"Reading the city": Cultural mapping as pedagogical inquiry

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> Everywhere we go, everything we do, we're surrounded by symbols, by things so
> familiar we don't ever look at them or don't see them if we do look. If anyone ever
> could report to you exactly what he saw and thought while walking ten feet down the
> street, you'd get the most twisted, clouded, partial picture you ever ran across. And
> nobody ever looks at what's around him with any kind of attention until...

I first read those lines whilst browsing the shelves of a bookstore, killing time before my train was due to depart. As I exited onto the station concourse, the words raced around my head, providing a soundtrack to the blur of people rushing to catch their trains. One figure among them, however, wasn't moving. He stood transfixed, one hand pinning his hat in place whilst he leaned back to gaze in wonder at the great glazed canopy soaring above. He'd been rooted to the same spot for so long that an inscription had encircled his feet: *"John Betjeman 1906-1984, poet, who saved this glorious station."*

Figure 10.1. Bronze statue of Sir John Betjeman by Martin Jennings (St. Pancras Station, 2007). Photograph by Stuart Burch (March 12, 2014)

Betjeman used his gift for words to draw attention to a familiar symbol: London's St. Pancras station. In the 1960s, this monument of the Victorian era stood on the brink of demolition. Betjeman's actions helped stave off the bulldozers. Decades later a bronze effigy of the poet was erected on the concourse of a rejuvenated St. Pancras International as a permanent record of this fact.

The eventful history of this station confirms an important point: we become most keenly aware of our heritage when it is in danger (Cormack, 1978). Threats—human or environmental—

disturb our surroundings, bringing certain familiar symbols into sharper relief. Thus it was that John Betjeman rallied support for St. Pancras in order to ensure that it avoided the same fate as the great arch in front of nearby Euston Station. Its imminent destruction provided a catalyst for the formation of the Victorian Society in 1958, with Betjeman as its first secretary (Filmer-Sankey, 1998). By that time, Betjeman had already begun to publish his famous *Shell Guides*. These were a series of topographical handbooks designed to encourage car-owning "weekenders" and "armchair travellers" to appreciate details omitted from other guides, such as "the disregarded and fast disappearing Georgian landscape of England" (Betjeman, cited in Mawson, 2009, no page).

Betjeman's *Shell Guides*—like all such directories—constitute a form of cultural mapping. They strive to bring order to a given landscape, isolating and extracting certain aspects from a confusion of symbols on the grounds of aesthetic merit, historical interest, or some other criteria. The authors of such publications may be motivated by different things, but they share the common goal of seeking to dissuade us from turning a blind eye to our world. Neglectfulness is, however, perfectly understandable. It is all too easy to become inured to our immediate environment, lost as we are in a myriad of thoughts and too busy to care as we rush past in pursuit of a train that is just about to depart.

It was this that struck me when, waiting at St. Pancras station, I stumbled across the lines that appear at the beginning of this chapter. They come from an unexpected source: Theodore Sturgeon's novel *More Than Human* (in Sturgeon, 1952/1999, pp. 358-359). This science fiction classic from the 1950s is an odd starting point for a text on cultural mapping. Nevertheless, the

extract provides a neat summation of my attitude toward this phenomenon. The manner of my discovery and the thoughts it inspired encapsulate the approach taken in "Reading the City," an undergraduate university programme of my devising and which I describe in the second half of this chapter. It can be best understood as an extended response to Theodore Sturgeon. Because, you see, he was so right: I know from experience that my students seldom look at what's around them with any kind of attention—until, that is, they start *reading the city*.

Can cities be read?

The notion of treating a cultural phenomenon as a text to be "read" is neither new nor exceptional, but it has been "energetically criticized" (Augé and Colleyn, 2006, p. 124). Many historians, cultural geographers, and other scholars have considered "landscape as text" (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987; Black, 2003). The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has been identified as a point of origin for the notion of going beyond written sources to treat all "cultural forms ... as texts" (Geertz, 1973, p. 30; Barnes and Duncan, 1992, p. 7). However, Geertz himself cautioned that text is "a dangerously unfocused term" (Geertz, 1983, p. 30). This is compounded by the fact that, when it comes to "close reading, one can start anywhere in a culture's repertoire of forms and end up anywhere else" (Geertz, 1973, p. 453). This is reminiscent of that "twisted, clouded, partial picture" identified by Theodore Sturgeon at the outset. The best chance of making sense of this textual mélange is by seeking to gain access to the multiple ways in which it has been interpreted by individuals and groups within a given society (Geertz, 1973). The fluid, multifarious nature of these "readings" led Geertz to stress that texts should not be understood as codes to be cracked (Geertz, 1983).

Quite the opposite approach was advocated by the English local historian, W.G. Hoskins. Right from an early age he felt that his environs were trying to communicate with him. It was, however, "a landscape written in a kind of code" that he was unable to decipher (Hoskins, 1973, p. 5). Hoskins felt that he had cracked that cipher with his seminal book, *The Making of the English Landscape*. The introduction to the first edition of 1955 includes the following assertion: "The English landscape itself, to those who know how to read it aright, is the richest historical record we possess" (Hoskins, 1955, p. 14). Being schooled in knowing how to identify the "correct" aspects of the English landscape and learning to assimilate them in the "right" way provides a potent means of fashioning group identity, as is made clear in the following, oft-repeated statement: "Every mature nation has its symbolic landscapes. They are part of the iconography of nationhood, part of the shared set of ideas and memories and feelings which bind a people together" (Meinig, 1979, p. 164).

Landscape is about power and ideology (Alderman, 2008). Yet the part played by landscape in these social processes is masked by familiarity—those symbols that surround us that are "so familiar we don't ever look at them or don't see them if we do look," to recall Theodore Sturgeon. And because landscapes "are often read 'inattentively'," they have the potential to inculcate their readers with conceptions about how society is or even *must* be organized (Duncan and Duncan, 1988, p. 123). This ideology is manifest both in the physical environment and embedded in a complex and pervasive hierarchy of "dominant or preferred meanings" (Hall, 1980, p. 123).

