

ASYLUM

There was only a thin wall separating the cell from the world outside. Through a narrow opening between the boards I could glimpse the busy streets, people hurrying past Slussen. I heard the sounds of their footsteps on the sidewalk, fragments of conversations and the noise of cars and busses. From this hideaway I felt like an untouchable observer.

All the necessities for survival were available in there: a place to sleep, a small supply of food and a few old photographs on one of the walls (which documented the construction of Slussen's tunnels) and an ingenious, handmade lock construction which secured the door. If the unthinkable happened, there was an escape route down a collapsible ladder that lead to the underground spaces and pathways. Down there, a fantastic geography stretched out below, ready to be discovered.

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From up here, nothing of Argia can be seen; some say, "It's down below there", and we can only believe them. The place is deserted. At night, putting your ear to the ground, you can sometimes hear a door slam.

Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities

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*- I'm talking about the one in the other cave, after the little red door. Because that door is open.
- What's this temple you're talking about?? And more importantly, where is it??*

<http://www.flashback.info/archive/index.php?t-83942.html>

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The exposed city above stands in daylight or the light of neon signs, carefully organized, traversed by a constant stream of people. Beneath it, an underground world spreads out like the city's suppressed subconscious. Through the labyrinth-like tunnels, rooms and passages, all the things which serve the city in secret are in operation: sewers, telecommunications, internet cables, electricity lines, gas, water and subway tracks. They are the guts, the intestines of the city. No one person has all the maps. Here and there in the city are manholes in the street for access down into this underground parallel world. Beneath the streets you can find remarkable caves and spaces as bewildering as Piranesi's prison fantasies—or closed doors and dead ends. An expansive cataract of tunnels and canals for rain-water unfolds down there.

To explore this system, Adam has built a canoe from simple materials; collapsible so that it fits in a bag, and no bigger than a manhole.

The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre called the city's uncharted and unclaimed places "representational space", an informal, lived place often linked with "underground or clandestine sides of social life, and also art". It constitutes a kind of third space, for example a third space for the Third Man in Vienna's underground alleys and sewers. Descent feels like a passage from a real world to fiction and utopian possibilities. One of the French Situationists used a map of London to orient himself in Harz, a region in Germany.



I scarcely know of anything but those two harbours at dusk painted by Claude Lorrain – which are at the Louvre and which juxtapose two extremely dissimilar urban ambiances – that can rival in beauty the Paris Metro maps. It will be understood that in speaking here of beauty I don't have in mind plastic beauty – the new beauty can only be a beauty of situation – the particularly moving presentation, in both cases of a sum of possibilities.

Guy Debord, Introduction to a Critique of
the Urban Geography, Les Lèvres nues



In the gigantic rotunda of Gunnar Asplund's public library and in the surrounding wings, in the countless collection of books, nine volumes are hidden. Each contain their own key to their own underground space in Stockholm. The books are camouflaged so that they blend in among the other library books: the outer covers are made of actual books Adam had found with pertinent titles like "Unknown Stockholm", "City District" or "Open Doors". The person who happens to find one of these books by chance is free to borrow the key that grants entrance to an underground space, camouflaged in the surrounding city, much like the key in its little space inside the book, camouflaged in the public library. Nine keys, nine rooms. A person can visit the room or just carry around the key with a feeling of secret invincibility: I have this haven. The keys conceive reveries.



But for the cellar, the impassioned inhabitant digs and re-digs, making its very depth active. The fact is not enough, the dream is at work. When it comes to excavated ground, dreams have no limit.

Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space



Through a peep-hole drilled into the shack's boarded wall, the world outside is projected into the room using the principle of the camera obscura. From the cot I could watch the upside-down projections of cars, busses and façades. It created the image of two parallel worlds which mirror each other and give each other value.

A Thoreau, not in the woods by Walden, but an urban Thoreau by Slussen.

Thoreau built with his own hands a stark and simple wooden cabin on the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson's land to try out life as a hermit. The meditations on the shores of Walden weren't just removed and remote contemplations, but a kind of political action much like Thoreau would come to write in *Civil Disobedience*. Gandhi, Tolstoy and the English Socialists, American Civil Rights activists and militant environmentalists read him. To choose a condition as hermit by Walden Pond is to take the position of the romantic and the outsider. Thoreau placed himself outside the emerging culture of consumption, built on a hysterical production of things; Emerson wrote: *Things are in the saddle / And ride mankind*. The person who therefore refrains from excess and limits the effort of acquiring life's necessities is liberated from wage slavery and frees up time for reflection, existence. Voluntary simplicity and ascetism: Thoreau's possessions in Walden were easily counted—his room wasn't much different than the prison cell where he spent a night, an enlightening and defining experience which Thoreau describes in *Civil Disobedience*.



