Narrative Deserts and Embodied Meanings in the City
The Microstories of Ghent's City Pavilion

Kris Pint

Meaningfulness in a Narrative Desert: Violent, Vital Microstories

Many urban environments seem to suffer from what architecture theorist Françoise Choay calls 'semantic reduction' or *hyposignifiance*, with only one form of meaning left: the economic discourse of production and consumption.[1] This creates what we could call narrative deserts: spaces without a thriving narrative ecosystem that provides sufficient different, meaningful stories to its inhabitants. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) Michel de Certeau paints a similar picture:

> *Where stories are disappearing (or else are being reduced to museographical objects), there is a loss of space: deprived of narrations (as one sees it happen in both the city and the countryside), the group or the individual regresses toward the disquieting, fatalistic experience of a formless, indistinct, and nocturnal totality.*[2]

In de Certeau's dystopian view, the suppression of stories and legends by a technocratic and economic discourse of efficiency and homogenization makes the contemporary city uninhabitable. Historical narratives and cultural meanings are often reduced to elements of touristic city branding, without as much as a vital link to the actual daily life of city dwellers.

> *Thus, as a woman from Rouen puts it, no, here 'there isn't any place special, except for my own home, that's all . . . . There isn't anything.' Nothing 'special': nothing that is marked, opened up by a memory or a story, signed by something or someone else. Only the cave of the home remains believable, still open for a certain time to legends, still full of shadows. Except for that, according to another city-dweller, there are only 'places in which one can no longer believe in anything'.*[3]

However, the strong sense of melancholy in de Certeau's analysis is countered by a belief in a tactical form of resistance: the proliferation of meaningful practices, creating microstories that stubbornly resist the spatial and discursive homogenization promoted by mass media, marketing and politics. The proliferation of these microstories provides the inhabitants with 'spatial trajectories' and helps them to give meaning to their everyday life. Like public transport, these minor stories allow individuals to escape the reductive, controlling and fixating strategies of a technocratic society that only addresses them in their economic role as potential consumer or producer. Seen from this perspective, an apparent narrative desert can actually be full of such hidden storylines. A good example is urban photographer Jeff Mermelstein's *#nyc* (2020), a series that captures the text messages of New Yorker's smartphones in public spaces.[4] The results are narrative fragments of desire and despair, gossip and advice that add a multitude of layers to urban places and trajectories.

More than 40 years after its first publication in France, de Certeau's investigation is still relevant to the discussion of meaningfulness and urbanism.

It holds a warning against the potential danger of contemporary concepts like 'smart cities' (even with the best intentions, for example fighting climate change). Such an approach runs the risk of repeating the errors of the past, of making the same arrogant mistake modernist urbanists and experts made in thinking they could control the city and its microstories. These narrative practices continue to challenge any interpretative framework that tries to recuperate these practices, and resist any effort to be assimilated into a technocratic spatial regime:

> *Totalitarianism attacks what it quite correctly calls superstitions: supererogatory semantic overlays that insert themselves 'over and above' and 'in excess' and annex to a past or poetic realm a part of the land the promoters of technical rationalities and financial profitabilities had reserved for themselves.*[5]

Certeau's idea of stories that resist the urban technocracy was indebted to the surrealist and situationist movements of twentieth-century France, as well as to the student and workers' protests of May '68. What they had in common was the exploration of other modes of existence, other 'ways of operating' within the structures of production and consumption that dominate the modern city. But in the age of post-truth and fake news, Paris Spring slogans like 'l'imagination au pouvoir' have now acquired a sinister undertone. Michel de Certeau was right: stories and legends can never be fully erased, and in contemporary society a great deal of the population seems to feel lost in a kind of fearful 'nocturnal totality', desperately searching for stories to believe in, for a narrative shape to make sense of a formless everyday existence.

