

Interiors in the Land of the Great Outdoors

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Abstract: *In the context of an expanding economy around the so-called creative industries, many cities are searching for theoretical models to guide urban development. Theoretical models from early post-modernists are being regularly re-examined, in part, because of their relevance to models for the contemporary city. This paper investigates situationist theory as a lens through which to explore alternative pockets of culture. Using situationist theory as a lens to observe the culture of the New Zealand bach, or the myth that it left behind, this paper exposes the paradox of bach culture as an urban model: the paradox of institutionalising a creative culture of resistance and of escaping the city only to find oneself at its centre.*

Keywords: *New Zealand bach, Situationist International, urban design*

Paradox one: creative capitalism



Figure 1: Your one-stop shopping source.
(<http://www.creativeclass.org>)

In the last ten years there has been much public discussion on cultures of innovation, play and the so-called creative industries. Cities are currently competing to attract the big business that comes with these industries. Richard Florida's book, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), outlines his research on this new demographic and what its members want from a city and a workplace. In the United States, Florida counted 38 million members of this new group and credits them for 30% of the economy. He says, 'If you are a scientist or engineer, an architect or designer, a writer, artist, or musician, or if you use your creativity as a key factor in your work in business, or education, you are a member' (Florida, 2002, p. ix).

Florida builds many of his arguments on the work of Jane Jacobs and her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). He extends, or transforms, her arguments for diversity, interaction and play into capitalist terms. Sociological models are being re-examined in this context too, including Charles Landry's *The Creative City* (2000). These ideas are not

only important for the well-being of the city but, according to Florida, they are a central tenet of late capitalist production. His book and the associated lecture tours are being taken up by city councils and business leaders on this basis. Writing directly about his consulting work, Florida says, 'I often tell business and political leaders that places need to have a people climate – or creativity climate – as well as a business climate' (2002, p. 7).

Florida might well have included Situationist International theory and practice in his discussions with the urban establishment had it not been so blatantly anti-capitalist, anti-bureaucracy and even anti-class. Their work is similarly enthusiastic about the creative and experiential city and is also built on the rich diversity of constructive play that is being called for by Florida's *Creative Class*; '...we increasingly demand a lifestyle built around creative experiences... the new lifestyle favours individuality, self-statement, acceptance of difference and the desire for rich multidimensional experiences' (Florida, 2002, p. 13).

Situationist International is receiving attention from academics and artists but not from Richard Florida, city councils, or business leaders. The Drawing Center in New York hosted an exhibition, a symposium and produced a book around Constant's *New Babylon* in 1999 (Wigley & de Zegher, 2001), and there have been many others. But situationists and city councillors alike would surely feel uneasy if situationist theory became an agenda item for any city planning department. It is anathema to that kind of institutionalisation as it opposed top down control and any form of establishment. In a speech on Paris, Guy Debord, a founding protagonist of Situationist International, bluntly put forward that '...from any standpoint other than that of police control, Haussmann's Paris is a city built by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing' (Sadler, 1998, p. 16).

The situationists could barely institutionalise themselves, without destroying something of their potency. The first edition of *Internationale Situationniste* even denied its own labelling when it said 'There is no such thing as Situationism, which would mean a doctrine of existing facts', and 'The notion of Situationism is obviously devised by antisituationists' (Sadler, 1998, p. 3). Despite the impossibility of avoiding some form of institutionalisation, Florida would still have to destroy an important attitude if he attempted to re-package situationism for the urban establishment that has become his audience. Yet this kind of resistance is important, even economically necessary, for the contemporary city. He acknowledges, in his polite language that, 'Creative work in fact is often downright *subversive*, since it disrupts existing patterns of thought and life. It can feel subversive and unsettling even to the creator' (Florida, 2002, p. 31).

This imaginary dialogue between Florida and the situationists opens up an important paradox. Florida argues convincingly that the Creative Class is fundamental to contemporary capitalism, but also that the same Creative Class must resist capitalism. Florida himself refers to this paradox when he cites Joseph Schumpeter arguing ‘the “perennial gale of creative destruction” was the very essence of capitalism’ (2002, p.31). Berthold Brecht explained it more vividly when he wrote, ‘Capitalism has the power instantly and continuously to transform into a drug the very venom that is spit in its face, and to revel in it’ (Brecht, 1967, p. 593).

