Borrowed Places, Borrowed Times: Visual Rhetoric in Hong Kong and Vancouver Urban Photography

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The ocean between them is not reason enough to think of Hong Kong and Vancouver as anything but sister cities. Unusual among world cities, both urban centres are artificial creations of the 19th century, rather than organic continuations of settlements many centuries older. Hong Kong was created as a British mercantile enclave out of an archipelago of pirate-ridden islands and tiny fishing villages as a part of the negotiations that ended the Opium War. Vancouver was invented as a land development scheme by the Canadian Pacific Railway Lands Department in the late 1870s in order to maximize returns on their peninsular location of a western terminus for their inaugural national line courtesy of a gift of extensive government lands rather than share speculative profit with existing land owners in such older, established towns as New Westminster or Port Moody. The very names of each city are somewhat problematic, revealing the contingencies of their invention, not evolution. Hong Kong means "fragrant harbour" in Chinese, a double-baited marketing hook not unlike the Chinese characters meaning "golden mountain" ascribed identically to California, Australia, British Columbia and elsewhere to help expedite emigration of Chinese gold prospectors and railroad labourers.

For the 19th century flow of labour that anticipated today's borderless flows of capital, the actual differences between these employment destinations mattered little. The CPR Lands Department and government officials insisted on calling their new creation "Vancouver" for its sentimental appeal to potential property investors in Britain and Eastern Canada, who had become unsettled over the previous two decades during which the British Pacific colonies had repeatedly threatened to join the United States. They did this knowing full well that a thriving and much older town with the same name existed 300 miles away in Washington State, a town founded, in fact, by Canadians when it was an outpost of the Hudson's Bay Company. If the common names for these two Pacific cities can be thought of as masks, this is doubly true of the sentimental and marketing handles developed by each decades later. These speak to the provisional, threatened, artificial qualities of each city. The sobriquet borrowed place, borrowed time grew more popular in Hong Kong through the 1980s and 1990s as its industrious and talented citizens paused in their hectic lives to remember that their home was a temporary concession from the Chinese government, one with a prominent and non-repealable return-by date.

"Terminal City" was first promoted by the Vancouver Board of Trade just before the First World War to trade on its status as railhead and port. This same phrase has taken on other, unintended meanings more recently as Canadians flocked here to change their lifestyles, laidoff resources workers gathered on the Downtown Eastside to idle through their final decades, hightech firms conglomerated here to take advantage of a technically talented workforce, and finally, in every sense, this became the endgame location of choice for junkies and crackheads. Geography and economics have combined to forge other similarities between Vancouver and Hong Kong. Both cities occupy delimited sites between mountains and the same Pacific Ocean. Hong Kong's Kowloon and Central and Vancouver's downtown peninsula share status as some of the most intensely developed areas of any First World city. Our citizens share a fanatical quest for views, and, in consequence, are jointly responsible for some of the world's most overpriced residential real estate. While the magnificent natural ports in both places continue to thrive, entrep and traditional manufacturing industries in each have been priced out of existence, and the future of both cities is predicated on building knowledge and technology based industries, along with an efficient service sector and investment in tourism.

The life of the two cities is now linked as never before. Vancouverites increasingly live in small floorplate high rise towers à la Hong Kong built by Hong Kong developers and financiers, and partially filled temporarily, permanently or periodically with Hong Kongers "seeking a new home. For the first time in its history, Vancouver has seen its most recent immigrants new arrivals from Hong Kong and Taiwan since 1986 emerge as the richest, not poorest, sector of its society, a shift that has been accomplished surprisingly smoothly. In turn, Hong Kong families with friends and relatives in Canada

feel the tug and influence of our educational, health care and political systems, especially now when the agreed terms of the One Country, Two Systems Hong Kong Basic Law seem subject to negotiation; in Hong Kongers' lives, going B.C. has come to mean valuing something other than constant work and material accumulation. And by no means least in this obsessive " gastronopolis," Hong Kong restaurants list Vancouver crab and oysters at the top of their best menus.

These are mainly verbal forms of urban masks in Barthes "take on Calvino but what of (the visual are there broader and recurring photographic ideas, frequentlyused visual masks artists employ as they work in Vancouver and Hong Kong Urban photography is one of the most useful art forms to investigate the visual culture of a city, and the rest of this essay will explore how contemporary art photography in Hong Kong and Vancouver is an exemplar of), existing visual culture while also being a catalytic force in its reinvention. In coming to understand the visual cultures of cities like these, one must start with their visual rhetoric; recurring communicative devices and conventions relied on time and again. This visual rhetoric provides structure to artists as they build arguments consciously or not about the location of their creative activities. I will list a number of the more obvious devices of visual rhetoric in the work collected here, and clearly there are many more. Moreover, visual rhetoric about the city is not held out as the only or even primary axis of interpretation of these works; clearly there are many other useful ways of looking at them: theoretical, political, material, economic and so on.