Positing alternative perspectives is to acknowledge that "every reading of a text offers the possibility of challenging received ideas about the politics of place" (Jackson, 1989, p. 44). This accords with the manner in which the French semiologist Roland Barthes perceived cities as texts. He discounted the idea of monolithic interpretations and instead advocated multiple readings (Barthes, 1997). A "city-text" was not so much a single volume to be read, but a whole library (Burch, 2008, p. 453). This, in turn, tallies with Geertz's idea of thinking about culture as a whole being a variously interpreted "assemblage of texts" (Geertz, 1973, p. 448).

In some senses, this is not all that different from Hoskins' position. He was fully cognizant of the fact that, through his active involvement in local history and the dissemination of ideas, he was contributing to that "assemblage of texts." His actions included the writing of scholarly and popular publications, but also talks, lectures, and appearances on television. The last-named activity led to a book entitled *English Landscapes: How to Read the Man-made Scenery of England* (Hoskins, 1973). His conscious use of "landscapes" in the plural was a deliberate attempt to emphasize that every nation contains multiple landscapes.

Another sense in which Hoskins can be seen to concur with the notion of landscape as an "assemblage of texts" is the methodological approaches he advocated. He urged his fellow "readers" to shun superficial "guide-book" accounts in favour of "unearthing" the reasons why a particular landscape takes the form it does. This could be achieved through "a combination of documentary research and fieldwork." The "raw material" was to be found in the archives as well as secondary texts. But these could only be understood in conjunction with the principal document/text: the landscape itself (Hoskins, 1955, p. 14).

Thus, beginning in the 1950s with Hoskins' encouragement for a new breed of historians to plough through "records in the muniment room" *and* go "laboriously scrambling on foot" (Hoskins, 1955, p. 14), there now exists a great variety of instructional guides setting out "approaches to 'reading' the landscape" (Robertson and Richards, 2003). These vary according to disciplinary distinctions and the type of material being read. One such subset relates to the reading of cultural landscapes by geographers (Salter, 1990; Black, 2003). Within this field is a lexicon of particular phenomena, including utilitarian buildings and symbolic artworks, as well as analogues of landscapes such as maps (Blunt et al., 2003).

The upshot of all this is that whilst the notion that the spaces of a city are somehow "readable" is well established, their precise textual nature and the manner in which they can and should be interpreted—as well as how and with what inferences—remains in doubt. The French social theorist and philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, debates just this point in his much-cited work, *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre, 1991), and it is for this reason that I wish to focus on this particular book as the basis for what follows.

Lefebvre (1991) is equivocal when it comes to the question *can cities be read*? He starts by saying, yes, a particular urban space *can* be read, but it would be wrong to equate it with a leaf in a book or a blank sheet of paper. Lefebvre argues that this is because the words on such a page are incapable of going beyond surface description but are instead little more than a mere decorative afterthought. Elsewhere, Lefebvre identifies additional barriers to analysis. Like Geertz—and in contrast to Hoskins—Lefebvre was interested in those aspects that resist codification or classification. Rulers, regulators, and wielders of power obfuscate their authority.

The upshot of this is that those "social 'realities'" that seem most legible are in truth the least trustworthy (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 149). Monuments and commemorative memorials, for example, should be treated as "deceptive fragments" (p. 96) that dissimulate deliberately and conceal far more than they reveal. Their elusiveness is assured by the "over-inscribed" cacophony of messages that space elicits (that "twisted, clouded, partial" swirl of symbols to which Theodore Sturgeon referred).

Alas, Lefebvre himself stands accused of contributing to this over-inscription. There are a number of important critiques of his most famous book. One of the most memorable is Tim Unwin's article "A Waste of Space?" It is ironic that the one thing that seems harder to read than space is Henri Lefebvre:

> Reading *The Production of Space* can be compared to walking across quicksand, or trying to find the end of a rainbow. No sooner does one think that one has understood what he is trying to say, than he shifts his position, so that what was once thought to be acceptable is now shown to be problematic. (Unwin, 2000, p. 14)

Unwin goes on to add, however, that what Lefebvre had to say is less significant than the manner in which he has been construed and used. In my own modest way, I am culpable here. I have invoked Lefebvre as a means of providing inspiration, critical weight, and plausibility to my own studies of space. And so, mindful of the need to avoid extraneous and therefore erroneous "readings" of the city, I took Lefebvre's lead and sought a more participative means of ascertaining how urban spaces are "heard and enacted" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 200).

Just such an opportunity presented itself in 2002. During the summer of that year, the city of

Stockholm celebrated the 750th anniversary of its founding. This prompted a series of

publications and museum exhibitions together with historically themed markets, street

processions, guided tours, and other types of performances. These took place in deliberately

chosen "anchors" dotted across central Stockholm. This term—*anchors*—is used by Lefebvre to

refer to prominent monuments and gathering places such as statues and squares. It is these

"strong points" that make up, not the "text" of the city, but its "texture" (Lefebvre, 1991, pp.

146, 222). For Lefebvre, "texture" consists of a web or network of "strong points" which signify

across "a *horizon of meaning*: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting

hierarchy in which now one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore, by means

of—and for the sake of—a particular action" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 222).

The "particular action" in this case was Stockholm's 750th anniversary. The events it inspired

corroborated Lefebvre's view that cities are *acted* rather than *read*. Fixed monuments give way

to festival and everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991). The nature of these festive happenings and the

behaviour of the participants—both locals and visitors—provided recourse to attitudes that are

normally left unarticulated. It was this that I tried to capture in my written response (Burch,

2005).

My reading of the city sought to show that whilst this "particular action" (i.e., the anniversary)

was ostensively rooted in the past, its "messages" were routed to the future. The events of 2002

echoed "actions" that took place 50 years earlier to mark Stockholm's 700th anniversary and

prefigure those that are destined to occur in the years 2052 and 2252. These serial cultural

mappings are based on a series of "well-told stories" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 144). Comparing such narratives at different junctures in time and space exposes the city's fluctuating hierarchies, inequalities, and exclusions (Burch, 2005).

