

**DISTANCE AND CITIES**

**Where do we stand?**

**WRITING CITIES**

**Gassner, Kaasa and Robinson, Editors**

**WRITING**

**CITIES 2.**

A collaboration between the Cities Programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science, the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT Media LAB, Harvard Graduate School of Design and Harvard Law School.

# **WRITING CITIES** Working Papers Volume 2.

## **DISTANCE AND CITIES: Where do we stand?**

A collection of working papers by graduate researchers of the Cities Programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), MIT Media LAB, Harvard Graduate School of Design and Harvard Law School.

Edited by Gunter Gassner, Adam Kaasa and Katherine Robinson

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To all participants of the Writing Cities Conference 2011



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## Acknowledgements

Writing Cities is a student-led collaboration and a process of exchange between graduate students from the Cities Programme and Urban@LSE at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), the School of Architecture and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) and Harvard Law School. It emerges out of a process of enquiry and discussion about the city, in which energy has been invested by students and faculty members. This project has substantially benefited from the generosity and intellectual commitment of Gerald Frug, Richard Sennett, Fran Tonkiss and Lawrence Vale.

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We extend our great thanks to all of the authors in this collection who first submitted their papers for the Writing Cities Workshop in 2011, and then refined their ideas after three rounds of review. We would like to especially thank Gerald Frug, Suzi Hall and Fran Tonkiss for reviewing and commenting on papers.

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**Patrik Schumacher** is partner at Zaha Hadid Architects and founding director at the AA Design Research Lab. He studied philosophy and architecture in Bonn, London and Stuttgart, where he received his Diploma in architecture in 1990. In 1999 he completed his PhD at the Institute for Cultural Science, Klagenfurt University. Patrik has co-taught a series of post-graduate option studios with Zaha Hadid at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Columbia University, and at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University. Since 2004 he has been tenured Professor at the Institute for Experimental Architecture, Innsbruck University. Currently he is a guest professor at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna.

**Richard Sennett** writes about cities, labour and culture. He teaches sociology at New York University, and at the LSE. In addition to these academic homes, he maintains connections to MIT and to Trinity College, Cambridge University.

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**Antonis Vradis** is a PhD candidate at LSE Geography, a member of the Occupied London collective and the Alternatives Editor of the journal *CITY*.

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# WRITING CITIES 2011

Writing Cities, 19 – 21 May 2011, London  
Graduate Student Conference  
[writing.cities@lse.ac.uk](mailto:writing.cities@lse.ac.uk) | [writingcities.net](http://writingcities.net)

Abstract submission: 21 February 2011  
Confirmation of accepted abstracts: 28 February 2011  
Paper submission: 25 April 2011

## CALL FOR PAPERS

### DISTANCE AND CITIES: WHERE DO WE STAND?

When researching urban issues, we inevitably face questions concerning distance. Distance is, first of all, a spatial and temporal notion. But it also incorporates social, emotional, aesthetic, legal, cultural, design and political dimensions. As a methodological concern we ask is there a “right” distance to write cities? And how do we intervene in distance? When researching and writing, we often face the problem of being “too close” or “too far”, “not close enough” or “not far enough” from a subject matter. In communicating the written city, we have to translate the distance between authors and audiences. At what distance do our thoughts, our ideas and our research become valuable to others? What is the right distance for public engagement in the city?

The architect, Le Corbusier, embraced the perspectives afforded by flight. The ability to see cities from a distance and from above contributed in some measure to the development of design strategies now considered to be hallmarks of modern architecture, design and urban planning, an estimation itself informed by temporal distance. Legal distances arise between property boundaries and built structures or between cars driving on a road in the same direction. Here, the concern with spatial distance is often to keep a minimum required distance to allow a peaceful co-existence of persons living with and next to each other. The urban sociologist, Georg Simmel, analyzed the social distance that emerges out of spatial closeness in the modern metropolis. As a result of being “too close” to others, Simmel identifies the city dweller’s adoption of a blasé attitude, a reserve that outwardly conveys

inner indifference and aversion to others, and simultaneously results in a heightened sense of individuality and freedom from group demands. Personified in Simmel's dichotomy between the "native" and the "stranger", or in conceptions of urban and rural, citizens and tourists, and researchers and practitioners, distance continues to inform the subject and the object of urban research.

But what contemporary conceptualisations of distance remain relevant to urban disciplines? How can we understand and map the changing relationships of distance to the 21st century city or to cities in history? How do we research these distances? When does distance make us vulnerable, as both urban citizens and as researchers? How can we decide what distance we should have from a subject matter? How can we increase and decrease distance at a particular point within our research process? How can we translate distances?

This conference examines the issues arising from the concept of distance when we write cities. Writing Cities 2011 invites papers that use their work to reflect on the issue of distance in their own unique way. Writing Cities is a close working exchange and collaboration between Harvard, MIT and the LSE, as such, abstracts will be accepted from:

LSE Cities Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science  
Urban@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science  
Harvard Law School  
Harvard Graduate School of Design  
MIT School of Architecture and Planning (Department of Architecture, Media Lab, Media Arts and Sciences, Department of Urban Studies and Planning)

**Please send an abstract of 300 words and a 50 word bio by 21 February 2011 to [writing.cities@lse.ac.uk](mailto:writing.cities@lse.ac.uk).**

#### **THE CONFERENCE AS A WORKSHOP**

Writing Cities 2011 will use the concept of "distance" in organising the workshop. As in past years, individual authors will not present their papers. Rather, each participant will be tasked as a respondent to raise questions, critiques and concerns coming from another paper. As such, papers will be submitted and circulated before hand to be read. However, this year we will assign a different selection of half of the papers to every participant to read. The outcome will be a shifting geography of those who have read the papers, and those who have not, and therefore different distances between the participants to each paper that is discussed. The chair will ensure that discussion is balanced between those with an "insider" and an "outsider" perspective to each paper.

Spatially, the conference will take place inside and outside an academic environment. Thereby we hope to create different distances to what is conventionally regarded as an "academic discussion".

Finally, the 2011 organizing committee, along with others who self identify at the conference, commit to producing a publication as an extension of the workshop. This publication may include co-authored papers by workshop discussion partners, developing the discussions and translations started in May, and will be launched at Writing Cities 2012.

## Introduction: The Process of Writing Cities 2011

*Gunter Gassner, Adam Kaasa and Katherine Robinson*

This publication marks a particular temporal distance. Five years ago, Writing Cities began through the intellectual stewardship of **Gerald Frug** and **Richard Sennett**, as an interdisciplinary and transatlantic debate between urban researchers. Developed over the years with **Fran Tonkiss** and **Lawrence Vale**, it is a workshop that moves beyond the boundaries of academic institutions and disciplinary milieus, yet remains grounded to the concerns of writing – methodologically, practically, metaphorically.

A diverse group of different urban institutions and disciplines have been part of this student-led project. As such, Writing Cities is a constantly reforming group of graduate students from the London School of Economics and Political Science, the School of Architecture and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and Harvard Law School. Participants meet annually, alternating between the UK and the USA.

The theme of the annual conference is deliberately broad, aiming to test and celebrate the interdisciplinary nature of the participants. This approach invites a wide range of responses to the guiding impetus of the project: how do we write about the city, how do we write the city, and how does the city write us? However, a certain amount of thematic direction, as well as a carefully curated distribution of the papers, outlined below, helps to develop a shared platform through which to encourage and maximise intellectual exchange. Each year, then, the Writing Cities organisers face the challenge of finding a topic that does just that: to direct without over-directing, to focus without limiting the breadth and complexity of urban research, and to encourage exchange between different urban researchers without downplaying the specificity of disciplinary or research backgrounds.

### Call for Papers

For the Writing Cities conference in May 2011, we decided on the thematic overview of 'Distance and Cities: Where do we stand?' In posing this question, we hoped to prompt reflections among participants, as urban researchers coming from different academic fields and research perspectives, to problematise their

work from this thematic perspective, as well as reflect on their own positionality within and their relationship to their research. As the organisers, one of our starting points in discussing the theme of distance was the idea of propinquity and therefore of the common trope of the insider / outsider in urban research. We started to think of ways to harness aspects of its conceptual and spatial utility, while upsetting its normative limitations. We found that thinking about this distinction through the lens of distance prompted us to consider positionalities as relational and shifting. In the provocation – where do you stand? – we wanted to question the idea of critical distance as both necessary for social research and an unproblematic virtue, and to acknowledge that the relationship between our work as urban researchers and our experiences as urban subjects require different degrees of distance and proximity.

Some of the deliberately broad and fundamental questions we asked researchers to reflect on were: thematically, what contemporary conceptualisations of distance remain relevant to urban disciplines? How can we understand and map the challenging relationships of distance to the twenty-first-century city or to cities in history? Methodologically, we were interested in how to research these distances. How can we decide what distance we should have from a subject matter? How can we increase and decrease distance at a particular point within our research process? How can we translate distances between the author and the audience?

### Conference as a Workshop

From a great number of applicants, we invited sixteen researchers to present and discuss their work. Papers were submitted and circulated beforehand and a different selection of half of the papers were assigned to every participant to read. In contrast to some conventional conferences, participants did not present the paper they contributed. Rather, each participant was asked as a respondent to raise questions, offer critiques and express concerns coming from another paper.

In order to maximise the interdisciplinary challenge between different participants, we organised the papers into six broad

Distance & Scale

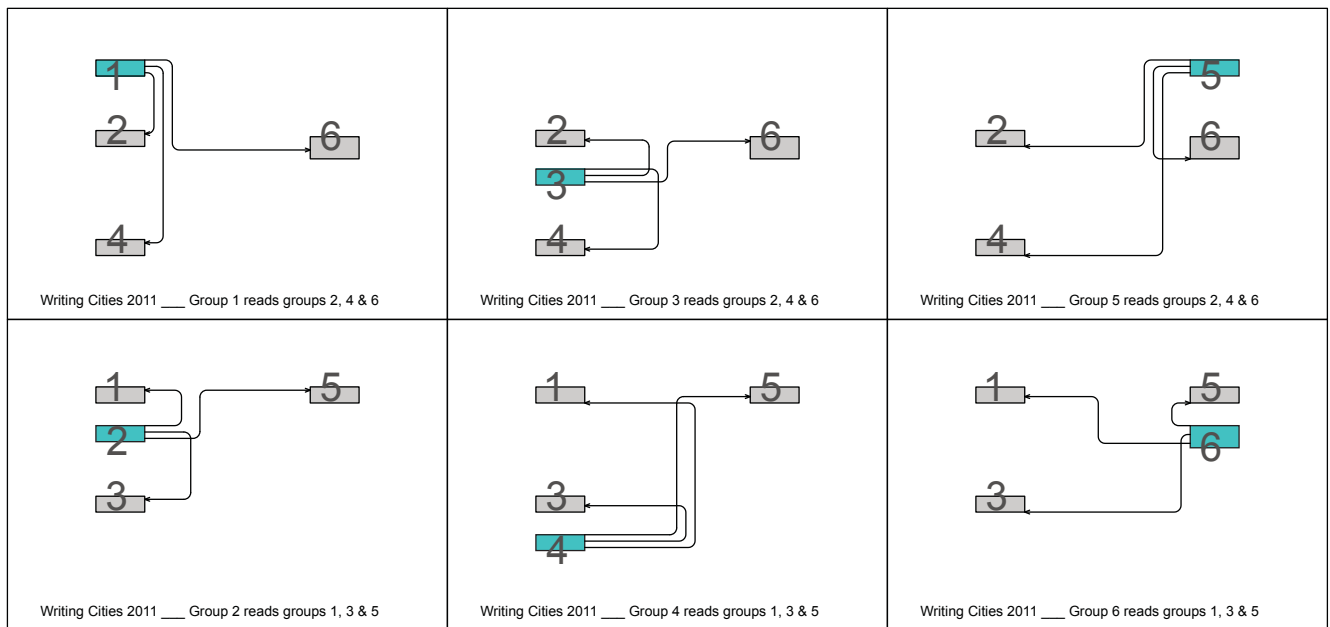
Distance Emerged

Discursive Distance

Call for Closeness

Distance & Infrastructure

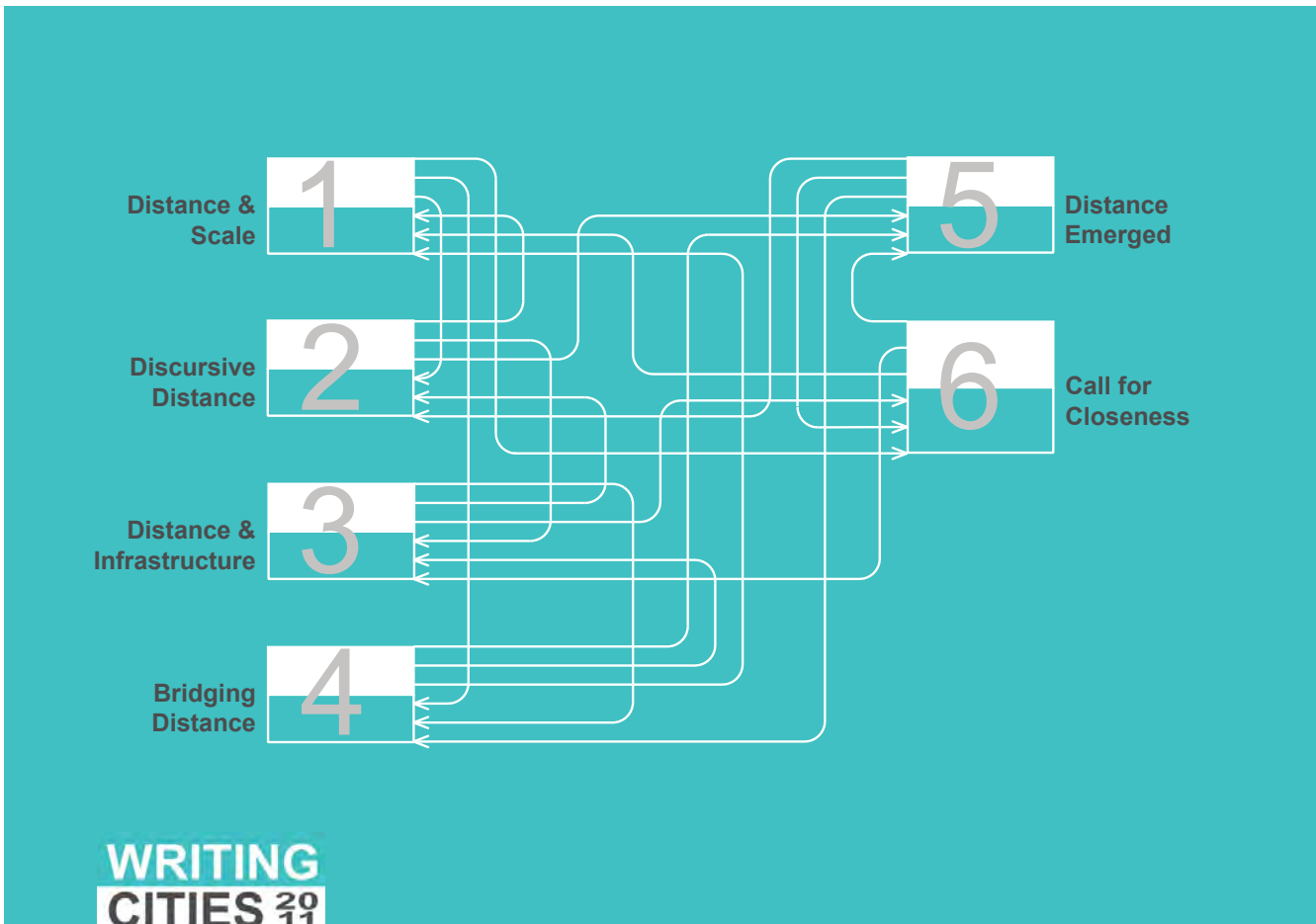
Bridging Distance



thematic groups: *Distance & Scale*, *Discursive Distance*, *Distance & Infrastructure*, *Bridging Distance*, *Distance Emerged*, and finally, *Call for Closeness*. Participants from each group were assigned to read the papers of those three other groups that were thematically and methodologically furthest away from their own concern. The outcome was a shifting geography of those who had read, or not, each paper, and therefore different distances between the participants themselves in each session. The chair ensured that discussion was balanced between those with an 'insider' and an 'outsider' perspective to each paper.

