Finding Room in Beirut: Places of the Everyday

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Part 3
To use or to useless: making room for what seemed like nothing or why tell the city through its little things

A natural phenomenon is an observable thing or event: what is manifest, in itself visible and referring to our lived experience as human beings. It constitutes a primal reality manifested through the mediation of one or several senses. Any occurrence we can see, hear, touch, smell, taste, understand, or traverse is a phenomenon. The use of the term in popular language and experience allows, of course, its demystification, but necessarily brings a trivial sense to it. Since these phenomena take place in determined, familiar contexts, what phenomenologists call the everyday world, we tend to not pay attention to them. Experiences come forth and manifest themselves without us acknowledging or understanding their essence: not wondering how they happen to occur, how differently they could take place, or yet, to what larger phenomena they might belong. Our natural attitude is to take for granted the everyday world and to presume that it can only be what it already is: we find ourselves immersed in a world that unfolds automatically before our eyes.

The same goes for the places, people, and events we encounter on a daily basis: beyond the familiar phenomenon, many things occupy our daily activities and yet remain blurred, as if situated beyond our ability to see. Chances are we neglect most of these things, events, and people because they appear as meaningless. Their apparent lack of worth or usefulness in our global experience of the city renders them insignificant to the hurried eye: though likely to warrant a brief glance, they remain unaccounted for in any depth. But, as argued Heidegger, the most useful things are in fact useless. It is when an object is no longer of use, says Heidegger when speaking of Van Gogh’s shoes, that we are able to see its usefulness: through “uselessness”, the truth about usefulness appears. While usefulness is tangible, calculated, and productive, uselessness refuses to be quantified; it is free of restraint. While the useful is generally understood as that which has an immediate purpose, most likely a technical one—i.e. it allows us to do, to buy, or to exchange something—the useless, that which cannot be merchandised as a commodity, defies our appreciation of our environment by enriching the worth of things deemed unworthy.

In a vibrant manifesto on the usefulness of uselessness, Nuccio Ordine argues, with the help of many great figures of literature and science, that attributing worth only to that which has an immediate applicability is a historically recurring error. Literature, music, poetry, and science, when pursued for the sake of pursuit, free our minds from expected standards to help build a sense of being and a cultural basis upon which to rest. While Ordine develops his argument in support of the humanities and

knowledge devoid of practical pursuit, his case can also be extended to recognize the benefit and enrichment of our experience of the city. Indeed, our going about our daily affairs, walking mechanically ahead toward what it is that we need to do, what Ordine refers to as a wrongful worth, ensures that we remain within a normative reading of what surrounds us. We disregard the countless little things that could participate in our experience, that could perhaps even transform our responses to the norm.

A means to transform the normative was proposed by the Swiss-Cuban author Alejo Carpentier in the introduction to his novel *The Kingdom of this World*. In Carpentier’s view, the everyday already harbors occurrences, objects, and relations that can challenge our perceptions of what is considered acceptable—if one is willing to pay attention to them. This real maravilloso, or marvelous real, he claimed, reaches beyond our common sense even if found in direct sensible experience—that is, in perceivable events. According to Carpentier, all is a matter of careful examination: for one willing to wait and observe, the unusual will unmistakably emerge amidst the real, so that the most ordinary everyday can compete with the most creative imagination. While Carpentier’s proposal might seem to follow closely that of the Surrealists, one major difference keeps them apart. The Surrealist proposal called for an imagination that would supersede realism—a mode of representation that was thought, by the Surrealists, to exclude any exercise of imagination (on the part of the reader) in the worlds depicted through literature and the arts in general. The Surrealist’s imagination, the marvelous, was thus to emerge from dreams, from unlikely combinations or inventions. The paintings of Salvador Dali are a remarkable example of this dreamlike imagination, one that transports the viewer into a world that is not rendered up to his or her understanding so much as it is conjured up to further its own creativity. This is where the difference with Carpentier’s marvelous real is most evident. For Carpentier, the marvelous is linked to observable reality, to circumstances and history: the marvelous is grounded in the experience of the everyday. As such, the marvelous is realized when an unforeseen alteration of reality happens, a privileged manifestation of the real. Carpentier speaks of an illumination revealing the richness of the unseen—as in, for example, a change in scale through which improbable juxtapositions suddenly emerge as dominant features of the real. So unlike the Surrealists, Carpentier’s marvelous emerges from a modification or transformation of the real, not from an imagined world.

The same could be said of the magical real, another variation on the marvelous, but one that embeds elements of magic in the real. While it is true that Carpentier’s marvelous real does recognize supernatural elements to be part of reality, it is precisely that which differentiates it from magical realism. Indeed, while the magical is considered a bidimensional world—a magical one that interacts with the real one—the notion of the marvelous suggests that there is only one dimension to the world and that the realm of the oneiric and familiar comingle. While these gradations in meaning can help us try to define with greater clarity the essence of the marvelous real, both terms are often used interchangeably; amongst literary critics, there is no consensus about their distinction. Two characteristics must be retained though. Firstly, in the view of the marvelous real, the fantastic and the extraordinary are simply parts of the everyday, just like the many other varied events that fill our daily experience. Their specificity lies in their hidden nature, one that might only be shown to the observant and creative eye. The second characteristic lies in the “qualities” of the marvelous. As Carpentier explains in the quote below, the marvelous does not need to be beautiful:
The word “marvelous” has, with time and use, lost its true meaning...Dictionaries tell us the marvelous is something that causes admiration because it is extraordinary, excellent, formidable. And that is joined to the notion that everything marvelous must be beautiful, lovely, pleasant, when really the only thing that should be gleaned from the dictionaries’ definition is a reference to the extraordinary. The extraordinary is not necessarily lovely or beautiful. It is neither beautiful nor ugly; rather, it is amazing because it is strange. Everything strange, everything amazing, everything that eludes established norms is marvelous.

