

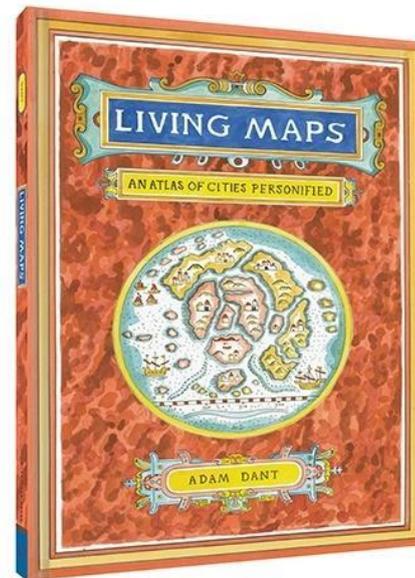
Adam Dent

Living Maps: An Atlas of Cities Personified

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Phil Cohen



Richard Sennett has argued that there are two main ways of representing the city in the history of Western civilisation: the city of stone, whose material construction is driven by cold logics of money and power, home to architects, planners, military strategists and civilian administrators; and the city of flesh, a site of physical sensation emotional attachment and social encounter, inhabited by stories, haunted by memories, the locus genii of biopolitics.

The relationship between these two ways of imagining a city is complex, we might even say dialectical. They might appear at first sight to be mutually exclusive discourses and yet there are many hidden connections operating in the interstices of each urban vision. For example, the notion of a 'line of desire' is at one and the same time a metric of pedestrian footfall and an arc of trespass which disrupts the rationalised grid of transport planning.

To these two versions of the city, correspond two different ways of mapping it. Google Maps and our sat navs enable us to find our way around the city of stone with ever greater efficiency and precision. Narrative maps, memory maps, imaginary maps allow us to explore the city of flesh, and its 'other scenes'. Our mental maps, which are never not embodied, draw selectively on both resources.

What has been interesting in the evolution of Adam Dant's work is his ability to explore the relationships between these two cities by conjugating their respective forms of mapping into new cartographic idioms. So for instance in his 'Journey to the Heart of East London' he positioned a number of 'scouts' on the outskirts of East London and instructed them to ask directions from passers-by, chosen at random, to where they thought the centre of the East End might now be. They then walked, following the routes indicated, until they all converged at a single point in the Westfield Shopping Centre. The map which Dant composed from this exercise took the form of a *mappa mundi* which in its original mediaeval version had Jerusalem at its centre. In this way he made a point about the recentring of East London around the new developments in Stratford and the Olympic Park and about the role of regeneration in re-constituting epicentric visions of the world. For example, the Mayor of Newham not only claimed it was the borough which had won the 2012 Games but that

Stratford would henceforth displace Canary Wharf as the new pivot of London's eastward's turn and economic growth.

Much of Dant's work has been focussed on London, and especially the East End. In this new work, he has travelled much further afield. He follows Richard Sennett's strategy in selecting case studies that illustrate his main thesis, namely that cities are not only embodied in their social imagination, given hearts, lungs, arteries, and bowels, but personified, given distinctive identities by their inhabitants. He is not interested in the fake iconographies created by urban imagineers in order to sell cities, or parts of them, to prospective investors. Indeed, he explicitly rejects this approach. In his introduction he says that instead he wants to explore how the particular physical geography of a city is registered anthropomorphically and how its citizens create its distinctive personality as a projection of their own.

I am not sure that this model of the urban imaginary actually works in any real sense. 'Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner that I love London so' in its very circularity, begs a whole series of interesting questions about how the impossible complexity of the city is rendered down into affective particularisms which come to stand for the whole. The whole construction involves what the philosopher A.N. Whitehead called a 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness', rendering and literally reifying the city of flesh into one built of stone. But Dant is a visual artist not an urban ethnographer, and the granularities of his maps are aesthetic not empirical. The traditions of representation he draws upon are primarily pre-scientific Western cartography: maps which populated the edges of the known world with fabulous creatures. Another source is the caricatural maps which from the 18th century onwards portrayed national characteristics in a more or less satirical vein. From this starting point he has conducted a thought experiment in rhetorical mapping which has yielded a rich feast for readers with an appetite for graphic re-imaginings of well-known cities.

Our Grand Tour begins with Jerusalem, Mecca and Rome, those centres of world faith which have become such locally contested territories of religious belonging. He takes in other capitals which feature prominently on the maps of cultural tourists - Venice, Istanbul, Paris, Zurich, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Edinburgh and of course London. We then move to some traditionally exotic places in Africa, the Indian subcontinent and the global south - Lagos, Mumbai, Beijing, Hong Kong, Tokyo Sydney - before reaching Rio and thence the USA, with whistle stops at Boston, Manhattan, Chicago, Dallas and San Francisco. Our trip finishes at Dubai, which is aptly personified as 'A City of Visitors'.

Each city is given the same treatment. There is an initial characterisation. Moscow is the City out of Reach. Copenhagen a Fairy Tale City. Mumbai is subtitled 'A big fish eating a little fish' and Hong Kong 'An Old City in a Young Body'. This theme is then elaborated in a series of captioned graphics which point up some key features. In the case of Hong Kong, Dant highlights the tension between on the one hand its youthful population and dynamic economy and on the other its cultural respect for elders. This tension is literally portrayed in the figures of the puppet and puppet master, the city itself shown as a doomed marionette theatre, albeit one that 'still leaves hope for puppets of glove, shadow and finger'.

Dant's argument thus proceeds entirely by allegory and analogy, and at times verges on the distinctly esoteric. But there is method in his graphic madness. After the introductory thesis, completed with a full page iconic statement, we get a double page spread of the city itself. This purports to come from the library of the 'Institute of Corporeal Geography' or just possibly 'The Centre for Urban Anthropomorphism' while the Atlas as a whole is placed under the patronage of a 'shadowy Dickensian sponsor', a certain 'Dr London'. The adoption of an apocryphal provenance for the book might strike some readers as an unnecessarily artificial device, but at least it does provide a pseudo-rationale for the book's splendid design

features, including its large format and full colour reproductions. This a beautiful looking book, the graphics are often of exquisite delicacy; putting it on a coffee table, doubtless its intended destination, would be to risk damaging its pages with accidental spillages yet its overall impact is quite low caffeine.

Dant has been influenced by psychogeography, but you will look in vain for the kind of critical urbanistic perspective that characterised the Situationist maps of Paris. He seems to have forgotten that the personal is always and already the political, not least in the way cities are imagined. There is no reference to the Democracy Movement in his portrayal of Hong Kong, although there is a nod in the direction of the indentured servitude which is the lot of many who service the tourist economy of Dubai. There are many missed opportunities to dig beneath the cosmetic surface of the global city to bring to light the hidden and often ugly aspects of its wealth and power. Compare the maps in Rebecca Solnit's *Infinite City: Atlas of San Francisco*, or the cartography produced by the Bay area anti-eviction project with Dant's equivocal evocation of 'The City that rejects the City'. We are left in the dark as to how the impoverished inhabitants of the slums of Lagos or Rio might characterise 'their' city, which they neither own or control. Dr London, the atlas's mythic creator seems to have been intent on creating a cabinet of curiosities, and Dant's other cartographic reference points do little to challenge a suspicion about the implicit Eurocentrism of whole project.

No doubt this is an ethnographer's quibble, and certainly these omissions, or if you prefer, evasions, should not lesson the reader's pleasure in the images, even if, for this reader they render some parts of the text problematic. In any case Dant's atlas will serve as a useful introduction to the work of one our most creative cartographers, and an entertaining supplement to Richard Sennet's *Flesh and Stone*.