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Adapting City of Dreams: Staging an Urban Imaginary

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Adapting *City of Dreams*: Staging an Urban Imaginary

by Caleb Johnston



Figure 1: Mapping Vancouver
Photo by Tim Matheson

Six performers take to an empty stage. The performance begins with a blank slate in the stillness of geological time. The sounds of wind gust over vacant space, and then slowly the crackling of fire echoes in the theatre. It is the sounds of the beginning of human life. A small circle of twigs is placed centre stage, and little-by-little, bits of driftwood form the contour of a coastline. Cedar leaves are laid flat to sketch a forest. Several First Nation settlements of the Coast Salish are constructed and we hear the low rhythmic resonance of song. Over the next hour, the city of Vancouver gradually takes shape in miniature, animated through blocks of wood, brick, and iron. We move from sounds of clanking hammers to the recorded narratives of European settlers, lamenting street bands of brass to foghorns and the coming of the railway. The work culminates with a glittering mirage of tea lights and glass overlaid with Diana Krall's version of *The Look of Love*. In a final gesture, smoke is blown over this aerial topography, mimicking the mist that often hangs over the coastal mountains. The familiar tones of

Vancouver's Skytrain fade into the faint rumblings of city streets. Spectators are invited on stage to encircle the city.

I am describing the performance of *City of Dreams*, a contemporary theatre-installation work that premiered at Vancouver's PuSh International Performing Arts Festival. In January 2011, I worked with British director Peter Reder to adapt *City of Dreams* into the local context of Vancouver, and I produced the piece through my performing arts society (see www.urban-crawl.com). The central image of the work was a map of Vancouver created from hundreds of found objects that were methodically assembled during performance. This mapping was mirrored by a soundscape composed of recorded and archival materials. *City of Dreams* appealed to my work as a theatre artist and geographer located at the intersection of urban studies and popular performance. I began this project interested in its possibilities of circulating a poetic cartography, and saw it as an opportunity to push back against dominant histories that constitute the city. In this short reflection, I assess the production's efforts to forge identification with a collective urban imaginary.

Working with private memory

There is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory.

— Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian impression*

Peter Reder is a theatre artist based in London whose work is embedded in the fabric of the urban. A number of his works use site-specific performance, video, and public installation to examine how the past is present in our everyday lives. *City of Dreams* originated in 1998 as a component of Reder's teaching in an adult education college in London. The project was

designed to engage students in the histories of the city. It was then restaged in the South London Gallery, and eventually produced in the United Kingdom's National Theatre, before touring internationally to Brisbane, Bremen, and Singapore. Reder and I developed a conversation after being introduced to each other by presenters at the PuSh Festival, which has a keen interest in facilitating exchange between international and local Vancouver artists. *City of Dreams* was a natural extension of my own theatre practice animating urban histories, and Reder and I thought this would be a significant project through which to develop innovative ways of thinking about and representing the cultural landscapes of the city. While the project has been adapted in various cities around the world, its appeal rests in a well-honed methodology that produces mappings that are reworked in relation to the geographies of particular places.

Our adaptation began with a two-week creation process that brought together six Vancouver artists, Peter Reder, and his longtime collaborator sound designer Tom Wallace. I produced the project through my performing arts society, selected cast and crew, identified sites we visited in Vancouver, as well as contributed a number of materials we used in the construction of the piece. Reder directed the collective through a number of exercises designed to get us thinking more deeply about our relationship to the city. We were asked to identify places in Vancouver representative of its iconic landscape, and to distinguish the sounds that constitute its acoustic ecology. These initial workshops were followed by expeditions around the city. We toured Burrard Inlet by boat guided by a longshoreman and senior union activist. We heard stories of the rapid expansion of British Columbia's coal and copper industries to satiate China's rising hunger for raw materials. We visited the Stevenson Canary and the Silvertree Sawmill on the banks of the Fraser River. We hiked the forest in Lynn Canyon and meandered city streets.

