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Sex(edness) in the City: Reimagining Our Urban Spaces With Abraham Akkerman

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Introduction

TO BUILD A CITY is to make space. But of course, we need to ask: for what? For whom? If city-building, as in human existence, is always directed toward some end, then it is necessary to establish the end of architecture as profoundly related to some end of human life, or some depiction of what a human life should be, as a human being envisions it.

According to Abraham Akkerman (2006, 229), the construction of the city is rooted largely in gendered traits and dispositions; thus, we build cities out of masculine and feminine characteristics. Akkerman's claim is that the Western City has been built largely out of masculine traits or aspirations, leaving the feminine traits to the sidelines that serve minor decorative and profitable functions. As this paper shows, a huge part of the feminine that city-building has shelved are the aspects of intimacy and eroticism.

As we explore our cities more and more, we are bound to discover that such cities are wanting in terms of spaces for fostering human connectedness and desire. What we have, instead, are spaces that serve only to transform whatever desires we may have into something profitable. The result, thus, is the kind of urban living that thinks of intimacy and eroticism as either the concerns of the home or as capital—either way, it is the kind of urban living that is impoverished and incapacitated in its desiring of the other.

Because the masculine has always emphasized the straight and the predictable, it has also always favored the mind over the body, leading to the building of dis-embodied cities, cities that discourage movement as much as possible, cities that discourage relationships except for purposes of advancing one's own interests. What this ultimately leads to, therefore, is a kind of impoverished human living, with an emphasis on the self as alone, as well as an enforced forgetting of human existence as shared.

What is needed, therefore, is a way to reimagine our urban spaces, in such a way that they highlight our bodily capacities to express desire for each other without leading to possession or oppression. There is a need to reconstruct spaces, if only to have spaces that allow us to rediscover our proximity to each other, a proximity whose human quality lies in the fact that it can never be overcome. Such a proximity, of course, is one that is rooted in love.

In this way, then, we can say that we, as human beings, take responsibility for the city that we have built, as well as for its unintended consequences, including our own dehumanization. In this whole process of taking responsibility, we have also come to see how we are to restore what our own city has taken away from us: the capacity to remake our own humanity.

This paper proceeds in four parts. The first part is a discussion of Akkerman's text on femininity and masculinity taking on a city-form. However, instead of simply settling with Akkerman's gender binary, this work also treats the masculine-feminine divide as the mind-body divide, and shows that it is the body that we lose along the way in the construction of our cities. The second part is the discussion of the Western city as dis-embodied, and as such, it is a place that discourages us from using our bodies for mobility and for human interactions, thus leading to the kind of existence that renders us incapable of loving one another. The third part is where we see the proposed solution to the problem identified in this paper: man's loss of humanness in the city may be restored by reclaiming the original meaning of eros and translating applications of eros into spatiotemporal constructions and urban planning. The fourth part is the conclusion.

The Western City as Masculine: Abraham Akkerman
Mutual feedbacking

In "Femininity and Masculinity in City-Form: Philosophical Urbanism as a History of Consciousness," Abraham Akkerman traces out the development of the city-form based on the unfolding of human consciousness. Based on Carl Sauer's insight into mutual feedbacking (2006, 230), Akkerman shows how the process of building a city is one that is accomplished by human consciousness; at the same time, as its construction, the same city, in turn, shapes the consciousness that built it, giving rise to new problems, new concerns, and new values.

City-building as masculine, feminine: The Myths

Akkerman (230–32) shows, more importantly, that city-building is rooted in gendered traits and characteristics: the feminine and the masculine, which, he says, are represented by two myths, the Myth of the Garden (feminine), and the Myth of the Citadel (masculine). The City as a Garden emerged as a response to human values such as fertility and abundance, while the City as a Citadel arose as a response to values such as protection and security, both internal and external. Through time, it was the Citadel that became dominant as opposed to the Garden, as communities also began to favor the need for security over the celebration of fertility.