My interpretation of Stockholm's anniversary was of necessity limited and subjective. It differed in all sorts of ways from the intentions of the event's organizers, the diverse reactions of my fellow participants, and the conclusions of other observers. This is as it should be. Such divergences confirm that the complexities of space necessitate multiple decodings (Lefebvre, 1991).

Seen in a charitable light, my published article can be considered a worthwhile effort, approaching as it does Lefebvre's main aim of ditching our banally accepted appreciation of our surroundings in favor of a more enquiring, critical analysis of space (Unwin, 2000). On the other hand, approaching the 2002 anniversary with "readability in mind" risks giving rise to nothing more than a surfeit of superfluous words— "a sort of pleonasm, that of a 'pure' and illusory transparency" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 313). This "illusion of transparency" is linked to the desire on the part of "the geographical imagination" for perceptions of space to be "known and mapped" (Rose, 1993, p. 71; see also Arnesen, 2011; Lefebvre, 1991). Or, as Geertz put it, the analysis of culture should not be undertaken with the hope of mapping out a "Continent of Meaning," but should be a thought-out series of best guesses (Geertz, 1973, p. 20). And it is precisely because a doubt lingers about how much sense we can and should make of the swirl of deceptive symbols and transient thoughts that envelop us "while walking ten feet down the street" that we loop back to the imponderable question with which this section began, namely *can cities be read?*

Strong points and deceptive fragments

Producing a textual response to space that claims to articulate the mental maps of one's own or those of others is, then, a difficult undertaking. Yet it is surely a necessary endeavor given that urban spaces play such important roles in identity formation, both at an individual and collective level. Many scholars have demonstrated, for example, how commemorative anniversaries and ritual events, often played out in the "texture" of our cities, foster a sense of communal identity through politicized processes of collective memory (Assmann, 2006; Connerton, 1989; Coser, 1992; Olick et al., 2011).

This was apparent in Stockholm during the summer of 2002. A more recent example took place in the same city in 2011 in a centrally located square known as Norrmalmstorg. In the early 1990s this was the site of popular gatherings in support of independence for the three Baltic states (then under Soviet rule). These demonstrations occurred every Monday at 12 o'clock. A total of 79 such events occurred between March 19, 1990 and September 16, 1991.

Two decades later—at 12 o'clock on Monday, August 15, 2011—the Swedish Prime Minister plus his counterparts from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania returned to the square to mark the twentieth anniversary of these so-called "Monday meetings" (*måndagsmöten*). They, plus other dignitaries and a large crowd of onlookers, were invited to "go back in time." Twenty-year-old recordings of Swedish radio reports were broadcast on loudspeakers before Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt was invited to address the gathering.

In his speech, he rightly celebrated Sweden's role in helping to bring about and sustain the two decades of freedom and independence enjoyed by the Baltic states. Yet Sweden's current Prime Minister also noted that popular support for Baltic independence was not always shared by the political establishment in Sweden. Reinfeldt illustrated this point by raising aloft a copy of the history book that he had read as a student in the 1980s. He drew attention to the fact that the Baltic states were rarely mentioned and that their fate after the Second World War was completely absent from the textbook.

This comment served as a convenient piece of party political point scoring. The leader of the ruling centre right coalition was seeking to take the higher moral ground over his predecessors—the Social Democrats—by implying that they had not done enough to support their Baltic neighbours during the Cold War.

The Swedish Prime Minister's speech and the anniversary gathering as a whole demonstrate how past events are forgotten and remembered in all sorts of social spaces, including school classrooms, public squares, and parliamentary chambers. The cultural maps that ensue compete and sometimes collide, disclosing societal schisms in the process. This has been particularly prevalent in the Baltic states, where they struggle to shake off their "post-Soviet" status (Burch and Zander, 2008).

A dramatic demonstration of this occurred in 2007 in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, in relation to a Soviet-era war memorial known colloquially as the Bronze Soldier. It had been erected in 1947 to symbolize the Red Army's liberation of Nazi-occupied Tallinn. Six decades later the

democratically elected government of a now independent Estonia decided to uproot this reminder and remove it to the more peripheral setting of a military cemetery.

It is possible to explain this action by recourse to Lefebvre's terminology. In 2007, a *particular action* transferred this *strong point* to another physical location in the city *texture* and, in so doing, shifted this *deceptive fragment* across the *horizon of meaning*: it was transposed from a symbol of liberation (of Nazi-occupied Estonia by the Red Army) to one of occupation (of the Republic of Estonia by the Soviet Union). Those versed in Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* would have been able to anticipate the repercussions of such an action. It shattered the monument's illusory sense of "durability," with all too predictable consequences: "Turmoil is inevitable once a monument loses its prestige" (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 221-222).

And so it was that those people in Estonia who favoured the statue's previous "reading" reacted vociferously to this act. Two nights of deadly riots served as a shocking reminder that that which constitutes a cultural asset for one constituency can represent a cultural burden for another. This state of affairs is crystallized in the Museum of Occupations in Tallinn, not far from the original location of the Bronze Soldier. In the basement are a series of public monuments from Estonia's Soviet period. They have been prised from their original public settings and mapped on to a very different narrative landscape—that of the Museum of Occupations (Burch and Zander, 2008).

