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Agency of Urban Space and David Greig's *San Diego* as Soft City

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Abstract: Agency of space is a phenomenon not to be ignored. Affecting every entity, it encloses and interacts with gives space a peculiar agency. Without doubt, urban space is a particular space where the interaction between human and space is the densest. Billions of people sustain their lives in urban containers and these containers surrounding them are shaping the lives of its inhabitants. This act of shaping is not only physical but also identity-related. Through the analysis of how the characters are shaped by the eponymous city in David Greig's *San Diego*, this article aims to demonstrate the special relationship between urban space and human beings. While some spatial theories and spatial agency are being stressed prior to reaching any conclusions about this relationship, the similarity between a playwright and an architect will be analysed to highlight that the setting of the play is not a random construction and to demonstrate how the playwright utilises space to shape his characters.

Keywords:

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Kentsel Mekânın Eyleyiciliği ve Yumuşak Bir Şehir Olarak David Greig'in *San Diego*'su

Öz: Mekânın eyleyici kapasitesi göz ardı edilmemesi gereken bir olgudur. İçinde bulundurduğu ve etkileşime girdiği her bir varlığa etki etmesi, mekâna kendine has bir eyleyicilik vermektedir. Kentsel mekânlar da şüphesiz insan ve mekân arasındaki etkileşimin en yoğun yaşandığı yerlerdir. Milyarlarca insan artık kentsel konteynırlar içerisinde yaşamını sürdürmektedir ve içinde bulundukları bu konteynırlar onları şekillendirmektedir. Bu şekillendirme sadece fiziksel değil aynı zamanda kimlikseldir. Bu makale, İskoç yazar David Greig'in *San Diego* oyunundaki karakterlerin San Diego şehri tarafından nasıl şekillendirildiğini analiz ederek, kentsel mekân ve insan arasındaki özel ilişkiyi ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu ilişkiye dair sonuçlar çıkarılmadan önce bazı mekânsal teoriler ile mekânın kendine özgü etkinliği vurgulanırken, oyun yazarı ve bir mimar arasındaki benzerlik oyunda şekillendirilen mekânın rastlantısal olmadığını ve yazarın karakterlerini şekillendirmede mekânı nasıl kullandığını vurgulamak icin incelenecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Kentsel mekân,
David Greig,
San Diego,
Yumuşak şehir,
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Introduction

With the help of current studies underlining space as a form of reality that has the ability to change, space is stripped of its previous conceptualisation as passive, inert and without any agency. As a result, the interaction between the residents of a space and space itself is deemed to be reciprocal; that is, as individuals possess the ability to shape and structure their surrounding space, so is space endowed with the power to transform the human species. Being the most commonly revisited spaces of our world, and hosting the present bulk of the world population, cities, in this sense, serve as meeting points where urban space demonstrates its effect on its inhabitants' psychology and corporeality. Many modern playwrights employ urban space as the setting of their plays and investigate the relationship between cities and people, like Caryl Churchill (1938–…) in *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* (1971) and *Top Girls* (1982), and Jez Butterworth's (1969–…) *Jerusalem* (2009) do. Scottish playwright David Greig (1969–…) is also among the contemporary playwrights sharing an interest in this dense interaction between people and their urban environment in his plays. Greig's dramatic style is heterogeneous, as Clare Wallace identifies, yet it carries certain tendencies like having "distant locations" and "imaginatively displaced" characters (492). One example is surely the urban spaces bringing about lots of complications. More often than not, Greig places his characters in a setting where they profoundly interact with their environment, and urban space usually has a special place in shaping his characters' behaviours and words. In *Europe* (1994), it is a border town hosting a group of refugees and natives, and the changing identity of the town redefines the identity of its short-term or long-term inhabitants. In general, as Verónica Rodríguez argues, "Greig is generally keen on using geographical locations to name his plays" (*David,* 166). Showing Greig's interest in urban space, it is never surprising to see Greig composing a title with the name of real cities like *Damascus* (2007), *Glasgow Girls* (2012), *Kyoto* (2010), *Miniskirts of Kabul* (2010), and the subject of this article, *San Diego* (2003).

