



STREETS OF TRASH

Toronto trash flâneur
Lisa Rochon wanders the streets,
shooting as she goes.

*We trashed the place the other night. Her and I.
She wore a gaudy, trashy dress with holes in her stockings.
Whenever she spoke it was complete garbage—
“Is not,” she whined, totally trashed. “Get me my smokes.”*

There is much absurdity thrown up on the sidewalk. Construction debris, toilets, chairs, doors, garbage in misshapen green plastic bags. Piles of sleeping bags, a diary, a tidy plastic bag of Oreo cookies. Human beings.

A place for the flâneur to wander in a state of careless distraction? Hardly. Grab a shopping cart and start maneuvering your way through the debris.





Sprawl trashes. And trash sprawls, devouring the sidewalk. This public space, which in postgraduate urban design courses we thought of as strictly reserved for mailboxes and benches, lamp standards and recycling bins, is actually ruled by the startling, insidious demands of trash. People lie down on the sidewalk, drawing heat from the city's underground, seeking shelter from the wind behind a granite bank building. Strange cohabitations occur—a recycling bin dwarfed by glittering corporate towers, two-by-fours thrown onto a traffic median, and piles of sleeping bags, how soft they look—like Renaissance drapery—against the wrought iron fence of a downtown church. On the other side of town, there's a striped duvet that's been floated down on the pavement. Once upon a time, it adorned somebody's bed and looked beautiful. There on the street corner, that blanket is fluffed with lies and deceit—Job's comforter.

As a seventeen-year-old newly arrived in Paris, I looked down from my third-floor apartment, and saw a beaten-up mattress with a lamp next to it. There could be no argument about its position on the sidewalk—the mattress was clearly, deliberately occupying center stage. It was my first experience of garbage and human beings in an unsettling co-existence. Nighttime: looking down from my window, I saw a man with a white beard curled up on the mattress. That summer night, he appeared to be wearing cotton pajamas. Such was one man's attempt to maintain a sense of domestic decorum even while living in the wilds of the sidewalk. I've never encountered a lamp that held so much sadness.





How to package garbage, and make it less offensive, has become the latest design challenge. Toronto, like so many other cities, has issued green recycling bins. On garbage day, they're lined up on the sidewalk like little green men. There are smaller containers for under your kitchen sink to catch your raw fruits and vegetables. Decomposing paper bags are required for your autumn leaves. Dog poop must be scooped from the sidewalk and the beach. Apparently, trash has been contained. But nothing could be further from the truth. Trash seeps out a little more every day.

We've adjusted our eyes to the crap on the sidewalks. Placing a toilet in the lobby of your office is unacceptable—but position it outside and there's no shame. Frank Gehry contends that a debilitating impoverishment happened decades ago when chain-link fence and corrugated metal proliferated, demarcating schools, tennis courts, and highways. Only when Gehry wrapped his Santa Monica house in layers of the metal hardness did people pay attention.





When did our senses grow numb, overwhelmed by the parade of pain that moves constantly through the public realm? Was it during the aerial bombardments of the Second World War when entire cities were ripped apart? Was it when American blacks stood in a separate line at the bus stop? Did we grow hard with the 1989 slaughter at Tiananmen Square?

It's not that we've lost the ability to feel for the trash that lies scattered on the ground. We've simply innovated coping mechanisms. Such as stepping around bodies huddled on the ground. Leaving a sandwich by the emaciated body of a crack addict. Throwing some coins into a paper cup. Last year, on a freezing winter's day, there was a small shape lying on a grate; so small was this person, with hair cropped short, I thought I had come across a boy. In fact, she was a woman, maybe twenty, with startling blue eyes. She accepted my invitation to lunch and we drove to her idea of a perfect restaurant: Mr. Sub. In the minus 10°C cold, she wore beach sandals and socks. She refused to go to a shelter or a hospital, but shopping held considerable appeal. We found a Salvation Army and, though she was strung out on crack and sucking with quiet desperation on a baby's soother, she became a regular girl during that shopping spree. Together, we dug through boxes of footwear and showed each other what we had found. I recommended a pair of warm boots. But trashy silver platforms were what she discovered, and what she wanted. She put them on and walked out of the store. We parted ways on the sidewalk, where all is forgiven and excused.