CAMERA LUCIDA

Roland Barthes writes of the unique relationship of photography to reality:...Photography's Referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. [It is] not the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers, but the "necessarily" real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it.[2] The "necessary realness" of the urban environments of these two Pacific cities is inevitably revealed in the work of any photographer who does nonstudio work there, whether this is their avowed subject or not. Walter Benjamin's famous dictum that architecture is best appreciated in a state of distraction can be restructured to describe the sometimes inadvertent metropolitan verity that art photographers compile as a byproduct of their work in cities: urban visual culture is best revealed in a state of distraction.

The pensiveness that only photography permits means that topography, vegetation, architecture, and urban patterns of cities imprint themselves on viewers: they are the ocular matrix of this art. In the contemplative space of pensiveness, urban visual culture can emerge as announced subject, necessary framing device, subliminal distraction, or unacknowledged latent theme. I am most drawn to the last of these, as a horizontal slice through the work collected here plus companion works reveals much about these two cities, often inadvertently. What follows is less a critique of these architecturally rich photographic works than an exposition of some issues around it, grouped into four three latent themes.

1. Nature Versus New Nature

In presence or absence, a dialogue about nature is implicit in nearly all landscape art, even in its uptown cousin, urban photography. For two cities set on verdant mountains next to oceans, as are Vancouver and Hong Kong, such a dialogue is nearly inevitable. I have split the more common but now too global concept of landscape into two complementary concepts: Nature and New Nature. Landscape, as conventionally understood as a set of aesthetic conventions largely emerging in both cities "visual cultures out of 19th century British traditions is dealt with by the next of my critical categories The Picturesque. By Nature I mean the topographic and geological underlays of cities, along with water and vegetation, whether in large expanses or isolated samples. New Nature is a concept that has developed in the literature of architecture over the past decade, referring to the layered collection of buildings, roadways, bridges, and electronic communications that agglomerate to form an artificial environment as pervasive and powerful as the preexisting natural one. Defined this way, nearly every image here can be seen as a dialogue of Nature with New Nature. However, the relative balance of the two speaks of broader issues of the predispositions of visual culture in each place.

Interpretations of the dialogue of Nature with New Nature are fundamental to the work of Vancouver's most interesting photographers and photobased artists over the past two decades, who are collectively known as The Vancouver School.. Architecture is not a subject but a trope in their photography, as their interests are more with the broader forces of modernity and urbanization, in which buildings are the means not the end.

Roy Arden's "Soil Compactor, Richmond B.C., 1992" is an exemplar of the urban insights of The Vancouver School, showing the urban development process underway in a flat southern suburb of Vancouver. There is the everpresent monster house, as much a constant marker of urban life to the Vancouver photographers as shuttered Parisian shopfronts were to Atget. The flat treeless plain could be the outskirts of Regina, and the detritusstrewn, highly processed soil in the foreground is a kind of marker of Nature become New Nature. Centre image is the rusting bulk of a soil compactor, its forms and colours rather demonic, appropriate to its task as the last of the series of infernal machines that have taken a tidal flat and marshland and rendered it into a subdivision, an appropriately Cartesian word for such a triumph of geometry over the cyclic processes of river and delta.

The tension between Nature and New Nature is also evident in much of the Hong Kong work selected for the Vertical Cities Exhibition by curator Greg Bellerby. It is less apparent that this particular sample represents the same broader interest in this theme by other Hong Kong photobased

artists as it does for the Vancouverites. Hong Kong remains without a contemporary art school in the Western sense, though there are traditional Chinese arts training institutes and photographic technical training at the Polytechnic University, where some of the artists in this show first learned their craft. The Hong Kong photographers collected here are more likely to work as photojournalists or commercial photographers than teach at art colleges or sell their work through international galleries, but perhaps indicative of things to come, Hong Kong now has a fine commercial art gallery specializing in photography.

