



MICHAEL SORKIN.

‘I THINK I’M
REASONABLY
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IF HE SEES SOMETHING THAT IRRITATES HIM, MICHAEL SORKIN HAS TO RESPOND. THE RESULT? A STACK OF BOOKS ON ARCHITECTURE.

Text Katya Tylevich / Photos Jeff Barnett-Winsby

In mental preparation for this interview, I envision myself ducking to avoid a verbal Molotov cocktail. I've been to architect Michael Sorkin's lectures. I've read his books and articles. I know this is a man who says 'major and minor axes' in the same breath as 'shitty beaux-arts apparatus' and totally gets away with it (see Sorkin's less-than-flattering review of Michael Graves's addition to the Whitney Museum, 1985). Or, or – here's one – Sorkin's version of what must have transpired at a hush-hush, invite-only conference in 1986, organized by Peter Eisenman and Philip Johnson. I quote from Sorkin's essay, 'A Bunch of White Guys (and Three Japanese) Sitting Around Talking'. Ahem:

Philip: Here's a new building that should make a buck.

The others: It's ugly as sin!

Philip: I don't give a fuck!

The above are examples from Sorkin's decade-long stint as the explosive, devastatingly funny architecture critic for New York City's left-leaning weekly *The Village Voice*. Sorkin's 1994 collection of articles, *Exquisite Corpse*, was his final bow from the paper, but not from writing – and certainly not from rabble-rousing. Since then, he's averaged roughly a book a year, all the while heading his architecture studio in New York City. One part nonprofit, the other for profit, Michael Sorkin Studio is in its 34th year of insisting that cities shape-shift to better fit the people and ecosystems within them. Accordingly, Sorkin's drawings are borderline-psychedelic master plans and colourful grand ideas. One of Sorkin's forthcoming projects, 'New York City (Steady) State', is a fervent how-to for a completely self-sufficient NYC. Ah, New York, never far from Sorkin's heart, though he travels the world constantly. In 2009 he released *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan*, a literary rubbernecking of the political, sociological and architectural views en route from his fifth-floor apartment in West Village to his office in TriBeCa. In the text, Sorkin plays the role of Sorkin: fiery, opinionated, always fighting the good fight, whether against his landlord or *The Man*. Sorkin says the intention for *Twenty Minutes* was a 'more popular' book. When I meet Sorkin at his studio in New York, I ask about his 'popularity'. Which is to say, we dish about what writing's done to Sorkin's social life.

At the airport, I saw a review for *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan* in a fashion magazine and had to do a double take. Is that the point?

Writing that book, I hoped the audience could extend beyond architects. I didn't think Sarah Palin was going to be interested, but maybe the average *New York Review of Books* reader.

Success?

Who knows? I don't look back. It creeps me out to revisit work that's already been published. All I see are the infelicities, errors and bad arguments.

You don't read Sorkin?

Not unless I have to. Occasionally, I dip in to see how bad it is.

To write a book that extends beyond architects, did you have to soften up as a critic?

No, but I went to greater lengths explaining who people were and expanding on slightly technical stuff. I began my journalistic career at *The Village Voice*, where the intention was always to agitate. Popular agitation: I think I'm reasonably successful at that. But actually, I don't think I have to argue too persuasively to attract an audience. Everybody in New York is interested in architecture in one form or another – whether you call it real estate, building or high design. We're all up against our environments.

You're not just writing for New Yorkers, though.

Twenty Minutes is very much informed by my environment – in that sense it's New York-centric – but it addresses global issues. One of the things the book is about – and certainly

'I BUILT A CAREER OUT OF CALLING PHILIP JOHNSON A NAZI'

something my practice is about – is looking for sources of locality and particularity in environments that are increasingly hostile to the idea, and where all cultural authenticity is being destroyed. Starbucks on every corner!

We're doing a lot of work in China now, where they're maniacally trying to reproduce the worst parts of what we've already done. So I feel like the guilty colonial saying, 'It's not necessary to pass through the automobile stage in order to reach the nirvana of pedestrianism.' In the last couple years, China has really begun to talk the talk about green urbanism; whether they're going to walk the walk is not yet clear. But we're competing for a project to do an eco city – you don't see too many of those in the United States. And there's nobody like a Communist to make a great capitalist. They've already become the largest producers of wind-mills and photovoltaics – and soon electric cars. Something's happening over there.