We were also concerned that the location of the conference should reflect the theme of distance. We deliberately sought out venues that were both physically outside of the university, and conceptually distant from the usual experiences and expectations of academic conferences. We looked for organisations and

spaces that reflected the idea of trying to write, create, or curate concerns in the contemporary urban environment. Day one of the conference took place at the Chisenhale Gallery in Mile End, East London. Housed in a former veneer factory beside the Regents Canal, the Chisenhale commissions original work from contemporary emerging artists. The gallery has a history of collaboration with people living locally and is concerned with developing a critical understanding of its location within and relationship to an area that is currently experiencing intense change as a result of the Olympic project. The second day took place at the head office of Zaha Hadid Architects, one of the most well-known contemporary architecture practices, located in a former girl's school in Farringdon, East Central London. We were inspired to be in a place where contemporary visions of the urban are professionally produced and realised in cities internationally.



## Writing Cities 2

The writing which this volume brings together is as diverse and multifaceted as the very thought-provoking discussions we had in May 2011. From the sixteen participants at the workshop, seven have contributed to this publication and together, they characterise something of the thematic and methodological richness of the theme of distance. Following the conference, each of the contributors reworked their paper in light of the debates that we had shared, and two more rounds of peer review and editing followed. The process of producing this publication proved to be as interesting and instructive as the workshop itself, exemplifying the inseparable link between 'producing' and 'thinking'.

While the six thematic groups mentioned above were productive for the workshop format, for this publication we have refrained from grouping papers under subheadings. What follows is a deliberately 'random' collection of working papers.

**Antoine Paccoud's** paper on Haussmann's plans for Paris works with different understandings of chronological distance. Through an analysis of letters written by Parisian property owners he highlights the distance between intention and realisation contained within the urban planning process, and reflects on the changing spatialities provoked by the process of historical research.

In her paper, **Katherine Robinson** introduces her ethnographic field site, a public library in Croydon, South London, to examine some of the conceptual and geographical implications of the edge of the city. Through an analysis of the bus journey out to her field site, and a discussion of the significance of the location of the library, she works with understandings of distance and place which are experiential, relational, and shifting.

**Alla Vronskaya** discusses the utopian potential of distance explored by architects in early-twentieth-century Soviet Russia. Distance as a situation of utopian possibility was informed by the closer relationship between art and architecture in the avant-garde, developing a vocabulary of form which was expansive, dynamic and visionary, but also vulnerable to shifting political priorities.

**Nikolaos Katsikis** traces the changing territory of spatial theory through the case of infrastructures. Outlining key theoretical shifts in the opening parts of his paper, he goes on to make the case for infrastructures themselves as producing a typomorphological understanding of space – a more dynamic response to the paradox of the spatial fix.

Using his photographic journey through Chicago, **Sebastian Schmidt-Tomczak** argues for an urban research methodology that emerges from an experiential practice. Discussing the work of key urban thinkers, he develops a mobile methodology to incorporate more elastic, relational, fragmented and partial forms of distance as a basis for both reflection and action.

Through an in-depth historical case study of a painting competition and a state housing project in Mexico City in 1949, **Adam Kaasa** introduces the theme of temporal distance as a rhetorical device with political effect. Addressing the conception of developmentalist geography that creates a global hierarchy of different places operating in different times, he reflects on the implications of coevalness to the continued Euro-centric origins of modernity.

**Antonis Vradis** examines the distancing role of discourse in discussions of urban riots in the case of Exarcheia, an area of Athens closely associated with urban unrest. Using research methods that are themselves conceived as either distant (discourse analysis) and more close-up (ethnography) he reflects on the implications of these perspectives for his research.

Each of their papers stand on their own: they are a piece of research in their own right. At the same time, each paper can productively be read in relation to other papers in the publication. *Writing Cities 2* does not ask to be read in a linear fashion from cover to cover but to be approached in a more creative and intuitive fashion. We think of this publication as a loose collection of interesting and thought-provoking pieces, in which the work-in-progress status is not a deficiency but a virtue.

Writing Cities 2011 commenced with a public lecture hosted by LSE Cities at the LSE. We invited a range of academics and an architect to reflect on the conference theme in a short 'tweet-like' statement of about thirty words. The participants' elaboration on them opened out to a public debate, and here, form the opening section of *Writing Cities 2*.

These statements are critical contemporary conceptualisations of distance and cities, and their diverse nature represents the ethos of the Writing Cities project. We urbanists, whether sociologists, architects, planners or lawyers, need to think collaboratively if we want not only to understand cities better and more critically, but also if we want to change them to 'better' places. We have to talk and listen to each other, we have to agree and disagree, we have to push our thoughts in order to become proactive. The topic of *Distance and Cities: Where do we stand?* provided us with a relevant and fruitful testing ground.



## Distance and Cities: Writing Cities Public Lecture

*Gerald Frug, Patrik Schumacher, Richard Sennett, Fran Tonkiss, Lawrence Vale*

**LSE Cities**  
AN INTERNATIONAL CENTRE SUPPORTED BY DEUTSCHE BANK

**WRITING  
CITIES 21**

4TH ANNUAL WRITING CITIES PUBLIC LECTURE

**THURSDAY 19 MAY | 18:30 – 20:00**

SHEIKH ZAYED THEATRE, NEW ACADEMIC BUILDING, LSE

# **DISTANCE AND CITIES WHERE DO WE STAND?**

**SPEAKERS: GERALD FRUG, ASHER  
GHERTNER, PATRIK SCHUMACHER,  
RICHARD SENNETT, FRAN TONKISS,  
LAWRENCE VALE**

**CHAIR: JUSTIN MCGUIRK**

This panel discussion will examine the concept of distance when writing about cities. How does this concept remain relevant to urban disciplines? And how does it both inform and limit research on cities?

*Gerald Frug is the Louis D. Brandeis Professor of Law at Harvard Law School; Asher Ghertner is Lecturer, Geography, LSE; Patrik Schumacher is Partner, Zaha Hadid Architects; Fran Tonkiss is Director of the Cities Programme, LSE; Lawrence Vale is Ford Professor of Urban Design and Planning, MIT; Richard Sennett is University Professor of the Humanities, NYU and School Professor of Sociology, emeritus, LSE; Justin McGuirk is Design Critic at the Guardian.*

Writing Cities ([writingcities.net](http://writingcities.net)) is an interdisciplinary network of graduate students from MIT, Harvard and the LSE. We aim to foster research on cities that cuts across disciplinary boundaries and addresses a broad audience. As emerging academics and practitioners situated between the social sciences, humanities, and practice, Writing Cities aims to initiate a conversation on future scholarship on and engagement with cities.

LSE Cities, an international research centre at the London School of Economics, builds on the interdisciplinary work of the Urban Age, extending its partnership with Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen Society. Its core objective is to understand how the built environment has consequences on the shape of society in an increasingly urbanised world where over 50% of people live in cities.

**Free and open to the public. No RSVP necessary. Contact [h.c.stevens@lse.ac.uk](mailto:h.c.stevens@lse.ac.uk) for additional information.  
London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE**

## ***Gerald Frug***

At urban conferences these days, people talk in a way that I'm going to summarise and caricature. They say: we believe in mass transit; we're against a car-centred culture. We believe in affordable housing. We want to promote density over sprawl. We believe in public space and social inclusion. We believe in protecting the environment by building bike paths and promoting alternatives to single-family housing. If you have been to these conferences, you can easily add more sentences to this list yourself. This generally accepted idea of urbanism can even be framed as a single sentence: the car-centred, sprawling, single-family housing model of metropolitan growth is no longer sustainable.

This kind of talk adopts the wonderful ambiguity best perfected by Marx. When people say that metropolitan sprawl is no longer sustainable, it sounds like a claim that it is not possible to continue it. It just can't happen anymore. It's over. But it also seems to mean: urbanists of the world unite. We need to bring a new city model into existence. If we don't work hard to create a new model – a mass transit-oriented, dense city – it will be a disaster for the world. The Marxian puzzle is: why do we have to work so hard to bring about the inevitable?

My point is not to dispute the substance of this vision. I actually believe in it too. My problem is that no one is listening. If you actually follow the details of public policy decision making, it is largely embracing the opposite of the future urbanists want. In China as in the United States, public policy is supporting a car-centred culture. Governments around the world continue to support building new settlements far from the central city. They continue to embrace the segregation of housing along income lines. The world is moving in one direction, while the urban discourse is moving in another.

What I'm interested in is: why are policy makers not listening? And who are the policy makers who are not listening? Whoever they are, how could one get them to listen? Some respond to these questions by saying: it's capitalism that is driving the current policy choices. And there's nothing you can do about the unfolding of capitalism. Politics is just superstructure; it's driven by capitalism, not the way to reform it. Others respond: actually, what's happening now is all politics. What we have to do is change current politics – we have to get together in our own communities and work for social change. The people united can never be defeated.

I'm not in either of these two camps. I don't believe that politics is too captured to be useful or that politics is simply a matter of organising local communities. I think that each city operates in a specific institutional structure that empowers certain policy makers to make these decisions. To be sure, it is very complicated to figure out exactly who they are because doing so requires figuring out, city by city, how power works. Moreover, to change current policies, we have to do more than identify who's in power. We have to change the system that enables them to be in power. This requires spending less time generating the warm feeling we get when we repeat our slogans to each other over and over again. It requires concentrating instead on institutional design – on reducing the distance between policy makers and those who work in urban studies.

## Lawrence Vale

We often navigate a semi-permeable city. Think about what that means. To me, it means a city where a design is saying 'yes, you are welcome', but the politics that surround that are saying 'no, you must stay away'. And sometimes that mixed message goes in the opposite direction. So I advocate a term: design-politics. Not design *and* politics, but a hyphenated single term that helps us talk about the ways in which we have to live with a kind of cognitive dissonance.

I have been involved in thinking about this for a long time and have taught a class called Urban Design Politics, and people have always said, 'Oh you mean urban design and politics,' and I say, 'No, no, it's urban design-politics'. I want to talk about the politics of design and the design of politics. It started when I was working on a book about parliamentary districts around the world called *Architecture, Power and National Identity* and was confronted with the paradox – and I think it has 'distance' all over it – that the symbols of openness and democratic access and societal openness were surrounded by armed guards, and often impermeable or even unapproachable. There was a sense of distance that was both literal and figurative.

And so if I had to figure out what the distance for writing and comprehending cities would be, it's really getting you to a point where you're just about far enough from your subject so that you're able to comprehend the details of the built environment, but also just far away enough to be able to comprehend the ways in which the layers of politics have enshrouded that place.

Let me give you a quick example. One of the parliamentary places that I looked at back in 1990 was the National Assembly building for Kuwait, which was built in the 80s, designed by Jørn Utzon in one of these 'let me make concrete look like cloth' exercises. It has this grand portico facing the Arabian Gulf and all sorts of large architectural gestures on a very prominent site in Kuwait City. When I went to go see it the first time, however, I found out that it was forbidden to photograph or even to approach the building. I found that very, very strange.

So, my first thought was 'let me get a hotel room that overlooks it.' I did that and took some pictures, but then I wanted to figure out: where do I really stand? Where do I begin to comprehend this building in the politics of Kuwait City? And so I got closer to the building and invented what became known to me, at least, as the Palm Trunk Principle. This means that you find the armed guard

in his little booth and you figure out how to get close enough so that it is possible to put the thick trunk of a palm tree between his machine gun and my camera just long enough so that I can lift up my camera, 'click', put down the camera, and continue unnoticed – all the while making sure that the forbidden building is itself nicely framed behind both tree and guard.

This was a moment when I felt design-politics together, because I was close to the building, but I was also trying to understand why it was that the building didn't want me to be getting any closer to it. What was it about that place that both drew me in and held me at bay?

It turns out that in Utzon's initial scheme the grand portico was intended to shelter a mosque. But Kuwaiti leaders considered this to be completely inappropriate. They reminded the overeager Dane that if you put a mosque out front that means you have to let all comers approach it and enter for prayer. And the last thing that anybody in Kuwait's fragile quasi-democracy wanted was to have large numbers of people there. So it ended up being the world's largest carport, spectacularly if emptily marking the entrance to the parliament building. They put the mosque inside so that only those who were vetted properly could attend.

So here's the question for me: what happens when there is a world where people like to think that they're being open and creating openness and yet the circumstances that engulf the commission and the whole idea of a public place are working against it? There are places like that all over the world. It's not just explicitly political spaces. It's everywhere where security issues have intruded upon the basic precepts of public space. And so the question for me when writing about those places is: how do you find the vantage point from which you can see both the space that was intended and the political reality that enshrouds it?