This paper is not a campaign for the simple application of situationist theory to the contemporary city on Florida’s behalf, it could not be. To maintain its potency, situationist thinking must remain farther out of view than Florida’s well publicised campaign trail. Situationist theory described the city more like a Creative Class-room, than the home of a ruling creative demographic: a place for play, but also for playing up. Situationists necessarily worked in the blind spots of culture. Members of Florida’s Creative Class apparently work in these blind spots too. They are attracted to what culture has not yet delivered, not yet discovered. They find gaps in culture and business. If we take Florida seriously, then these gaps form the nerve centre of culture and the economy, and it is here where Florida and the situationists meet. The reactor that keeps our constructed world boiling is, in a sense, a blind spot. This paper peers into one of these blind spots looking for situationist thinking; a logic that has leaked between the cracks. It is the cracks in culture and the economy that, paradoxically, provide strength.

Paradox two: bach city



*Figure 2: Motuketekete.
(Photography: Marti Friedlander, Brownson, 2001, p. 142)*

The typology of the modest New Zealand holiday house, called the bach, began its life as a way to avoid the city, avoid work-life and even, for many men, avoid the family. Indeed, it was a place to avoid much of what New Zealand culture was seen to be, and instead indulge in a supposedly uncultured landscape. The mythical New Zealand bach, now remembered mostly in its 1950s and 1960s version, occupied the cracks. Not just cracks in the landscape, which they often occupied too, but cracks in the economy, social hierarchy and law of the land. But in another paradox, the myth has become a crucial component of New Zealand society. It is not only a component of the coastal landscape, but also a significant component of the economy, social hierarchies and, indeed, the law of the land. The bach became a place that symbolised the liberties, explorations and earthiness of life in a land of the great outdoors. Yet it may also become an emblem for the successful city as a key component in cities for the Creative Class. Bach dwellers may have been rushing from the city, only to find themselves at its conceptual centre.

Paul Walker introduced the bach to Australian audiences like this,

The 'noun' bach (sounds like 'batch')... denotes a small, usually rather informal, habitation located near the kinds of places people like to spend their spare time: harbour and ocean beaches, the banks of lakes and rivers, and so on. It is the equivalent of the Australian 'weekender', but with an extra degree of picturesque dishevelment... Baches are... often considered by New Zealanders to embody principles of egalitarianism: having shed the inhibitions, formalities, and status distinctions of everyday life – and much of the clothing – everyone is the same at the beach/bach... Made from inexpensively acquired materials, often put up on pieces of land to which the builders had no clear title, baches were constructed outside of the usual economic determinations of the built environment (Walker, 2001, p. 44).

Bach culture was, at least mythically, a non-hierarchical liberation that existed outside of routine urban life. The bach was not watched with the same institutional eyes that watched other parts of culture. Bach dwellers stepped out of the roles defined by their professional lives and met fellow enthusiasts of coastal leisure. Their baches were jerry-built on crown land, out of government view and invisible to the economy. They occupied the blind spots. This concurs with a popular version of the same story in which baches were something to 'Build... yourself on land you don't own, out of things you've pinched' (Wilson, 2004, p. 23). Baches were built in the cracks of a tight New Zealand society. These cracks provided a place to drift, literally and mentally: people drifted in and out of their own identities, days drifted from one to the next, interiors drifted outside, and sand drifted back in. People drifted

between baches to sample the ambience. Bach dwellers were liberated from a bureaucracy who had largely handed over public control. Even for bach dwellers with the means to build professionally it was a place to Do-It-Yourself: a culture of anti-design.

The bach was in many ways, anti-urban. Yet at the same time, many of the habits and values at the bach correspond with both situationist and Creative Class views of urban life. The bach is paradoxically an escape from urban culture and the very essence of urbanity; bach dwellers are a virtual opposition to the situationists, but also their kindred spirit.

Without too much imagination we can see Guy Debord in a coastal *drift* drafting his late submission of a French colonial map of New Zealand's South Island. Indeed the last bach building boom, in the 1950s, coincided with the founding of Situationist International. Situationist International might well have begun on golden sand under an old Pohutakawa tree; such was their disillusionment with work in the city. In fact,

In July 1957 eight delegates, 'in a state of semi-drunkenness', met in a remote bar in Italy... The benign professionalism of architecture and design had, in their opinion, led to a sterilization of the world that threatened to wipe out any sense of spontaneity or playfulness (Sadler, 1998, p. 5).