So while for Certeau 'superstition' is a positive term, the past decades also showed the destructive nature of some of these stories that challenge modernity: from the rise of religious fundamentalism, to the reactivation of conspiracy theories that seem primitive in their medieval imaginary

of Satanic cults, with a malignant elite poisoning the population, using chemtrails and vaccines. These 'superstitions' travel the same way as the microstories captured by Mermelstein's camera, through the virtual space of social media. They, too, are 'spatial trajectories' into the parallel, virtual 'polis' of the Internet, mostly invisible for those not in the same 'virtual bubble'. People sitting next to you on a bus or train may be in the same actual place, but the narrative space accessed through their mobile devices might be radically different.

A revealing event in this case is the storming by a violent mob of the United States Capitol on 6 January 2021. The stories that led up to this bizarre attempt at a coup were clearly 'in excess', incited by 'semantic overlays' of a 'past realm', in this case, the historical narrative of the Civil War, with the prominent use of confederate flags. It showed that this need for meaning as a way to defy and resist technocratic functionalism can also generate violent and destructive counterstories.

This is a danger that is inherent to the linguistic nature of narratives. Ferdinand de Saussure's analysis of language made clear that meaning is not so much a question of reference, of establishing a kind of correct, truthful relationship with the outside world, but a question of differences within a linguistic system itself, not only on the level of form (for example the difference between sounds that generate a difference in meaning), but also on the level of content. A differing other is always needed to determine an element's meaning: it is the distinctive difference that allows meaning to appear. Meaningfulness requires a form of opposition, of 'othering', to work. In the Christian framework of de Certeau – a Jesuit – this 'othering' has a positive connotation: it is the promise that any given structure or system is never fixed and can always be opened up, transformed for the better.[6] But in many stories the other appears as an opponent, as an unwelcome enemy. Here one can think of Greimas's actantial model as the abstract blueprint of every story: with an opposition between the subject,

the protagonist, who wants something else, an object, and who has helpers and opponents, with again conflicting interests.[7] As Greimas makes clear, the creation of meaning in stories, both fictional and non-fictional, is by definition antagonistic, based on radical differences, and thus inherently conflictual and potentially violent.

It is important to keep in mind this oppositional structure when we analyse not only the stories of dwellers of specific urban areas, but also the metastories of researchers, spatial professionals and policymakers (in de Certeau's story of modern life 'the promoters of technical rationalities and financial profitabilities' clearly take the oppositional role of the classic villain). If the narrative framework changes, the evaluation of the different actants changes as well, and the same actions can suddenly be perceived in a radically different, yet equally meaningful light. The attempt to re-evaluate the historical dimension of a site, the rich cultural heritage of a specific urban area can be very helpful to give meaning and generate a sense of pride for the local population. And yet it can also be 'read' as a shrewd, perhaps even cynical attempt to gentrify an area, to gradually push out lower-income households.

Embodied Meanings, Affective Architecture: Ghent's City Pavilion

The work of Michel de Certeau was strongly embedded in the (post)structuralist context of French theory. But recent decades saw the so-called affective or corporeal turn in the humanities, stressing the importance of sensual, affective experiences embedded in cultural artefacts, including architecture. An important book in this regard is Mark Johnson's *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (2007). In this book, Johnson argues that our common understanding of meaning is much too focused on semantic, conceptual forms of meaning. In his previous work with Georg Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) and *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999), Johnson already stressed the close, inseparable link between

language and our understanding of the world. The language we use shapes our view of reality, but this language itself is shaped by bodily experiences. These form the sensorial, affective basis from which the more abstract concepts and images emerge with which we make sense of our environment. But for Johnson, these sensations and affects are in themselves already crucial in understanding the world. Meaningfulness is also produced by images, feelings, affects, emotions and kinaesthetic experiences, as well as by the sensual qualities of an atmosphere.[8]

Meaning is thus not so much the result of 'decoding' the text of our environment, but something that emerges in our embodied relation to and interaction with our environment. Meaning is not only propositional and language based, but can also be affective, emotional, sensorial. This is of course very relevant when we are talking about the meaning of architecture. The meaningfulness of a specific place does not only lie in the cultural, sociopolitical meanings it generates and the specific scripts and scenarios that are performed there. It can also be found in the specific bodily experiences the site makes possible, as crucial elements to give sense to a specific place. As Johnson argues in another text, 'The Embodied Meaning of Architecture' (2015), the role of architecture is to intensify this meaningful relationship with the environment:

