

# Exploring the History of Cities through Sculpture

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"Boston," by Matthew Picton.

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MAPS HAVE ALMOST always been a feature in my work; to me, they function in a transportive manner, allowing for the imagination of place, landscape, and history. Maps are often objects of great beauty, intricate diagrams of the forms and patterns of the organisms that constitute the city. My works map the physical terrain and the historical and cultural landscape that reflects each city's evolving individuality and idiosyncrasy, interweaving the narratives of personal and public history.

I am less concerned with creating a factual and objective record than I am with presenting an emotional and cultural history of the city, a non-objective mirror of that history seen through the lens of film, music, literature, and the visual art of a given period. I am particularly interested in the intersection between history and art, the blurred line between the myth, the narrative, and the historical truth. Some works view a city specifically through its literary heritage; others will have defined periods of cinematography associated with them. Many cities will have undergone some cataclysmic change, through the effects of war or natural disaster, and some of the sculptures I have made have been specifically about this.

In my practice, a great deal of time is spent researching the city in question; I like to immerse myself in the history, reading the significant novels and films set in and about that particular city. I am slowly working toward a parallel history of all the major cities of the world, realized as sculptures.

I present four examples of my works here.

## MEXICO CITY #2

To spend time exploring the Zocalo—the vast square in the heart of the oldest part of Mexico City—is to become aware of the layers of history in the city, the remnants of which are all visible here. High above the square is a huge Mexican flag, in its center is the emblem depicting the myth of the founding of the city: the eagle devouring the snake upon the cactus. The original city of Tenochtitlan was built on an island in Lake Texaco, the drained lake upon which Mexico city currently sits. The surrounding Spanish palaces and the Catholic cathedrals were built on top of the leveled Aztec pyramids of Tenochtitlan, the bases of which can be seen partially unearthed beneath the great flagstones of the square. It was here during

excavations that the great stone wheel of the Sun Stone, the Aztec calendar, was discovered. The form of this can be seen in the background of the sculpture. In the palaces surrounding the Zocalo are some of the famous murals by Diego Riviera and Siqueiros, most of which are a visual representation of the history of Mexico. Images from these murals are suspended beneath the main street network inside the sculpture. These murals have been cut through with text from Octavio Paz's poem "La Piedra del Sol," based upon the Aztec calendar and the Sun Stone.



"Mexico City #2."



"Mexico City #2," detail.

## BOSTON

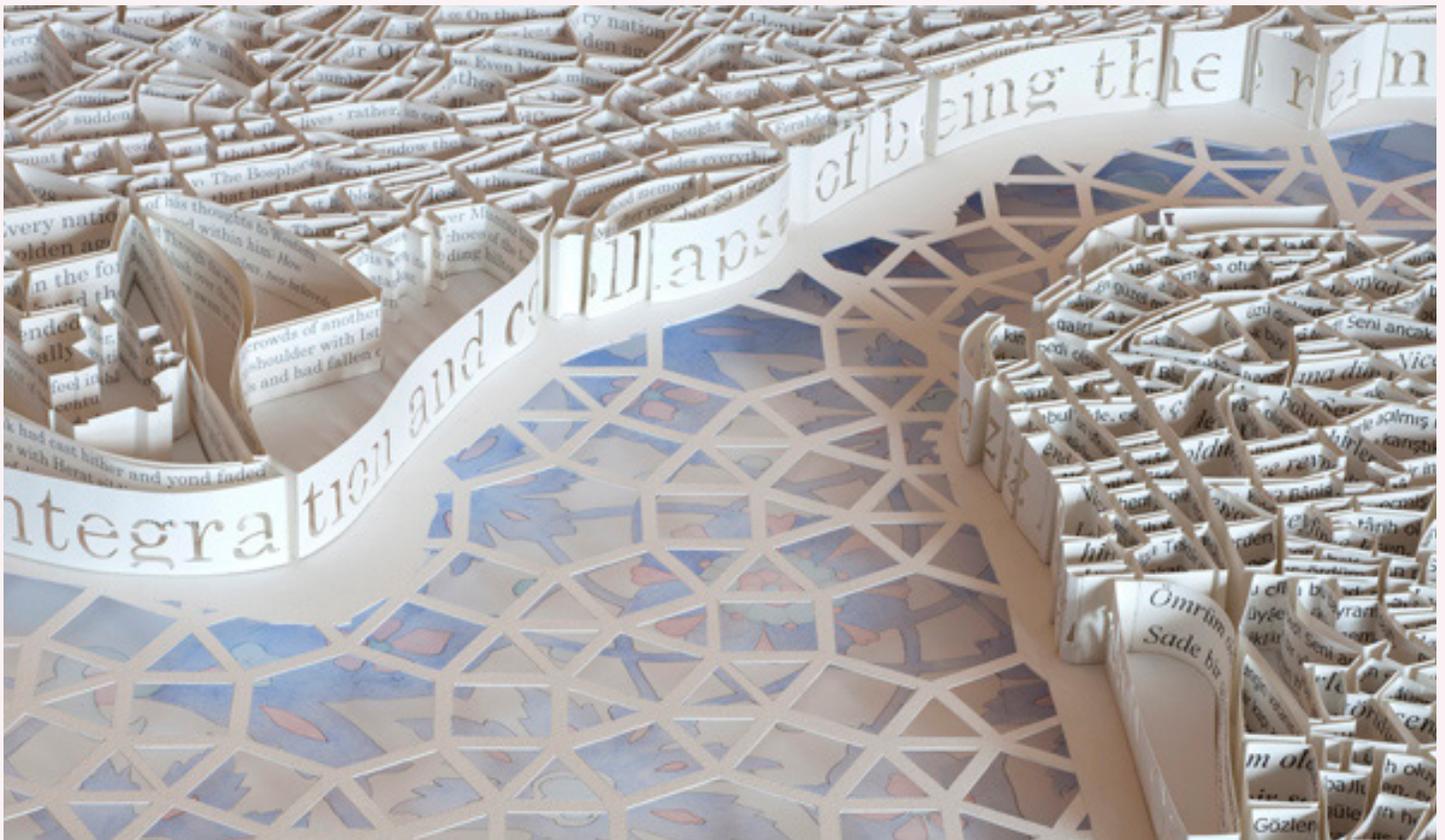
The sculpture “Boston” in part documents the history of the landfill that became Boston. The darker raised forms of the sculpture show the small peninsula that was the original scale of Boston in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Great Boston Fire of 1872 is depicted in the burnt and singed area in the sculpture. The sculpture also contains the words and thoughts of leading intellectual and cultural figures to have emerged from Boston. In many ways this sculpture illuminates the idealism in American culture, whether from the figures of the establishment or from those of the counter-culture.

