

‘Decant’

WINE is symbolic in a host of ways. A silver chalice of it can represent the blood of a historic martyr. A cellar full of aged vintages represents private family wealth and educated taste. A table with wine at the centre at any income level represents conviviality, togetherness, sharing, family and community. In France and Spain, for example, where wine is central to culture, it represents a wealth of heritage that is shared across all classes and which undergirds a whole national identity.

Such strong symbolism of the beverage itself naturally spills over into the associations we have with the actions and paraphernalia that are part of the rituals associated with wine. From wine-making to storing, to presenting, serving, and drinking, every layer of dust, every glistening glint of crystal, every red drop soaking gently into a crisp white napkin has great significance.

The great comfort such symbols and rituals afford us (not to mention the tipsiness following what Auden called ‘the cloop of corks’) points to the incredible importance of establishing place, whether around the table or in the spaces of communities, and of human association in rooms and landscapes that accrue significance when they are filled with love and laughter.

Thus it is with sinister irony that some bright spark thought it fit to use the term ‘decant’ to describe the process whereby, in one council’s ‘Decant Policy’, ‘residents are compelled to move from their homes because either their landlord or an authority with compulsory purchase powers has redevelopment plans for their home.’ Oh yes, let’s examine this irony.

What happens when a wine is decanted? Usually a wine to be decanted is a vintage one. It is gently aerated by the process, and most importantly the good, clear wine is separated from the bitter dregs at the bottom of the bottle. It is an easy step from here to determine just what the dregs represent. These are the urban poor to be discarded and rinsed away. Who knows where the drain leads. Who cares?



Here, however, is where the symbolism of ‘decanting’ people ends in its similarity to that of wine. Wine gains from a long association with place, whether this is where the vines are rooted, a cellar rested in, or a culinary culture that has developed over time. The French call this ‘terroir’: deep place, deep time, deep satisfaction. Decanting people treats a building as a simple vessel, empty of association built up over time, and of context.

Finally, we have come to glorify the winemaker. Face wrinkled and baked like the stony soil. Dirt under the fingernails. Not so the urban poor. They have no right to the fruits of their labour or to a deep connection with place and community. What trump their rights are the processes in which developers, aided by a weakened planning system and the exodus of capable designers and planners from the public sector, present ‘viability assessments’ which protect their profits while pruning away any planning gain that might provide homes for low-income people. Those low-income people have a right to landscape and a right to the city, but these rights are bulldozed by a de facto ‘right to profit’ of the developers. It’s not just the urban poor, but us – landscape professionals who have struggled through the recent recession – who know one thing for certain: there is no ‘right to profit’.

So let’s not ‘decant’ people. Let’s be honest about the fact that they are being forced from their homes rather than dressing the process up in pseudo-gracious language. Then both we and they will be more clear-sighted about the whole debacle. And then in the good times we can decant a little bit of clear, vintage wine together with clear consciences. •

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