## **Richard Sennett**

I'd like to just preface what I'm about to say by making a comment about Writing Cities as a project. Which is that I think for us as urbanists, and I assume, most of you are, that this is a kind of opportunity to think about writing as itself in the form of a city – that the sort of spatial world of cities is suggestive about the forms of writing we make. When I think about people like Italo Calvino, or there's a remarkable novel about New York by Teju Cole that has just been produced, these are overlays, fragments, assemblages of material that has a narrative form, but isn't linear. And that's much of the arousing experience we have walking through the street, dwelling in the square and so on. And it seems to me that as urbanists, we have a kind of insight into a way of perception and of expression which should be reflected in the poetry or even the prose that we use. So I hope that this project develops as much into an experimental workshop about writing as it is an investigation about cities.

I guess what I could contribute to this, is that I've been very preoccupied recently both in my thinking and in my practice with the phenomenon of urban edges and boundaries. Boundaries between different communities, separations between different socio-economic groups in the city, spatial segregation, also ethnic and religious segregation. And as a political project (and I should also say that a lot of the direction that twentieth-century urbanism moved towards creating more and more homogeneous communities) – the bounded, or gated communities metaphor used in a great deal of urbanism, applies to immigrants and poor people, as much as it does to the rich. So that the edge condition where differences meet seems to be to be, to use your language, a design-political space. And the thing about edge conditions is that even as they bring different groups closer together, they increase the distance, and the comfort distance, people have from places where they are with others like themselves. This is a double act, that getting people to live in edge situations is something that imposes a propinquity on them, and creates a sense of loss by creating this distance: you're further away from what's familiar, but it serves a political process in the city.

And my sense of this is that we as designers aren't so skilled at how to do this. This is a quite amorphous kind of zone. I'm hoping to work in Marseilles and Lyon on this project to complement work I'm already doing in New York on 110th Street. People don't inhabit this boundary condition willingly. They don't go this distance for interaction willingly. And the urbanist has to think about what kind of magnets, or location of resources get put in

these spaces which draw people out of the communities where they have greater comfort.

It's a very ambiguous proposition. It has political logic, but it is also in some way coercive. We're having a discussion in New York, for instance, and it's a discussion that's beginning in Marseille, about where to locate schools on the boundaries in New York, between white and black areas, and in Marseille between poor whites and poor North Africans, so that these groups are drawn out of the centres of their community to interact at the edge. And that complicated experience of distance can't be described by urbanity in its normal terms. It's not *flânerie*, it's enforced by design. It's ambiguous. It's a space of difficulty rather than a space of pleasure.

But to me that's what this subject contains, this relationship between distance and closeness. It's set into the context of the massive segregative power of twentieth-century city making which has to be undone.

## Fran Tonkiss

The closer things get, the further apart we stand.

Keeping your distance is a key urban art. The tension between physical proximity and social distance has been central to classical attempts to write the modern city, and is a tension that is played out in innumerable everyday urban encounters, or near-encounters.

Georg Simmel wrote powerfully of the need to mark out and protect what he called one's 'psychological private property' in the metropolitan crowd, and of how this produced a characteristic urban attitude – as recognisable in the London of the early twenty-first century as it was in Berlin in the early twentieth century: an attitude that allows people to maintain their affective distance, even at very close physical range.

Social distance in this sense has long been seen as a line of defence against the pressures of urban life. But more positively we can think about other ways of writing distance in the city – in terms of the capacity of everyday urban spaces, if not exactly to mediate social differences and social distance, at least to hold them together in the same place in ways that are non-conflictual and even at times convivial.

The other, darker side of social distance bears on my original claim. And that is the very simple observation that, as physical distance is compressed in various ways in the city, as material space is annihilated by electronic time via communication technologies, and as differences in city form collapse through an increasingly prevalent logic of urban development, conversely forms of social distance are compounded, deepened and entrenched.

Let me take two instances of this tendency as I see it. The first of these concerns urban economies and the second comes from the realm of policy, and links with Gerald Frug's comment as I understood it.

One feature of the dominant logics of contemporary urban economic development is a general, if not exactly universal, trend of widening income inequality in cities. We see this in a range of cities worldwide, from the relatively more egalitarian Chinese cities now seeing their income disparities deepening, to the very stark inequalities evident in cities in Sub-Saharan

Africa. And inside that broad range, there is growing inequality in many rich-world cities in western Europe and in the United States. This deepening of economic inequality and the social and economic distances associated with it is evident not simply in the cold language of Gini coefficients, but also in the kind of functional interdependence that we find between increasing wealth and persistent poverty in the city. We might instance here the economic interdependence between low-grade and high-grade service workers in globalising parts of an economy such as London's: workforces that share the same workplace, that live much of their economic lives in the same space (if not always at the same time), but are separated by extreme forms of social distance and economic differentiation.

It's also visible in the cheek-by-jowl proximity of affluence and relative degrees of deprivation in the city. This is very pronounced in the gated communities of developing-world cities, with the necessary service labour located at its perimeter and entering into it daily. It is visible, too, in the enduring presence of homelessness on the streets of some of the wealthiest cities in the world.

The other point I want to raise is from the field of policy, and in particular the turn to the local which Gerald Frug addresses in his thoughts on 'The architecture of governance'. I would suggest that the turn to the local – certainly in British politics – represents not only a disavowal of the state and a retrenchment of local government, but is also a disavowal of the city as a place of difference and a geography of distance. Such an ideal of the local favours proximity – that is physical proximity – and discounts the scope for identity or common cause at a distance with those you may not know, with those whom you may never even meet. It is, I would contend, anti-urban in the respect that cities tend to condense differences up close and spread commonalities across space. It advocates a logic of home rule at a micro-scale, whereas cities depend on – cities *are* – systems of interconnections across spatial scales. In this sense a politics of localism misses the proximity of differences in the city, overstates the capacity of local adjacency to overcome social distance, but also limits the imaginative and the spatial range of connection in the city.

## ***Patrik Schumacher***

I think it will be quite a different mood in which I'll be talking, compared to the previous speakers. I'm going to be less critical, more propositional, more constructive maybe, with the sense of participating in (rather than criticising) contemporary society. The techno-managerial, for me, is not something negative, it's something you take on. The existence of inequalities and multiple social strata in the city translates into a dense and diverse division of labour. I would prefer to look at the city not only from the perspective of an unskilled migrant worker, but moreover from the perspective of more central figures: the innovative professional workers who have the highest impact on further progressing the world economy. If their life and work processes are facilitated, overall societal productivity and wealth increases. I'm taking the high-density city with its many social strata with their diverse respective work and life processes as a productive hothouse. And I want to enhance that productivity constructively.

The politics of the urban development process, the politics of urban and architectural design if you like, is ultimately (and legitimately) embedded in the political system via political parties and in the economic system through entrepreneurs who become the architect's clients. The micro-political meaning and demeanour of architectural projects originate from their clients. I'm taking this on, seeing the positive and progressive aspects of our clients' agendas because I want to work with these clients and produce vital and productive spaces. As an architect I have to engage with the world constructively rather than criticise it. Productivity depends on effective communication. Architecture has its unique contribution to make. The societal function of urban and architectural design is the innovative ordering and framing of social communication. Parametricism, which is my phrase for the contemporary epochal style of architecture and urbanism, articulates the post-Fordist network society by increasing the complexity and intensity of spatial communication. I'm talking about organisation, articulation and signification as the tasks of architecture in a societal context with a much higher level of communicative density, with multiple publics, partially interacting, partially operating in parallel. Density implies the collapse of distance. Ordering implies that you separate and distinguish different communication scenarios that nevertheless should be aware of each other all the time. Parametricism can achieve this. The kind of spaces we're designing offer a simultaneity of many events: at every point, in your visual field, in your immediate circumstance, you have access to many spaces, you are continuously presented with many choices, so you have a rich, productive experience and can fully utilise your time in the city. We do something similar when we watch television via channel hopping, while simultaneously being on the mobile and

on the web. Urban spaces can function like that too. They should be packed with diverse offerings. If you step into an urban street, or into the urban interiors we are developing, there are a large number of potential event-spaces (and thus communicative situations) you can overview and scan and which you might want to participate in. And this field of possibilities should be ordered and made legible for the sake of quick and effortless navigation.

So my discourse is about the intensification of relations. To articulate that we develop a new style which allows societal complexity to be ordered and made perceptually palpable, in order to be navigated effectively. The design of the built environment becomes both a phenomenological and a semiological project. I feel like riding or surfing an irresistible wave. I have to see the progressive aspects of it, in order to participate productively. I do not think it's the designer's task to criticise or resist. If you try that for real, for instance in a competition – maybe the only arena where you can somehow try it – you will most probably fail. Trying to confront a client is not productive. The client knows what the political character and demeanour of his setting should be, which audiences he wants to attract, what degree of openness, or privacy his life process requires etc. There can be an open, educational dialogue based on the architect's prior respect for the client's rights, but it is neither realistic nor legitimate for the architect to impose their own political agenda.

Despite all the on-going hardship in the world I feel that the world has been progressing. In our globalised world economy the wealth differentials are much larger than in the 50s and 60s when we witnessed the convergence towards a general consumption standard within the most advanced national economies. But I wouldn't want to exaggerate the problem of unequal income distribution. I do not see that as such a dreadful and horrific fact, not even if I see great income contrasts within a single city. When I reflect on my own level of consumption and comfort in a city like London – as the Director of a 400-strong firm of architects, managing high-profile projects globally – and if I compare myself to a taxi driver, or even to a welfare recipient, I'm not sure if they are really lacking anything substantial from the basket of amenities I enjoy myself or in terms of social security. Of course there are differences in terms of monetary income but the essential amenities and services of modern life reach virtually everybody, at least in a first-world city like London. Everybody is protected by rights and provided for materially to an extent unimaginable in older times. I think that I have to believe in the progress of contemporary society and its city to participate in its further development.







# 1. Paris, Haussmann and Property Owners (1853 – 1860): Researching Temporally Distant Events

*Antoine Paccoud*

This paper will approach the theme of distance and cities, not in terms of distance across space but in term of distance in time. I will explore how a sequence of events distant in historical time can be approached by bracketing established frameworks and by creating a direct engagement with material written at the time of its occurrence. The city is Paris and the time is 1853, at the very beginning of Haussmann's tenure as prefect, the 17 years within which Paris went through a tremendous transformation. A neglected set of archival material from the first years of Haussmann's tenure as Prefect of the Seine (1853 – 1860) serves as the basis for the empirical analysis I have conducted, the findings of which can then be brought back into the debate to complement the large and heterogeneous literature on the transformation of Paris. A first section will attempt to synthesise this literature by presenting four major strands of investigation into the transformation of Paris (biography, Durkheimian sociology, Marxism and planning history). The paper then moves on to a discussion of my empirical findings: in the first years of his tenure, Haussmann was caught in an intense political confrontation with property owners because of his conception of what planning's role and practice should be, and the way in which it should interact with private property and individual freedom. In the last section, I show how these findings can complement the work of the other strands of investigation into the public works by offering a richer understanding of the evolution of Haussmann's practice: from a coercive stance to property owners, Haussmann had to take a more conciliatory approach when the battle turned in favour of property owners and his legal and political support eroded. What this paper highlights is not only a way to research temporally distant events but also the distance between the temporality of the everyday functioning of planning and the temporality of these intense sequences when planning itself is defined.

## Theoretical Engagements with the Transformation of Paris

Approaching the transformation of Paris is, most of all, an exercise in temporal distance. The sequence of events has been studied so deeply that through it can be seen the evolution, and ebb

and flow, of theoretical scholarship on urban transformations. Interpretations of the public works have changed with the evolving priorities and preoccupations of different generations of scholars. This section will present four major traditions of scholarship on the transformation of Paris, with the aim of concluding that selecting either one of these traditions entails a temporally mediated encounter with the sequence of events they are all based on. A more direct engagement with these events will then be advocated.

I will start with those authors who have attempted to draw a picture of Haussmann, the man, and who can thus be labelled as the biographers. They usually take as the basis of their investigation Haussmann's own *Mémoires*, published in 1890, which they have complemented with speeches, meeting records and reports written by Haussmann and by the memoirs of other key players in the public works. The four main texts in this tradition are those by Chapman (1957), Pinkney (1958), Saalman (1971) and Jordan (1995). Schematically, the two earlier authors have a more positive assessment of Haussmann's actions than the later two. This can be understood by focusing on the historical contexts in which the first texts were written. In English-speaking academia, most of what had been known about the transformation of Paris had come from Geddes in the first decades of the twentieth century and Mumford in the 30s and 40s, both of which strongly condemned the public works, for the strategic and military considerations that guided the piercing of the boulevards, the effect they had on worker housing and the imitations the model of Paris spawned. On this last point, the following quote from Geddes's 1915 *Cities in Evolution* is a good summary of their overall sentiment towards Haussmann:

'Town planning is not something which can be done from above, on general principles easily laid down, which can be learned in one place and imitated in another – that way Haussmannism lies' (205).

Chapman and Pinkney's relatively positive evaluations can thus be understood as attempts to rehabilitate certain aspects of the

public works. Saalman's and Jordan's account sought to integrate more recent scholarship on the transformation of Paris and follow the more cautious approach towards the public works prevalent in English-speaking academic texts on Haussmann today.

Some of the work used by Saalman and Jordan in their accounts of the transformation of Paris is part of a long tradition of what can be called the Durkheimian school of sociology in France, which focuses on the material aspects of the public works, such as the evolution of house prices, the patterns of housing demolitions and rebuilding and demographic and economic trends. Members of this tradition are Halbwachs (1909), Daumard (1965) and Gaillard (1976). These classic texts, and especially Gaillard's, have been influential in informing English-speaking scholarship on the public works. In contrast to the great detail of the biographical accounts described above, Durkheimian scholars all attempted to find the larger patterns at work behind the scenes and how they affected and were affected by the changes that were being brought to the city. Their aim is to present a picture of the major processes (economic, sociological or cultural) that are being expressed through the transformation of Paris as a whole, not the particular ways in which they were in fact expressed historically. Whereas the biographers focused on action and autonomy, these scholars prioritised all that escaped the former and constrained the latter.

For the third group, the urban Marxist scholars, Engel's *The Housing Question* in 1872 was the point of departure:

'By 'Haussmann' I mean the practice which has now become general of making breaches in the working class quarters of our big towns, and particularly in those which are centrally situated, quite apart from whether this is done from considerations of public health and for beautifying the town, or owing to the demand for big centrally situated business premises, or owing to traffic requirements, such as the laying down of railways, streets, etc. No matter how different the reasons may be, the result is everywhere the same: the scandalous alleys and lanes disappear to the accompaniment of lavish self-praise from the bourgeoisie on account of this tremendous success, but they appear again immediately somewhere else and often in the immediate neighbourhood' (Part 2, III).

