

# Cityspeak!

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# CITYSPEAK!

## Markus Jung

Metaphor for cities with future.

Cityspeak is a fictional language spoken by the denizens in the movie 'Blade Runner' by Ridley Scott in 1982. It is composed of a Babylonian mix of languages introduced by citizens of foreign descent, and forms an integrative part of the rich and diverse society described in the narrative of the 'Blade Runner'. Along with the multiplicity of languages, the movie illustrates moments and elements of spatial representation important to cities with future. Filmed in the context of downtown LA, this fictive city compresses a colourful collage of foreign signage and iconography into a dense urban vision...

As a metaphor, this language relates very strongly to the reality of certain contemporary cities, of which Melbourne is an exemplar; a city set apart in the Australian context. Melbourne is a city that is rich in its historic layerings, from its early beginnings in harsh colonial times, through periods of great wealth brought about by the gold rush and agriculture, to its dramatic population expansion due to its immigration intake, which has created its current cosmopolitan condition. The city's urban planning has allowed for a looseness of form and occupation, developing Melbourne into a rich field of urban growth.



**MELBOURNE 1938**  
Louise Forthun, 2008, oil on linen, 197 x 231cm  
© Courtesy Block Projects Gallery Melbourne.

In contrast, most European cities have grown organically and are thus site-specific. Despite their initial flexible way of growth, their built form appears to be less transformable or adaptable to integrate the current challenges of the contemporary city.

The comparison of Cityspeak and Melbourne enables an understanding of the city as an open system. By allowing the interaction and input of the individual, an open city creates diversity and richness and provokes encounters and contact. Ideas and innovation arise from the intelligent use of collective knowledge and human capital. Open systems are in essence in constant evolution, and in doing so stay interesting and fresh.

#### ‹STREET SLANG›

##### CITYSPEAK: THE STREET LANGUAGE OF THE DENIZENS.

In the movie, the first person to use Cityspeak is Detective Gaff (Edward James Olmos), when he first accosts Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford). The gibberish he utters is gutter talk, a mishmash of Japanese, Spanish and German ...

Cityspeak is first and foremost street lingo. The language is necessitated by people of different origins for the pure sake of understanding each other – originally for trade and the basic needs of life. Specifically in Melbourne, the streets are the primary spaces for informal social encounters, exchanges and activities. Due to its linearity and narrowness, Melbourne's street network forms the crossroads for all citizens and their natural territory of interaction.

#### ‹BABYLONIAN MIX›

##### CITYSPEAK: A MELTING POT OF DIFFERENT CULTURAL INFLUENCES.

Edward James Olmos devised the fictional idiom Cityspeak used in the film while doing background research for his character Gaff. He exploited his diverse ethnic background, incorporating bits of Hungarian, Chinese, French and Korean.

Similarly, Melbourne's streets host ›door by door‹ a colourful collection of shops, small businesses and restaurants of different international origins, creating a blend of identity as well as forming an extensive urban mix. Side by side, vendors and restaurants express their owners' individualities and backgrounds, creating the most diverse





**INCANDESCENT**  
Louise Forthun, 2011, oil on linen, 190 x 107cm  
© Courtesy Block Projects Gallery Melbourne.

street atmospheres. Simultaneously, the exchange of experiences leads to a fusion of ideas and cosmopolitan understanding. Melbourne's relatively short urban history allows immigrants to shape the entire culture of the place in a much faster and more significant way than cities in Europe, which are built on a foundation of thousands of years of slowly changing urban culture.

#### «OPEN + DYNAMIC SYSTEMS»

**CITYSPEAK: ENABLES KNOWLEDGE SHARING.**

Edward James Olmos integrates the best and most interesting trans-lingual expressions to create Cityspeak. Over the course of the movie, new characters adopt Cityspeak and successively transform the street slang by constructing fresh idioms of their own. Cityspeak thus evolves dynamically; successful expressions develop while others are replaced or superseded.

In contrast to traditional European cities, where public life unfolds via the interplay of streets and squares in a more formal and structured way, Melbourne is a street city. The Central Business District (CBD) as well as later extensions is based on the Hoddle grid, laid out in 1837. Originally it was 1.6 km long by 0.8 km wide and was

structured by 24 square blocks of 201 metres each. These blocks were further broken down into 20 allotments. Since their establishment, the city blocks have been adapted and transformed several times but have kept their historical readability. In order to provide services, light and ventilation to the individual buildings, a fine network of laneways was incorporated at the rear of the blocks, thus complementing the representative main streets. Having partially lost their original purpose as servicing lanes, this hidden system was abandoned and forgotten for quite some time. It was not until the 1980s that young «creatives» rediscovered and appropriated these forgotten spaces. Thereafter the local council policy played a decisive role by allowing grass root activities to grow at the core of the established fabric. By the implementation of informal programmes, the «creatives» transformed this system into a lively network of creativity and innovation; soon the city opened up and attracted a wider public. From this outcome, the local planning authorities recognized the huge potential to project the city into the future. For instance, from the beginning of the 1990s, the laneways have inspired and become an integral part of a greater city vision: The Pedestrian City.



