweet to look into the fair
And open face of heaven – to breathe a prayer
Full in the smile of the blue firmament.

And for Plato, 'Any city however small, is in fact divided into two, one the city of the poor, the other of the rich. These are at war with one another'. This sentiment is still in force in contemporary western fiction, perhaps not surprisingly, given our stretched times. In Australian and British fiction, in particular, we encounter a heady sense of suburban despair. Christos Tsiolkas's novel *The Slap*, set in Australian suburbia, reeks of mortgage stress, middle class guilt and a plain unapologetic disappointment at the

underside of the dream, the relentless pursuit of spoils and the breakdown of the flimsy veneer of families fracturing under the pressure of keeping up with the Joneses with their swimming pools, back decks, splashbacks and renovations. Dystopian visions and vacuous spectacles have driven urban representation from a literary point of view since industrialisation. The rise of speculative fiction gave voice to both our fascination with technology and our subsequent fears. Overall a critical tone dominates. We see characters in despair. Characters that, despite the fascinations they covet in and of the city (or indeed because of them), are people who are lost. The gap between how they have imagined life, or how they have been sold it and how they actually live is too far, too keen.

Who can forget Hunter S Thompson's description of Las Vegas as symbolising the point where the 1960s revolution rolled up and rolled back – the high watermark still visible in a certain light. I think here we can see the crux of the problem for writers. The city is a vehicle, a mirror, a message, a warning of other concerns, not an end in itself. Since the late 19th century literature has chronicled the mass exodus to cities, country to city migrations, the cool remove of modernist expression and the more recent dispersive effects of technological advancement and globalisation. Literature has attributed to that development, overall, a sense of alienation and anxiety. A dystopian vision attached poetically to the rise of the machine. To the lost promise of Paradise, of Arcadia, even if these utopias were only ever dreams in the first place. And of course this sense of loss is 'romantic', but more potent because of that yearning. That feeling of failing to grasp something we never really had. Again and again we read of urbanised cultures moving further and further away from the earth; literally in the development of the tall building, figuratively in the relentless desire for the American dream, ideologically via the lofty intellectual heights imposed by modernism and in the fragmentation and simulacra we see in the

media-saturated landscapes of postmodernism. All of these visions have been represented in literature perhaps to the point of cliché, but they are nonetheless powerful messages, question the ability of a city to save or protect anyone except perhaps the elite.

With more people living in cities than in the country for the first time in human history, the rapidity of this shift seems to have enhanced the poetic panic in an atmosphere of protest as writers try futilely to extract themselves from nature, the classic romantic sensibility, the call of the wild. It's not so much that the majority of 20th and 21st century writers have posited a return to a prelapsarian state; many have celebrated the joys and headiness of city life, but that they have found it hard to shake the idea of a 'wild', unregulated, uncontrolled nature altogether. And so the city and the moon, the skyscraper and the light, the drugstore and the brittle wind, the billboard and the sun hitting it at the shooting hour in Los Angeles cannot be separated. The city has not yet stood in for all forms of reverie. In beat generation narratives for example, the city was as Shakespeare suggested: only ever as wild as its people, people who were sometimes in revolt against the city state – the walls and the demarcations, which sought to contain them.

Perhaps the poet and the architect are not as enamoured as we'd like to think. They are in fact at loggerheads in a question of at cross-purposes. For just as architects are continually seeking to wrestle with ideas relating to form and function and at best (and when the client allows) beauty, liveability, sustainability, perhaps even social and democratic space, the purpose of literature, at its best, is to reveal the gaps between how we like to see ourselves and how we really are; the space between intent and outcome; and so the city becomes a potent nexus, symbolising the fallout, the failed projects of politics, policy and ideology.

Juhani Pallasmaa in 'The Eyes of the Skin' attributes this lived disappointment in architecture to the dominance of

the visual realm in today's technological and consumer culture at the expense of other sensorial experiences. The dominant eye. The world rendered flat, screen read and produced, something slick, something to be gazed at. An urban vision that looks better in the drawing, he says, than it actually works. He quotes Luis Barragan:

In our time, light has turned into a mere quantitative matter and the window has lost its significance as a mediator between two worlds, between enclosed and open, interiority and exteriority, private and public, shadow and light. Having lost its ontological meaning, the window has turned into a mere absence of a wall. Take the use of enormous plate windows; they deprive our buildings of intimacy, the effect of shadow and atmosphere. Architects all over the world have been mistaken in the proportions which they have assigned to large plate windows or spaces opening to the outside. We have lost our sense of intimate life and have become forced to live public lives essentially away from home.

