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Imagining Cities, Imagining Civilization

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With what do we imagine cities? With our eyes, with our fingers, with our feet? Or with words, numbers, diagrams and pictures? Do we call forth the future with an inner voice, or with tools rendered dispassionate by their distance from our selves?

In this issue we consider the scope of such imaginings, from the visions of civic landscape that stirred the hearts of many San Franciscans early in the century to the bland and tinsel uniformity that dominates in those places where commercial interests have usurped the public realm.

Despite our best efforts, we never seem to get it all. Whole groups of people are left out, or the landscape is trundled aside, or the multiple patterns of exchange that underlie the very purpose of the city are simplified into those that calculate as economic return.

Calculations abound; transactions are charted, logistics are scheduled, impacts are assessed and images are bartered for community support. Nevertheless, we have difficulty imagining fully the lives that are led within cities or the complex ways that they can be transformed by our actions. We continue to avert our eyes from the homeless, from the dispossessed and undereducated, from the waste in which we are embedded and from the “others” with whom we must share this world, one way or another.

That we generally imagine poorly is nowhere more evident than in our propensity to make war. How, except through a failure of empathy and a trust in steely (mis)calculation, can we commit such brutality against our cities and the principles of civilization upon which they are founded?

One of the great works of Modern art, Picasso's *Guernica*, grew from the intellectual and emotional necessity to visualize the stark, emphatic, mindless horror of a single bombing raid on a Spanish village and to make that reality present in our lives. Today we keep a distance, allowing similar raids to be called "sorties" and to be numbered in the tens of thousands.

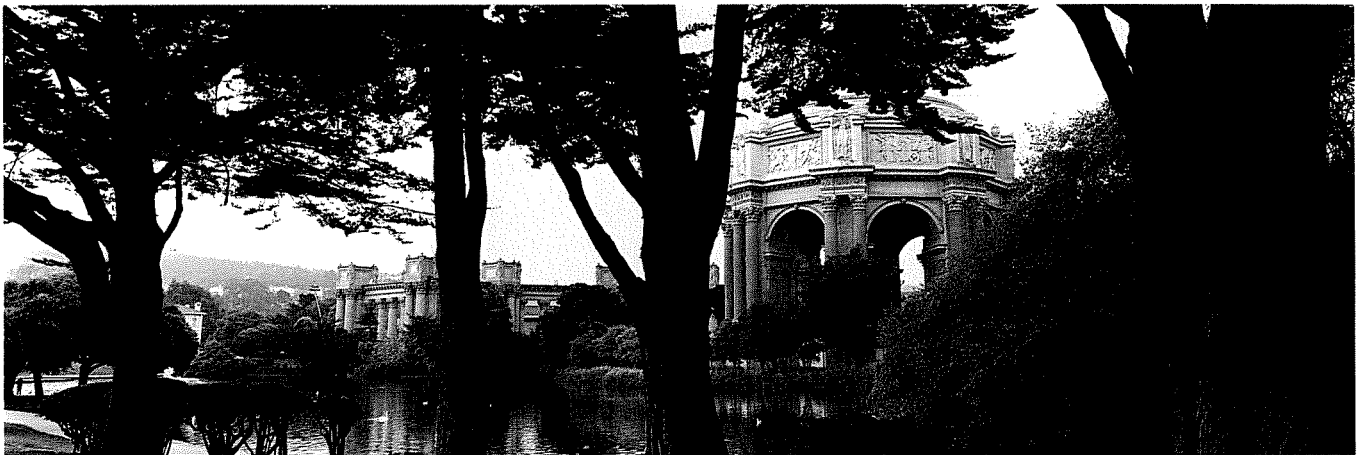
As war raged in the Middle East, what did we know of the sufferings in Baghdad, or in Iraqi or Kuwaiti vil-

lages, or of the destruction of precious Islamic heritage — television coverage notwithstanding? What did we know of the consequences of battle for the lives of soldiers and their families? Are we able yet to imagine continuing civil disorder or future dislocations to our own lives, other innocent people and the places we inhabit? How well have we imagined a city of terror at home?

We need to become human again.

We must learn to imagine concretely and with passion; vividly and with generosity; systematically and with uncertainty; creatively and with empathy. We must learn to live the city, live civilization, in our minds — then join with others to make it take place.

—Donlyn Lyndon



Cover: The Palace of Fine Arts is the only structure from San Francisco's 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition that is still standing. The architectural and planning visions embodied in the Exposition buildings and grounds inspired a generation of designers. Photo by Alice Wingwall.