**I often dream of cities …..**

**City dream #1**

I often dream of cities. Usually there are battlements and buttresses: towering slabs of red sandstone or flinty blocks of grey granite. In the air there is sometimes a forbidding-ness, a forbidden-ness; causing a hesitancy in how I might plan my approach to the place. Usually I am on horseback or on foot; sometimes in armour, sometimes in rags. I am always travelling alone but as I look across the barren space there are always black threads shuffling forward, mingling, merging in small scuffles of dust.

I urge myself forward to join one strand: We converge, funnel onto the drawbridge, hunch under the portcullis, sweep on past the faces safe in their guardhouse. We surge further, in anticipation, spreading, exuberant; on into the twisting streets, the narrow alleyways. We move as one through markets and souks; taking in every trace, every sight, every sound, every smell that the city offers.

I push my way through, jostling the ebbs and flows, until I am in the Great Square. I stand, taking it all in. At that instant I become the city and the city becomes me.

Here the human stream has thinned to small knots of people scattered across the hugeness of the Square. Families look around in wonder. Children dash from one excitement to the next. They are newcomers. I could try to tell them what will happen but they probably wouldn’t listen to me.

They will stand and stare for some time, shuffling first this way then that. Eventually they will be drawn to the long side wall of the Square: the abstract shield of metallic discs, repeating and repeating into the distance. Its significance is in its sheer size. It is a shifting motif of light and shade, a subtle switching on and off, a strength and, at the same time, an ambiguity – throwing their reflections back at them before they have time to work things out.

I was like them once. On that first visit I drifted, just as they are doing. I was drawn to the discs, just as they are. The closer I got the more the discs seemed to lose substance. I passed through the outer shell: it let me do that. I had a sense of buildings half-shadowed, half-shadowing themselves; structures lying in the shadows of each other’s histories.

I have been there. I can say what they will find. I can lay the details out before them. I can describe how, inside those walls, the city has an emptiness. There are the bleached bones of towering structures; tantalising hints of what might be.

There are pale essences, as if seen through a mist or cateracted eyes. There are designs: geometries – arcing, looping, tracing out possibilities. The lines and spaces intersect, divide, multiply – adding up to something and nothing. There is something spectral about its block upon block, line upon line, row upon row of not-quite-thereness. It is a half-formed place. It is a place of endless fragments, but nothing of substance.

The city will draw them closer. They will be bemused by the ins-and-outs of it all, by the twists-and-turns of it all. They will be drawn in by faded memories; sucked into holes in the city’s fabric as it unrolls before them. They will lose themselves there for a while. I can tell them all that but they will still need to discover it for themselves.

I, as I say, have been here before. I know what I am looking for. I scan the far horizon, at the very edge of the Great Square, and see the hint of luminosity, the mere pinprick of light. That is my beacon.

I start walking. There are a few people heading the same way. Occasionally I pass stalls of fresh fruit and bottled water. I am joined by a woman. She keeps looking across, as if certain that she has seen me somewhere before. I am just as certain that I have never met her. We walk on in silence. She holds back, a few paces behind but from time to time I slow suddenly so that she comes into view. She is tall, in a red flowing dress. Attractive but with a strangeness about her. I speed up again and she matches my stride. For a while we are side by side in our silence. Suddenly, I look across and she is gone. I check my pockets but everything is there. I walk on alone, head high, eyes on the distant lights.

I get closer as dusk comes in slants across the length of the Square. I feel more secure in the darkness. The lights stand out now. I can begin to see detail. From the distance they looked like stacked containers, or an aerial view of jammed traffic. Now, now that I can see it for what it is, it is a mass of street signs more than a mile high and several miles across. They are stacked in a vertical mound. Discards, thrown one on top of the other.

There is no visible source of power but the signs flicker endlessly, pumping out their sales messages: streetlife come-ons captured here for ever. ‘Fried Chicken Nuggets’; ‘Phones4Cash’; ‘Mr Noodle’; ‘SaunaSex’; ‘LoCostTravel’. Mostly English but many in Urdu; some in Chinese. I begin to hesitate but, in unison, the signs flash ‘Walk On’. I walk on. There is heat now and the intense light generates its own resistance. I hold my breath and push on into it.

I am in the middle of it all. There is neon brilliance all round: more tumbling than fixed; shifting, moving, patterning itself. Individual signs have become an impressionistic blur. There are flashes of red here and there, catching the eye. There are patches of darkness, hinting at something unsavoury. I push on harder. My hair is crackling and probably standing out in shock. The world is purple-pink. The city is a red orbit all around me as if I am looking through rose-coloured lenses, sensing my own emotions overlaid on some distant landscape.

It is mesmerising, with an air of mystery. There are traces of light; tracer tracking across the reddish grey. There are flashes of shock and awe. There are a thousand tiny flashes sprinkled on the ground. It is hypnotic. It is both familiar and futuristic; recognisable yet alienating. I am rooted, waiting for what comes next. As I stand transfixed there is a slight darkening, a clouding, a reddening of the eyes. I see a tear in the fabric of the world.