From Engel's focus on worker housing, with Lefebvre interpretations of the public works passed on to the displacement

of the impoverished from the centre to the periphery, sparking him to interpret the Paris Commune as an assertion of the right to the city (Lefebvre 1972). Lefebvre's insights into the relationship between space and Marxist thought sparked a new interest in the public works in Marxist circles, and the theoretical link he established between the public works and the Commune was further investigated by both Castells (1983) and Harvey (2003), the former through an investigation into urban social movements and the latter through the effects of the public works on the spatial organisation of class. Harvey's account represents the latest development in the Marxist understanding of the public works as participating in the development of capitalist modernity.

The last group of scholars that will be discussed here are those who attempt to position the public works in the history of urban planning. The first of the accounts of the development of planning which assigns a role to Haussmann is that of Giedion (1943), who argues that Haussmann was the first planner to see the large city as a technical problem to be solved; as he says it, Haussmann '*wished to make Paris the first of the great cities to be brought into conformity with the industrial age*' (469). Next is that of Benevolo (1967), who linked the tensions that arose through the public works to the politics of Haussmann's planning practice. Sutcliffe (1981) seeks to position the public works in the history of what he calls comprehensive urban planning, which he believes Haussmann fell short of because of his lack of regulation of private development: '*Second Empire Paris, perhaps, came closest to planning without actually getting there*' (204). The last of these accounts to be discussed here is that of Choay (1980, 1983) who has attempted in France to rehabilitate Haussmann, describing his planning as one of regularisation, based around the interconnection of comprehensive and layered systems that fulfilled the twin objectives of circulation and hygiene.

All four of these traditions have had long histories, and have alternated between isolationism and attempts to incorporate findings from other traditions. In addition to a choice over the strand to which to attach one's investigations into the public works, one has to decide which particular historical period in that tradition one wants to engage with. The passing of time has created a complex web of interpretations, which cut across both theoretical traditions and generational preoccupations. In order to bracket out the choice of a particular node of that web to which to attach my own investigations into the public works, I have decided to focus my work on the time of the events themselves by searching the National Archives for neglected archival material from the years of Haussmann's tenure as prefect of the Seine.

## Archives: Haussmann and Property Owners

My confrontation with the archives brought me to letters sent to Haussmann's administrative service (the Prefecture of the Seine) or to those of other Ministries involved with the public works (the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Agriculture and Public Works, the Ministry of Finance and even the Emperor or the Empress). These letters were written by property owners to contest the measures taken in their area or that concerned their property. I had not come across any account of these letters from property owners in any of the main texts written in the disciplines interested in understanding the public works, and the three boxes that form the basis of my analysis have not, to my current knowledge, been referenced in any other of the works on the transformation of Paris by Haussmann. They nonetheless seemed to me to contain intensely political material that showed an aspect of Haussmann's planning practice that is very poorly theorised, with only a limited number of authors hinting at the tension it brought out (Benevolo 1967, Gaillard 1976, Sutcliffe 1981, Harvey 2003).

This tension, as Benevolo puts it, emerged out of Haussmann's defence of '*the rights of an abstract administrative entity ("the city") against the concrete rights of the citizens*' (1967: 136), with the right of property ownership being foremost among the latter. The conceptions of the way, and of the extent to which, the city administration should regulate the private activity of property owners held by Haussmann and his administration on the one hand and by property owners, the courts, legislators and other state administrations on the other were fundamentally at odds. For Haussmann, it is the city, with its needs and means to achieve them, which should have priority over the needs of private individuals. Any infringement to the rights of the city as a formal entity in favour of the rights of property owners was thus seen as prioritising the individual parts rather than the sum that exceeds them. He sought to defend this conception of planning against attacks from property owners but also from his immediate superior in the administrative hierarchy, the Minister of the Interior, as in the following quote in which he is responding to an injunction from the Minister to allow private building activity to occur between the moment in which a new street piercing is declared and the moment at which it is actually begun:

'The administration should, without taking any account of its projects and without making a single comment, provide all construction permits requested by individuals within the limits of the old alignments, even as an administrative procedure is under way to adopt new plans. Until the decree declaring expropriations of public utility, everyone should be

completely free to take all possible actions to block its subsequent execution; the administration alone would have its hands tied. In this system, the inevitable administrative delays would be a time reserved for private interests, always very apt and very active, to speculate on the projects submitted to the public enquiries, and commit all possible frauds against general and municipal interests' (AN, F2 II Seine 35, 1858).<sup>1</sup>

Haussmann goes on to ask the Minister to help him resist the wrongful intentions of property owners, language which clearly shows that a political confrontation is occurring between two conceptions of the way planning should be undertaken. For Haussmann, this means ensuring that urban regulations are obeyed equally by all. This can be seen in another letter to the Minister in which he contests a particular property owner's attempts to woo the Minister into excusing her from reparations she was ordered to undertake on a building she owned:

'All the repairs that have been prescribed aim to consolidate the constructions elevated by Mme Bonardi outside of all generally accepted construction practices; the improvements made to the buildings since the condemnation cannot suffice to remedy such a unfavourable circumstance: in vain does Mme Bonardi appeal to the inconvenience the works will cause her and her tenants, this is a question of a very secondary order in the face of which the regulations cannot falter. The [city] administration must to the contrary be tough towards speculators who under the pretext of building worker housing, raise for the lowest possible price, in densely populated neighbourhoods, poor constructions whose existence is already limited to the length of a lease, and which jeopardise the lives of tenants' (AN, F2 II Seine 35, 1859).<sup>2</sup>

Property owners appealed to the Minister of the Interior to undermine these two aspects of Haussmann's planning practice: limiting speculation on the city administration's street projects and applying planning regulations universally and rigorously to all private activity. For property owners, construction freezes and expropriations represented dangerous violations of the rights of property ownership and they did whatever they could to either avoid them or profit from them. They saw Haussmann

as attacking individual liberty and thus attempting to revert back to a pre-revolutionary age. As Zeldin remarks, *'the declaration of the rights of man of 1791 was the culmination of a battle of many centuries to defend the dignity of the individual against claims that the public good should always have priority over him'* (1981: 30). Haussmann's attempt to expand the conception such that planning was one instance in which it is legitimate for the public good to trump individual interests was thus as fundamentally at odds with individualism and the ideals of personal liberty.

For example, against Haussmann's insistence that all private activity should be frozen between the announcement that a street piercing will take place and the moment when it is actually begun, this property owner believed he had the right to do whatever he pleased with his property until it was taken away from him through an expropriation order:

'These public works can only be carried out, after this decision with respect to property owners, by means of expropriation, and until the expropriation has been officially pronounced property rights remain intact, complete. And the right to build is one of the fundamental attributes of property ownership that the [city] administration cannot fail to recognize as legitimate without violating the law and without exceeding its authority, as long it has not followed the judicial process through to the pronouncement of an expropriation' (AN, F2 II Seine 35, 1856).<sup>3</sup>

Property owners were only willing to have their property rights restricted by street widening procedures: the city administration produces local alignment maps prescribing the width particular streets should have, and these maps then forbid all new construction and major repairs to building outside of this new alignment. Any other attempts to freeze private construction for the benefit of the city are perceived as illegal. This can be seen in this plea to the Minister of the Interior by a property owner who has been denied the right to make any changes to his property as it will soon be expropriated:

'M. Prefect of the Seine, by denying me the permission to build is causing me great harm and subjects my property to a ban on all construction. This is why, M. Minister, I have thought necessary to refer to your supreme justice an order which without any legal backing constitutes a grave infringement to my interests and my ownership rights. I dare hope that it

will prove sufficient to have informed Your Excellency of the illegality of Mr the Prefect of the Seine's decree and the extent of the irreparable harm that it would cause me, for this order to be revoked and for me to be able to resume in legal terms the right to freely make use of my property' (AN, F2 II Seine 35, 1856).<sup>4</sup>

Property owners viewed these new restrictions on their ownership rights as emanating solely from Haussmann's administration, with both the Minister and the Emperor seen to represent a different conception of planning, one that is much more amenable to property owners. It is thus Haussmann's planning practice that they incriminated, as this appeal to the Minister and the Emperor (Haussmann's main political supporter) by a property owner reveals:

'I have thus come to appeal to your justice, M. Minister, so that you make use of your authority to grant me the permission I am asking for, given that I am the owner of the property, that the property is on the proper alignment, and that finally I have the right to make the most of my what is mine; finally, I do not think that M. Prefect, just because construction will happen in 5 years at the earliest can come tie the arms and hands of an industrialist who needs to make a living. His Majesty the Emperor, who is just over all else, if my request could get to him, would not tolerate such an injustice. Made strong by your justice, M. Minister, I await your decision without fear' (AN, F2 II Seine 35, 1857).<sup>5</sup>

Politics, which emerged out of the confrontation between different conceptions of what planning's role and practice should be, and the way in which it should respond to private property and individual freedom, thus seemed to be a fundamental part of what Haussmann represents. His attempt to ground planning in the universal application of urban regulations and the idea that the public good can be made to trump private interests in particular circumstances were seen to be fundamentally at odds with the revolutionary ideas of the rights of man, represented here by private property rights. This is why, as Benevolo notes, Haussmann's most fervent opponents in the legislature were the liberals (such as Jules Ferry) who were out to defend *'a right consistently recognized by our laws'* (1967: 136), i.e. the right to property.

## Interpretation: Archives and Existing Accounts

The picture of the early years of the transformation of Paris that emerges from my analysis is that of a vehement opposition to Haussmann from property owners, centred on Haussmann's political choice to strongly regulate private activity and property owners' outright rejection of this principle. It was not a silent or ignored opposition, but one that Haussmann had to respond to in order to allow him to push his public works forward. This is a view very different from that of the biographers and the planning historians (who pictured Haussmann in his ivory tower, immune from having to engage with critics until very late in the process through parliamentary hearings) and from that of the scholars influenced by Durkheim and Marx (for whom opposition derives from an underlying logic rather than from individuals following through on their own political choices).

From this new vantage point, the approach I have taken speaks to each of the four types of investigation into the public works. For the biographers of Haussmann, his opposition to both property owners and members of the Imperial Government reinforces the view that he fought and held an autonomous space within the Imperial administrative machinery to push his own conception of what planning should be. Those who view wider sociological processes as crucial to understanding the public works should take note of the importance in determining the course of the public works of how property owners conceived of their rights of ownership. My analysis also develops some of the ideas about Haussmann's planning practice hinted at by the planning historians, taking what they saw as a tension and showing it was in fact an intense confrontation that severely impacted what Haussmann, as a planner, could do. Most crucially, Marxist scholars may find in Haussmann's emphasis on regulating private activity during 1853 – 1860 an indication that he was not the proto-capitalist he is considered to be. For the period I am investigating, I have found no indication that Haussmann was deliberately attempting to turn Paris into the bourgeois city it became.

Given my empirical findings, which show Haussmann engaged in a battle with property owners with the aim of imposing a strong regulatory framework on private activity, how can we understand the way in which the transformation of Paris later unfolded? All four traditions agree, at least, on the fact that Haussmannisation reinforced the polarisation of the city between the rich west and deprived east and led to the gentrification of many of Paris's neighbourhoods. Without a strategy for worker housing, all concur that the situation of the least well-off deteriorated over the period, and some even see in this the main cause for the Paris Commune that erupted a year after Haussmann's dismissal (March 1871). My hypothesis is that Haussmann's regulatory

approach came under the dual pressures of legal attacks from property owners aimed at his planning practice and of an erosion of support from the Imperial Government when Napoleon III realised he could no longer politically afford to alienate property owners. In order to finish the public works programme he had set out, Haussmann may have had to give up his coercive approach towards property owners and moved towards co-optation through speculative opportunities.

Support for this hypothesis can be found in the archival material I gathered and in the evidence presented by writers in the four traditions. The arguments used by property owners in their letters became increasingly steeped in legal argumentation from 1856 onwards, and there are multiple references to ongoing court cases, with some of the more wealthy property owners having opened court cases at the Council of State. Haussmann's main preoccupation in the defence of his planning practice to Minister of the Interior was to avoid creating precedents of property owners planning violations which could then be used against him in court decisions. Both Gaillard (2000: 28) and Harvey (2003: 128) detail the court decisions that were taken with the property owners against the municipal administration, with Harvey stating that property owners '*managed to turn the tables entirely on Haussmann by the early 1860s*' (Harvey 2003: 128). Roncayolo, whose work bridges geography and history, has detailed the consequences of these unfavourable court decisions on the course of Haussmannisation:

'The expropriation juries, usually selected from within the ranks of powerful notables and representatives of the high bourgeoisie, tend to integrate more and more firmly in the compensations the value added the public works are hoped to deliver. Anticipation thus profits, in a first instance, to the owners of land, which removes financial resources from the public authority, increases the cost of the operations, and pushes capitalist enterprises towards more selective means of land use or a more rapid circulation of capital through speculative sales of land or buildings. In order to complete the second network and the third, in Paris, Haussmann deals with contractors, to whom he entrusts, in return for a fee, not only the works themselves, but also the risks arising from expropriations. At the same time, the geographical field of public interest is constantly brought back to the strict dispositions contained within the



law and the 1852 decree is interpreted in the narrowest possible way. The Council of State condemns the City of Paris in this respect, in March 1856, by denouncing the illegality of certain acquisitions. The Council of State's 27th of December 1858 ruling confirms the right of former owners on the sections of expropriated parcels not on the new alignment. Initial possession of land is thus worth speculative profits, while the law of 1807 and the sharing of value-added it imposed are brought back to memory less and less often. This battle of interests, settled most often in the property owners' favour, is not only a page of social history. It marks the topographical design of a large section of the Haussmannian projects' (Roncayolo, in Agulhon, 1983: 114).<sup>6</sup>

However, these legal victories were not a sufficient condition for property owners to break Haussmann's planning practice. He could not be seriously attacked as long as he had the full support of Napoleon III. It was the Emperor himself who had brought Haussmann to Paris and it was the Emperor who had given the impulsion for the public works. As long as Haussmann could defend his actions from the Minister of the Interior by invoking imperial orders – '*Your administration, Mr Minister, wants the same thing as mine: to safeguard the execution of the plans decided by the Emperor*' (AN, F2 Seine 35, 1858) – his decisions could not be attacked by either property owners or the legislative bodies. As Benevolo informs us: 'precisely because he did have the Emperor's support, Haussmann was always able to avoid having to justify his actions politically and could present them as technical and administrative measures deriving from objective necessities' (Benevolo 1967: 134).