Situationists engaged in their environment much like their bach dwelling cousins. They both objected to the modernist city, they both took the built environment into their own hands, they both were sympathetic to common people, and they both took their play seriously. Perhaps more importantly, situationists and bach dwellers were both battling for mental health and the creative spirit from the underbelly of culture. In this, they unwittingly shared the construction of a theoretical platform for the contemporary city.

Simon Sadler's book, *The Situationist City*, reports on this theoretical platform. There is no suggestion of the great outdoors in his book, but Sadler's account helps us understand the bach as the site of some important attitudes. This is not to suggest that all attitudes at the bach are noteworthy, and they are by no means exemplary, but simply some attitudes are important, and they are more important to the city than is commonly recognised. Sadler focuses on ideas that emerged in their newsletter, *Potlach*, during the early years of Situationist International: '*derive*' (drift), '*psychogeographie*' (psychogeography), '*detournement*' (diversion), '*situations*' (situations), and '*urbanisme unitaire*' (unitary urbanism) (Sadler, 1998, p. 11). Elements of the bach come into focus when we read them through these lenses.

Drift

Think of the bach dweller drifting in the landscape, only not so aimless in his wandering. Think of the bach dwellers as drifters: skirting amongst the shadows, hunting the new. Think of them telling stories, drawing maps, revealing unexplored territory for the first time. Think of them all revelling in the 'flip side of modernisation'. 'The drift', Debord explained, 'entailed the sort of "playful-constructive behaviour" that had always distinguished situationist activities from mere pastimes' (Sadler, 1998, p. 81).

Think of the bach dweller's activities. Fishing, reading, writing, painting, and walking are pastimes, but they are often more than that too. Think of Bob Jones' famous right hook delivered to the over zealous journalist who interrupted his day fishing in Turangi during the lead up to the 1984 New Zealand general elections. Didn't that blow come as much for fishing as it did for politics? There is a sense that these pursuits were not *merely* pastimes. Drifting at the bach was important, and the practice of drifting that was so fundamental to the situationist city is in the bach dweller's blood. Think of that blood running through the city, seeping through the cracks. Drifting is symptomatic of a lack of capitalist productivity, it is drifting despite the modern city yet it is equally vital to it.

Pyschogeography

Ask the bach dweller for a map. Not a chart of ocean depths or walking tracks of which they will likely have drawers full, but their own map. A map of the best fishing spots, the best camping spots, or the strongest northwest wind. Ask for the story of that headland, how it changed, when it changed, who changed it and who it changed. Ask for a pyschogeography of the great outdoors. For the situationists, pyschogeography was, in a sense, a method of exploration through drifting. It resulted in maps of the city organised not by circulation paths but by ambience. It was a form of geography that included what Debord describes as 'active observation' and the 'development of hypotheses' (Sadler, 1998, p. 81). But it was also a form of escape. 'From the outset pyschogeography was regarded as a sort of therapy, a fetishization of those parts of the city that could still rescue drifters from the clutches of functionalism, exciting the senses and the body' (Sadler, 1998, p. 80).

It was a fetishization of the cracks. Life at the bach was also a kind of therapy through escape, or rescue, from the city. It was about local knowledge: a form of pyschogeography. And life at the bach was perhaps the ultimate venue for daydreaming and speculation, the central tenet of Florida's capitalism in the new city.

Detournement

Look at the bach itself, and look for the origins of its walls, its roof, and its furniture. The Do-It-Yourself culture that produced the bach aesthetic was also a pillar of situationist strategy. The idea of '*detournement*', or 'diversion', aligns with baching strategies of re-employing discarded structures out of their original context. Farms and cities alike had their stockpiles depleted by enthusiastic bach builders. Is this far from the situationist dream? Sadler (1998) writes,

Detournement would provide a stockpile of aesthetic elements from which anyone wishing to contribute to the revolutionary city could freely borrow. Once the drift had identified choice features of the existing environment, they could be freely diverted for situationist use (p. 110).

It does not seem far from here to, 'build[ing]... yourself on land you don't own, out of things you've pinched'. The use of vinyl flooring on kitchen bench tops, a kitset garage, or a redundant tram as the bach's structural core, was as obvious to the bach dweller as it is to Florida's Creative Class. It skirts the edges of the economy, but it was clear free trade, utterly urban. It was common situationist sense.

