Artículos

The fragmented and diffuse city Today: From the emotional city to the town of satisfaction

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Abstract

The article is not an attempt to return to old positions; it does not seek the lost paradise of feelings and sentiments that comprehend human relationships, but it does hope to scratch below the surface of consumption that shrouds the city today. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, one of the fundamental aims of philosophers has been to attain happiness. Today, however, that purpose is threatened. Happy people do not consume, but suffering, what is known in the advertising jargon as "post-shopping depression" has become the raw material for consumption.

Keywords: City, urban planning, technology, anthropological space, architecture, flows, territory, citizens.

*La ciudad fragmentada y difusa Hoy: Desde la ciudad emocional
a la ciudad de satisfacción*

Resumen

El artículo no es un intento de volver a viejas posiciones; no busca el paraíso perdido de los sentimientos y de los sentimientos que comprenden las relaciones humanas, pero sí espero que a la altura debajo de la superficie del consumo que envuelve la ciudad en la actualidad. Desde la época de los antiguos griegos, uno de los objetivos fundamentales de los filósofos ha sido la de alcanzar la felicidad. Hoy, sin embargo, ese propósito se ve amenazado. La gente feliz no consume, pero el sufrimiento, lo que se conoce en la jerga publicitaria como "depresión post-shopping" se ha convertido en la materia prima para el consumo.

Palabras clave: Ciudad, urbanismo, tecnología, espacio antropológico, arquitectura, flujos, territorio, los ciudadanos.

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0. INTRODUCTION

C learly, cities, or metropolitan spaces, are awakening ever more interest. They concentrate the majority of the world's population (72% in developed countries), and constitute the center for information, decision-making, production and consumer networks (a conglomerate of material structures that shape the world). Furthermore, they are an immaterial and invisible abstraction that shapes the basic social relationships and identities upon which our ideas, values and culture are built. The city is a text (Oates, (2001), 63) that calls for interpretation, it needs to be "read".

Today, it is not fitting to refer to "city" in the singular; the city is not a homogeneous organism in need of hermeneutic recognition from a traditional perspective. Instead, the concept of city calls for a redefinition that encompasses the myriad physical, social and linguistic universes it entails, but especially to shed some light on recent technological and perceptual changes.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder's statement (1945-1982), "what we are not capable of changing we should at least describe," undoubtedly serves as an introduction to the ideas I have espoused here. While Fassbinder's words are meant as a justification of the methodology used in this paper, I must, add, however, that I am not wholly convinced that I want to change anything. I certainly do not want my words to be heard as the decadent and melancholy song of an old-timer who refuses to walk down the new road of our times, but rather as those of a researcher who, while acknowledging that Fassbinder was right, is convinced that we must work towards building a city that will allow us to live the happiest and wisest life of all. Our happiness depends on the space in which we live and act. Yet this space is changing by leaps and bounds. My reflections upon the city are a modest attempt to reveal these weaknesses and respond with force, not only to the spectacle itself but to that which forms and creates the city; an organic whole that is born, grows and dies or simply lives badly.

I. CITY EFFECTS ON HUMANS

In the dawn of the 21st century, these recent changes come as no surprise. Back in the 1950s, when the Situationist International (Raspaud, Voyer, 1972 and Berréby, 1985) [2] attempted to bring together the social, psychological and artistic facets of urbanism in a new concept known as psychogeography: "Ce qui manifeste l'action directe du milieu géographique sur l'affectivé.", (*International Situationniste* magazine, 1997, 15), its members already foresaw the influence and effects that the city and its architecture would have on the way living beings thought and acted. The critique waged against the new concept of city that emerged after the Second World War was aimed at the negative changes taking place in all facets of life. Opposition to urbanism and architecture was not centered upon aesthetic questions, but was instead focused on the demand that the city be acknowledged as an entity that exerts an influence upon its inhabitants. The Situationists presented a new technique for appraising the anodyne and predictable city: the *dérive.* In the journal *Les Levres Nues* #8, 1956, Debord states that the dérive is a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiences. Dérive involves the playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psycho grographical effects, and is thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll (Libero, 1996, 22).

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2 A manifold post avant-garde movement originating in the Lettrist movement which, among other aims, vigorously criticized the architecture and urbanism of the time for its sole concern with the problem of housing and the construction of slums (taudis) as a means of dealing with the housing crisis.