The property owners' biggest victory was thus of winning over the Ministry of the Interior to their cause. There were many Ministers of the Interior during Haussmann's tenure as Prefect of the Seine, but there was a notable change in attitude towards Haussmann over the years. While the first Interior Ministers raised some objections to Haussmann's practice without actively getting involved, the Interior Ministers of the late 1850s started to side with property owners against Haussmann. While they invoked the importance of property rights, the concern of these later Interior Ministers was much more with matters of national interest, that is, with securing the property owners as supporters of Napoleon III's regime. This can be seen in the rationale invoked by the Interior Minister in late 1856 to oppose Haussmann's injunctions to condemn a property owner who resists undertaking the repairs her property desperately needs and asks the Minister for a grace period:

'In the strict legal sense, the Prefecture of the Seine is right. However, as the permission is requested only as toleration, for 18 months only, and the house it concerns containing 20 worker lodgings, it seems to me that a refusal would be too rigorous and even impolitic in the current crisis of the rarity and dearness of small lodgings' (AN, F2 II Seine 34, 1856).<sup>8</sup>

In the Minister of the Interior's remit was something called reporting on 'the public opinion', an eloquent turn of phrase to describe the active monitoring of anti-Bonapartist sentiments. While Napoleon III came to power on the back of popular support (and could thus afford not to give pre-eminence to the satisfaction of the wealthy Parisian property owners), this situation changed with the rise of republican sentiment in the late 1850s. What the Ministers of the Interiors of that period were sensing was that Haussmann's hard-line stance against property owners was pushing these away from the regime into republican arms. '*A material foundation was laid for a political rapprochement between Parisian property owners and Empire. Unbeholden at the beginning, the Empire increasingly looked to them as a base of support in a capital where opposition sentiment dominated as early as 1857*' (Harvey 2003: 127).

The anonymous letter below was sent to the Ministry of the Interior in 1864 and is a reflection of the change in the dynamic opposing Haussmann and property owners which had occurred in the 1860s: according to its author, Haussmann's actions are the root cause behind the opposition's victories in Paris, but the actions he incriminates are not those which have been detailed in this paper, they are Haussmann's relative disregard of the left bank with respect to the right bank. The author is not complaining about Haussmannisation per se, but because there hasn't been enough of it:

'The left side of the Seine is so forlorn that we do not know if we belong to Paris or the Province. Why this injustice? Do we not pay our contributions as well on this side as on the right side: if the Emperor and you knew the enemies M. Haussmann begets against the government, you would change the orientation of his work without delay. Of the eleven députés who were appointed last year in Paris, M. Haussmann is always the cause of at least ten. I invite M. Minister to inquire whether the facts described above are accurate. We deeply apologise if we do not sign' (AN, F1 cIII Seine 31, 1864).<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has explored how particular historical events could be analysed by bracketing out intervening theoretical developments and by creating a direct relationship with textual material produced during their unfolding. By exploring the surviving archives and by seeking out archival material that seemed neglected, I caught a glimpse of the transformation of Paris through a very particular lens, namely that of letters from property owners to the Minister of the Interior. Brought back into the web of published interpretations of the events, the findings gleaned from the archival material was found to complement them and allow for a new interpretation of Haussmann's role to emerge from their articulation: the wider processes which the urban Marxists and Durkheimian sociologists theorised as determining the course of events can now be understood to have been allowed to act by Haussmann's defeat at the hands of wealthy property owners. Haussmann failed not because he could not control the circulation of capital but because the means to do so were taken away from him by property owners. The autonomy and administrative ability which the biographers highlight was lost in a fiercely fought battle with property owners on the dual fronts of the courts and political support. As for the planning historians, their evaluation of Haussmann's place in history depends on which period of Haussmann's tenure as Prefect they focus on: in the early years, Haussmann was a comprehensive planner who broke the hold of property owners on the planning system; after 1860, he was head of a planning authority once again beholden to property-owner interests.

What this particular lens on the transformation of Paris seems to depend on is the identification of the period under question (1853 – 1860) as a special temporality. The distance of over 150 years separating us from Haussmann's first years as Prefect allows us to see how different those initial years were from the rest of the nineteenth century. We see a planning apparatus seeking to establish itself after years of impotence, and property owners struggling to keep the upper hand. This was a temporality of agency and of opposition: gone were the binds on municipal action, a vision of planning based on the control of the circulation of capital could be pushed through. But any real act of agency immediately calls forth a reaction by proponents of the status quo – in this case, property owners. By calling to them the courts and the political support of the Minister of the Interior, they were able to re-establish the prominence of property rights over the public interest. In addition to the temporal distance to these events themselves, this account shows the distance between the temporality of the everyday functioning of planning and the temporality of these intense sequences when planning itself is defined.

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## Archival Resources

Archives Nationales, Paris, box references : F2 II Seine 33, 34 & 54

Archives Nationales, Paris, box reference : F1 cIII Seine 31

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *'L'administration devrait, sans tenir aucun compte de ces projets et sans faire la moindre observation, donner toutes les autorisation de construire demandées par les particuliers dans la limite des anciens alignements, alors même qu'une instruction serait ouverte en vue de l'adoption de plans nouveaux. Jusqu'à l'apparition de décret déclaratif de l'utilité publique de ceux-ci, chacun devrait être complètement libre de faire toutes les combinaisons possibles pour en entraver l'exécution ultérieure; l'administration seule aurait les mains liées. Dans ce système, les délais inévitables de l'instruction seraient un temps réservé aux intérêts privés toujours fort habiles et fort actifs, pour spéculer sur les projets soumis aux enquêtes, et ourdir toutes les fraudes imaginables à l'encontre des intérêts généraux et municipaux'. (AN, F2 II Seine 35, 1858)*

<sup>2</sup> *'Tous les travaux prescrits tendent à la consolidation de constructions faites par Mme Bonardi en dehors de toutes les règles de l'art; les améliorations exécutées depuis la condamnation ne peuvent suffire pour remédier à un état des choses défavorable: en vain Mme Bonardi s'appuie t'elle sur le trouble que les travaux peuvent causer à elle et à ses locataires, c'est une question très secondaire devant laquelle les règlements ne peuvent faiblir. L'administration doit au contraire se montrer sévère à l'égard de spéculateurs qui, sous le prétexte de faire des logements d'ouvriers, élèvent au plus bas prix possible, dans les quartiers populeux, de mauvaises constructions dont l'existence, limitée d'avance à la durée d'un bail, compromet la vie des locataires'. (AN, F2 II Seine 35, 1859)*

<sup>3</sup> *'Ces travaux ne peuvent être exécutés après cette déclaration vis-à-vis des propriétaires que par voie d'expropriation, et jusqu'au jugement d'expropriation les droits de propriété demeurent intacts, complets. Or le droit de bâtir est un des attributs essentiels de la propriété que l'administration ne saurait méconnaître sans violer la loi, et sans commettre un excès de pouvoir, tant qu'elle n'a pas poursuivi et fait prononcer une expropriation régulière'. (AN, F2 II Seine 35, 1856)*

<sup>4</sup> *'M. le Préfet, en me refusant la permission de construire me cause un grave préjudice et met ma propriété en interdit. Voila, M. Le Ministre, pourquoi j'ai cru devoir déférer à votre souveraine justice un arrêté qui sans motifs légaux porte une si grave atteinte à mes intérêts et mon droit de propriété. J'ose espérer qu'il suffira d'avoir signalé à Votre Excellence, l'illégalité de l'arrêté de M. le Préfet et l'importance du tort irréparable qui en résulterait pour moi, pour que cet arrêté soit rapporté et je reprenne dans les termes légaux la libre disposition de ma propriété'. (AN, F2 II Seine 35, 1856)*

<sup>5</sup> *'Je viens donc faire appel à votre justice, M. le Ministre, pour que vous usiez de votre autorité pour m'accorder la permission que je demande, attendu que je suis propriétaire, je suis à l'alignement de la rue, et qu'enfin j'ai le droit de jouir de mon bien; enfin je ne crois pas que M. le Préfet, sous prétexte que les travaux se feront dans cinq années au plus tôt puisse venir lier les bras et les mains à un industriel qui a besoin de gagner sa vie. Sa Majesté l'Empereur qui est juste par dessus tout, si ma demande pouvait lui parvenir*



ne tolérerait pas une pareille injustice. Fort de votre justice, M. le Ministre, j'attends sans crainte votre décision'. (AN, F2 II Seine 35, 1857)

<sup>6</sup> 'Les jurys d'expropriation, choisis le plus souvent parmi les grands notables et les représentants de la haute bourgeoisie, sont amenés de plus en plus fermement à intégrer dans les indemnités les plus values espérées des grands travaux. L'anticipation profite ainsi, en premier, au propriétaire du sol, ce qui ôte des moyens de financement à l'autorité publique, accroît le coût des opérations, conduit les sociétés capitalistes vers des formes plus sélectives d'utilisation des terrains ou une rotation plus rapide des capitaux par la vente spéculative du sol ou des immeubles. Pour l'achèvement du deuxième réseau et l'achèvement du troisième, à Paris, Haussmann s'adresse à des compagnies concessionnaires auxquelles il confie, moyennant forfait, non seulement la conduite des travaux, mais les risques de l'expropriation. En même temps, le champ géographique de l'intérêt public est sans cesse ramené aux strictes dispositions prévues par la loi et le décret de 1852 est interprété de la manière la plus étroite. Le Conseil d'Etat condamne sur ce point la Ville de Paris, en mars 1856, en dénonçant l'illégalité de certaines acquisitions. L'arrêt du Conseil d'Etat, pris le 27 décembre 1858, confirme les droits des anciens propriétaires sur les parties des parcelles expropriées, qui restent hors-lignes. La possession initiale du sol vaut ainsi des bénéfices spéculatifs, alors que la loi de 1807 et le partage de la plus-value qu'elle imposait, sont de moins en moins rappelés. Cette lutte d'intérêts, tranchée le plus souvent en faveur du propriétaire, n'est pas seulement une page d'histoire sociale. Elle marque le dessin topographique d'une grande partie des opérations haussmanniennes'. (Roncayolo, in Agulhon, 1983 : 114)

<sup>7</sup> 'Mais votre administration, Monsieur le Ministres, veut ce que veut la mienne: sauvegarder l'exécution des plans arrêtés par l'empereur'. (AN, F2 Seine 35, 1858)

<sup>8</sup> 'En droit strict la Préfecture de la seine a raison. Mais la permission n'étant demandée qu'à titre de tolérance, pour 18 mois seulement, et d'un autre côté la maison dont il s'agit contenant 20 logements d'ouvriers, il semble qu'un refus serait trop rigoureux et même impolitique dans la crise actuelle de la rareté et de la cherté des petits logements'. (AN, F2 II Seine 34, 1856)

<sup>9</sup> 'Le côté gauche de la Seine est tellement délaissé que nous ne savons si nous appartenons à Paris ou à la Province. Pourquoi donc une telle injustice ? Ne payons nous pas aussi nos contributions de ce côté que du côté droit : si l'Empereur et vous saviez les ennemis que Monsieur Haussmann engendre contre le gouvernement, vous modifieriez sans retard son travail. Sur les onze députés qui ont été nommés l'année dernière à Paris, Monsieur Haussmann est toujours l'auteur d'au moins dix. Que Monsieur le Ministre veuille bien s'informer si les faits relatés ci-dessus sont exacts. Mille excuses si nous ne signons'. (AN, F1 cIII Seine 31, 1864)



## 2. Journey to the Urban Edge?

*Katherine Robinson*



Figure 1. Brigstock Road, Thornton Heath, Croydon (Robinson 2012).

This paper is an opportunity to explore the theme of distance through the analysis of the physical and discursive location of my field site, Thornton Heath public library in Croydon, South London. Working in a borough at the southernmost edge of the city, multiple manifestations of distance emerge.<sup>1</sup> Bordering the county of Surrey to the south and the London boroughs

of Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark to the north, Croydon has the highest population of all the London boroughs.<sup>2</sup> Eleven miles south of central London, and twenty minutes by train from Victoria, Croydon, although administratively part of Greater London, is geographically and conceptually peripheral – two forms of distance on which I want to focus in this paper.

Despite having a significant local population and acting as an important transport hub for north Croydon, Thornton Heath, with its unprepossessing appearance, and lack of local landmarks or a clearly demarcated central area, is often dismissed as a place empty of significance. Moreover, the northern fringes of Croydon were significantly affected by the intense period of rioting which broke out across London in August 2011, following the shooting of Mark Duggan by police.<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath of his death, there were three nights of violence, arson and looting in areas across London as well as other English cities. Starting in Tottenham, north London, on Saturday 6 August, by early evening on the following Monday the rioting had spread to Croydon. Several huge fires were started in businesses on the outskirts of the town centre, one on London Road, the road connecting Thornton Heath to central Croydon. Images of these fires were shown repeatedly in rolling news coverage and served to comprehensively link the riots to the area in the popular imagination, highlighting it as a place of danger and social unrest. Thus, it seems that Thornton Heath is both geographically peripheral, situated on the edge of London, and on the edge of Croydon; and as relatively economically deprived and arguably stigmatized place, it is simultaneously discursively peripheral.

However, in this paper I use an ethnographic approach to provoke a conceptual and empirical reorientation. I discuss everyday negotiations of place, diversity, and connectivity, framed though an exploration of the location of and the connections around Thornton Heath public library. Unpacking some of the factors at work in constructing the area as discursively peripheral opens up the possibility for Thornton Heath to be seen through a lens which is not distanced by stigma.

These foci thus upset or invert received notions of scale and location, and demonstrate that there is a more complicated geography at work in the area. I offer a version of location and distance which is rooted in both the experiential practices and imagined landscapes of library users, and travellers on the bus that stops outside it. The analysis of the bus journey and of experiences of place is foreshadowed by a critical evaluation of conventional notions of the urban edge in the literature. In this paper I aim to create an account that is more commensurable with both lived experience of a locality, and its political and 'folk' representations, as well as to develop a more metaphorical understanding of location and distance. With reference to Michael Keith (2005: 63), I consider all these elements to be constitutive of location, and the relationships between these understandings and representations of place as both situated and iterative.