In *San Diego* with his eponymous city, Greig creates a "soft city" (2) in Jonathan Raban's words, and his characters keep floating around in search of any kind of grounding experience; in the meantime, it is not only the city that is mapped by the characters in their own mental cosmos, but the characters are also re-identified by the agency of the city. Indeed, the urban setting of the play renounces the idea of being merely a backdrop to the actions of humans and makes itself evident through a series of radiant reflections. Although the relationship between place and characters in *San Diego* has been previously studied to some extent, the agency of urban space in creating identities must be further studied to put the spotlights particularly on the city. Thus, within the framework of theories about urban space developed by Raban, Bernard Tschumi and Teresa Brennan, this article investigates the entanglement of humans and their environment in a metropolitan city and aims to show how *San Diego* unravels the power of a city in remoulding the identity of human beings.

In contrast to the culturally constructed false assumptions, space is not a neutral passive container waiting for the intervention of other living beings. The relationship between bodies and space, as Tschumi contends, is symmetrical; it is not only bodies that "violate" space, space also "violates" bodies (123–26). Taking violence as a metaphor, Tschumi highlights "the intensity of a relationship between individuals and their surrounding spaces" (122). Following up on Tschumi's approach, Stephanie Riker underlines that "the static nature of architecture is severely threatened" (13). While wandering in or around spaces, human bodies leave some marks "by their very presence" as they "violate the balances of a precisely ordered geometry" (123). In other words, they do not have to literally violate the structure of an architecture; their corporeality, as it is, disturbs the equilibrium emerging out of the space. It can be likened to the ring of waves one causes after touching the surface of a pond or lake. In a similar way, space leaves its own impact on and builds an invisible cord with its visitors; and "the place your body inhabits is inscribed in your imagination, your unconscious, as a space of possible bliss. Or menace" (123). Tschumi extends his metaphor as follows: "What if you are forced to abandon your imaginary spatial markings? A torturer wants you, the victim, to regress, because he wants to demean his prey, to make you lose your identity as a subject" (123). Thus, space engulfing the material existence of other bodies functions as an identity marker. It extends beyond the corporeal boundaries of the human body and is involved in the process of identity formation. When one touches the surface of water and generates waves, it is also the water that touches the person's skin and generates visible and invisible effects. Likewise, emphasising the reverberations of space over human conscience and emotions, Brennan's theory of "the transmission of affect" conceives the human subject as a construction of its physical environment. Brennan denies the alleged notion of the human body as a "naturally contained" existence, and takes "physiology," besides "the social and psychological factors" into consideration, when she briefly states that "[t]he 'atmosphere' or the environment literally gets into the individual" (1–2). Affect for Brennan, as Dorian Stuber puts it, is "a force that gets inside us and influences our very bodily workings. Affects can enhance us, when we project them out on to others, or they can deplete us, when we introject them" (4). In a way, these theories offer a very egalitarian approach to the universe by rejecting the binary distinction between human and space/environment/city/architecture.

Soft City and *San Diego*

The city as a spatial formation occupies a unique place different from other smaller structures in the construction of human identity. For Raban, our relationship with the city is a distinct case because "Cities, unlike villages and small towns, are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images: they, in their turn, shape us by the resistance they offer when we try to impose our own personal form on them" (Raban 2). On the one hand, Raban's conceptualisation of the city as vibrant buttresses Brennan's definition of space as a vibrant identity marker "get[ting] into the individual" (Brennan 1) and highlights the

agency of the city shown in the form of resistance. With this regard, the transformation of people migrating into cities has always been a subject of investigation. On the other hand, this argument accentuates the dissimilitude of the imagined cityscape in someone's mind, which Raban refers to as "the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare," and the real object, "the hard city one can locate on maps in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture" (2). In line with this, Greig's understanding of the material city calls for a coexistence with the fictional world to be complete. For him, "a place doesn't exist until it's written about in fiction," or "a city isn't somehow real until it's been written or made into a film, a novel, or a play" (Rodríguez, "Zāhir and Bātin" 88). While describing Greig's works, Dilek Inan accentuates that "literature provides the readers with richer and more extensive worlds than physical geography" and "David Greig's theater abounds in decoding both real and imaginary places" (107). *San Diego*, in this respect, can be considered an attempt to make the city more real because, as Greig himself puts forward: "despite being such a great place to live, San Diego has featured in almost no fictions, films, novels or plays, but it has . . . 'served as the un-named background for several episodes of *America's Missing Children*'" (7). As such, the city needed a fictional representation to complete its existence from Greig's point of view. The fictional representation Greig created to complete this puzzle is not an idealised form. It is a city of loss. It does not serve people as home and it is not a land of belonging but a place of disconnection and loneliness. Although it lures the characters into its own scope, it does not promise reconnection but it is a dead end.