Nowadays, the grid hosts a typology of different streets, from main streets and laneways to passages and arcades. These linear spaces are Melbourne's lively and dynamic 'market places'. Spaces of commercial activity, innovation and creation exist side by side with adjacent hidden pockets that unveil surprising activities.

Successful urban centres such as Melbourne evolve in the same integrative, bottom up way. Their openness allows for the creative individual to influence public life. Shops lining the streets shape their image; new cultures and populations add depth to the rich palette. Successful elements get integrated into a mainstream yet heterogeneous culture. These innovations challenge neighbours to come up with new ideas themselves. As a result, the streetscapes are in constant evolution at a rate that is impossible to imagine in more historical, rooted cities, thus dynamically challenging the established collective knowledge. In Melbourne, the grid together with the associated building type of the loft is encouraging for flexibility. The vibrant pedestrian streetscapes mirror the citizens' multiculturalism and their interest in integrating newcomers, while a natural selection of the best ideas takes place. The city becomes a laboratory for ideas, a model for testing the human capital of each.

#### «THE URBANITE»

##### CITYSPEAK: LANGUAGE OF THE PEDESTRIAN.

In the 'Blade Runner' world, the flâneur Gaff accosts Rick Deckard at a noodle bar off the street. The noodle bar represents the space of unlikely encounters par excellence. Detective Gaff is an active flâneur, engaging strongly with the city in a way never imagined by Walter Benjamin in his unfinished 'Passagenwerk'.

**Benjamin's flâneur, as the free-spirited dandy or aristocrat, was absolved from the necessity of work. His meandering strolling was an act of pure amusement to kill time and emphasised his status in public life. As a pure observer of the modern city, he remained detached and isolated.**

By contrast, today's flâneur is goal orientated and purposeful. As a creative urbanite, 'he' strolls to seek inspiration and ideas, which feed into 'his' creative process. 'His' observations, snapshots, conversations, snippets and bar sketches morph into articles, blogs, films, narratives and projects that inform 'his' work in multiple ways. The flânerie, with smart phones and laptops, from café to café, to restaurants and bars, driven by observations and interrupted by encounters and conversations, is one current form of creative process. Smart portable technologies play a key role: similar to the historical coffer, they enable the 'creatives' to carry all their necessary belongings during their daily journeys. For the first time, they are in the position to enjoy public and private life simulta-

neously. As a consequence the flânerie, which was culturally lost for quite some time, is being revived by the contemporary flâneur.

In a new readability, the street system forms the new habitat of the contemporary flâneur. The permeability between private and public defines the street as 'his' hybrid working-living environment. As a pedestrian 'he' works, lives and eats on the street, uses public transport while strongly engaging with the city.

The creative class uses and now understands the city in a way that it becomes a new field of design: an opportunity to re-conquer the street space, which was given up to the cars for so long, and to rethink the public realm by integrating new types of collective spaces for exchange, innovation and recreation. This will consequently challenge the common division of public and private towards greater diversity within cities. Ultimately, there is a need to question the per capita use of private space in order to allow for more compact cities.

In Melbourne, the noodle bar is represented by the open café and shop fronts, which enliven urban street life. As market places they are open to anybody and nourish the exchange of ideas. At the same time, the noodle bar symbolizes the way of life of today's flâneurs in contrast to Benjamin's flâneur. The contemporary flânerie is defined as personal interaction with the city.

#### «PERMEABLE CITY»

##### CITYSPEAK: LANGUAGE OF THE PERMEABLE CITY.

Subsequent to the noodle bar scene, the camera perspective shifts from the haptic street plane into the 3<sup>rd</sup> dimension of the city, revealing an overwhelming panoramic view. The extreme long shot portrays the 'Blade Runner' world as a colourful and rich collage composed of elements of the modern city: elevators climbing skyscrapers, air taxis striping the sky, flickering screens and billboards and distant city lights bathing the scenery from afar into a dense urban vision. Thereby, the billboards and screens are complementary to the Cityspeak street lingo. They form the cities official-visual and universal language of communication. At the same time, together with the dynamic elements of transportation, they visually and physically connect the Cityspeakers with the upper planes of their city.

