

A Flower in the Grim City: Urban Environmental Education, Anti-Urban Philosophy, and Trips to the Field

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THE OXYMORON AND THE THING WITHOUT OPPOSITE

When talking with in-service teachers working in a large American city about Urban Environmental Education — a recent outgrowth of Environmental Education — it is not long before someone suggests, to much jaded agreement, that “Urban Environmentalism” is an oxymoron. There *is* no environment here, the implication seems to be; *this* is The City. Environmentalism, seen as the preservation of nature, has found its equal and opposite. The City, it would seem, is the place in which concern for the environment could find no place. And yet, if asked to reflect on what the opposite of an environment might be, there is a long pause. Somehow *an* environment is that which has no opposite, but *The* Environment finds its opposite in The City.

Rather than being a peculiarity of bringing Environmental Education to the urban (non)environment, however, this paradox has been a dominant factor in educational philosophy in general. Urban Environmental Education runs the risk, as it often finds expression, of becoming merely one of the most recent expressions of an educational desire to have the masses of the city acknowledge their own guilt in resisting changing their un-natural ways. Urban teaching has too often taken on a dubious missionary function, promising that something better is available for all, provided that the student hears this as meaning “even for you.” The hope that this model of education proffers at the same time implies a more essential guilt. It offers “upward mobility,” or a way out, while firmly reifying categories that resist mobilization. Urban Environmental Education has continued largely, if not without exception, in this tradition, seeming to suggest by what it highlights and omits that there is no environment to be had in the city that is not merely a sign indicating the exception: a park, a tree lined street, a lone flower in a grim city.

If education is to let go of this coercive strategy it will entail realizing how intricate and long-standing the connection is between our images of the city and our ideas about education. This means looking freshly at a philosophical landscape to which we have grown accustomed, no longer even recognizing it as a landscape. To that end, this essay will remark on three pivotal moments in our philosophizing about education that cast the city as a fallen space, as *the* undesirable abode. Looking further afield, we will then explore specifically urban approaches to environments. Drawing on the work of Jane Jacobs and the Situationist movement’s engagement with urban geographies, I will propose that, not only is it possible to have meaningful interactions with city environments, but doing so may have much to tell us about how we can think differently about our educational processes.

THE UNDERGROUND CITY

Let us begin by looking at a story about a cave — that is, a city. It is a familiar tale, having lost much of the strangeness that caused Glaucon to remark at Socrates’s

telling of it. We have long understood the cave allegory to provide a dramatic enactment of the divisions of knowing just laid out. One learns on the way up, and going down one risks, eventually, forgetting and death. Indeed, Socrates has just finished with the last of his interlocutors, finally concluding that in a well-ordered city it is the philosopher that rules. Like the divided line, however, the dialogue has only created the illusion of upward mobility, each participant going only so far. Having finished elaborating the ideal city, Socrates tells this next story directly to Glaucon. It is arguably, however, a story about the silent but barely restrained audience. As if in a stage whisper, Socrates pointedly warns: these cave dwellers will not listen, and will jump to defend their cave rather than allow the city just described to last. This, apparently, is Glaucon's lesson: an image, as Socrates introduces the allegory, "of our nature in its education *and lack of education*."¹ It is also, perhaps, a perverse lesson for the cave dwellers, if only they could truly hear it. The implication seems to be that they are like the lord of Hades, in a much earlier quote of Homer by Socrates: "Terrified, Hades, the master of those below, leapt from his throne, crying out, fearful that Poseidon who rocks the ground would tear open the earth, illuminating for mortals and immortals the abode below — grim, fetid, abhorrent even to the gods."² But what justifies our reading this earlier quote in the context of the cave? Is Socrates implying that the cave is a kind of hell? Speaking of the prisoner who finally takes in the cosmos, he again defers to Homer, "would he be affected and, as Homer says, 'prefer to live above ground, and be the servant of another man, a poor man,' and to undergo anything rather than opine with them and live in such a manner?"³ If we look to the original context, we find that it is Achilles speaking, indignantly turning down the notion of ruling over the underworld.