The theoretical basis for this work is the recognition of the constitutive relationship between social space and physical space (Bourdieu 2009: 123), that, as the limitations of abstract spatial

models have shown, one cannot be mapped without the other. Acknowledging Chantelle Mouffe, Doreen Massey observes that 'spatial identities' are closely bound up with 'the relational construction of political subjectivities' (2009: 10). With this in mind, I am searching for a rigorous way of seeing and writing, through which it is possible to reflexively consider 'the manner in which [...] space is made visible as an object of study' (Keith 2005: 62), and what this implies for questions of writing cities.

This paper is based on observations in and around Thornton Heath library over the summer of 2011. I am writing from an early stage of fieldwork, aware that these initial observations will inevitably become layered with later experiences and perspectives as the work progresses through to interview stages and beyond. In discussing them now, I am engaging with the notion of research as a shifting and uncertain field, and acknowledging research as a process of meaning making and reality construction (Law 2004: 13), rather than a quest for the / a finished article. Where I write from, where I now stand, is necessarily tentative, and preliminary, but I hope that this openness to an early engagement, a close encounter with some early research, is useful in thinking about writing distance and the city.

## The Urban Edge

The notion of the urban edge is a strong trope in urban studies literature, with Los Angeles acting as a foundational symbol and visual shorthand for the classic edge city.<sup>4</sup> However, Los Angeles, despite its indubitable traction, does not serve as a universal model. Empirically, the multiple dynamics at work around the city's edge make it a complex place, and provoke different contexts in different cities. Theoretically, this differentiation is reflected by a lack of consensus over how to name or define 'the edge': 'satellite loops' (Burgess 1967), 'outer city' (Herington 1984), 'technoburb' (Fishman 1987), 'edge city' (Garreau 1991), 'Exopolis' (Soja 2000), '*Zwischenstadt*' (Sieverts 2002), 'edgeless city' (Lang 2003) 'post-suburbia' (Phelps et al. 2006).

In a literature that is predominantly situated in a US context, the city's edge is the logical site for its expansion and re-creation, with space for experimentation in urban form and the development of broader understandings of what a city can be (Fishman 1987; Garreau 1991). The centrifugal 'pull' of the urban edge thus has two elements – it emerges out of the spatial and conceptual limits of the city, but also provides a powerful site of growth and potential. However, optimistic narratives are also tempered by work which considers the suburban periphery as a site for social problems (Power 1997; Wacquant 2008), and a sense of dislocation and detachment.

Classically, the city limits are where city forms and functions become more diffuse and distant, both from each other and from the city centre; the site of services, warehouses, and suburbs. In *Site Effects*, Bourdieu points out the capital city's role as the centre of capital, and how the city's edge thus parallels a slackening of capital, leading to a unavoidable opposition of centre and periphery (2009: 125). Thomas Sieverts illustrates this by observing that the 'entertainment and recreational areas, and tourist destinations' are located in the city centre, while the periphery is a place of 'functional space' (2003: 44).<sup>5</sup> These arguments define the edge against what it is not; an oppositional relationship, with one necessarily having to reject the other (Fishman 1987: 27). Here, the notion of the edge can be seen as forming a kind of 'constitutive outside', a means of identity formation and maintenance articulated out of a sense of negation (Mouffe 2007: 15).

However, this opposition, I argue, while performing a powerful imaginative function in urban discourse, has an oversimplified neatness, as Herington points out (1984: 6). Furthermore, conceptualisations of an edge city based on a US model are less fruitfully applied outside of that context.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly the case in London, where complex and diffuse patterns of urban functions challenge the idea of the distinguishable inner and outer city. The city's dynamic interdependency is explicitly addressed in the current London Plan, which acknowledges the limitations of working within local authority areas and observes how the variety of urban characteristics within certain boroughs precludes them being defined as purely suburban or metropolitan.<sup>7</sup> This is the certainly the case in Croydon, which has strong internal differentiation within its borders, exhibiting both north-south and lateral fragmentation (Phelps et al. 2006: 183 – 4) as well as a complex and interdependent relationship with its neighbouring boroughs and sub-region.<sup>8</sup>

This critique provides one conceptual starting point for this paper. Through my analysis of the transport connectivity through and around Thornton Heath's public library, as well as its symbolic connectivity generated through the practice and imaginations of library users, I will argue that the relationship between edge and centre can be seen as more of a continuum, and as more iterative and tentative than models of urban edges have allowed. Constantly implicated by its relationship to the centre, the edge is difficult to name, and difficult to locate.

The second theoretical contention is one of scale and spatial hierarchy. Conceptualisations of urban space, from Robert Park and Ernest Burgess's zonal depiction of the city's spaces (1967: 56), to those outlined in the literature above, are consistently rooted in a large-scale understanding of the city's relationship to the edge, producing clearly demarcated boundaries and

hierarchies of space. While these 'conceived' spatial ideas necessarily arise out of the requirements of the urban planning context, they should be seen as a conceptual tool, situated within a very specific context, and treated cautiously. As Michael Keith states, 'spatialised vocabularies may betray a misleading equivalence between the empirical and the real' (2005: 75). I argue that using a small-scale analysis of one edge urban location avoids generating this kind of equivalence and helps to develop a more nuanced understanding of place.

The residual potency of spatial hierarchies is manifest in London, where the river divides the city into north and south. Historically, the south was considered conceptually more 'distant' from the powerful north, the location for the 'stink industries'; leather tanning, and the manufacture of soap and tallow (Ackroyd 2000: 691). Isolated by the river until the more wholesale construction of bridges in the nineteenth century,<sup>9</sup> the south was considered a 'distinct and alien place' (Ibid., 694), 'foreign territory' to those venturing from the north (Ibid. 696). Despite parts of south London being actually much more geographically central to places of power, and the development of better integrated transport systems increasingly connecting both sides of the city, this conceptual division and generalised peripheralisation of south London remains, part of what Suzanne Hall calls the '*symbolic spatial order*, [...] a form of authority asserted in space by the endurance of spatial hierarchies, territorial divisions and public institutions in the urban landscape' (2009: 97). I take this symbolic spatial order as a starting point for a critical discussion of narratives of place, then use experiential spatial practices to move towards a symbolic re-orientation.

## Official Narratives

Ideas of spatial hierarchies are particularly acute in Croydon, and play out both in local authority politics and in the built environment. Croydon's relatively late incorporation into the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1965 resulted in the borough retaining a strong sense of independence and a significant amount of political clout compared to its neighbours (Phelps et al. 2006: 187). During the same period, its extensive building projects and road schemes made it a trendsetter in large-scale urban development. Croydon seeks to emphasise its independence from London, for example in claims that it is now 'a major employment centre in its own right' (Ibid. 174 – 5) and through its bid to become London's Third City.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Croydon's involvement in the European Edge Cities network indicates its desire to be seen as a city on an international scale (Phelps et al. 2006: 189).

As well as developing claims of independence, Croydon is also engaged in reconfiguring itself within alternative forms of centrality.<sup>11</sup> In the literature produced by the local authority's

regeneration department, centrality is a key component of the bright future envisaged for the borough. The area is determinedly re-imagined as central to both London and to the South East, and as a centre of innovation.<sup>12</sup> This positive vision of the future centrality and relevance of the area is an attempt to overturn a persisting negative image of Croydon, which Phelps et al. link explicitly to negative perceptions of downtown Croydon's faded concrete office blocks and retail developments (2006: 179), the once futuristic scale and ambition of which now appear outdated, even hubristic.

These attempts to articulate a particular narrative of Croydon are perhaps demonstrative of the idea that: '[u]rban policy does not intervene in given spaces but constitutes them as part of the policy process' (Dikeç 2007: 170). Another example of this may be seen in the work of the Croydon Observatory, which I use in this paper as a source of demographic information. Envisaged as a policy tool, the Observatory uses Census and GLA data to create ward profiles for each electoral district of Croydon.<sup>13</sup> The themes of the Local Area Agreements are used to determine and then categorise the information contained in the profiles. With policy pre-determining what is relevant to collect, the territory on which these profiles are mapped is thus already oriented towards pre-existing policy landscapes.

These articulations of place operate on large-scale and highly regulated notions of what is meaningful for a place. Seen from this perspective, Thornton Heath could be defined as doubly peripheral; lying on the borough's northern fringes, it is far from the vision of centrality emphasised by the council's branding strategy, while its below-average performance on the indices serves to conceptually mark the area as problematic, and highlight it as requiring special intervention.

### Place Myths

While relatively politically powerful at borough level, there is a north-south divide within Croydon; the south has a generally more leafy, suburban and prosperous profile, while the northern end of the borough has far greater incidences of poverty and wider social deprivation, as well as higher population density.<sup>14</sup> The north of the borough in particular thus struggles with a poor reputation. People tend to be flummoxed on hearing that my field site is in Thornton Heath, either imagining that there is no value in social research there; that it cannot possibly be interesting, or conversely, that working there must be something of a risky business. This impression is constructed from various channels of popular discourse, structural referents and physical landmarks.<sup>15</sup> The combination of negative media coverage, as well as operations of popular symbolic and discursive tropes which simultaneously 'mark' and marginalise, as seen in the

wake of the August riots, is powerful. During the weeks after, the area was placed under close examination as discussions about causes and ramifications reverberated through media channels, and became linked in the popular imagination to trouble and violence. This was reinforced by persistent physical reminders of the violence – on London Road, blackened shells of buildings remain, pinned together with intricate networks of scaffolding and surrounded by hoardings.

Structural factors also contribute to place myths at work around the area. Croydon is the home of the headquarters of the UK Border Agency's immigration and asylum offices, which identifies the area as a 'gateway' for foreigners, and has both practical and discursive implications. Thornton Heath is the location for much of the short-term accommodation for asylum seekers in the area, (as well as other homeless and vulnerable people) providing a foundation for assumptions which circulate about the resources allocated to asylum seekers, couched in terms of (un)fairness and (neglected) rights.

Thus in both official strategies of place making, as well as popular mythologies of place, Thornton Heath is overlooked, distanced and stigmatised. I argue that a more productive way of dealing with conceptual marginality and distance from the centre is to look at the everyday relationships and connections which radiate from purportedly marginal places. These starting points, of connectivity, complexity and diversity develop an examination of Thornton Heath that works at the scale of the everyday experience of spatial and social relationships, thus reconfiguring received spatialities by introducing experiential and imagined understandings of place.

### Traversing the Urban Periphery

In exploring ideas of connectivity, I move from the idea of the suburban edge being either a site of 'nothing' or a container for social deviance, to an understanding of a place with layers of history, multiple connections, and far-reaching social and symbolic practices. I do this through looking at the experience of using public transport at the edge of the city, travelling South by bus towards Thornton Heath.

This tactic has its precursor in François Maspero's 1990 monograph, *Roissy Express*, a depiction of his and photographer Anaïk Franz's month-long sojourn through the Paris suburbs on the RER train line, a journey punctuated with stops, diversions, and disorientation. The journey explores the changes wrought in the suburbs over the past fifty years, and provocatively inverts the distinction between the city and its edge. For Maspero, the true centre, where 'real people and real life' may be found, is in fact all around the centre, at the edge (1990: 16). In their





Figure 2. Road sign (Robinson 2012).

journey, Maspero and Franz thus dispel the idea of the suburbs as having nothing, or being 'nowhere' places. I take this spatial and symbolic reconfiguration as a starting point to counteract the symbolic lack surrounding Thornton Heath with an account of connectivity and continuity.

The 250 bus route, which extends from Brixton, in zone 2 of the London transport network, to Croydon town centre, which lies in zone 5, makes a stop outside Thornton Heath library in zone 4. These zones, while invisible, are conceptually and financially significant. Despite being estimated at an optimistic 47 minutes on the bus timetable, the journey from Brixton to Thornton Heath library is more likely to take an hour. Spatial and temporal distances are therefore imbricated in each other, as Bourdieu observes (2009: 127). Distances, and the time it takes to travel them, are in turn linked to financial cost – the bus journey costs £1.30; the equivalent train journey at peak hour costs £3.40.<sup>16</sup>

Bus travel is susceptible to diversions and unexpected terminations, as well as subject to the vagaries of traffic flows. If the bus terminates before its destination an aggrieved mood spreads among the passengers – the journey did not work out as promised. Moreover, in addition to the inconvenience, for travellers using the pre-pay electronic Oyster card, swiping onto a new bus will swallow up an additional fare, so they surround the driver, requesting paper transfer tickets to continue the journey. Riding the bus thus requires a pragmatic and flexible attitude.

Despite the trope of 'nothingness', way markers and symbols punctuate the bus route: St. Leonard's Church in Streatham is shorthand for a major traffic intersection and bus network hub, while the bus stops themselves indicate both historical and geographical phenomena – 'Streatham Common' – and mark current uses – 'Streatham Bus Garage / Ice Arena'. The names of local train stations double up as bus stops, and these, as well as

the names of key shops, are frequently used by bus passengers to indicate their progress while on the phone to those they are heading towards. Moreover, signage produced by the local authority draws attention to local boundaries through official insignia.

Intersections with train stations and other bus routes create webs of connections. At times deviating from the main traffic arteries, the bus serves minor roads and connects residential areas: 'Norbury Hill', 'Green Lane Post Office'. Starting to engage with an analysis of the everyday significances around the bus journey provokes the sense that the relationship between the centre and the periphery is processual, and not simply linear, thus complicating the notion of peripherality.

The journey to Thornton Heath traverses one long urban continuum, flowing south along the A23, crossing the south circular bypass, and traversing and linking with railway stations – Streatham, Norbury, then Thornton Heath, heading south to Brighton. The edge, if understood as a separation, is nowhere to be seen. Iain Chambers writes suggestively: 'The referents that once firmly separated the city from the countryside, the artificial from the "natural", are now indiscriminately reproduced as potential signs and horizons within a common topography' (1990: 54). The bus route navigates a path through this topography, straddling parish and local council boundaries and passing through multiple urban centres and multiple peripheries, which fade and layer into each other. Examining the everyday possibilities and connections opened out by the bus journey moves away from ideas of the centre and the periphery as two poles. It becomes possible to perceive the periphery as time- and place-specific, relational, and above all, emergent, appearing through layers or at junctures within an urban continuum.

