

### **Romantic narratives of urban places**

By Andrew Stuck, Managing Director, Rethinking Cities Ltd & Founding Director of the Museum of Walking

*Vivacious, hopelessly romantic, attractive, stylish, independent, passionate city into walking, life, art, culture, food, romance, good times and laughter, leading to LTR seeks adventurous, intelligent, discerning, thoughtful, and interesting participants with a GSOH to explore and share romantic experiences. Serious or grumpy need not reply.*

Just how do you get the time-starved urban dweller interested in their neighbourhood without having to resort to scare tactics about the loss of an old favourite haunt or road widening?

Over the last four years, London-based consultancy Rethinking Cities Ltd., has been devising ways in which to get people to re-engage with their environment through using the metaphor of romance. Romance gives us a prompt to adults so they can shrug off any reticence and learn about good design and urbanism in a fun way.

#### **Romantic Walk shops**

There has been a lot written about how the built environment impinges on people's health especially their mental health and emotional well-being. Using romance as a metaphor seemed to be a great way to get people thinking about how where they lived impinged on their happiness, their feelings of security and comfort, at the same time as making them more discerning consumers of the built environment.

We use simple techniques to get people to interact with each other, including measuring each others arm lengths, comparing shoe sizes and arranging people according to their birthdays, star signs, birthplaces etc. and this also contributes to the all important fun element through out the duration of what are called 'Romantic walk shops' – part guided walk, part site visit, part street theatre, part workshop.

The objectives of such walk shops include:

[Worthy ones]

- Determine what makes a place/city romantic
- Seek out examples of good design interventions that promote comfort, happiness and romance
- Prompt ideas and generate discussion about good design practice and quality place making
- Strengthen key generic skills including breakthrough thinking, communicating, collaboration, team building and inclusive visioning

[Vital ones]

- Fall in love
- Create life-long partnerships
- Have fun and feel good
- Elope

A typical romantic walk shop involves a lot of ‘mixing and matching’ – the walk shop leader is much like a party host, trying to get people to mingle and have fun.

When the walk shops have been conducted with professionals from different sectors within an organisation or includes those from other organisations the dynamic can be quite different, and it is the skill of the walk shop leader that brings each individual ‘to the party’, drawing out the best that each has to offer.

Some of the most successful romantic walk shops have been those when at the start, the participants are completely unfamiliar with each other and bring no prior knowledge of the standing or status that each may pertain.

We have run Romantic walk shops in London, Zurich, Melbourne and Toronto, and each time we have caught the attention of more and more publicity – last October (2007), we went national across Canada, as an arts journalist from the National Post joined the workshop en route to Toronto’s Harbourfront.

### **The Romantic Ribbons initiative**

The success of the Romantic walk shops emboldened us to set up the *Romantic Ribbons* initiative to map romantic urban places and encourage the designation and development of walking routes that link such places. We have been asking members of the public to recommend romantic urban places and walking routes, and in doing so write a post card from that place enticing would-be lovers to visit.

To coincide with Valentine’s Day 2007, Rethinking Cities Ltd. released a press statement asking: “Love in the city? Do you know where to find it? There are 38 streets in London (and only one in Dublin) with the word ‘Love’ in their names, but that doesn’t really help does it? So, where are all those special places that touch our gentler souls, soften our hearts, enhance our romantic moments or just make us feel good?”

This won national press coverage, this time in the Irish Times that triggered a flurry of on-line post cards from romantic Dubliners. A commercial radio station also took the opportunity to establish the levels of Snog Density across the city.

The response in Dublin put parks as top of the list of favourite romantic places: Harold’s Cross Park, Iveagh Gardens and the Botanic Gardens in Dublin.

“In a small quiet park at Harold's Cross, escape for a while from a bustling city & enjoy the ambience of calm tranquillity as you watch the sun flicker through the trees. What was once a Hanging Post is now a gentle place to while away a pleasant hour soothed by nature at its best, inhale the fragrance & live the dream.....”

Not only do website visitors offer their suggestions for recommended romantic urban places, they are invited to provide information about the best times and seasons in which to visit, and are asked to identify the key elements that contribute to the romance of the place.

Key elements frequently identified are the scent of flowers and the sound of nature, contrasting with the bustle of urban traffic-dominated streets and squares.

