

## Urban Landscape and the Postsocialist City

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**"Urban Landscape and the Postsocialist City"**

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.3 (2012)**

Thematic Issue ***New Work on Landscape and Its Narration***

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**Abstract:** In "Urban Landscape and the Postsocialist City" Krzysztof Nawratek discusses contemporary capitalism as shaping the urban environment of Riga, a multiethnic and bilingual postsocialist, post-Soviet, and postindustrial city. When communism collapsed at the end of the twentieth century the majority of European socialist cities in central and East Europe adopted two ideas: 1) the idea of neoliberal deregulated management based on private, multi-agent ownership of land (and on land speculation) and the weakened role of the city council and 2) the "cultural turn" rejecting the industrial heritage of the socialist city and the ideology of the proletariat and instead focusing on a postindustrial service-based economy of tourism and cultural production aiming to (re)create society with a strong middle class. These two notions are significant changes of paradigm — from material production to immaterial production — and Nawratek argues that both of these notions caused crises in postsocialist countries such as Latvia.

## Krzysztof NAWRATEK

### Urban Landscape and the Postsocialist City

Contemporary capitalism could be described by at least three adjectives: as "financial capitalism," as "communicative capitalism," or "cognitive capitalism" (see, e.g., Dean; Marazzi). All these concepts indicate a shift from material production to more intangible assets related to exchange, control, and circulation. Obviously, production has not disappeared, but today it is not so important because the spirit, or even soul, as Franco Berardi suggests, is the core of modern capitalism. In the study at hand I discuss changes of/in postsocialist East European cities caused by the pressures of modern "multi-adjective" capitalism. The basic problem concerns the relationship between the physical structure of the city, its social structure (in the broad sense), and the intangible constituents of modern capitalism. Among these constituting factors the most important are information and knowledge. How information is transferred, transformed, and used in order to produce knowledge is one of the key problems in a contemporary economy. The other is finance.

The connection between information and finance in contemporary discourse is obvious and it was Georg Simmel who in his essay "Metropolis and the Mental Life" wrote how the town based on interpersonal relationships between individuals is replaced by what is institutional and quantifiable. Simmel — followed by many others — describes the contemporary metropolis as an inhuman entity based on abstract values and as a world of numbers. Money, then, could be seen as an abstract, "cold" medium, destroying "warm" interpersonal relationships. However, money could also be seen as an element of social bonding: "Money, in other words, is the form in which value takes a certain relationship of exchange between buyer and seller" (Marazzi, *The Violence* 112). Although this bond is specific, it is in contrast to barter, where the exchange itself was linked to the socio-economic position of stakeholders as a lumberjack exchanges timber for fish from a fisherman. Therefore, trade originally strengthened already fixed roles of the participants in the social and economic structure of society, but money breaks this link between stakeholders of the exchange and their social role. Any socialization is connected to conventions of language (see Ochs) and therefore trade could be also considered as a kind of communication; however, we must be aware that money radically distorts communication.

At this point it is worth asking if the immaterial overpowered material production and fixed relations in the contemporary economy are strong enough so that this concept does not melt into air? It is a possibility that this unifying element is the human body. I argue that corporeality of/in the contemporary postsocialist city provides a connection between what is material and what is immaterial. Any relationship and communication, also those via financial operations, is based on the weave of different actions and positions, but always requires the existence of a real body. Even if one purchases an mp3 file using a credit card it is his/her musical taste, his/her need or whim which is the point of departure for the act of purchase. Since modern capitalism is trying to maximize the number of transactions (the intensity of capital flows), it is obvious that this human imperfection in generating needs — and the two most important human "flaws" are limited time and limited attention, the human limited desire — is the greatest obstacle to capitalism (the problem of a lack of cash has been eliminated by the invention of credit cards).