## ISTANBUL

Human societies are intrinsically dualistic by nature; few cities illustrate this more than Istanbul, which, particularly throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has often been caught between competing polarities. Its unique geographic position, divided between the continents of Europe and Asia, mirrors the competing directions that its society and culture are pulled in. The sculpture incorporates texts from *A Mind at Peace* by Ahmet Tanpinar—this 1949 novel



"Istanbul."



"Istanbul," detail.

poetically depicts and expounds upon the difficult transitional years of the midcentury. The section across the Golden Horn is comprised of the poetry of Yahya Kemal (1884–1958), whose works reflected and reworked the Ottoman poetic heritage into the period in which he lived. The language used is the modern Turkish that became the official language in 1928. Across the Bosphorus on the Asian side are poems in the original Ottoman Arabic texts, by Esrar Dede and Sheyh Galib. The space that is the Bosphorus in the sculpture is filled by a watercolor painting; this painting is taken from the tiles on the wall revetments in the Mosque of Rustem Pasha in Istanbul.

### BERLIN 1928–1989

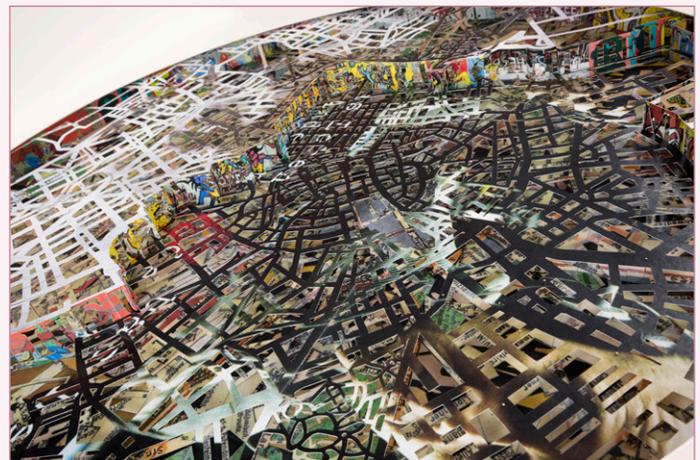
This sculpture is comprised of three layers. The surface layer has a street form of West Berlin cut from the film poster of *The Wings of Desire* by Wim Wenders. The sunken portion of East Berlin is cut from the film poster of *The Lives of Others* by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. Underneath and visible in a fragmented form are images from the posters and covers of the film *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Rainer Fassbinder. The three films address three very specific periods and localities: *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is set in the Berlin of 1928; *The Lives of Others* and *The Wings of Desire* take place in pre-1989 East and West Berlin, respectively.

The map used for the sculpture is from the pre-war era, 1932. The images along the wall are of the murals and graffiti that covered the Berlin Wall before its demolition in 1989.

*Matthew Picton creates fine art sculptures from a variety of media. He is based in Ashland, Oregon, and his work can be found in galleries and locations worldwide. For additional information, please see: [matthewpicton.com](http://matthewpicton.com)*



"Berlin 1928–1989."



"Berlin 1928–1989," detail.

*Visual Fields focuses on the appreciation of cartographic aesthetics and design, featuring examples of inspirational, beautiful, and intriguing work. Suggestions of works that will help enhance the appreciation and understanding of the cartographic arts are welcomed, and should be directed to the incoming section editor, Matt Dooley: [mathew.dooley@uwrf.edu](mailto:mathew.dooley@uwrf.edu).*