Melbourne, like the fictional city of the movie, is very much about a vertical city. The city has established multiple planes of spatial communication and public life: streetscape – façadescape – roofscape.

Similar to the 'Blade Runner' world, large and iconographic billboards communicate with the pedestrians from afar. As graphic landmarks on an urban scale, the



billboards not only act as spatial attractors but have also developed into important elements of identification. They naturally form the citizen's collective cultural heritage in such a way that they persist beyond the existence of the companies they advertise for and almost replace the spires of traditional cities. At the same time, they visually extend public life into the 3<sup>rd</sup> dimension, achieving further heterogeneity. From a street perspective, flickering movie screens, cantilevering pools, garden terraces, bar visitors at the rim and music attract the flâneur into the crowns of the city.

These upper decks of the city are of vital importance to the contemporary flâneur and form 'his' second collective habitat after the street. During daytime, in the lively streets, 'he' experiences the direct and close interaction with his environment. At night-time the roofscapes, revealing panoramic views onto the city, trigger the 'creative' to contemplate and recreate. It is here where 'his' daily street experiences and inspirations are being further processed and where 'he' physically regenerates. But it is also where the contemporary flâneur enjoys being a natural part of 'his' urban system.

In Melbourne, the roofs as originally undefined planes are appropriated and occupied. Similar to the evolution of the laneways, they are being transformed from unused to used spaces and made accessible to the public while accommodating formal and informal programmes. This permeability extends public-private life into the city's verticality, resulting in a truly 3-dimensional mixed-use city.

## «FUTURE CITIES»

### CITYSPEAK: LANGUAGE OF ENGAGEMENT.

In the final rooftop scene, the Replicant has to leave the 'Blade Runner' world. His time has expired. He is looking over the beauty of the city and longing for eternal life. His love for the place and desire to become a natural part of that environment overwhelms the Replicant into producing human tears. In the same way as W. Benjamin's flâneur, he cannot be part of that society or urban system. He knows he is unable to engage actively with the city and has to leave.

The contemporary flâneur has evolved into a new category and superseded Benjamin's flâneur at the threshold to modern society: the creative class. The creative class is a recognizable elite that produces economic progress and prosperity and lives in a dynamic field of mutual inspiration. Designers, couturiers, computer-freaks, software producers, architects, musicians, scientists, engineers, poets, analysts, journalists and actors form this heterogeneous class – a colourful coalition that produces new ideas and generates innovation. Knowledge centres and high-tech industries settle around them. It is vital that cities engage and attract this creative class in order to have a

viable and dynamic future. The creative class is the catalyst of the city transformation – from an age of post-industrialism to an age focused on knowledge and resilience.

The city with future, as an open and integrative system, offers the creative class inspiration in a permeable and evolutionary way. New collective spaces form their personal living-working-recreational 'homes' and enable a life which is simultaneously public and private. Within these collective spaces, the 'creatives' are able to engage with others as well as to celebrate their individualities, whilst being a natural part of their environment. Due to the compactness of the city, they take advantage of the proximity; they enjoy the active flânerie, which is indispensable for their renewal, as well as pure observation and contemplation – all at the same time.

## SOME THOUGHTS

Thinking about architecture not as a functionally determined but as an open structure, allowing for change and transformability over time, will be essential to secure cities a prosperous future. Diversity implies different understandings of life, styles, habits, and expectations, which in turn imply that architecture has to provide for a diversity of spaces and at the same time for robust but flexible structures. These structures need to be permeable and allow for visual and eventually physical extensions onto the street. Niches and transitional spaces can additionally allow for pioneering activities, dynamic or seasonal programmes, and temporary appropriation of public spaces, further enriching public life.

Architecture has to foster spaces for exchanges and encounters to happen; this is essential to urban life and creative exchange and shapes new cosmopolitan knowledge. Connectivity at street level and penetrating vertical and horizontal public spaces are the keys to accessing the multiple layers of urbanity and creating a biotope where a diverse field of urbanity can grow. Understanding the roof as a second public plane of the heterogeneous city, architecture has to provide the possibility of access and to understand verticality as a potential for challenging the divide between the public and private realms.

Cityspeak as a metaphor also shows the potential of re-reading the city and architecture as a language, communicating both from close to afar. The different grains and registers address the pedestrian or the flâneur, the main actors of the city, from different perspectives, providing inspirational forms and settings for activities to take place. To be attractive, architecture has to communicate and be permeable at all scales of urban interaction.





**BRIGHT LIGHT**  
 Louise Forthun, 2011, oil on linen, 1229 x 534cm  
 © Courtesy Block Projects Gallery Melbourne.

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