Finding Room in Beirut: Places of the Everyday

Carole Lévesque

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There was once a time in England when the king had to leave for a long voyage. While he had no close kin and had to be away with his army and counselors, his servile cousin was left to oversee the kingdom until his return. His cousin was selfish, greedy, and very jealous of the king for being so courageous and loved by his people. The prince seized this turn of events as the opportunity he had long awaited to take revenge upon the king. Since he couldn’t directly confront him, his revenge would have to be taken through the exploitation of the defenseless people who revered the king so. His scheme was simple enough: demand that taxes be paid on everything. And if all had been taxed already, demand that a second, higher tax be paid, until all were left with nothing. Life became terribly harsh: no food was left, trade came to an end, and people lived in fear of the prince and his followers, who would inevitably come to arrest and jail all those who could no longer afford to pay their debts.

There lived in the forest a young man, smart as a fox, who could not bear to see the land of the king ruled by this prince, to see the people hungry, sad, and helpless. So he put his cleverness at their service: he played a hundred tricks on the prince to take the money the prince had stolen and to give back to the people. This drove the prince mad, and he gradually became obsessed with his inability to catch the clever thief. The prince, who had been seeking revenge upon the king, was being mocked by this unexpected little fox.

While the story of Robin Hood is really a fable of power, greed, wisdom, courage, and a lesson that good spirits will prevail, it is also a representation of the daily life of the commoner transformed through unforeseen actions. It is a lesson that everyday life comprises both difficulties and the means to change them. In the Disney rendition of Robin Hood of 1973, where Robin is indeed a fox, the opening scene captures exactly the dialectic of the everyday. While the low and steady voice of a rooster introduces the premise of the story to the sound of a lute, a book opens with drawings of the various characters we will soon see in action: parading joyfully, they are soon chased by the royal guards, arrows flying toward them, axes, even, being swung down on them.

The camera zooms into the storybook and the animation begins: “Robin Hood and Little John were walking through the forest...” when they hear the footsteps of the rhinoceros soldiers carrying Prince John’s carriage and a large treasure chest. In no time, Robin Hood and Little John, dressed as colorful fortune tellers, lure Prince John into having his fortune told by Robin while Little John seduces the rhinoceroses, drills a hole under the treasure chest, unnoticed, and takes all the gold coins away with him, down in his dress. Robin Hood and Little John flee to the forest when Prince John realizes that all his gold is gone and erupts from his carriage screaming: “I’ve been robbed! Thieves!” But it is too late. The deed is done; the trick is played.
If this episode is quite humorous, it is interesting to think of it as a double-sided reality, a dialectic between the imposed order and the free event, between the city of the conqueror and the city of the dweller. It is also helpful to think of this tale to quickly put an image on and understand the powers at play in the contemporary city and the room that is still available for action. While our cities are quickly being developed under the spears of neoliberal forces and massive real-estate speculation, while it too often appears as if no alternative is feasible, the following pages will try to demonstrate, if not how, at least why, it is worth our while to look at the city as a field of open possibilities and action.

In his famous essay *The hedgehog and the fox*, Isaiah Berlin examines Tolstoy’s vision of history. Berlin rests his argument—that Tolstoy was a fox who thought himself to be a hedgehog—on a brief line borrowed from the Greek poet Archilocus, which says that “the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” Berlin argues that this analogy relates to the two overarching visions of history: the hedgehog “relates everything to a single central vision, one system,” while the fox “pursue[s] many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory[,]... related to no moral or aesthetic principle.” While it is not my intent to discuss at length Tolstoy’s literature and view of history, it is tempting to borrow Berlin’s analogy to explore the dialectic of the city. In his essay, Berlin relates the hedgehog to monism, where a single or narrow set of values override all others, while the fox relates to pluralism, as his view of the world embraces multiple points of view, even at the risk of them being conflicting or simply antithetical. In Berlin’s assessment, Tolstoy was a fox: “he saw the manifold objects and situations on earth in their full multiplicity.” But while Tolstoy avoided the use of generic descriptions in favor of the particular, capturing the most precise uniqueness of the moment, he also believed in the possibility of one embracing vision in which everything would be directly related. Tolstoy in fact brilliantly impersonated the dichotomy between the hedgehog and the fox, being both at the same time: desiring a unifying vision, yet seeing the multiplicity of events occurring independently of each other in unique ways. It also reveals, as the progress of Berlin’s argument makes it clear, that a conclusive categorization of Tolstoy is nearly impossible, that the initial seemingly obvious classification is itself, in the end, more difficult to achieve than one might have thought.