In essence, the relationship between the city and its inhabitants does not merely consist of the latter constructing the former. It is much more complicated than that; that is, the city also has the power to shape or "get into" the citizens and determine their identity. To further this complication, the reality of the city is not only limited to the "hard" reality of its roads, walls, buildings, and so forth, but it also includes the imagined or the fictional version that can be called the "soft" version. Raban attracts attention to the conflict between these two versions of the city and its consequences on the citizen. From his argument, it can be deduced that the former city may simply be at odds with the latter, and that is why the concurrence of soft and hard from time to time alienates the person from the urban environment. He is transformed into "a balloonist adrift," and he needs "anchors to tether [him] down" (Raban 1). It is the city that provides these points of anchorage, thereby letting the citizens build their own identities. The reality of the city, therefore, cannot be reduced merely to maps or other representations; it is rather a co-existence of the "hard" and the "soft."

Considering the relationship between a human being and the surrounding culture in his famous book *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*, David Harvey attempts to answer a similar question, and the answer is helpful to understand the hard version of San Diego in Greig's play: "Does the collectivity shape the person or does the person shape the collectivity" (200)? Following that, Harvey puts the spotlight on the capitalist mindset:

> In the US, . . . private property and inheritance, market exchange, commodification and monetization, the organization of economic security and social power, all place a premium upon personalized private property vested in the self (understood as a bounded entity, a non-porous individual), as well as in house, land, money, means of production, and the like, as the elemental socio-spatial forms of political-economic life. (200)

This mindset promotes a unilateral approach to urban space and everything is based on human actors owning and shaping whatever is around them. Accordingly, the human self is deemed to be "a bounded" or "non-porous" object, which is totally against the understanding of theoreticians like Brennan, Tschumi and Harvey himself. It is against this capitalist culture that Greig sets his soft city and creates an eye-opening contrast. As it can also be understood from the play, San Diego stands for a sample reflection of capitalist urban culture. With its highways, skyscrapers and luxurious details, the city is the embodiment of what Harvey was listing: "market exchange, commodification and monetization" (200). Yet, the soft version of San Diego is composed by the playwright to seriously reduce the reputation of the capitalist idealisation.

Greig's understanding of city formation in his plays combines the 'soft' and 'hard' versions of urban reality. As mentioned before, he always attaches a representation to its material reality to make it complete. To further the interaction between the former and the latter, Greig adopts an architect-like attitude in his works. He finds maps "appealing" and goes beyond them to create his own personal maps through his plays; he says, "I'm quite interested in finding my way through worlds, and maps are good for that. I think that if we say that the process of making a play is a bit like making a journey into an unknown world, then a big part of that process is kind of making the map, of finding the map" (qtd. in Rodríguez, "Zāhir and Bātin" 88). This process of making/finding turns the playwright into an architect and endows Greig's settings with a special relationship with the characters. As such, the playwright has similar duties to an architect to mould the space of a building or a stage. This is why Tschumi's definition aligns the architect with a playwright: "The architect designs the set, writes the script, and directs the actors" as long as "architectural spaces and programs can become totally interdependent" (128). The architect does not only design the buildings but also intervenes in the actions of the residents. As a consequence of this entanglement, the "architectural decision" has the power to "determine the user's attitude" (Tschumi 128) as the playwright gives a direction to his character's identity with the journey they take through the maps of the playwright's creation. However, it is not within the scope of this paper to explore the power of the playwright or the architect, because once the process of creation is completed, it is no longer the architect or the playwright that interacts with the inhabitants, but it is the structure itself that cohabits the space with the people and actively determines the reality of the residents. Therefore, this paper will be scrutinising the interaction between the urban space of Greig's *San Diego* and the characters.

The play commences with a prologue of David, the playwright, travelling from Scotland to San Diego by plane and seeing a "greylag goose" (Greig 8) on the tailfin of another aeroplane. The image prompts an anecdote David recalls from a newspaper about "a flock of baby geese" saved by "a Quebecois biologist" (8). As the story unfolds, it is revealed that the geese do not know how to migrate because they have lost their mother; the biologist knows that their brain is designed to follow some sound patterns like their mother. He teaches them to follow "a rhythmical sound" and by producing the same sound in a small plane, he leads them to where they need to fly. With an inspiring analogy, David states that "*America's Missing Children* are perhaps drawn to San Diego because it is sufficiently large and emits a rhythmical sound" (8). Many characters in the play are or were lost at some point in their lives and they end up populating the streets of the city. Greig scrutinises the journey of these characters and reveals the strength of the city which creates a vortex of attraction and engineers them like end products.

