



Conversations on Future Lifestyles:

Talk it through. Make it happen.

Where is the 'Soft City' now? – Feb 2007

Introduced by Tim Waterman

Hosted by Andrew Stuck, Rethinking Cities Ltd.

<http://www.rethinkingcities.net/conversations>

Where is the Soft City Now?

"We need – more urgently than architectural utopias, ingenious traffic disposal systems, or ecological programmes – to comprehend the nature of citizenship, to make a serious imaginative assessment of that special relationship between the self and the city; its unique plasticity, its privacy and freedom". – Jonathan Raban, Soft City

Jonathan Raban's soft city is the malleable material from which identity is formed. "It invites you to remake it, to consolidate it into a shape you can live in . . . Decide who you are, and the city will again assume a fixed form around you." This soft city is the mythic city, where illusion, dream, aspiration, and nightmare are all fixed into place; it comes into focus as it is passed through and acted upon by an individual or a collective.

We are hard at work, however, banishing the mythic city. We have become immensely savvy about manipulating human dreams, and this manifests itself not just in the media and advertising, but in the construction of public space, the public realm, and ultimately, the public sphere. The city centre, now the preserve of the elite, has been given over to "authenticity" and delivered only to those few who can afford it. Imagination has been replaced by *'Imagineering'*. Great sums of money are spent to calculate people's desires, leading to the creation of carefully controlled environments that focus on retail or business, not people. In direct opposition to the Situationist maxim, we are primarily engaged with constructing the city as a torpid pleasure-dome of leisure and consumption rather than a stimulating playground of action and invention.

Re-inhabiting the mythic city and making it safe again for dreamers is a process of both recognising and maintaining those qualities of urban spaces and life that city dwellers value. The stresses and fears of the city are as much a part of that experience, as much a part of that necessary dream world that they must also be maintained. The univocality and controlled nature of so many of today's designed urban spaces is a distinct threat not only to cherished ways of life in the city but to the life of the mind and the life of dreams.

'Fictions' that people create in their immediate environments are organisers for everyday life in the city. These de Certeauian figures of pedestrian rhetoric may be consulted to inform representation and to create new paradigms for the design of urban spaces that are generated from these methods. A city as a realm of the imagination, a theatre of dreams, might be fashioned amidst the brick and mortar of what we have already.

The great task ahead in urban design is the acceptance and celebration of the city as it is and the identification and utilisation of those traits that make it so. In the words of Katherine Shonfield, an admirer of Raban's Soft City, "It is possible that our epoch's best dream of the future yet-to-come may involve, more than anything, a new conception of what we already have, but don't yet know."