

Tacoma

“Kublai reflected on the invisible order that sustains cities, on the rules that decreed how they rise, take shape and prosper, adapting themselves to the seasons, and then how they sadden and fall into ruins.”

Invisible Cities

Italo Calvino

In Italo Calvino's mildly hallucinogenic book "Invisible Cities", the young traveler Marco Polo describes a zodiac of cities he has seen to the all powerful Kablai Khan. The book, in both a practical and metaphorical sense, becomes a catalog of the physical, cultural and intellectual elements that distinguish cities. It also prompts a novel way of looking at a city like Tacoma whether you sit on the cushion of the real visitor Marco Polo or on the throne of the Great Khan, seeing the place through the eyes of others.

Calvino's imaginative travelogue of cities is the antithesis of pop culture urban design interwoven with its importance on traffic and parking, zoning regulations and densities, corporate retail and best city magazine surveys. His invisible cities are explored in a more classical sense through buildings and their purposes, the distinctive nature of people and societies, marvels and sites, history and visions of the future and the stories cities tell about themselves-some truths and some lies. Tacoma seems particularly suited to being seen through Calvino's lens, a sort of invisible city in our midst seen as a mirage in the distance from the caravan route of I-5.

Tacoma, more than any other city in the Pacific Northwest is reimagining and recomposing itself around an uncommon, coherent but sometimes hesitant mix of ideas about what cities are for, who they serve and how they should look. Because the port city was built in a burst by the railroad two centuries back its underlying design reflects the movement of locomotives, wagons and streetcars. The street plan of the city and particularly the charting of boulevards predate the automobile and the conventions of traffic engineering. Though the freeway system has been intruded into the central city, Tacoma is restoring and rebuilding itself on the patterns of the 19th Century industrial revolution without any affectations of nostalgia or sentimentality.

Tacoma is best viewed in two acts- as a vestigial city of straight forward practicality and industry that is reappearing and suggesting a sustained direction and as a vernal city filling in empty spaces and taking advantage of physical opportunities with contemporary cultural and social expressions.

The last decade of the 20th Century saw the emergence of the vestigial city starting with the restoration of the beaux arts Union Station as a federal courthouse in 1990 followed by the unprecedented selection in 1991 of the sturdy warehouse district as the campus for the University of Washington Tacoma. The UWT campus incorporates industrial buildings that are a generation older than anything on the Seattle campus. The original right of way for the Northern transcontinental railroad that reached Puget Sound in 1873 runs directly through the center of the university. The reading room of the library is an adapted Neo Classical electrical power station that is canted in orientation to the railroad right of way and regularly offers students in deep concentration the rumbling hiatus of a train passing within a few feet of the building.

In company with these two transforming projects are an array of commercial building rehabilitations, historic restorations and unexpected reuse projects. All tolled Tacoma could have built a stadium with the investment that went into

existing downtown buildings during the 1990's. Headline projects like the uncladding of the ten-story Schoenfeld building as a corporate headquarters for the DaVita Corporation were emblematic of the time. Many of the most interesting tenants downtown now have addresses in the Bone Dry Shoe Company, the Love and Joy buildings, and the Heidelberg bottling plant.

The single most significant restoration project in Tacoma however is still under construction and effectively reanimating the city with its disruption. Tacoma will fittingly be the first city in the state to return streetcars. It was the first to have them, horse drawn in the 1870s and the last to replace them with buses in the late 1930's. When light rail begins operation in the fall of 2003 along Pacific Avenue through the Union Station district it will run on a boulevard planned by Fredrick Law Olmstead and engineered specifically for streetcars. One of the bewildering political decisions made during planning for the line was to run it up a block off Pacific to the old service road for wagons in the northern downtown. The ghosts of practical railroad engineers that built the city must cringe at this concession to not inconveniencing automobile parking and maintaining cavernous parking structures along Tacoma's uptown central spine.