Contemporary (financial and communicative) capitalism attempts to overcome this obstacle: it is enough for both capital and information just to circulate and the human involvement seems not to be essential any more. Slavoj Žižek, for example, argues that modern technology is a fetish in contemporary capitalism which leads people to the state of interpassivity, preventing their "flaws" to disturb the functioning of the inhuman systems. Therefore, human imperfections embodied within the human body are an essential factor of the contemporary economy and for our analyses the human body therefore forms a key element of the contemporary city. To understand the importance of the body and the value of its imperfections, it is useful to go back to Aristotle's definition of the soul and to Christian theology. Aristotle believed that only the "rational soul" is immortal and reduced what is human only to what is rational. Christian theology, however, believing in the resurrection of the body, appreciates the importance of the "passions of the body" and its imperfections (from a Christian point of view). This is an important clue, because it allows us to understand the Christian discord with

capitalism. From the Christian perspective capitalism reduces people from who they are to what they possess.

If financial operations, especially the act of purchase, could be defined as a process of compressing humans-in-the-wider-context into a pure act of exchange, the crucial moment is the reversing act of "decompression." This act is not a sovereign act of human will; rather, it is a contaminated process where the wider context overpowers the human as such. Those who see the system of ethics within capitalism, reduce humanity to a process of conscious and rational decision. Christian theology claims it as false — we can say that the money in the process of decompression becomes "contaminated" by what is irrational — and human desires, emotions, caprices, etc., are contaminated by what does not fully belong to the subject. But to the external world this is managed by gossip, advertisements, and other people. Therefore, in the process of the "decompression of money" — in the act of re-establishing a human social position and the act of social self-creation — humans are not alone and they are not free. The process of "decompression of money" is also closely connected to language; however, in contrast to financial manipulations based on a kind of "topological continuity" natural language is full of gaps and discontinuities and natural language does not provide the information in the absolutist sense, but instead within a series of insinuations. The specificity of natural language is not a transfer of information, it is not even a transmutation of information, but is instead the existence of holes which necessitate the construction of connections. Communication in natural language is based on the freedom to create, not the freedom of choice. This aspect of natural language supports the importance of face-to-face communication over today's digitalized kind of contact (on the impact of digital culture and communication, see, e.g., Marche). This importance of the natural language is also pertinent to my discussion surrounding Riga particularly because of the tension between the two languages of the country, Latvian (official) and Russian.

Aaron Betsky argues that buildings are the tombs of architecture. Perhaps so, but even the tomb contains meanings and activities: each building is a kind of generator which even in its simplest sense generates movement of people. Buildings are also significant as meaningful objects that provoke emotions. Therefore, in the urban environment humans have to deal with the flow of information and the streams transmitted by various objects (buildings, advertising, people, etc.). However, what is crucial for understanding the relationship between information/knowledge and the city is not only the various elements associated with the production and transmission of knowledge, but also the structure of their interrelationships and dependencies. Contrary to the vision of Richard Florida, who considers a tolerant urban crowd as a crucial and sufficient element supporting the modern postindustrial city's development, Bjorn Asheim's typology of knowledge seems to be a more useful tool for my analysis. According to Asheim there are three types of knowledge: analytic (pure science based, e.g., mathematics), synthetics (engineering based, sharing by doing), and symbolic (creativity based, face-to-face interaction). If we agree that the production of knowledge (innovation) is vital to economic success in today's global economy, we must also ask what urban structures would facilitate the production of certain types of knowledge. Putting Florida's theory into the context of Asheim's typology it becomes clear that Florida is focused only on one type of knowledge production, namely the symbolic one. The production of symbolic knowledge needs urban "buzz." The problem is that other types of knowledge could be produced outside cities: synthetic knowledge could be (and primarily is) produced in industrial clusters while analytic knowledge needs research institutes. Both clusters and research institutes do not have to be located in the city (for example the French CERN research institute). Using the above methodological perspective, it becomes obvious that Florida — broadly accepted and adopted by European policy makers (named European Ambassador for Creativity and Innovation in 2009) — defines the city only as a phenomenon of cultural production. Taking his approach to the extreme and putting the contemporary city into the context of the internet as a new environment where culture could be (and is) produce, Florida's concept of the city becomes questionable. Does the city still have a reason to exist or does it exist only by inertia? This question is even more dramatic when one questions further the reasons for the existence of the European postsocialist city. In socialist times the city was meant to be an industrial city — often expanded to such or even created, for example Nowa Huta built near Kraków — and it is because of this that the change from a socialist to postsocialist Florida's model is so dramatic and dangerous. As in many postsocialist cities, industrial production in Riga rapidly declined — employment in the industrial sector