The members of the Situationist International recognized that the process of constructing a city was related to the soul and character of its inhabitants. In the first issue of *Potlatch*[3] (Dumontier, 1995, 27-28) magazine, the Situationists summed up this concept by presenting the social and psychological facets of urbanism. Half jokingly and half seriously, they stated: "Enfonction de ce que vous cherchez, choisissez una contrée, une ville de peuplement plus o moins dense, une rue plus o moins animée. Construisez une maison. Mueblez-la. Tirez le meilleur parti de sa décoration et de ses alentours. Choissisez la saison et l'heure. Réunissez les personnes les plus aptes, les disques et les alcohols qui conviennent. L'éclairage et la conversation devront être évidemment de circonstance, comme le climat extérieur ou vos souvenirs. S'il n'y a pas eu d'erreur dans vos calculs, la reponse doit vous satisfaire (Comuniquer les résultats à la redaction), (*Potlach* #1, 1996, 15).
Their seeming vagueness and consequent indifference regarding the place or time and type of dwelling, their emphasis on a combination of music, friends and alcohol as social practices to construct housing, underlie not only the prevailing aesthetic concept of that time, but also the need for psychological and social elements to achieve greater habitability and improve living conditions overall.

The members of these movements could not even begin to fathom just how visionary they were in perceiving the psychological wear and tear that the urban setting would have on the well being of society, a well being that was not material but spiritual in nature. On the whole, cities have embarked on a shortsighted functionalism and ignored the psychology of the environment; imbuing the objects that surround us with a practical and standardized meaning in response to the new laws of the market. Architecture has been transformed from a mental and artistic representation into the materialization of an economic state. A good example of this standardization can be found in one of the classic handbooks of modern and contemporary architecture: (The examples of devotion to the "functional" were similar and often very sophisticated...The preference for isolating structures within space is as evident in the temples of the nineteenth century as it is in the high-rises of the mid-twentieth century. Monochromatism and even the monotony of the homogeneous materials that covered the walls and the abandonment of all forms of relief were countered in both periods by the accentuation of direct structural expression, (Russell Hitchcock, 1993, 22).

Thus, although we do, in fact, continue to live in physical spaces, in a "real" world, the significance and influence of these places upon our perception and knowledge has been reduced to a new function: representation and class power in the city is organized around flows where social relations no longer exist. In other words, the city has turned its back on human action. As Lynch so categorically states, we must once again acknowledge the mobile elements of a city; the people and their daily activities are just as important as its fixed parts (Kevin Lynch manifested that living beings are not only observers of the city, but part of the spectacle and share the stage with the other actors.
Almost all the senses are activated and the image (of the city) is a combination of all of them (Lynch, 2000, 10). In his book, Lynch defends the theory

In his book, Lynch defends the theory that the visual quality or "legibility" of a city is decisive in the urban milieu, that is, an orderly environment can serve as a framework for the organization of activity, beliefs or knowledge. Thus, if architecture-as Hilberseimer claims- is the creation of space (Hilberseimer, 1999, 98), it is founded upon our own perception. If our perception changes, so will the space and the relationship that living beings have with it.

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3 Potlatch magazine, which has been published since June 1954, gave voice to the radical criticism that members of the Lettrist International (forerunner of Situationism, whose most prominent members included Guy Debord, Gil J. Wolman, Mohamed Dahou, Jacques Fillon y Michèle Bernstein) directed against the arts and which constituted the basis upon which the theories of the future Situationist International would be founded..

II. Technology as a process of disembedding human reality

Long before the first *menhir* (in Egyptian, the *benben* is "the first stone that emerged from the chaos," referring to the psychological, spatial and temporal relationship of places with the human being who perceives it. This idea is wonderfully manifested in Stanley Kubrick's *2002: A Space Odyssey)* was erected, human beings had a natural and symbolic manner of constructing the landscape: "walking" (Andreotti, Costa, 1996). This activity, to which the first year of our lives is dedicated, is an act that begins painfully and becomes unconscious, natural and automatic. Walking has always created architecture and landscapes and, in this century, obliges us to perceive the city, make it visible, draw its territory, create it and live it. To put it another way, walking reveals the inner forms of the city. As we move our bodies, we recognize and identify areas, thus creating an individual and social dynamic. This attitude unquestionably entails a "political stance" (in the sense that we are *polites* or citizens); a way of viewing art, urbanism, and the social project as a means of living well. Today, however, the new methods of transportation and mobility in technological societies have brought about a new perception of the city; a new city that affects the emotional behavior of individuals.

