

Regina: Genius loci and Technological Sublime

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1.

A “cultural-geographical thriller” is how Lucy Lippard describes Mike Davis’s book City of Quartz. And indeed it is; but so too is the history of our small city, as indicated by its original name alone. Pile of Bones – evocative of the desserts of surrealism, the black humor of Kafka, the visions of aboriginals who have dwelled here for 10,000 years or more.

Just where was this Pile of Bones? Here the controversy begins. Most likely there were many piles, of several different types. The photographs we do have show piles of bone at various sites in s. Sask. collected for shipment by rail to more industrially advanced centres. Different reports describe the bones being ground up for use as fertilizer in intensive agriculture, as an ingredient in bone china, and as a filtering agent in sugar refining.

John Weston Powers, Regina’s first historian, described an aboriginal pile, perhaps with spiritual meaning, at a kill site on Wascana Creek (a corruption of the Cree “oskana”, meaning bones) in about 1862: “...this pile of buffalo bones stood six feet high, cylinder-shaped and boasted a diameter of forty feet at its base...the bleached materials were laid with artistic skill and taste, shin and other bones radiating from a center.” Since we have no photographic record of this, we must resort to “artist conceptions” for images to flesh out this provocative description. Was it perhaps some sort of symbolically shaped structure, a labyrinth, something other than our current capacity to imagine?

A third situation has been suggested by Edward Poitras, who has found writings which indicate that human bones may have been included in the pile described by Powers, or at another kill site; the remains of aboriginal smallpox victims left as a warning signal.

So what was Regina’s *raison d’être*? The City of Regina’s most distinguishing geographical feature is a creek, which if left to the forces of nature, would be for the majority of the time completely dry. The real reason for its location was land speculation. The powers that held property here on the flat prairie adjacent to the CPR, mainline prevailing over opposing forces lobbying for a Fort Qu’appelle site. A hundred years along, this was evidently a big mistake in terms of property development as the alternate site, in a valley with hills, rivers and lakes, would have held the topographic potential for real estate values similar to those of Calgary, or even Lake Como in Italy.

Genius loci is a term literally translated as “spirit of place”, the unique nature of a given site in space. The Architect Christian Norberg-Schulz refers to Genius loci as “...that

“opposite” man has to come to terms with in order to dwell in a particular place.” - “to dwell” being a Heideggerian concept embracing all “the arts of living”. From the preamble the reader can no doubt discern something of that challenging “opposite” Regina presents to its inhabitants, but what spatial features are on the plus side of the ledger? Objectively, it would seem that our sole geographical asset is this meandering creek, so let’s look at what’s been done with it.....

2.

It has been said that Regina is the Canadian city that has done the most with the least (and Vancouver the least with the most). From the air, southern Saskatchewan is the most artificial of landscapes, close to a pure Cartesian grid imposed on a flat plane, and within this Regina is the most artificial of cities, an oasis of cultivated trees – 11,000 trees and shrubs were planted around the legislative buildings alone in 1913. The crown jewel of the city is Wascana park, one of the largest urban parks in N. America, with a man-made lake at its center.

Thomas Mawson, the SOM (international corporate architects Skidmore Owings & Merrill, the marquee architects of Regina’s Twin Towers) of his day in the realm of landscape architecture, drew up a plan, a vision in the City Beautiful style. Wascana Lake was created by damming the creek and was expanded in the early 1930’s as a make-work project . The dirt excavated during the deepening of the reservoir was used to create two islands in the lake. Another employment project of the dirty ‘30s was the Albert Memorial Bridge in the Egyptian Revival Style, sited where the city’s central north-south street crossed Wascana Creek and cited in the World Book of Records as “ the longest bridge over the narrowest body of water”, but subsequently disputed on various grounds such as the definition of the term “bridge”. What was never disputed was its exorbitant cost, a fact which earned it the name “Bryant’s Folly” after the then Minister of Finance, but considering its absurd beauty and role in providing work to many unemployed, it should be lauded as that rarest of follies, the socially constructive type.