**City dream #2**

This is the ‘City of Entertainment’. That is what the strapline says. That is the logo the city works to, but it isn’t quite right. ‘City as Entertainment’ doesn’t do it either. This is a shifting, evolving place, I know that. When I first came here it was a city like any other, with its entertainment district of galleries, theatres, cinemas; its discrete half-shuttered shops, its basement Speakeasies, its pavement cafes. Now that whole Entertainment thing has spread, colonising the whole city. It has become the city’s reason for being. I sense that it is even going beyond that. The city is becoming Entertainment as a way of life.

When people come here, now, they take on roles: Hairdressing, costume, makeup, set designing, scriptwriting – not for particular productions but for city life itself. They become leading ladies. They become gaffers, best boys and star actors. They don’t realise it but they are Participants: bit players in an entertainment that is the city itself. So am I but at least I have seen through it all. I know the reality and that gives me freedom to choose. I can select what part I wish to play. I can change from day to day. Today I have opted for Viewer. This is my preferred status. As Viewer I am distanced, away from it all, watching, patient. I hover high above the city. I can look down on things. Watching the city from up here, from afar – too far up to be distracted by individual movements and actions, this high above the cut and thrust of street life - you get the bigger picture. From way up here you get a serene take on the city. From here you see it in all its beauty.

I gaze down. There is nothing other than the shiftings, shapings, and patternings. Things float and glide. This is spaceworld. This is Bladerunner in the extreme. This is me orbiting the city, seeing things from both sides at once, seeing it in the round, getting the feel of the place.

From up here I get a real sense of the city. I can see into its very soul. The view is exhilarating, kaleidoscopic: shapes sliding into each other, colours gliding over each other. At this distance I feel the sheer extravagance, the level of excess that the city has adopted. The people who live down there, amid the hustle and bustle, might marvel at mere things like an aurora. If they were only able to come up here, to look down on their own lives, they would be astounded.

I lose sense of time up here. I don’t want to leave. The whole thing is a constant motion of fountains of light; blocks of white and green; mirages in pink, purple and electric blue collapsing in on themselves. Occasionally details show through: arrows, signals, signs; tumbling over themselves against the greys, earthy browns and shadowy blacks of distant hills where there are towers: the sort you might find in any city, except that this is not just any city – this is the City of Entertainment.

Up here I take things carefully as I slowly breathe the upper atmosphere of the city. In and out; out and in. My breath puffs wind through the city streets: speeding things up with every exhale, slowing things down on every inhale. If I forget myself and stretch my cheeks, if I arch and strain, if I gulp and gasp myself to breathlessness then, somewhere down there, people will be about to be swept away in fits of giddiness. At one level that is of no concern to me. I am happy to remain transfixed up here for what remains of the day, held by the glory of the city.

Yesterday was different. Yesterday I was dogged Observer, the Voyeur. I was City Ethnographer. I set myself up to film on a ramp. It was a good spot. A tenth of the city can flow past there in a day: masses on their way through the city’s pavilions and pallasades; transporting themselves and being transported.

I stood and filmed as they flowed round me. Locked to the viewer I could see only a frame into which people might slowly enter and from which they might slowly exit. I watched their faces come and go. They were fleeting street portraits. They were transients moving through my limited-view world.

I watched the faces: A stream of determined urgency. Heads up, heads down. From time to time an individual would freeze in the crowd: standing, lost, isolated in the blur around them. One poor soul struggled against the flow but soon gave in and was swept along to places she never wanted to visit. Occasionally pairs were discussing something or nothing but mostly people moved in separated silences. One young woman talked to herself, or to the crowd in general.

I saw the detail: the hair, the glasses, the caps and bags. An ice-cream slowly licked, a drip running down the side of the mouth. Headscarves. Logos, chains, necklaces. Mostly casual but one man formal in shirt and tie. An old man looked lost but no one stopped to check. An old woman was quietly crying but no one asked why. These were the unique faces in what otherwise was an identical mass of humanity.

There was only so much of it I could take. Focusing on all those faces was too upclose, too personal. After forty-five minutes I desperately needed more space. I swung the camera upwards and zoomed in on the middle distance.

Beyond the ramp was the ring road. Above it all, another ramp with fewer people. Beyond that, a construction site with half-built flats and the hopeful sign of a hospital. It was a buzz, a mass of action. It was all comings and goings, weaving forward and backward across my screen. It was life being woven before my eyes by the rhythmic flows of the city. It was a work of art, a moving picture painted before my eyes by all these unknown city-dwellers. They were assistants to my masterpiece. The scene scrolled out before me. It was not until I looked closer that I saw details:

* the pigtails of the girl in blue, staring as cars blurred against stilled queues at bus-stops
* a couple, with the woman pointing up the ramp. At their feet, under their noses, a stumbled woman, crutch trapped beneath one leg
* children stopping to look at some incidental detail, and shouting at nothing in particular
* a McDonalds tucked into place, sandwiced between bigger buildings
* the hustlings and hasslings, heads down, with carrier bags
* a woman talking into a microphone; a man filming – a commentary on something or other

In the middle of it all, old men sit on a park bench, staring. Are they Participants? Are they Observers? It’s hard to tell these days.