We also undertook self-guided journeys to places meaningful to us. We carried handheld recorders to collect environmental sounds, snatches of song, and oral testimonies. The objective of these sojourns was to scavenge found objects and audio materials evocative of the city's past and present. These materials were then used to construct a map of Vancouver during performance. Bricks, sawdust and personal artifacts were used to trace the spatial form of the city, whose shifting morphology unfolded through time, from the depths of origins to First Nations, European colonization to the rise of the (post)modern metropolis.



Figure 2: Hazel Venzon lighting tea candle
Photo by Tim Matheson

Some participants in *City of Dreams* discovered unexpected histories. Alex Ferguson, a cast member, observed that:

I learned weird things that I didn't know before. In the middle of it, I talked to my mother, and she's, "We just made a fight with the city and succeeded in establishing and protecting this old Greek Church in Kitsilano, which was established in 1927." And I used to go to that church with my mother when I was a kid, right? ... These things are going on in the city and who knows about them? (Personal)¹

Such serendipitous discoveries traced the past through the everyday lives of participants. This historicization of place required performers to engage personal experience and popular memory.

"I was very interested in the conversation," another performer, Igor Santizo, noted, "and the thinking process of what is Vancouver. What are our iconic places? What is history? What is memory? What are different ways to represent that?" (Personal). Santizo touches upon common terrain for artists and social scientists alike: restaging place and the challenge of translating memory. Dilemmas of representation surfaced during the creation process when performers were asked to draw on and—to some extent—embody intimate histories.

Santizo: We all had our own space where we were able to create our own story ... What comes to mind is [Maiko] wanting to put in and acknowledge Japan town, right? What role that played in history, in Canadian history. So she brought a fan, and she unfolded it and put it down at a certain point ... When we got chronologically to the time when it was World War II, she turned out the candle and closed the fan, which was obviously meant to stand in for the way that Japanese people were taken away, you know, into those camps. I think that was something important for her to do. (Personal)

"I felt conflicted at times in the process of *City of Dreams*," said Maiko Yamamoto. She clarified:

No doubt there was a purpose to myself, a Japanese Canadian in the room with other performers who came from diverse backgrounds (Mexican, German, Greek, First Nations, Filipino) ... The conflict came in feeling responsible to 'represent' in some way. My family immigrated relatively recently to Canada, and so I don't have the same relationship to the internment that Japanese Canadians who went through it ... But yet I'm there, in the room and could sense that if I didn't take it on in some way, it wouldn't be there. (Message)

Participating artists were selected because they came from various disciplines and were interested in innovative practices. But more important than theatrical experience was their willingness to explore personal histories in the city. Performers were asked to do precisely what Yamamoto fears: to represent the multiple, often contested narratives that constitute the identity of the city. Maiko touches upon the politics of publicizing an archive of private feeling (Cvetkovich). She also expresses concern over feeling responsible to represent a history that has little resonance in her own familial life. Participants took on the challenging work of bringing both their own intimate experiences and difficult public memories into the making of the map.



Figure 3: Igor Santizo
Photo by Tim Matheson

Troubling knowledges did enter into *City of Dreams*—for example Yamamoto’s representation of the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II. Assembling the map involved violently sweeping away First Nation settlements to make way for European colonization. These gestures were affective. During a post-performance talk-back, one spectator described being deeply moved by the map whose installation he felt was seeped in the violence of colonial occupation. In a journal kept during the creation of the project, Melanie Kuxdorf echoed similar sentiments, suggesting that *City of Dreams* represented “the piling up of losses ... There’s a melancholic feel to the show. [It is] an act of mourning.” Reder challenged any easy identification with loss:

Someone said in the talk-back that they were so moved seeing the exodus of the indigenous people, he argued that sadness stayed with them for the whole piece. I did feel that was something I’m uncomfortable with. The taking of somebody else’s trauma almost as your own is, for me, a dubious activity ... I think this trauma becomes a very popular narrative, and that can be another appropriation. (Personal)

Political theatre often asks us to bear witness, and Reder questions to what extent our identification with the pain of others can lead to cultural appropriation. Many gestures and materials used in the map did resonate with audience members, but Reder (for the most part) did not seek to forge identification through the testimonials of individuals. Actors may have felt the burden of representation but they were not asked to embody specific narratives during performance. There was no “acting” in the theatrical installation. Performers did not deliver any text and their “roles” were limited to building the map. *City of Dreams* did not ask spectators to witness but rather to situate themselves within a staged representation.

