

VOYAGES IN A CULTURAL ONION

"When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object..."¹



Vienna Studio at the W.U.K. on Währinger Strasse

PROLOGUE TO A VOYAGE

The formation of an architect is a delicate business. Travel plays a crucial role here, but let's define our terms. To consider the importance of travel to the education of the architect one must confront the enigmatic riddle of the Onion. 'Travel,' after all, could account for nothing more than the mundane displacement of a body over a given surface – usually the Earth's – but this is primarily a question of geographical skimming. Such surface skimming, at potentially dizzying speed, effectively permits matter to stay at the exact level of the absolute present.² This *alone* proves to be of little importance to education since it has little or nothing to do with Onions. When dealing with the labyrinthine qualities of this profound vegetable, 'travel' as movement is not very helpful, but 'travel' as *Voyage* is paramount. 'Voyaging' represents the educational potential of travel.



A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread upon the surfaces of things in the world. In recognizing this, we recall the elusive property of the Onion in its habit of continually presenting skins of transparent presence to the outside world. Regardless of what depth we excavate to, the Onion is tragically centre-less; and yet it is also centre-full by virtue of the focused nature of its surrounding skins. A city (another thing of the world) shares this intriguing property. Seeing beneath the skins without removing them is the trick. Through this we view the depths of the past within which the shadows of the future can be dimly discerned.³ The voyage is in the penetrating of these layers – sinking into the skins of the places we visit. A *voyage* is therefore about *seeing*. The movement is one of passage, from outside to inside. This is the sort of displacement that is the most fruitful to the traveller, and most epidermically reflected in the Onion.

We are familiar with the epic hero or heroine who undertakes the voyage of self-discovery, enlightenment, perhaps redemption – or even vengeance. Certainly travel is the vehicle for this positional change. In every darkened glass there are shadows of the Initial Voyage when, from the garden of Eden the first humans fled before an embittered, and for the most part disappointed, God. Travel as displacement is however not a prerequisite; recall the many voyages within voyages that Alice takes without actually *going* anywhere other than into the Wonderland of her own self-awareness. This is a journey which begins once in sleep and once at the portal of the mirror⁴ – a good place to start – but more on this point in a moment.

A Voyage is thus not necessarily a passage between places, but more importantly, from one position of knowledge to another. In this sense one could imagine travel as geographically limited as the Onion itself; for instance, travelling into the complex archaeology of place, object or self. Regardless of the distance travelled, a *Voyage* is essentially a personal displacement involving the peeling back of

layers, moving inward through our individual conceptual frameworks, in which we are enrobed – like Onions. The skins of cultural heritage are revealed through our travelling outside their geographical enclosure, making travel and Onions of crucial importance to the education of an architect – and to education in general.