On Jan 1, 2004 a new round of artifice began, the Wascana Lake Urban Revitalization Project. Giant backhoes and trucks will work 24/7 to excavate 1.2 million cubic metres of sediment that has built up since the deepening of the ‘30s, and use it to create two man-made mountains. Because the heavy machinery would sink into the ooze the project must be carried out when the sediment is frozen; the first 3’ in a designated area will be removed then the frost allowed to penetrate the soft, steaming muck until solidified, and another 12’ removed.

When I first heard stories of this project I was quite excited by the boldness of the intervention and its congruity with Regina’s tradition of artificiality, not to mention the prospect of boating and swimming outdoors in the heart of the city. But as my cultural-detective’s mind ponders, disturbing thoughts arise. Nobody asked me if I approved of this “history in the making”, just as nobody asked whether I wanted to terminate another

of the city's socially constructive jewels, the Dunlop Gallery in the central Library, ostensibly because of a temporary budget shortfall.

Then too, comparing this project to the deepening of the lake in the '30s that was exemplary in its social consciousness, one wonders about the motivations of this exercise, and how far-thinking it is. Two webcams allow viewing of the activity at www.wascanalake.com, but why is the site a .com? And, given the attempt to close the popular pool in the park a decade ago, might the possibility of swimming in the revitalized lake be used as an excuse to try it again? A more visionary plan for the 21st C. might have been a pilot project modeled on the Bear River Waste Water Treatment Plant in Nova Scotia, a man-made system of linked ponds where sewage is conducted through a series of mini-ecosystems providing natural filtration and purification. This might even include glasshouses for plants and swimming at the outflow end. Perhaps the time has come for another socially and ecologically conscious Folly!

3.

Meanwhile, in another part of the city, a major commercial development is taking place, a Big Box Power Centre that a friend who frequently visits L.A. says is more intensive than anything he's seen there and which strikingly parallels the artifice of the public Wascana park. Here, on the eastern edge, the land is being shamelessly reshaped again, this time privately to create a totally artificial, meandering waterway designed to maximize views for chain stores, condos and malls with enticing names like Riverbend and Riverview.

This is a bizarre landscape, a sharply defined edge where grain fields and tumbleweeds give way to global capital. In a new iteration of colonialism, a complex web of transportation, high technology, advertising and capital is stretched out to the provinces establishing outposts worked by deskilled local labour. Like traders exchanging cheap glass beads for furs, these entities offer nutritionally devalued foodstuffs, media saturated objects of desire and knock-off Italian designs to natives of the City of Regina and exploit their lack of understanding and valuation of their own local resources, including the area's creative sector.

These are manifestations of the Technological Sublime. Related to the Romantic conception of the Sublime - feelings of awe and dread before the overpowering forces of nature, The Technological Sublime has been defined as "...corporate forces and technological systems beyond the capacity of a single human mind to comprehend", and evokes shock and awe before the instruments of power. Both exert simultaneous forces of attraction and repulsion and hold us transfixed by their hypnotic power. Closely linked to the tidal flows of global capital that wash up here on the prairies are other strands of the Technological Sublime - instant-landmark corporate architecture parachuted into the city, burgeoning digitization and networking, and the tenacious power of the multi-national auto industry.

4.

But back to local reality, to the fascinating field of infrastructure studies, and to the ultimate infrastructure – our treatment of sewage. How we produce and treat our wastes is a very revealing index of culture; in China “night soil” has traditionally been used directly in agriculture; presently in Japan, the solids from sewage are pressed and fired into paving bricks. Regina’s Waste Treatment Plant is quite futuristic in appearance, controlled and park-like, but processing 20 million gallons/day, or 100 gallons/inhabitant – quite a staggering amount especially for a region perennially plagued by drought!

Basically, solids are separated from liquids and digested in buried anerobic tanks. Liquids are aerated in ponds, phosphates precipitated out, and then discharged into the natural watershed which eventually feeds into a nearby recreational lake, still high in ammonia and whatever else might not be measured. And where is Regina’s Waste plant? Very near to the aboriginal pile of bones described by Powers. Is this a coincidence, or does it have some meaning; and if so, what? I leave these questions for you to ponder.