The immediate genesis of this panel was the sense that we needed to revisit ‘The City as Text: Urban Environments as the Classroom in Education Abroad’, the first of the series of CAPA’s Occasional Papers published in May 2012. There were several reasons for this thought. The authors had got older if not wiser and we were aware that new material had become available, other books had appeared and the paper was out of print, although available on line on our website.

There were some notable new books since the paper had been written. Most recently, Lauren Elkins’ Flaneuse opened up the notion of flaneur, the man about town, with her study of women as walkers in the city. Her study offered insights that challenged some embedded gender assumptions. I also revisited some texts that had slipped out of focus over time, particularly Alfred Kazin’s A Walker in the City.

It was not only commentary and critical thought that had changed since we wrote the text in 2011. Cities themselves are not static spaces but quasi-organic forms shaped and reshaped not only in concrete but also in the imagination of those who inhabit them. The most obvious factor that has intensified alterations of perception is the form and frequency of urban terrorism. Since the cataclysm
of September 11, 2001, urban terrorism has become more frequent and more oddly intimate: actions that are less anonymous though no less random. Our cities are more menacing environments -- both familiar and disturbingly new.

At a more creative level, the city is a space for exploration and accidental encounters where the physical world, the world of memory (as personal and collective histories), and the construction of myth co-exist: a confrontation with paradox.

It is also a landscape of transformation where the self-moves from one location to another in more than a geographic sense. Cities are marked by constructed boundaries: roads, race, wealth, class, across visible and invisible frontiers. The geography of Athens, London, New York, creates boundaries and barriers that are physical, political, sociological and imaginative: a landscape of mind as well as geography, white space open to interpretative acts. The city is, therefore, not inert space but a challenge to invent: analogous to a character in fiction that is no less “real” for the fact of its malleability: a place built of bricks and ideas, populated by the living and the dead.

Geography becomes a metaphor for intellectual and imaginative space. The village is small, constructed as parochial and narrow. The wilderness is by definition virgin space, untouched (or at least unspoiled) by human hands--outside of history. The city, in contrast, is inclusive, wide enough to contain
polarities and paradoxes - a place of memory, promise, menace and refuge. To travel through the streets is to encounter juxtaposition and asymmetry, movement and flow. Through that created space flows in (and out) culture, wealth, influence, crime, poetry, dreams and delusions. Geography becomes a metaphor for intellectual and social space.

The conjunction of these factors led us to think that it was time to reconsider and revisit. This panel is the beginning of that process and we will invite our panel and you to contribute to the new edition.

On a personal level, my essay in the first edition was based on my experience as a Jew growing up in the East End of London in the 1950s and 1960s. I tried to explore the transformation of the Jew into an urban figure, at home on the streets but uneasy in nature; a transformation made through expulsions and exclusions culminating in the forced exodus from the shtetl: Jewish villages of Eastern Europe where life styles and working practices were traditional (artisan manufacturing, farming, small retailing) and far from those characterised by life in the city.

In contrast, in my childhood experience, the countryside was a form of alien, exotic landscape about as familiar as Jupiter to my generation of unruly urchins. As children our notions of community and neighbourhood were narrow, represented by a few streets, a community defined by the families who lived within that space. The world beyond was vaguely menacing, occupied (we
believed) by people who had no love for us. Though unspoken, the shadows of Jewish experiences in Europe fell across all our lives creating a climate of
timidity, a sense of unease that was neither defined nor specific. The holocaust was a silent presence, neither understood nor vocalised. The people beyond our community were, we believed, alarmingly strong and simple-minded in their prevailing prejudice. This was not a comforting thought.

The alignment with urban rather than rural life was bred into our collective psyche and our world was streets that were safe and familiar, our known universe. The countryside was alien space, bestial and unhygienic (this from kids who saw no meaningful distinction between sleeves and handkerchiefs). We knew nobody who lived in the countryside.