**Citydream#3**

I am standing at the very edge where darkness turns into light. Glancing over my shoulder I see, for the first time, that everything is not total darkness. Far on the horizon, floating in their own spaces, are four or five pinpoints of faint luminosity. I strain to see them and, in return, the more I look the more they grow. Slowly, imperceptibly, at first but then spreading more quickly. I begin to see detail: small light nodules networked to each other. It reminds me of bacterial growth in some laboratory dish, or something cancerous. The light colonising the dark. I know that if I come back in a few week time it will have grown even more. In a year or so it will have spread grid-like to become a wall of light miles wide and miles high. It will stand out as a beacon for all wanderers like myself, those who have learnt to recognise such signs.

I turn back to the light. This is where I am exploring today. This is my current area of interest. I have been here before but each time I step into the swirling mist I discover something new. I hesitate before taking that first step. White shifting ribbons move slowly in front of me: welcoming me, creating small chinks in the curtain. A screen of shifting silk tempts me to enter, dares me to move. I lean forward and the misty lightness folds itself around me.

The mist settles into patterns. The patterns coagulate. Things take shape. This is what I have come to see. This is what is different every time.

I am in a room. White walls, white ceiling, white floor. It is an empty box. There are window spaces but no glass. There are doorways but no doors. I can see through to a similar room beyond and another beyond that. Similar but not identical. They are boxes linked to boxes. Not vertically as in an apartment block; not horizontally as is a row of terraced houses. There is a higgledypigglediness about the construction, as if the boxes were put together hurriedly, or by a child.

The whole place looks as if it has been patched together; driftwood nailed in place. Thrown together; pieced together – not quite fitting, not quite matching up. There is a sense of regeneration once started but which has now stopped. I am in the partially abandoned carcass of some community whose lives have been left behind, stranded in place and time as things press on. Glancing through one of the window spaces I think I catch a distant glimpse of brickwork, scaffolding, half-complete buildings – but it must have been an illusion for when I look steadily there is nothing there.

It feels as if the whole place has no real foundations, as if it is suspended, slowly rotating in a white, misty breeze: a tissue floating quietly in the air. It is delicate, fragile: A world of its own. I feel as if, all around me, something is being made out of nothing. It is hard to tell whether this is a place that has grown and spread, or a place that is slowly falling in on itself from a city that no longer exists: frozen in this instant.

Whatever it is, or once was, this is a washed-out, run-down place; a discarded place. It is not total dereliction; not absolute abandonment. There is a lingering hope of return. In one room there are chairs. I can sit on them.

In another room a snapped-off ladder dangles from a hole in the ceiling. No way up and no way down, just a sign of what once might have been. It casts a faint shadow on the wall opposite; pale grey rungs slanting across like slowly toppling prison bars.

There is a sadness about the place: a wraithful feel, a ghostly feel, an unworldliness. Despite this the rooms have substance. I can walk through them, slowly, cautiously. I can touch the walls. They are cold and dry.

As I move from one room to the next I think I can hear voices. Cold voices; dry voices; voices that seem powdery, like dust. Voices whispering to me from somewhere in the past. They want to tell me about things that happened. They want me to know.

They don’t disturb me even if I have the feeling that I have disturbed them. They whisper quietly but leave me to roam, room to room to room. I stand at a place where the voices seem loudest. Even here they are barely whispers. When I listen it feels more like people breathing but when I concentrate there are words, sentences; an urgency of feelings.

They are telling me about a time before the city, before the displacement. They want me to know that they were happy. They want me to know that they are still there, underneath everything. If people like me dig down beneath the city life we can uncover them. Our delving will allow them to talk to us. They feel that they have been silent for too long. Maybe they hope that I will be able to write it all down or tell other people. Maybe they are longing to find a voice. Maybe that is why I am here.

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I often dream of cities was written in relation to the following works in the Metropolis exhibition:

City dream #1 was written with reference to:

* Ola Kolehmainen ‘Shadow of Church’ (2006)
* Andreas Gefeller ‘IP12’ (2012), CS02 (2010), CS13 (2011)
* Rashid Rana ‘Language Series 3’ (2011)
* Grazia Toderi ‘Red Orbits’ (2009)

City dream #2 was written with reference to:

* Nicholas Provost ‘Storyteller’ (2011)
* Yang Zdenzhong ‘Let’s Puff’ (2002)
* Miao Xiaochun ‘Orbit’ (2005)
* Beat Streuli ‘Pallasades’ (2001)

City dream #3 was written with reference to

* Naiza Khan ‘Membrane’ (2010)
* Huang Xu ‘Fragment No 10’ (2007)
* Hanni Bjartalid ‘Untitled’ (2012)
* Andreas Gefeller ‘SV01-8’ (2012)
* Naiza Khan ‘The City Soaks Up Like a Sponge’ (2011)
* Naiza Khan ‘The Structures Do Not Hold’ (2011)