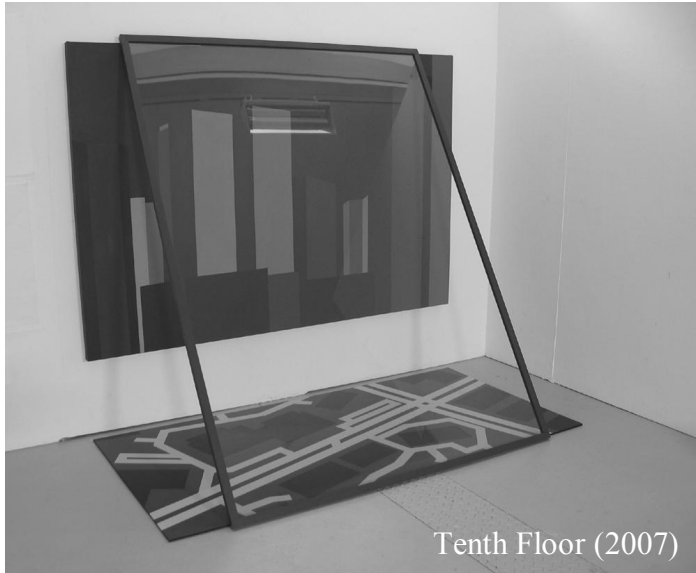


THE CITY AS OEUVRE

Agnieszka Mlicka

How can *one* individual believe to be able to describe the city as a totality?

My work '*Tenth Floor*' tries to capture the two opposite experiences of the city: from the viewpoint of the citizen and the urban planner. By creating a window through which you can

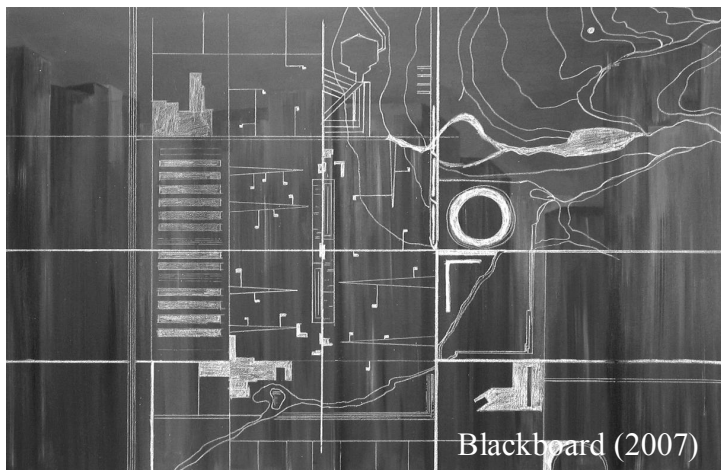


look out onto other blocks of flats, I tried to evoke the feeling of isolation and separateness one has when living 'in the air'. Such urban planning, as I experienced first hand from living in Warsaw, has been influenced by ideas of Le Corbusier. He and his fellow early 20th century planners (e.g. Ebenezer Howard and Frank Lloyd Wright) all believed themselves to be the natural leader of society, someone who can look into the future and embody society's desires. This is the individual who looks at the city with the eyes of God – in my work literally from above, but metaphorically distanced through

'knowledge' of the urban environment – and is convinced of his infallibility.

The reason Le Corbusier's plans are nowadays called utopian is that one person cannot change physical, social and mental space at once, especially not through architecture. The critique of totalitarian plans came from many directions, but most interesting here are the ideas of Henri Lefebvre and Jane Jacobs from the 60s and 70s. Lefebvre understood the city as 'oeuvre', a spatial and social product of human relationships. In his unitary theory of space, he tries to describe the city as a totality rather than just through one single science as was the case with urban planners. I believe that Jacobs's attempt at explaining the city in its full diversity is much more successful. Whereas Lefebvre is a philosopher and still relies on other sciences, Jacobs has no academic background and writes a truthful observation from the perspective of the citizen.

In the work '*Blackboard*' I have contrasted the real with the ideal view of the city. The painted



layer is a view onto the urban scene – the grey and dull highrises in the metropolis -, the second layer is a drawing of Wright's utopian plan of Broadacre City. Wright argued that the city should be decentralized and every family should receive one acre of land. The contrast between reality and imagination is emphasized by the depth of the painting and the flatness – like on a blackboard – of the architectural plan.

My current MA research focuses on such architectural drawings, and I

question how far they still relate to the reality of the city as described by Lefebvre and Jacobs. The architects of the 70s and 80s tried to encompass this diversity, complexity and disorder in their drawings, resulting in very experimental visionary images: the Walking City, Inflatable City, Plug-In City, The Continuous Monument, Spatial City etc. They imagined the city as an organism, embodying the diversity of city life in megastructures. Nevertheless, they all relied on the same superior architectural order: the grid. The drawings of these megastructures are really fascinating, and although experimental groups like Archigram never aimed at a realisation of their visions, one has to be aware that they share many characteristics with the earlier utopias. Architects have a similar imagination to artists, but they also seem to have a fantasy to control, a need for ordering space. I work in between these two fields, as architect and as artist, between the real and the ideal, struggling with the importance of disorder and the impulse to organise space.

Next to the utopia and the experiment, an architectural drawing can also be read like a text. Such works, made from the 80s and 90s onwards by for instance Daniel Libeskind, contribute to research in the theoretical field of architecture. Libeskind uses geometrical elements to create complex structures unidentifiable as functional architecture. Just like in linguistic theory, he searches for the limits of culture by creating unlimited arrangements with a fixed amount of elements. Perhaps this is then the only way of approaching the city; as a system of diverse elements in all possible relationships. I believe that artists, with a more varied visual language than architects, are even more able to describe the city.

Rests the question whether I, as *one* individual, will achieve a visual description of the city as oeuvre... You can follow my progress on my website www.AgnieszkaMlicka.com.