

Arcade Mystics

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by Min Straussman

When I think about Walter Benjamin, I like to think about him in Paris. I like to think about Walter Benjamin going out to meet the guy he buys hash from in a café. He is always awkward when buying drugs, I imagine. He sits nervously at the café, waiting for the ugly, lanky 20-something man who will get there when he gets there, sidling up to Benjamin's table with with a street cat gait. I like to think about Walter Benjamin having three cups of espresso while he waits and later regretting it. I like to think about Walter Benjamin in his Paris apartment. I like to think about Walter Benjamin smoking hash in his small Paris apartment, on the couch or maybe on the floor, surrounded by books and scraps of paper, entirely alone. While he lays there, stoned, exhausted, melancholy, Walter Benjamin thinks about what he saw in the few blocks between his apartment and the café. In his mind, he tallies it all up: the rumbling motorized vehicles, the placid face of the waiter at the café, the inscriptions on the francs he left on the table to pay for the three espressos, the Haussmannian streetwall looming over him, a harbinger of things to

come. I like to think about Walter Benjamin replaying the interaction with the hash dealer over again in his head. Should he have said hello more politely? Did he seem too eager? Would the man take his call again? I like to think about Walter Benjamin falling asleep on the couch, or the floor, as the questions dribble out of his ears.

It may be that we have become so feckless as a people that we no longer care how things do work, but only what kind of quick, easy outer impression they give. If so, there is little hope for our cities or probably for much else in our society. But I do not think this is so. – Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of American Cities*, pg. 8

The built environment does not exist in contrast with nature as such but is *of* nature, part of it. Just as birds build their nests, rabbits their warrens, bees their hives, and so on, humans build cities. Is a nest a reflection of the ideology of birds? Does it say something about their foundational psyche as creatures? Does the seagull who chooses to build its nest out of anti-bird spikes have a perspective that is somehow unique from the seagull that builds out of conventional materials? No, surely not, you say, it is

only responding to its environment, which has provided it with anti-bird spikes. And, yes, I agree, but consider this: not all seagulls given anti-bird spikes will use them in their nests. What drives creatures to build and in what way is both singular and collective. It is a cybernetic relationship creating a feedback loop. The seagull with the spiky nest is inverting the hostile environment back in on itself, creating an environment hostile to others in turn. And so, Paris.