This sense of exposure or lack of gradience is expressed beautifully by American novelist Bret Easton Ellis in his recent release *Imperial Bedrooms*, once again focusing on the lives of the rich and famous, the disaffected in Los Angeles. Ellis's characters are at all turns exposed – watched, followed, pursued. In the following quote the narrator, Clay, has recently moved back to LA, taking what he believes is a kind of refuge in his condo.

Minimally decorated in soft beiges and grays with hardwood floors and recessed lighting, it's only twelve hundred square feet – a master bedroom, an office, an immaculate living room opening onto a futuristic sterile kitchen – but the entire window wall that runs the length of the living room is actually a sliding glass door divided into five panels that I push open to air the condo out and where the

large white tiled balcony drops into an epic view – the view is impressive without becoming a study in isolation; it's more intimate than the one a friend had who lived on Appian Way which was so far above the city it seemed as if you were looking at a vast and abandoned world laid out in anonymous grids and quadrants, a view that confirmed you were much more alone than you actually thought you were, a view that inspired the flickering thoughts of suicide. The view from the Doheny Plaza is so tactile that you can almost touch the blues and greens of the design centre on Melrose. Because of how high I am above the city it's a good place to hide when working in LA. Tonight the sky is violet tinged and there's mist.

There are so many contradictions at play here. Initially Clay views his apartment as superior to that of his friend precisely because of the tactile proximity to the city. Ellis reminds us of the sensorial Barragan yearns for; through the plate glass, Clay gazes at the colours of other buildings, at the sky, the mist, but it is a false sense of intimacy. Clay is projecting onto the space rather than the other way around and words like 'sterile', 'futuristic' and 'suicide' ignite questions in the reader; with all this description of shiny hardwood floors and recessed lighting now so clichéd in terms of affluent domestic space is Clay reeling off a set of determinates of status, or understanding what he really needs? Reading the book is like watching a car crash and as the novel progresses Clay takes to sitting in his apartment in the dark after receiving text messages which describe what he is doing – 'Where did she go?' and 'I'm watching you'. He knows he can be seen from various vantage points, his apartment no longer the removed haven he once perceived it to be. The setting mimics the predatory emptiness of the Hollywood machine, permeating his reality to the point where there is nowhere to hide not even from himself. Like a curtain

drawing back across a movie screen the walls don't close in around him, they fall away.

Of course Ellis, in his treatment of Los Angeles, is speaking to and drawing on a long history of rendering that city as a flawed dreamscape. Los Angeles is arguably the world's most mythologised contemporary city, precisely because its new frontier construction and dispersal has allowed for such imaginative treatment. Los Angeles was conjured, idealised, and constructed before it existed. It operates quite differently from the Italian humanist ideal of a centrifugal organised system of urban formation focused on the place of worship. Perhaps the concept of Hollywood has in the last century replaced the traditional place of worship – a new shrine that is not solid but ephemeral. In *Imperial Bedrooms* and indeed in his whole oeuvre, Ellis joins hands with many American and European writers in exile who preceded him: Raymond Chandler, Nathanael West, Aldous Huxley, even Bertolt Brecht, who once famously described Los Angeles in similarly degrading terms in his poem, *Contemplating Hell*.

Contemplating Hell, as I once heard it
My brother Shelley found it to be a place
Much like the city of London. I,
Who do not live in London, but in Los Angeles,
Find, contemplating Hell, that it
Must be even more like Los Angeles

Also in Hell
I do not doubt it, there exists these opulent gardens
With flowers as large as trees, wilting, of course,
Very quickly, if they are not watered with very
expensive water. And fruit markets
With great leaps of fruit, which nonetheless

Possess neither scent nor taste. And endless trains
of autos
Lighter than their own shadows, swifter than
Foolish thoughts, shimmering vehicles, in which

Rosy people, coming from nowhere, go nowhere.
And houses, designed for happiness, standing empty,
Even when inhabited.