In The Kingdom of this World, a novel set in French-occupied Haiti, a simple cook becomes the emperor of the island and, believing that the Frenchmen will try to reconquer his newly acquired kingdom, sets out to build a magnificent fortress strong enough to endure a 10 years’ siege. And to better resist the anticipated attack, he orders “that the cement be mixed with the blood of hundreds of bulls.” Twenty thousand people, men and women, built the fortress atop a 900-meter mountain, for a battle that will never come. This, according to Carpentier, is marvelous. While it may appear as an unlikely, heroic task, the folly of King Henri Christophe was clearly beyond reason; it built a reality that could only be possible by “virtue of a specific history, geography, demography, and politics—not by manifesto”, it was thus unlike the Surrealist’s proposal. As wild as this episode might seem, it is neither a fabrication nor was it premeditated. The marvelous defended by Carpentier is one that is latent, omnipresent, and always in the commonplace.

The elaboration of scales and improbable juxtapositions are also found in everyday occurrences. Similar to de Certeau’s proposal, everyday practices may embed manipulations in a given system or an established order. Tricks can be played, as tropes can be written, both inscribing ruses and displacements within the ordinary, revealing strange, bizarre, or simply unexpected elements that provide an awkwardly real perspective on things. And according to Carpentier, “we have only to reach out our hands to grasp [the marvelous], [Our everyday environment] presents us with strange occurrences everyday.”

As in this passage:

While his master was being shaved, Ti Noël could gaze his fill at the four wax heads that adorned the counter by the door. The curls of the wigs, opening into a pool of ringlets on the red baize, framed expressionless faces... By an amusing coincidence, in the window of the tripe-shop next door there were calves’ heads, skinned and each with a sprig of parsley across the tongue, which possessed the same waxy quality... Only a wooden wall separated the two counters, and it amused Ti Noël to think that alongside the pale calves’ heads, heads of white men were served on the same tablecloth. Just as fowl for a banquet are adorned with their feathers, so some experienced, macabre cook might have trimmed the

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81. Marvelous Real in America, 75.


heads with their best wigs."\textsuperscript{84}

Carpentier explores ways in which the marvelous augments the layers of the narrative, creating, with the addition of each exploration, a plausible sense in which every encountered place can hold the seed for the marvelous to grow. As such, following Ti Noël's observations, he begins to see how indeed, "the morning was rampant with heads."\textsuperscript{85} remarking on the various prints hung in front of the bookseller, picturing kings and dignitaries, until he hears the "voice of his master, who emerged from the barber’s with heavily powdered cheeks. His face now bore a startling resemblance to the four dull wax faces that stood in a row along the counter, smiling stupidly."\textsuperscript{86} The presence of the heads continues as Ti Noël has to carry, across town and into the plantation, a "chill skull under his arm, thinking how much it probably resembled the bald head of his master hidden beneath his wig."\textsuperscript{87} By insisting on the interchangeability between two- or three-dimensional, printed or powdered, bewigged or dressed with parsley, animal or human, upon a body or a shelf or under an arm—heads become no longer the essential part of a complete being that one carries at the upper extremity of one’s body, but rather an apparatus that is, at most, decorative and interchangeable.

Carpentier proposes that there is no separation between everyday banalities and the wonders of an imaginary world; quite to the contrary, he shows that reality can itself be marvelous. That is, marvelous in the sense of being unexpected, meaningful, and imaginative, more than reflecting a simple naïve happiness. Throughout the narrative Carpentier embeds the marvelous in different ways so that our imagination might transcend the expected daily life of a colony, creating a plausible sense of reality. For instance, the following passage plays on sensorial experiences in which an imminent violence is intertwined with both nature’s protective serenity and its potential uprising in support of revolution, where the natural sea shells dispersed through the landscape become the tools of the uprising, and where delicate purple flowers become a protective bunker:

From far off came the sound of a conch-shell trumpet. What was strange was that the slow bellow was answered by others in the hills and the forests. And others floated in from farther off by the sea, from the direction of the farms of Milot it was as though all the shell trumpets of the coast, all the Indian lambis, all the purple conchs that served as doorstops, all the shells that lag alone and petrified at the summits of the hills, had begun to sing in chorus...

M. Lenormand de Mézy, frightened, hid behind a chump of bougainvillea.\textsuperscript{88}

In a delicate oscillation between the marvelous and the real, Carpentier crafts throughout the novel exchanges between natural elements, organs, functions, colors and sentiments, embedding resonances between seemingly unrelated objects, events, or beliefs. For example, while a mysterious poison spreads over the colony, killing animals and white masters, Ti Noël rejoices at the coming uprising of the long awaited king-warrior, and in his imagining of the coming events, weaves a known reality with one in which exchanges blur the limits of reality, the boundaries at which it begins to transform:

\textsuperscript{84} Carpentier, \textit{The Kingdom of this World}, 10–11.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 72-73.
In that great hour—said Ti Noël—the blood of the Whites would run into the brooks, and the loas, drunk with joy, would bury their faces in it and drink until their lungs were full.  

Through repetition of such motifs, Carpentier generates a growing belief that what might have seemed absurd or unreal is in fact everywhere around us, and that through the attentive observation of its recurrence, the marvelous is integrated into our experience of reality. As Carpentier relates the dramatic end of the colony and the eventual enslavement of Haitians by their new king, the marvelous real gains its raison d’être: one builds a vision of an everyday reality that encompasses the marvelous. He trains the eye to be alert for the marvelous ordinariness that enriches what we are most often willing to consider to be worthy of attention.

