

## Psychogeography Now - Window to the urban future

*...active search for and celebration of, chance and coincidence.[01]*

Describing technique and practice of psychogeography requires going back in time to the post second world war years full of enthusiasm for the renewal of humanity and huge step in rejuvenated civilization. It was first described by Guy Debord, writer and philosopher, prominent member of the “Situationist” movement, in 1955 as: “*the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals*“. [02] It was an aspect of the situationists’ wider drive to achieve a revolutionary transformation of everyday life. They were insisting on pedestrianism to experience astonishment and encrypted events of the city. Most popular technique *dérive* [drift ] was first step toward an urban praxis and psychogeographical articulation of the modern city. *Dérive* is a stroll through the urban environment usually by group of people with an attempt to understand and interpret complex language of urban space. Situationist saw in the cities “*repressed desires*” and a possibility to by turning them around get engaged in a “*playful reconstructive behaviour*”. They used this tool to expose scandalous poverty of everyday life, contrast of what it could be and what presently is. It was a harsh critique of “*our commodified consumer society so that our repressed desires of a more authentic nature could come forward*” [03].

Idea of drifting is based on the experiences of the 19th century Thomas de Quincey, the prototype of the obsessive drifter. In the 20th century, first the Surrealists in the 30ties and then Letrists in the 50ties elaborated on this urge by transforming it into a systematic practice. In the 60ties it was the Situationists that took this activity to the next level by developing psychogeography: the science of the *dérive*, the drift.

Since those days this practise - performance went through numerous transformation and it was used many times over and over by various groups and individuals. Many groups specially around 1980s and 90s started flourishing and theory become popular once again among academic circles, avant-garde artists, revolutionary groups, urban explorers and other sometimes quite extreme practitioners dedicated to action-based participatory experiments. In last couple of years groups like *Povflux*, *Psy-Geo-Conflux*, *The Workshop for Non-linear Architecture*, several semi-organized associations like *A Toronto Psychogeography Society* etc. dissatisfied with the nature and design of the modern environment and a desire to make the everyday world more interesting, are keeping this idea alive. In a practical sense many groups of urban explorers often are practicing psychogeography, perhaps unknowingly, and they certainly often draw on modern psychogeographic writers as an inspiration. Over time psychogeography become one of the cornerstones of modern geography and major post-modern way of writing on the city.

My personal favourite “*psycho*” practitioner is Wilfried Hou Je Bek, from **socialfiction.org** -Nederland, one of the most productive, creative and versatile individual with wide spectrum of interests in social and space related activities. Since 2001 when **socialfiction.org** performed the first experiment in algorithmic pedestrian culture as a new methodology in psychogeographical action research of all aspects of the urban condition, they are promoting further development of generative psychogeography and encouraging interested to join in and take these ideas as the jumping board for their own creative activities. Opening quote to this text – ...active search for and celebration of, chance and coincidence – is one of the best descriptions of psychogeography existing today.

Word psychogeography itself is combination of Psychology and Geography and it is obvious that order of those words is also very important. Mental reaction [psychology] in a particular space [geography] are leading towards interaction of both main aspects of human life: mental and psychical.

Civilization, especially in the North America with very specific historic and social position is facing challenging time. “*New development*” mode of operation, is in the past, “*maintenance/conservation stage*” is at the very end and new stage of “*restorative development*” is in front of us. “*Communities and nations normally start with new development, for obvious reasons. The maintenance and conservation mode than kicks in, to service newly built environment. When their creations get too old to maintain, when the “highest and best” uses of their structure change, and/or when they run out of room [and resources – my comment] and have to start redeveloping the land they’ve already developed, than the final, and longest lasting mode become dominant: restorative development.*” [04].

