

## Katie Warfield – Notes for Cultural Research Salon

Derek and I met last year as I neared the end of my first year of studies at the School of Community and regional planning at UBC. I can't recall how we got in touch with each other but I knew our research interests were similar and so I excitedly met Derek one Wednesday afternoon, at Urban Fare in Yaletown—in the midst of the concrete landscape he so profoundly studied.

Over Chai teas Derek began into his research. My memory now of that day was that we started off talking about concrete and that material's psychological effects on urban residents. Derek mentioned his interest in Jane Jacobs—the earth mother of street life—a theorist whose ideas were foundational in the planning of North False Creek.

Then Derek began into the notion of the “uncanny”—Freud's descriptions of the dual and contradictory feelings of familiarity and horror usually triggered when an individual struggles in defining whether an animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might in fact be animate.

Derek dabbled in notions of the subconscious—he dwelled pensively on the psychological or latent effects of the aesthetics of one's environment: what do people *feel* when they live in a world of concrete? What can be said about the tacit psychology of Vancouverites who seem to perpetually buy into promises of “ocean views” and “plate glass gazable windows”? Can we read something about a population of people who “always want to look out but never want to be looked into?” Is this a metaphor? As Derek spoke he used terms like “intuition” and “feelings of uneasiness” and, attempting empathy I told him how I felt when, once, I walked into Urban Fare and saw a stack of square watermelon's for sale at 95\$ a fruit. I thought that was weird. “Exactly!” he said, and he continued on his interests with Freud's notion of “*unheimlich*” and that feeling of being both in some sort of familiar home, but not in your home at all.

I listened. We sipped the drivels of our Chais, and then we went our separate ways. On my way out the front doors of Urban Fare I summarized in my head our entire discussion in five perhaps insensitive words: *cool, but good is it?*

Yeah, it's cool to think about that stuff. But what *good* is that type of knowledge? What purpose does it serve in the long run of getting things done? We can't measure the subconscious, and we can't measure feelings or intuition; and so, what good is it for policy or planning or design guidelines?

What's the use?

## Reaction 2

On my way home, however, as I trod up Beatty Street towards Gastown chastising Freud and all those freaky surrealist theorists, I noticed a little uneasiness in myself. I felt a little contradiction in my gut. Although I struggled with some of his notions, I wasn't upset with Derek. I didn't think he was off his rocker. I walked some more, and thought again how I *felt* about our discussion: "I felt, well I actually felt very satisfied." What I *felt* after that discussion, was a sense that what we'd spoken about was in fact very rich, and very satisfying. I felt kind of like I eaten a piece of intellectual chessecake; full, satiated, and complete.

On my way home I was reminded about an experience I had this past summer when I visited my brother who was then living in England. One day, Andy took me on a 12-hour cultural crash course of London: we visited the Victoria and Albert Museum, we hopped on the tube, hopped off, I took a photo of Andy at a distance from the London Eye pretending to squish the giant wheel between his fingers. We hopped on the tube, tried to get a photo of myself outside the prime minister's house like in the movie *Love Actually*, then realized that the prime minister's house is in reality behind a huge iron gate. I pouted, we hopped back on tube, and we continued the tour.

One of my top three items to see in London was the Tate Modern Gallery. I remember having legs itchy with excitement as we walked from outside the Modernist factory, into the glass-roofed, massive loading bay-like entrance. We took an escalator up to the second floor and there we casually passed icons of contemporary art: "the" Roy Lichtenstein pop art comic, a Dali here, a Warhol there.

I giddily wove through pieces of art that I remember past teachers displaying on Powerpoint and fawning over in undergrad courses. As I analyzed each piece I recalled the intellectual impact of each artist. Then something fascinating happened. Andy, grabbed my elbow.

He had visited the Tate many times since he moved to England, and he told me that if there was anything I had to see in that gallery, it was the Rothko room—A room that had six Rothko paintings from a series painted only in shades of red and black. Mark Rothko, if you are unfamiliar, is an abstract expressionist painter. Abstract expressionism is considered one of the first truly American styles of painting and is characterized by spontaneous, automatic or subconscious creation. The aim of abstract art, for many artists, was to create works with such drama, and in such scale, and with such emotion, that the audience to the work has an equal emotional reaction. Abstract expressionist paintings aimed to reach with such force the intuitive, the emotional, or the gut level of the viewer, that they bypassed the viewer's conscious and critical reasoning level of perception. When you see one of these painting you don't *see* an object, you *feel* the subject. I knew this—I read about it—but, apart from

Internet thumbnails, I had never seen a real Rothko.