While finding the marvelous requires a genuine openness to events at hand, it also asks that we be willing to make what we find part of the building of our “valuable” world. Michel de Certeau’s proposal in *L’invention du quotidien* supposes that the acceptance and inclusion of everyday occurrences, be they normative or marvelous, into one’s experience is epitomized by the practice of the street. As such, de Certeau claims that practice invents the everyday as a lived experience. To practice the street implies an active participation—a performance, really—that seeks to relate to details and events in order to build a direct contact with the immediate environment, as an *art de faire*. Because practicing is a kind of thinking, says de Certeau, it is an operative and efficient knowledge of the everyday, one that exists through what is already there: a reuse, or new-use, of the available. With improvisation, inventiveness, or *braconnage*, as de Certeau likes to put it, we can invent our everyday in ways that may resemble Carpentier’s, and discover underlying facets of reality otherwise left in the shadows.

The practice of the street implies, beyond an active participation and appreciation, that struggles, conflicts, contradictions, and all marvelous aspects be incorporated in the knowledge of a given city and its ways of operating. Things that may appear as inconsequential can be embedded creatively so that the practitioner is able to work with them—as opposed to working around them or, worse, to simply brushing them out of the way. To a certain extent, it might not even matter where the working-with will eventually lead, as long as it leads forward, toward alternative readings, perceptions, and practices of the city.

The marvelous and practice both suggest that the everyday be thought of as a lived experience, one that happens in phenomenological time and is lived as direct experience. Paul Ricoeur explains this phenomenological time as a time told, *raconté*, which can be considered a form of practice. Like practice, it is likely to have a variable constitution, as opposed to a linear historical time. In the eyes of Ricoeur, time is always plural; the present holds past, present, and future tenses in what we can imagine as a “thick present.” Rather than thinking of a chronological order, Ricoeur’s time is a triple present: a present of things future, a present of things past, and a present of things present. Present of the future? asks Ricoeur: from now on, i.e. starting now, I commit myself to do such a thing tomorrow. Present of the past? he asks again: I have now the intention of doing this because I just thought that... Present of the present? he asks finally: Now I am doing this because now I have the time for

89. Ibid., 42.

it. While the capacity to act—"now I am doing this"—is what constitutes the present of the present, it invariably contains the initial thought that produced the action and the expectancy of an outcome. Thus everyday practice becomes a mediator between the three constituents of the present time, allowing a dynamic interaction between them. And it is through this most elementary articulation of the present that practice induces stories. 

In the eyes of Ricoeur, stories, or what he calls mise en intrigue, can free perceptions from normative and apparently unshakeable givens. In a tripartite process, as that of the thick present, the central position, that of configuration, plays a most important role in linking past and future to shape new cultural elements. The configuration of things already known leads to a multifaceted reading of the familiar, and, in the case at hand, of our cities. It allows for multiple readings to participate in challenging our preconceptions of how cities need to be looked upon and practiced.

The process begins with a pre-understanding of the world that surrounds us, what Ricoeur calls prefiguration. He suggests that the "composition of the plot is grounded in a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources and its temporal character." In other words, the narrative, or the everyday, is practiced well before it is written. Prefigurative elements are the available material one disposes of to comprehend stories: familiar things, events, and places that allow us to approach narratives with a certain pre-understanding of what will constitute the intrigue. While we do experience these events and places in the present time, that is, the present of the present, they also belong to the past as they portray the cultural memory of a given community which, in return, enables us to claim a pre-understanding of things that surround us.

The second part of Ricoeur’s model belongs to the realm of action, the present of the present. Configuration, the central and most decisive part of his model, is what mediates between singular events and the narrative as a whole, giving shape to and connecting disparate elements, circumstances, means, and interactions. The role of this emplotment is to hold together the various parts into a meaningful story: it is a "temporal synthesis of the heterogeneous, [an] attempt to clarify the inextricable [and to] confront several stories against, before or after each other.” Ricoeur speaks of it in terms of a braid that ties together events with their ways of creating actions, their causes and reasons for acting, crossed by elements of fortuity, coincidences, and simple chance. The configuring act can bring closer together overlooked, unknown, surprising, or marvelous elements within the realm of the normative, allowing the latter to transform. While configuration belongs to the realm of action (as it ties together various elements, objects, practices, and everyday events), it is also built and conceived as an imperfect knowledge, incomplete and perhaps even clumsy, that slowly moves forward toward an eventual completion and objective. Thus, as in the present of the present, configuration is the mediator between things readily available and those becoming. The craft of configuration advances toward future narratives and outcomes while remaining grounded in the real.

92. Ibid.
93. Ibid., 54.
95. Ibid., 49.
The process of configuring comes to fruition in the third and final part of Ricoeur’s model, a reconfiguration of the temporal and spatial experience. Reconfiguration is what marks the intersection of the text with the reader, where the land of interpretation opens up. The story, constituted from a novel configuration of existing practices and cultural symbols, comes to life in the consciousness of the reader/practitioner, out of the literary world, and into the realm of the everyday. The configuration thus contributes, once it comes in contact with the reader/practitioner, to the enunciation of possible inhabitations and engagements with the physical world: a reconfiguration of what things ought to be and a re-reading of our built environment.96

Between the configuration and the marvelous real, we can begin to see how indeed the practice of the street may very well collect and tie together the bizarreness of certain places, the unexpected organization of a given area, or the incongruent information given by strangers into a narrative embedding the marvelous and the normative in ways that may transform how we apprehend and think about our everyday.

