**The Language of Metropolis**

“Metropolis: Reflections on the Modern City” is an exhibition currently at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (from 23rd March 2013 to 23rd June 2013). It is billed as ‘a major showcase of international contemporary artwork’ focused on interpretations reflecting modern city life. It brings together a broad selection of work from 26 international contemporary artists.

Several visits were made to the Metropolis exhibition and these led to a number of pieces of fiction written in relation to various works in the exhibition.

This nonfiction article is not in response any particular works of art but is in relation to the idea behind the exhibition as a whole ie the concept of ‘Metropolis’ and the thinking of what constitutes a ‘modern city’. It is taken forward by some questions that occurred to me as I went round the exhibition:

* What might be inferred from the words used as part of the exhibition? What notions of ‘city/metropolis’ is portrayed by the language used?
* Was there a subject/topic/theme about large modern cities in the minds of the various artists as they produced their pieces of work? Did they work from a guiding principle of what contemporary life was like in ‘metropolis’? What were the city’s starting points to their thinking (if this was, indeed, the process they followed)?
* How do any such ideas, stemming from the art work, look when lined up alongside thoughts on cities from thinkers in the areas of sociology, economics or geography?
* Can any general conclusions be drawn, or is the whole enterprise quite subjective and idiosyncratic (without implying that there is anything wrong with subjectivity or idiosyncracy)?
* What is the function/role of art and artists in relation to any of this? Is it the job of an artist to make statements, or run commentaries, on current social issues? Is it their job to portray ideas about life for others to be stimulated by? Is it their job to entertain; or to simply express themselves irrespective of others? Is it the job of artists to be in the vanguard, leading thinking about how there might be other ways of seeing things and feeling things?

The exhibition has its own general publicity material and each artwork has its own small piece of supporting text. In constructing the language that formed part of the Metropolis exhibition a process had already taken place. Various artists had chosen some aspect of modern city life, and chosen how best to represent this artistically. The enterprise of putting the collection together was grant-funded and behind that would be words to explain Birmingham’s intentions re the collection. There had been curating decisions about how the set of works were to be displayed and what messages/themes this might entail. There had been the job of producing the supporting texts to relate each work of art to some ideas of city life.

I wrote down all the words used as part of the publicity, the words used as the supporting texts next to each work, and relevant words from the guided tours that were part of the overall exhibition. There are various ways in which these words can be clustered together. What follows is my attempt at grouping them:

1. Cities are places to work, live, shop, visit, and seek refuge: cities perform many different functions.
2. The city has a physical ‘cityscape’; its unique built environment. This forms part of the context within which people live their lives. It includes:

* High rise flats/apartments
* Transport systems
* Iconic buildings
* Peripheral estates
* Empty, fragmented places
* Everyday street scenes
* Imagined places
* Designated areas: commerce, entertainment, shopping
* Small, quiet places; tucked-away places
* Areas of dereliction and construction
* Signs; symbols

1. Such places act as stage sets, and can be:

* Unsettling
* Chaotic
* Jumbled
* Noisy/bustling
* Alienating
* Anonymous
* Hectic
* Uncertain
* Mysterious
* Bewildering
* A source of tension/unease
* Battlefields/places of struggle
* Linked to decay/dereliction/rubbish
* Impasses/dead-ends
* Familiar
* Reclaimed/reimagined/repurposed

1. The city is more than its infrastructure, however. It is predominantly a set of social interactions:

* The movement of people setting up patterns/ producing ‘flow’
* People, separately or collectively, negotiating/ navigating public places.
* Individuals within the crowd
* Established rhythms of the city and its people
* Based on stereotypes/interpretations/attitudes to others
* Including expectations and strategies for survival
* Involving a degree of dissent, competition, struggle
* Characterised by disparities, differences, exclusions, destitutions, unfairnesses
* With a strong sense of emptiness/powerlessness
* Including networks of relationships that are complex
* With its own visual language eg of body language

1. Because of the scale associated with Metropolis there is also a grandeur that can be:

* Futuristic
* With extravagance/excess
* Vibrant
* Mesmerising/hypnotic
* Visually overwhelming
* Based on growth and development; having potential

1. Commerce drives much of what happens in the city:

* As result of de-industrialisation/changes in employment
* With advances in technology being influential
* Via globalisation; producing economic/environmental concerns
* With a culture of consumerism/ mass production
* At a number of levels: Big corporations, city districts, rows of shops, individual street traders

1. The city is in constant flux:

* Bustling/shifting
* Constant change
* Upheavals/ transformations
* Comings and goings

1. At the same time the city can be contemplative:

* Abstract
* Minimal
* Fragile
* With layers of meaning, sometimes not always apparent

1. There is a need to match freedom and control within the city:

* Boundaries are being established, but also being challenged
* Things may be overlooked/ignored or may be taken note of/acted upon
* Technology will be used for surveillance as well as outright control

Is there more than that? Are there things about cities that are being communicated by the artworks themselves, in languages other than the written English (maybe through the language of painting or the language of video etc)? I revisited the exhibition purely with that question as a focus. I also visited the websites of the artists, where possible, to see if they themselves were expressing any views of the city that had not been already picked up. For me, these did not add anything to the existing list above.

My own pre-existing thinking around some of the ideas about cities had been via a sociology route that took in ideas of space and place, alongside concerns about political and economic structurings of how societies worked themselves out. It included ideas from thinkers and writers across various times and conditions, including:

1930s: Cities as changing, growing, adapting interactions as large numbers of people migrated from rural to urban. The focus tended to be on individual motivations; group cultures; spatial shapings of patterns of behaviour; responses to change, freedom and authority etc.