Along with this, according to Akkerman, came the priority given to egoism over altruism (232), with the city spaces beginning to take the form of a fortress, and the garden gradually losing ground. In this sense, then, we see how spaces were constructed to address man's need to secure property, over and above whatever reasons he might have had to establish relations with others. In a way, we can say that the spaces man constructed, while protecting his property, also isolated him from other people and kept him from sharing what he owned. At the same time, the fortress man built around himself became a testament to what he had achieved, and thus a testament to his egoism.

City-building as Platonic: Straight and Predictable

Apart from the understanding of the masculine as the kind of consciousness that seeks to define and protect what is his,

masculinity also took on a different dimension of meaning in Plato. In Plato, masculinity became not just a matter of securing one's ownership, but also the kind of consciousness that accomplishes this security of property in a very calculated, measured way. Thus, another characteristic for the masculine would be that it is straight (235); moreover, as straight, there is a clear sense of positionality and direction in the masculine, while the feminine would be represented by the curves and the "crooked lines." With Plato, then, masculinity becomes synonymous with a hierarchical system, classifying and measuring everything according to a standard of straightness, where the straight line took on an ethical dimension in the Platonic world.

Along with the assumption of straightness-as-ought, furthermore, has come the consequence of designing cities according to the same assumption. Cities designed after what Akkerman calls the Platonic blueprint thereby sought to reproduce straightness in every possible way, minimizing curves and eliminating crookedness as much as possible. The operative principle in Platonic architecture was also taken as true in the ethical life–that is, human life, if it is to be moral, is to be characterized by a rigidity and a firmness (235), reminiscent perhaps of a fort, a tower, or a phallus.

City-building as Cartesian: No Confusion

It is with Rene Descartes that Akkerman finally shows more clearly the second phase of mutual feedbacking. Descartes, according to Akkerman, as a philosopher and mathematician, was largely influenced by the New Cities of the Renaissance which he had begun to see emerge (238). Built primarily on Platonic foundations, these New Cities were characterized by straightness, where one sees roads stretching into roads, and the distance of each one is perfectly measured in such a way as to lead a person to the next—everything comes and goes, therefore, without surprise; everything is predictable.

Descartes, being a child of his time, thus fashions his mathematical and philosophical system out of the cities to which the so-called Enlightenment has given birth. Akkerman argues that it is largely to the straight and predictable New Towns of the Renaissance that Descartes owes his system, valorizing ideas that

are clear and distinct over those that are vague and confusing (239). With Descartes, we see a shift: from Plato's straightness as the foundational principle of city-building, we now have straightness in city-building as the foundational principle for human consciousness and, consequentially, human life.

As an attempt to develop further the ideas of Akkerman, this paper, applied to urban planning, goes beyond the binary of masculine-feminine, and explores the mind-body divide, where the mind, as straight, logical, and responsible for prediction and control, takes priority in the building of cities. Meanwhile the body, as flowing, unpredictable, and curved, is left to the sidelines. Hence, from the myths that early civilization has handed down to us, to Plato's blueprint of the Ideal City, down to Descartes' standard for the modern city, we find that the Ideal state of being of the human person is one that is driven by the thinking mind, and at the same time, the Ideal City is one that enables us to think of new ideas, new strategies, and new possibilities for achievement.

Looking into Philippine history, we find that Daniel H. Burnham's plans (Palafox 2014) for the City of Manila also ran along the same lines—emphasizing logic and straightness, calculating proper distances from one boulevard to another, and assigning specific spaces for waterways, parks, and civic spaces; ultimately, these plans reflected Burnham's vision for Manila, that of a city that could rival the grandeur of the more advanced Western cities. It was to be known as the City Beautiful of the Orient, with Burnham infusing some touches of Rome, Paris, and Venice into his plans for Manila.

Akkerman: Mind the Gap

However, as Akkerman pointedly reminds us, in between the planning of the city and the actual city, there is a gap (2006, 240). This gap has two aspects. The first aspect is what Akkerman calls the "unplanned," as captured by situations that serve to remind that we are not in control: for example, when one's car breaks down in the middle of the road, or when the weather does not seem to "cooperate" with our plans to go out, and many other instances. This aspect of the gap gives the human being a quick but biting reminder of the city as a human artifact, and as a human artifact, it comes with human limits and definitions. One only needs to look

around Manila's state today to see how builders have fallen short of realizing Burnham's original plans. The second aspect of the gap is the ethical aspect, where the way we have fashioned our cities have also caused a significant change in our character, and thus in who we are as human beings. In a way, we have become our cities—mechanical, calculative/calculable, in all of our dealings, and even with each other.

