

RINNY GREMAUD

IT'S A TACKY WORLD (EXCERPT)

Translated by Luise von Flotow

I LIVE IN LAUSANNE, on the Swiss shores of Lake Geneva. For as long as I can remember, I have felt sad about how ugly its streets are. I say this not to be snobbish but because I am convinced that this ugliness is not relative. It's not because I have seen much more beautiful streets that I find these ones particularly ugly. The streets of Lausanne, and in particular the streets in the centre of Lausanne, are intrinsically ugly, even objectively ugly. Since the 1970s the disastrous architectural and urbanist choices made in the city's development have constructed a remarkably impoverished commercial landscape. Indeed, the city centre is so utterly hideous and unchic that it is beyond recuperation. Which is not to say that the ensemble is completely devoid of charm, but walking through that part of the city I can't help but feel sulky, irritated by this constructed environment: it seems so final, so irremediable.

I have always thought Lausanne was too small for me. I would come back from my travels and be confronted by its ugliness. This city, which I love and prefer to many others, would strike me—on the world's scale—as filled with impossibilities and small-mindedness, as though the lack of panache that I tend to ascribe more generally to this part of Switzerland had materialized in its buildings and was reflected in its shop windows. It seemed that the poor city centre, poor pedestrian streets, and poor marketplace had nothing more to offer than musty café-restaurants and drab store signs.

Over the last decade I observed a rather disconcerting phenomenon take hold in Lausanne: any shop that was empty would sooner or later become a shoe store. If some place closed down—a butcher shop, a chocolate shop, a fashion boutique, a gift/souvenir store, a hardware store, a bookstore, a fabric store, hi-fi, mobile telephone, housewares, fashion furniture, a welding shop, whatever—in the next year a shoe store would open up. Even the shoe

stores were replaced by shoe stores.

Invariably, mid-range stores would sell low-quality shoes in a completely nondescript set-up. Sometimes they were branches of well-known chains with outlets in all the other cities of Switzerland or Europe. But more often, they were independent stores—the kind that employ one or two older Italian women and offer an assortment of shoes with medium high heels made in China.

I imagined researching this strange change in the urban landscape, calling the commercial authorities and building managers and going door-to-door in the pedestrian streets to survey the neighbours—not to understand why the other shops were failing but to figure out what systemic anomaly was allowing shoe stores to proliferate without ever really flourishing, since they too ended up disappearing.

As far as I know, a mid-range shoe business does not make for massive profit margins. It is a sector that depends on the economic climate of a place. In times of crisis, this type of product tends to give way to more occasional purchases of high-quality items. When there is not much cash, a good pair of expensive, durable, and classic shoes is considered to be worth more than several pairs of fashion-dependent throwaways.

So, from the perspective of economics, the proliferation of shoe stores was counter-intuitive. Nor could it be explained by some local idiosyncrasy or twist in the market. Something about the local business realities was allowing shoe stores to multiply.

I devised a number of hypotheses.

First: these stores were less important for selling shoes than they were for laundering the money of various underground economies. It's a known fact that small businesses offer the easiest ways for dirty money to become licit. Who would check if the money deposited in a bank by the owner of a shoe store actually came from the sale of shoes?

My second hypothesis was that, given the same rental income, building managers would favour a shoe store as a tenant over any other type of business because it requires very little renovation, so the lease agreement would be simpler and less costly.

Third, I hypothesized that the countless regulations, sanitary rules, and other controls on business activities might discourage most other businesses except shoe stores. The Belgian owner of a clothing boutique in the old city centre had innovative renovation plans that didn't conform to regulations,

and he talked to me at length about the frustration he felt at the treatment meted out by the commercial authorities, who astounded him with their ball-busting policies. After five years in business and tired of the struggle, he eventually gave up, and his shop was replaced by a shoe store.