With *Two concepts of liberty*, which Berlin writes in 1958, one could think of the hedgehog as the zoomorphic representation of positive liberty, which places restrictions on individual freedom so as to achieve a common good for everyone, everywhere, at all times. Meanwhile the fox represents negative liberty, in which individuals are allowed to pursue their own vision of the good. The idea of both positive and negative liberty comes from the desire of the individual to be as he intends to be: “I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, acting being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by reference to my own ideas and purposes.” What divides the two liberties is that the positive one sees a dual nature within the individual: the real self, which is identified with reason, and the empirical self, which needs to be disciplined or even repressed if one ever wants to realize the potential of the real self.

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 463.
The danger sitting between the two selves is that the real self is too often understood as greater than the whole of the individual itself, and it becomes accepted, or even desired, to coerce other individuals for their own greater good. Berlin argues that the privileging of the real self can and has led positive liberty to go so far as to justify coercive actions by claiming that groups of individuals may not know of their real selves and that it is only their inability to repress their empirical selves that brings them to resist the greater good. It leads, more often than not, to a situation in which the positive means and ends supersede those of others. There has to remain, of course, a certain degree of negative liberty, an area, as little as it may be, within which individual choices are possible. But there is a greater area within which choices have already been made and imposed. Positive liberty is thus the hedgehog in that it finds a true solution, applicable to all and followed by all.

When looking at the city, the hedgehog and its positive liberty are both easily identifiable. Cities in the developing world, in countries with steady demographic growth or exponential wealth, have been the locus of financial expansion, of drastic urban strategies and “sustainable” innovation for the greater advancement of urbanity. While some might appear as clever and promising solutions, as if the real selves of the cities were finally coming to light, they leave, in fact, very little room for negative inhabitation. The grand master plans, development strategies, marketing and branding campaigns, economic growth, tourism, and corporations all require that the city be thought of as one all-encompassing blanket under which spaces are organized, placed, and synchronized, assuring the greater good of urban coherence. While the city planner, the urban designer, the engineer, and the architect are hard at work to satisfy both their thirst for eloquent ideas and their desire to act upon the city’s fabric, it is generally agreed upon that an overall vision and intervention will serve a common goal toward the greater benefit of the city. If we are too close to current developments to see our hedgehog rolling around, we only have to think of the modernist dogma of the post-war years (with either the large housing projects built under the yoke of communism in Eastern Europe or those in any large American city, as critiqued by Jane Jacobs) to acknowledge the negative impacts of an overall vision applied at a great scale. One cannot, of course, be against the desire for beautiful and comfortable cities; one cannot, of course, be against the desire for a well-functioning city. But it is under these presumptions, along with massive capital and political gain, that cities are turned over, cleared of undesirables—be they of stone or flesh—and rebuilt to eventually attain the grand goal assigned to the process: to create a perfected image of the perfected city. Manicured to the tips of its sidewalks, the perfect city is one where surprises are kept to a minimum, where any form of illegality is controlled or incrementally pushed out to the boundaries, and where technologically advanced, environmentally friendly, or branded architectural landmarks rearrange the image of the city—an image quite different from that of Lynch.

