

CITY

It was only three or four years ago when a chronic adolescent anxiety prompted me to stand on the balcony of our small home and attempt to find meaning in the night's cold humidity. The city of Hong Kong was something different at four in the morning: it was not exactly the end of the night nor beginning of the day, and looking south I saw the highways meandering like great rivers around the freight carpark. The carpark itself glittered like a yolk, bustling with activity amidst swaths of silent darkness. Since then my endeavours to understand the city have remained restless yet mindful, candid yet in its own strange way, enigmatic. The city and I became a mutual connection.

Plato once contended that the city is what it is because our citizens are what they are. Mok Ho Kwong was a graduate in 2004 when he realized that Hong Kong's landfill problems had reached a tipping point. A year later he decided to reject the city in its totality and moved to its periphery, a village dwelling in Sheung Shui. The man whose moniker is "The Savage" experienced an exodus what he saw as an oppressive behemoth that could not reconcile with his way of life. Although Hong Kong's compactness means a mere 40 minute drive will see a return to skyscrapers, he claims to be disposed of the excesses of consumerism. Going without a stove, air conditioning and soap, he suggests that a simple way of living and minimal reliance increases our freedom and happiness. Such attempts to live off the grid are certainly not novel. But they are increasing. The appeal of these ventures have its roots in humankind's problematic relationship with the modern city. We wonder what kind of "innocent monsters", as put by Charles Baudelaire, may lead to a total renunciation of the City. Flummoxed and destroyed, we begin to question what the city ultimately entails for the human experience.

The city's physical construction often reveals greater truths about its inhabitants' mind-sets. A Chicagoan friend of mine once pointed out an oddly simple but valid flaw with the city's planning. It was not the grid system's cost, nor its insensitivity to natural environments and topography. It was the lack of spontaneity that precipitated from the grid design. The avenues, numbered in a rigid, almost clinical formation would make it exceedingly difficult to get lost. The real point is that our preconceptions see cities as objects of efficiency, order and modernity. However Mr. Chicago's surmises are not new. In a similar spirit, Jane Jacobs' 1961 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* presented an acerbic critique of modernist and rationalist planners, arguing that it removes human communities from the equation which stifled community and innovation by creating unnatural and isolated urban spaces. It is true that Jacobs' field was urban planning, but we may draw an important philosophical conclusion: reason may be sufficient for rational creatures, but as humans we are beyond

reason. Hence it is not difficult to understand why we might associate our city existence with insurmountable feelings of senselessness and a desire to depart, even momentarily.

A mere appraisal of the city as a physical entity would be insufficient if we are to understand its multifaceted relationship with humanity. When we consider the city as something more than a physical institution – when we begin to consider it as a *mindset*, we understand how the city can outstrip its traditional borders to engage us in an omnipresent way. J.M. Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace* explores Professor Lurie's pursuit for sanctuary away from the city, in the Eastern Cape. Through the experience Coetzee discusses notions of redemption and attempts to find a sense of place in the aftermath of disgrace, far removed from the hedonism of his previous city life. When we see Lord Byron's scandalized life as an allegorical self-reflection of Lurie's, we realize that just because his surroundings have changed, Lurie has not – because the disgrace and the city remains within him. However, this does not necessarily mean that the quest to pastoral simplicity is a futile one. The idea of “[saving] the honour of the corpses” represents the ability of time spent at the rural animal shelter to bring forth redemption. When we consider the role of pastoral simplicity as a counterbalance to the discordance of the city, we must acknowledge it is clearly impossible to make a clean break between the two. In realizing the ‘city’ as a mindset highly reflective of the human condition, the often dismal reality is that the city is not limited by any tangible, geographical borders.

Geoffrey West talked about cities as the “crucible of civilization” in his 2011 TED – but cultural and economic dominance aside – a key tenant of his discussion centred on the reality that modern cities are institutions that can take sustainability only so far. Obvious are the environmental concerns – which come to mind as a relatively self-explanatory and possibly over-reported issue. But a lesser portrayed issue especially in mainstream media is the issue of *social* sustainability. There will always be a thought looming at the back of peoples' minds as the stress, costs and social divides (that commonly associate themselves with cities like Hong Kong) accumulate. ‘How long until I can go to sleep without a constant anxiety of what tomorrow holds? How much longer will I sustain this?’ Again, we attempt to dissect humanity's problematic relationship with the modern city, and if these are just the external symptoms, we begin to wonder if there is any sort of a perceivable end to these means, or whether the city is just a tantalizing and fleeting prosperity.