In some ways the Hong Kong photographers approach the Nature versus New Nature dichotomy from the other side; they are drawn to images of incredibly dense constructions that achieve the scale and complexity of geological and zoological structures. Though since demolished in typical Hong Kong fashion to make way for new urban development, Kowloon's Walled City has attained a mythic status among architects as an exemplar of New Nature. Like a perverse condensation of megastructures such as Montreal's Place Bonaventure (ARCOP Architects), Edmonton's HUB Mall (Diamond and Myers Architects) and Paolo Soleri's "arcologies" (massive but unbuilt architectural ecologies seen in the opening sequences of the film "Blade Runner") with the most fetid of 19th century Dickensian slums, this organic hive of human activity demonstrates the formal convergence of Nature with New Nature. After being published in the West by architect and theorist Rem Koolhaas, city planner Peter Hall, and other architectural writers, there was even a brief, if ultimately unsuccessful movement to retain the Walled City as a permanent memorial to the adaptability of human life to extremely high densities of occupation. Even more so than Vancouver, Hong Kong has almost no interest, desire, or legislation to protect physical reminders of its past.

Wong Kan Tai's images of the astonishing Walled City in Kowloon's Hunghom district is at the conceptual centre a kind of icon image of the Scott Gallery's Vertical Cities á exhibition. The Walled City is also a startling concatenation of architecture as New Nature, with almost inconceivable densities, arrayed by building codes and conventions of concrete construction into a kind of inhabited wall of vital humanity. On this wall each human resident is given visual expression by wash drying outside their windows; below is a fetid street, barely visible in the eternal urban darkness. The image is the epitome of Rem Koolhaas "idea of the culture of congestion[3] and is indeed one of the scenes that first inspired the phrase.

The Hong Kong urban neighbourhoods constructed in the 1980s and 1990s have little of the organicism of the Walled City and thus are less the subject of romantic curiosity by western commentators, despite having nearly the same densities of human habitation. One example of these is the Sha Tin City project by Wong and Ouyang Architects, with its regularly aligned platoon of small floorplate, highrise towers, all at the same height, the maximum allowed under municipal building regulations. Sha Tin is a vertical city as well, but one in which repetition and rationalism predominate. While it was a superior project for its time with significant recreational, educational and commercial amenities in midproject for residents its regulated p-forms are offensive to AngloCanadian eyes inculcated with the aesthetics of the Picturesque (see next section). Tellingly, Vancouver's Concord Pacific Place has densities approaching those of Sha Tin, but the Canadian towers are the products of a number of different architects, and cladding and detailing have been selected to emphasize slight marketing differences between them, rather than the emphatic unity of the Hong Kong project. As the last few Concord towers are finished over the next few years, the north shore of False Creek will, ironically, increasingly take on the generalized appearance of Kowloon's nowdeparted Walled City. This may well serve as creative fodder for a new generation of photographers, perhaps Hong Kongers, who will recognize this high density New Nature as a direct descendent of their own patterns of city building and living.

2. The Picturesque

In sharing their original formation as British colonial outposts of the 19th century, both Vancouver and Hong Kong also share an ongoing dialogue with the most important aesthetic theory of the time of their creation, the Picturesque. Emerging out of an 18th century literature of "the Sublime and the Terrible," Picturesque aesthetics were intrinsic to the conception and promotion of both cities. While large natural harbours were the fundamental draws for both, the proscenium backdrops and physical beauty of each urban site were nearly as important to the success of both places, these being cities that were made, selected, rather than former villages that made it, and therefore much more subject to wilful aesthetic formulations and predispositions. Every generation of Vancouverites and Hong Kongers discovers their city's beauty anew, as if none before had noticed it, little realizing that it is the pictorial power of these), conjunctions of mountain, water, rocks and forest that have acted as crucial draws to immigrants and investors over the past 130 years, a period when visual culture has increasingly predominated and when cities have increasingly competed for people and capital. It is aesthetics every bit as much as politics or economics that has created these two great cities.

Victoria harbour in Hong Kong is its enduring iconic urban image, from the linoprints and early photographs of the 1860s to the present, a space of framing mountains, a perch of exploding buildings, a foreground of churning seawater, and nearly always, that requisite Picturesque foreground object, usually a sampan or the Star Ferry. Pictorially, Victoria harbour is the great visual space, the zone of frantic floating activity, with both buildings and hills acting as needed framing devices. Gretchen So's image at the beginning of this essay shows land reclaimed from the ocean as part of the railway, road and new neighbourhood infrastructure at Tai Kwok Tsui, part of the preparations for the new airport on

Lantau Island. This is New Nature of the surest sort: the South China Sea remade as urban development plot. So opts for the figural, with some redpainted piledriving and reclamation equipment occupying the foreground centre of the pictorial space of this image, a brightly coloured umbrella nearby with someone enjoying this artificial urban beach.