dropped from 40% in 1990 to less than 20% in 1998, the machine building industry vanished almost completely (Müller, Finka, Lintz) replaced by transport and logistics, the construction industry (real estate), and the service sector. Therefore, in order to find a reason for postsocialist cities to operate successfully and to escape from the service orientated model of postindustrial culture and to maximize the opportunity of the production of different types of knowledge, it is crucial to examine all possible spatial structures which can support the widest possible spectrum of economic activity. The postsocialist city in this context is a unique entity — to some extent it is still partly a classless city (potentially supporting Florida's "tolerant urban crowd") — but more importantly, European postsocialist cities still have the remnants of past industry and of scientific and research centers located there. Therefore, potentially, the social and spatial structure of postsocialist cities should be the ideal environment for development along the cognitive capitalism agenda. The question is why does it not work?

Riga is the capital and largest city in Latvia with a steadily decreasing population (approximately ten thousand per year) of 714,000 inhabitants (2009). Riga is a multi-layered city. It is an old, Hanseatic city and a reasonably popular tourist's destination. Half of the city was built during the Soviet period and almost 70% of its population live in block-house residential areas, the highest percentage of all European cities (see Bertaud <[http://www.alain-bertaud.com/images/Note\\_on\\_Riga\\_Spatial\\_Structure\\_Rev.pdf](http://www.alain-bertaud.com/images/Note_on_Riga_Spatial_Structure_Rev.pdf)>). The structure of the city reflects its 800 years of history. Swedish, Polish, Russian, German, and Latvian rulers' legacy tells different stories, loosely connected to each other and creating a magnitude of chaotic micro narrations. The lack of clear structure is probably a principal feature of this city. No logical traffic scheme, green areas divided by heavy traffic roads, pavements ending abruptly and this not only reflects the complicated history of the city but somehow also creates an uncomfortable state of unpredictability for the future. Most of the population is first generation "urban people" or at least "Riga people." I was told by a Latvian friend who lives in Riga that "we are just farmers" and this may be the reason that foreigners find Riga almost empty during weekends. Riga's people just leave the city and go to the country, drawn to the environment which they find much more natural for them. Nowadays, the postmodern fragmentation of almost every city is obvious but in the case of Riga it is interesting because of repeated attempts to establish one homogeneous narrative to define the city. In the last seventy years there were three such attempts. First, for many years the Soviets occupying Latvia attempted to impose a modernist narrative of a socialist industrial city. As a result, Riga was surrounded by an industrial belt and scattered districts were added. While pre-Soviet Riga did not disappear, it buckled under the pressure from the Soviet narrative. New investments appeared not only outside the core of the city, but also important changes occurred within the existing structure. For example, the old town was cut off from the river (which for centuries had been a key element organizing Riga's structure) by a highway drawn along the shore and, in addition, several high-rise buildings violated the historic skyline of the city. Today, while the Soviet city landscape is still present, the most interesting processes began to happen when Latvia regained its independence in 1991.