And so as we rounded a corner and entered the Rothko room I saw the works. I can't really describe it. That's the thing. I stood in front of a painting about 80 ft tall and 80 ft wide, red on the outside, black in the centre; I felt shock. I moved to the next: black on the outside red in the centre, I felt pressure, sadness, fear, claustrophobia. I moved again. The next one was bright maroon in the centre and lighter red on the edges, and I felt hope and calm—a nice feeling after the previous piece. As I looked around the room—not at the art, but at the people—I noticed that the majority of spectators were standing in front of the hopeful image. Many people looked at the black-framed piece and passed on quickly, shivering, pinching their shoulders. Amazing, I thought.

As we left, I remember noticing that the people in the Rothko room moved much more slowly than people in the other rooms of the gallery. In that room they also spoke less. They used the seats more. They sat to rest.

### **Thought 1**

That was the end of my memory, but the beginning of my questioning: this memory supported my quandary. Walking home, thinking about my talk with Derek, how could I feel at once satisfied and complete about our conversation while at the same time feeling that many of Derek's ideas were essentially impractical and useless?

There was something “right” in what Derek had said. But at the same time, to me, several things seemed wrong. What was I feeling? What was at the root of this dilemma? When I got home I sat down with a piece of paper and started drawing. And after a bit of pondering and doodling, what I realized, amidst my drawings of stick men and women, and my little sketches of brains, thought clouds and buildings, was that the root of my turmoil was a conflict between epistemologies; a conflict between philosophies of “ways of knowing”. What I was struggling with was the question: what type of knowledge can you use to measure the success of a given initiative?

What do you use to measure, and who gets to choose the measures, to determine the *success* of False Creek North? How do you know it's good, or as the policy calls it: livable?

The rational side of me said “Derek, to test the validity of your argument” you have to go ask people in North False Creek: what do you think about your neighborhood? If they say it's good then your assumptions are wrong. False Creek is a success. If, however, the residents say it's “horrific” then, yeah, I you may have something to go on.

But then the other side of me was saying something different. It was saying that Derek was right. That other side of me was saying that I do believe that there are some things that we can't always see or measure empirically but which serve nonetheless **as equally valid proof for the success of a neighborhood or a community**. There are even something's, (and here come the creeping return of freaky Freud) that you can't even really measure with questions because the audience you are *asking may not even be aware of the impacts of their given environment*.

**Proof:** McLuhan said it well: a fish doesn't know he's in water until he's plucked from it. **Proof:** when I saw square watermelons I laughed and then was angry. The experience made me avoid Urban Fare for a while. Why? Don't know. Can't explain it. You'd have to be my gut to know exactly what I'm talking about. **Proof:** when I sat in front of the Rothko paintings I experienced shock, sadness, and then joy from hardened acrylic matter on a painted cloth. **Proof:** I can't explain what it was, but after I saw those painting I felt better. I felt satisfied. I felt filled with something...like cheesecake. The Tate may measure their success with numbers like 13.3 million visitors per year, and a 65 million pound income, but for me, the success of that museum was the feeling and atmosphere of the Rothko room. How are you going to measure and plan for that?

## **Thought 2**

After this was a bit more clear, I thought some more. Why did I have two ways of thinking? I wanted to know where these two ways of thinking came from.

When Derek and I sat down for that first meeting at Urban Fare, like I said, I was rounding the end of the first year of my PhD. I had just left SFU's School of Communications for UBC's School of Planning.

