

The City and its Image: Theoretical Perspectives

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In the catalogue for the exhibition entitled *Urban Images: Canadian Painting*, Dorothy Farr argues that, given the immense attention paid to landscape painting in the historiography of Canadian art, the importance of urban images has been strongly underestimated.¹ One could add that architectural historians too have some difficulty in studying urban images, since the information they find in them is usually limited to factual elements such as the existence and location of a building at a specific time or, when the image is exceptionally accurate, its general characteristics or its most significant features. Urban images, however, like any other kinds of images, carry symbolic meaning. As such, they not only reflect the history of the places they represent, they also participate in the historical process itself. Urban images have, for instance, played an important role in shaping the perceptions that have guided many city officials in their decision-making processes, and architects have not designed their buildings in relation to cities as they are conceived by contemporary historians, but rather in relation to the way they were perceived in the past, even though these perceptions may be considered erroneous

today. In other words, the perceptions that guided the different actors in the production of architecture at any given period were necessarily entangled with the symbolic and rhetorical contents of the images available at that time.

The study of urban images such as plans, views, and photographs can thus bring new insights to architectural history. The three following articles attempt to demonstrate the value of this study by providing examples dealing with Quebec City, Montreal, and Toronto. As an introduction to these articles, this text is meant to acknowledge a few important precedents in the study of city maps and views, without being restricted to Canadian historiography alone.

One of the most influential studies on the symbolic contents of urban images is the article that Jurgen Schulz published in 1978 on Jacopo de'Barbari's view of Venice in 1500 (Figure 1).² After demonstrating that this view is made up of several smaller views sketched from the numerous towers of the city and assembled together to form a single image, the author argues that it should be interpreted as a symbolic celebration of the Venetian Republic. According to him, "the



Figure 1. Jacopo de'Barbari, view of Venice, 1500. (*Art Bulletin* 60 [1978]: 433)



Figure 2. After Francesco Rosselli (?), view of Florence with the chain, ca. 1470. (*Art Bulletin* 60 [1978]: 433)

constancy with which medieval and early Renaissance artists pressed geographical images into the service of conceptual illustration and, in particular, used city views in emblem of abstract ideas, gives us every reason to suppose that [Jacopo's view of Venice] had some abstract conceptual meaning beyond [its] significance as [a] topographical [record].³ In the image, the figures of Mercury and Neptune watch over the activities of the city, and captions express how they look favourably upon that location. Jacopo's view, therefore, was conceived as a symbol of the Republic, comparable to the winged lion of Saint Mark. The author completes his argument by saying that: "The subject ... is the commonwealth of Venice rather than the physical city: Venice, the premier trading and maritime power of Europe. Her physical features are exhibited as the material manifestation of this state, just as the figures of Mercury and Neptune are the incarnation of its numen."⁴

This article by Jurgen Schulz has inspired many scholars working on city views, and especially those working on the Italian Renaissance. For example, Thomas Frangenberg recently published a study on 15th- and 16th-century views of Florence in which he discusses the meaning of the famous view-with-a-chain, made around 1470 (Figure 2).⁵ According to the author, the chain and the padlock that frame the image signify the security provided for the city by its government: "Chains were, and are, employed in all kinds of circumstances to keep people out and, as several Tuscan place-names attest, chains were associated with state borders. The chain around the city of Florence could therefore have functioned as a metaphor for defence of the city or its territory.... Thus the point being made might be that the security of Florence is closely linked to the seat of power within the city itself."⁶

Another important development within the field of art history can be found in the work of Svetlana Alpers on Dutch painting, *The Art of Describing*.⁷ In a chapter that provides a fundamental reinterpretation of Vermeer's picture *The Art of Painting*, Alpers argues that Dutch art is an art of description, something that Vermeer himself suggests by the map and the city views that hang on the wall behind the model in his painting. According to the author, Dutch artists who produced landscape paintings and city views relied much less on the theatrical space of perspective construction, as theorised by Alberti, than on the open and unfocused space of maps, as conceived by Ptolemy in his *Geography*. Alpers thus reveals that a strong "mapping impulse" can be found in the development of Northern European art. Her argument easily relates Dutch landscape painting to the tradition already identified by Jurgen Schulz, that which leads from late medieval chronicles to modern atlases.