In an effort to gain a better understanding of Estonia's "geographical imagination," I went on to instigate a series of cultural mappings of Narva, a border town in eastern Estonia where the vast majority of inhabitants speak Russian as their first language and where many of the Soviet-era

monuments remain *in situ*. Mixed methodologies produced two "readings" of the town's "texture"; one "from above," the other "from below" (Burch and Smith, 2007; Smith and Burch, 2012). The latter involved the assistance of students from a local college. They were instructed to approach their fellow townspeople to ask them about their views on the urban spaces of Narva. One of the most memorable moments during the research occurred when respondents were shown a photograph of Narva's "empty plinth." A statue of Lenin had stood there until 1993 when, like Tallinn's Bronze Soldier, it was moved to a less politically significant site. Our intention was to prompt people into saying what they thought should be done with the redundant pedestal. Some respondents, however, looked beyond the plinth and remarked on the seemingly unremarkable tower block behind. This mundane-looking monument triggered all manner of associations, fanciful stories, and personal anecdotes. Its location near the Russian border and the fact that it is the tallest structure in the town means that it is the first thing many people see when coming home from "the East."

When I took the photograph, the tower block was included merely as a convenient framing device for what I thought was the main point of interest: the pedestal. But in so doing I had forgotten that, when it comes to "lived experience," space is never merely a "frame" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 93). An incidental or marginal detail for one person is a fundamental reference point for another. Barriers, ends, and exits can also serve as routes, openings, and entrances (and vice versa).

I really should not have been surprised by the unanticipated responses to this image. For whenever I drive up England's M1 motorway and encounter the looming shadow of a huge

coal-fired electricity generator, I know that I am nearly home. This is Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station. It was commissioned in the 1960s—at almost exactly the same time that London's St. Pancras station was scheduled for demolition. Its giant cooling towers are never going to appear in a John Betjeman-style guidebook. Betjeman loathed these "concrete monsters" and the "yellow vomit" they belched into the skies (Betjeman, 1973, pp. 355-356).

Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station is neither environmentally friendly nor aesthetically appealing in a conventional sense. It is, however, a "strong point" in space, an "anchor" in my mental map. It stands adjacent to a railway station and airport both named after the region in which they are situated: the East Midlands of England. More specifically, it is, for me, a symbol of Nottingham. It was there that I disembarked from the train that I had boarded some hours before at St. Pancras station—the place where I first discovered what it means to be *More than Human*.

Psychosyndrome cities

Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station features in my *psychogeography* of Nottingham in a similar fashion as a tower block near the Estonia–Russia border exists in the minds of many Narvitians. The term "psychogeography" was coined by Guy Debord to account for the "effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals" (Debord, 1955, no page). The approach to the city favoured by Debord and his fellow Situationists mitigate Lefebvre's concerns regarding the illusionary meaningfulness of urban space invoked whenever it is approached with "readability in mind." A case in point is *dérive* or drift; the indeterminate detection of those aspects of the environment that strike a chord with the subject's state of mind. Once identified, they can be used as a means of personal

navigation rather than allowing the intentions of urban planners to dictate one's movements or thought processes (Plant, 1992).

Such subjective responses to external stimuli can be usefully combined with Coverley's view of psychogeography as equating more "to a form of local history than to any geographical investigation" (Coverley, 2007, p. 14). Visceral reaction to lived experience combined with the archival and community resources of the local historian allow psychogeography to open interesting and novel ways of appreciating those facets of the urban environment that would otherwise remain passively accepted or unconsciously overlooked.

Before considering the implications of this for Nottingham, it is instructive to bring to bear a psychoanalytical response to some of the examples already cited. Take Stockholm's Norrmalmstorg, for instance. For some it is a place of work. For others it connotes leisure and latté. Consumers diverge to diverse destinations; some head for a posh café, others choose McDonalds. At the present time the latter occupies one corner of the square whilst, diagonally opposite, is a branch of the upmarket Finnish interior design store, Marimekko. A token of globalization balanced by a distinctly "Nordic" regionalism (Burch, 2010).

Norrmalmstorg has its virtual visitors too. It is, for example, the most expensive property in Stockholm's version of the board game, Monopoly. This indicates that the place has a prominent position in popular culture, a status that is underlined by its claim to fame as the originating source for the term "Stockholm syndrome." This widely understood but medically disputed phenomenon refers to a situation in which a hostage appears to develop a "positive bond" with

his or her captor. This occurred in the case of four bank clerks who spent six days of the summer of 1973 as hostages in the Norrmalmstorg branch of *Sveriges Kreditbanken*. It is debateable whether Stockholm syndrome is a "psychiatric diagnosis or urban myth" (Namnyak et al., 2007, p. 4). But there is no doubt that it is a psychogeographical reality. Confirmation came in August 2013 when a host of media reports were published to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the raid. These, in turn, sparked renewed interest in this aspect of Norrmalmstorg's psychogeography.

From mundane, everyday occurrences to spectacular commemorative gatherings, squares constitute particularly important "strong points" in the "texture" of our cities. So too do railway stations, which are equally susceptible to psychogeographic mappings—even if for most travellers they are little more than utilitarian passing-through points. Sometimes, however, they can become sublime, poetic oases for reflecting on the politics of the urban environment—as when travellers pause at the feet of John Betjeman's statue at St. Pancras station. Indeed, railway stations are capable of serving as shared "reference places in citizens' life" (Novy and Peters, 2012, p. 143). This is just how the 1920s clock tower of Stuttgart Central Station in Germany has been described. This local landmark has in recent times become a rallying point for those opposed to the station's redevelopment and partial demolition. Mass demonstrations and even violent protest have broken out as this familiar symbol has come under threat. John Betjeman would have been pleased.

Figure 10.2. The Clock Tower of the former Nottingham Victoria Station ghosting today's shopping mall. Photograph by Stuart Burch (May 29, 2009)

Reading Nottingham

Another railway station clock tower that serves as a popular reference point exists in Nottingham. But no matter what time the clock shows, there is no point rushing for a train. The last one departed in 1967. There was, alas, no poet to save Nottingham's Victoria Station from the wrecking ball. After its demolition all that remained was its clock tower. The grey concrete and glass shell of a shopping centre has sprouted up around it, plus a warren of underground car parks and hundreds of high-rise apartments. They form an outlandish foil to this "gallant Victorian spire" (Betjeman, 1973, p. 120).