To begin with, Pilot, Kevin, is of pivotal importance in *San Diego* to further Greig's analogy of the geese missing their mother. While he is on the plane to San Diego, David is soothed by the incoming self-confident voice of Pilot who seems to "[know] where he's going" (9). Yet, this soothing sound of the pilot becomes a piece of the biggest ironies Greig creates during the play. Although Pilot seems to be a confident guide in his cockpit while flying the plane, ironically, he does not look like a good father to his own daughter. As soon as the first part of the play concludes with the screeching sound of the landing tyres of the plane, Pilot transforms into someone lost in the crowds of San Diego. The second part of the play starts with Laura, the daughter of Pilot who is in a hospital, searching for a signal and calling his father with a mobile phone. The Pilot's prominent image of a guiding figure is dramatically shattered beyond this point. Right after missing his daughter's call, he starts looking for the phone, yet it is not to call Laura back. He is rather calling an agency to invite a call girl. Obviously, Pilot is not the goose sending signals to his goslings, and shortly afterwards, it also becomes clear that he himself is lost in this city when he is stripped of the technology of his plane. He himself gets lost when he is asked to give directions to his apartment:

> **Pilot**: I'm sorry, I don't know the city
> It's called Pacific View.
> **Woman:** Can you see the Pacific there?
> **Pilot:** No at least I don't know
> I can see the Hilton Hotel
> The top of the Hilton Hotel
> And, when I look out of the window, there's a freeway
> And it intersects with another freeway
> It's a complex, a complex of apartments. (18–19)

Even scanning through a map and going out of his apartment to look for the name of the street are to no avail; he cannot help the girl find his location. While defining the city as "non-place" in Marc Auge's terms, Dan Rebellato makes it clear that Greig's San Diego is "an anonymous complex of freeways and apartment blocks whose only distinguishing

marker is a Hilton International hotel that can be found in any major city across the world" (174). Revisiting Raban's theory, Pilot can be defined as "a balloonist adrift" without "anchors to tether [him] down" (Raban 1) and interestingly the city abstains from providing him proper anchorage to mitigate his search for his place. The only locators he could find around are the Hilton Hotel and the freeway, which can certainly be found in any other American metropolitan city. The hard version of Greig's San Diego does not collaborate with its residents by yielding locators for their identities, yet it rather generates an identity of loss. This basically stems from the conflict between the soft and hard versions of the city's reality. The characters rely on their soft version of the city, consisting of what they have got about the city. The name of Pilot's apartment, 'Pacific View' is highly related to this soft reality. The city is supposed to be positioned next to the ocean; nevertheless, the ocean is not visible from the apartments. The irony underlines the conflict between the soft and the hard city and clarifies why Pilot is lost. His expectations, springing from the soft map of San Diego, a mental map, does not comply with the hard reality of San Diego, just like Pacific View does not comply with the reality of the Pacific's absence. Exploring Greig's dramaturgy, Rebellato argues that "Greig leaves little solid ground for the audience as names, origins and identities continually slip and double and the audience is left to join the dots of this multi-perspectival work" (173). Yet, this is not true only for the audience. The characters themselves are in the same condition: The names, directions, maps and technological guidance do not help them find a foothold.

Reflecting the complexity of the reality experienced in this urban space, Greig organises overlapping action and dialogue during many scenes in the play. While Pilot is casually looking for his phone and later trying to find the directions to his apartment, David, the travelling playwright, is simultaneously lost on the stage:

> **David:** I've been in San Diego for six hours and already I'm lost
>
> The girl from the theatre who met me at the airport was called Amy, she gave me a car and a map. It was an automatic car, I set off on the freeway and I seemed to drive for hours just following everybody else. Then I was halfway to Mexico. I decided to stop and ask somebody. (15)

Recalling the playwright's interest in maps, and reminding the reader of the difference between the hard and soft realities of urban space, characters repeatedly wield maps to find their way or location. Yet, the vague urban architecture the playwright designs and creates on the stage, mirroring Greig's perception of big cities, does not let them meet by intention. The characters are only allowed to find each other when they are lost; in a sense, they are united in their lostness. First, asking for directions, David comes across Daniel, the stowaway who came to San Diego under the wings of David and Pilot's plane, and Daniel "is carrying a dead goose" (15) at that moment. Then, David, Pilot, and Amy, the girl looking for Pilot's apartment, are reunited by chance once Pilot and Amy find David bleeding to death next to the freeway. He has been stabbed by Daniel and left to die.