1950s/60s: Cities as the outcomes of planning and design; recognising the contradictory objectives of different groups etc.

1970s/80s: Influence of economic and politics; ideologies and ways of thinking about things; structural causes of spatial patternings etc.

Early 21st century: The slippery nature of language; the uncertain nature of text. The importance of language use in how things are made to exist. Rejection of totalised views etc.

It is the latter ones of these that have been more significant when thinking about ‘the modern city’. In addition, my more recent wandering about in academic ideas of locality and place, and ideas about cities in particular, has led to the following:

* Cities increasingly act as nodes within the global knowledge economy and within the global systems of economic exchange. There is a city-location focus to these activities, despite the supposed decline in the importance of distance in a world where information can be shared electronically over large distances almost immediately. Cities have been described as ‘nuclei’ or ‘crucibles’ or ‘focus points’ within or around which key social, economic and political transaction take places. Cities are currently the sites where most economic developments occur through new and old ideas getting mixed and mashed together as large numbers of creative and skilled people meet in complex networks. Whist there is an understanding of the workings within these nodes, there is less understanding of how the various cities link together and influence each other.
* Cities are more and more characterised by networks of telecommunications – to the extent that there are references to technocities with technohubs and technoburbs alongside existing city sprawl. Streams of information flow into and over places: each folded into the other.
* The density of cities gives them the potential to be ‘greener’ than dispersed communities
* Alongside the wealth generated within the city’s networked activities there are also clear signs of poverty. References are made to dual cities/polarised cities – cities where differences are at odds with each other – needing sound approaches to social justice and inclusion. Cities were, at one time, undoubtedly seen as examples of urban squalor, urban crime etc but, even as poverty still exists, we seem to be moving to a position where cities are seen much more as solutions to issues rather than only as sources of urban problems. Cities, if they get it right, are able to flourish.
* Compared with other places, cities have a wealth of human energy. Workers in cities are more skilled and more productive. Residents of cities are reported to be happier.. Additionally, cities have the infrastructures to take in less advantaged people and enable them to succeed.
* With the city’s opportunities for interchange and innovation we can get a fragmented metropolis of diversity, specification, subsets, and individuality; producing shifting constellations of cultural activities.
* Within city developments, the focus has often been on large-scale rebuilding projects. However, it is the people who make a city – and that set of people may be quite fluid and transient. A city’s ‘soul’ can be seen by walking the streets and watching how people behave.
* Cities can decline if they only rely on things that have made them successful in the past. There is a balance to be struck between preservation and renewal. There is also a balance to be struck between investing in places and investing in people.
* More significant than the growth of separate cities may be the way that these are flowing into mega-urban regions.
* Cities are complex systems in which there are high levels of uncertainty. This makes it difficult for planners to determine one precise best course of action. The Plan-and-Implement model is weak in these circumstances and some cities are looking at frameworks for managing transitions in which ideas about long-term goals are broadly agreed, incremental actions tested out, technical quick-fixes avoided, and so on.
* Cities are increasingly being characterised as being (or aspiring to be) smart cities, learning cities, intelligent cities, resilient cities, networked cities, world cities, global cities, hybrid cities made up of fragments, cybercities, and fortress cities with large privatised areas.

From the above I was left with a matrix within which I might understand things and in relation to which other thinking might be done. This was more of a framework of considerations, good enough for now, rather than an attempt to find one grand narrative that would conclusively do the job.

That was my way through. Others will need to find their own ways into and through the topic and emerge with their own ideas.

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So, at the end of all of this, how does the language gleaned from the Metropolis exhibition corroborate or contradict the ideas from my reading of studies on cities?

The works that formed the Metropolis exhibition (and their explanation through accompanying texts) capture diverse aspects of what a metropolis might signify. They catch the diverse, fragmentary moods of the modern city at the beginnings of the twenty-first century. There are, within the works and within the language used to support those works, traces of ideas of older cities just as those residues linger on in city life in reality. In a few of the works there are also hints of what the modern city is becoming.

The following appear (to me at least) to be current ideas about the nature of the modern city that chimes well with the language of the exhibition:

* The sense of space that a city can evoke – which can be mesmerising and overwhelming as well as strange
* Cities as settings where lives are acted out – in crowds, in groups or by individuals; all weaving and flowing across a city-stage, experienced in different ways for different groups.
* Tensions, uncertainties, ambiguities and change
* Interactions of trade and commerce at a number of levels
* Things from the past needing to be dealt with in a changing, developing context
* The fine balance between freedom and control

What is (again in my opinion) least represented are a few complex issues that modern cities are starting to seriously grapple with:

* Cities linking out into global financial/ economic networks of cities
* The creative mix that comes with densities of ‘professional’ groups, and which can drive developments in a city
* Cities operating across city regions/merging cities with complex implications for governance
* The volume/flow of information that technology now allows to be used to come up with solutions to major issues
* Constellations of meanings, fragmentary, contested understandings that are kaleidoscopically shifting as the city changes
* Cities striving to have better impacts on waste, environment, sustainability; the potential that the modern city has to be a solution rather than a set of problems.

So what is the role of the artist? To comment on features of modern city life? To react personally to the changing nature of the city? To simply produce work that, if the artists is working in a modern metropolis, cannot step outside of that city’s influence? To point ways forward in how the metropolis could be or should be? I’m not an artist so how would I know; but that doesn’t stop me thinking about it – and that may (or may not) form the basis of a future article.

As I say: All of this is merely my views.

I may just need to visit the exhibition again to check it all out once more.