As a particularly mendacious "deceptive fragment," Nottingham station's clock tower provides a useful introduction to "Reading the City." This is a year-long course of study for final-year undergraduate students enrolled in Nottingham Trent University's History and Humanities programmes. The module is non-standard in terms of both methodology and mission. It is deliberately "playful", both in a ludic sense and also in keeping with Lefebvre's notion of the city as a musical "score" longing to be performed (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 211). Readings of the city are facilitated by encouraging the cohort to exit the classroom and experience it first hand— scrambling about on foot as Hoskins and Lefebvre suggest, all their senses receptive to the "particular world" into which they "plunge" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 221; see also Hoskins, 1955). Then, dividing themselves into groups, the participants choose self-selected thematic topics: from tourism to architecture, public houses to public transport, sport to shopping. These are investigated *in situ*. Observation leads to speculation framed into questions (Salter, 1990). These enquiries are then taken to archives, libraries, and other sources of information for analysis and evaluation leading to discussion, written responses, and, finally, group presentations.

The goal is not to produce balanced, judicious textual responses to a set assignment. Just for once I "let others fuss over academic details" (Betjeman, 1973, p. 331). So, rather than take Hoskins' approach to training students how to read the landscape "aright," I instead seek to give voice to students' accounts (Duncan, 1990). They are therefore encouraged to take the musical "score" of the city and make it "sing" (Lefebvre, 1991; Barthes, 1997; Burch 2008). It should be stressed, though, that the musical score of Nottingham is no neat, harmonious composition: it is a cacophony of sounds, some of which are distinctly discordant. An instance of this (although sadly no longer to be heard) is Frank Robinson (1932-2004), "The Xylophone Man." He was remarkable for his lack of musical talent as he plinked and plonked on his trusty toy metallophone. Robinson remains Nottingham's most notable busker. With the passing of time, however, newer generations of students are starting to have no recollection of what is a key feature in my sonic landscape of the city. But the spot he once occupied is still filled thanks to an oft-overlooked and occasionally vandalized plaque set into the street paving. On Saturday, July 5, 2014, a "big busk" was organised here and across Nottingham to mark the tenth anniversary of Frank's death.

Figure 10.3. Tribute to Frank Robinson a.k.a. "The Xylophone Man" by Chris Hart (Listergate, Nottingham, 2005).

Photograph by Stuart Burch (February 16, 2013)

Invoking Frank Robinson's memory is the antithesis of remembering "great" achievers. Falling

into the latter category is Feargus O'Connor (1796-1855). He is commemorated by a statue in

Nottingham's Arboretum park. Honoring a person in such a manner—literally placing them on a

pedestal—implies universal admiration and respect. This is courtesy of the tricksy nature of such

"deceptive fragments." That the truth is far more contested and considerably less certain is

confirmed by Nottingham's lichen-covered statue to this towering orator, Chartist leader, and a

man whose radical politics led to imprisonment. O'Connor served as the parliamentary

representative for Nottingham from 1847-1852. When it was proposed to erect a posthumous

statue to his memory a petition was launched to oppose it on the grounds that "there was nothing in the Public Character or principles of the late Mr O'Connor... to entitle him to be held up to favourable Notice" (*Records of the Borough of Nottingham*, cited in Beckett, 1988, p. 64).

No less controversial a figure is Brian Clough (1935-2004), who is commemorated by statue, street, stadium, and even a tram to mark his considerable achievements as manager of Nottingham Forest football club. But his success and charm cannot disguise the fact that he was "brash, conceited, intolerant and rude" —qualities certainly not helped by his alcoholism and the taint of corruption (Mason, 2008).

These three individuals are very different, but they share one characteristic: they are all men. Nottingham is no different from anywhere else when it comes to gender inequality in the memorial landscape (Warner, 1987/1996; Monk, 1992). It remains the case, however, that the city's most grandiose commemorative symbol celebrates a woman. Victoria shopping center, like the station that it replaced, recalls Britain's erstwhile longest serving monarch. So too did a statue in the main "strong point" of the city—Old Market Square. Alas, this has fared only slightly better than her eponymous railway station. In 1953, less than 50 years after its inauguration, the statue was moved to make way for traffic. Such is life when the "motor-car is master" (Betjeman, 1973, p. 354). The marble queen is now in a marginalized, rather shabby state on the Victoria Embankment looking across the River Trent at the football stand named after Brian Clough.

This is just a small selection of Nottingham's constellation of symbols that await configuring in all sorts of weird, unexpected and playful ways. The superficially straightforward "facts" they tell squabble for attention among the psychogeographies of the city. This was something that struck me when I first came to Nottingham and visited the statue of Victoria in her displaced riverside setting. The largest feature in these "Public Gardens [where] ended things begin" (Betjeman, 1973, p. 292) is a large memorial archway dedicated to the people of Nottingham who perished in various wars. Beneath the monument are public toilets. These are now closed, presumably to deter the sorts of men I encountered on my first visit to see Victoria. Their illicit use of the park's facilities revealed an alternative psycho-sexual-geography of the embankment. Such covert activity in this memorial space is suggestive of an "asterisk" appended to the memorials (cf. Mauer, 2009, p. 90): an extracurricular activity that provided additional significance to these endlessly deceptive fragments.

That private things go on in public places is one important reason why I instruct my students to always carry out fieldwork in groups. Another motivation is so that they can share thoughts and feelings. The texts of our cities are dialogues, not monologues (Lefebvre, 1991). This means that those experiencing it are able to tell each other when they detect a "sudden change of ambiance in a street" (Debord, 1955, no page). One explanation for such an alteration in atmosphere is when we see or sense the illicit activities of other users; another cause is due to a shift in ownership of the public realm. Close readings of the city can uncover this and thus expose its unwritten rules and the limits they place on acceptable behavior (Vasagar, 2012a). This has prompted one British newspaper to ask its readers to help build up a composite picture of

corporately owned semi-public spaces in Britain; here cultural mapping becomes a valuable tool for charting the "creeping privatisation of public space" (Vasagar, 2012b, no page).