96. As a matter of fact, Ricoeur did publish a short essay, *Architecture and Narrative*, in which he pulls his theory of emplotment out of literature to extend it toward architecture and cities. In his argument, the prefigurative stage is linked to the general built environment because every “lived history” happens within “lived spaces”: everyday events mark and affect spatial organizations. The configuration, which consists of a temporal synthesis of the heterogeneous, finds its architectural correspondence in a spatial synthesis of the heterogeneous. To build necessitates bringing together know-hows, context, users, history, and so on, into a cohesive, yet ever changing, built form. The last part of the model, reconfiguration, finds its equivalent in architecture as a retaliation to building, an active inhabitation that implies an attentive re-reading and continuous re-learning of the built environment. Ricoeur, “Architecture et narrativité.”

Events, people, and places in ordinary life will strike the practitioner as stories waiting to be told, as what might have first appeared as useless episodes crystallize and pass into collective consciousness. Ricoeur insists that the ways we understand each other in daily life involve an irreducible *storification*, narratives that take shape in the immediacy of the present through the banalities of our everyday environment. The implication of the everyday in the shaping of narratives is that instead of things happening one after the other, as would be the case in a well-planned and foreseen storyline (or urban development for that matter), they happen one because of the other, entangled in practice. It is through this organic emplotment that past, present, and future are linked, or as argued earlier, that tradition and utopia find a common ground: an active and practiced present. It is precisely because of the present’s ability to mediate that it is in the present that things worthy of attention are found; it is here that things that may be regarded as insignificant can be key to possible and different narratives.

As shown in the historical fiction of Carpentier, the entanglement of historical facts (or prefigurative elements of the real) with marvelous real elements of the present (or that which seemed as of no consequence) influences our original understanding and changes our perspective on additional layers of the real that might not have been suspected without the narrative. Ricoeur explains in *The Narrative Function* that “to narrate and to follow a story is already to ‘reflect upon’ events” and “the notion of reflective judgment upon events includes the concept of ‘point of view’.”97 In other words, to tell the city through

its normative, expected, and agreed upon chronological time and events can only tell us the story of a city from the perspective of the dominant discourse; to tell the city through its details, as insignificant as they might appear to be, reflects upon the story of the normative through the point of view of those who practice the city. In this sort of augmented narrative, layers of the thick present build up to change our perspective and to make us admit the possibility that useless details can in fact turn out to be quite useful when truly considering the places we inhabit.

Details: Architectural drawings and other stories

Details in architecture are one of the most difficult elements to master. Taught in general terms in university, it is only through practice, experimentation, and close collaboration with the building process that the art of details can be developed. Often presented as tectonics, the role of the detail—besides ensuring a sturdy and tempered envelope, which occupies most of our efforts in teaching details—is to bring the construction of architecture forward to speak of its construing. As claimed Marco Frascari, “details are much more than subordinate elements; they can be regarded as the minimal units of signification in architectural production and meanings.”

Details, he asserted, express the process of signification in that they are, or can be, generators of meaning—a role generally ascribed to the plan, and sometimes to the section, as they are the two main elements in the architectural production that convey spatial qualities. While most of our experience of architecture is first rendered through these qualities, or through the promenade architecturale, to borrow the words of Le Corbusier, we often neglect to recognize that details carry an important and decisive effect on the appreciation of our experience. Though we often neglect to pay attention to details, as we are more interested in the deployment of space and perhaps also because good details are often traded off for sound budgets, meaningful details still make their way through contemporary architecture. For instance, the charred concrete of Bruder Klaus Field chapel of Peter Zumthor, delicately punctured with copper-covered pinholes to create a star-like natural light; the crafted layering of tiles and stones of the Ningbo History Museum by Wang Shu, carefully assembled to render a historical texture; or, at the opposite extent of the spectrum, the effacement of details as in the Corning Museum of Glass north wing expansion by Thomas Phifer, where a carefully crafted assembly creates a glass-like light, white and seamless; these are but a few examples of details that, beyond the spatial prowess of the respective buildings, play a decisive part in the overall quality of the experience.

In Le Corbusier in Detail, Flora Samuel reflects on such details in Corbusier’s promenade:

Le Corbusier was always keen to emphasize the fact that his architecture was built around a series of unfolding views, encompassing and celebrating the movements of the body. Just as a film director creates a feeling of suspense, or a writer draws out the end of a book in order to render the conclusion all the more satisfying, the architect can choreograph a route to create maximum drama. In these cases it is the small details that are of the utmost importance in contributing to the sense of anticipation.


The articulation of details thus enriches and defines the spatial experience. Rather than mere anecdotes or vanities, details are an intrinsic part of architectural experience as a whole. The examples given by Samuel, particularly in regard to the treatment of doors—the large pivoting door to let the space flow in and out, the encased handle which lets the eye think the door is a wall and the hand think it can reach through, or the small door cut within the wall which demands a physical effort to move across in exchange for the space it offers—lead us to believe that details are in fact a priority in devising a promenade. The role of the detail is that of a device, or a joint, as Frascari would say, that is, it has the power to operate an action upon the grander narrative in order to influence and divert it toward its desired effect.

Strongly influenced by the Italian Renaissance and concerned with architectural representation, the senses, and narrative throughout his career, Frascari discussed in *The Tell-the-Tale Detail*, an influential essay published in 1984, the art of detailing as the locus for innovation and invention of both the construction and the construing of architecture. It is through details, he says, “that architects can give harmony to the most uncommon and difficult or disorderly environment generated by culture.”

Joining materials, elements, and components, details play an essential role in ordering not only how the building is put together but also how one enters, how one sits by the window, how spaces sound and feel. Thus beyond the tectonic joint, i.e. the skillful art of joining materials in ways that convey meaning, details join architecture to its occupants, join a building to its environment, and join the experience of space to the stories we tell about a city. Expressing both the reality of construction and the imagination of new possibilities, details join and reconfigure the places we inhabit on a daily basis.