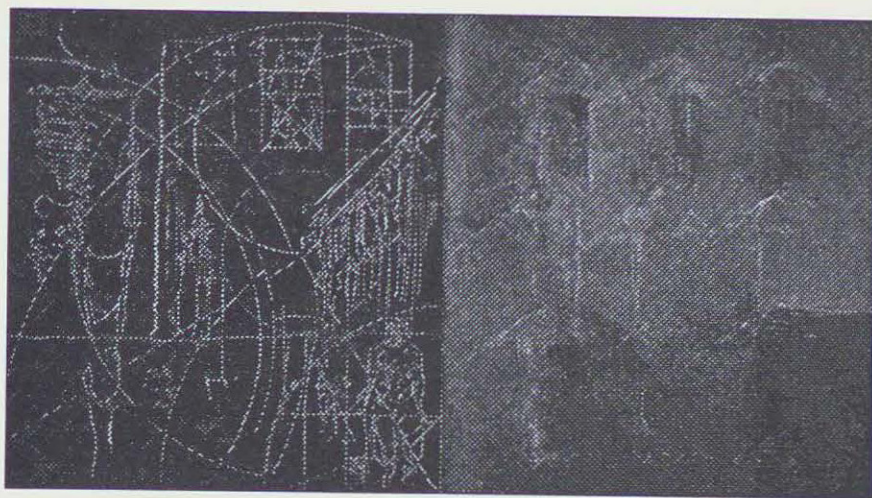


"And you?" the Great Khan asked Polo, "you return from lands equally distant and you can tell me only the thoughts that come to a man who sits on his doorstep at evening to enjoy the cool air. What is the use, then of all your travelling?" ... In fact, they were silent, their eyes half-closed, reclining on cushions, swaying in hammocks, smoking long amber pipes.... And Marco's answer was: "Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveller recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he has not and will never have."

Italo Calvino. *Invisible Cities*

The mirror of elsewhere is the gift of travel. It too is a skin, although invisible, between the reality of corporeal space and the virtual reality of the inverted world of reflection. Here even the Onion fails us. In reflection the familiar is de-familiarized. It is from this dislocated vantage point – a point of departure – that one comes to understand the silent, sub-sur-

face reign of the familiar in our cognitive bias towards things both found and made. The traveller is forced by the voyage to confront his/her own personal Onion of the familiar – the inevitable result of dwelling in the world that is at once threatened, and yet so expanded by the timeless layering of familiarity.



The familiar is both sacred and invisible. It simultaneously occupies "all time" in the space of our subconscious and "no time" in the realm of conscious thought. The familiar is the grounding of identity, and yet by its omnipresence can remain unidentifiable. A fish, whose knowledge of water is vital, is incapable of understanding its 'wetness.' Wetness, after all, is a condition which depends upon the knowledge of dryness – an impossible condition to the curious fish who, by its terrestrial voyage, would suffer the fatal result of being killed by the very thing, that in another form, sustains its life.

It is through travel that the familiar can become refreshed and our awareness is increased by the acknowledgement of its reflection. Similarly, the familiar word can be renewed in poetry by its unusual relation to others in the disjunctions provided in

verse. Poetry creates gaps, or spaces in familiar sequences – in the textural⁵ layers of expectations, where emotion can exist. A Voyage, in a similarly penetrating fashion, can create the disjunctions where poetry can exist.

This article is about a study abroad that I undertook in the spring of 1990. Upon this occasion I consciously tried to reduce the amount of travel and instead focused on three European cities in which I would live and study. They were: Barcelona, Glasgow, and Vienna. I suppose if one were to extrapolate this objective towards slower travel to its potential extreme, one might imagine the ultimate traveller sitting like a Zen Monk before a garden of stone, silently contemplating the stillness of the inscrutably placed pebbles while the mind alone is in motion. Finding this difficult, I was resigned to explore the city through drawing and painting. The goal was to work in each city – creating a physical travel journal of impressions and research, almost like emblems, which could communicate metaphorically and graphically an 'invisible city'

of personal experience and inquiry. The drawings became the vehicle of an inward search to disclose a city which was constructed in the imaged space of perception and sensation.

I left Montreal in early April to trace the essence of each city. This record is the physical consummation of the essentially immaterial lessons and sensual experiences of the foreign city. The accompanying images, to which the story is but a fragment, are from the work that was done in each of the three cities. This is a story and an observation. It is about travel, mirrors, the foreign city, and of course, Onions.





THE STORY

... "I speak and speak," Marco says, "but the listener retains only the words he is expecting. The description of the world to which you lend a benevolent ear is one thing; ... That which I might dictate late in life, if I were taken prisoner by Genoese pirates and put in irons in the same cell with a writer of adventure stories [is another]. It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear.