Adding to this opinion is a comment from one of the early participants in the Situationists Movement from 1953 and even today, 35 years later, it sounds quite contemporary: “*A mental disease has swept the planet: banalization. Everyone is hypnotized by production and conveniences — sewage systems, elevators, bathrooms, washing machines. This state of affairs, arising out of a struggle against poverty, has overshot its ultimate goal — the liberation of humanity from material cares — and become an omnipresent obsessive image.*” [05] Neighbourhoods in all large urban areas today all over the world are facing problems that often look unsolvable. Story quoted is from the [www.recivilization.net](http://www.recivilization.net) and sounds extremely scary: “*This neighborhood is doomed. It’s only five years old, a new subdivision on the suburban fringe of a booming sunbelt city (sunbelt area in the US consists of Alabama, Aranzas, Florida, New Mexico, CO and Texas), made of relatively inexpensive starter homes. Approximately 23% of the properties are recent and pending foreclosures, all of them now vacant. The people who live here don’t know what hit them. Suddenly, right after they bought their dream homes, others on the block started to empty out. Then crime and gang activity appeared, the last thing they expected. No one’s looking after the vacant homes now; frazzled homeowners are jangling the phones at city hall, demanding action, only to be told that city police and service crews are busy; their neighborhood isn’t the only one.*” [06]

Having in mind all of this we are in the position to do something or at least to start looking for the ways to provide better future for the generations to come. We are concentrating on large urban areas in North America. They are overwhelmed with very complicated matrix of problems shared with the whole societies in crises in a both psychical and social sense. Deterioration of wellbeing due to the disappearing cheap energy resources, pollution of water and other natural resources, global food crises, basic transportation problems, deteriorating urban space, wrong decisions made by urban planners and builders/developers is “*screaming*” for action. Franco Berardi (Bifo), Italian writer and media-activist best describes this contemporary situation: “*During the past centuries, the building of the modern urban environment used to be dependent on the rationalist plan of the political city. The economic dictatorship of the last few decades has accelerated the urban expansion. The interaction between cyber-spatial sprawl and urban physical environment has destroyed the rationalist organization of the space. In the intersection of information and urban space we see the proliferation of a chaotic sprawl following no rule, no plan, dictated by the sole logic of economic interest. Urban panic is caused by the perception of this sprawl and this proliferation of metropolitan experience. Proliferation of spatial lines of flight.*”

*The metropolis is a surface of complexity in the territorial domain. The social organism is unable to process the overwhelmingly complex experience of metropolitan chaos. The proliferation of lines of communication has created a new kind of chaotic perception.” ... “The city of panic is the place where nobody has the time anymore to get close to each other, for the caresses for the pleasure or for the slowness of whispered words. Advertisement exalts and stimulates the libidinous attention, person to person communication multiplies the promises of encounters, but these promises never get fulfilled. Desire turns into anxiety and time contracts.” [07]*

Ever expanding internet network [world wide web - global borrowing] is ideal medium for various groups of activists to spread and share theories like this: ... *“contemporary city is defined by a kind of de facto psychopathology that is embodied in the very spaces and architectural rationales that order urbanization today, from gated communities to urban surveillance landscapes, to the last dying refuges of public space that have been overwhelmed by privatization and a complete hyper securitization of the built environment at all scales.”* and proposing social resistance to: ...” the city being viewed as an architectural weapon to enforce a certain behavioral code, or to forcefully spatialize neo-liberalism in a way, to rear obedience (or addiction) to a rampant commerce? What are the inherent narratives of power that run through constructs like maximum-security prisons, megalithic casinos, shopping mall complexes, refugee camps, suburban sprawl, torture spaces and the hardened borderzones between nation-states? [08]

Messages are *“hitting the target”*, and they are reaching wide audience. Following is the very short list of more or less official organizations just in Toronto metropolitan area: Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority [*Conservation for the Living City*], Urban Green Tourism, Toronto – Expanding Eco-tourism, Heritage Toronto, City of Toronto Environmental Task Force, Toronto Urban Nutrient Recovery Committee, Urban Agriculture, Toronto, Toronto Parks and Environment Committee, The Sustainability Network, Living Green Toronto, Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force [*to oversee and lead waterfront renewal*], Toronto Bay Initiative, Spacing Magazine [*Understanding Toronto’s Urban Landscape*] etc.