Cities indeed encompass all the extremities of the human condition – a person's experience of it can rise from excess to wonder in an instant, and equally the reverse. Perhaps the greatest irony – a city's ability to be bluntly repetitive and at the same time accommodate vast disparities is also the very factor that leaves its inhabitants gasping. The next part of this essay will argue that the inability to totally escape the restraints of the city (considering it as a *mindset*) clearly signposts that whatever cities were engineered for, it places close to the heart of the human condition, and we hence have the responsibility to adapt it into a force for good

rather than lament its inadequacies. Furthermore, the idea of responsibility becomes increasingly important when we consider the construction of cities as a product of our age. It reflects society's collective fears, aspirations and hopes. Natural disasters that trigger nuclear ones, deepening concerns about global terrorism, the congregation of independent economies into a global system, the Digital Revolution – cities stand out as forthright symbols of human capacity. Our capacity to triumph over adversity is illuminated in cities – it is there if we choose to find it. Roman Payne in *Cities and Countries* eloquently summarises the city as a complex character reflective of its creators, "...Cities and countries are as alive, as feeling, as fickle and uncertain as people". Cities are phenomenal places, which, when understood and operated well, can be moral giants, a role I see them taking on further into the 21st century.

On the other hand, a city's relics are a symbol of what we have done, and its progress an indicator of what we can do. This essay has made an attempt to accommodate the complexities of the City by presenting its inherently contradictory natures: cities are places of limitless opportunity and squandered dreams, wonder and disillusionment, prosperity and decay. Its polarised nature suggests that the idea of greatness in cities no longer fully resonates with modern citizens. As increasingly cynical city inhabitants, our judgments of our world are coloured with flailing confidence and humanity's moral artifice. Charles Dickens' *Night Walks* develops a powerful summation of moments where the opulence and magnificence of London gives way to a store of vice, homelessness and wretchedness, demonstrating a city's cruelty and variety. Dickens' work has resonated through the times – the "houselessness" and "restlessness" illuminates a real human struggle in the modern city as much as it does his times. The desolation and near-madness of the city forms an appropriate analogy for his own insomnia and compulsion to walk on in darkness, in the rain until sunrise. As the responder we are haunted and forced to ponder *Night Walks* as a text beyond the meanderings of an insomniac: Dickens effectively provokes an idea about the excesses of cities that challenges our more widely held assumptions about their nature.

Given what once was an exuding optimism about the greatness of cities, would it then be appropriate to equate "The Savage" with a noble savage? As an outsider Mok seems like a genuine attempt to advocate pastoral simplicity in a consumption-driven, plasticised world. But that leaves the rest of us wondering if the city and its civilization has really corrupted us and whether he is an archetype of nature's gentleman, inimitable and impossible within this chaotic world.

What partially answered this question for me was a particular visit to Hong Kong Island, where I decided to traverse the Zoological Gardens. King George VI's bronze statue was not nearly as prominent amongst the trees for the sky was greying into a leaden fog. The fountain area was almost empty as people began to head home. Standing on a small white terrace with rusty wrought iron frames I watched the passerbys make their way down the road after

exiting the Gardens – then it occurred to me that these people always seem to carry a particular look about their faces. The same look becomes more and more apparent the longer one resides here, in the city. It was not a look of continuous disillusionment, for I do not believe Hong Kongers have inflated views of their city. It was somewhat a purposeful look hiding a marginal worry for their own futures. It was a small leak in an otherwise steadfast boat. For it was true and difficult to know where one could be tomorrow, when it becomes difficult to navigate the city's turmoils with a broken compass. It was a pleading call for some sort of assurance, but it does not seem like an entirely bleak one.

The architectural wonder of buildings such as Lippo Centre and the International Commerce Centre are particularly obvious at night. Oblique reflections of the city itself, the convoluted roads, people and the harbour would line the one-way mirror panels of each building and glisten among a thousand lights like a trembling river. It may be right to presume that anyone positioned to view such a spectacle may experience the smallest surge of veneration. Without seeming pedagogical, it is believed that the ephemerality of the city as well as its darker undertones should not detract from its potency. If we are to reject the city at its worst, then how do we assume it at its best? Sobriety and bright lights do not have to be mutually exclusive: it occurs to me that a balance between the two is of integral importance.

So watching the instant trajectory of light from all directions illuminating the high rise buildings in darkness, the average city-dweller might just ruminate in a single moment:
This was made for me.