In parallel to the research conducted within the field of art history, the historian of cartography John Brian Harley has profoundly transformed the way in which historical maps are considered. Articles such as "The Map and the Development of the History of Cartography"⁸ and "Deconstructing the Map"⁹ argue that historical maps should be interpreted as forms of expression and communication, and not as simple ornamentation or as necessary steps in a scientific development towards greater accuracy. Harley's research deals not only with peripheral iconography, but also considers the very structure of cartographic representation, its various codes, and the distortions they impose on the territory. In his article "Meaning and Ambiguity in Tudor Cartography," Harley applies Panofsky's method to 16th-century British maps and shows that, beyond their obvious practical functions, estate maps contributed to

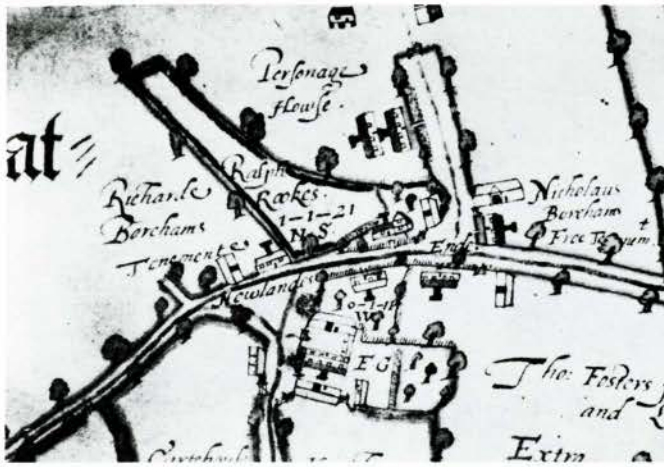


Figure 3. John Walker, Sr. and Jr., map of "Newlandes Ende," 1609 (detail). (Abbott Lowell Cummings, *The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay, 1625-1725* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979], fig. 21)

the shaping of attitudes towards land (Figure 3).¹⁰ He argues that, among other things, "hunting scenes represented a specific privilege of landowners, and the depiction of houses and buildings stood for a pride in the ownership of that property."¹¹ He goes on to show that "a landowner unable to 'see' his properties as a whole was not concerned to concentrate his scattered holdings by sale or exchanges; a ruler, unable to 'see' his kingdom, was not perturbed by bargaining away provinces that map-conscious generations were to see as essential to strategic frontiers."¹² For Harley, therefore, maps are not only sources of historical data, but also clues as to the way land was intellectualized at a specific period. His profound influence has led to new studies on maps of every period, including such recent documents as the Official Highway Map of North Carolina.¹³

Finally, we should also acknowledge the contribution of writers of fiction to the understanding of historical maps and views. In his novel *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon*, William Thackeray depicts an episode that completes Harley's argument on estate maps in a most interesting way. In the novel, Redmond Barry, now married to Lady Lyndon, aims to produce an impressive image of his estate on maps through the acquisition of a worthless quagmire. After describing the improvements he projected for Ballybarry castle, the narrator adds that "eight hundred acres of bog falling in handy, I purchased them at three pounds an acre, so that my estate upon the map looked to be no insignificant one." [my emphasis]¹⁴

In summary, one can say that the acute awareness of the role of images we have today — in the world of mass-media, public relations, and opinion polls — is not entirely new. The pursuit of a better understanding of how images both reflect and participate in the development of cities represents a promising area of research. The three articles that follow make an important contribution to this endeavour.¹⁵

Endnotes

- 1 Dorothy Farr, *Urban Image: Canadian Painting*, exhibition catalogue (Kingston, Ont.: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1990), xx.
- 2 Jurgen Schulz, "Jacopo de'Barbari's View of Venice," *Art Bulletin* 60 (1978): 425-74.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 467-8.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 468.
- 5 Thomas Frangenberg, "Chorographies of Florence: The Use of City Views and City Plans in the Sixteenth Century," *Imago Mundi* 46 (1994): 41-64.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 7 Svetlana Alpers, "The Mapping Impulse in Dutch Art," in *The Art of Describing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 119-68.
- 8 John Brian Harley, "The Map and the Development of the History of Cartography," in *The History of Cartography*, ed. J.B. Harley and David Woodward (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1:1-42.
- 9 J.B. Harley, "Deconstructing the Map," *Cartographica* 26, no. 2 (1989): 1-20.
- 10 J.B. Harley, "Meaning and Ambiguity in Tudor Cartography," in *English Map-Making 1500-1650*, ed. Sarah Tyacke (London: The British Library, 1983), 22-45.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 26, quoting J. R. Hale, *Renaissance Europe 1480-1520* (London, 1971), 5253.
- 13 Denis Wood and John Fels, "Designs on Signs/Myth and Meaning in Maps," *Cartographica* 23, no. 3 (1986): 54-103.
- 14 William Thackeray, *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon* (New York: Frank F. Lowell & Co., 1883), 219.
- 15 These three papers were presented in a session entitled "The Image of the City," organized by Marc Grignon at the 1997 SSAC conference in Calgary. Marc Grignon's research on the subject is supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. See Marc Grignon, "L'architecture comme métaphore du pouvoir : Québec à la fin du XVIIe siècle," in *Les métaphores de la culture*, ed. Joseph Melançon (Quebec City: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1992), 155-67, and Marc Grignon, "Loing du Soleil": *Architectural Practice in Quebec City during the French Regime* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).