With the second aspect of the gap, then, we see a new dimension opening up. We now see how the process of building cities is simultaneous with the building of what is to be considered a fully human life. With cities built to emphasize and maximize achievement and profit, it is understandable that the principles of straightness and predictability should accompany them. As a consequence, we have also come to believe that such is the so-called measure of a human life—an existence that is straight and predictable, a life lived by carefully foreseeing benefits and costs both in the long term and in the short, a life emphasizing achievement and profit. And all this at the expense of those parts of our selves that are "crooked," surprising, altruistic.

The Western City and Its Dis-embodiment

Developing Akkerman's concept of the gap, this present section shows how the gap that was earlier discussed can also be explained by way of looking into our cities and revealing not what they have, but what they lack. At the same time, what the cities lack may also tell us a lot about what we have come to lack as human beings who dwell in the city.

Returning to Sauer's insight into mutual feedbacking, where consciousness shapes cities and cities shape consciousness, it is perhaps time to allow our minds to be formed by the cities that we have built, focusing this time on what these cities do not have. In particular, what they lack, as this section shows, is an authentic embodiment, where we have cities that discourage movement, cities that favor security, discourage love and pleasure, favor the profit of stability and the stability of profit, discourage personal relationships, and favor functional operations as well as fierce competition.

Cities Without Bodies

In the article "Imperiled Pedestrian," Charles Porter (1964, 55–67) depicts how difficult it is to have lived as a pedestrian in Paris of the eighteenth century. We read of a pedestrian who considers himself as imperiled, due to the many dangers that walking along the city streets has in store for him—from the "minor" dangers such as getting doused with the water that someone throws out the window, down to the more serious dangers such as getting run over by a speeding carriage. Centuries later, we find that pedestrians still suffer the same fate: that of facing dangers that come with physical mobility.

What is the assurance that the city gives, in its pretense of control and predictability? The city promises safety and security, and thus devises various solutions, all of which are aimed at the flourishing of this promise. Hence, what are these solutions? They all boil down to this: that people remain as immobile as possible. On a micro scale, surveillance and other technological systems restrict movement, or willingly perform the movement for people. Netflix marathons have replaced the cinema, for instance. Communication lines, business transactions, and even athleticism have all taken on a virtual character; maintaining this virtual trait, they have also moved on to become the quick and easy solutions to the threat and agony of actual mobility. Websites and applications thus give the assurance of productivity and efficiency, right from the comfort and security of one's home.

On a grander, macro scale, there are also cities that have built to make people believe that each city is fully capable of providing everything they need, to make them believe that there really is no need to move elsewhere, or indeed, to move at all. This calls to mind the slogan of the biggest chain of shopping malls in the Philippines, Shoemart (SM): "We've got it all for you!" where the assurance in itself professes to give one enough reason to not go anywhere else, precisely because this very mall already has everything one can possibly need. It also reminds us of certain cultural standards of what having a good residential area means: you must be near the hospital, the school, the church, and the market. Once again, it is the same operative principle—the less movement, the safer, the better.

What we have, then, are cities that are in themselves disembodied (Pallasmaa 2008, 30 and 7),[1] leading to the "creation" of human beings who also end up just as dislodged from their bodies as their cities, unable to move unless with a machine.

Cities without Love

At this point, we return to Akkerman's discussion of how the early cities were built with the intent of defining and securing man's property, protecting it against strangers who are automatically potential enemies or threats. From the perspective of economics, cities were built according to the law of supply and demand. With this, we see how the city is, in a way, a testament to how well man has preserved his selfishness and warded off his rivals.

Hence, we have a Western City that is built on the notion of conquest and egoism, and in pursuit of both, this city has also come to lose its capacity to love. The city is a place that seems to have forgotten how to desire without possessing. Urban spaces, therefore, have also become spaces where even relationships become simply reduced to matters of conquest and egoism, leaving no room for real desire and connection with another human being. We are left with spaces that either constrict our capacities for intimacy to the confines of the home and the private sphere, or spaces that turn our desire for each other into a profit center, spaces that alienate us from our own desires.