There were two — sometimes competing and sometimes complimentary — narratives of the urban landscape. One which can be described as referring to national identity and that attempted to erase the traces of Soviet occupation (which was easy at the micro-symbolic level when street names were changed and the Museum of Communism was renamed as the Museum of Occupation; on this with regard to similar situations in postsocialist cities, see, e.g., Delanty) and to build a new Riga in relation to the pre-Soviet urban and cultural landscape. The other opened Riga to the expansion to a global capital as the city searched for a new shape by copying symbols familiar to cities in the world. Today, both of these narratives of urban landscape are disowned. The "national narrative" has shown its absurdity when it tried to build a "Latvian Riga" drawing on the history of a German, Russian, and Swedish Riga. The "global narrative" collapsed along with the bursting of the real estate bubble and with the onset of recession. Therefore, Riga now faces the challenge to construct its new, post-Soviet yet not postmodern narrative, a narrative that is capable of integrating the two antagonized communities, the Latvian- and the Russian-speaking population and communities. This new narrative cannot be a nationalist one because in a city where the Latvian population is under 50%, a nationalist project could cause future terror and bloodshed. There can also be neither a "European" nor "global narrative" simply because it would not have enough power to give Riga the subjectivity necessary to

survive. A working narrative of the urban landscape must give Riga a validation to exist and develop within a challenging post-crisis global context.

If we agree that a fundamental feature of capitalism as an economic system is the ability to accumulate capital, the postsocialist city cannot be considered as a capitalist city. It does not accumulate capital, but, rather, it is a territorial resource of exploitation by external powers (national and global). As Agata Anna Lisiak argues, postsocialist cities could be described as (post)colonial; however, because of the shift from an industry-based economy to a less stable service economy (see Müller, Finka, Lintz) and because of the influx of foreign capital (and lack of national/local capital) arguably a more adequate description seems to be just "colonial" or "neocolonial" cities. The (post)colonial or (neo)colonial state of being characterized by "in-betweenness" (see Lisiak) could lead us to consider the hybrid nature of the contemporary (postsocialist) city. Hybridity is a tempting term, because as Manuel Castells observed "what we observe in our societies is the development of a communication hybrid that brings together physical place and cyber place" (131). The hybridity of the postsocialist city has a different nature and can be defined along with the tension between the egalitarian social structure combined with heavy industry which characterized the socialist city and the capitalist legal regulations (especially land ownership) and the economic system. Therefore, the postsocialist egalitarian and industrial "body" (base) interferes with the practice of the free-market (ideology and legal system). The contemporary city in general is described in a context of a global network rather than an autonomous entity (see, e.g., Beaverstock, Smith, Taylor) with focus on a flow of information, capital, people, ideas, etc. Many modern cities — especially the megalopolises in South America or Africa are, as Paul Hirst called them, anti-cities, because of their lost ability for self-governance (25). European postsocialist cities could be considered as a similar case. There is also a question of democratic legitimization of urban governance versus the tradition of the socialist city under Soviet rule. Managing a modern city takes place in many areas and at many levels: political, economic, cultural, social. Only small numbers of these areas are managed democratically. A truly democratic management of the city is only possible when the city has interfaces supporting both residents and users and when the city reinforces the strength of individuals. The instability and threat to democracy in the modern city is also rooted within a blurred urban social structure where a rapidly growing number of users of the city (immigrants, tourists, students etc.) and the decreasing number of citizens occurs. In the case of Riga, about 30% of the population of the city does not have political rights and cannot participate in elections, even at the municipal level.

Therefore, the question is: what can integrate the citizens and users of the city? According to Pierre Manent the city was (is?) a fundamental political idea, together with ideas of empire, national state, and the church. All of them are "imagined communities" (see Anderson; Hardt and Negri; Virno), based on a shared cultural framework. Paolo Virno defines a multitude around an idea of "being not at home" (40) what seems to be relevant in a contemporary global city inhabited by users rather than citizens. Virno defines "general intellect" as a kind of cultural plateau on which people can come together in all kinds of interactions (40). While the idea that the city is the natural emanation of the multitude sounds interesting, there is not one multitude, but, rather, many multitudes and they are unstable. The feeling of "being not at home" is something that most people naturally try to avoid: instead of finding a refuge in the "general intellect" they try to find less universal shelters (ethnic, religious, or ideological). They tend to form small, local (geographically and mentally) communities. General intellect then disintegrates into a multitude of local languages and cultural codes and yet Virno is right. The city actually works and some kind of connection between the residents exists. It seems, however, that this is not transcendent to the residents/users of the space/sphere, but, on the contrary, the spheres of interaction are constructed inherently as a series of interfaces constructed as a dialectical mode of existence in the world.