The urban views of many of the Vancouver photographers mentioned previously tend to leave their foregrounds open, and in doing so imply the Derridean "sense de l'absence," be it missing authenticity, urbanity, First Nations or unbridled nature itself. Gretchen So's occupation of that crucial zone by a set of machines and people speaks of questions about the identity of place where contemporary activity counts more than a sense of missing presence, that nearby but elusive ghost, however defined. The instrumental, economic exploitation of urban space is assumed by Hong Kongers even its art photographers whereas Vancouverites Pá photo-based artists prime among them look for the presence of nature in any such place, and speculate about what is not present as much as that which is, maximum economic use of land more a subject of criticism for them than accepted inevitability.

Arni Haraldsson has an enduring interest in the juncture of landscape with built form, and a residue of the visual rhetoric of the Picturesque haunts his work like a spectre. Architecture is more of an avowed subject in Haraldsson's work than it is in any of the other photographers collected in this exhibition. As were Jeff Wall and Roy Arden before him, Haraldsson is drawn to marginal sites whether suburban or forgotten zones of the centre city where the social and aesthetic transformations of a rapidly changing metropolis are most evident. At first glance "Cypress Park Estates, West Vancouver," an image of some justfinished monster houses, monstrous less for their size than for their ungainly sense of being stitched together from other, notquitedead domestic creatures seems almost an homage to the suburban transformation images of Wall and Arden. Pictorially, however, other things are happening.

This West Vancouver locale is as interesting for its siteworks as for its architectural content, with extensive retaining walls, terraces and walls out of a local stone visible in a hill cut to the right of the image. The foreground location of a regularly planted row of shrubs set off with acute shadows points to the arcadian ambitions of its developer's instant attempt at a prestige address. Here and elsewhere, Haraldsson's photography looks for arcadia, then finds it lost. Architecture, siteworks and plantings combine to accentuate the lack of focus and authenticity to this bit of forestedged New Nature. As with many of the other artists in the Vertical Cities Exhibition, Haraldsson reconfigures Picturesque concepts of landscape, along the way prompting metaphysical queries on the nature of place and time.

3. The Culture of Congestion

As a former filmmaker and London-based unbuilt paper architect, Rem Koolhaas spent a year in the early 1970s at Peter Eisenman's Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies researching, writing and painting his responses to New York City. As only a fresh-eyed European could, Koolhaas took inventory of those special qualities of Manhattan that constitute a new kind of urban living and with it a new kind of urban architecture. Koolhaas was particularly intrigued by the highrise accumulation of many different human activities on the same site (he was particularly taken with a high rise boxing club from the 1930s), and the new and unpredicted positive qualities of high urban densities, which he calls the culture of congestion. These ideas took final form in the book "Delirious New York," one of the most influential architectural books of the 1970s. In a more recent book coproduced with Toronto graphic designer Bruce Mau entitled "SMLXL," Koolhaas cites Singapore, Hong Kong, and the new Chinese cities currently being crafted in their image as the true inheritors of the culture of congestion. If there was a North American addition to this list it would surely be Vancouver, as large portions of the downtown peninsula now have higher population densities than Manhattan.

Gretchen So's work demonstrate her unique position as a Hong Kong artist trained in Western Canada, and thereby inevitably subject to the influence, positive and negative, of the renown contemporary photographers from Vancouver. It is no accident that hers are some of the most open, wideangled and airy of all the images produced by Hong Kong photographers in this show. Clearly Canadian aesthetic predispositions both selfconscious/stylistic and sub "- conscious/subliminal have entered her work."

"Unitled (Tai O)" shows a New Territories fishing village captured at that last moment of the bucolic in its final transformation into the urban, a process and time so often a subject for the Vancouver group. The visual rhetoric implicit in this choice of recurring subject promotes the idea that the advance of New Nature is so powerful that we come to read it as a natural force, in much the same way as we read the hyperdense Walled City as organic. It is a very different nature that Gretchen So depicts in the New Territories muddy saltflats and scrubcovered bluffs have none of the powerful resistence provided by the Lower Mainland's mountains, forests and rivers that are an inevitable constant when doing urban photography here. There is a kind of fatalism in this image that the phalanx of new towers in the background will march up to and through the site of the fishing village, and moreover, little will be lost in the process. The romantic nostalgia permeating much of British Columbia art right from its beginnings is missing in Hong Kong, and with the shift back to China, it is less likely now than ever that it will emerge.

