

"AT THE EDGE OF THE PRESENT"

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<INTRO>

"When you walk through a city and you get a wave of emotions, that's because you come across the footprints of those who have lived and died there - whatever is left behind - a certain 'humidity'. This is not merely the product of our individual culture - it is that, times one billion for those who have gone before us, and another billion for those who will come after us. We exist at that edge of the present. This is what a city is" [Nikos Vatopoulos, interview with RG].

<MAIN TITLE SEQUENCE>

<ACT 1. TRIBES>

Cities are the building blocks of our civilisation. The Greek language only has one word for both "the civic" and "the urban" (αστικός). Everything from social etiquette in our daily interactions, to law and order, to how we reach decisions as a society goes back to the idea of the city. Politics and police are rooted in the Greek word for the city - polis.

Sociologist Norbert Elias showed that the emergence of urban culture required the suppression of our bodies and our behaviour in public space. The purpose of that social coercion, however, was not control for its own sake - but enabling coexistence with other people in the limited shared space of cities.

"Urban space is the space in which infinite differences have to coexist while ensuring the maximum level of liberty for everyone" [Myrto Kiourti, interview with RG].

The most fundamental feature of cities is diversity. Diversity of languages, ethnicities, sexualities, religions, professions, ideologies, socioeconomic backgrounds, habits, interests... But here's a paradox: the more diversity a city offers us, the more choices we have. But, the more we build our daily routines and relationships around *choice*, the more likely we are to fall back into predictable patterns of behaviour; to create *habits*; to withdraw to the safety of our private sphere; to only encounter those who *think* like us; those who *are* like us.

As we move across borders, as cities grow and become more multicultural "there has been a tendency towards privacy, withdrawal, segregation - increasing anxiety about the behaviour and values of others" (Bannister and Kearns 2013: 2713). When we encounter difference our first instinct is to withdraw - to disengage - to form tribes. Yet, as sociologist Richard Sennett notes, "tribalism couples solidarity with others like yourself to aggression against those who differ" (2012: 3). Gated communities and urban ghettos are symptoms of super-diversity and segregation.

It is easy for a city to fall victim to its success; to afford its residents the luxury of retreating into their comfort zone. "Too many strong ties in a locality can lead to provincialism; the kind of oppressive small town culture that sociologist Georg Simmel warned against" (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011: 110). People focusing too much on the local, on the parochial. We expect more from cities. We expect them to provide us with a universal narrative, a gateway to the world.

Creating and maintaining a sense of community in urban neighbourhoods requires interacting with others - having "meaningful encounters" (Henriksen and Tjora 2014: 2116).

"Public squares are crucial for the civic culture because they force you to coexist. A square puts you in the process of coexisting even with people that you haven't chosen. The key factor is the *coercion* of citizens to coexist. The *lack of choice*" [John Karahalios, interview with RG].

"I have seen people transform and become mellower through social interaction in public spaces - by sharing experiences with others at the same time, in the same place" [Nikos Vatopoulos, interview with RG].

However, just being present in the same space with others is not enough. Nurturing coexistence requires tolerance. And tolerance requires respect and empathy - "the recognition of the legitimacy of difference" (Bannister and Kearns 2013: 2700). It's okay to be different. We don't have to *agree* with each other. We don't have to be like each other. Even conflict is engagement. "You may live in a city that is constantly boiling but you're part of that. It's not just about saying 'sorry' and moving on. Somebody may have an argument with you, but at least they engage with you and that makes you feel alive" [Dimitris Mihas, interview with RG]. You are acknowledged. You belong.

"Opening yourself up to the community is a good thing; you immediately get new data, which means that you keep moving forward- that you keep changing. Many people changing means that *the city* is changing" [Nikos Vatopoulos, interview with RG].

We have so much to gain from *engaging* with those around us... our surroundings. Pause. Listen... Look...

<ACT 2. LIGHTS>

"It takes a lot of lights to make a city..." [Raymond Chandler, *The Blue Dahlia*]

City lights are a metaphor for human progress. They are an expression of both enlightenment and hubris. They challenge nature and distort space. They create dreamscapes, imaginary worlds. They illuminate the darkness, and create shadows. They regulate movement.

"A beautiful urban space acknowledges and accepts speed. It allows the seamless coexistence of humans and cars; the efficient operation of complex systems" [John Karahalios, interview with RG].

Cities accumulate energy, wealth, talent, knowledge, innovation. We push each other to push boundaries, to break through, to make it. Yet, cities are "internally uneven spaces that produce and maintain inequality, even as they produce prosperity" (Elinoff 2014: 198).