Finally, my fourth hypothesis: Lausanne is known worldwide for its three spectacular topographic levels, extending over three hills. The explanation could simply be technical: its paving stones destroy the shoes that trudge over them more quickly than elsewhere. Of the four hypotheses, this was the simplest, and the least likely. But resting as it did on the issue of demand, it was worth considering, if only formally.

Taken together or individually, these four avenues of research would doubtless have allowed me to break through the mystery of this proliferation. But the idea collected dust in a corner of my brain. Like so many other projects that are set aside for better days, this one ended up dissolving in my body; I metabolized, digested, and assimilated it until I developed the illusion that it had concretized. This is the privilege of indecisiveness: the capacity to believe that there is but a short step between an idea and its realization—a step so negligible that it is quite useless to even take it.

And then, over time, things in Lausanne changed for the better, as gentrification brought a more targeted, independent, and courageous kind of commerce to some areas. On the other hand, a large number of bankrupted shoe stores were replaced by real estate agencies or the branches and outlets of global chains. Like anywhere else, these chains are the only ones that can and do take on long-term leases for stores located in busy city centres.

Over thirty years I have seen Lausanne trade in its local unsightliness for global unsightliness, which has turned it into a clone of neighbouring cities and of all the other cities of the same size the world over. Lausanne, which felt too small for me yesterday, has become too global.

It never ceases to amaze me how fatalistic people are about the ugly environments in which they live, as though the daily suffering and the depressing, abrasive aggression that makes the body resist both passively and permanently only really affect a handful of overly sensitive aesthetes with time on their hands, who can just as easily move somewhere else since they generally belong to the well-heeled classes anyway. Let them go build architects' villas in the suburbs or buy a loft in some gentrified neighbourhood and stop filling our ears with complaints of privilege. The people have neither time nor money to bother with good taste.

Now, I'm not so concerned with taste—good or bad. I'm concerned with the ugliness that takes over our pedestrian streets or city squares when they host nothing but franchises, low-end clothing chains, and branches of supermarkets. Their uniformly garish display windows, featuring the same global labels, are ensconced at the foot of high-rises that have been constructed or renovated without style or spirit. A criminal lack of vision and originality causes not-so-clever entrepreneurs driven by imbecilic optimism to keep opening up franchises that only make building managers happy.

Like the omnipresence of global chains, these mediocre retailers are symptoms of a larger problem. Indeed, they are evidence of a chain of irresponsibility, petty personal interests, cowardice, abandonment, and the accumulation of indifference. I'm referring to real estate promoters who play up profitability and municipal authorities in charge of urban development who wash their hands of the question. I'm referring to a kind of liberalism that hardly conceals its laissez-faire attitudes and the inhabitants of these tacky cities who hardly react.

How is it that the commercial offerings of our city centres are not a political topic? We seldom hear that the urban environment plays a role in a citizen's well-being because those who manipulate ideas don't want to touch such unsavoury topics as consumption or the buying and selling of real estate. Or, if they do, it is only to denounce the subjugation and manipulation of the masses.

As far as I'm concerned, the levelling of the commercial offerings in our cities has consequences that are quite concrete and reach beyond the sole, rather tainted, pleasure of the consumer. They touch the heart of a citizen's feeling of empowerment or weakness.

The commercial environment is an essential part of the physical reality we inhabit. If it no longer represents a place and a community but only a system—that is, the system of chains and franchises, which means nothing to us and for which we mean nothing—then it doesn't matter if we are here, somewhere else, or even nowhere, such as on the web, in our pajamas, in bed.

As commercial activity is increasingly reserved for a handful of big industrial groups, the feeling of possibility erodes. Doing business within and for a collective or developing a local offer that is adapted to the needs of a particular population has become a sort of abstraction—a model from another time.

So what is it that makes a place feel like home? What is it that anchors us and creates a sense of community and social connection? What gives us the urge to act on our surroundings or the feeling that this is even possible? We are affected by the urban landscapes we traverse and everything our eyes automatically take in. If everything is ugly—uniformly ugly—then this limits our boldness as well as our desires.