With Concrete Reveries we have something of an anomaly. It is a book of philosophy with pictures and with active readers, whom the writer sometimes addresses in the second person. Its questions are also injunctions and its theses are suggestions that send us back toward our experience of urban reality. The reasons for such a renewed approach are offered in some of the opening claims: “Almost all of our models or metaphors for thinking about cities are inadequate” (11-2); “consider that cities are also, on this anti-inductive view, like persons. That is, they are forms of embodied consciousness.” (14) Embodiment is a central category of the book and it organises its subject matter. Just as, daily, we escape the design of the grid in cities like New York by walking the streets and entering into relationships with passersby and buildings, we escape the form of the book and the traditional form of philosophical writing by being constantly invited to reconsider our experience of the city and the ideas we use to reflect upon it.

Kingwell uses the notion of embodiment and adopts a phenomenological approach in order to convince us that just like the concrete we mould into square towers or flowing Guggenheims, cities are what we make them. Cities are only ruins when they are abandoned; but as their inhabitants, we constantly shape them. Against the tendency to abandon their planning to others, the author suggests, we should transform our cities to make them into public spaces where justice will become possible. There is a constant evolution in tone throughout Concrete Reveries, following the aesthetic, political and philosophical dimensions of our experience of the city and of our reflection upon it.

The first two chapters are lyrical, almost poetic. In the movement of Kingwell’s prose, it is urban life that is manifested. Cities appear to us in our embodied existence: they can stop us or help our movement from one place to the next; they can be orderly, be patrolled by one hundred thousand police officers, or leave sixteen percent of the world’s population out of the range of the State and its services. They can be violent and treacherous, or they can foster cooperation. Hard or soft like concrete or glass, they are also the shapes and patterns they take under the rain. Above all, they are public places, and Kingwell invites us to renew the
way we inhabit them. The ever-present echoes of Walter Benjamin suit the theme. While New York City is not historically layered like Paris, its depth still takes our gaze beyond the grid, beyond streets and the buildings, to a manner of experiencing them that Kingwell, following Benjamin, likens to dreams.

We can take as an example the activity of walking through New York City. There is energy everywhere around us and we barely control our own direction: “New York, like all cities, is a collective experiment in barely averted chaos, a play of vast possibility within the mapped order of the grid. It flows, and that is amazing, because it should not.” (36) There, the pace of walking and the constant bare avoidance of dangers have quickened far beyond the shocks registered in Paris by Benjamin. Kingwell repeats these experiences through his prose. As we read, we can feel how Paris is still the city of flâneurs and how New York has no place for them; we encounter the writer as we would were we to walk directly behind him around others and vehicles, espousing his path, passing into his body, in stride.

Benjamin is not the only philosophical figure lending material to our thinking about the city. In the third chapter, postmodernism reappears as an architectural movement with its own public reach, when museums erase the narrative of art history by becoming works of art themselves—as buildings that “might as well remain empty.” (73) Museums are but the most obvious illustration of a trend toward the monumental and the conceptual in architecture. Beyond postmodernism and its theoretical architecture lie the inhabitation of public space and the contribution of architecture to the good life. After all, buildings cannot be ignored like works of art, and they incessantly shape our social relations. Public space, Kingwell suggests, would then gain by being understood from the point of view of architecture: inhabited (rather than abstracted as is the case in the political philosophy of Habermas and Rawls, or even Arendt), embodied, felt, occupied—and although mastered only by some, lived by all. And so through this conceptualisation of an embodied public space, political philosophy would be able to finally come back to the world we inhabit, to what belongs to us all because it affects us all.

In the fourth chapter, Kingwell’s Reveries turn away from concrete experience as the author takes on the theme of the inventive possibilities opened by non-democratic states. The change of style in the description of rampant capitalism brings the focus onto the monstrous pos-
sibilities of architecture without constraints or rules and the emptiness of the space within and around the products of buildings that were never meant to be inhabited. And, again, the author’s prose adapts to its subject in order to make us feel how Shanghai takes city life further still than New York by turning shocks into full-out collisions and how, with the emergence of Shanghai, non-democratic politics allowed for the apparition of a new form of urban life.

The following chapter, in a similar manner, loses the directedness of the first three. Dealing with consciousness, it turns toward the philosophical tradition, a new orientation that echoes and continues the criticism of postmodern architecture and of capitalism: “The contemporary discourses of consciousness, architecture and politics are almost completely unknown to one another, despite that their interdependence seems obvious.” (152) With an explicit reference to philosophy, the author turns, against dualism, toward the idea of a spatially oriented self, and from there, jumps to the way consciousness shapes cities, before reverting back to the philosophical critique of unsatisfying streams of thought. In other words, philosophy becomes the topic, rather than being a way to approach the city. Yet here again, the approach fits the subject. Kingwell tells us how architecture tends to become the work of pure consciousness and to forget the embodied aspect of cities, that is, the fact that we not only live in them, but that we live them. Like the disembodied conscience of modern philosophers, we are becoming placeless as we lose our grip on urban space.

It is fitting, then, that the discussions on boundaries and thresholds that follow in the sixth chapter become so detached from the starting point of the book, that is, their illustrations have nothing to do with the city, but, for example, with baseball. However, it quickly becomes obvious that the move away from the concreteness of cities was merely a play on thresholds: through global capitalism, embodied consciousness, circles, psychoanalysis and porches, we come back to the experience of the city with a renewed perspective. In the seventh chapter, the figure of the threshold finally materialises. Exploring maps takes us back to the streets from which they were purposely abstracted: after all, we are thinking about turning spaces into embodied places.

According to Kingwell, we must find again our sense of threshold in order to perceive thresholds and finally cross them. We must find our likeness in the places we inhabit, defined like us by the crossing
of thresholds, those lines that only exist insofar as they are being crossed: “Limits squeeze us; they make us feel the edges of our interiority. Every interior you enter or inhabit challenges you to ask who you are, this apparently individual consciousness among others.” (211) Attempts to divide what is inside and outside no longer differ from the division between what is in sight and what has been put away; contamination, the return of the excluded over the threshold, is a constant possibility. In the face of the impossibility of purity, intellectual and political control shows its limits—as those limits are being crossed. Only then, when thresholds are recognised for what they are and when our space is finally shared, can we start talking about a just, non-exclusive city.

Closing the book, we can hope for further developments on what conceptual architecture can offer, as opposed to theoretical (or a-conceptual?) architecture; on the relation between thresholds and disgust in architecture and politics; or most importantly, as is only suggested in the eighth and last chapter, on the possibility of justice within cities, and on the possibilities for reflecting on justice based on our urban experiences. Nevertheless, Kingwell’s writing indicates that certain reflections demand we change directions and tone. As pedestrians we find ourselves in new neighbourhoods without warning, looking at something different yet related and tied to the streets where we were just walking; as readers, we find in Kingwell’s Reveries a concrete space with philosophers’ names as signposts and theories as storefronts, all of which orient us without ever pulling us out of our environment, all of which send us back to our tasks and our preoccupations. Throughout all such sketches and detours, Concrete Reveries calls for what is always only evoked in dreams: development, solidity. The resulting feeling of airiness and allusiveness allows Kingwell to capture something of the elusiveness of shared public spaces.

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