Invisible Others play their background roles in the daily performance of urban existence. The street cleaner who wakes up at the crack of dawn to collect my trash. The flyer boy who hands out vouchers for tonight's show. The charity worker who is trying to get me to sign up. The intoxicated beggar who is trying to survive one more day. The lonely saxophone player in the metro. The bullied teenager who keeps looking over her shoulder, scared to death. The sex worker, the car park valet, the bus driver, the concierge... They are all there, yet they're invisible.

"Homeless people essentially live *within* the city. They are the ones who are most 'at home' in the city. They delineate and domesticate urban areas" [Mara Bitrou, interview with RG]. As urban centres are regenerated and redeveloped, they "struggle to find and make space for themselves in clean, smartly paved, well provided and increasingly pedestrianized settings. They tend to rely on other

locations: 'backstage' settings, such as rear lanes and access and delivery ramps; vacant premises and a dwindling number of derelict plots, awaiting development; cluttered corners, little strips and skirts of neglected space and overgrown verges and all the other interstitial affordances of urban architecture - overhangs, underpasses, stairwells, recessed fire-exit doorways" (Hall and Smith 2014: 303).

"Society is used to seeing people as human resources. When they stop being resources and are merely human, they also stop being part of society" [Dimitris Mihas, interview with RG]. Spaces such as cemeteries, prisons, brothels and psychiatric hospitals are pushed to the margins of the city because they challenge society's norms. "This is where the Other lives. These places constitute an obscure second level of urban public space. They have their own rules. But they're vital parts of the urban landscape. It's important to keep spaces like that at the heart of the city. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a drive to move cemeteries out of city centres because of the negative connotations. No- this is life, this is memory- this is how you shape the civic culture. We *all* come from somewhere, we will *all* go somewhere" [Mara Bitrou, interview with RG].

<ACT 3. TIME>

Urban public space holds the power and responsibility to connect us with our past and to allow us to dream of a better future. It reminds citizens of those who have fought for the freedoms we now take for granted. Monuments, statues, works of art - all the civic landmarks in a city remind us where we come from; the struggles, human tragedies and epic triumphs of our ancestors; but they also give us glimpses into the stories of those who are different from us; *their* cultures, *their* memories, *their* values. It is this ever-changing tapestry of memories that keeps a city alive.

"We can't understand the conditions of life- we can't understand *change* by using our own lifespan as a point of reference... The city exists and functions in a timeframe that is outside of your own timeframe. You have to step outside and become detached so as to be able to calmly observe and judge" [Nikos Vatopoulos, interview with RG].

We are all transient beings. The way we usually experience the city is by going from point A to point B... purposefully... following predetermined routes. Yet, it is when we deviate from our habitual paths - when we lose ourselves, when we become explorers in our own city - that we start to observe, to experience, to connect. I look around me and see surfaces that have been smoothed by infinite repetitions of movements over time. As if we are all just working on time's behalf...

Urban decay is both heart-breaking and beautiful. Buildings that were once full of life and enterprise, now reminders of a by-gone era; of how ephemeral we all are. David Lynch wrote that "when you see an aging building or a rusted bridge, you are seeing nature and man working together. If you paint over a building, there is no more magic to that building. But if it is allowed to age, then man has built it and nature has added into it - it's so organic" (Lynch, 2006: 119).

"Public space emits signals. They're not necessarily loud or visible. You walk down the street thinking about that meeting that you're going to. However, at the same time a second level of consciousness is registering the surrounding environment and 'saving' it into your brain... If we could unlock a commuter's consciousness, we'd reveal an emotional torrent about their relationship to the city" [Nikos Vatopoulos, interview with RG].

Fleeting encounters that affect us profoundly. Random acts of kindness - the kindness of strangers. Historic moments grounded in

space. Yes, we all are transient beings but somehow everyone leaves their mark on the city.

"Place is experienced space. It is what happens when geographic space takes on meaning of any sort—as an object of memory, desire, or fear... Place can function as the most powerful organizing theme of shared meaning. Street corners and neighborhoods, parks and schools, monuments and memorials— these are not just spots on a map. They are what hold the abstraction of social life together" (Gordon and Koo 2008: 206).

In an age dominated by speed, stress, risk, insecurity and fear, public space has the responsibility to enable us to imagine alternative realities. Public space should allow the creation of "emergent phenomena" [John Karahalios, interview with RG]; "the potentiality of the unexpected" [Mara Bitrou, interview with RG]; situations that are unpredictable, challenging and above all else, liberating. "Aesthetic beauty is ultimately about being moved by the realisation of liberation" [Myrto Kiourti, interview with RG].

Sometimes, I just close my eyes and listen to the sounds of the city... of the people around me. And I feel like I'm a tiny part of a living organism - that I am part of the city.

<END CREDITS>

**Full Video:** <https://vimeo.com/gerodimos/edge>

**Other resources:** <http://www.romangerodimos.com/films/edge/>

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