If the cave is intended to represent Hades, what suggests that this hell/cave is a kind of city? John Sallis's admirable reading of the whole dialogue as a descent into and ascent from Hades, beginning with the first words, "I went down to Piraeus," might give us a clue.⁴ The Piraeus is the harbor of Athens, connected to the city proper by a long wall, a city beneath the city. It is a place in which things of all kinds mix, in which foreigners and natives engage in commerce, and where distinctions are oddly leveled. It is a place, from a dramatic point of view, to leave. And yet, Socrates, like Ulysses, will bear the unfortunate detour heroically, for the sake of those less wise.

We have, then, a hellish city that brings down and entraps a citizen of an ideal city. But, there is another aspect potentially at work here as well. What if we translate Socrates's quote from Homer, "would he be struck and...much prefer 'to plow the soil for a tenant farmer who has been allotted little,' and to endure any such thing rather than to believe those things and live in that manner?" Here the emphasis is not on being *above* ground as much as being *of* the ground, and less on poverty in general than of having little land distributed to one. Perhaps in this reading we can glean a double bias at work here. To be of the soil, a farmer, is certainly demeaning in the eyes of our cosmopolitan interlocutors. But even this, the suggestion seems to be, is preferable to returning to Hades, the grim city. Indeed, it seems that an experience

of the world outside the city, seeing the stars, is what leads to realizing how grim the city actually is. To learn is to leave the prison of the cave and enter the field of the world. Teaching, in this model, involves a return to the cave, speaking of a world that is not present, and attempting to convince the denizens of the cave to leave. In so doing the teacher risks ridicule, disorientation, and violence. There is no indication that it will do any good. They seem to enjoy their hellish city, leaping like Hades at the thought of its grimness being shown for what it is.

DESCARTES AND URBAN REDEVELOPMENT

If Plato has Socrates lay out the ideal city with its philosopher king only to then suggest how this organization is brought to a halt by the masses of the grim city, this philosophical conflict between two kinds of cities is not strictly an ancient problem. Descartes, in *Discourse on Method*, writes, “Thus these ancient cities that were once merely straggling villages and have become in the course of time great cities are commonly quite poorly laid out, compared to those well-ordered towns that an engineer lays out on a vacant plain as it suits his fancy.”⁵ In Bruno Fortier’s terms we could call this the difference between the “accumulation city” and the “creation city.”⁶ The city that forms by way of accumulation, however, is plagued for Descartes, not just by an aesthetic messiness, but by unsure foundations and the threat of collapse. Descartes surmises that one person could not likely raze and rebuild a whole state, but doing so to the foundations of one’s own thought is perhaps a manageable and desirable project.

Like our freed prisoner, Descartes, attempting to share with others what he has discovered, worries about the murderous masses. In a published whisper, Descartes speaks of those who received his work poorly:

In this they seem to me like a blind man, who, to fight without a handicap against someone who is sighted, makes his opponent go into the depths of a very dark cave...For my principles being very simple and very evident, I would, by publishing them, be doing almost the same as if I were to open some windows and make some light of day enter that cave where they have descended to fight.⁷

What is this cave into which Descartes imagines he might introduce some light? Rather than understanding his language of city and cave as an eloquent metaphor for the life of the mind, urban planners of the time understood well enough that Descartes was also talking about practical matters.⁸ And just as with the cave allegory, the story of Descartes’s project is as much about education or the lack thereof as it is about cities. For Descartes, we might say, the dark caves of antiquated cities are maintained by the general unwillingness of the inhabitants to raze and rebuild first their minds and then their cities. The creation city is pitted against the accumulation city and it is the citizens’ unconcern for self-education that gives the accumulation city its edge. The citizens of the dark city resist, holding out against the light by drawing those who would start anew deeper down into the cave.