While we are well aware that political monism can be dangerous when pursued to its extreme, urban monism doesn’t appear quite as threatening, mostly because its extreme would lead to utopian visions and thus to nonplaces: the end of urban monism is in fact impossible. Cities can’t literally tell people what to do and not to do; cities do not directly forbid or impose. But cities can be the means to a monism’s end; they can be developed in such a way as to act on behalf of the greater good, be it political, social, or financial. Orchestrated urban development becomes both the shield and the spear that safeguards the acquired stability and pushes further the
growth of the “real” ideal. So the city may, in that respect, know one great thing: it knows how to gain and retain terrain, just like the hedgehog also knows one great thing: it knows to curl up to protect itself against the danger of the enemy. While curling up, the hedgehog also projects its sharp spikes toward the outside and brings to a halt any form of undesired intrusion. But it does something perhaps even more powerful, which it shares with current neoliberal urban growth: while it will indeed stop short the attack, it first seeks—and most likely succeeds—to discourage the very idea of a potential attack, before the soon-to-become attacker has even had the chance to conceive of the possibility of an attack. If the hedgehog succeeds at dismantling the very idea of the attack, then it not only stays safe but also builds a growing belief that it is in fact impossible to overcome its defense. It diminishes the chances of future attacks and establishes its superiority. Neoliberalism adopts similar strategies: as it builds our cities, it protects its establishment and at the same time builds the belief that it is an unavoidable and necessary force that has now become seemingly irreversible. If the neoliberal city does not discourage an attacker per se, it inculcates a passive relationship toward the development of the city and removes to a great distance the potential for action. In either case, it has guaranteed its own protection.

Well, almost.

The protection isn’t fully guaranteed simply because, while cities can act as an important means to a monist end, means can change hands. As the hedgehog will eventually come to learn, the fox has, in its many ways, developed a way to indeed attack the hedgehog. If the fox doesn’t know one big thing, it certainly has found one big trick: the sudden fall of liquid over the hedgehog, such as urine, for example, or rolling it into a river, will cause the hedgehog to uncurl, at which point the fox will be able to eat the said hedgehog. That is to say that amid the prowess of neoliberal predominance, there are breaches within which to operate and challenge the ways the city is: how it can be used, experienced, perceived, and lived. If the hedgehog serves to illustrate the modes of current urban development, the fox becomes an analogy to the free event, building, with its constant struggle and creativity, the dialectic of the planned city and the dwelled-in one.

The 1960s avant-garde understood this dialectic and provided a discourse that addressed the city in very powerful ways: the return to the everyday by the Smithsons, the playgrounds of Aldo van Eyck, or the critiques of Reyner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall and Cedric Price, exposed in Non-Plan: an experiment in freedom. Are examples of how looking at the free event helps in looking back on the whole with fresh eyes. While the Smithsons and van Eyck advocated the acknowledgment of the individual in reaction to the mass development by the Modernists, Banham and his acolytes positioned their discourse against individualistic urbanization. What could appear at first as two different positions worked in fact toward a common objective, that is the recognition of the qualities of any given individual, of his or her capacity and need to be able and allowed to recognize himself or herself amongst others, underlying an equivalence between the means and ends pertaining to each individual and the need for a space in which this freedom can be enacted. In this sense, the avant-garde proposed a pluralist view of the city, a view entailing a negative liberty. They recognized that, as are human’s desires, the city’s goals are many and reach beyond our capacity, as

specialists of urban affairs, to list them all and act upon our findings with unfailing success. They also recognized that, while the city’s goals are diverse, several of them will undoubtedly be in conflict with each other, and thus space should be left available for negotiations to take place. The totalizing view of monist urban development cannot make sense because, as needs the fox, so city dwellers need room for attack, room for play, and room to escape.

The intricacy of any given city lies in the fact that, despite the rigidity we might attribute to it, or that we might desire to build within it, it inevitably proves to be spaces constantly redefined by shifting experience. This implies a city that is seen and one that is perceived, a space filled with differences and oppositions, of multiple situations, entangled in a complex web. So, even if the neoliberal city presents itself as dominant, in a clear opposition with that of the dweller, there are multiple and shifting subdialectics amongst the grounded layers of the urban. Free from the ordering of planning and master plans, the events of the city act on their own, as multiple foxes running through the streets, looking for, exploring, learning from what comes to them and from what they themselves create. Some cities will obviously respond more freely to the possibility of change and challenge, but even within the stricter ones, the better-organized ones, the better-controlled ones, there always remains an area within which, even at the risk of being illegal or repressed, action remains a possibility. This is why demonstrations take place within cities; this is why wars and revolutions happen in cities. If a city is a means for coercing its population, the city will infallibly, at one point or another, become the means for change.