The map as poetic screen



Figure 4: Maiko Yamamoto building Gastown
Photo by Tim Matheson

From the onset of the project, Reder was clear that he wanted to take a light touch in creating a piece that would function as a poetic screen. The map was meant as an image that would resonate with a broad Vancouver public by activating spectators' own identification with the city. Reder concluded:

This Vancouver [version] is mostly about public memory It begins to enter this thing of public memory being a huge composite of personal feelings. But it's where they overlap that it's quite interesting. And I've felt that perhaps more emphasis should be given to what's shared because we easily atomize and, you know, highly value the individual and what divides people in some way.
(Personal)

City of Dreams sought common ground to disrupt the "atomization" of individual lives. Our mapping of Vancouver was constructed from a combination of personal and public artifacts representative of the city. During the creation process, we not only collected public objects but

also gathered a variety of materials from others. We conducted interviews with people and borrowed objects identified within our own social networks.

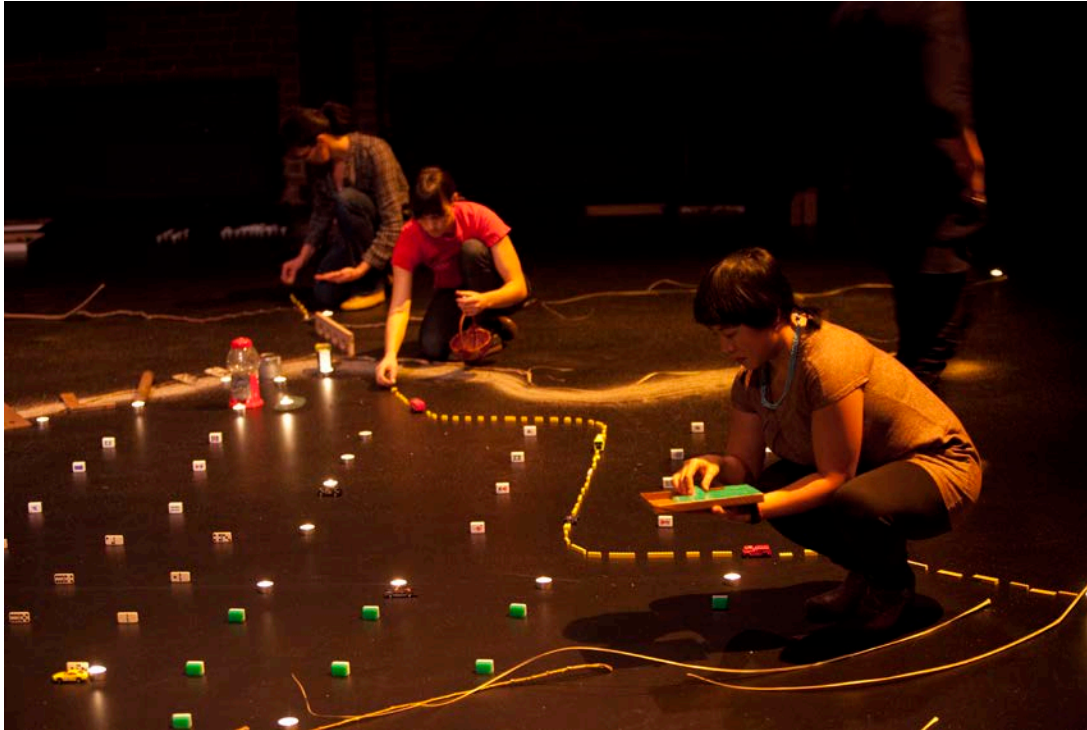


Figure 5: Lisa Ravensbergen, Melanie Kuxdorf and Hazel Venzon construct the suburbs.
Photo by Tim Matheson

The objective of this process was to select materials to stage an urban imaginary whose affect hinged on a “recognition of things” and invited spectators to infuse materials with emotive meaning.