Even the houses in Hell are not all ugly.
But concern about being thrown into the street
Consumes the inhabitants of the villas no less
Than the inhabitants of the barracks.

This poem mourns the absence of what a poet like Brecht and 'his brother Shelley' would consider a more tactile, earthy experience. The power and tradition of the European poetic sensibility is still present here; even in a contemporary place of such sensory overload Brecht seems to want to remind us that the natural cannot be constructed, fabricated or replaced, though of course to some extent. Today we see a similar critique accelerated by Ellis, who extends the idea toward a new millennium sensibility where screens in all manner of forms (signs, billboards, intercoms, mobile phones) and flat planes (controlled surfaces, empty streets, still blue pools) permeate the landscape to the point where, for his characters, unreality and reality are no longer delineated. The people who inhabit his narratives are often disorientated, forgetful, confused and this suits his cool, detached, existential style. Ellis's actual position is much more slippery – he critiques the landscape of Los Angeles while celebrating it. He derides the excess while glorifying it. He seduces while he defiles and nothing is what it seems. In the famous closing line from *American Psycho*, 'This is not an exit', he suggests that whether we're in Los Angeles or New York we're all stuck in a kind of urban no-end game – and so the succession of urban mythologisation continues.

The Boulevard of Broken Dreams has long fuelled the mythic power of Los Angeles and allowed writers to evoke provocative images, moods and atmospheres. These positions are not so much a criticism of the city itself but of the machinations of late capitalism; the ubiquitous presence of a saturated media culture, which the city by

default, comes to symbolise. But of course Los Angeles is real. People actually live there. And in studying this literature I began to see the pattern of approach; a kind of literary erasure, which refused recognition of the real in order to mourn its absence. Los Angeles was a city it was better not to really know. 'Real people' and 'ordinary lives' weren't useful in the development of such surreal, ambitious narratives. The neon-soaked streets of Los Angeles, its glass facades, its skyscrapers required fallen angels, vampiric-style murderers, anti-heroes, surveillance and counter-surveillance, meaningless sex, rogue asteroids and Armageddon.



How then, I thought, could we write cities like Los Angeles, Vegas and perhaps even Australia's Gold Coast from a different point of view – cities that shared this postmodern urbanism without tipping into the enormous literary tide of what had come before, without siding in terms of a line of enquiry with one of two camps: theorists like Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Edward Soja, who celebrated and valued what was interpreted as garish, junk culture in Las Vegas and Los Angeles, and those like Mike Davis, who critiqued the vacuous excess and spectacle from a Marxist perspective. Each of these positions has after all, been clearly represented by their literary counterparts for many decades and in ways which have become known, owned and perhaps even old.

As a one-time resident of all three cities I felt neither position held definitive sway over the lived experience. At times the dystopian visions resonated, at others I felt the rush and thrill of the surreal dream but in the end, these cities resisted absolute definition. We had grappled with dramatic urban change and an 'either or' mentality, or a 'for and against' dialogue did little to extrapolate on the curious assemblage of sites, projections and experiences now alive and continuous in these cities. I wanted to consider how might we write them into a different imaginative future.

When potent mythologies wrap around cities like Los Angeles, Vegas and the Gold Coast the shroud of mystique can prevent more nuanced kinds of understanding about how they work and how writers might depict them. In cities seemingly made to expose the dark behind the light, the tarnish underneath the glitter, the horror of a place where the sun always shines it's hard to resist that noirish lure, to be true to the characteristic of a place but to develop a view from the inside. I wanted to find out. I wanted to write about the Gold Coast from the point of view of the inside – to try and resist the clichéd, almost automated responses to the landscape embedded in our culture – so pervasive that very few Australian writers have actually gone there. Matthew Condon in *A Night at the Pink Poodle* does well, Helen Garner in *Postcards from Surfers* less so, as her view is pinched tight – a Melbournian in exile scowling at the perceived vacancy of the city, while conversely taking respite from her old world history within it. A view not unlike Fran Lebowitz's description of Los Angeles as, 'A large city-like area surrounding the Beverly Hills Hotel'.