ROUSSEAU’S PARIS

In the stories of Plato and Descartes we have seen the grim city pitted against the ideal city, and the want of education taking center stage. It is in Rousseau’s *Emile* that we witness an apparent turn of affairs. The city is still grim, to be sure; but, rather

than linking an ideal city with the besieged possibility of education, Emile's education is through removal from the city altogether. If the city is grim, why not start outside, in "nature"? But this turn of affairs is only apparent; Rousseau cannot stay the course. Nature, somehow, is understandable only by reference to the city. Examples such as the following pile up: "Walk in the country... The public walks of cities are pernicious for children of both sexes. It is there that they begin to become vain and to want to be looked at."⁹

The more one stays away, the more one is drawn in. In a reversal of Achilles' double edged refusal, Rousseau writes: "By these measures and other similar ones I believe he will be so well protected against external objects and vulgar maxims that I would rather see him in the midst of the worst society of Paris than alone in his room or in a park, given over to all the restlessness of his age."¹⁰ If one must undergo the city it is because, even within its walls, one may find something of value.

At the present time there is perhaps not a civilized place on earth where the general taste is worse than in Paris. Nevertheless it is in this capital that good taste is cultivated... It is the spirit of societies which develops a thoughtful mind and extends our vision as far as it can go. If you have a spark of genius, go and spend a year in Paris. Soon you will be all that you can be, or you will never be anything.¹¹

Go down and find what one is looking for, but do not stay, even if offered the throne. Rousseau continues: "One can learn to think in places where bad taste reigns; but one must not think as do those who have this bad taste — and it is quite difficult for this to happen when one stays among them too long."¹² Even then, do not be assured: its flowers in the dark are false promises. Rousseau, it turns out, knew this, and was once more teaching Emile a hard lesson. Emile's Sophie is not here. This is the city, and its women, for Rousseau, are not what they appear. And so, "Adieu, then, Paris, celebrated city, city of noise, smoke, and mud, where the women no longer believe in honor and the men no longer believe in virtue. Adieu, Paris. We are seeking love, happiness, innocence. We shall never be far enough away from you."¹³

This is Rousseau's last word on the city — the last word *to* the city, because we should remember that Emile does not exist. Once more we have a stage whisper, in front of, at least in part, a city audience, about the failure of the audience to be properly educated. This *is* the education, more than that of the hypothetical Emile, of *Emile*. But what is worth noticing in passing is how Emile's education in nature nevertheless involves an inevitable foray into the city. How else will Emile learn? How else engage with the "spirit of society?" How else, finally, to say adieu to the city?

NATURE WRITING AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

This legacy of thought, turning with Rousseau away from Achilles's back-handed disdain for the farmer to an embrace of nature as the proper place for education, is developed within the literary tradition of nature writing. Here we learn that nature in all its wonders will draw us out of our complacent selves, a theme found within the writings of Aldo Leopold, Henry David Thoreau, Annie Dillard, and taken up by countless others. Their celebrations of nature are frequently accompanied by a subtle or not so subtle disdain for the city.

Leopold, in his seminal work, *A Sand County Almanac*, begins his reflections for February with characteristic charm and bite: “There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace.”¹⁴ Time and time again, writers on the environment find a link between a spiritual and moral disconnect and a disconnection from the natural world. Otherwise insightful and remarkable writers such as David Orr¹⁵ and Glen Mazis¹⁶ contrast amazing descriptions of an attunement with nature, with dire failures such as the Holocaust. As Slavoj Žižek suggests in “The Subject Supposed to Loot and Rape,” on recent media coverage of New Orleans, it is not a matter of whether such connections are real or not — they may very well be — rather the catastrophe serves as an opportunity to trot out a preconceived bias.¹⁷ The natural force of Hurricane Katrina is paradoxically made to show that it is the grim, *black* city itself that is truly violent. The racial nature of these preconceptions is glaringly obvious, and yet the thinnest of veneers, New Orleans, seems to allow it to continue. This all too common strategy of “addressing” racism and classism, of putting them in a place, and of then letting the place stand in — like the eponymous Hades — might be called a kind of “environmental-ism.” Bringing this analysis back to the genre of nature writing, what never gets assessed is why we look to find this violence, why we look for the disconnect of the city to fuel our drive to save-the-planet? Why do we not find such moral environmental significance in the battles that have been fought in the fields, in the farmer disconnectedly defending his crops against “vermin,” in the American Indians’ liberal use of fire to alter the landscape to their benefit, in the carefully crafted “nature” park of Yellowstone? Why is it that our inner cities are dirty, but our fields are Disney spotless?

