JUSTIN BENNETT / City of Progress

A city could start like this drawing: first there's an empty space, and then an event: a dot on the paper.

Someone decides to stay instead of to go. Someone finds water. Paths form a cross-roads, people meet, exchange goods or gossip. The city grows organically, its cells dividing, changing and spreading, but in doing so it becomes fixed, sedentary. The tents are replaced with wood, stone, bricks, concrete, steel and glass. This process of crystallisation embeds memory and history into the plan of the city itself.

This drawn utopia is also its own dystopia. The pencil is at war with the eraser. The hand that draws - my hand -takes on different roles – the hand of a master architect, a poor man building a shack, a pilot dropping a bomb.

This city of progress is insular, a world unto itself, autistic even, but still, it cannot help but to engage with the world outside the studio, the office buildings of the new business district rising slowly outside my window as I draw. Every mark that I make contributes to the creative capital of the area, and thus to the legitimacy of the cultural politics of the developers.

The city is often seen as being formed through economic activity – the market, trade. But equally the city is formed through conflict.

To begin with, the act of founding a city often involves colonialism. Dividing up space implies possession of, or at least political control over, land and buildings.

Tension between public and private uses of space grows. The organic, anarchic growth is held in check, altered and reversed by laws, architects and politicians.

In their book Pure War, Virilio and Lotringer show the relation of the city to warfare. A city can be built as a military obstacle, a fort or it can simply be the battleground itself.

Embedded in the city is the plan of its own destruction, the object is made one with its own accident. As Virilio says:

"The invention of the boat was the invention of shipwrecks... the invention of the aeroplane was the invention of the plane crash"

This destruction is implicit in technological progress, which, in excess, can become perverse.

In times of revolution, buildings housing powerful institutions – government, the media, are always the ones to be assaulted first, even if they are empty.

The idea that a construction or a designed object contains the seeds of its own destruction finds resonance in the work of many artists. Gustav Metzger, Cornelia Parker and Gordon Matta-Clark use destructive energy as a sculptural force, in an attempt to side-step the art market, question the legitimacy of the art-object, or to freeze or reverse progress for a moment in a work so that it can be perceived.

When the city has grown to fill the paper, I use the city itself as the canvas, like Le Corbusier wielding his pencil, the city becomes a mere background on which to draw, to erase and to reorder.

There are different timescales involved here. There is the time you are taking to watch, there is the time taken to draw – slowing down artistic production to a basic rhythm, one mark after another. There is a seemingly historical narrative where hundreds of years are compressed into minutes, and there are the words that I am speaking – all these come together in a fictive time.

Just as with the plan of a real city, this fictive map echoes the traces of different societal, utopian programs.

Ildefons Cerdá's plan for Barcelona was a grid; an open regular structure, designed to solve social problems by guaranteeing light, air and garden space. However, the private developers who actually built the Eixample district maximised their profits by filling in all the four sides of each block creating a monotonous and, with the advent of the motor car, pedestrian-unfriendly environment.

Urban planning , although led by social ambitions, can often reveal or even exaggerate hidden social differences. What starts as "an exclusive development" can strengthen a class distinction and eventually could end up as a border, a security fence.

There is a balance between creation and destruction implicit in any large urban development. This is not just present in the well-known violence of gentrification but also in the violence that is displaced elsewhere. An urban development program has an Ethical as well as a Carbon Footprint. Many of the financial institutions involved in construction projects in european cities invest their money (and our money) in companies that produce cluster bombs, depleted uranium munitions or nuclear warheads.

Just imagine the effect of using those weapons at ground zero of the Zuidas in Amsterdam, the Docklands in London, La Defense in Paris or the Forum in Barcelona.

Of course it would never happen. As a consequence of globalisation, those weapons are mostly produced and used in other countries - the war has been out-sourced. In some godforsaken place on the opposite side of the globe an explosion has left an enormous crater the size and shape of our new business district.

No, the violence here in northern europe is more subtle – it acts through the systematic privatisation of public spaces and services, through the use of our current obsession with security to create spaces of fear, or through the relegation of the public sphere to the internet where citizens can safely play out a simulation of democracy, or even worse, police themselves more efficiently than George Orwell could have ever imagined.

Every technological development is an accident waiting to happen. Conversely, every disaster, every wasteland of rubble and twisted metal from Beirut to Manhattan is a new opportunity. The Neutron bomb was designed to kill people while preserving buildings – even attractive for the UN World Heritage centre, but project developers would rather have a blank canvas. In Beirut the destroyed centre was re-branded as a heritage trail, creating another militarised zone within the city; this time a playground for the rich and for the tourists. The World Trade Centre will rise again from the ashes – a monument in the form of a generic skyscraper that would not be out of place in any other city centre.

But here, back in my studio again, the eraser seems to have won. The military-industrial complex has crumbled, an economy or an ideology has failed. Utopia remained unrealised, Labour was not abolished, Constant's "New Babylon" was not even started. And I'm left with an empty page, pencil poised to make a new mark, ready to start all over again.

But first, this time, I'm going to think for a long time about what it is that I want to start.

Justin Bennett
2008

"City of Progress" was made during a 5 month residency at the Vrije Ruimten Zuidas, Amsterdam.

VISIONS FUGITIVES

DU DESSIN ANIMÉ AUX IMAGES DE SYNTHÈSE

11.02 › 15.04 2012