Constructed situation

Think of the bach as a total work of art. According to Sadler (1998), the constructed situation is best thought of in this way too. 'Each constructed situation would provide a décor and ambience of such power that it would stimulate new sorts of behaviour, a glimpse into an improved future social life based upon human encounter and play' (p. 105).

The point of a constructed situation is not too far from the whole point of the bach itself. The bach was a constructed situation with the intention to alter behaviour and stimulate one's sense of play. Bach dwellers enjoyed the décor and ambience of the *detourned* and natural environment because it did encourage different behaviour. Like the constructed situation, life at the bach was a temporary suspension of urban life; it framed an event waiting to happen. These events are cultural fuel for Florida's Creative Class.

Unitary urbanism

Imagine the bach dweller in context. Sadler (1998) explains that 'situationist unitary urbanism was a vision of the unification of space and architecture with the social [and individual] body' (p. 118). It was a merging of social, architectural and environmental space, or a compounding of one into the other. Baches were often sited with an enthusiasm for this kind of conflation,

even if the means to achieve it were relatively crude and the results not always successful. Imagine the bach dwellers, half outside, half inside in the great outdoors. Imagine their stories. Imagine them as a group. With everybody on a level playing field, if you will, it was expected that bach dwellers would share bedrooms, if not beds, and everybody was expected to participate in the maintenance and production of household necessities. Imagine the culture of conflation at the bach: a unitary urbanism in the great outdoors.



*Figure 3: Drifting through Lagos.
(Photography: Uche Isichei and Medua Izegebu)*

Postscript: Lagos and the superbach

Bach culture was very much about leaving the city behind, and situationists were obsessed with the city. But the myth of culture at the bach resonates remarkably with the situationists and through them it resonates with the city. While bach and situationist cultures existed at opposite ends of the road to the beach, they have much in common.

Is it an urban version of the bach we see in the Koolhaas-led study on Lagos? Does the bach provide the perfect shelter in the extremely fluid, vaguely anarchic, African city which Koolhaas puts forward as an advanced capitalist metropolis? Koolhaas writes, '...we argue that Lagos represents a developed, extreme, paradigmatic case study of a city at the forefront of globalising modernity. This is not to say that Lagos is catching up with us, but we may be catching up with Lagos' (2001, p. 42).

Perhaps the bach is an emblem for the future? Could Lagos be the ultimate metropolis for bach and situationist culture: a metropolis for an extremely Creative Class? Perhaps, but Uche Isichei cautions that the cracks in Lagos' infrastructure maybe too wide to provide strength. He explains what most people probably assumed, that a 'succession of coups and political mismanagement [has] crippled the economy' (Isichei, 2002, p. 11). The Lagos bach may simply be a symptom of urban failure. Perhaps it is both a monument to the potential, and failure, of the capitalist metropolis?

Likewise, the obsession with bach culture today might signal its failure as much as its success. While elements of bach culture have gone to town, elements of urban culture have gone coastal. There is a general consensus that bach culture in the New Zealand landscape is not what it was. There will be survivors, but they are not the majority. They have become over-crowded and over-exposed. The same bach culture that might have been attractive to anti-capitalist situationists, turns out to be equally attractive to the wealthy classes of late capitalism. Drifting has become big business. Accordingly, baches appear more and more like beached super yachts. While the bach we have mythologised may be endangered, the new *superbach* is booming. It appears elements of the 'soul-crushing and wicked city' that bach dwellers and situationists were ducking, has settled on the coast and in the hills. Interiors of the glass walled *superbach* are self consciously urbane. Hierarchies are clear, status is signposted, work is proudly catered for, and territory is guarded. The fences are up and the security cameras are rolling. The success of the bach brought its own demise. The cracks have all but closed up.

It seems there is currently a curious cross-dressing between urban culture and the old bach culture. Old bach culture, at the beach in particular, has transformed into something more and more like a city of *superbaches* and highways: as if CIAM architects had their way at the beach. At the same time, the fluid, subversive, and explorative culture of the situationists, the mythological bach, and its urban manifestations in the advanced metropolis, may become a key typology of the new city for Florida's Creative Class. Perhaps our understanding of interiors in the land of the great outdoors can offer as much to the contemporary city, as elements of the CIAM-born modern city have already offered the *superbach*?

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