The vernal city in the making will always be connected to the most recent turn of the century and to reversing the urban dilation Tacoma experienced in the wake of building I-5 in the 1950's. The present city building campaign is marked by some major architectural additions and to continued thematic focus on cultural, educational and governmental development. Conspicuously absent from Tacoma's downtown are the ubiquitous signs of corporate retailing and formulaic urban fabric. Governmental and political efforts to attract suburban, well tested replay projects, including a Cineplex anchored "themed" development in the Old City Hall historic district and a city center tower project have flopped. A serious effort to unify city building efforts in an enlightened master plan for urban development, boldly titled "Destination Downtown" was undermined by serious consideration of a 25 year plan for building super dense freeway towers on public

land next to the Tacoma Dome. The planning blueprint missed addressing the possibilities of edge development just outside the downtown and the dome project ignored any sense of height politeness recommended in the plan. The two initiatives cancelled each other out at no small cost though hope still burns for a true master plan and navigational instrument.

The actual need for a wayfinding master plan for Tacoma right now however, may be minimal if not entirely redundant. The patterns and vestiges of the original city and the dictates of the landscape are driving most meaningful urban design decisions and the results are proving quite workable and defining. The natural hillside setting of the city articulates the need for a classical city neither overtly vertical nor sprawlingly horizontal. As a port city, the visual orientation is toward the waterfront and for the first time in decades a fair share of development is reaching the chinstrap shoreline that runs below the downtown. New construction now runs on parallel tracks along Pacific Avenue and the Thea Foss Waterway and on each there are notable architectural pieces appearing.

Two Museums

On the waterway, The Museum of Glass, International Center for Contemporary Art by Arthur Erickson opened to the public on July 6 2002. It is seamlessly blended into a heroic scaled esplanade, a sort of industrial ghost walk that has re-carved the former working waterfront into a generous public place. The museum puzzles thoughtfully over the alchemy of glassmaking as its primary mission. The form of a signature 90 foot tilted cone over the hot shop expresses the puzzle in architectural terms and gives the building wit and a genuine sense of marked place. A broad stair climbs up around the cone from the esplanade and connects the building with the Chihuly Bridge of Glass over I-705 that in turn

connects with the Charles Moore designed Washington State History Museum (1996) on Pacific Avenue. The larger composition of buildings and bridge is an adventurous winding public place that dances with both the brilliant and bizarre. The artworks at the Glass Museum, most notably the Buster Simpson glass panel installation and lagoons on the roof help explain the intensely ornamented Chihuly bridge and transition people into the building.

The main hall and galleries of the glass museum have an underhill quality, tucked into the hillside under the city like Bilbo's home in the shire. The galleries in particular seem dark and cave-like, in part due to the forced ceiling height and perhaps partly because of the psychological distance from the immense hearth of the hot shop. They are not entirely unsuccessful or uninteresting however, as the "*The Inner Light*" exhibition by Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová demonstrates. Like a dark corner of a hobbit's house the galleries with the large jewel like sculptures of the Lubensky's seem a proper place for treasures. The ambling, somewhat aimless gallery space used for the largely two dimensional "*Sounds of the Inner Eye*" exhibition are simply cold and distant. In time the building will likely reveal a clear preference for specific types of art and presentations.

The other signal cultural project appearing in the city is the Tacoma Art Museum scheduled for opening on May 3, 2003. The angular, metallic exterior of the building, designed by Antoine Predock, is nearing completion and startlingly apart in appearance from the brick masonry language of lower Pacific Avenue and the Union Station District that surrounds it. The aesthetic presence of the building is industrial and stoic with a mysterious sense of expressed purpose. The impression sets you up for the contrasting inner workings of the building and the discovery of the central interior device-an open to the rain "moss garden". The galleries are still unfinished but are organized in a sequence that climbs around the central garden.

The crisp edged vertical building emphasizes the wedge shaped site it's built on suggesting a sense of self importance and history that come with the intersection it faces. When finished the museum will open directly onto Pacific Avenue at the point where the transcontinental railroad crosses and the streetcar begins its swing up the hill, the epicenter of the meeting of the vestigial and vernal cities of Tacoma.

Tacoma is an elder city robust in the act of building upon itself. It is a lesson separate in scale from larger cities like Seattle and Portland and different in purpose than automobile cities like Bellevue and Federal Way. With no guiding urban plan or compelling economic design it is nonetheless taking on a distinct and uncommon approach to physical change and growth. Tacoma is a study in the durability of classical ideas about cities and the meaning of social centers that are sustained fundamentally by educational, cultural and social mechanisms. At least at the present, it is a singular place, rewarding to observe, far from invisible.

Michael Sullivan

September 25, 2002