Cities without Relationships

Ultimately then, the city as we know it has alienated us, not just from our bodies and our desires, but more fundamentally, from each other. Man's construction of the city out of largely masculine ideals of profit, control, and predictability, has led to a reconstruction of human relationships under competitive and calculable terms.

Such a depiction of the building of the city reminds us of David Harvey's discussion of what urban planners call "creative destruction" (2012, 16). The assumption is that in order to build or create, it is necessary to destroy. Thus, in the building and creation of cities, taken literally, contractors need to destroy trees, as well as pre-existing structures such as houses and other buildings. In

other words, they must destroy anything that comes in the way of the new structure that needs to be built. That in itself is disturbing enough.

However, taken in a more fundamental sense, it becomes even more disturbing. To say that destruction is necessary for creation is the ultimate justification for our dehumanization, in the wake of the Ideal City. For the builder to build a city, it becomes a prerequisite for him to destroy himself, including whatever it is in him that gets in the way of building—his capacity to be—with others in a context beyond productivity, and thus also his capacity to feel and love.

And so, Akkerman quotes George Simmel:

> The more the unifying bond of social life takes the character of an asso-ciation for specific purposes, the more soulless it becomes. The complete heartlessness of money is reflected in our social culture, which is itself determined by money. . . It may be emphasized in this context that money has just as close a relationship to the widening of the social group as to the objectification of the contents of life. (1903, quoted in Akkerman, 234)

At this point, it appears appropriate to ask: if we have failed to build human cityscapes as our cityscapes have failed to humanize us, what is to be done, then?

Reimagining Urban Spaces: Resuscitating Eros

What have we lost? Our vain attempts at building cities based on masculine ideals have caused us to lose a significant aspect of our humanness, what Akkerman calls the feminine. In our struggle to build a city fashioned after the Ideal Man—free, independent, calculative, straight—we have done so at the expense of our capac-ities for relationships, surprise, dynamism, and love.

In the article "Reclaiming Eroticism in the Academy" (Bell and Sinclair 2014, 269), there is a concept called "resuscitating eros," which we interpret to mean as the need to rescue eros on two levels: first, to restore it to the meaning that is closer to its etymology, and second, to restore its status in human practices and relations. In the context of this present paper, this section shows how the very process of urban planning itself is in dire need to resuscitate eros. Additionally this resuscitation can be done in

two interrelated ways or aspects: first, to construct architectural spaces that acknowledge the indispensable role of the body in the living of a human life, encouraging movement and mobility, and second, to construct spaces that encourage and invite us to build relationships founded on love and desire, instead of the culture of competition.

To resuscitate eros, the first thing to do is to restore its meaning. In the midst of a world that seems to enjoy turning everything into a product from which one can profit, eros has had to suffer the same fate. Transformed into capital (270) the erotic has become what we now know it to be—merely the sexual act and all tools and methods that may be used to achieve its consummation. And yet, upon closer inspection, eros has richer, more profound meaning. Erotic experiences can be found in practically any human experience that serves to deepen our connection with another—art, music, poetry, and even looking upon the face of another person (270). What we need to do, then, is to give back to eroticism what it has lost. More interestingly, what we must return to eroticism is closer to eroticism itself than sex, and that is love.

In the context of urban planning and city-building, the task is to reimagine spaces so as to make space for our bodiliness and eroticism, for our capacities to truly desire and love one another. The first aspect of this task consists in constructing spaces that acknowledge and encourage the use of our bodies for mobility, for reaching out. This would perhaps mean giving more space for walking, for sitting, for simply experiencing the city as a vulnerable human being among vulnerable human beings, without the pretense to security that a car or any similar gadget provides.

The second aspect of the task consists in constructing spaces that emphasize the need to build relationships rather than profiteering empires. To do this, we may want to take our cue from architectural spaces that invite us to embrace as it embraces us, those spaces whose silences remind us of our own depths. Akkerman (2006, 245) uses the imagery of the zen garden, where, as opposed to the city, we feel and better experience ourselves as subjects. We pause, we are quiet, we reflect, and we are reminded that we are selves. At the same time, we are reminded that the others around us are selves, too, and not mere objects for individual satisfaction.

