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The Natural Nature of Cities

In the first chapter of his book, *The Language of Cities*, entitled *What is a City*, Deyan Sudjic examines the nature of a city by considering various definitions of a city and probing the limits of each definition. One of the questions he asks his reader is whether cities are man-made artefacts or natural phenomena. In this paper I argue that a city is largely a natural phenomenon, which is to say the characteristics of a city are closer to those of natural objects than man-made ones. The ebb and flow of a city is more akin to the chaotic waves on a beach than the uniform humdrum of factories.

An argument one might make for why cities are man-made is that the physical components of a city, the buildings, the roads, parks, are clearly man-made. However, as Sudjic notes, a city is more than an amalgamation of buildings. In fact he says that a “city is made by its people” (1), where “made” suggests that not only are the people an important characteristic of a city but are in fact one of its defining characteristics. This is supported by other texts such as in Wolff’s *Gender and the Haunting of Cities* which comments on the distinction that exists between the physical city, composed of the buildings and roads and parks, and the perceived city, outlined by the experiences of the citizens (26). The latter is clearly more representative of the city and, importantly, is defined by the citizens. Sennett comments on this distinction further by introducing notions of the *cit * and the *ville* while *ville* is used to describe the physical characteristics of the city and *cit * is the city that one experiences. As Sennett notes, cities are full of “jagged edges” (2) which makes the seamless union of these impossible. So while certainly the two ideas are related, they also live separate

from one another, further emphasising the difference between the physical structures and the social structures of a city. Thus we see that this vital component of a city relies heavily on people and their interpersonal interactions, suggesting that cities too must be natural.

Even taking a closer look at these physical structures themselves, we find a kernel of something organic. As Sennett writes “the built environment is more than a reflection of economics or politics; [...] the forms of the built environment are the product of the maker’s will” (2). Thus very often in these buildings and structures we see the architect’s own creativity shimmering through.

Some may argue that cities are ordered and uniform, making the interactions outlined above seem synthetic. Simmel seems to echo this when he writes of the “punctuality, calculability, and exactness [...] of metropolitan life” (328). By contrast, Sudjic calls unpredictability “one of the key virtues of the city” (32). It is interesting to note that not only does Sudjic view unpredictability as a virtue of the city, he sees it as a very important one. We can perhaps understand this by looking back to one of Sudjic’s first definitions of a city: a place that “offers its citizens the freedom to be what they want to be.” (1). Hence cities need to be able to encompass the entire spectrum of human desires and given how creative, and frankly unpredictable, human desires are, we see that cities must share these traits as well. Moreover an unpredictable city allows its citizens to really believe in this freedom of choice they are presented with.

On the other hand, of course, Simmel is not wrong. Punctuality and a certain rigidity are also important qualities of a city. They are needed to have any form of organisation among such a large mass of people. I think of Tokyo, the most populous city in the world, with its famously punctual train system, which is a cornerstone that Tokyoites rely on to travel to work, home, school, etc. While these traits may seem contradictory, I don’t think

there is much issue. For one, cities are no strangers to contradictions, with their “glaring inequalities” and “crooked” nature (Sennett 2). Secondly, unpredictability needn’t beget complete chaos; rather it suggests twists and slight deviations from the norm. These smaller acts of rebellion to the enforced structure is what cities thrive on, case in point: the rhetoric of walking in a city.

De Certeau contrasts looking at a city from a high vantage point, such as the World Trade Center, with walking through the city (157-158). The walkers use and view the space very differently to the onlookers. These onlookers are akin to the planners who view the city macroscopically while the walkers are the citizens who live through the minute details of the city. While the planners may encourage spatial practice in some ways, it is ultimately the citizens, the walkers, who decide spatial use. Hence, as De Certeau writes, “A migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (158). The use of “metaphorical” in particular illustrates the transient nature of these practices and experiences, opposing it with the rigid and “planned” components of a city. Arguably, it is this mismatch between the planned and the lived where we see the city being born. These are signs of the people taking in the city and making it their own. One such example is highlighted by the seizing of proper names by the walkers. These names lose their original history “like worn coins” (162) and instead become much larger and “take on the diverse meanings given them by passers-by” (162). This forms but one example of where the residents seize control of spaces from the planners and overload them with meanings of their own, giving these spaces the unique flavour one finds in cities.

Thus, presented with these two extremes of perfect order and unpredictability, cities appear closer to the latter. We see above the difficulty in predicting spatial use. Sudjic gives the example of Mexico City which had a doomsday prediction hanging over its head that was never fulfilled (15). In *The Human Scale*, we see an example of a snowball fight that occurred

entirely spontaneously in New York City. All of these illustrate the fundamentally unpredictable nature of cities. Even cities that appear to have an order and logic to them, like New York with its grids, use this uniformity to “allow[] every kind of energy to flourish.” (Sudjic 32), where “every kind of energy” paints a rather chaotic picture of the place. Note that although this chaos/energy might be constrained by the grids, it isn’t obstructed by them. This unpredictability then illustrates yet another organic trait of cities.

One could argue that these constraints make this chaos different from that found in nature, which seems to be entirely lawless. Animals hunt and behave as they see fit, with little regard to any foundational order. The wind and weather change swiftly and suddenly, seemingly without pattern. However, in this line of reasoning we forget that as bizarre as nature is, she too has some base rules she must follow. In fact, one could argue that the laws of physics bound water waves far more tightly than the grid system binds the energy of a city. Having base rules that one must follow need not mean that the system built on them is perfectly ordered.

Finally, Sudjic argues that cities “are formed by ideas as they are by things” (27). A more careful analysis shows that this relationship is perhaps less direct than suggested; I would argue that the citizens play an intermediate role. Like Sudjic, let us also consider the vacuum tube, the precursor to the transistor at the heart of every digital device. While there may have been some immediate effects on a city, the real effect of these tubes and transistors was on the people. A whole new way of life was introduced; one that people embraced wholeheartedly. It is this radical change in the people that caused the cities they reside in to change as well. Similarly, the car provided people with greater mobility and cities evolved as a result of that. While this introduction of people as an intermediary may seem little more than a semantic difference, it highlights that the growth of a city stems from the growth of the people within the city. Hence the growth of cities must also be natural.

One of Sudjic's central arguments throughout is that there can be no clear, concise definition of a city as such a definition "runs the risk of meaning nothing" (1). This inability to characterise cities, despite our best efforts, suggests that there is some inherent quality to the city that lies beyond our control and comprehension. Perhaps it is obvious that such a quality should arise, when we have such an enormous mass of people intermingling within the limited confines of a city, all in order to create something extraordinary. Certainly, it is not something the machines of a factory could imitate.

Word count: 1497

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