Italo Calvino. *Invisible Cities*

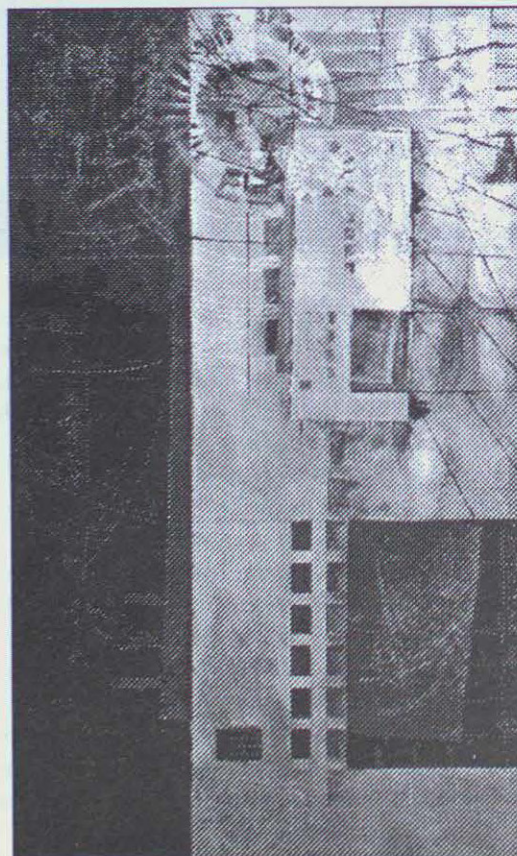
I arrived in Barcelona to set up my first studio in the Catalan capital of Spain. Ready to absorb the city like a sponge, from my meagre rooms in the old city, I emerged with the morning. With my tablets strapped hazardously across my back, my paints and brushes under arm, I squinted into the city with messianic enthusiasm.

I cannot remember my countless, shadowless steps under the austere verticality of the Mediterranean sun. It is only the works which now recall the heat which dried the pigmented edges of colour on my paper before I could replenish my thirsty brush. In them is the terra-cotta dust and salty sand of the Costa Brava which has long since left my lungs and filtered from my clothes and skin. The colours and the textures of each city got into the works, and the space of the imagination began to materialize beneath their layered surfaces like shadows in an amber resin.

Three months later the mists of Scotland penetrated the paper of the highland works, blurring their rugged chroma. The multicolored streets of Glasgow and the hardened face of industry offset the soft palette of Victorian fantasy. These contrasts found their shape in the canvas studies which I made there, as the summer closed about the Stone City and its river.

The icy austerity of Vienna and its sensually inverted passions drastically altered the palette of my later works towards a strange yellowing green of an incipient morbidity and the latent spiritual estrangement in baroque extravagance. The winter besieged the golden crispness of the Viennese Autumn, and as the Siberian crows arrived like the haunting sentinels of the encroaching winter, I left the third and last city of my study to return with much regret – and little capital – to Montreal.

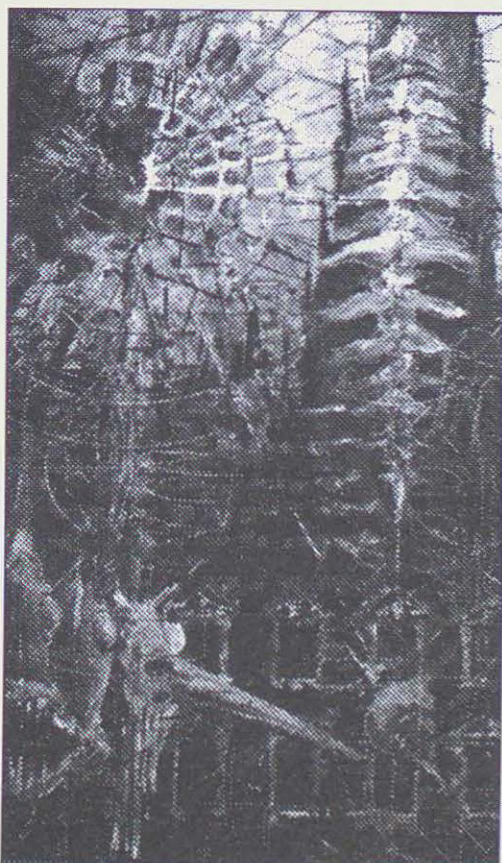
By the time of my return, almost ten months later, the study had evolved drastically from the course I had predicted – but this was part of its lesson. The work forms a body of collected emblems which were in some ways 'found' along the course of the study. The works were not static or self-contained as solitary signs, for it was through them that the archaeological record came to life during my research, in all its mystery and contradictions. I had come to see the foreign city as a giant, complex, and mind-boggling artifact: like some incalculably intricate machine of immeasurable illogic, which despite its wonderful disorder has a thread of the absolute.