Despite everything, the camp gives a maximal feeling of freedom.

Andrei Sinjavskij, A Voice from the Chorus



The cell is the common room for the hermit, the monk and the prisoner. Thoreau is a successor to the Desert Fathers of Egypt who turned their backs on the city and searched for a spiritual life in solitude. They sometimes goaded each other to great feats of self-denial, exploits which probably would fit in better in the *Guinness Book of World Records* than a humble and unassuming life of Christ. The cell itself as protection, discipline and freedom, an extreme place on the fringes: the reclusive pickpocket's room in Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* isn't much different than the Resistance member's cell in *A man escaped* by the same director. Adam's room is related to such cells. A person can spend some time there, then go on their way, just like the recluse could return to community life after a few years as a hermit.



Camouflage is protection against an attack for plants and animals and military targets. During the first world war, the agencies involved in the production of camouflage employed many artists, experts in the visual field. Gertrude Stein's anecdote is famous: she tells how Picasso, when he caught sight of the first camouflage-painted vehicle in Paris exclaimed: "*We came up with that! That's cubism!*"

But there is also a deeper connection between camouflage and art beyond the purely visual. Artworks also protect themselves, keep safe their integrity against interpretation's attack. It unites itself with its meaning, it both shows and hides.

Camouflage is Adam's recurring strategy, his rooms in the city and in books are all camouflaged.



The entrance to our hiding place has now been properly concealed. Mr. Kugler thought it would be better to put a cupboard in front of our door (because a lot of houses are being searched for hidden bicycles.) but of course it had to be a movable cupboard that can open like a door. Mr. Voskuyl made the whole thing.

The Diary of Anne Frank, 21 August 1942



There are many stories about hermits and holy men who pretend to be someone else when they hear that an outsider is looking for them. So as not to disturb their solitude, they dress up in gaudy clothes and wolf down delicacies and the visitor begrudgingly admits that they've got the wrong place, turn around and keep looking.

But the concept homo sacer or holy man, can also cite a more dramatic example of vulnerability and risk for attack. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has stated that Roman law designated a special judgment for homo sacer convicted of a crime: a homo sacer was not fined or punished by the court – but anyone else was permitted to kill him. He was without civil liberties in a judicial State of Emergency.

According to Agamben homo sacer had been deprived of everything apart from his naked life; in this way supposed criminals were deported to concentration camps, or today to Guantanamo, by the suppression of civil liberties during States of Emergency. Suppressing civil liberties is contemporary history's grim underlying theme. Adam's room can also be seen in the light of this, as sanctuaries, in preparation for when a State of Emergency is called and civil liberties come under attack. The ladder leads both to an expedition and an escape route. The collapsible canoe also becomes a kind of device for traveling between Jules Verne's fantasy and Agamben's State of Emergency.



He perceived a few steps from him, under some fallen paving-stones which partly hid it, an iron grating laid flat and level with the ground. This grating, made of strong transverse bars, was about two feet square. The stone frame which held it had been torn up, and it was as it were unset. Through the bars a glimpse could be caught of an obscure opening, something like the main of a cistern. Jean Valjean sprang forward. To remove the stones, to lift the grating, to load Marius, who was inert as a dead body,

upon his shoulders, to descend with that burden upon his back, by the aid of his elbows and knees, into this kind of well, fortunately not very deep, to let fall over his head the heavy iron trapdoor – it required but very few moments. Jean Valjean found himself with Marius still senseless, in a sort of long underground passage. There, deep peace, absolute silence, night.

He could now hardly hear above him, like a vague murmur, the fearful tumult of the wine-shop taken by assault. It was in the sewers of Paris that Jean Valjean found himself. In the very heart of the city he had escaped from the city and slid into the stagnation of the tomb.

Victor Hugo, Les Misérables

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It's all about taking advantage of existing system and machines, rather than manufacturing new things; any other necessary devices are produced with simple techniques and materials. The city's subterranean spaces exist like intangible physical rooms, which don't become public space for general use until they are designated and indicated in an artistic happening. These third spaces – in Lefebvre's words "spaces the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" – corresponds to the items which through designation acquires a new role as ready-mades and works of art. Keys, canoes, the hut: it is a story about making the closed-off available, a utopian invitation to open up that which is closed and hidden: publicizing zones within oneself and others. The artist is a romantic operator.

Peter Cornell

(Translation by Amber Morris)