Reder: One of our starting points is to talk about a recognition of things ... It’s a reader’s work to find the meaning, not necessarily the artist ... You know, theatre that I’ve seen, I’ve often had some misgivings around political stuff before, stuff that feels like an issue, or a very strong agenda being presented. Even if I agree with it, I feel a bit suffocated by it, as being given no option to disagree ... Maybe I’m politically undecided as well. (Personal)

Reder wanted the map left open to multiple perspectives. He is reticent to work from a predetermined political agenda. “I’m not trying to be polemic about anything, really,” he noted, “I’m not trying to make a big statement” (Personal). This ambiguity sat uneasily with certain cast members. Ferguson observed that, “[Peter] had suggested that he wanted to take a light touch. So he didn’t want to overly politicize things in an overt way. And of course many of us in the group wanted to politicize it. Very much so” (Personal). Ferguson expresses a desire for a greater interrogation of the city. He referred specifically to the effects of Expo 1986—an event that ignited decades of escalating real estate speculation in Vancouver:

I performed in ‘86 as a street theatre guy, walking on stilts and worked for the UN pavilion. It was a good-paying gig ... [But] I didn’t want Vancouver to become an international city that everybody knew about. And of course here we are a few decades later with a city that’s too expensive to live in ... Yeah, for me it’s like it should have been put down as a blight on the city. (Personal)



Figure 6: Lasting image of *City of Dreams*
Photo by Tim Matheson

The absence of a critical politics mapping Vancouver generated a lively discussion not only among performers but also with audience members, and the play's final image provoked much debate. *City of Dreams* ended with a spectacular view of the metropolis. Gleaming glass vases (bought from IKEA) stood in for the incredible redevelopment that stretches through former Expo lands and wraps its way around the downtown core. This landscape was set ablaze with a hundred tea lights. As spectators gazed down, Diana Krall's smooth, melodious voice rang out with, "I can hardly wait to hold you, feel my arms around you, how long I have waited, waited just to love you, now that I have found you, don't ever go, don't ever go, don't ever go." It was an enchanting image. "I felt very emotional at times watching it be constructed," Ferguson confessed, "especially with the candle-lights. It was so beautiful. I kind of like [Diana Krall] ... It's a bit ridiculous. I found that kind of funny but also kind of beautiful" (Personal). This topography elicited strong reactions from audience members, one of whom directed a pointed question to Reder regarding what appeared to her to be a blatant celebration of a highly exclusionary city—what she described as a "real estate agent's dream city."

Was the map meant to be ironic? Elegant? Depoliticized? It is hard to say. For his part, Reder maintained a distance from any fixed political position. Conflicting interpretations of the map constituted the project's greatest effect. Reder desired an uneasy ambiguity to shape how we all map the city, an objective furthered by a number of directorial decisions. *City of Dreams* was theatrically minimal in its public presentation. Performers did not act roles, nor did they speak during performance, with the exception of the very end of the piece where they gathered around the map and called out memorable sites in the city. With the work focused solely on constructing the city, spectators' identification with actors and text was disrupted. Deciding to emphasize this

construction brought the map to the foreground. *City of Dreams* asked Vancouver residents to activate their own agency—to situate their lives, experiences and memories within a poetic representation of the city. To this end, we take heart from an e-mail received during the production:

We attended *City of Dreams* this week. What a beautiful piece, how transient is the human journey ... As a Vancouverite, born here and now 70 years old, the visual and audio combinations drew me in and generated so many recollections of things I have personally experienced (riding the tram to Stevenson), and what I heard from my parents and their friends (some of whose parents were alive when the city was founded). (Clague)

Note

¹ This article utilizes materials drawn from a series of recorded interviews and e-mail correspondence conducted with Peter Reder and performers following the public presentation of the project in January 2011.

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