Many community based groups are also active: Streets are for People! [Creating the city we all want to live in], Toronto Environmental Alliance, Toronto Coalition for Active Transportation, The Centre for Social Innovation [*new ideas that resolve existing social, cultural, economic and environmental challenges*], Citizens for the Old Town, Old Town Toronto Network, Community History Project, The St. Lawrence Market Neighbourhood [*Business Improvements Area*], Toronto’s St. Lawrence Neighbourhood Association, Union Station Revitalization Public Advisory Group, Smart Living St. Lawrence. There are of course also more radical but equally interested and active groups: Toronto Exploration Society [*exploration and social interaction*], Infiltration [*the zine about going places you are not suppose to go*], Underground urban exploration in Toronto, [*guerilla art ‘actions*], Urban Exploration Resource [active forum for the Urban Exploration and Infiltration Community], or groups involved from the urban art standpoint: Style in Progress [*celebrating hip-hop culture, promotes urban art, music, dance, and fashion*], Art Crimes [*The Writing on the Wall*], or more moderate Urban Arts Toronto, [*A community arts council*], Artscape [*enterprise engaged in culture-led regeneration*], Strong and Free Toronto [*language, arts, culture, people*] or no9 [*... committed to the belief that contemporary art can stimulate positive social and environmental change*].

*“In a world reigned and dominated by capital, profit, status and prestige, greed and gluttony, suppression and segregation, the time has come to realize the need for mental change.*

*The legal and social practice of separating people on the basis of their race, ethnicity or social class must come to an end. We need to realize that, no matter which color of eyes or skin, culture or roots, we need to form as one, to face the head of the beast in order to achieve evolution and change. Non-conformity is an attack on the evil of our surroundings, becoming catalysts for creativity, development and change. The world needs Big Dreamers following a vision of a better future, consisting in equality, justice and freedom.”[08]* This reasoning is even more understandable with the opening quote used by Manuel with this text: *“The real voyage of discovery consists of not seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.”* [Marcel Proust]

On a larger global stage there are also few significant players: Project for Public Spaces [*Building Community, Creating Places, Using Common Sense*], Urban Lovers [*Dedicated to all those who live and love the Traditional City of the Past, the Present, and, especially, the Traditional City of the Future*], New Urbanism [*Creating Livable Sustainable Communities*], Center for Environmental Structure [*Building Livable Structure*], Charrette Center [*Online Compendium of Free Information for the Community Based Urban Design Process*], and many others.

My involvement in urban activities started very early in my career. From 1972-1975 I was doing: *“space objects in the urban environment”*, conceptual art performances in Belgrade capital of ex Yugoslavia. Life shifted me to other direction but interests in the city issues continued. Since 1965 I visited estimated 300 cities with over 100 thousand inhabitants on 4 continents. When traveling we are hoping to learn something about people living there, something about the place where they live and learn something about ourselves. In 2000 I started my collection of Urban Squares, all of them visited and photographed on those trips. Web site *“urbansquares.com”* was created to store and expose this collection to the public. Very soon after start it shifted towards the research initiative in order to explore visual and artistic aspects of public urban squares as a nucleus of any neighbourhood. Interpreting/translating language of urban squares their urban morphology and fundamental values in the overall social integration and sustainability of the urban life was my main activity. Each square is accompanied by the little mental reaction–description of the space. This inspired me to begin performing more structured analysis of urban space – psychogeographical performances, and produce *“psychogeographical portraits”* [09] of these neighbourhoods.