### Location – Everyday Connectivity

Following the arrival of the railway in 1862, Thornton Heath expanded into its current form. It was thus part of the process of Victorian London's suburbanisation and emerging commuting patterns.<sup>27</sup> However, I argue that the contemporary situation and function of Thornton Heath cannot be straightforwardly categorised as suburban following the criteria outlined by Harris and Larkham (1999: 8). The area has a strong 'urban' character, with a distinct lack of green space and significant traffic. Moreover, it is the location for Croydon's hospital, and is permeated with extensive retail and small industrial activity, although the character of the retail is relatively small-scale and down-market when compared to central Croydon's chain stores and shopping centres. Furthermore, it is densely and diversely populated, in Bensham Manor ward, the area immediately

around Thornton Heath library, 68 percent of the population are from minority ethnic groups.<sup>28</sup>

If the everyday complexity, diversity and connectivity at work in Thornton Heath does not seem to fit a suburban exemplar, then a more suitable reflection of the spatial complexities can be found by using Ed Soja's notion of Exopolis. Both a critical empirical lens through which to explore the impact of economic restructuring and globalisation on changing urban forms and a way of moving beyond arguments predicated on a division between the inner and the outer city, Exopolis turns the city inside out and outside in, drawing in what was once considered 'elsewhere' to its own symbolic zone (2000: 250). Drawing on these ideas to look at Brigstock Road and Thornton Heath public library allows more complex, open and subtle ideas of location to emerge.

Brigstock Road branches off from London Road, the A23, and heads east towards Thornton Heath Rail Station and the High Street. One of the principal routes into Thornton Heath, it is heavily trafficked, and is used by three bus routes: 198, 250 and 450. Thornton Heath library lies almost exactly in the middle of the north side of Brigstock Road, within what is predominantly a residential area. However, the road itself is lined with small businesses: betting shops, accountants, estate agents and newsagents, phone and internet shops, car washes and workshops as well as civic and community spaces (the Ghanapathy Temple, the Dominion House Church, Potters House Church) several medical and dental practices, pre-school nurseries, the North Croydon Conservative Club, the Derby and Joan Club, and the headquarters of Streatham and Croydon Rugby Club. The variegated character of Brigstock Road represents histories of immigration to Britain, and reveals multiple traces of globality in overseas products and services which offer international connectivity (Massey 1994: 153).

Although the library is not in the main shopping area of the town, I argue that its location has an important bridging function. It is situated exactly between the small commercial hub of Thornton Heath High Street, with its large supermarket and leisure centre, as well as the railway station and the more residential area, schools and hospital on the western side of the town. To illustrate this spatially and temporally, it is five minutes' walk and two bus stops away from the train station, further west, and it is a ten minute walk or five bus stops from Croydon's hospital. This perspective demonstrates that the local library has a generous and convenient relationship to its wider locality.

The simultaneously global and local spatial identities manifest in Brigstock Road thus become constitutive of the library's symbolic relationship with its locality, while the library building occupies a





**Figure 3.** Thornton Heath Library, Brigstock Road (Robinson 2012).

central position on Brigstock Road. The library acts as a fulcrum between the two different sides of the town, and provides a striking visual landmark along a road that is an architectural mish-mash of predominantly semi-detached housing, small-scale retail, guest houses, and workshops and garages.

Originally built in 1914, Thornton Heath's Carnegie public library was re-opened in June 2010 following major restoration and modernisation work funded by the Big Lottery and designed by FAT architects.<sup>39</sup> The library, classically Carnegie, yet unassuming, somewhat recessive, and pre-renovation, distinctly dowdy, has been extended onto the street through the addition of the

pavilion-like entrance, as well as extensive ramping to improve access. The library abuts the pavement and stretches right to the edges of its site, its pavilion reaching up, as well as out, into the street, its expanse of window and bold signage giving the impression of a shop front, as well as radiating strong messages about its function. At the same time, looking in from the street affords a domestic impression of people in armchairs reading newspapers, drinking tea, talking, or snoozing. The frontage may thus be seen as an architectural nod to the mix of uses present in the buildings on Brigstock Road, both commercial and convivial.

The library also has an important symbolic location in its relationship with and its orientation to the population in its locality. This is laid down in the 1964 Libraries and Museums Act, which states that public libraries have a duty to provide access to material that is relevant to and necessary for the users of the library.<sup>20</sup> The library stocks books in languages common among local residents, supplies international newspapers, and provides drop-in sessions of careers advice and IT training. There are weekly storytelling and singing groups for young children as well as a homework help club. An IT suite containing bookable computers with free, fast internet access is incredibly popular, and at any time of the day, all of the computers are in use. To the rear of the library is a community garden, providing a green and safe outdoor space in a heavily built-up area.

To become a member of the library, it is necessary to provide written proof of address.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in order to access the library the user first has to locate themselves, something difficult for people without a fixed address. Immediately up the road from the library is Brigstock House, a short-term hostel for asylum seekers. The library has an arrangement with the hostel that residents are welcome to register as library users, with the hostel providing them with a letter to prove their residency. This small act of temporary location enables people in situations of extreme dislocation and uncertainty access to a place where they can situate themselves. The locatory note endows them with the same rights as anyone else to be there, as full members; it provides them with a completely legitimate location, without charge, for as long as they choose to use it, gives them the resources to keep in touch with friends and family, thus shaping a framework around which they can build a day, and begin to re-orientate themselves. This arrangement, a mix of pragmatism and generosity, may be seen as symbolic of a cosmopolitan view of belonging and participation afforded by the library locality.

Considering the location of Thornton Heath library not simply as its physical site, but also in terms of its response to its location starts to open out a spatial and discursive reorientation. It becomes apparent how the specific needs and desires of library users reflect and refract wider relationships and connections. Examining the library's physical and conceptual location maps different layers of spatial relationships and demonstrates that the urban public library is necessarily oriented both towards the heart of its locality, and, at the same time, is situated within a condition of global connectivity. Drawing out the iterative function of the library, its enfolding of the 'elsewhere' in its response to its users and their needs, shows how the library itself may be seen as a condition of Exopolis.

## Conclusion

Through the two discussions, first of connectivity and continuity and then of location, I have embarked on a re-orientation of a place which might be seen as peripheral in terms of spatial hierarchies. This reorientation has considered both spatial and discursive distance through a critique of commonly used scales and perspectives in which discussions of the edge are framed, based on a consideration of everyday experiences and discursive landscapes.

Writing against the idea of the suburb as a place of 'nothingness' or emptiness, I used one of the bus routes to Thornton Heath library to explore the urban edge as a place of continuity and moreover, connectivity. I explored how narratives of place are created through the everyday practices of bus travel and how the urban continuum emerges both as a site of layered connectivity and as a site of distinctiveness, punctuated by way markers and differentiating signs.

A close-up analysis of Thornton Heath through the lens of the location of its public library has allowed a conceptual reorientation of the site. It can be seen how the library works as a fulcrum for the local area, occupying a bridging position between the western and eastern ends of Thornton Heath, and having characteristics of a public as well as a domestic space. The library, in its generous interpretation of who constitutes the local community, and in changing itself to respond to the needs and desires of its community, may be seen as an iterative location. Moreover, I have shown how examining the materiality of the everyday generates both a more symbolically significant and an empirically nuanced depiction of the complexities of the periphery.

Concluding this paper at the end of a summer which saw riots in Croydon and other areas of geographically and socially peripheral locations of London, I am aware of the multiplicity and disjuncture at work in narratives of place. As a footnote, I want to briefly explore two narratives which permeated the area in the weeks after the riots. All around Broad Green and West Croydon, the areas adjacent to Thornton Heath, and scenes of the worst of the arson and looting in that area, home-made signs on boarded-up shop windows announced that they were 'open as usual'. At the same time, the local authority produced large posters prominently displaying the number of arrests and convictions, and asking witnesses to call a phone number with information, while the local newspaper printed pictures of perpetrators caught on CCTV and asked for help to reveal their identities.<sup>22</sup>

These two narratives, a sense of 'normality' in the face of personal disaster and collective fear, and a sense of the extraordinary conveyed by the public display of the abnormal and deviant, were both constitutive of understandings of place at that particular time, and as such, may be understood as 'moments of arbitrary closure' (Keith 2005: 69). To say arbitrary is not to deny the significance of these narratives, but is to emphasize their shifting nature, to see them working at particular moments in time, and thus avoiding spatial and social equivalence.

Considering places as 'moments of arbitrary closure' is to both open out the possibility for these narratives to shift and change, to 'consider the way we look and the way we tell, to privilege neither but reveal the artifice of both' (Keith 2005: 80). Observing how the narrative of the extraordinary becomes part of the everyday narrative of place, and is digested, commented upon, and rearticulated, will become part of my fieldwork narrative. At a time when it is being asked how the riots will impact on Croydon, critical consideration of the shifting narratives around location and distance is vital.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Boroughs are the local administrative authorities in London, responsible for delivering public services to residents. There are 33 boroughs in London. (Greater London Authority (GLA): <http://www.london.gov.uk/who-runs-london/london-boroughs>).

<sup>2</sup> 340,000 people live in Croydon. (Borough profile, Croydon Observatory: <http://www.croydonobservatory.org/Borough>). Croydon Council's Croydon Observatory is a mapping and policy development tool hosted by the borough's strategic partnership, a collaboration of local agencies.

<sup>3</sup> The circumstances of the shooting remain unclear and are the subject of an ongoing investigation by the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

<sup>4</sup> Los Angeles has been used as a symbol of the edge city to the extent that it 'has travelled internationally to appear as a synecdoche in local debates regarding suburban growth' (Phelps et al. 2006: 5).

<sup>5</sup> However, he goes on to complicate, and even invert, this distinction by describing his efforts at leading 'alternative tourism' tours on the outskirts of Cologne, encountering 'spatial sequences which are particularly rich in surprises' (2003: 44).

<sup>6</sup> The inappropriateness of applying edge city definitions to Croydon is highlighted by an interviewee in Phelps et al.: '... as a centre, Croydon is clearly an office based retail employment centre. It's got good public transport links but it's still got very much a car based culture which comes from the 1960s and 1970s. So it does have those elements about it. But as a borough it's too big and too differentiated to fit into those easy American [edge city] definitions.' (2006: 184)

<sup>7</sup> '... administrative boundaries do not necessarily reflect neighbourhoods or economic or functional areas on the ground – some boroughs, for example, have characteristics of central, inner and outer London within their boundaries' (London Plan, 2011: 38). This is echoed by a comment from an interviewee in Phelps et al.: '... these are artificial boundaries and they never work properly for every activity. They might work for training but not work for transport' (2006: 176). The London Plan also recognises the independency of parts of the city on each other, as well as on bordering areas and sub-regions (2011: 39), and recommends the co-ordination of sub-regional policies to ensure 'a level playing field' (Ibid.: 41).

<sup>8</sup> Phelps et al. comment that the complex spatial conditions at work in Croydon reflect both the layering of functions in the area as well as the layered pattern of its development (2006: 185).

<sup>9</sup> Since 1209, versions of London Bridge have connected the North and South of the city (Matthews 2008: 145) but it remained the only stone bridge in London until 1746, when Westminster Bridge was built (Ibid.: 93).

<sup>10</sup> The others are Westminster and the City. The official city bid and the accompanying Facebook campaign is available online: Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/#!/group.php?gid=12256376092&v=info>; Croydon Council bid: <http://www.croydon.gov.uk/planningandregeneration/regeneration-vision-croydon/vision>

<sup>11</sup> 'It's the last thing I would want to be known as on the edge of something. I want us to be central to the whole of the South East' (Interviewee in Phelps et al. 2006: 190).

<sup>12</sup> 'In 2040, Croydon will be known as London's centre of knowledge, creativity, and innovation. [...] The regeneration of the town centre will help drive this forward. In 2040, Croydon will be regarded as an iconic, safe, and modern mixed-use European city. It will enjoy a reputation comparable with other major commercial centres thanks to a raft of new, modern, office developments. It will provide the principal retail and leisure offer in outer south London (including for visitors and workers arriving from Gatwick airport) and its tree-lined streets will look more attractive than more sterile shopping and leisure malls in other parts of London and the immediate south east.' (*Towards a Preferred Core Strategy for Croydon* 2010: 28)

<sup>13</sup> Boroughs are divided into wards, small electoral districts.

<sup>14</sup> Thornton Heath library is located within Bensham Manor Ward With 16,088 residents, Bensham Manor Ward has the second biggest ward population in Croydon. Deprivation indicators include the second highest incidence of childhood obesity in the borough and the second highest rate of low infant birth rate in Croydon (Bensham Manor Ward Profile 2009: 6). Five neighbourhoods in the ward 'fall into the 11-20% most deprived bracket and one falls into the 6-10% most deprived for "Living Environment" deprivation, which suggests that [...] there is a greater than average proportion of housing that does not meet Decent Homes standards.' (ibid.: 16.) Higher than average rate of private housing tenure means that: 'neighbourhoods in the ward resemble inner city areas in terms of tenure, more than they resemble suburban areas in the south' (ibid.: 7). (Croydon Observatory, Bensham Manor Ward Profile: <http://www.croydonobservatory.org/docs/877820/877837>.)

<sup>15</sup> There is a widespread perception that Thornton Heath has nothing to symbolise it, or that it has lost its landmarks. In a local history column, the *Croydon Advertiser* commented on the significance of Thornton Heath Pond, once a key local landmark and now a major traffic roundabout. The article makes a feature of this perceived lack, with contrasting 'then' and 'now' photos and the caption, 'Full pond is now a dry landmark' (12 July 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Fare information from Transport for London, correct as of August 2011: [www.tfl.gov.uk/tickets/14416.aspx](http://www.tfl.gov.uk/tickets/14416.aspx).

<sup>17</sup> The growth of the suburban rail network had the effect of drawing: 'the whole of the perimeter of the city [...] ineluctably [...] into its centre' (Ackroyd 2000: 591).

<sup>18</sup> The borough average is 36%. Croydon Observatory: <http://www.croydonobservatory.org/docs/877820/877837>.

<sup>19</sup> *Architects Journal* online: <http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/buildings/-magazine-building-studies/thornton-heath-library-croydon-by-fat/8605951.article>.

<sup>20</sup> '... that facilities are available for the borrowing of, or reference to, books and other printed matter, [...] and other materials, sufficient in number, range and quality to meet the general requirements and any special requirements both of adults and children.' (National Archives: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1964/75#commentary-c713328>.)

<sup>21</sup> There is no fee to join a public library in the UK, although certain services incur a charge and fines are levied for late returns.

<sup>22</sup> 'Help bring these rioters to justice', *Croydon Advertiser*, 12 August 2011.