> *My hypothesis is that architectural structures are experienced by humans as both sense-giving and signifying. That is, architectural structures present us, first, with a way of situating ourselves in, or being 'at home' in, and making sense of our world, and, second, they provide material and cultural affordances that are meaningful for our survival and flourishing as meaning-seeking creatures.*[9]

However, it is remarkable that just like de Certeau, Johnson seems to downplay the negative, and even violent, experiences that also produce embodied meanings. In his pragmatist view, our embodied relationship with our

environment is holistic, harmonious, or at least strives for such harmony. But the actual relation to our environment is often less peaceful. Anxiety, anger and disgust can also be effective ways to give meaning to a specific environment, and are, whether we like it or not, part and parcel of everyday life – very much including our relation to the built environment.

As an example, I want to discuss the Stadshal, the City Pavilion (2012), right in the centre of Ghent, Belgium. The Pavilion was designed by Robbrecht & Daem and Marie-José Van Hee architects and quickly nicknamed the 'Schaapstal', the 'Sheep Stable'. The project was contested because it interfered with the historical nature of the square on which it was situated. Despite the obvious references to the surrounding medieval and renaissance buildings, the Pavilion looks brutally modern, and its massive size indeed obstructs part of the view.[10] It was initially also criticized by UNESCO because it was not consulted in the process. The expensive construction was also seen as an unnecessary prestige project, a waste of public money that was better spent on perhaps less spectacular, but more effective forms of urban development. It is, to paraphrase de Certeau, a site that is most definitely not 'deprived of narrations', including antagonistic ones, with as villains the arrogant politicians and architects. There is the interesting relationship between a modern city and its historical past, but also between tourists and locals, between the municipal authorities and some of the inhabitants of the city. Obviously, the Pavilion is used for city branding and the tourist industry. It is close to the commercial centre of Ghent's inner city, it has a 'grand café', and is easily integrated in the 'experience economy' of many European cities. Yet at the same time, the architectural features of the building also seem to resist this recuperation.

Partly, this is the result of Robbrecht & Daem and Marie-José Van Hee's paradoxical use of historical references. The design echoes the surrounding landscape and its cultural history, but at the same time feels like a brutal intrusion of a massive volume that does not blend in. We see the same

approach in Robbrecht & Daem's Concert Hall in Bruges (1999-2002), and the refurbishment of some public squares in Deinze, also with Marie-José Van Hee (2009-2013), combining historical references with outspoken volumes and patterns. But the approach of the designers is only one way to oppose the dominance of an economic storyline. It also resides in the microstories that were 'performed' at this site in the past years, and which are not embedded in a larger commercial or political strategy, like the placing of some amateurishly made plush kittens in 2020 on the lawn before the Pavilion, or a spontaneous silent wake for a victim of a sex crime in 2021. These stories are transitory, and often do not go further than the regional newspaper, but they provide the kind of narrative anarchy that de Certeau found so necessary.

The City Pavilion is also a generator of embodied meanings. And again, the architectural qualities of the actual building play an important part. All of the meaningful features that Mark Johnson attributes to architecture are addressed. The building gives a sense of containment, shelter, and it also reinforces the very crucial senses of movement, verticality and gravity.[11] The gaze is directed upwards, towards the many small light wells in the wooden double roof, which leans together in the middle. The horizontal and diagonal lines of the canopy create a dynamism in the structure, while the sheer mass of the wooden construction and the concrete pedestals creates a sense of weight and grounds the building. On a sunny day, the shadows cast by this building are massive and abrupt, and you can follow their slow movement on the pavement, while the glass rooftiles reflect the sunlight, almost as if you are watching a very large, gravity-defying formal pond. There is also the visual rhyme with the forms of the windows, doors, roofs of the surrounding historical buildings, but always with a difference, a variation, foreclosing a too obvious harmony.