What I quickly learned after this switch was the distinction between these two disciplines. Communications is a discipline in the humanities. Planning is a social science. When I was in Communications, I learned amidst critical theorists: academics who loved postmodern theory. They loved deconstruction. They loved picking things apart. And my peers and mentors deconstructed everything from Cosmopolitan magazines to SUV ads to Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

And I learned to deconstruct too. I learned not to take any one way of thinking for granted. I was taken under the wing of a group of linguistic vultures who would take some topic, say Brittany Spears, and pick at it, and pick at it. They'd deconstruct it, and pick at its corpse until there was nothing left but a tube top, a microphone and a lace thong. I loved this way of thinking because it forced you to "think about the way you think". In a sense, we were a centre for "ways of thinking". After a while, however, I felt like I wanted to make some suggestions.

Rather than just contemplating what “was” I wanted to write about “what could be.”

And so I moved to planning, which quickly proved to be a whole new ballgame. Yes, it was definitely the place to suggest what “could” be, but what was difficult for me was the applied and practical nature of planning as a discipline. Planning is a social science, and as with other “sciences”, the methodologies are based in developing empirical proof for your given argument: proof you can recreate and show; proof that you can see and measure.

Having to provide “visible proof” for any of my arguments was new for me. It seemed to me that many of my academic mentors in communications had gotten along just fine without providing empirical evidence for their arguments. Now it was as if someone said, “Sure, you can argue that Cosmopolitan should be banned, but first, you have to show me a direct cause and effect correlation between eating disorders and cosmo readers. Then you have to provide a year long study proving that the provincial health costs for psychological treatments and hospital visits for underweight women who read Cosmo, are significantly higher than the importation levy’s the federal government profits from through the foreign magazine industry...*but*, I....all I wanted...I just know those magazine are bad. Can’t I just know that?

### **Thought 3**

When I began at SCARP I was interested in north false creek too and so the history of the topic we are discussing today is familiar to me. When I began my PhD I wanted to study “home”. I wanted to see if people felt at “home” in False Creek North. But the more I studied the more I realized that “home” is a concept just as difficult to measure as what we are talking about today.

How do you measure *home*? Can you see home? Think of your experience, what proof do you have that the place you now live in is home? Do you even need a sense of home?

Derek’s interests in livability, I believe, are just as tricky to conceptualize. What is livability? Can you measure it? Is livability always good? If it’s good, what are the keys to livability?

This is one of the first issues we’d like to think about today.

A second topic we’d like to discuss today also relates to challenges with definitions. The topics we—all of us in this room—are interested in are topics that we know are important to our daily lives but which we can often only describe through feeling, experience, and intuition: notion like comfort, belonging, livability, place, community, arts, and culture. But where does real culture and

community come from? Properly designed built forms? High quality of life? Ambitious and active people? Group events? Innovative opportunities? Education?

Thirdly, let's say we do manage to agree on some intangible concepts about what fosters culture and community, but let's also say that some of those catalysts are experiential or feeling-based, non-empirical, non-measurable. In a system that validates and funds initiatives based on measurable benefits and empiricism rather than "feelings" and experience, how do we translate intangible feelings into tangible, measurable and quantifiable deliverables? How do we assure that we are measuring all the proper and necessary indicators of success?

And finally, if say we can get this far: we can figure out the origins of arts and cultural success, we can develop measures, and we feel good about them. Is it possible to transfer this model to a new environment? Say, if we were to study False Creek North, and decide that it is truly a successful model. Could we apply "general guidelines" about culture and community to other places? Should all places be livable in the same way North False Creek is livable?

We toss these questions out to you all openly hoping to seek your opinions.

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But in closing, I'll give my two cents and hope that these last remarks may spark some discussion. To me, planning anything but culture and the arts involves planning **things to be** and which are to **do some specific task**: transit, public toilets, or roads. Like a new bus route: you plan for it to be completed, and plan for it to carry people from point A to B. And when it is complete you measure its success based on whether the buses are there, and whether the buses carry out your hoped-for plans.

But the reason that culture and community are difficult but exciting to think about, is because these subject aren't really about "planning for something to be". Culture and community, at their essence, are about, well, they're about just "being". The sources of successful culture and community, and the measures of successful culture and community cannot be easily distilled from that complex equation that each of us has established to define who we are, and what it means to be. Culture and community do have visual manifestations, but moreover, aren't these concepts about what we feel, about what we experience, about cheesecakey feelings and feelings of essence? And if that's the case, if culture and community are about "being", then should that not be the starting point for any further discussion?

Thank you.