Psychogeography is *“walking on a very narrow path”* between art and science. This suited our goal very well. Our intention is to have artistic freedom in interpreting the facts, and perceive things unseen before. In the first half of 2006 this work was recognized by Bill Humber from The Seneca College’s Centre for the Built Environment and we started collaboration on a *“Digital Neighbourhoods Project”*. Between other research we formed a teams that performed two psychogeographical walks. Participants were couple of people from our group and at least one person living in the area. Technique is quite simple. Group of enthusiasts is walking for an hour or so with a not predetermined plan through the part of the community with eyes wide open and curiosity. Help of some recording devices for later analysis [*digital or video camera, pen and paper etc.*], live discussions and possible contacts with locals is all you need. Our working definition of this procedure is: *“The subjective analysis–mental reaction, to neighbourhood behaviours related to geographic location. A chronological process based on the order of appearance of observed topics, with the time delayed inclusion of other relevant instances”*[10]. Bill Humber described our intentions in his article about psychogeography like this: *“In discovering a small world we discover the whole world.”* [11]

We tried to push our practise to the more complex level, to use this very specific urban analytical tool to formulate the “*burning*” questions arising in the neighborhoods visited. Of course defining neighbourhood is “*burning*” question by itself and if this informal praxis offer some help for this very complex issue we will be very happy. In first two recorded walks we tried to develop this technique insisting on pedestrianism to experience astonishment and encrypted events of the city/neighbourhood. We were interested in transformations in the urban space, shared communal experience, shared neighborhood vision if it exists, long-term neighborhood relationships through community-oriented urban planning and development of criteria necessary to create a great neighborhood or a great city. Most of the time lot of questions were raised like: what’s unique here; what do we need to revitalize it; how to make it function; how to give it expression, how can it differentiate itself; preserve, experiment or promote; how to communicate community; where is this neighbourhood going; and many others. Topics for exploration were identified: heritage buildings; public urban squares; existence and usage of green spaces; traffic; individualism; connectivity; mixed usage spaces; mixed living; urban art; potential for tourism; atmosphere; need for expansion; neighbourhood identity; heritage; and many others, some very specific for the space visited.

Students from the Seneca’s Integrated Environmental Site Remediation Program were asked to perform as a regular school assignment psychogeographical walks and those were included in the conclusion and guide lines we developed for Students in a Philippines to try to further develop this analytical tool for professional usage in the pre urban planning process. Two more psychogeographical portraits were performed and recorded by myself alone in two very different urban situations. First was in the Old Town Toronto and the other in the suburb of Belgrade, Serbia. In those two I used little more creative freedom in interpreting language of urban space. Intention was to expand practical usage of this technique.

Our “*Digital Neighbourhoods*” group is recently included in the “*Revitalization Institute*” at Seneca and we are planning to perform few more walks in the near future. First one is going to be “*Flemingdon Park*” – first modern planned community in Toronto [1956] with much more similarities with, Paris or Belgrade suburbs than our southern cousins. The next one might be “*Eastern Avenue*”, very neglected community with huge potential for renewal and redevelopment. We are also planning to diversify this analysis to do a storytelling trough psychogeographic recording of our current 9 Seneca Campuses landscapes.

Listed here are main discoveries, only one for each “*Portrait*” as an illustration for what could be accomplished: Bowmanville - Proudly taken by local participants to the Lovers Lane, to discover first real “*woonerf*” in Ontario; Old Toronto - Beauty and heritage in the back alleys, huge potential for pedestrianization of the urban core; Williamsburg–Witby - Baseball Diamond [Square] as a main public square –gathering space; Zmaj Colony Beograd - Spontaneous urban development with lot of characteristic of organic Mediterranean cities.

Psychogeography is a window to the urban future. This is true for two main reasons.

The first one: Urban Areas anywhere in the world are going to expand and include large percentage of population and accordingly existing problems are not going to shrink. World is entering new redevelopment phase. Rediscoveries has to be made with renewed new usage: Rediscover - Renew - Reuse. Psychogeography is the only effective analytical technique, in this rediscovered variation, in the arsenal of weapons of professional sustainable urban planners. It is absolutely necessary to take a first step on the “*ground*”. Renewal of basic

human needs in urban conglomeration of the future should definitely start from the pedestrian perspective.