Environmental Education, emerging from the environmental movement, has largely followed suit. “If only we could show people nature,” the thinking seems to go, “they would see the error of their ways.” In that evangelical spirit, Urban Environmental Education has taken the message to those who, it is implied, need it most, the environmentally deprived city dwellers. But, while Plato’s cave was the unfortunate site for education and the want thereof, in a perverse educational stance, environmentalists now *make* caves for education to strive against. “Face the front,” they seem to say, “and we will tell you of a world you do not know, the real world. If you recognize your status, this education may allow you to break free.” Just as in Plato’s cave, there is no indication that there is anything worth looking around to see. You may find nature here, in a park, in a glimpse of the sky between buildings, striving up through a crack in the concrete, a testament to lone courage against the odds, but this is precisely the point: it is beleaguered, from elsewhere, out of place. In working so hard not to leave anyone behind, we have to ask where we are going. Urban educators all too easily omit the very environment that surrounds, supports, and is home to the students. “If you are to really understand,” we seem to say, “we will have to take you on a field trip, on a trip to the fields.” To be sure, it is not that there is anything wrong with field trips. But what about descriptions of the urban environment? Where is the possible message that this too might be a place to live,

a place for beauty, a place worth observing? Field trips, without comparable descriptions of the students lived environments, do constitute a form of education, but it is not perhaps going where we imagine. We need to be able to distinguish between the education environments can provide and the education we provide through one-sided images of the environment.

JANE JACOBS: OBSERVING A CITY

Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, first published in 1961, was a stunning critique of city planning in America, which had followed largely in the footsteps of Descartes. Her message was simple, but powerful: stop and look. Doing so herself, she devotes three chapters to the different functions of sidewalks. Received wisdom suggests that sidewalks are for getting from place to place, from home to work, from school to nature in the form of a park. They catch us in transition and are no place to be. Instead, Jacobs described how having diverse people on the sidewalk in the various functions of their day was more important for safety than shining light on them, like Poseidon, making them bare for all and none to see. She talked about how they serve not to corrupt the youth, as Rousseau suggests, but as places in which children can be assimilated into a community life. She talked about how sidewalk contact *is* community, and how walling off buildings from the street, turning them towards inner gardens, might prevent such contact. In all her looking at and describing of what actually happens in the city, she resisted the orthodox model of city planning.

According to Jacobs, this orthodoxy followed in the footsteps of Ebenezer Howard, an avid English social planner with a distaste for cities. Howard proposed, instead, the Garden City, moving all the people of the city to a new kind of town where all the functions of life could take place in proximity to nature. Few such towns materialized as such, but the message was taken to heart. Cities began to divide up the functions of the life into discreet areas. Houses were turned away from the streets. Parks were turned in on themselves, as if in denial of the city. The Decentrists took this even further, suggesting that cities ought to be distributed out into the countryside. Cities were out of control, and planners such as Lewis Mumford were happy to catalog the morbid failures of the great cities.

As the Garden City proved elusive, enthusiasm for it began to fade. The sheer accumulated mass, planners began to think, recalling Descartes, made it difficult to change, and the logistics of such a great number of people proved daunting to the garden ideal. In the 1920s Le Corbusier proposed another dream, an ideal city that would rise up above the ground. He called it the Radiant City, and it entailed building large skyscrapers up into the sky. While such a positive image of the city may seem to signal a departure from the denigration of urban landscapes that we have described, the whole point of the skyscrapers was to create suitable surface space for a garden below. The ideal city would be a radiant city above, not a grim city, but a garden. In the Cartesian tradition, this became a strong force in urban "renewal," a process of removing blighted communities and replacing them with an ideal that was supposed to work better.

Jacobs's countering of this tradition by looking at living cities and what actually allowed them to thrive was a powerful attempt to reclaim the city from the vision of planners. Her work can be a valuable example of another way to practice Urban Environmental Education. To look is to see not only what does not work, but also what does work, and to be willing to examine and reconsider the underlying prejudice against the environment of lived cities.

