

Vancouver. Edge city. A territory on the geographical and cultural periphery. A place where people come to escape the confines of convention and a place with a unique aptitude for freethinking, incubating and investigating.

(Vancouver Design Week)

Architexture:

building narratives with(in) an urban land/scape



text:

- from the Latin "textus", literally things woven
- past participle stem of "texere", meaning to weave, join, construct, fabricate, build

scape:

- variously defined as a plant stem growing up from the ground; the shaft of a feather, or an architectural column
- a view or picture of a scene, usually used in combination, for example: cityscape

In the introduction to *Concrete Forest*, edited by Hal Niedzviecki, the new fiction of urban Canada is metaphorically referred to as *the concrete forest . . . a fiction forest overgrown with the joys and terrors of the urban, a land where the events of the everyday are depicted as real to us in lasting ways that transcend the ephemera of our fleeting lives*. Niedzviecki's collection came out in 1998. In 2015, Renée Sarojini Saklikar writes in her opening to *The Revolving City – 51 Poems and the Stories Behind Them* the following: *To live in the city, is to experience dichotomy: east/west, alone/together: architecture as exploration of class, ecology as means of production. More and more, we might see the city as ecosphere, habitat where the disparate might meet, even if by no other means than happenstance or necessity.*

For much of my teaching career, I toyed with and ventured into the notion of how identity is crafted and shaped through story and place. Places are often referenced by their identity, reflected in various contexts, and it is important for students to understand the role literature plays in creating identity. My students, every year, read stories/novels and poems about Vancouver. They write stories and poems about Vancouver. We visit places in Vancouver. This project is, in part, the on-going culmination and a beginning of a writing initiative, one which includes the following question as a starting point:

How can we (Gladstone's English department) enhance our students' understanding and appreciation of Vancouver's rich history and diverse identity through story and building narratives?

The aim and scope of this project not only address the above question but also the possibility of blurring the lines between architecture and text/story, in a sense, creating a place of *architexture*, where students may discover and write about the many narratives which inhabit the city, real and imagined, through some of Vancouver's more identifiable (or not) neighbourhoods, streets, urban walkways, structures/buildings, for example.

By creating and listening to some of the stories associated with various habitats in Vancouver, one may better explore, examine, and perhaps surprisingly understand the various contexts and constructs of an urban landscape. These contexts may be historical, geographical; they may range from traditional, modernist, and beyond post-modernist views, from brick, wood, concrete, glass, to relations with profound natural settings.

Kim Stafford writes: *A place is a story happening many times*. I couldn't agree more. I would like to engage with our students that, since a building is a place, then a building may be considered a story. A building that *has* character now becomes a building that *is* character.

Building: an on-going story. A storied place. A neighbourhood with character becoming a character. The streets becoming alive with narratives. Storying.

And if we listen *in* on the words emerging from such places, if we pay attention, as Laurie Ricou suggests, to the thoughtful element of surprise when we discover a literary component even when none was expected, we may, then, be able to appreciate the rich histories and diverse identities of place, of this place we call Vancouver.

This project intends to foster a high degree of self-awareness and self-direction as students proceed. As such, the shape (or format) of this project is entirely up to the student. Students are encouraged to take risks, to discover dead-ends, to explore, to search and re-search, but most of all, to write.

The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, and nightmare, is as real maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps, in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture.

-- Jonathan Raban