As I grew older I became a student of literature and, perhaps demonstrating a serious lack of imagination, my research was focused upon the Jew as a protagonist within the literature of America, in particular. The Jew was almost inevitably an urban figure, particularly in the American novel where the known world was frequently New York with forays into Chicago, bits of California and, for the decrepit, Florida. The daffodils over which Wordsworth swooned and the great ocean that drove Ahab towards madness and profound epiphany in an elemental struggle with Moby Dick could, certainly, be appreciated by Jewish students of literature. But only on the page. As the comedian Jackie Mason observed with particular clarity “There is no bigger schmuck than a Jew
in a boat.” Flowers and sea (unless in a fancy vase or on a nice beach somewhere) were alien environments. Jews were not a pastoral people in the world in which I lived or in the worlds I studied.

That said, the filter of my experience was too narrow a lens to understand the lives of Jews in cities. Jews had been farmers and artisans in the villages of Eastern Europe. In Israel, the experience of Jews was historically distinct – a pioneer struggle with wilderness and desert. In the world I inhabited the work we aspired to was sedentary, intellectual, not a matter of physical exertion. We took a perverse pride in being physically inept challenged by such tasks as changing lightbulbs: more at home with words than screwdrivers. The unease of us Diaspora Jews in Israel may have something to do with this fundamental distinction between perceived identities.

The limitations of my analysis were not only historical and autobiographical however. The experience and the relocation of Jews in urban environments resonates with histories, myths and ideas that create a series of paradoxes that offer a case study of the construction of ethnic identity. This is an identity that is paradoxically both a matter of community consciousness and a set of stereotypes that are used to validate anti-semitism. Jews are among those groups who are defined not only by themselves but by those who are hostile to them, and to behaviours and ideas that they perceive as alien or subversive.
The interaction of myth and history is a potent one. The Wandering Jew morphs into the idea of cosmopolitanism which, in turn, enforces stereotypical notions of divided loyalties. Cosmopolitanism was transformed into a crime in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia precisely because it implied that certain groups (most commonly the Jews) were only marginally part of the nation. Henry Ford also strongly and actively endorsed this view.

Histories and myth in uneasy conjunction offer a portrait of dislocation. The Jews were a dangerous, alien subversive group, conspirators whose loyalties belonged elsewhere – even if that place could not be readily located.

In short, the Jews I focused upon had become a cosmopolitan people without a sense of permanence; perfectly suited, therefore, for the fluid disturbances and impermanence of urban life.

It is no accident that in the greatest novel of urban life in the twentieth century, the central protagonist is a Jew: the restless cosmopolitan Leopold Bloom who wanders around Dublin in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922).

I am fully aware that this is a very particular approach to the study of the city. Nevertheless, it serves to indicate the degree to which urban studies creates a substantial field of investigation that is profoundly fertile for analysis and exploration. Our panel and our studies demonstrate the centrality of urban studies in study abroad from some diverse perspectives. A common thread that
links all of these areas of thought is that the city offers access to profound learning experiences.

Studies of urban environments have an obvious relevance to the contemporary environment. For most of us the rhythms of life are not defined by the natural world. We do not wake and sleep in alignment with the rising and falling of the sun. Time is marked by other more mechanical and noisy cadences. The global future is urban. Our experiences are increasingly impacted by those realities. The city is a place of diversity and social dynamics that define the worlds we inhabit. An engagement with and within those spaces is arguably crucial to the educational agenda.

Urban studies also places the notion of situational learning at the heart of study abroad. In one way or another, in this context “abroad” is a dynamic factor in how and what we teach. Students are engaged in studying various courses and, essentially, the context in which those courses exist. In the city, the interaction of place and discipline creates potential for significant enrichment and enhancement of learning.

Finally, study abroad challenges the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines. The impact of place, situational learning, necessarily adds a further dimension to the topic studied. Traditional boundaries are eroded when the dynamics of the city create contexts that are inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary.
The speakers on this panel demonstrate this precisely. Approaches to the city may be primarily geographic, economic, political, ethnographic, sociological, historic, mythic, psychological and so on, but they are never solely one or the other.

The potential for cities as uniquely challenging sites for learning which transcend traditional study abroad agendas and generate innovative pedagogies is the broad focus of our collective thoughts. To open these discussions, I offer the image of the Jew as a case study of constructed identity in which history and myth interact to offer at least one pathway to the study of the city.

NOTES:


Alfred Kazin, A Walker in the City, New York, Harvester, 1951.

Jackie Mason: “There is no bigger schmuck than a Jew in a boat.”