A few scenes later, when the narrative turns back to David and Pilot, it is Pilot who finds him first. The audience finds Pilot trying to keep David awake. At this moment, Pilot

hands over David a "Blue Guide" of San Diego and asks him to read some facts from the book out loud. The guide is highlighting some interesting facts like the city having "the highest quality of life in the whole of the United States" and its airport being "so close to the city centre" (34). The scene creates a dark contrast between what the characters go through in San Diego and the resplendent image created by the book's narrative. As Marilena Zaroulia puts it, "[t]he Pilot as well as other characters in San Diego do not experience the place in a way determined by tourist guides or other narratives that present a place only as a destination; instead, the image of San Diego appears as a multidimensional one depending on the way each character interacts with the place and the people inhabiting them" (72). The interaction between people and a city does not happen all at once; that is, every person inhabits and experiences different parts of a city. This makes the city "a multidimensional" entity. Moreover, every inhabitant has his own version of the soft city, which is independent of the hard reality experienced through the city but is based on the realities presented through details such as the "blue guide" in *San Diego*.

Diverse and tough as the experience characters have with the city is, there is a common ground on which these experiences are based. Through this common ground, Greig shows how "[t]he 'atmosphere' or the environment literally gets into the individual" in Brennan's words (1). The city gets its citizens lost, and being lost, searching for an anchoring point in life becomes a pivotal part of the character's identity. That is why, the theme of searching and calling are repeatedly iterated by the playwright. Later in the play, David, the stabbed mirroring persona of the playwright, – as the play consists of a dream-like setting – reappears and confesses how the city strips them of their feeling of belonging:

> A person needs to know where they are, where they're going and what time it is.
> . . .
> But in reality – time and place no longer exist in the world
> There is not time in the city
> There is no place on the high street
> The safety of the ground is an illusion
> . . .
> We want to be a part of the rhythm
> We want to belong
> . . . (88–89)

R. E. Pahl's critique of urban society underlines how the city itself is a confusion: "In an urbanized society, 'urban' is everywhere and nowhere: the city cannot be defined and neither, therefore, can urban sociology" (143). It is this confusion that penetrates into the citizens and leads them to an identity of lostness. The undefinable and inconsistent nature of the city seeps into the veins of its inhabitants, and their communication with the urban environment brings them loss and ambiguity. David searches for a theatre and ends up

dead next to a highway. Zaroulia contends that multiple Davids appearing after the first's death is a consequence of "disorientation—both in terms of location but also subsequent identity confusion" (76). In a similar vein, numerous characters with the same name like Amy are also a part of this confusion. Eventually, with or without the same name, every character goes through this sense of loss: Pilot calls Amy but can find her only by coincidence; Laura calls for her father but she can never find him; Daniel looks for his mother yet what he finds is not a mother to attach himself, and his journey concludes with disappointment; Marie "wander[s] round being scared all the time" for not being able to find comfort (Greig 60). In other words, the city, "gets into the individual" (Brennan 1) or into the characters.

Conclusion

All in all, the urban space Greig prepares for his characters in *San Diego* is not just a simple setting to nest the action and dialogue in the play. He constructs a 'soft' city with only a few markers for his characters to hold onto and lets them wander around in search of a place to belong. In the meantime, the city demonstrates that it is not a passive container box waiting to be engaged with by the living beings inhabiting it. The city has its own agency and vibrancy, which is to say, it is not only shaped by human beings but it also shapes them. While people engineer the city, the city penetrates into their identities. While the playwright is the constructor of this fictional city of San Diego, it is this same city that divides David into multiple identities all at loss. Greig's San Diego becomes a demonstration of the conflict between the hard and soft versions of the city. It navigates its inhabitants into loss, and being lost becomes a part of their identity; on the other hand, it denies the idealisation of the capitalist mindset and questions the social and psychological catastrophe the citizens go through. Despite wielding cutting-edge technology like mobile phones, navigation devices and aeroplanes, the characters lose communication with each other and lose track of their whereabouts. Even the sincerest form of connection between parents and their siblings is severed, and the families do not function as hubs of mutual understanding. To refer back to the metaphor of goslings, parents cannot guide their children because they are already lost in the city. The city no longer functions as a home to belong to: its members are living in the city but they cannot find attachment and belonging. They are in a constant search which testifies to their being lost. By projecting a soft version of the city, Greig completes the puzzle and reminds the co-existence of these versions.

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