Gradations of public-ness and changes in ambiance can be discerned by evaluating an urban space and then comparing it with another analogous location. The main "strong point" of Nottingham is Old Market Square. As its name suggests, it has left its principal mercantile past behind and is now a multiuse space. It serves as a pedestal for the bombastic Council House, the steps of which are policed during the day, preventing anyone sitting on them, let alone skateboard or any other form of "antisocial" behavior. But the rest of the square can be, and often is, a riot of activity. This has been aided by its redesign in 2007. From a staid, symmetrical space that many locals dubbed "Slab Square," it has become a backcloth for all sorts of officially endorsed events. During recent summers, for instance, it has been the location for an artificial beach. The miniscule waves lap the sand beside a lively funfair. Nottingham-by-sea is a pastiche of the British seaside in a place in England that could not be farther from the ocean.

A far less prominent space in the center of Nottingham is Lace Market Square. It shares its name with a zone of the city that was the first industrial site of its kind to be given protected status as a heritage conservation area. The Lace Market features some very important warehouse structures connected to Nottingham's vanished role as a global hub in the sale of high quality lace. There was a time when people the world over "gazed at the... skies / Through the Nottingham lace of the curtains" (Betjeman, 1973, p. 18). However, following the decline of the industry the area became neglected and rundown. An urban myth that captures this vanished dereliction was the police's apparent term for three streets in the vicinity. George Street, Broad Street, and

Heathcoat Street, I am led to believe, were referred to as GBH. These are the initials for "grievous bodily harm" (under sections 18 and 20 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861). This neatly encapsulates the popular reputation of the area. It is almost impossible to picture this now amidst the trendy independent stores frequented by fashion-conscious students and young professionals, some of whom are lucky enough to live in the former warehouses, now converted into costly apartments fitted-out for so-called "city living."

A key element of this gentrification is Lace Market Square. This corporate space backs on to one of the area's most magnificent monuments: the Adams Building. Built in 1855, it is now used by a local college. The attached square was completed in 2008 with the intention of providing a "mixed-use redevelopment project accommodating housing, leisure and creative industries" (Heath, 2009, p. 154). Whereas the new Old Market Square is alive, Lace Market Square has—for me at least—a distinctly barren feel. This impression is exacerbated by the fact that, at the time of writing, its main commercial unit lays empty—a testimony of the current recession.

Capturing the feel of such a space during a time of economic downturn is to catch a glimpse of the ever-changing fortunes of a city. Underlying this are events in one's own life: at the right (or wrong) time or place and given the right (or wrong) frame of mind, a particular space can become hugely significant in a private drama. Life in an urban environment is like being on a perpetual treasure hunt (Battista et al., 2005). Surrealists and Situationists went out of their way to enliven this further by imagining revolutionary readaptations—such as alternative uses for churches (Plant, 1992). Yet there really is no need to delve into Nottingham's underbelly or inject surrealism into the streets. Bizarre mutations are everywhere to be seen—you just need to

open your eyes. In the Lace Market alone can be found places of work that are now homes; a church that is now a posh pub; and a court of law that has metamorphosed into a successful tourist attraction (the Galleries of Justice). Jobs, justice, and Jesus are dealt out elsewhere. Those workers that once worshipped at the defunct church have now gone, replaced by other pilgrims with different values and beliefs. Wine and communion are still to be found in the church, although imbibed for different purposes.

"Reading the City" is an attempt to embrace non-orthodox responses to such distinctly wacky mutations. This is apt in a town whose main claim to fame is a myth, that is, Robin Hood and his band of supposedly merry men. Nottingham is therefore a fitting place for realizing Warner's dictum that each and every "city carries a story, the city presents a lure into its own version of the past; you could say it tells tales; that it lies" (Warner, 1987/1996, p. 20; cf. Lefebvre, 1991, p. 92). With this in mind I ask my students to articulate what Nottingham means to them. An invitation to do just that comes every time a visitor or resident logs on to the city's official website. At present its homepage is headed "My Nottingham" (http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk). This subjective stance obviates any fear that over-interpretation might lead to something being ascribed meanings that are in fact the projections of the observer (Augé and Colleyn, 2006). This is hardly a problem when piecing together so many deceptive fragments.

Therefore, the work undertaken by the students for "Reading the City" involves sanctioning something which is normally proscribed, namely the introduction of a first-person narrative into their academic work; a personal point of view that is substantiated by processes of collecting,