I thought perhaps I could do something different. The result was *Ante Up*, a novel to be released by Harper Collins in 2012. *Ante Up*, though it is certainly noir, is deliberately conscious of the influence of the gamut of noir literature, especially that written in and about Los Angeles and is an attempt to wrestle the Australian crime narrative from the historically reductionist treatment it receives in narratives like *Underbelly* which, I believe, mimic the American rather than progress the Australian strain of noir narrative strain. Based on a true story; the main character is a croupier, the heroine a scamster, who by the time she is 19 has been arrested on 48 counts of fraudulent activity. Moving against the tide of moody critique the story is set in what appears to be a California-esque sunny place for shady people but one in which the

city gets to speak back. In the novel the city acts as a kind of character watching and observing its players – the glitter so easily dismissed or reviled becomes a potent reverie.

The challenge for writers, as it is for architects, is to develop ways of seeing and interpreting living, which are appropriate to the city or locale, which respond to the city on its own terms. The boulevards might be constructed on the Gold Coast, the canals might be man-made, but the water which fills them still rolls in from the sea and you can still be taken by a shark. The connection therefore between the real and the man-made, between the constructed and the tangible is not necessarily enacted in a binary but within a complex set of relationships – of exchanges, engagements and actions between different states of being. I thought there might be another way to write crime without sacrificing a closer, more open and therefore more interesting vision of the city.



Buoyed by the notion that it might be possible to reconfigure long-held, outmoded, perhaps even snobbish ideas of what a city should be and how it should read I became fascinated with the notion and spectacle of Dubai – here was a city I thought was the epitome of relentless acceleration, the collapse of boundaries, the sheer thrill of urban vision, which had so excited me about Los Angeles and the Gold Coast. What I found though when travelling there to do a major essay for *The Griffith Review* in 2008 was that my theory evaporated in the dust and the heat as the imagined city began to bounce against the real.

I had landed and I was snared, caught in a literary and architectural conundrum, in a pre-Global Financial Crisis Dubai, which seemed to know no limits.

If Los Angeles was the mother ship and the Gold Coast the sister city of postmodern urban life, then Dubai was the death star. I realised just as Plato had suggested so long ago that what a writer cannot do is ignore the gaps, the trespasses taken in the name of progress, even

with so much titillating diversion. After spending 30 days in Dubai I saw the enormous folly in the project of trying to sublimate nature to our point of view. Dubai is unhealthy, an environmental travesty and actually murderous. The kilometres and kilometres of labour camps attesting to the slavery such unmitigated and unregulated progress requires. Men in blue overalls falling out of the tallest building in the world, the Burj Dubai, at 50 bodies a month – their hands still clutching the small packets of rice they are given to eat high in steel towers in horrific heat. An enormous global farce we were all complicit in.

In Dubai it became important, as Juhani Pallasmaa posited, to shut off my eyes, to write about what I couldn't see, what I wasn't allowed to see, what I was told was merely a mirage. One of the ultimate goals of literature is to critique the political and economic machines that disenfranchise people and I realised this position could not be erased by a detached worship of spectacle for its own sake or, at the other end of the scale, a romanticised version of urban decay.

I read Dubai on its own terms and realised that perhaps there was something in the position of all those romantic poets: Keats, Byron and later, Brecht, walking lonely and appalled by all the condoms washed up on a Californian beach, that while their sensibilities did not translate well to the 'new' cities of America, living is and always has been about the body. That even in the most unnatural of places a human being reads the world through the five senses, through the 'Eyes of the Skin' – the environment, the economics and the culture. As writers or architects we should not ignore the context in which a city is placed even if in many instances we are drawing on assumptions, the swirl of narratives spinning around places we think we know and the mythologies which come to define the people who inhabit them. All those reassuring stories we have told ourselves since we sat around the campfire. Every practice, whether it is written in the word or in stone, is an amalgam of what has gone

before. And so, in considering the relationship between writing and architecture we come full circle. How do we wrestle the spirit of both vocations into the problematic textures of human experience as it morphs and progresses? It is not as easy an endeavour as we may like to think. Hard not to rest on laurels, on the assurances, even the entertainment value of an old tale. Hard not to appropriate and paraphrase because something has worked so well before. Perhaps we have forgotten that we need only to continually reach for the essence of corporeal experience in the tastes, textures and aural messages of contemporary life, in the scent of the real, the tangible, the recesses of nature and the body, even if it is through a plate glass, against a slick facade, over a flat screen or from a safer vantage point inside the tallest building in the world.

I do not want to be able to see the end of the world from here.