Obviously, the formation of a new landscape is a bilateral process between the observer and the observed. While the outer form influences the perceiver, the interpretation of this information, the way in which the data is organized and how our attention is directed, influences what is seen. Humans are extremely adaptable and flexible beings who greatly depend upon the historical relationship they have with their surroundings. Different groups of people can have different images of the same (?) outside reality. Lynch provides numerous examples of the different ways in which primitive groups perceive their physical surroundings. For some, raised topographical features are fundamental to situating the points of reference in a semi-arid region, while others have no names for the elevated features of the terrain but words to denote the smallest horizontal feature of water. (Lynch, 2000, 160 and ff.). But as I already said in an article published last year, technology has introduced a novel element that ruptures the natural interplay between the perceiver and the perceived.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, and especially in the late 20th century, innumerable technological breakthroughs have had a profound influence on the city as the setting for the everyday life of its inhabitants. Industrial and productive society has brought about a progressive democratization of the city, modifying the way in which it is represented, transforming the individual or personal into *uniformed collectives* which have no choice but to convert contemplation into *spectacle*, unique experiences into *consumption,* or knowledge into *information* (By the 1930s some architects had already envisioned the significance of the big city when the requirements of the new city forced them to eliminate any kind of variation in construction: "the common case, law, stands out and is admired. The exception, on the other hand, is averted, nuances are eliminated, measurements are all that count until chaos is forcibly converted into form: logical, precise, mathematical, law", (Hilberseimer, (1999), 102). The risk of transforming the city as the center of life and experience into a center for the production, distribution and consumption of commodities which are mainly technical and cultural has become a reality.

Through new advertising and film myths, the city has been replaced by a bazaar and the outskirts transformed into a prison of dreams. It is evident that each city has its own patterns and singular combinations, a synthesis of modernity and vernacular traditions, but multicultural globalization has had the effect of blending these differences and making them indistinguishable from one another, (López García, Flores Martos, 2007, 37-50).

Today, the city is no longer static, nor is it a creator of perception. Instead, it is crisscrossed by streams of energy, by a whirlwind of human masses that move in a straight line, by automobiles at full speed with sounds and lights that multiply our points of perspective, which metamorphose space without reprieve. This singular, worldwide urban landscape has given rise to manifold sense perceptions that have redefined the traditional human senses. We have not realized it, but the five traditional senses-instruments of perception and our relationship with others-have been transformed into new tools for the appraisal of goods and merchandise. No longer do cities serve to orient us in space or as a nexus between ourselves and **otherness,** that is, with the other that I am not. Instead, they are instruments that link our perception of the world with what we consume: smell becomes *fragrance* (perfume); sight becomes *image* (television); sound becomes *reception* (piped music); taste becomes *flavor* (liquor, soft drinks) and touch becomes *texture* (fabrics or textiles) (Serres, 1985).

If we take a close look, we can see that the senses today are dictated by desire, the very cornerstone of consumption that overwhelms us with promises of happiness through advertising campaigns which are both optimistic and alienating. In such a visual and consumer-oriented world, the viewer does not desire or imagine; he sees and is content to see. All or almost all can be seen with little or no effort. The perverse use of television is just one more symptom of the accelerated movement of our societies towards a new barbarism; a barbarism that is not characterized for being a forerunner to civilization in the way of ancient civilization, but the result of our new civilization and its sidekick: technology.

The risk of replacing a natural and customary way of relating to others with one that is artificial and foreign to us is accepted with great benevolence. No one wants to be excluded from this new discovery, from this new way of understanding space. Furthermore, there is a novel element that has clearly transformed our perception of space: speed. Speed is treated as the raw material for sight. Travel is equivalent to filming; not insofar as it produces images or mnemonic impressions which are new, implausible or supernatural (Virilio, 1988, 67), but as Virilio tacitly acknowledges, in that it entails our need to move from one place to another, leading us to blur out the city and focus solely on the movement itself. A different type of nomadism deurbanizes the city, creating a new model where the speed of transport multiplies the vacancy of space. The consequences of an accelerated world qualitatively transform our perception, blurring all that is fixed: the architecture and the landscape[4]. The ease with which we move and the overlapping of our senses brought on by technology has increasingly given rise to a city that is a network of generic places of speed and transportation. These new spaces ignore the relationship living beings have with their city and its structure and deprive us of reality.