The question of scale thus becomes irrelevant. As Frascari points out, “a column is a detail as well as it is a larger whole, and a whole classical round temple is sometimes a detail when it is a lantern on top of a dome.” The vestibules of Frank Lloyd Wright play that exact role: finely detailed in their construction, the tight space covered in wood and stone acts as a transition, a detail, from the outdoor to a tall ceiling living room; or the thick windows of Louis Khan at the Exeter Library, where a number of layers from concrete to glass to wood generate an individual room for the reader within the larger open space of the library. While dictionaries define details as being minor decorative features of a building or of a work of art, Frascari argues that architectural details are rather defined by their capacity to join and connect: to join physically and narratively. Details, which might appear as secondary, as insignificant aspects that can easily be overseen, become central elements in the definition of experience and meaning, in the “meeting of the mental construing and of the actual construction.”

The role of drawing in understanding details was central to the study of architecture in the Beaux-Arts tradition, as Frascari reminds us. While we now draw shop drawings to communicate complete information about what needs to be built and how, architects didn’t always have to detail their details. Relying on master builders and craftsmen, there was a direct relation between the building (the plot) and the detail (the tale), while the tradesmen “were able to construct the drawing with the exact eye of the artist.” That is to say that the drawing submitted to the

101. Ibid.
102. Ibid., 503.
103. Ibid., 502.
master builder from the architect carried the idea of the detail rather than its precise dimensions. It is no wonder that Jacques-François Blondel included the study of stereotomy in his school of architecture. As the architect, for Blondel, should be knowledgeable of the trades required for the construction of his buildings, so should he be able to draw properly the elements to be built. By “properly,” Blondel meant that drawing was the most essential know-how of an architect: he should be able to draw an accurate representation of the detail to be built, but most importantly he should be able to draw the intention and idea of his design—dessiner à dessein. While dessin and dessein are now two distinct words, the former meaning a drawing, the latter an intention, the 18th century dessein was used for both, so that the drawing of the architect necessarily contained an idea. Obviously this could not have been an easily acquired skill, and so in a lecture given in 1747, entitled *Discours sur la manière d’étudier l’architecture, et les arts relatifs à celui de bastir*, Blondel explained how dessein would be taught every day, 12 hours a day so that when students were not busy with other studies, they would have to draw.

Through this particular insistence on drawing was developed the graphic survey of existing buildings known as the analytique. Frascari explains how analytiques were “composed in different scales in the attempt to single out the dialogue among the parts in the making of the text of the (studied) building.” Drawings were assembled at various scales onto a single sheet of paper and sometimes included the drawing of the entire building façade, usually drawn at a very small scale so that the building appeared as “a detail among details.” Independently of their scale, details were thus studied to train the hand along with the mind and to learn the ideas embedded within the construction, dismantling the building in parts, changing the scales of the parts and reorganizing them in a composition. The drawing was considered an instrument to stimulate thought, critical assessment, and the craft of narrative, as much as an instrument of learning the construction process.

A contemporary rendition of the analytique can be read into the work of Melvin Charney. Trained as an architect and turned to the arts, Charney’s work is an intricate balance between reality and interpretation, between observation and extrapolation of meaning, between criticism and desire. Concerned with the space of the city and of its everyday manifestations, Charney saw in the urban landscape a hearth of knowledge. According to Phyllis Lambert, he understood it as an encyclopedia where architecture becomes a metaphorical representation of human being. His work, she continues, is a meticulous work of exploration, associating diverse elements, disparate factors, and heterogeneous objects: a work dedicated to revealing hidden truths.

While several of his works could be talked about in terms of analytique, two of his early studies in particular evoke a process of dismemberment in order to better comprehend the formative and narrative elements that constitute the acts and consequences of building, living, and abandoning. They also help build a foundation for understanding his later work.


105. Ibid.

106. Ibid.

Une Histoire...Le trésor de Trois-Rivières, a work completed in 1975, is a compelling documentation and story of a worker’s house linking the cultural history of a community to details of classical architecture. Charney explains, in a catalogue published for the exhibition Melvin Charney: Œuvres 1970–1979, presented at the Museum of Contemporary Arts (MAC) in Montreal in 1979, that he started this work by studying buildings dating back to the beginning of industrialization in Quebec. He collected photographs, post cards, maps, newspaper clips, all sorts of images that pictured everyday buildings, from churches to shops, factories and houses. He paid particular attention to the birth of the urban architecture growing from the incoming population to industrialized cities, as was the case in Trois-Rivières, a small city halfway between Montreal and Quebec city, located at the confluence of the St–Maurice and St–Lawrence rivers. While Charney had mostly been preoccupied with the architecture of Montreal, Trois-Rivières had also been a city with exponential growth, and in this case, almost exclusively due to its industrialization. At the turn of the 19th century, the lucrative wood industry developed, taking advantage of the hinterland and the rivers bordering the city, along which several sawmills were built and eventually the first paper mills. The industry flourished and in 1926, Canada became the world leader in the paper industry and Trois-Rivières the world capital of paper production, being home to the largest paper mill in the world. The fast growing population, coming from rural areas, and most of them working at producing paper, had to invent a new urban context in the vicinity of the mills, one that must have been quite foreign to them. Adapting the constructions they were familiar with to the denser situation, the first industrialized construction materials—mainly standardized wood lumber—became common for building houses and shops. This meant that instead of building with solid wood as they were used to—with pièces-sur-pièces houses in which large pieces of wood, three inches by twelve inches or there about, stacked on edge to serve both as structure and insulation—houses were now built with balloon frames. These involved a much lighter construction method with correspondingly light insulation as the new empty walls were stuffed with sawdust or newspaper.