We could define three types of interfaces necessary for society to exist: 1) convention, namely the interface of face-to-face relationship, open to change; "internal interface," 2) all kinds of organizations which retain their specific set of rules partly open to grassroots originated changes, and 3) "external interface" meaning all kinds of institutions, where the grassroots movements are almost impossible, yet letting users to conditionally plug-in and plug-out. These interfaces, however, are not in any way connected with Jürgen Habermas's concept of public sphere and, even less so with urban public space. They are closer to the aforementioned general intellect concept. General intellect, briefly mentioned by



Karl Marx in his *Grundrisse*, is described as the process of the growing importance of knowledge (mainly in the form of technical knowledge and skills) within the processes of production and fusion of that knowledge to the machines, as a kind of capital. Each machine — whether the engine or laptop computer — includes a "frozen" (both common and professional) knowledge. Today, in the works of thinkers connected to the Italian Autonomist movement the meaning of this concept is expanded primarily by binding general intellect to a human body (e.g., a programmer or a scientist) (see, e.g., Hardt and Negri; Marazzi; Virno). It could be expanded and developed further as not only bodies, but also the machines, buildings, and the space itself containing a general intellect. Thereby interfaces are tools of coding and de-coding a general intellect in/out of the world. If general intellect is a key idea to understand current capitalism focused on immaterial production, a precise definition of interfaces is essential to understand the relationships between different elements of the urban landscape and environment and how they could support the production of knowledge and innovation.

If we agree that the production and transfer of knowledge is essential in today's economy, and if we still believe in the idea of a global city as a center where knowledge and innovation will be produced in the twenty-first century, one should ask in what way will it happen?

Asheim's analysis seems to indicate that this would occur in the erosion of the modern city rather than in its growth. The production of synthetic and analytical knowledge today can take place outside the city as symbolic knowledge could be produced in virtual space. Thus it follows that Florida's model of the creative city is incorrect. Does this also apply to postsocialist cities? Does it apply to Riga? I suggest that the postsocialist city is distinguished from Western capitalist cities of Europe and that its role within the global economy may also be different. So we have to answer two questions: how these cities differ from the cities in West Europe and how these differences could potentially put them in a better position in a global competition? Riga appears to provide a particularly good case study with which to ask such questions for two reasons: its spatial structure is almost a textbook example of the (post)socialist city (Grava) and the 2008-2012 financial and economic crisis hit this city particularly hard. The analysis of the spatial structure of Riga should proceed on two levels as an analysis of the macro-scale organization of main transport corridors and main functional zones and it is also necessary to analyze the spatial landscape structure of the city at the micro level at the street and square levels and the fundamental relationships between human beings and city space. Thus, the idea of technological clustering is closely linked with the concept of the knowledge-based economy.