III. The city as an entity outside the inhabitant

For years now we have spoken about the non-city. Although all these processes were initiated with the development of industrial society, today's technological and media-oriented society has had a decisive impact on the global level. At the end of the seventies, the huge generic metropolis of Sao Paolo, Mexico City, Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai and Bombay began to spring up and espouse new lifestyles and relationships between living beings and the city.
I am not referring to cities that have gradually forfeited their history to become economic and tourist attractions (Worldwide, the tourist industry has transformed historical centers and monumental

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4 The cinema is a clear example of perceptual transformation. It is no coincidence that museums and art exhibits dedicate increasingly more space to film and video since the speed of images has intensified in the last decade. Action films are the prime manifestation of this enormous success, including animated films for children that are wholly inspired by speed. This is the way children perceive their surroundings.

cities into pseudo-cultural and pseudo-educational theme parks for commercial purposes), but formless metropolis which are utilitarian, fragmented and multicultural. They are places which oppose the ideal of a socially cohesive monumental city (polis); an ideal that has been traditionally accepted and one which we are loath to replace, even if it is dead. The city as a nucleus of human relations and creator of values and ideas has become a center for production, distribution and consumption. Often, when we speak of the humanities and their loss of influence, what we really mean to say is that the technological and scientific have replaced the relationships between humans.

In the words of Santiago Olmo, the city is transformed "into a bazaar of stereotyped modernity (with electrical appliances, televisions, videos, DVDs, hi-fis and computers) where, too, the myth of new symbolic values merge in film and advertising (Olmo, 2002, 103). As Marisa Vadillo sententiously declares: *" the city today is not inhabited, it is consumed:* consumption and communication are indivisible and what is more, consumption is the most common means of communication in today's social relationships" (Vadillo Rodríguez, 2005 in Román, 2005, 49-66). Clearly, each city has its own patterns and develops its own particular synthesis between the present and its vernacular traditions. But the effect of multicultural global consumption transforms action into something diffuse and homogeneous.

The city alienates us from examining subjective experience. Citizens, who can only measure experience against themselves and exchange affection and passion with others when they frequent places; freeze up and become autistic (Internet is a clear example of this confusion virtual, Candido Mendes reflects on the encounter virtual humans on the Internet, (Mendes, 2010, 350)) only to recover through frenzied consumption.

Anticipating this scenario early on, the Situationists proposed the transformation of time to obtain pleasure. Mistakenly, they believed that the modification of the systems of production and automation were a means to reducing the amount of time spent working, time which could then be dedicated to free play. However, it was necessary to ensure that this non-productive time was not usurped by the power and channeled through capitalist society. They therefore tried to *construct situations* as the most straightforward way of disrupting ordinary ways of thinking and acting in the city and of experiencing what life could have been like in a freer society. This was summed up by the Situationist slogan: "living is being at home everywhere." But the technology at the service of the bourgeoisie proved to be more powerful and has imposed a form of happiness, which in the urban setting, is equated with buying very expensive homes "equipped with comfort" that provide us with all that we need, organize our movements and allow us to travel more quickly to our areas of work or leisure.

The sum result has been the loss of the city as a territory and the advent of circulation (i.e. traffic) as a complement to work. Movement or circulation for pleasure or adventure has come to be a means of distributing citizens among different functional spaces. In the seventies, when architects abandoned the analysis of historical centers to turn their attention to the city, they realized that something incomprehensible had happened around them, something that did not fit into any hermeneutic category.

A "non-city" and a "dispersed city" had sprung up in the outskirts. This non-city was an urban chaos, a generalized mess. But as Careri states, "the solution they proposed was mistaken as they contemplated this sort of chaotic city from within the perspective of the historical city. From this vantage point, the architects confronted this thing in much the same way as a doctor treats an ailing patient: it was necessary to intervene, reclassify, and *bestow* quality" (Careri, 2002, 177).

IV. The city as fragmented and diffuse model

They were wrong, however, and needed new ways of comprehending the process of dissolution that extended beyond the meaning of the concept of city. In Europe, the debate on the need for alternative policies on a local and global level took an important step forward following the Earth Summit in Rio and the Agenda 21 in 1992. In 1994, more than 100 cities launched the Aalborg Charter regarding economic, social and ecological issues. This was the first European initiative to proclaim the need for new strategies in the sustainable development of cities which until that time had been solely concerned with reorganization and economic development.