THE CITY

The city is perhaps the most pertinent reflection of our social condition; it is here that we inevitably and often unwittingly speak openly of the order that is the pattern of our deepest cultural and intellectual questioning. As visitors to any foreign city discover, it is not *what* we see that is the voyage, but *how* what we see changes and colours the knowledge of ourselves and of the cities to which we return, finally affecting what we will make in them and of them.

As within any of the artifacts of man's making, the city contains the imprint of an insidious sub-text which has shaped and is shaping its creation. Mankind expends a great deal of energy organizing available material into hundreds of vast cities; all in a hopeless battle against the second law of thermodynamics (the propensity towards greater disorder). In this exhaustive enterprise each culture unavoidably creates, through time, a fossil record of their obses-



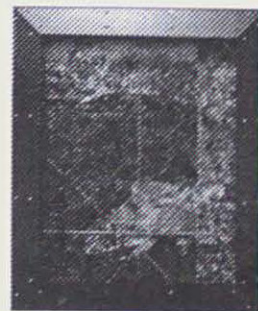
Voyages in a Cultural Onion

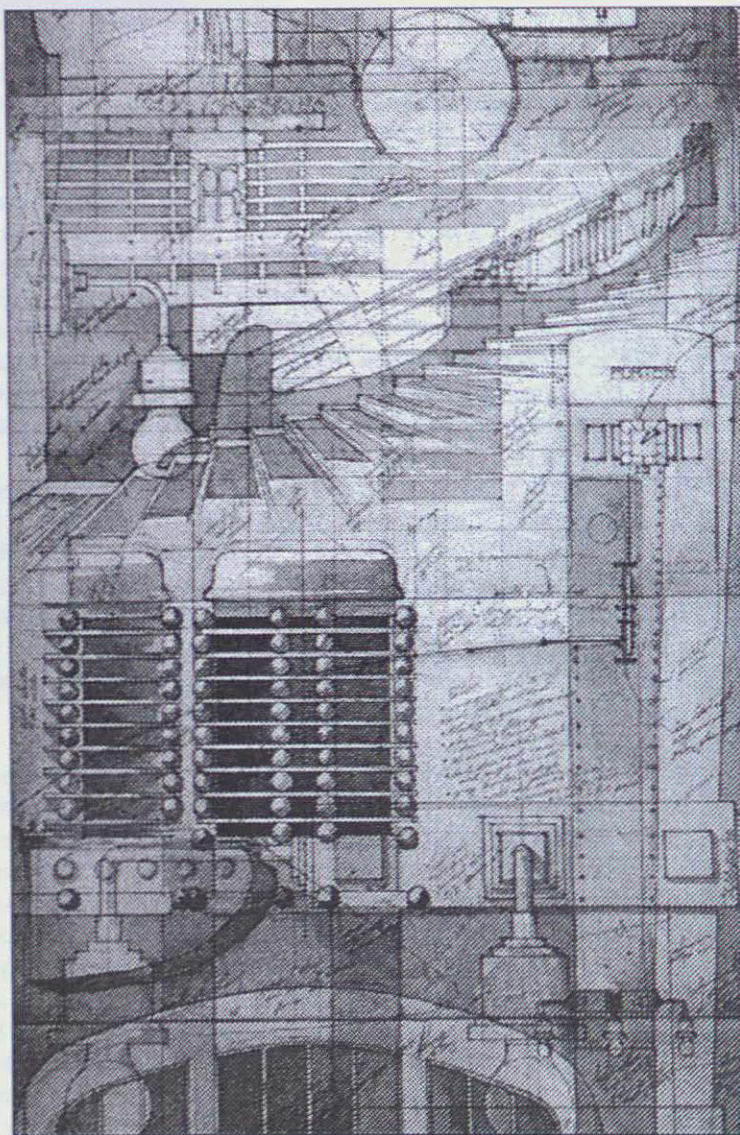
sions, fears, hopes and follies. Cities are the architectures of desire; they are the paradigms of our confusion and it is this that renders them indispensable as artifacts – events to be explored.