recording, analyzing, and synthesizing information. Lies are fine, so long as they are told convincingly. Again, this is particularly apposite in a city such as Nottingham, which once marketed itself under the slogan: "our style is legendary" (Dowdy, 1998). Indeed, surprise at the sheer dominance of Robin Hood is something that frequently occurs in students' cultural mappings. It is not unusual to encounter their opprobrium for the way in which the "proper" history of the city is downplayed in favour of a "myth." This extends to a perennial feature of the student landscape: pubs. Together with churches these establishments constitute the oldest buildings in the city (Barley and Cullen, 1975, p. 2). But even here "historical facts" take second place to fantasy. As fieldwork turns into pub crawl, students are regaled with increasingly fanciful accounts, each seeking to support the claim that this particular hostelry carries the mantle of "oldest pub in Nottingham" or "Nottingham's most haunted." These aspects are invariably connected to this city's subterranean claim to fame: Nottingham is the self-declared "City of Caves" courtesy of the sandstone hills beneath its streets, which have been hollowed out by centuries of residents (Barley and Cullen, 1975). It is always a pleasure to share in the students' sense of excitement as they recount stories of being shown the underground chambers of Ye Olde Salutation Inn and its grisly collection of toys left behind by Rosie, the resident ghost.
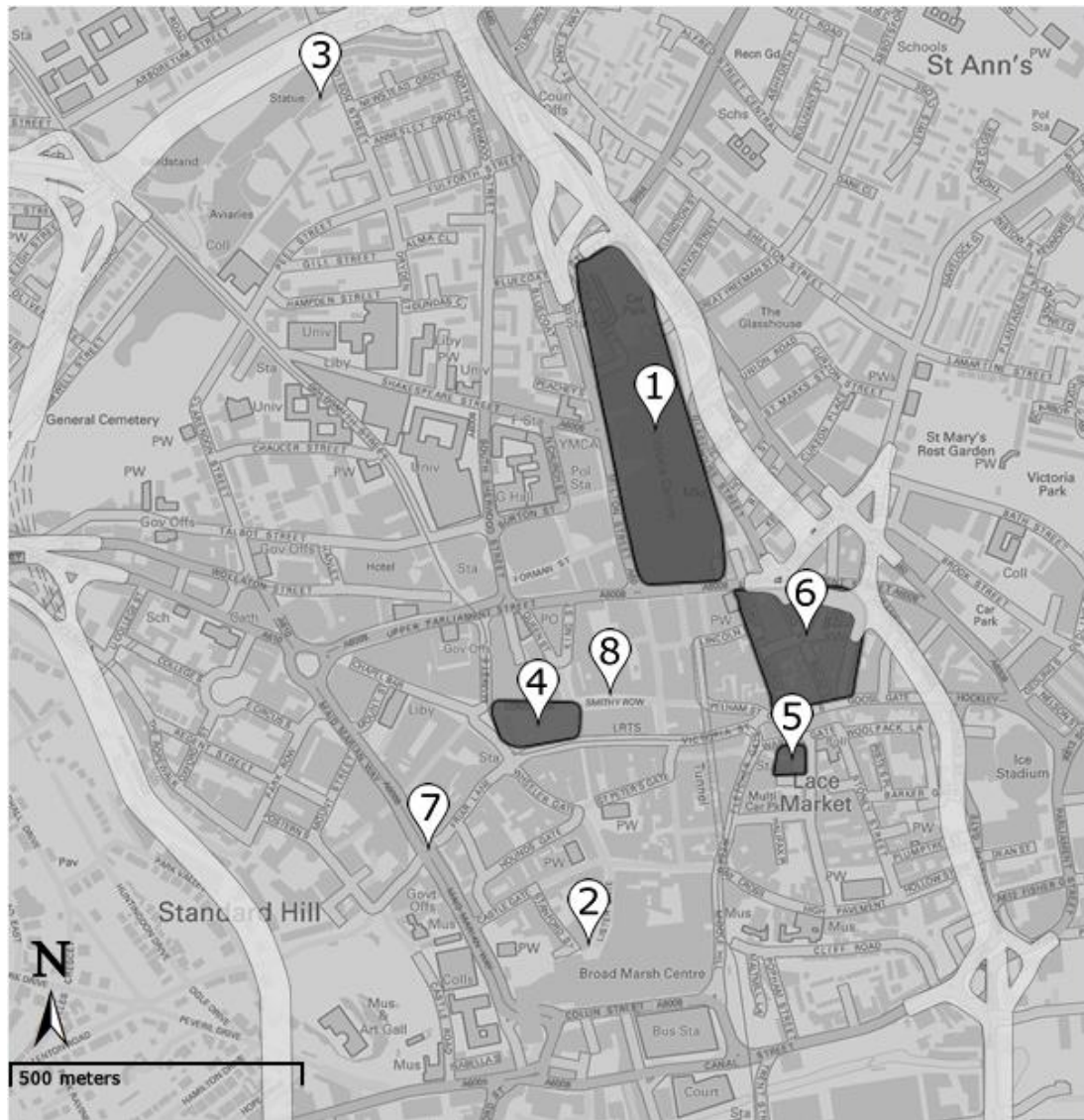
Figure 10.4. An outline of the unrealized inner-city motorway (including "Sheriff's Way") superimposed upon a contemporary street-map of Nottingham City Centre. Map by Phillip Pierce, Nottingham Trent University using Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright 2013 and Nottingham Corporation's *Primary Highway Plan, 1965-2005*

Key:

1. Clock Tower of the former Victoria Station
2. Xylophone Man's spot on Lister Gate
3. Feargus O'Connor's statue in the Arboretum
4. Old Market Square and the original location of the Queen Victoria Statue
5. Lace Market Square and the Adams Building
6. G.B.H. a.k.a. George Street, Broad Street, and Heathcoat Street in the Lace Market
7. Maid Marian Way
8. Site of the Black Boy Hotel

Outstandingly ugly Nottingham

Given enough invention, *anything* can be deemed worthy of coming under the cartographer's purview (Burch, 2008). This reminds us again that, when culturally mapping, we should be wary of a too-clear divide between that which is noteworthy and that which is not worth noting. Confirmation of this comes courtesy of one of Nottingham's principal claims to fame (or infamy). In the 1950s, it was not just Nottingham's effigy of Queen Victoria that had to make way for traffic. From 1958 to 1966, a giant swathe was cut through the city resulting in the destruction of much that would today be cherished as "heritage." In its place was Maid Marian Way—an inner-city motorway whose sole purpose was to "let all things travel faster" (Betjeman, 1973, p. 354). It ran antithetical to the town's ancient street layout; linkages between Nottingham's castle and its city centre were severed in order to see "traffic thunder through" (Betjeman, 1973, p. 355).

Such was the outcry over Maid Marian Way that the much grander plans for an entirely new road network—including an elevated highway behind the city's castle and a multi-lane freeway scything through the Lace Market—were never realized (Little, 1966). This makes Maid Marian Way a notable piece in a jigsaw that does not physically exist. Nevertheless, this arterial route is habitually dismissed as being "devoid of interesting buildings" and condemned as "one of the ugliest roads in Europe" (Pevsner, 1979, pp. 228-229). It will come as no surprise to learn that the person responsible for these remarks—Nikolaus Pevsner—was, together with John Betjeman, a founding member of the Victorian Society.