Romantic urban places, spaces or routes in London that have so far been recommended include bridges and river views, church gardens and even a cemetery or two! Although parks and green spaces are often chosen, with Richmond Park frequently getting a mention, it is the Thames that draws romantic lovers. Crossing the river Thames on the Jubilee foot bridges on either side of Hungerford Bridge is the outright winner:

Downstream Jubilee foot bridge:

“People talk about Waterloo Bridge as London’s perfect viewpoint, but the Jubilee walkway bridges combine spectacular views to St Paul’s and the Eye and along a sparkling Southbank and Somerset House – and without the traffic roar. Do not dismay, the rumble from Charing Cross will muffle any noise you and your partner will create...”

Hungerford Bridge on an Autumn Sunday at about 7.30pm

“London’s most romantic place is walking across Hungerford Bridge / Jubilee walkway at sunset. The river, the fabulous architecture and the twinkling lights of London’s west end slowly coming to life.”

“Stroll over Hungerford Bridge and admire the old and new whilst catching snatches of a multitude of languages. Crossing the Thames, let your eyes drift east to rest on the dome of St Paul's, the heart of London's city. As you step on to the south bank, hear the crash of the river on the banks drift towards Waterloo Bridge and then take a moment to stop and kiss.”

It wasn’t that long ago that Hungerford Bridge was despised as an ugly, noisy bridge across the Thames, carrying main line trains from Charing Cross station on the north bank, to Waterloo East on the south side, and onwards to south east London and the Kent commuter belt. There was a footway on the downstream side of the bridge that was crowded at peak times but often felt abandoned and neglected at other times. The building of the Jubilee footbridges on either side of the railway bridge was an entirely privately financed initiative that has created a new pedestrian thoroughfare linking the South Bank cultural district with north bank. Erected in much less time than the more architecturally notable ‘wobbly’ foot bridge from the Tate Modern to St Paul’s Cathedral, the Jubilee footbridges have woven a new romantic narrative in a bustling city.

A lot of public money has been invested in improving the pedestrian environments of each of the south banks of the Thames in London and the Yarra in Melbourne, Australia - both feature amongst the post card narratives:

“Good food, good wine and good company. All of this can be found at Southbank in Melbourne. Southbank is like the jewel in Melbourne's crown. As you stroll along the river bank the noise of the city fades away, it is replaced with the sounds of people. Everyone along here is walking, running or riding. A group of rowers pass by on the river, they look like they are gliding effortlessly on the still water. I have to go now my glass of wine has arrived with my food which smells fantastic. We can’t wait to see you here.”

South bank, crossing the river from Embankment over Hungerford / Jubilee Bridge, up to Bankside and Borough - Winter Weekday Early evening / sunset

“A cold clear day just turning into evening, crossing the bridge and pausing to the silhouette of the city against a blue sky, stopping for lavender cake at the Royal Festival Hall watching the light go, strolling along the river at it gets dark – plenty of people and not too over lit, holding hands and feeling good.”

Waterfronts, river banks, canal sides and sea walls feature frequently – what draws us romantically to the water’s edge?

“Harbourfront Toronto like most waterfronts is typically romantic – water lapping, waves, moonlight. Park shoreline in the distance. But when you are with the one you love, the horizon is infinite, the city disappears and the boardwalk extends to infinity. What better place to propose to the one you love.”

“Relaxing in Humber Bay Park on the shores of Lake Ontario – our sweet water sea. A great place to sit on the rocks at sunset and share a bottle of wine, listening to the waves lapping on the stones. A wild place in the city but feels so far from it. CN Tower in the distance. Gulls, ducks and cormorants. Little boats hurrying back to the marina before dusk. Strolling along the gravel pathways lined with yellow, red and orange poplar, willow, sumec and grasses humming with insects.”

The romantic urban narratives written by would-be lovers are not just of places of which they have memories of being there themselves, but include places that have been used as locations for films or TV, others are completely imagined:

Under, behind, away from, up in the tree house:

Go around behind the house, through the garden, under the fence behind the barn away from it all to the chestnut tree. Stand under, look up, climb the ladder to the platform. Wait for me there.

Trying to map these hasn’t been so easy!

In Canada, we were fortunate enough to have two gallery spaces that exhibited the hard copy versions of our Romantic Ribbons postcards, one such was at the Banff Centre of Arts, at which gallery visitors were able to add their own post cards to the exhibit. Some of these narratives were prompted by them reading those of others rather than being prompted by their memories of a specific place. The gallery space also provides an opportunity for us to interact with post card writers to ask them what it is that triggers them to right about the places close to their hearts.

For many of the places recommended, I too have a personal recollection of visiting them, but for others, I have never been anywhere near them, but I am sorely tempted to find these romantic places for myself.

Do join us in mapping romantic urban places across the world: <https://bit.ly/2CKch5f>