Among the collected photographs, a small house near the mill stood out. The house was part of an area where urban renewal was imminent when Charney was examining the photograph, and he described it as having a poignant presence. Its volume, he said, evoked the geometry of a classical temple; its façade, larger than the house itself, was added on as if a baroque fronton, while the window and doorframes inscribed a cross.108 While the house still stands,109 Charney believed it would soon be demolished and saw in this process a violent act of politically motivated destruction. He sought to capture its meaning through drawings and a reconstruction of

109. In a catalog published in 1979, Charney explains how he went to visit the house to find out that it had been demolished in the midst of the urban renewal/demolition process. “Afin de mieux comprendre cette maison, je m’y suis rendu pour me rendre compte qu’elle avait été démolie en 1974, emportée par un programme de rénovation urbaine.” (Charney, Melvin Charney: Œuvres 1970–1979, 32) In a later catalogue, published in 1991, Charney describes the house as being part of an area which was clearly destined for large-scale demolition. He claims to have gone to see the house, to have measured it and photographed it. “Afin de mieux comprendre cette maison, j’ai voulu la voir. Je l’ai mesurée, photographié.” (Lambert. Paraboles et autres allégories, 58). In Louis Martin’s On Architecture, Melvin Charney, a Critical Anthology, Martin notes that the house was not demolished, as shows the above photograph. (Martin, Louis ed. 2014. On Architecture, Melvin Charney, a Critical Anthology. Montreal: McGill Queen’s University Press, 299).
its exterior features. The MAC installation built a sort of effigy, “ritualized the figuration that gave [the house] meaning, [showing] architecture to be part of an ever-developing discourse closer to the language and understanding of people than our cultural institutions would have it.”

The work shown in the exhibition “presented collective values built in our surroundings.”

The process of surveying the house shows the same attention that would be paid to a temple, using the same language and technique to the extent of eventually blurring the elements of both: whether the descriptive sketches belong to one or another becomes irrelevant as the house becomes a monument, the monument a house. But my attention goes to a color rendering over a photocopy of the original photograph. It shows the neighbouring houses in sepia color, as if they belonged to an accurate past, one that can be dated and remembered, and leaves the women and children walking past the houses in black and white, as if standing outside the identifiable time. The house itself is rendered in color pencil, an even brown with what now seems a blue metal roof. Manipulating the photocopy further, the sidewalk appears to be cut at the entrance of the house, acting more as an access bridge than as a continuous and nondescript ground surface. The remaining ground disappears under an etching-like gray rendering to leave the house standing on posts, themselves poised on distant anchor points. The house colors disappear toward the edge of the image to abstract it from its context and to turn it into the relic of a monument.

Though the technique is quite simple, this early drawing by Charney anchors his work in a study of the everyday. It shows the quotidian as something worthy of attention and as something that shares proportions, materiality and history with other types of construction that might

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110. Melvin Charney, in Martin, On Architecture, 300.
111. Ibid., 301.
appear to history as more momentous. The small house captures the collective memory of a city built for industry, the struggle and precariousness of its inhabitants living in paper thin houses while working in a gigantic and sturdy paper mill. The drawing of Charney thus speaks of the house as a temple, built for the ages. Its theatrical presence and temporality reveal the fragility of the structure all the while evoking an everyday that has been snatched away and a future that is anchored in the past.

In *Fragments*, a study completed between 1975 and 1978, Charney gathered yet more photographs of abandoned vernacular buildings, all taken between 1890 and 1940, at the highest years of industrialization in Quebec. As in the house of Trois-Rivières, the collected images exposed both the remnants of construction as emptied presence and the figurative stories that once inhabited the structures. Charney transformed these images to free the forms—the details—of the buildings, manipulating, cutting, blurring or repeating the images or sections of the images so as to reshape these photographs into projective constructions meant to bring into the present time the constitutive details of everyday buildings. Pursuing the dismemberment of the elements, the drawings produced by Charney begin to erase the superfluous materials to concentrate on the “worthy” details while keeping just enough traces of the discarded to retain a sense of context. His drawing *La maison de Rivière-des-Prairies*, drawn in 1977 again over the photocopy of a photograph, pictures the façade of a farmhouse as a paper-thin surface supported by timber-frame scaffoldings, the rest of the house blurred under a blue veil of colored pencil. The apparent weight of the scaffolding renders the façade, that which should protect its inhabitant, frail and obsolete; it also fills the space that should be occupied by the private interior with solid pieces of the wood that once built these houses. In effect, it reverses the façade, turning the exterior into the interior, toward what we imagine as being the front road, as would a theater set. The blue veil, masking the side of the house, leaves just enough transparency for the hidden façade to maintain a phantom-like presence in the drawing. As white marks are added over the lower portion of the hidden façade, the perspective line is erased to move up with the horizon, blurred underneath the blue veil. The depth of the original photograph is thus augmented: it pushes the side façade to an abysmal depth, far removed from the front façade and scaffolding. This is where the veil gets slightly more complex: moving from over the far-removed side façade to just underneath the front façade, it begins to act as a scrim, as a layer meant to reinforce the protecting surface of the façade. Moving in and out of the house, through the scaffolding and over the horizon...
The blue scrim that might have appeared to simply serve a function—hiding the side façade to draw in the scaffolding—tells the story of a lost past, of present remnants and of a desire to withhold details in the changing context.