The study was an attempt to 'read' the urban subtext like Braille – that is not only with my eyes, but also through the touch of the pen, brush and knife upon the canvas of my inquiry. To the uninitiated eye of the traveller cities are like the indecipherable hieroglyphic texts of ancient Phoenician scribes. These imagined scribes of antiquity and those that followed, had an obvious problem with communication. This was due in part to their conspicuous lack of paper. But not easily hushed, they impressed grave words upon carefully prepared slabs of stone which were laboriously carried to and fro.

Upon receiving the message, the author of the reply would not have gone to the great trouble of preparing a new slab, but instead would have more likely saved the taxes of his kingdom for more noble pursuits, and instructed his scribe to engrave the reply between the lines of the previous message in a finer hand. The first great Ruler, not to be outdone by the frugality of his neighbouring pen-pal would have surely responded in kind with a still finer hand between the lines of the now double-font text.

Imagine if this ancient dialogue in stone were extrapolated onto a sort of great fractal palimpsest continuing in upon itself. – If the entire history of the land – its great wars, its magnificent victories, and the sufferings of its crushing defeats – the dramatic rise and fall of empires and the deaths of its great Monarchs; from the birth of prodigious tyrants and the fall of the Dark Ages followed by the brilliance of enlightened thought, to the passing of plagues and cataclysmic tragedy were all captured on a single textured surface, what a great artifact such a tablet would be! Now imagine, this encrusted slab of the ages beginning to grow – as we shrunk in relation to its vast expansion, until the tiny embrasures upon its surface; the multifold scratches of countless scribes began to appear as deep fissures. Then let it grow further as we continue to shrink until the first now enormous printed lines of the slab's initial message, become vast boulevards to our diminished size. Then the later texts would be as streets and alleys. And later texts still would be driveways and front paths, stair wells and even tiny hallways, or perhaps only the distance between you the reader and this page – then this slab of stone would be a city, and what else could it be – for is this not a city?





EPILOGUE

Often it is only in returning from a voyage that one is able to make sense of the footprints. The work carried out in each temporary studio progressed autonomously and the voyage strayed further and further from its intended path. I remember arriving back in Montreal, to find the numerous boxes, crates and brown paper packages which were the product of my travel. It did not look like much. It is amazing how small the collected work of ten months abroad can look when packed for maximum security and minimum postage weight.

But now, finally, I could open my mail.

Out of the tightly bound vessels, some of which I had not seen since my evacuation of Barcelona almost six months before, came hundreds of drawings, paintings, sketches, and scribbles. There were placemats scrawled with studies for larger works, notes and journal entries written in some now indecipherable hand on scraps of paper or crumbling napkins. There was an entire table cloth, (the type common to those unquestionably marginalized eateries sought out by the obsessively frugal) upon which I had planned one of the larger works in oil during an interminable wait for the chronically disinterested service typical of Spanish red light districts. I had tipped the waiter but stolen the cloth.