How does your work translate in China?

We're doing okay. The system is strange, but we've won a few competitions.

I mean, literally, how do your books and lectures translate? Your clever use of language seems impossible to 'dub over'.

[Laughs.] I think one of the reasons we're doing so much work in China is that I'm known over there via images, not words. So all the nasty things I said about my colleagues in New York don't impact my career over there. Whereas here, there's still a certain amount of rancour in the old generation.

Right. How do you get on with those colleagues?

Eh, well, you know at this point I get along with everybody. Almost everybody.

Almost everybody.

Almost everybody. Charlie Gwathmey [modernist architect and one of The New York Five] didn't talk to me for years. But one doesn't speak ill of the dead. My side of the story is that a lot of people in my generation were political, and we were creeped out by white-guy developer sluts and their less-than-admirable values: I built a career out of calling Philip Johnson a Nazi. We never kissed and made up. [Pauses.] But the older I get the more – shall we say – flexible I get.

That's not a word I expected from you. What do you mean?

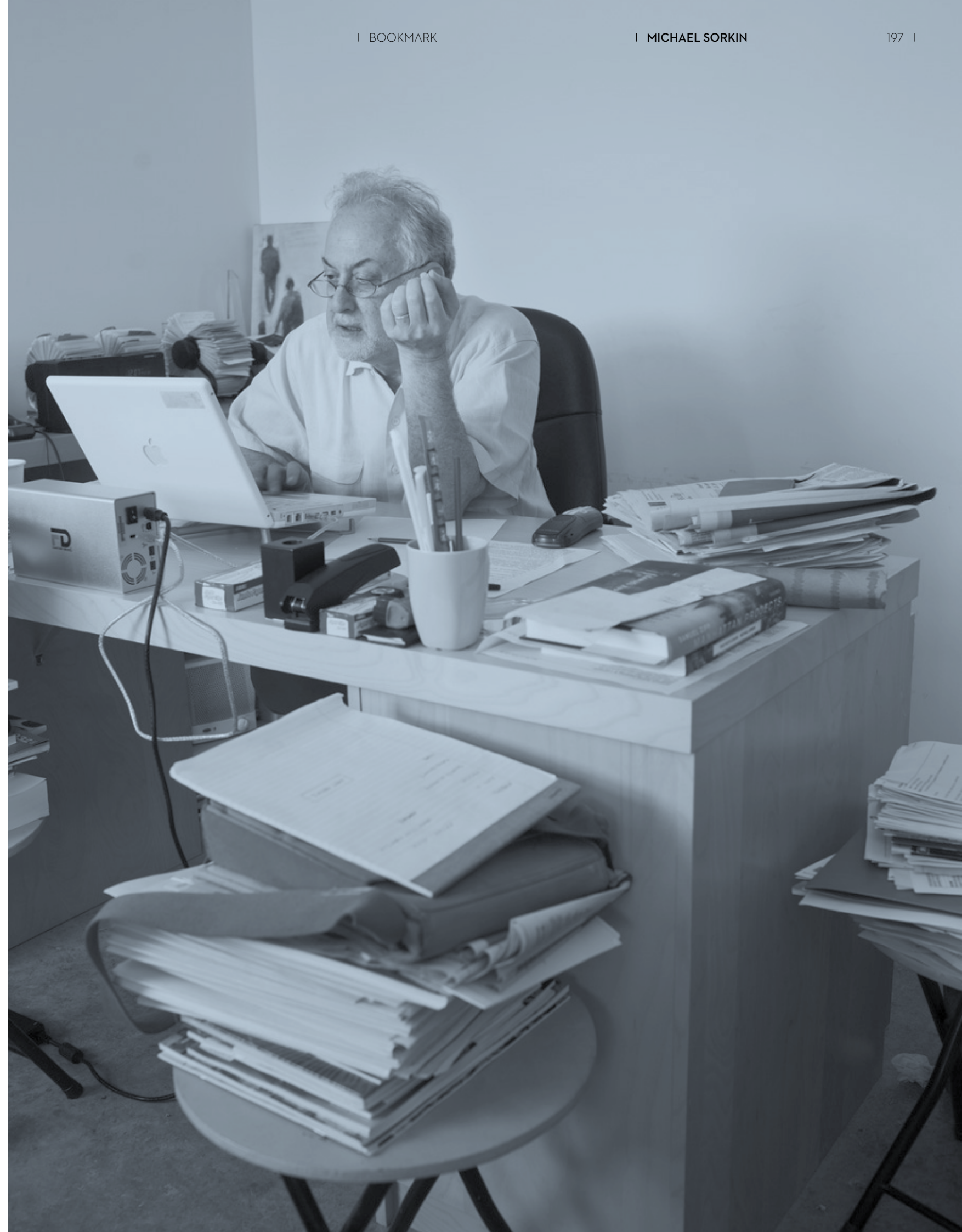
I have to deal with clients! We just won a competition for 4500 housing units, and there was one totally transformational stipulation on the part of the client, which was that every single unit had to face south. You know, trying to avoid being Ludwig Hilberseimer [German architect with Bauhaus roots] *and* meeting such a requirement is tough. I think we did pretty well, but it's not the project we would have done if we'd written the rules. Similarly, we had another project where they said nobody would accept a view to the north, leaving us three sides to work with.

