

POINT OF VIEW



Photo: Pauline C. Yu

THE WHINE OF THE CITY

STEVEN FLUSTY, *Ph.D.*

As an urban geographer, the only thing I detest more than the notion of the “world class city” is the frequency and intensity with which I encounter interminable whining about being a world class city.

For some half dozen years, circumstances and poor choices compelled me to reside in Toronto, perhaps the drabest, most unsociable, and ultimately most unnoticeable city it has ever been my displeasure to inhabit. Which, I suppose, is in itself a mark of global urban distinction, but that is another discussion entirely. Unsurprisingly, there exists a tendency amongst the locals to be very touchy about their city’s shabby anonymity, and as is common with these sorts of well-deserved inferiority complexes there is a widespread urge to either counter that anonymity or deny it entirely. The latter impetus takes the form of asserting Toronto is indeed a world class city, whereas the former entails quests to acquire the presumed trappings of world-classness and display them upon some sort of “world stage”. It is not uncommon to encounter Torontonians asserting both positions simultaneously. But whichever the case, the proof of urban worldliness is always the same; financial head offices,

ARVAMUS

spendy “ethnic”-inspired eateries, a shiny tarted-up airport, and so on, plus an international festival or three providing excuses to show it all off. And starchitecture, of course, to clad the skyline in the biggest budgeted semi- and non-Euclidean forms, which in Toronto’s case generally manifests as facades affixed on the cheap to existing, undistinguished structures.

In all fairness, though, I must allow that my particularly low tolerance for this sort of world class whining is as much my own fault as it is any of the prodigious faults that constitute Toronto. Having been born and raised in Los Angeles throughout the last third of the 20th Century, I am no stranger to the dogged pursuit of world class status. Throughout my adolescence, one of the most commonly overheard turns of urbanistic phrase was “west of the Mississippi”. As in, we had the tallest building west of the Mississippi, the busiest port west of the Mississippi, the most dynamic gallery scene west of the Mississippi. As in, our ass was forever being whipped by New York and Chicago, the locales from which we tended to import all our objets *d’art et architecture*. Galling. Pathetic. And also a thing of the past. Because Los Angeles grew weary of being sullenly jealous and, in conjunction with untold millions of Latin American, East Asian and Ex-Soviet immigrants, did something about it. Things like build a downtown full of skyscrapers where none had been before, install a subway and lightrail network from scratch, strew museums and opera houses across the landscape, and even hold a garishly pastel-tinted Olympics to announce the transformation. By the time it was all over, we Angelenos had even become the world’s principle exporters of starchitecture. Well, the principle exporters of Frank Gehry, anyway, and Frank Gehry is starchitecture.

Angelenos no longer whine about becoming world class. There was a very brief moment of celebrating it, but for the most part we don’t much care anymore for world classness at all. To some extent, this is a case of a city becoming secure in and about its own identity. But it’s something else as well, an effect of what being world class has proven to include. The perquisites and luxuries aside, being world class has entailed exponentially swelling populations, exponentially swelling land rents, exponentially swelling incomes for elites only, and all the exponentially swelling social tensions this implies. All that, and a violent uprising. Those surrendering ever more of their shrinking paychecks to remain sheltered in ever smaller spaces do not tend towards celebratory moods, an indication that being world class is not necessarily something to which a city, let alone the overwhelming majority of its population, should aspire. The wish for worldliness may well be one made upon a monkey’s paw.

This unintended outcome should come as no surprise to anybody who takes just a moment to honestly consider where world classness, and the cities to which it adheres, originates. Clearly the core attribute of a world class city is some sort of broad centrality, but central to, and for, what? The canonical answer has long been “central to the control of capital flows, of flows of goods and flows of services,” nodes within a global order of free markets and parliamentary democracies. But this is less an answer than a canard, one that cynically misrepresents a global pantomime of electoral circuses concealing crony capitalism, all propped up by the water cannons of armoured personnel carriers and by missile-equipped Unmanned Aerial Vehicles. Nor is this so novel as we are inclined to believe, the water cannon is merely the new truncheon and MQ-9 Reaper drone the new Gatling gun. Similarly, the global metastasis of gigantic titanium-skinned artichokes-cum-museums à la Gehry

recapitulates the proliferation Paxton-esque crystal palace exhibition halls at the turn of the last century. Nor are these examples merely coincidental. Gatling guns and Reaper drones are the currency that makes the rest possible. So world class city is just the new imperial metropolis, imperialism having always been a prolonged chronic militarised shopping spree. Bargain hunting through superior firepower. And no matter how ghastly the lives of, say, Imperial Rome's plebeians may have been, remembering the provincial fates of Jesus Christ or Queen Boadicea's daughters should be enough to underscore that the only urban condition worse than being a world class city is not being one.

In this observation hides another, far less obvious, reason to revile the lionisation of the world class city. Globalist rhetorics underpinning world class urban thinking presume one planet under the invisible hand, flat and fluid, in which cities rationalise their innards and pretty up their faces to compete and collude for the attention of the same corporate cosmopolitan class. Sure, perhaps, if you happen to be Singapore or Dubai. But anybody who has attempted a spontaneous afternoon drive from Tijuana to San Diego or from Tangier to Ceuta has run up against the towering contrarian steel and concrete truth of the matter. There is not one world, not for most of us at any rate. Rather, as in any age of empire, there are multiple imperia and spheres of influence, each with its own urban logics and city systems.

Taking these commonly dissimulated divisions of the world into account, it becomes evident every world city that thinks itself the center of the world is at most a center for some worlds and, necessarily, not for others. But if a center can thus be made peripheral, might not this also imply a periphery can become central? At points where multiple imperia intersect and overlap, yes. Thus, the world city viewed through a funhouse mirror: the interworld city, a city situated at the interstice of empires and brokering between them. Metropolises like the divided city of San Diego-Tijuana, at the rupture of the *Pax Americana* and the corpse of *Nueva Hispania*. Or like Hong Kong, where a resurgent *Pax Sinica* washes up against the picturesque ruins of the *Pax Britannica*. And perhaps most exemplary of all, Tallinn, at the edge of the ancient *Nordosphere*, butt up against the wreckage of the *Pax Sovietica*, ideally sited and populated for exchange between the *Pax Europaea* and the Russian wild wild east.

So congratulations, my Estonian readers, and surprise! You have been world class all along.

Of course, similar could be said of those Torontonians, situated as they are in the crack between the *Pax Americana* and the perpetually receding *Pax Britannica*. Please though, don't tell them. They're insufferable enough as it is.