Of course, the actual use of the Pavilion also generates meaningful sensations: there is the rhythmical flow of people coming and going, the move-

Fig. 1. Market Hall, Ghent. Photograph by Peter Lorré.

ments made by users of the space for different events or activities, such as the performances and fairs that take place under this giant roof; there are children playing with each other, or people cycling underneath the canopy on a deserted and cold winter night; it can also give an emotional and physical sense of shelter, to escape a sudden summer rain shower. And despite its open and public character, it can even give one a sense of cosiness when the open fireplace in one of the concrete pedestals is occasionally lit.

A proper analysis of the meaning of the site would not be complete, however, without taking seriously the negative ones it also generates: in comparison with the other historical buildings and their refined medieval or renaissance façades, the Pavilion can look relentlessly heavy and stern. The massive roof and the huge, grey pedestals can feel depressing, literally and figuratively; the welcoming, open structure is strangely contradicted by its alien, uncompromising presence. Each time the square is approached, a sense of disgust, anger, sadness, or perhaps just a mild, but insisting frustration that the view is blocked might be experienced. And of course, the critique on this building should also be taken into account, its popular nickname of sheep stable, the microstories of people passing and commenting on the impact of the Pavilion: they, too, are fully part of the narrative landscape that is opened up by this building. The point is precisely that these negative bodily responses and microstories also give meaning to this space, just like the positive effects and sensations it creates: marking it as special, non-generic, quite opposite to the plain, unremarkable public parking lot it was before.

Conclusion

The difficult question is, of course, what urbanists, designers and researchers' roles could and should be when faced with contemporary city lives and their messy, embodied multitude of meanings and stories. Perhaps the common task here can only be rather modest (albeit important): to explore and develop the narrative, meaningful 'affordances'

of the built environment, and provide an ecosystem where different embodied meanings can thrive. Again, meanings that are embedded not only in stories, but also in embodied experiences, and in actual spatial trajectories: effects, emotions, senses. Meanings that go from bodily movements to atmospheres to bigger stories, linking the city both to a past and a future, and providing it with a viable narrative ecosystem that reduces 'hyposignifiance'. The underlying hypothesis here, following Johnson and de Certeau, is that if cities can create the economic, social conditions and the public space that allows for a vital thriving of meanings and stories, the narrative ecosystem might be vital and transformative enough to prevent one specific kind of destructive, negative stories and sensations from overgrowing the others.

1 André Loeckx and Hilde Heynen, 'Meaning and Effect: Revisiting Semiotics in Architecture', in: Sebastiaan Loosen, Rajesh Heynickx and Hilde Heynen (eds.), *The Figure of Knowledge. Conditioning Architectural Theory, 1960s–1990s* (Leuven, 2020), 31-61: 31-32.
2 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1988), 123.
3 Ibid., 106.
4 Jeff Mermelstein, *#nyc* (London, 2020).
5 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, op. cit. (note 2), 106.
6 See: Michel de Certeau, *L'Etranger ou l'union dans la difference* (Paris, 2005).
7 Ronald Schleifer and Alan Velie, 'Genre and Structure: Toward an Actantial Typology of Narrative Genres and Modes', *MLN* 102/5 (1987), 1122-1150: 1126 ff.
8 Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago, 2007), xi.
9 Mark Johnson, 'The Embodied Meaning of Architecture', in: Sarah Robinson and Juhani Pallasmaa (eds.), *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment, and the Future of Design* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), 33-50: 40.
10 Guy Châtel, 'Stedenbouw (en architectuur) volgens artistieke principes', in: Christoph Grafe (ed.), *Radicale Gemeenplaatsen: Europese architectuur uit Vlaanderen: Architectuurboek Vlaanderen Vol. 10* (Antwerp, 2012), 258-267.
11 Johnson, 'The Embodied Meaning of Architecture', op. cit. (note 9), 41 ff.