Rixdorf Editions
BERLIN
1908

THE BEAUTY OF THE METROPOLIS

AUGUST ENDELL

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THE BEAUTY OF THE METROPOLIS

PREVIEW

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THE VEILS OF DAY

It is perhaps the fog that does this most insistently, and its beauty has always attracted at least some notice. It transforms a street utterly. It draws a gentle veil over buildings – grey, when clouds cover the sun on high, or warm, golden and bright when a clear sky stretches above. It changes the colours of the buildings, makes them milder and more cohesive; it smears stark shadows or removes them altogether, and these buildings, almost all of them groaning under absurdly overblown plasterwork, seem finer, flatter, more subdued. Even the Dom[13] – that frightful product of aimless handicraft run amok – strikes a wonderful figure on hazy autumn mornings around ten o'clock when the fog is visible and warm; the pointless recesses, the thousands of dissections and divisions disappear, infused with the fog that fills and swells the riven forms. Fog refines poor architecture, filling streets that would otherwise run on into infinity and transforming a void into an enclosed space.

What fog makes tangible and clear, with an

effect perceptible to even the unobservant eye, air does so more subtly, more softly, more inconspicuously, casting a hazy, gauzy veil over everything, almost continuously. Its density changes, and so this veil changes every day as well, sometimes almost imperceptibly and sometimes with very obvious effect. How beautiful it is when the whole street appears to be composed of a thousand gradations of grey and black, with the colourful highlight of an advertising pillar or the yellowing of an autumnal tree. How beautiful, when after a long dry spell everything seems entirely light grey, almost white. How wonderful it is on a bright summer day when the soft haze, visible only in the shadows, casts its fine, bright veil. Of course, as with nature, not everything is beautiful. You have to look for it. But this is harder, because unlike the open landscape, it hasn't been sought out and painted and described by thousands before us. Often it is only small sections that are beautiful, such as the reflective tram tracks in the grey asphalt or the recess of a loggia, whose red wall, half sunlit, half shaded, offers a delightful play of colour that contrasts with the grey of the facade. But expansive images can often delight as well – a happy accident of light, a fine distribution of shadow that stretches right across the street and transforms monotonous regularity into a dynamic form.

The effect of rain is completely different; it doesn't smudge colours but instead makes them heavier, darker, richer. The light grey asphalt turns deep brown, outlines become harder, the air clearer, the depths seem deeper, everything acquires firmness and solidity; but over this lies the wonder of lustre and reflection that

envelops everything in a glittering net, turning the sensible, workaday street into a shimmering fairy tale, a sparkling dream.

Wilder and more fantastical still is the dusk; it thickens the haze of day, deposits steadily darkening clouds in the depths of buildings and appears to fill out the streets right and left; forms become calmer and heavier, every colour milder and more matt, everything gradually darkening, leaving only a few points of illumination – the colours of a wagon or a poster on an advertising pillar, so shrill and loud by day, now resounding bright and subtle in the descending grey. But the light of the sky drowns out everything, it dazzles the eye and spreads a mantle of flickering, uncertain, twitching light over the whole street, appearing everywhere and yet originating from nowhere. And then suddenly the sunset flares, everything that previously appeared grey and moribund now warm and glowing. The air itself is filled with warm, bright colours, every shade turns lively, the peaks of the buildings and churches glimmer in garish reddish yellow, and the radiant blue of evening spreads through the dusky streets. It penetrates everywhere, stronger than any artificial light, filling the narrowest streets, indeed this is perhaps where it is strongest. There is nothing like sitting in a city café at this time of day, looking down from the first floor onto the masses of people becoming ever darker, sensing the little patch of sky above suddenly flaring up and watching the blue tide fill the whole street, penetrating through large windows into smoke-filled rooms and for a few fleeting moments displacing everything – the newspapers, the menus, the conversation

and all the petty concerns of banal existence.

Fog, haze, sun, rain and dusk – these are the forces that swathe our great rock eyries in splendid, ever-changing colours, melding their forms, making them more self-enclosed, even monumental; turning the most pitiful courtyards, the bleakest neighbourhoods into worlds of wondrous colour. They transform seemingly uniform piles of stone into a living and ever-changing entity. One individual could never exhaust its riches; it would be more than enough to experience what is offered by your immediate environment, your courtyard, your building, the streets you walk down every day.

From my study[14] I can see a high gable wall; in fact from my desk it is all I can see, the sky only visible when I go right up to the window and crane my neck. The wall is bare, made with inferior bricks, ranging from yellow to reddish, with grey, irregular grouting. But this wall is a living thing, a creature that changes with the weather – grey, monotonous and heavy on overcast days, lively and dynamic when it's sunny. The red bricks glow brighter than usual then, and the wall acquires a shimmering grain as the unevenness of the masonry becomes more apparent. Sometimes the sun shines on the upper part of the wall. Then it turns fiery and luminescent, and the lower part takes on a soft, subtle, bluish tone. Against the wall – I live on the second floor – stretch the tips of the trees in the 'garden' with their thin, shining branches. In summer they bear huge leaves – trees wish to live and the youngest leaves absorb energy from the sky early on – their heavy green is rich and full against the matt tones of the wall. But in autumn, when

the leaves start to yellow, they shine with the light of the sun against the shaded wall, with a mild glow that renders the shadows cool and bluish. And as other leaves turn red it results in a wonderful image of tenderness; the glowing red of the leaves against the softer red of the stone. But when you look out onto the garden in the late afternoon, when a light mist envelops the trees, you can imagine yourself to be in a wonderland – the bright glowing leaves, swaying slightly in the darkening space before the violet shimmering wall, and the bluish dusk surging all about, alternately concealing and revealing. Then comes winter, the leaves fall, and one day the tip of the highest tree, the only part that sees the sun, rises ghostly and unfathomable like a golden whorl set against the wall shimmering in tones of red and blue.