WANDERING AROUND

Around the same time Jacobs was pursuing an experiential analysis of what allows cities to thrive or fail, the Situationist International movement, picking up and rerouting the work of Dadaism and Surrealism, was also taking seriously the importance of experiencing the city. In *Theory of the Dérive*, Guy Debord describes the practice of the *dérive*, or "drifting." The *dérive* is more than just a walk or aimless stroll. The intent is to glean, by moving through an urban space, the "psychogeographic" contours, the way in which a space is formed and functions as a place. Debord writes:

The ecological analysis of the absolute or relative character of fissures in the urban network, of the role of micro-climates, of distinct neighborhoods with no relation to administrative boundaries, and above all of the dominating action of centers of attraction, must be utilized and completed by psychogeographic methods. The objective passionate terrain of the *dérive* must be defined in accordance both with its own logic and with its relations with social morphology.¹⁸

By taking oneself out of the habitual modes of moving through urban spaces, one creates a new possibility for noticing the ways in which the space encourages and discourages certain ways of moving. The goal is two fold: on the one hand, to recognize and disrupt one's own habitual patterns in order to enlarge the range of meaningful urban interactions; and, on the other hand, to create a map of the "objective passionate terrain," the urban reality as it is felt and lived. Unlike a field trip, the point is not to experience another place as other, what Debord calls a "mere exoticism." Instead, one can begin right where one is, experiencing the ordinary in a manner that is not so much extraordinary — in the sense of being taken out of the ordinary or leaving the cave — as it is what we might call "ex-ordinary." The *dérive* involves us *more* deeply in our immediate urban surroundings, allowing us to recognize that we have choices concerning how we feel and respond to our environment. The Situationists took seriously the power of looking and experiencing to transform the landscape itself:

Today the different unities of atmosphere and of dwelling are not precisely marked off, but are surrounded by more or less extended and indistinct border regions. The most general change that *dérive* experience leads to proposing is the constant diminution of these border regions, up to the point of their complete suppression.¹⁹

The transformation available through the *dérive* is not upward from a grim city to an ideal city, or outward from city to garden, but from experiences of such divisions to an environment more welcoming of varied interactions, to a more "alive" city in Jacobs's language.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS AN URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

The historic link constructed between a lack of education and the city, rather than serving as a motivator for true learning and thriving social arrangements,

continues to serve as a coercive strategy that reinforces and reifies biases inherent in how our societies structure themselves. Education, promising a way out, all too often creates a narrow path, and tells us that while all *can* leave, most will not. Urban Environmental Education is potentially in a position to ask us to rethink, not only our preconceptions about environments, but also what the experience of education can be. What would an education look like that was not already about entering and exiting a place that has nothing to offer, a hellish no-place? What would it look like to learn from the city; to consider one's immediate environment as a place worthy of engaging with; to not have the path laid out in advance, asking us to follow it out of fear of failure, guilty in advance for not making it? What if, after looking around the cave, we decided that there was something to see? What might cities have to teach us about education?

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1. Plato, *Republic*, 514a (emphasis added).
 2. Plato, *Republic*, 386d. Homer, *Iliad*, XX, 64–65 (my translation).
 3. Plato, *Republic*, 516d. Homer, *Odyssey*, IX, 489 (my translation).
 4. See John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 312–455.
 5. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1993), 7.
 6. See Bruno Fortier, *L'Amour Des Villes* (Paris: Mardaga Institut français d'architecture, 1994).
 7. Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 40.
 8. See Matt Erlin, *Berlin's Forgotten Future City, History, and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
 9. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or, On Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 141.
 10. *Ibid.*, 333.
 11. *Ibid.*, 342.
 12. *Ibid.*, 342.
 13. *Ibid.*, 355.
 14. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 6.
 15. David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind on Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1994), 16–25.
 16. Glen A. Mazis, *Earthbodies: Rediscovering Our Planetary Senses* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2002).
 17. Slavoj Žižek, "The Subject Supposed to Loot and Rape," *In These Times*, October 20, 2005.
 18. Guy Debord, *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996).
 19. *Ibid.*