The second one: Even more important reason is a simplicity of the Psychogeography and possibility to be performed by everybody. Only needed is a will and of course vision that something could be done on the individual and basic community level to improve our living conditions. Proof of this is a great interest of the inhabitants in almost all big cities, existence of wide spectrum of social groups and citizen associations making tremendous influence on city and government officials and through them to builders-developers. Psychogeography and its analytical power is another weapon in this constant struggle for the “*Power for the People*”. There is one more aspect of psychogeography that in this context needs to be recognized. Social involvement and before anything else positive results from those actions are contributing to the feeling of being engaged. New technologies including internet and other new media should be used as a tool for recording and spreading the “*good word*”. Personal responsibility and creative energy is willing contribution and available in huge quantities in any kind of political, economical or social environment. Redevelopment of democratic movements is another result of this activity. Involvement, organization and perhaps even funding of these actions through the official city structures can be highly beneficial for all interested. Citizen needs can be identified and influence economic renewal. Performance by itself is a social engagement and its adding to the much needed sense of belonging to the space.

**1.1** Cities should be places where all human rights and fundamental liberties are realized and where the dignity and collective well being of all persons is assured under conditions of equality, equitability and justice with full fulfilment of the social responsibility of the habitat. Everyone has the right to find in the cities the conditions necessary for his or her political, economic, cultural, social, and ecological realization while assuming the associated duties of solidarity.

**1.2** All persons have the right to participate in a direct and representative manner in the elaboration, definition, control and implementation of the public policy and the Municipal budget in the cities in order to improve the transparency, efficiency and autonomous nature of the local public administrations and the popular organizations.

This are first two articles of the document prepared by the UN-HABITAT. This next paragraph is a foreword for this paper and it is making clear where the psychogeography fits in the process that leads to the sustainable urban life. *“The Right to the City is defined as the equitable enjoyment of the cities while respecting the principles of sustainability, democracy and social justice, and is a collective right of all city inhabitants especially the vulnerable and disfavored on whom is further conferred legality for such actions and organization as their culture and custom suggests as a means of achieving the complete enjoyment of the right to an adequate standard of living. The Right to the City is interdependent to all recognized international human rights; and its conception is based on an integral view, which includes civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights enshrined in the international Human Rights Treaties.” [12]*

For the conclusion in this opinion about psychogeography I will use a sentence from the paper *Competing on Creativity: Placing Ontario’s Cities in a North American Context*, from November 2002, by Meric Gertler and Richard Florida, both prominent urban theorists: *“The ability to attract creative people in arts and culture fields and to be open to diverse groups of people of different ethnic, racial and lifestyle groups provides distinct advantages to regions*

*in generating innovations, growing and attracting high-technology industries, and spurring economic growth.”*

Potential is here, technique is available, so join few companions, arm yourself with patience, enthusiasm, be ready for a mental change and start fulfilling your Big Dreams!”

**Aleksandar Janicijevic**, Toronto, September 2, 2008  
[urbansquares.com]

- [01] Wilfried Hou Je Bek, socialfiction.org, 2007
- [02] Gay Debord, An introduction to a critique of urban geography, 1955
- [03] Flemming Funch, Psychogeography and derive, 2002
- [04] Storm Cunningham, The Restoration Economy, 2002
- [05] Ivan Chtcheglov, Formulary for a New Urbanism, 1953
- [06] Michael Pauls, www.recivilization.net, 2008
- [07] Franco Berardi (Bifo), City of Panic, 2007
- [08] Bryan Finoki, A Field Guide to Military Urbanism, 2007
- [08a] Interview with Manuel Gerullis, the MOS Mastermind, Innerscity Magazine
- [09] This term was proposed by Bill Humber from the Seneca’s Centre for the Built Environment
- [10] This definition is included in the official definition of Psychogeography in Wikipedia, A Free Encyclopedia - wikipedia.org
- [11] William Humber, Back Peddaling Annual 2008, Psychogeography and the Backpedaler
- [12] Paper prepared for UN-HABITAT’s Global Campaign on Urban Governance Based on a Henry Lefebvre’s “Right to the city”, 1968

### **urbansquares photoblog**

objective of this collection is to explore a visual and artistic aspects of public urban space and to compliment to the research initiative urbansquares.com. if it provokes mental reaction from your part, in a same way any psychogeographical drift does, that is what really was our intention

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