And just as this wall reflects the life of the year for me, so too does the street on which my building stands. Every morning I go downstairs for a few minutes to observe its changes. Its length shifts constantly with the transparency of the air, the ends almost always enclosed by haze, and the buildings appearing taller or smaller, advancing or receding as sun and shade dictate. The grey of the footpath and the road, the green clouds of the two rows of trees and the black columns of their trunks look different every day, not always beautiful, but often so delightful that I can't tear myself away. And it's the same everywhere.

Nearby is a Romanesque church[15]. Frightful, simply frightful as architecture, confused in construction, senseless in proportion, absurd in detail, laboriously amassed from a thousand old treasures. In architectonic

terms I couldn't imagine a worst spectacle. It is impossible to get used to it. And yet I look at its towers every day. Because every day the air and the haze transform them into new wonders. In rain and storm the stone roofs of the towers grow darker than the walls and gable, they dominate the streets all around, and I see them several times a day in the changing light. They recede, light grey in a grey sky, they advance, dark and menacing; after the rain they appear green, from certain sides even violet, and then they glow almost white against the blue sky once again. They look different from a distance, different from close up, different in the light, different in the shadow, different every hour and every day. They too are just one part of the living entity that constantly surrounds us in mysterious ways, for which we can only find meagre words like weather, or climate.

While you can witness transformation in the things you see every day, seldom trod streets and districts can imprint themselves individually through their charm or their scale. One of the most stupendous that comes to mind is an iron bridge along the Stettin railway[16]. Behind the station stretches a street that accompanies the railway track, to the right a row of five-story buildings without balconies – flat, charmless, formless. But in the distance rises a dark behemoth. That's where the railway curves a little to the right and passes over the street on a bridge 70 metres long. Here the street droops below it, so it appears that the bridge is almost touching the ground, the heavy, giant supports shifting against one another and forming a dark, vaulting mass which passes right by the last building and seems to race toward it with

a roar. A mountain in motion, black and towering, it appears like a trumpet blast; your heart stands still when you behold the monstrous forces, the passion, the size of the hulking mass. There is only one thing to which I can compare it. It was in the harbour at Kiel[17]. The armoured cruisers lay at dock at wide intervals. And one of the ships had all its signal flags out to dry; it was the same passionate, horrendous roar, made madder still by the bright colours which ended in a piercing red, the whole a giant, blood-red coxcomb from the deck to the tip of the mast, swaying sluggishly, in monstrous contrast to the giant forms of the ships in their mute grey. On a similar scale but more disjointed is the huge arc of Gleisdreieck[18], part of the above-ground railway, which presents an unusual contrast to the slender, abstruse forms of the iron construction.

Then there is something completely different, glittering, almost playful, and yet overpowering – the hall of the Schlesischer Station[19], the colossal roof measuring 207 by 54 metres, supported by countless slender iron columns, so slender, that you can hardly make out where they join up, and they appear almost painfully sharp to the eye. As architecture it is hideous, but when fine haze fills the wide hall and turns the iron rods into an endless, glittering spider's web – the effect is unparalleled.

In high summer, the sight of certain streets in the north-east presents an unusual contrast. The buildings are very tall, taller than currently permitted, but without alcoves, hideously plastered with a thousand forms, devoid of understanding or vitality. There are two tall, gloomy walls, with a senseless profusion of cornices

and mouldings spreading a network of black shadows where the sun strikes the surface, rendering the cloudy grey of the paintwork even heavier on the shaded side. But each of these buildings has two latticework balconies like little birdcages in each storey, each completely filled with the dark green and red of the flowers and creepers so diligently grown there. The street-side walls appear to be entirely decked with dense, richly coloured nests, which in the displacement of perspective perch right on top of one another, lending the cheerless, meagre street a strange charm, a glow of restrained passion, of fantastic magnificence. And so out of a dry paragraph in the building code, out of the most heedless exploitation of the available land, out of architectonic folly and the penned-in city-dweller's longing for flowers and greenery, arises an image of rare beauty. Naturally this is an unusually fortunate confluence. Grand impressions are more easily won where the gigantic proportions of engineering structures offer a certain monumentality even in their raw forms, especially in the great factory halls, although known only to a few, and above all in railway halls. How wonderful Friedrichstrasse Station[20] is when you stand on the outside platform suspended over the Spree, when you see nothing of the 'architecture', only the huge expanse of the glass apron[21], and its counterpoint to the petty jumble of buildings all around. It is particularly fine when twilight shadows fuse the tattered confusion of the surrounding area into one form, and the numerous little panes begin reflecting the sunset, the entire surface glowing and shimmering with life, arching over the low, dark, nocturnal fissure from which the broad, menacing

form of the locomotive thrusts forth. And what a heightening of sensation when you enter the darkening halls yet filled with a hesitant daylight; the giant, gently curving form indistinct in the murky haze, a sea of grey, hushed shades, from the bright rising steam to the heavy dark roof cladding and the full black of the locomotive roaring in from the east. Above it, however, the evening sun picks out a gable at random, engulfing it in bright flames that shine in the dull surface of the glass apron like a towering, red, shimmering mountain.

END OF PREVIEW

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