The "dispersed" inhabitants of these new spaces were people who lived in lowly populated urban settlements that were alien to the most elemental of urban norms. They were people who lived in the private space of home and automobile, for whom public places were shopping malls, picnic areas, gasoline stations and train or subway stations but who were indifferent to spaces constructed for social life. These new barbarians (i.e. strangers, others) lived in single-family dwellings and extended their habitat to include real highways or virtual ones such as Internet nowadays.

Dormitory cities, which at one time held the promise of countrified living with the pleasures of the city a stone's throw away, now have nothing to offer. The suburbs alienate us: the pseudo-countryside or the pseudo-town are unsatisfying because we want to be at once here and elsewhere. Although these pseudo-spaces have been founded on the idea that we can be in one place while enjoying the advantages of another, they do not let us experience a genuine environment, and in the end, generate discontent. According to Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander (*1963*, 165), the reason why so many people move to the outskirts lies in their desire to encounter nature and move away from the disadvantages of the city. They return because nature is no longer there and so they want to enjoy once again the advantages the city has to offer. But when everything is everywhere, nothing is tangible anywhere.

This model of dispersed city has spontaneously sprung up around cities and is defined by the inclusion of vast and vacant territories. The new empty territories are an outlet for these new inhabitants who need the *lightness* of the fragmented city to counter the *heaviness* of the occupied city. Thus, the cities' new inhabitants not only inhabit houses, freeways and computer networks, but also these empty spaces which are lacking in history and power. They move outwards to build their country homes, plant their illegal plots of land, walk the dog, have a picnic, or make love. These places are distinct from the empty spaces which were traditionally understood to be public - squares, gardens and parks - and make up a large part of the unbuilt, empty territory of the city that is all too often impenetrable. According to Careri, these vacant spaces give meaning to today's cities: "they are a fundamental part of the urban system, inhabiting the city in a nomad-like way, moving whenever the power attempts to impose a new order upon them.

They are realities that grow outside of and in opposition to a modern project that continues to be incapable of recognizing their value and accepting them" (Careri, 2002, 181).

If we are to accept that a city of this type is difficult to plan and foresee given the innumerable emotional, sociological and economic variables that come into play, we must first acknowledge that the city is a fragmented and dispersed space. In a model of this kind, the center is lacking in interest, has less chance of being developed, is transformed slowly and tends to become saturated. Yet the borders of this space are dynamic. Time has frozen in the center, developments are paralyzed, and when something does change it is so evident that it is foreseeable.

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We are trapped in a vicious circle. We want to escape from a space that we dislike because there are too many different mixtures and combinations. We must protect ourselves from the unpleasant and displeasing place to which our consciousness has led us. It is a distorted, broken place that we both love and despise; an urban space where everything happens amongst noise, and multiple mixed-up worlds that are juxtaposed and conflicting. Cities today, especially macro-cities, are witnesses to a spatial distribution that makes us feel as if we were divided; they prevent us from living in them. We spend more time going from here to there like electrodes in Internet, than just being in one place. We contemplate how the financial and business centers of the city are different from the dormitory city, or the department stores, or the country house we escape to at the weekends. Without wanting to, we organize our time in such a way that we spend as little time as possible in any single place without really enjoying ourselves. We do not know how to be anywhere because nowhere is complete.

The permanent city is broken and traversed by natural, chaotic and vacant fissures. These are nomad territories that can only be availed through experience, by that esthetic practice known as strolling; the aimless wandering through the last remaining places where it is possible to get lost, to free ourselves from all control. The spectacle of tourism has converted big cities into mere caricatures of themselves with the sole aim of revealing their brilliant and monumental facade and creating a simulated city, an urban setting where the gray areas are avoided or hidden and whose function is not understood. Nowadays, we attempt to understand this lack of meaning, the emptiness of the city that confronts the banal idea of the happy, peaceful, controlled and safe city. The Situationist dérive helps us to understand and enables us to turn our gaze to those meaningless spaces, those other unfrequented places that question the society of the spectacle. Accepting these invisible spaces that reveal the architectural and urban project is to come a step closer to unveiling the architectural problem of the big city.

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