In a critical contextualization of the work of Charney, George Adamczyk explains that this early work consisted of a “search for ‘significant fragments’ in ordinary architecture”\(^\text{112}\), where fragments were considered as a kind of “totality, as if the fragment [could] act as the whole architecture.”\(^\text{113}\) In the eye of Charney, continues Adamczyk, fragments, or details, “translate the profound meaning of building and dwelling,”\(^\text{114}\) and can thus act, as Frascari claimed about details, as the smallest unit of meaning, or perhaps, as elements that can build our experience and knowledge of architecture and cities. In that regard, drawing over photocopies of old photographs, “as in radiography,”\(^\text{115}\) says Louis Martin, is telling. It demonstrates how Charney, though interested in memory, did not consider these abandoned buildings as memorabilia, but rather as significant fragments that are very much part of the constant process of construction and reconstruction of the city. Frail workers’ houses, their emptied walls and humble proportions, emerge as significant elements in our imagination of what constitutes the culture of a people and in our imagination of what the present holds in its grasp: both a prefiguration of our environment (embedded in the past) and the foreseeability of a future that might accommodate such details.

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\(^{113}\) Ibid.

\(^{114}\) Ibid.

\(^{115}\) Martin, On Architecture, 229.
Les maisons de la rue Sherbrooke brought these fragmentary drawing explorations into the city as part of a collection of artistic interventions for Montreal’s Olympic games in 1976. Just like the drawings, two thin façades of plywood held by intricate scaffolding replicated each other on a site where similar buildings had once stood. Playing with the ambiguity of time, between the remembrance of a historical continuity and an active critical presence in a period where tabula rasa was frequently deployed, Charney built the houses as the timely meeting of ruins and the first stages of a new construction. The temporary, fragmentary building proposed that new urban practices should acknowledge and make use of the historical city to bridge between past and future.

As do these examples and much of the later production of Charney, the representation of architecture no longer belongs to the realm of use and shelter. It is rather meant to expose, to display, and to question the perception of our cities and of the spaces we inhabit. Without telling an overt or explicit story of the places he depicts, Charney’s drawings and constructions encapsulate significant moments from the past as much as the future. As he renders them present, we recognize fragments of architecture and life with which we might be familiar, but which we have never really seen before. Through the banalities of the everyday—the shared commonalities of our built environment—Charney’s work steps outside of a linear narrative, and allows multiple times and storylines to entangle.
The old woman is all smiles. I don't understand what she seems so eager to tell me, but it is clear she is happy to see I am paying attention to her humble house. She lives in a tight alley, which comes from the busy market street up the gentle slope, leading into the inner-block compound. She lives in the corridor. Yet, her house is the most inviting: a simple opening along this long, otherwise uneventful concrete wall, decorated with six potted plants, three on either side. There are two clotheslines on top of each other, both filled with the day's laundry, mostly dark colored dresses. At the end of the corridor, a large, faded painting of a boy hangs above an archway. An air conditioner is leaking its water a bit further. The sky is a spotless, flat, blue surface, and there is no air to be felt. The large metal door is wide open and reveals, behind a small passageway, a room, dimly lit by its single window in the far corner, and what appears, to my eye, to be Christmas decorations. She invites me in. The room is her life story: wedding and baby pictures, news clippings, random objects, a bed, a table, a chair, a gas stove, a radio. This is where she sleeps, she eats, she reads, she waits for the days to go by. The ceiling is surprisingly high and reveals a dark wooden structure. I reach the window which looks out onto a tight concrete yard to realize it has bars on it: the brightness of the midday summer sun shining in makes them disappear. She looks at me looking at her house, she points to a bowl with a few dusty candies, I smile back. It is nearly 40 degrees outside but here, the air is cool. She offers coffee.
A room for sharing essential things

غرفة المشاركة في أمور أساسية
It is clear I am not from here.
No matter how hard I try to blend in, there's nothing I can really do about it.

I wear worn running shoes, jeans, a plain t-shirt, but still, I don't hold a chance.
As I walk through Bachoura, I stand out like a sore thumb.

"Do you know Sodeco Square?" a man asks me from out of nowhere.
He is wearing sunglasses, a baseball cap, bright shiny white running shoes and a backpack, all very unusual items for a Bachourian.

"Yes, indeed I know where it is. You just walk a block here, to Independence street, you turn left and it will be right in front of you, within a five-minute walk."

"Well, let me tell you, you just go this way, " he says, pointing toward Sodeco, "and it's right there."

A few men gather around us, probably wondering what all these pointed fingers in the air might be for.

"I know where Sodeco Square is," I answer, slightly confused from his response.
"I don't want to go to Sodeco, I want to be here. Do you need to go to Sodeco?"
"No, here is not Sodeco," he replies.

"On this side of the street is Basta, on this side, Bachoura. Sodeco is that way."

I look around.
More men have gathered.
Everyone seems to be looking for Sodeco.
Down the street the market is thriving.
Up the tight alley cutting through tall buildings, the usual traffic on the metal bridge.
All seems quite normal.

"Yes, I know this," I reply. "Thank you for your help."

A small woman, curled up shoulders under her dark gray, heavy cotton dress, makes her way through the small crowd, pushing, grocery bags in hand.
She comes right up to me and asks:
"Are you looking for Sodeco?"

The man in the baseball cap and white shoes interrupts: "This is Bachoura. Don't listen to her, she is Turk."
She - Sodeco is that way.

"Yes, Sodeco Square," he replies.

"I wasn't telling her you're a Turk, I thought you were speaking Turkish."

"I don't speak Turkish, I live in Bachoura."

"I am telling her how to get to Sodeco."

"Listen to me: Sodeco is this way."

Confusion abounds.
Who wants to go to Sodeco square anyway?

