

Jerry Herron

THROW-AWAY CITIES

I live in a throw-away city, the most thrown-away city that humans have ever built. But this is beside the point. The point is that throw-away is the telic destination toward which all cities are headed. And this is what makes cities different from nature, where nothing is throw-away, or at least where nothing ever, finally, gets thrown away. Within that ecological regime, everything is always already still here, matter never being either created or erased. The city is the opposite. The point of the city is to be disposable, to put itself at the disposal of things and events and people that are desirable precisely because they won't last. Because they will be thrown away, and because everybody knows this from the start, regardless of what contrary proposition they pretend to believe. The only difference, then, between other people's cities and ours – between historic cities and the "generic" city apparatus (after Koolhaas) that Americans disseminate globally – is that their cities are either more or less botched imitations of the throw-away logic that reaches perfection in ours, with there being no more perfect example of throw-away than Detroit, which has been thrown away by more people than any other city on planet earth.

Here's what I mean. Historically speaking, the only reason for coming to a city, and similarly the only reason for remaining in a city, or building a new city, is to be able to throw away things from the past you didn't want to keep around, including the city itself. (The Brasilia Effect, it might be called.) That's the deep truth in the old Hanseatic maxim, about city air making people free. It's true. The city does free people, potentially at least, from anything related to the past, and in that way it remains the only real alternative to the dismal (and often deadly) re-cyclings of nature. Think about great novelists of the city: Balzac, Zola, Dreiser. The thing that gives the city its erotic charge, making it crucially different from the country, is the calculated impermanence of everything there, so that identity (including the identity of the city itself) is moment by moment being renegotiated, discarded, thrown away, on behalf of whatever it is that will come next. And that's the profit of the city, both real and metaphoric: it disposes of things so effectively that people come to rely on disposability itself as the only believable, and believably renewable, stay against impermanence and chaos.

"Historic" cities – Paris, London, Prague, Berlin – only look different. They really aren't different from ours, not if the truth were told. Baron Haussman disposed of Paris (just as Corbusier wanted to do a century later), and by disposing of the past, ended up creating the metropolis that people now-naively-think of as the evolved epitome of city life itself when the only thing that really evolves is the equipment for getting rid of the past. Which is to say that the power of things that are old-streets, neighborhoods, houses, public buildings-does not reside in the things themselves (an obvious point, if constantly overlooked) but in the minds of people who transact the city as discourse, sentiment, nostalgias of various kinds. The reason we say we like the past is that such statements make us feel better about erasing the equipment that created it, which-again-is why people bother with cities, which are the only alternative we have to the inescapable past of nature, and the natural wasting that overtakes us all individually. Death, I mean. We enjoy

throwing other things away because it gives us a feeling of being in control, because it protects us from the truth that we too are throw-away, and we can't help it.

The history of the city is a history of forgetting how to remember the past—the past of nature, of the city itself. That's a different project entirely from simple forgetfulness. It implies intention, design, a strategic dismantling of the equipment required to preserve the past as a way of seeing. That's what throw-away means; it's no accident, but a positive plan. And this plan is distinctive to each city, and unique, and the opposite of the generic sameness toward which everything new is tending. All cities are alike in their future; they are likewise headed toward the generic vanishing point of throw-away sameness. What makes each one distinctive is the precise mechanisms by which it reaches that telic destination. Here, no two are alike. What site-specific engines of demolition arise at each location? Racism, freeways, a war, reconstruction, natural disaster, politicians, Henry Ford? That is where the real history of the city is being written: by the vernacular forgetting machines that render the past natively un-rememberable. Not the fact that it's all about throw-away, but the means by which the throwing away gets done. That's what makes city people free.

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