In *The Economy of Cities* Jane Jacobs pointed to the necessity of innovation for economic development and the concept was summarized by Edward Glaeser, Vernon Henderson, and Robert P. Inman: "While Alfred Marshall is really the pioneer of the view of the city as a place where knowledge is transferred ... Jacobs deserves credit for putting together the view that ideas come from urban areas. In cities there are many ideas floating around, which makes imitation easier and news of breakthroughs more accessible. Jacobs's model emphasized that 'new ideas are generally combinations of old ideas' (1135). Florida developed this concept by combining tolerance, human capital, and technological development in a coherent, interconnected structure. However, Asheim challenges the optimism of Florida and there are many examples which put Florida's theory into question: for example, the phenomenon of Nokia in Finland as a country lacking dense urban centers or the development of Singapore where tolerance could be easily questioned. Thus, what differs the cluster from the city? First, objectives of the cluster are different from objectives of the landscape and space structures of the modern city: the cluster is an organization of businesses looking for profit while the city has many more actors aiming for diverse goals. These two also differ in the technique of generating innovation. The city is producing innovation "by chance" as part of non-market interactions, while the cluster is based on idea of producing innovation by supporting synergistic relationships. Clusters do not only need to be located within a dense urban environment, they do not even need to be based on geographical proximity (this has been discussed, for example, in *Australia 2020* <<http://www.australia2020.gov.au>> concerning "virtual clusters" of towns and small settlements or the INDE <<http://www.inde-network.org>> project aiming to help reorganize the model of urban development of European cities based on accumulation characterized by the US era of Fordism into a network model based on "propagation"). However, both industrial and urban strategies focus — currently — on synergies and relationships and both clusters and cities are "networked species."

I argue that the concepts proposed by Florida and Glaeser, Henderson, and Inman lack analyses for the understanding of the impact of urban infrastructure on knowledge production and innovation. Glaeser, Henderson, and Inman address this issue, but a deeper analysis of the human-artifact-human interrelationships in the urban environment is missing. Analyses of the city in the context of a knowledge-based economy and production of innovation sooner or later should conclude that a human being is not only a consumer, but also a medium processing and communicating knowledge. People operating in an environment of natural language are able to build bridges between the unknown and are able to combine separate entities into a larger and acting aggregate. And in our age of digitality, people are able to transfer knowledge, are able to combine what is difficult to combine, and add what is missing in the transmission. With regard to the example I am discussing, namely the postsocialist city, analyses of the said processes and communication are essential where a compact urban structure, mixing (remnants of) industry, universities, libraries, and research institutes is a typical feature. Postsocialist cities still have large areas of (post)industrial structures located in key, strategic areas of the urban landscape: while under the process of "regeneration" this often only focuses on new residential and mercantile functions.

It would be interesting to put European postsocialist cities into the context of contemporary Chinese cities, especially taking into account the phenomenon of urban villages. These urban villages, being a kind of productive squat, formed in the cracks of an authoritarian system (see Mangurian and Ray) of city management and they are a contrast to, in theory, the democratic and free model of postsocialist European cities. It seems that the current model of the postsocialist city, i.e., Riga as an example, with privately owned land and individual freedom including entrepreneurship, shows its weakness and inadequacy to face the challenges of the modern economy. The "authoritarian" Chinese model, however, offers a surprisingly wide window of freedom, at least, a freedom in the economic and artistic sense.

In conclusion, my objective with the study at hand is not to posit definitive answers, but, rather, to construct a theoretical framework and produce the tools to conceptualize the interrelationship between social and spatial structures and the production of knowledge and innovations. When we pose the question of why Riga is a city in crisis despite the fact that its urban landscape, its spatial and social structures should allow it to fit the requirements of modern capitalism, we would have to find answers not in the city as such, not only in its spatial or social structures, but outside them. The weakness of postsocialist cities in Central and East Europe is an outcome of an adopted model of imitative development ignoring the potential of the hybrid solutions these cities could become. Although it may sound like heresy, it seems that the weakness of postsocialist cities lies in practices of neoliberal "freedom" based on the dogma of sacred private property. While it seems that the model of the postindustrial, creative neoliberal city is remains valid in West European cities, on the peripheries of the European Union this model does not work. The example of Riga, a city hit by the disappearance of speculative capital, confirms it. The (neo)colonial model of dependent development does not work. The spatial and social structure of the postsocialist city is so unique that missing the potential inherent within it seems to be an unforgivable short sightedness.

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