4. Where is Here?

Toronto literary critic Northrop Frye characterized the implicit question in much Canadian literature and painting as the collective plaint, "Where is here?" Hong Kong's relation to China has obvious correspondences to Canada's dealings with the United States, and establishes an direct parallel, as

the questions our visual artists ask are often relational: Who or what are we in relation to geography, time, the European tradition, American pop culture, and so on? Judging by the sample in the Vertical Cities Exhibition, Hong Kong artists are even more interested in such questions of identity after their reunification with China. Images recur of figures, hands, faces interposed and layered on the dense New Nature of Hong Kong's urban environment, as if in showing these juxtapositions broader questions of identity can be cogently posed, if not solved. Christos Dikeakos' interrogations of Vancouver's urban landscapes are attempts to place them in time as much as space. The layering of texts and diagrams onto wideangled, wide formatted urban views is a Dikeakos trademark, often used as a means to open up the implicit meanings of his landscapes while avoiding initial, standpat readings. In addition to these, Dikeakos also often employs the conventions of19th century museum displays, with carefully constructed artefact boxes brimming with titles, maps, photosasobjects, field notes, and ancillary information, such as is to be found in the engaging "Sites and Place Names" installation in this exhibition. With these the artist can assemble many bucolic scenes of nature or industrial landscapes and icons, but represent them at urban densities of thought, using Victorian conventions of classification and contextualization against type sometimes literally; textbased type against type. The same storage/transport box recalls those for surveyor's transits, and Dikeakos "collection is a kind of reverse survey; a collection of images and information produced from the landscape outside, but which are, in turn, tools of its critical reinterpretation. The artist reveals the Victorian metaphysics and aesthetics at the core of our treatment of landscapes in British Columbia, by simultaneously working within and against their pictorial conventions."

BORROWED CONCLUSIONS

Since the Photograph is pure contingency and can be nothing else (it is always "something that is prepresented") contrary to the text which, by the sudden action of a single word, can shift a sentence from description to reflection. [4] Barthes "writerly reaction to the photograph as art object and creative" text "undercuts its own analysis; surely the photographer's substitution of any of countless tiny details, the choice of a slightly different angle of composition, or reregulation of light by an fstop or two can completely alter the impact of an image, change its emotional tone, and shift from description to reflection. But Barthes "emphasis on the contingency of the photograph is well placed, especially in the late 1970s when *Camera Lucida* was written, a time when photographic theorists and critics laboured often fruitlessly to establish the discipline's wilfulness, a search for validation through the properties of fine arts, a conflation of the myth of the romantic painter onto photographers, who despite these efforts, can never sever their editing of the moments of a world in flux. Photographers are borrowers, and what they borrow are places and times, real or imagined, at any scale. To document, interpret, and appropriate are all too active verb forms for the task of the photographer and all too wilful to account for the serendipity that is one of their essential creative devices. To borrow seems more apt for me, with its sense of temporary possession and the possibility of return, actuated or not. Borrowers are close to collectors, as both tend to order their acquisitions into visual and thematic patterns, what I have called visual rhetoric in this essay. Borrowing is also an apt description of viewing and internalizing photographic images, a continuation by the public of the same stratagem.

It is apparent to me that the visual rhetoric of these works is inspired to a remarkable degree by the two remarkable cities in which these photographers chose to practice. As I indicated at the beginning of this essay, Hong Kong and Vancouver are new and highly artificial cities, and we are just starting to understand their conceptual deep structures and submerged influences on visual culture. I believe the internalized ideas and approaches to urban dwelling in each city are at least as important to the fine photographs shown here as stylistic or technical models from our contemporary culture of photography. Rhetoric makes communication possible, but its own powerful conventions are often forgotten in the Babel of daily life. Only photographers as talented as those collected here can foreground the repeating patterns out of the white noise of urban existence.

This essay was adapted from Trevor Boddy 's catalogue essay for the exhibition "Vertical Cities: Documenting Hong Kong and Vancouver" at the Scott Gallery, Emily Carr College of Art and Design in Vancouver, July 22 to August 23, 1999.

FOOTNOTES

1. Roland Barthes, "Camera Lucida." (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) p. 34.
2. Ibid., p. 76.
3. Rem Koolhaas, "Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan." (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
4. Roland Barthes, "Camera Lucida." (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) p. 28.