Are your books a way to realize projects without restrictions?

I certainly don't think writing about a project is realizing it. The more interesting question is whether *drawing* a project is the same as realizing it, and certainly there were a lot of architects of my generation who thought so. Me among them, for a while. But the frustrations of simply drawing wore thin for me. Being the '60s' person that I am, when I graduated from architecture school I thought: the system is too corrupt to sully myself. I lost a lot of time trying to keep myself too pristine.

What's the word? 'Uncompromising'?

Yeah, well, I mean ... [Laughs.] Uncompromising! Some principles are worth defending, others less so. I think in the past I conflated some important principles with some less important ones. I mean to be principled. I'm definitely a man of the left, and the political implications of everything you do are never far away. I hope never to design a prison, for example, or a nuclear power plant, or even an apartment that's too small to live in. But that's an old modernist chestnut, isn't it? »





A dozen books that Michael Sorkin finds important for students of urbanism to read

Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982)

A moving meditation on modernity and on New York that bridges the political, the personal, and the spatial.

Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983)

A succinct and critical telling of the origin tale of modernist urbanism.

Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974)

Indispensable for understanding the labyrinths of power that have shaped New York and a novelistic portrayal of a mighty monster.

Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996)

A foundational text in the description of the re-casting of global society by the exponential rise of ever-denser networks of virtual and physical flows.

William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1991)

Describing the growth of Chicago, Cronon has written a remarkable description of the city's extended economic, social, and environmental ecologies, redefining what it means to write urban history.

Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990)

The best book ever written about Los Angeles and a wild ride through the forces, sinister and delirious, that produced it.

Do you think of yourself as an architect who writes, or as a writer who practices architecture?

Not an interesting distinction. I spent my youth thinking that everybody had a genetic predisposition to a very specific métier, and that it would be revealed eventually. The problem was that my fantasy métier was rather conventional. 'I will be a fireman' or 'I will be a farmer' or 'a writer'. Well, it turns out there are all kinds of composite métiers, and that's where I find myself. If I could give up anything, at this point I would give up teaching. I've been doing it for 30 years, and life is short. Though I have a wonderful academic situation, as good as it could possibly be in a lot of ways – and God knows neither my for-profit nor my nonprofit office is making any money. Despite Obama, I still need to pay for my health insurance, collect my measly pension and get social security.

In an old interview, you called the stack of books you've written an emblem of your frustrations in architecture.

Sure. Architecture is collaborative, both in the creation of plans and in the execution of the project. Certainly a book is something much easier to manage in a room by myself. I have a certain amount of energy; if I can't spend it in one place, I spend it someplace else. But I've always been writing, I've always been designing and I've always been teaching. I also travel too much, eat too much and drink too much.

In your intro to *Exquisite Corpse*, you formally bid adieu to writing to focus on your studio work.

Yeah, right. I just finished my third collection of essays. That adieu didn't quite work out.

Is it because you can't let go of writing?

In part because I can't let go. Actually, in large part because I can't let go. If I see something that fascinates me or irritates me, I want to respond.

Do you quarrel with editors?

