

DÉRIVE EDMONTON: A Psychogeographic Exploration of the City

Open new doors to your imagination with a walking psychogeographic tour of Edmonton – bring portable recording tools (c.f.: camera, sketching supplies, cell phone, tape recorder). Download the Derive brochure to do the tour in any city or environment.

On Saturday, May 23 2009, Kristy Trinier will meander through Edmonton's invisible, in-between, blighted and generally unsung zones. The idea is to see things and experience the city, not as the municipal planners and corporate developers intended, but with fresh eyes. Often the most interesting parts of a city occur, not by dint of approved planning methods, but accidentally, through organic use, and even neglect. These forgotten and overlooked sites can be real gems, but they can't be found through the tourist office. They must be discovered by looking – differently. In other words: stepping out of the habitual, zombie-like mode most of us assume as we go about our daily business and rebooting our senses.

Most people's lives are pretty busy. In order to juggle everything, they develop routines and habits to filter out sensations earmarked as irrelevant or insignificant. We all do this. After all – we can't always be interested in everything. But whereas filtering allows us to function efficiently, it also comes at a price: we tend to miss those bits of the world we've relegated as inconsequential. For most of us, these bits go into dormancy and loom larger and larger as we go through life. The bright side is that they're sleeping, not dead.

Here's a chance to wake-up and re-discover the city. Kristy Trinier is an artist and she heads up the Public Art Department at the Edmonton Arts Council (EAC). Recently awarded the Northlands Award for an Emerging Artist, her solo exhibit: *otherworld*, is on now at the Art Gallery of Alberta until June 7. As the EAC's Public Art Director Trinier is well qualified to re-orient our aesthetic vision of the city – to help us re-assess and re-value the things we've turned off. Last year at the Creative City Network conference, she led a prominent group of urban planners and cultural bureaucrats from across the country on a psychogeographic tour and collected more than kudos for her innovative practices.

She collected a scrapbook of pictures taken by the planners as they followed their noses through parking lots, back lanes and various drafting-board disasters. Now she's the keeper of a catalogue of unintended vistas, lovely little urban respites and gorgeous, but rarely frequented routes. Recording your experience by drawing, taking pictures or sampling audio environments is an important part of psychogeography because representing is so integral to experience. And that's what psychogeography is all about: re-experiencing a place that's sunk below your radar.

I spoke with Kristy Trinier about some of the implications and motivations behind psychogeography:

M: You're conducting a very unusual tour of the city for the DOORS OPEN festival called: *Derive Edmonton: a psychogeographic exploration of the city*. So I went to Wikipedia and found this definition: psychogeography was defined in 1955 by French artist and theoretician Guy Debord as the "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical

environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." Kristy, what does this mean?

K: Basically it means that your surroundings impact the way you think and feel, and conversely, the way you think and feel impacts your surroundings. All environments can be perceived to have an aesthetic value which impacts the people in that space. The built urban environments are either highly organized or designed or not – Edmonton is an example of a highly designed grid-style city. The layout of the streets, the design of the buildings, and all of the people and objects in the space comprise the environment.

M: Okay – so if the city looks great, I’m going to feel great – that makes sense or why would we spend so much time, energy and money on artists and designers? But when you say: “the way you think and feel impacts your surroundings,” aren’t you just agreeing that beauty is in the eye of the beholder? That it doesn’t really matter what’s objectively out there – it all depends on how I’m feeling, or what I’ve just eaten?

K: There are many theories which explain how environment impacts behaviour, for example, the “Broken Window” theory, which is used as part of crime prevention strategies. The theory is often contested, however. Graffiti, litter, garbage, and evidence of vandalism such as broken windows are considered ugly in the eye of the majority of beholders, and often lead people to feel that they do not have to behave responsibly in these areas (using trash receptacles, etc.) when they normally would.

But the purpose of the psychogeographic walk is not so much to decide to clean up areas or to leave them as is – before responding, it is vital to simply to begin to see. It is important to notice and give regard to all of the elements together as a single visual entity, where buildings, sidewalks, cigarette butts, garbage bags, people, shopping carts, power lines, etc. all merge to create an image, which offers elements of composition. The point is to begin to see the detail of the urban landscape in this way: to notice contrast, pattern, line, colour, negative spaces.

Everything eventually will decay - and this decay is often absent from the utopic urban or architectural renderings created in the process of urban designs. In Umberto Eco's recent book "On Ugliness," he asks an equally relevant question: "Is repulsiveness, too, in the eye of the beholder?"

The random patterns generated by the psychogeographic walks are used by artists, designers, psychologists etc. to disengage you from how you typically see your neighbourhoods and cities, and to allow another perspective. It is a simple exercise which can help in achieving objectivity. And in this sense, I would recommend it for anyone who inherently believes and states "I think Edmonton is ugly" or "I think the suburbs are ugly." It is possible to change this statement by just changing yourself, and not the city. Regardless of how a person values ugliness or beauty, it may be possible to be fascinated or interested in the city as either ugly or beautiful.

For now, your beauty may be my ugliness, but Trinier’s psychogeographic tour will put us both to the test and may just be the urban makeover we’ve all been waiting for. Certainly the price is right.

Marcus Miller
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