Along with the free event, there also exists a physical manifestation of the fox. Empty buildings, lots, or areas caught between serviceable buildings, forgotten behind infrastructures, hiding within fences, leftover, abandoned, or simply deemed unworthy of construction are the antithesis of neoliberalism: they are places where chance is possible, where ad-hoc situations are welcomed and where appropriations are the engine of their well-being. Also known as terrains vagues, they are an anti-thesis to neoliberalism because they are both reminiscent of an economic failure and the locus of imaginative beginnings. It is no surprise that terrains vagues have become, over the past years, among the favorite spaces for art installations, demonstrations, sit-ins, urban camping, and the like. While its true nature is really that of a stagnant capital, the terrain vague reverses its financial downturn into possible urban opportunities. When considered as a network of open land, in the sense of “physically empty” as much as in the sense of “open-ended,” they generate an independent network within which an alternative urban system can take place.

One such system appears in well-defined areas where the fox is at its strongest: areas of anticipated transformation, inhabited terrains vagues, or what I shall call a vague urbain. While large-scale developments are busy redefining central, or even peripheral areas of cities, there often remain substantial inhabited areas that are completely neglected, overseen, ignored; that in fact defy and challenge how the city is to be perceived and lived. Though the logic of my argument suggests that we should simply be content that such areas exist, it also implies that their state of vagueness is only temporary and that, eventually, they will fall under pressure. The question is really how long they will resist and to what cost. But while they are indeed resisting, they provide a space for inhabitants to put their cleverness into play and to demonstrate how the ingenuity entailed in times of need and of urban laissez-faire can invent and create
alternative possible perceptions and uses of the city. Contrary to the terrain vague, these areas do not create an independent network as such, but create, within their well-defined boundaries, thriving urban systems. Just as an ecosystem organizes itself in ways that sustain its various parts, the vague urbain develops an independent organizational mode of operation. Considered in terms of sustainable communities, the model of the vague urbain is near perfect—if we oversee the quality of actual living conditions: walkability, local economy, mixed-used areas, active local culture, inclusive participation are all to a large extent present. What truly differs from the politically correct model is that the independent organization can only be temporary, can only exist because eyes are looking away or because no one has yet managed or dared to venture within its limits. Until land and properties are sold and occupants evicted, until “proper” replacement quarters are built, vagues urbains offer the possibility for the most basic, ordinary, banal, free activities to take place, in ways that make sense to its inhabitants and in which negative liberty can find its space of negotiation.

The danger underlying the engagement with the vague urbain is twofold: one might seek to find, within the practices of the vague, an opportunistic ground from which to attack the neoliberal city; one might also, in a desire for self or even collective comforting, engage the vague with a preemptive nostalgia for the opportunities that will soon disappear. While both dangers are common responses, and indeed quite valid in their own right, they overlook the actual potential of the vague as the locus for a discourse on the history of events and for a survey of alternative everyday practices. Both of these potentialities can serve to establish the validity of negative spaces within a city’s fabric.

In his closing argument of the Two concepts of liberty, Berlin states:

Pluralism, with the measure of “negative” liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal “positive” self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind. It is truer because it does, at least, recognize the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another.6

This simple recognition, that hopes, desires, goals, and practices do, in fact, cohabit within a given city, is the first step toward the creation of spaces for their materialization. This recognition is also a tool with which to maneuver and maintain equilibrium between the hedgehog and the fox since they have, after all, to share the same forest: the recognition is the means to keep the hedgehog and the fox within a healthy relation. In this way, the city might be used to both ends: it can gain terrain, but it can also offer room for or be welcoming to the free event. It thus seems essential that we consider, as often as it is possible, the minute event, the punctual, the bizarre, the unusual, or, one could say, the fox. Doing so, we eventually also recognize that the unexpected in everyday life contains the means for challenging monism; it bears our freedom to choose. But it seems most essential that we learn from these considerations in order to be able to maintain, at the very least, a dualism within our cities. If we achieve in doing so, we might very well be in a position to transform these considerations into actual urban practices, so as to leave room for the Robins of our time.

demolition on Nassif Al-Yazigi Street
Part 1