Maid Marian Way is to urban design what "The Xylophone Man" was to music. Yet its extremes of ugliness mark it out as special: it is an "area of outstanding unnatural beauty" (Battista et al., 2005). This is boosted by the perverse decision to name it after the fictive paramour of the city's fabulous son. Maid Marian Way has all the trappings of the heritage of the future—but only once we have overcome our collective aversion to concrete. A refreshing antidote comes in the form of the recently published book, *Turning Back the Pages in Maid Marian Way* (Dorrington, 2011). This features archival images showing the demolition and reconstruction of the area. It challenges us to re-evaluate this "deceptive fragment"; rather than a misguided aberration, Maid Marian Way can be understood as a precious survival of a bold vision for an unrealized 21st-century Nottingham. And who knows? Favourably framed it might even qualify as a UNESCO World Heritage Site one day.

Casting Maid Marian Way in such a light provides a useful means of "unsettling" traditional notions of heritage in order to reveal its inherently contingent and contestable nature (Macdonald, 2009, p. 93). Proposing potential candidates in a roll call of heretical heritage is one way of unearthing a city's more underground aspects and of "reading between the lines" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 419). This mindset could even go so far as to lend a sort of beauty to the very ugliest aspects of Nottingham. A case in point is a low-cost clothes store that occupies a squat, concrete building in a prime city-centre location. Attached to its much-loathed façade is a plaque indicating that the spot was once filled by the Black Boy Hotel. Designed by the local architect Watson Fothergill (1841-1928), this Victorian fantasy was demolished in 1970 to make way for the present structure. The "short-sighted folly" of this act of "municipal vandalism" is everywhere met with universal condemnation (Anon, 2011, no page). But will this *always* be the

case? Even if concrete functionalism is forever destined to be popularly despised, this particular edifice will remain significant—if only as a reminder of the ghostly structure that still haunts the area (like Rosie's ghost at Ye Olde Salutation Inn).

Conclusions and continuations

In his article "A Waste of Space?" Tim Unwin devotes most of his energies to criticizing Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. Toward the end, however, he turns his attention to what he considers to be the correct approach to the world around us:

> A critical geography needs to engage with the everyday practices of all of us who live in the places that we do; it needs to focus on the needs and interests of the poor and underprivileged; it remains a very modern enterprise, retaining a belief that it is possible to make the world a 'better' place. (Unwin, 2000, p. 27)

My aims are far narrower and markedly less ambitious than Unwin's. "Reading the City" aspires *to make Nottingham a slightly more interesting place*. The means of achieving this are intentionally low-tech. Future iterations of the course might see students construct websites paralleling the city of Nottingham's official homepage. They could tweet their discoveries, shape their own soundscapes, or use their mobile devices in the pursuit of ever-more augmented realities (Bradley, 2012). I fear, however, that these clever technologies run the risk of adding yet another dimension to Lefebvre's "illusion of transparency."

So, for the time being at least, the student-generated cultural maps of Nottingham remain articulated solely in written and oral form. The course concludes with group presentations through which the class is able to define itself as a participative community. This is a consciously performative turn (Lefebvre, 1991). Each new set of students gives accounts of *their* Nottingham. The city stage belongs to them.

And this is as it should be. Guy Debord was surely correct to argue for the importance of those strategies that change the way we see our streets and squares (Plant, 1992). My goal of attuning students to cultural mapping is done in order to nurture tendencies that I'm hopeful will continue long after their academic studies have come to a close. But I remain realistic. My students might have opted to study History, but not all of them share my passion for "heritage."

Nor, for that matter, does the rest of the population. This was brought home to me when my sister-in-law came to stay. She loves Nottingham on the grounds that it is a great place to shop for herself and her young children. One of her favorite destinations is that low-cost clothes store that squats on the grave of Watson Fothergill's Black Boy Hotel. The "normal" response is to lament its loss and condemn the usurper. But, for my sister-in-law at least, it is the latter that makes Nottingham a serviceable, interesting, and memorable place. It is a part of her psychogeography in a way that Fothergill's folly never would have been.

I certainly don't want to deny my students the pleasures of shopping. But this doesn't stop me hoping that they might, just occasionally, look beyond the "chain stores" and "their miles of black glass facia" (Betjeman, 1973, p. 355). Because if they *do* they might notice the plaque

depicting the vanished Black Boy Hotel. And, with their imaginations stimulated or sensibilities piqued, they might be inspired to adopt a questioning frame of mind: Who was it that determined the hotel was surplus to requirements? Why does the new building look so very different? What other aspects of the city have—or might soon—change? And what can I do about it?

Moreover, if they start down that line of reasoning they just might pick up an item of clothing on sale and ask: "Who has produced it? ... Who will profit from its sale? ... Where will the money go?" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 340). If these questions are posed in the Victoria shopping mall they could well inspire the thinker to "remember" a time when Nottingham had two stations. One is now just a memory—but a tangible one at that, courtesy of its surviving clock tower plus a rich seam of archival film, documents, and collective memories.

This chapter began with John Betjeman and concluded with the antithesis of all that he stood for when defending St. Pancras from the bulldozers, namely Maid Marian Way. At the outset I provided a citation from a science fiction novel. I want to do the same again now that this city reading is coming to a close. It is taken from a little-known book by the Swedish writer, Bertil Mårtensson. Entitled *Skeppet i Kambrium* (1974), it tells the tale of a man who begins to gradually realize that he has been stripped of his true identity and held captive in a simulacrum of London. With this realization the apparently fixed, hermetic spaces around him begin to crack—and with it "his value system [which] shifted like pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope. The same pieces but a new pattern" (Mårtensson, 1974, p. 7).

A kaleidoscope lends brilliance to everything. What matters is the identity of the hand that holds the instrument and the nature of the eye that determines when to shift the image. If we are all encouraged to perceive our surroundings with kaleidoscopic eyes, then we would be better placed to appreciate the beautifully interesting world around us—even if we are happening to look at a contender for "one of the ugliest roads in Europe."

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