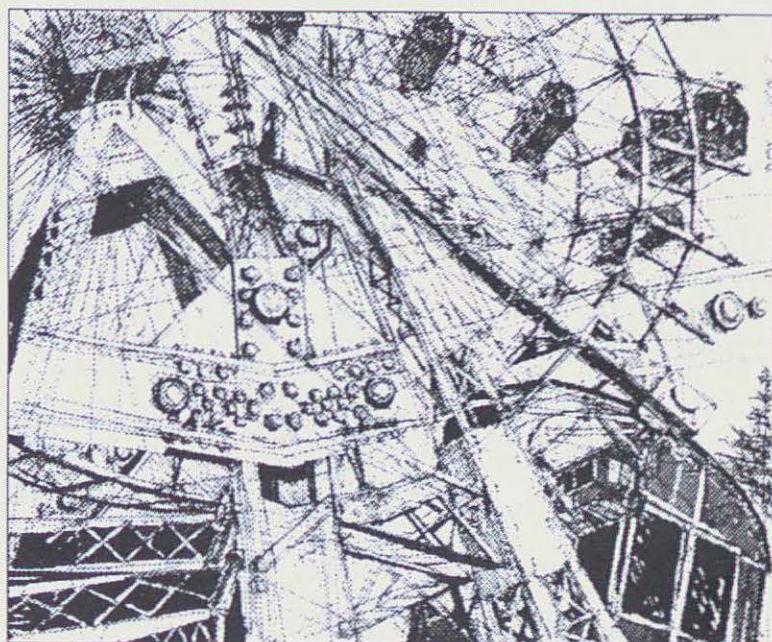
What presented the greatest fascination was the novelty of viewing all the works, from all three cities, together in one room for the first time. Until then the works had been carried out in isolation - one city at a time. Now the subtle changes in approach, palette and textures, size and preference of subject matter became apparent. It was in these discrepancies, these omissions, where I began to trace a second, parallel city of fragments. The reflected city of the unfamiliar was glimpsed in what was said or left unsaid - as in a darkened glass.

In fact, by the end of each three month stay, I was not drawing the city at all. The drawings became more and more abstract: establishing a symbolic dialogue between historical research and the immediacy of sensual impressions. In the patterns and reliefs, taken in some cases directly from the walls and streets, were layered and blended the weavings of a graphic story depicting allegorical relationships and associations consistent, not with the city as such, but with the mind's lattice upon which, as in warm wax or humid plaster, the sensual impressions of the city are impressed.

I believe that as one travels, the mind is stretched open and the foreign world of the unknowable becomes a force which floods in to fill the gaps as they appear between the contiguous layers of our Onion-like consciousness. The inherent educational grounding is in this deluge. This is a necessary passage, while the actual displacement of travel is the vehicle for its possibility.

In order to organize and make sense of the cultural and sensual confrontations that the foreign city provokes, the mind creates out of necessity a second city - almost as a defence. This second city is complete with paths and stairwells, sewers and towers similar to the original. It is a city of beautiful places - of light and colour filled with openness and the pleasant sounds of water and laughter; it is also one of fearful darkness and dangerous blind alleys. It is a city built not of earth and trees but of a billion tenuous silk-like threads of conductive tissues and synaptic connections. Like a coiled lattice of interwoven memories and experiences, this 'invisible city' is hung like a silvery net in the infinite electro-magnetic space of our minds. It is a city made of walls or skins which, although containing nothing, are yet as surely focused as is the Onion, or for that matter, the centreless darkness of the brain itself.

Into this gossamer structure of memory cells and neural ganglions the new impressions rush and are caught. Here within this existential urban plan, the electro-magnetic second city of memory, experience and confusion begins a reconstruction. This is the darkened glass,



and it is through this invisible mental city of the journeyman architect that the *voyage of travel* must occur. The wonder and paradox of the foreign cities we visit and all that they symbolize are embossed in this city of electronic pathways and synaptic traffic. This is where the true school of travel can be found. From this school the greatest lessons in architecture may be gleaned and, I think - more than anything else - it was this city that I finally began to draw.

Notes:

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things*. New York: Vintage Books 1989.