I don't have many problems with progressive presses. When I write a piece, even if the first publication rejects it, I have enough presence to eventually see it somewhere.

And as an editor of your own writing, have you changed with time?

David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1973)

Harvey is our most important geographer and bearer of the Marxian analytic tradition, author of an amazing body of work that brilliantly explores the reciprocity of capital, space and justice.

Michael Hough, *Cities and Natural Process: A Basis for Sustainability* (London: Routledge, 1995)

This unsurpassed work is foundational for thinking about a new kind of city, attuned to the natural environment and invested in its role in planetary sustainability.

I think I've gotten better. My problem is that I write with my eyes closed, and when it doesn't come out well, the writing needs to be reconstructed, which is very tedious. Of course, there are days I think I'm illiterate, and that's a struggle, but the basic principle of writing for me is to be as economical as possible, which is a sort of elegance.

You reference and quote from a variety of literary sources. Obviously you're well versed in architecture and urban design, but also in politics, sociology – even advertising.

I read widely. I had a good liberal education. [Laughs.] Did a philosophy degree, then a degree in English literature before I went to architecture school. So that taught me how to *read*. I read novels, too, I like to read fiction, and I have my hobbyhorses. You know, I can't get enough Hitler! [He switches from one subject to another, without skipping a beat.] I'm writing a book about sustainability now, and ploughing through

‘AS AN URBANIST, LE CORBUSIER IS A FASCIST NIGHTMARE’

a lot of 'sustainability' literature, much of which is turgid. At the moment I'm reading many books about waste, because I'm trying to write the chapter on waste. Before that I was reading books about food. I try to keep up with urban studies literature, and some general critical theory, but not as conscientiously as I should. My wife is a philosopher, so I figure she's taking care of that for the family. But, like I said, I've got this

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961)

Perhaps the key text of 20th century urbanism, a defense of the neighbourhood and the fine grain of the city, a slashing riposte to top-down, indifferent, styles of 'planning'.

Henri Lefebvre, *La révolution urbaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970); English translation, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003)

Lefebvre stands at the headwaters of a progressive socially-rooted urbanism and his articulation of the idea of a physical and imaginative 'right to the city' is one of

hobbyhorse about the Nazis. That's pornography for me. Getting under the covers with a flashlight and Ian Kershaw [British historian, specializing in the history of the Third Reich], watching the Hitler channel on TV – how great is that?

Well, you do favour modernism because it draws from a wide range of influences.

I think there's a tendency to look at modernism as a single taxonomic branch. You want to know which architects I like? Alvar Aalto, Michel de Klerk, Hans Scharoun, Erich Mendelsohn. I like those slightly wiggier, more plastic, more organic minds. When I was going to architecture school, initially at GSD [Harvard University Graduate School of Design], you could not speak the words 'Frank Lloyd Wright' – who is, of course, the greatest of them all. Everyone was so fixated on Le Corbusier, even though his urbanism was appalling. As a practitioner of the plastic arts, Le Corbusier was great, but as an urbanist he's a fascist nightmare.

Twenty years ago you called the state of architectural journalism 'dismal'. Is that still the case?

It is and it isn't. It's changing a lot; there are some interesting writers out there. I'm not so big on online stuff, but every once in a while I see conversations taking place in real-time, controversies being worked out. When the media was controlled by a few magazines – that was not such a happy time. Not enough variety, and much of it was just a higher form of advertising. There were definitely not enough interesting critical voices. Indeed, the major magazines are still not very interesting. It's amazing that in this giant, rich country we can produce only two monthly architecture magazines.

So to make up for it you publish a book a year?

The closer you get to the grave, the more incitement there is to get this stuff out. I want to leave *something* physical behind. I'm not building enough buildings, so . . .

Are you saying writing is a way to make yourself immortal?

Uh, well, not just immortal but *palpable*. You know, you can pile up books to change a light bulb. [Pauses.] Yeah, sure, it's all about immortality. «

the most consequential concepts at our disposal.

Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960)

A small but powerful book that describes how each of us internally invents a version of the city in which we live and move, locating a kind of urban unconscious.

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973)

Writing with literary grace and intensity, Williams interrogates the old chestnut of a strong dichotomy between the urban and the rural and shows the ways in which they mutually invent each other.