Me - Ok, ok, thank you.
I will just look around a bit longer and I will go this way to Sodeco after.

Thank you.
I make my way through the men, leaving without looking back.
Their voices fade away as the noise from the generators start.
It is three o'clock.
A room for going where you don’t need to be

غرفة لنقل الحجر
Standing in the middle of a decrepit lot,
full of garbage and flies,
the façades of semi-abandoned buildings protect the growing wilderness.
The relatively flat topography is a perfect terrain for weeds and flowers,
mostly yellow,
to grow.

In the far back corner
the land suddenly goes up
(perhaps over what used to be the first floor of a now buried building),
to a narrow opening between two one-story-high concrete walls,
leaving to the inner block of one-room houses.

I saw three kids play there once.
They were pretending to cook,
using what was left of a rotting lettuce
and a broken plastic bowl
they had probably found in the pile of randomly abandoned goods
and other unwanted belongings,
a few feet away.

They had also found a little wooden platform to stand on,
and two wooden boxes to sit on.
They were curious of my presence
and giggled,
hiding behind one another in chronological order.

Today there are no kids to be seen.
The sun is certainly too hot for play
and the smell of garbage,
well,
could overpower any idea of a game.

But the light embraces the wild plants.
The growing vines have already taken over back doors and service windows,
leaving only the thickness of an a/c unit protruding
as a reminder of life behind the thick gnarling leaves.

A gigantic rubber tree offers the clemency of some shade.

As the summer afternoon sits comfortably over the wild,
the surrounding façades appear in a play of shadows, textures and colors.

It is particularly so with the façade in front of which I am standing,
where the missing windows reveal
in their black rectangles
the depth of rooms behind them,
each one empty of any visible activity.

The sound of the street is kept quiet by the tall concrete fence,
a perfect acoustical environment
to hear the sound of small lizards climbing up the rubber tree trunk.

"Bonjour Madame!"
says a small head popping out of one of the black holes,
from the upper floor.

"C'est toi la plus jolie!"

Two pretty, unexpected, joyful
little birds
have made themselves a nest
in the depth of the garden's rooms.
A room for hiding in the shadows of a room

غرفة للاختباء في ظلال غرفة
There is an old stone building, on the corner of streets 53 and 54, sector 25, which will apparently soon be demolished. The main attraction of this building, other than the open porch behind repeated arches, was its public fountain. A rare amenity in Bachoura. So the neighbors ripped it out before the bulldozer came to demolish the building, and installed it across the street, next to what has now become a small square, dedicated to public use. Another rare amenity in Bachoura. On the paving of the public square sit four plastic chairs and a table where boys play card games. A few lights have been hung under a bamboo cover and now that summer is well under way, the potted banana plants are almost completely closing off the sides and back of the square. On the adjacent lot, a parking space for the ambulance. A group of men sit at the corner of the building, over wooden boxes, in the crevasses of the building, or across from where a small improvised market has been arranged for the day. The merchandise is carefully organized over large flattened cardboard boxes, laid out on the ground. It's unclear whether the market is on the street, or what could be a parking lot, or perhaps a forgotten construction site. “You know why there are no sidewalks here?” asks a man who appears Bachourian (but as will turn out, lives in Switzerland and is only visiting relatives for the summer). I look around. Ah! That's why the market isn't in the street, nor in a parking lot, nor in a construction site, or even less so on the sidewalk. “Hariri wanted to build himself a house in the Gulf, so he came here and ripped out our sidewalks so he could use the stones. These are beautiful stones. Look here,” he says as he gets up to let me see the stone he was sitting on. "Isn't this a beautiful stone? 200 years old. That's how old this stone is. When I came here, I yelled at him, oh yes, we all yelled. But this was the only stone we were able to save.” The stories people will tell. Yes, indeed, this is a beautiful piece of rock, old, worn. If it could speak, it would probably have some stories of its own.
A room for carrying stones

غرفة لنقل الحجر

A room for carrying stones
The perspective is just about perfect:
the empty lot sits at the end of the street
down a gentle slope
framed between an abandoned two-story building with rooms painted as blue as the sky above
(one can tell since the roof is nowhere to be found) and
a brand new one, just as empty.

One can guess, at the far end,
a big drop
dividing the empty lot in two more or less equal parts
opening up the view toward more abandoned empty structures on one side,
and an elegant white façade striped with thin black windows on the other,
leaving just enough room to let the new mosque downtown be part of the picture.

On the sidewalk, a man sits in his plastic chair,
smoking arguileh, drinking coffee.

Beside him, a white van covered in a blue tarp
has closed business for the day.

Behind him, his van is indefinitely parked with its own blue tarp,
hung between the vehicle and wooden posts.

It's unclear which is holding which.
But all seems to stay steady.

In the van is everything one needs to prepare coffee,
listen to the radio, eat old, probably melted chocolate bars,
and an armchair that must have seen better days.

The building facing his impromptu café is unusually tall
and casts a long shadow, stopping just past the man's chair.

A convenient shade for a late afternoon coffee.

"Hello! Do you want coffee?"
he asks from within the smoke.

Past the café, indeed is a significant topographical drop.
Looking down from the top, another white van is parked on the far lot corner.

This one is filled with car parts.

Four cars are parked around it, hoods open
and all seem to be very busy.

"You want coffee?"
Looking back toward the café onto its other side,
a table is set up with a few more plastic chairs along with a lamp and an old carpet on the ground.

The back, cozy room, I guess.

No one has moved still.
"You want coffee?"

Inhales some arguileh.

... Looks out to the street.
... Has a sip.
... "You want coffee?"
A room for keeping distractions away

غرفة للإحتراس من تشتيت الأفكار