Ultimately, as we share in this kind of existence, we also come to enrich one another.

Apart from the garden, we may also look for ways to redesign our corporate offices. These offices are usually spaces that emphasize individual productivity to ensure individual advancement; hence, cubicles set one apart from everyone else, floors and buildings are designed in such a way that people never have to speak to each other, and many other "solutions" that the modern city provides to ensure such productivity. Constructing in the spirit of love, however, allows us to rethink the way we plan these offices. Rethinking leads to new ways that call into question this very emphasis on productivity. Perhaps spaces that have more interactive opportunities may provide the key to seeing how an overemphasis on productivity has turned us into zombies and robots, as well as the key to getting on the road to better humanness.

Utilizing our bodies for mobility allows us to physically come together, to see, and more importantly, feel, that human existence in the world is one that is shared and thus not solitary. At the same time, entering spaces that remind us of our need for one another in love helps us to see how humanness is found and cultivated in human relationships and not just in individual accomplishments. This insight into a shared existence then underscores the meaninglessness of the modern city's emphasis on selfish motives and ambitions. This new city, instead, ushers in the coming of new values, all the while emphasizing empathy, relationships, community.

Conclusion

To build is to make space. As we have seen in this paper, human civilization is a civilization that builds out of its innermost longings and dispositions. However, in our blind longing to become the Ideal Man, we have made a city that has, in turn, led to our own unmaking. Thus, as we build cities that are founded more and more on our aspirations for independence and profit, such cities transform human beings into mere calculating atoms, absolutely independent from each other except for transactions, thereby reducing relations to mere business opportunities.

To build is to make space. However, our attempts at building have only served to make space for more destruction, not

necessarily of physical structures, but of the capacities and abilities that were rightfully ours as human beings. In effect, our building has given place to cities, but has dis-placed the builders, and even more, its dwellers.

To build is to make space, which means there is still work to be done, and space to be made. As this paper has shown, to make space this time might no longer call for more opportunities to rake in more profit, or for us to be even more separated from each other. Perhaps, this time, we may want to make space for that part of us which our modern cities have so strongly tried to suppress—that part which comes together, that part which reaches out, that part which truly builds, in order to make space.

Endnote

1. Juhani Pallasmaa notes in "Eroticism of Space" how ironic and impossible it is for embodied human beings to create or build dis-embodied cities. Pallasmaa claims that it is impossible for architecture to have been created by a dis-embodied human being. On the other hand, we may say that the dis-embodiment that we find and experience in our cities is a product, not of our actual dis-embodiment, but of our longing to be dis-embodied. For too long, culture has inscribed sinister meanings to the body, thus leading to shared efforts to actually be rid of it.

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The City and the Dynamism of Invention and Exploitation[1]

THE CITY IS A DYNAMISM AT PLAY. It is the hothouse for both innovation and the development of human civilizations, but it has also facilitated the creation of a worldwide web of unjust resource extraction and exploitation. Because humanity created urban settlements, we as a species have an arena for continuous and creative development. The city allows us to gather the best thinkers and entrepreneurs of our species in concentrated areas of cooperation and competition. Scientific and technological ideas are shared and artistic possibilities are exhibited to challenge set boundaries. If not for the city and its concentration of human exchange, the great discoveries of humanity, particularly Western humanity, in the areas of medicine, technology, governance, and all aspects of art would never have flourished and gained world domination at the rate that they have today.[2] However, it is also the instrument that makes possible the marginalization of many of the world's poor. In colonial times, the imposition of Western cultures and economies allowed for the exploitation of indigenous cultures that could not, for various reasons, resist the impositions of colonialism. Through the establishment of cities, it was possible to link indigenous communities of the non-Western world to the mostly aggressive and imposing Western economies (Gilbert and Gugler 1992). This function of the city continues today to the extent that all civilizations have been linked to the global commerce of the West and the cities are the nodes of the net which gather all peoples of the world in that world order.[3]