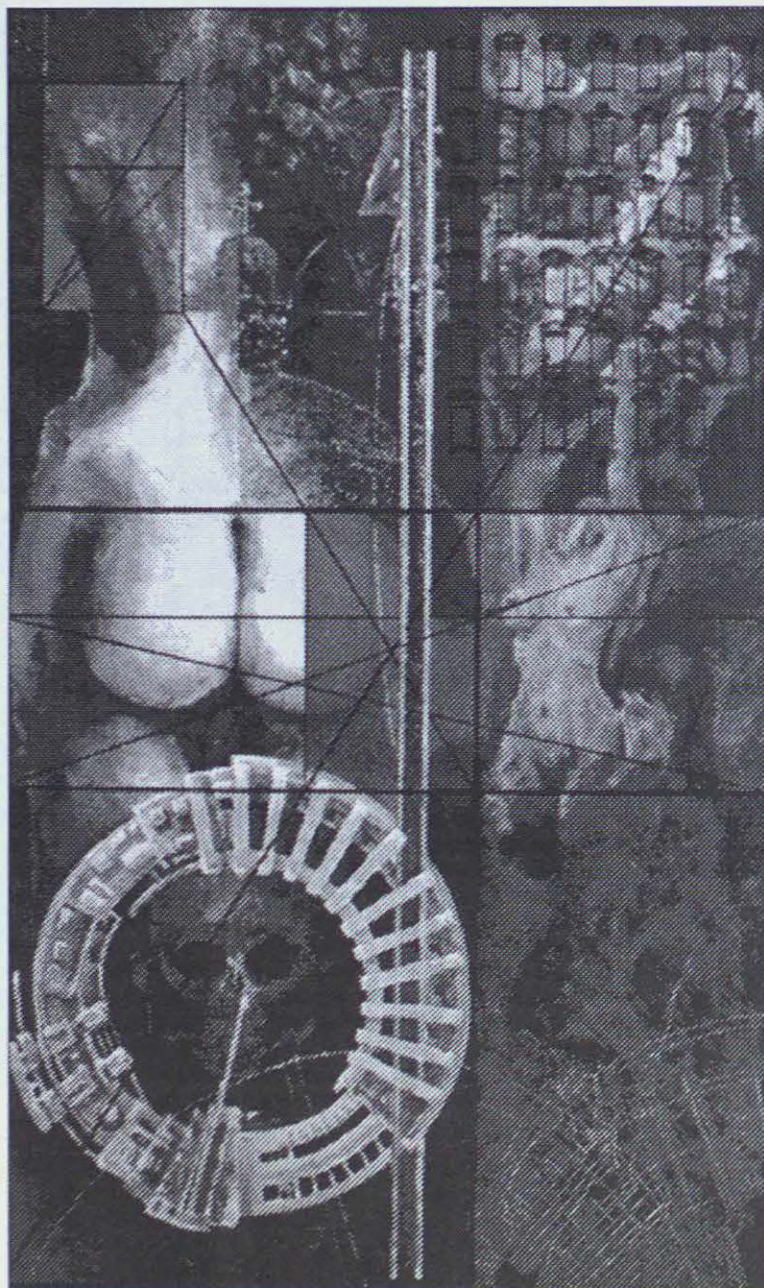
² Ibid.

³ Source quote



⁴ Architecture, as a mode of thought and action begins at this same door. It is in the void or gap between the images that the task is given shape and the questions are asked. The voyage is then the work of making. It is in this search undertaken in the work that the inchoate answers take form. Design is then a voyage of discovery, through which the pre-eminence of the physical crafted object is established. The architect *travels* through the work towards a personal understanding of dwelling. If architecture is to reconcile the stuff of the world with the consummation of human ritual space, it must be deeply indebted to the voyage of its inception.

⁵ "Textural" is used here in reference to its connection to text which is related to textiles and weaving since this is in fact what written "text" is – the weaving of words. Poetry is merely one loom, but it can be of the highest quality.



In 1990 Andrew Dunbar pursued an independent study of the city in the European context. He established work studios in Barcelona, Glasgow and Vienna in order to carry out the body of work which was the subject of an exhibition entitled City Works. He recently completed a Master of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania.