A KIND OF LOVING

TOM COMMON + TOM HYDRO GO! SHEFFIELD 2006

How can you love a city?

Well. you can love it out of excitement: with the pace of change, with the number of people, with the height of the buildings and the width of the streets. With the sheer mind blowing speed of the place.

Or you can love it out of lust, flattered by luxury riverside developments you can't afford, infatuated with new iconic architecture. God knows there are enough cities in the North that you can love in this way, that vou can consume. Love like whirlwind romance and expensive dinners, love like shaqqing on fake sheepskin rugs in front of fake fires in fake factories next to canals.

It's difficult to understand, from the outside, from the first glimpse, how an ugly city with seventies buildings and a bad taste in its mouth can make so many oeoole fall in love with it.

On the surface. this city is unlovable.

It doesn't fall into the standardized version of a Successful European City: retail per square foot, trendy department stores, mixed use developments. None of the buzzwords, none of the pages you'd normally see in the brochure. And architecturally, it's blank. Since they knocked the sixties down, we've had no architecture worthy of the name.

This city seems, at first glance, to be pretty mediocre.

But you have to look deeper. elsewhere. Because there are different things to love here. And with time, in the detail. you can see it. This is a picture of the city we love.

The city we love is a lo-fi city.

The pace is different.

It feels like a day-dream, things take a little longer. A city where you can always walk home when a taxi is too much, and where most of the time you want to. A city that's small enough to know. Where you can always bump The place is beautiful. into your friends on a Saturday in the record shops without trying. A low-rise city, five storeys at the max. which isn't about skyscrapers and plate-glass and people like ants in the middle of it all. And this size, this pace, makes the city friendly. We love the city because love is on its lips. Where people on buses, in summer, that should be the city's civic flower. In queues. in newsagents. call each other - strangers -Love. A whole city chattering at bus stops like bird song. This city isn't bigger than any one of us. It's human.

The city we love is a different shape. We don't want it to look like all those other cities. all architectural plastic surgery and botox-ed shopping precincts. It's a cliché, but we want something natural.

The hills that shape our city are inconvenient. They make everything run inwards, like the city is built

in the middle of a giant bath.

But they're beautiful.

They're always there, in between the buildings, in the distance, green and majestic or brown and scrubby. Down in the valleys, there are fast, short, stupid rivers, that aren't big enough to build apartments on. And above them there's a sky that's always changing.

The city is like a theatre set.

The city grows like a carpet. Everything is alive.

In old Victorian parks, with avenues of trees and happy families. Or in the crop of weeds that bloom every doorways, on verges, on the margins, where they shouldn't be. There are trees everywhere. Growing through pavements, along streets, around houses, like packaging. It's like living your life outside.

The city is alone.

The hills pen us in, stop us from escaping. But this isolation has bred independence. We love this city because it refuses to conform. Because it is brave and foolish, and always asks the awkward questions. Because it offers an alternative. even when that alternative is utopian and unlikely. Even if sticking its neck out means its head will be

chopped off, this city tries to do the Right Thing.

Maybe it will always be on the outside. On its own.

But at the same time, this city goes worldwide. It has stamped its name all over the globe. An artisan city, a creator. A city that's always echoed to the sound of making. You can still hear it in the to be rich, not to be at the top of the charts, but to make something beautiful, on its own terms. The same unorthodoxy. the same invention.

Cult classic not bestseller. 

And the city that we love doesn't just exist today. It's been places, done things, that we can only imagine. Maybe there's no beach.

Maybe there's no mega Sunday Times art gallery to buy a coffee in and pretend you like art.

But that doesn't matter.

The city itself is the attraction. A pop up picture book of the last two hundred years. Walk through it, in a direct line, and you pass through everything. Every dirtied brick of the industrial revolution. Every bomb of the Second World War. Every bespectacled architect casting people's lives in concrete. You walk through it. Through back streets and over cobbles and under subways and along streets in the sky.

You see the scars everywhere, all the failed, half streets on your way home at night. From cheap rehearsal finished sections of each chapter, but they're scars rooms, from crafters with their doors open. A few isolated of experience. Scars of a city that's tried, and sometimes hoots and clangs from the workshops. Not making things succeeded, and sometimes failed, but still tried. And you come out of this history, blinking in the light, like something chewed and spat back out again, like you come out of a brilliant but scary film. That brightness is today, after a long industrial story has been played out. laid to rest. Maybe we don't know where we're going next.

But it's going to be amazing. 

This city has holes, gaps, it doesn't fit together. It can't be easily packaged and marketed in a tourist brochure. But that's why it's brilliant.

Because it's an alternative.

The sum of its parts is a city you couldn't imagine in your wildest dreams.

We're not saying you can't love the other cities. too. Of course we get frustrated with this place, when we walk around Paris, Barcelona, Manchester, and we're wooed by their size, and their self-belief, and their beautiful buildings. And sometimes you do fall out with God knows we love ours. the one you love. Sometimes all the charm starts to look a bit tired, all the modesty and secrets just seem to be an excuse to not do anything. Not to have that ambition.

But you always come back to it. Because you know that this city, this kind of loving will always be there for you. This place will always be doing its own thing, always standing at the back with its eyebrows arched, with a shruq on its shoulders.

Always there when those other loves wear off.

This kind of loving echoes round the world.

All those people who love their city, their town, their place, not because it's in the Sunday supplements, not because it's the next big thing, but because they've lived it and they know it and understand what it's about. All those second class cities with a first class past. All those cities with something else to offer than the modern shopping theme park city.

People love these places, because they're unique. Because they've got some personality, some soul.