### 3- Two Utopias of Georgii Krutikov's 'The City of the Future'

*Alla Vronskaia*

After a series of scheduled public defences of architecture graduates in May 1928 in the VKhUTEIN (Higher Art and Technical Institute<sup>2</sup>) in Moscow, only one was still pending as the author kept asking for more time to finish his project, the notorious futuristic fantasy of a city suspended above the earth, 'The City of the Future (The Evolution of Architectural Principles of City-Planning and the Organisation of Dwelling)'. The defence finally occurred in June. It took place in the Psychotechnical Laboratory organised within the institute by a professor of architecture, Nikolai Ladovskii – an entirely black room designed for psychological experiments with human perception.<sup>2</sup> As the eyewitnesses later recalled, an uncanny silence filled the room. The chair of the defence committee suggested posing questions, but nobody was willing to speak. At last, the representative of the City Infrastructure Department broke the silence: 'How much time did you spend preparing the project, what is it based on, and how does it deal with the questions of sewer and water-supply?' The author, Georgii Krutikov, stoutly responded that it took him fifteen years to think about the problems that are solved in the project, and that the forthcoming progress of science and technology would definitely allow solving the latter problem. There were no other questions or commentaries. Relieved, the dean of the Architecture Department hastened to proclaim Krutikov an 'architect-artist'.

The scandal exploded later, when the newspaper *Postrojka* [*Edifice*] published a scoffing review entitled 'Soviet Jules-Vernes. VKhUTEMAS Trains Dreamers instead of Builders; The Project of the Construction of a "Flying City"', in which it accused Krutikov of fruitless fantasising and losing touch with reality (Levochskii 1928). This quick, biased assessment of Soviet propagandist Levochskii seems to have had presaged the perception of Krutikov's project throughout the twentieth century – in western academia as well as in Soviet criticism. Its echoes could be heard, for example, when Richard Stites discussed Krutikov alongside the cosmist philosopher Nikolai Fedorov (who dreamt of reviving the dead and resettling them in other planets) and science fiction novels of Alexei Tolstoi and Alexander Beliaev in a chapter devoted to futurology and science fiction (Stites 1989: 170), or when Milka Bliznakov connected Krutikov's 'The City of the Future' with the

expectation of a miraculous technological breakthrough due to an anticipated foreign technological help (Bliznakov 1990).

However, a very different interpretation of Krutikov's project was offered by his VKhUTEIN pedagogues, who immediately intervened to protect the reputation of their student and explain the principles and intentions of architectural pedagogy in the institute (Presidium arkhitekturnogo fakulteta et al. 1928). In their response, published in the same newspaper, the Architecture Department claimed that Levochskii distorted the project's title by mislabelling what in fact was a 'project for the solution of a new city' as a 'project for the construction of a new city'. Krutikov's defenders argued that his exploration of the 'future city' was in fact an example of scientific research, which, being conducted within the Architecture Department, by necessity had to acquire the architectural form of an urban project. Rather than being dissociated from reality, 'The City of the Future' explored reality on a deeper level. What the Architecture Department claimed, was that Krutikov's 'Flying City' was not a science fiction, but a utopia, a word too painful for post-Revolutionary Soviet culture to be pronounced openly.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, I will explore how exactly Krutikov's notorious project was connected to the reality of his times and what solutions it in fact offered for new cities. This will be achieved by an examination of the functioning of Krutikov's architectural project as a utopia in the context of Soviet post-Revolutionary history – by a review of its alliances, possible readings, and inevitable ideological implications. I will demonstrate that 'The City of the Future' presented an uneasy coexistence of two alternative utopian paradigms, both connected to specific moments of early-Soviet history – the Romantic, post-Revolutionary utopia as a hope and the proto-totalitarian utopia as a rigid social organisation, associated with the economic politics of the First Five-Year Plan. In different ways they both explored the possibilities offered by geographical distance and the technological means of overcoming it: if the first paradigm was preoccupied with the impact of distance upon the visual perception of form, the second dealt with the new structures of organisation that distance necessitated.

The latter paradigm – represented by dystopian novels, cold-war political criticism, and the philosophies of freedom and democracy – is more familiar today. Moreover, it is more specifically connected to architecture, which it treats as a material means of organising and controlling hierarchical human relationships. Lewis Mumford, for instance, argued that the first cities appeared around religious centres as materialised utopias, earthly incarnations of divine order and harmony; the earliest utopias, on the other hand, such as Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*, were modelled after real, material cities of the ancient world (Mumford 1965).

For Mumford, both a city and a utopia were defined by their rationality, their order and regulation – as such, both of them were nothing but social machines, in which the inadequacy of technological knowledge was replaced with a complex social order.

'By royal command, the necessary machine was created: a machine that concentrated energy in great assemblages of men, each unit shaped, graded, trained, regimented, articulated, to perform its particular function in a unified working whole. With such a machine, work could be conceived and executed on a scale that otherwise was impossible until the steam engine and the dynamo were invented' (Mumford 1965: 284).

If an interpretation of ancient cities as social machines might be problematic, the identification of utopia with production and machine-like rationality certainly applies to an idea of a modern city and modernity in general, as epitomised in the project of Enlightenment as the 'Age of Reason' with its architectural 'revolutionary' utopias (Kaufmann 1952). An ideal modern city, such as Ledoux's *Salines de Chaux* (1775 – 1778), was structured to optimise industrial production, organisation and control of the workers, who were identified with their social function.

The concerns of urbanisation and industrial production also regulated the so-called 'Cultural Revolution' that occurred in the USSR in the late 1920s, coinciding with the rapid and forced modernisation policy of the First Five-Year Plan (1928 – 1932) (Fitzpatrick 1974). After the semi-capitalist period of the New Economic Policy, which lasted from 1921 until 1928, the announcement of Stalin's First Five-Year Plan was perceived by leftist intellectuals as the long-awaited return to revolutionary ideals. Indeed, Stalin's industrialisation was based on a programme that he himself just a few years earlier condemned as unrealisable 'left deviation' (then espoused by Leon Trotsky). Artists followed the utopian trend of the Party: Tatlin's flying

machine Letatlin (1929 – 32); Ginzburg's 'social condenser' as the new house-commune (1927); Leonidov's Lenin Institute, a bold diploma project referring to the traditions of Ledoux (1927); the radical town-planning theories of urbanism and disurbanism (1929), and the 'machine for rest', the Green City (1929), all appeared during the cultural revolution. This brief blossoming of artistic activity allowed Manfredo Tafuri to call the late twenties 'the second avant-garde' (Tafuri & Dal Co 1986). In Mumfordian terms, the utopia of the First Five-Year plan was a collective human machine, a coercive apparatus necessary to complete the leap from an agrarian to industrial society – to produce the means of industrial production with preindustrial means.

This dehumanising utopia of the cultural revolution was very different from the utopias that originated during the New Economic Policy. Given that the Party preferred more realistic solutions to economic problems, these earlier utopias evolved in, and were restricted to, artistic avant-garde circles. Unlike the static and rigid utopia-as-social-machine, in which any change would bring the loss of balance and disjunction of parts, theirs was a dynamic, open and liberating understanding of utopia as hope and inspiration. Some twenty years later, this definition was made famous in his *Principle of Hope* (1938–1947) by German Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch, who claimed that

'[t]he imagination and the thoughts of future intention ... are utopian, ... not in a narrow sense of the word which only defines what is bad (emotively reckless picturing, playful form of an abstract kind), but rather in fact in the newly tenable sense of the forward dream, of anticipation in general' (Bloch 1986: 15).

Hope, for Bloch, was the emotion that allowed people to go forward, that gave them a direction, supported people on the way and ultimately made the future become a reality.

Similarly, for the theoretician of Soviet Constructivism Boris Arvatov, the purpose of a valuable, revolutionary – materialised [*oveschestvlennaia*], to use Arvatov's own term – utopia was an organisation of creative power. In a 1923 issue of *LEF* [*Levyi Front Iskusstv*; Left Front of Arts], the journal of the Constructivists and other radically minded, communist and materialist artists and thinkers, Arvatov suggested a utopia that pointed to the direction which a society had to take, igniting souls and inspiring minds:

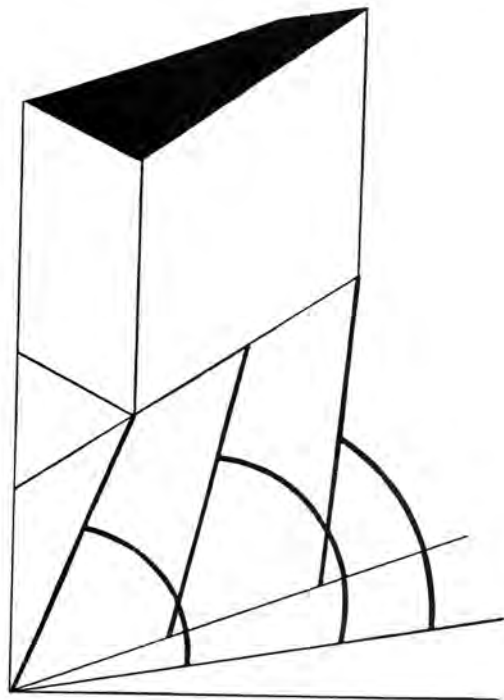
'Manilov practiced utopias in his leisure time: [it would be nice to build] a bridge, and on the bridge... etc.<sup>4</sup> His utopias were born passively. The economist Sismondi



created another sort of utopia – he was fascinated with the past. Fourier was also a utopian, and his utopia was revolutionary. Breaking into the heart of the historic process, this utopia becomes a material power that organizes creativity. And then we name it with a capital U – Utopia. Because everyone knows that Marx would not have been possible without Fourier and his likes' (Arvatov 1923: 64).<sup>5</sup>

Unlike Engels's 'scientific socialism', Constructivist utopia did not have to be or even look realisable. Another major *LEF* critic, Osip Brik, argued that it was precisely the manifested impossibility that made a utopia valuable. In 1923, commenting on a precursor of Krutikov's utopian project, 'A City on Leaf Springs' by Constructivist Anton Lavinskii (Figure 1), Brik argued that only the unrealisable can ascend above the mundane, entering the immaterial theoretical realm.

'I... assume... that this is unbuildable. The same questions arose with regard to Tatlin's monument. I assume that both cannot be built, that engineers would smile at these discussions. Taking this into consideration,



**Figure 1.** Anton Lavinskii. Scheme for a house-block [Skhema doma-kvartala]. Published in *LEF*, 1923, No. 1: 62.

I insist that Lavinskii's work possesses an immense significance precisely because it, first of all, arouses questions. ... And if Lavinskii did not drive this utopia to the end, then this is a certain error of his, because he decided to connect somehow the utopia with today. This is his fault. It would have been more utopian if he had driven the idea of the liberation of the human from the immobile and untransformable city to the end ...' (Brik 1923: 56 – 57).

Architect Nikolai Ladovskii, the VKhUTEIN teacher of Krutikov, also did not remain indifferent to Lavinskii's idea to supply houses with leaf springs. However, he found it unsatisfactory – insufficiently utopian. Articulated in the course of the discussion, Ladovskii's notion of artistic utopia, in the same way as Arvatov's concept of reified utopia, stimulated movement into the future and pointed to its possible directions. Unlike the more ambitious Arvatov, however, who was thinking in terms of society as a whole, Ladovskii confined himself and his disciples to the sphere of designed form. It was the absence of formal artistic thinking in Lavinskii's project that dissatisfied Ladovskii.

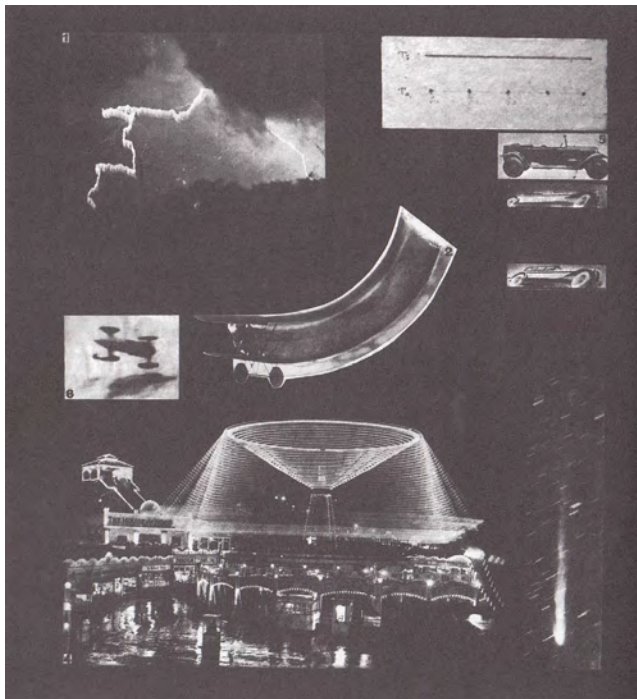
'The idea that is clear both from the drawings and from the descriptions, possesses a utopian character... As for the houses on leaf springs, I don't see anything utopian here in what deals with the technical realisation. ... Utopia is beauty and an interesting flight of fantasy – and Lavinskii's project does not possess this interest. Is it interesting to lift a house? I can invent even better: make a house electromagnetic and it wouldn't need material support. I will use electromagnets to transport cargo... All these are inventions in technology, not in art or architecture... As for technology, I can go even further. I can imagine my house flying and solve the sewer problem... This is a technologically-based utopia. But what I am interested to hear is not technological, but other artistic challenges. Technology: I can draw whatever I wish. I can take a number of balloons and suspend a house from them. Everything is moving, every chair... Would my idea be any worse? Give me an artistic utopia, the principles of which I don't see here ...' (Ladovskii 1923: 59 – 60).

Ladovskii understood artistic utopia as forecasting new forms, which were to appear in the future in response to new modes of perception. Unlike their materialist colleagues and rivals, architectural Constructivists, and their *LEF* fellow-thinkers, the Rationalists focused on psychological phenomena, basing their approach to architecture on psychophysiology, a young 'positive' science that attempted to bridge the gap between the sciences of 'spirit' and those of 'nature' (*Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*) or, in other words, to suggest a way of measuring and verifying such immaterial substances as beauty and happiness. Ladovskii was convinced that the essence of architecture consisted not in exploring the capacities of technology and construction, but in investigating the expressive qualities of architectural form. 'Space, not stone, is the material of architecture,' Ladovskii liked to repeat. Good architecture for him facilitated the perception of spatial forms, economised perceptive energy, and increased the amount of vital energy, making humans happier and more optimistic. The easiness of perception of a spatial form for Ladovskii was determined by the clarity of the expression of physical forces at work in it, and an architect's task was to make the form's qualities manifest.

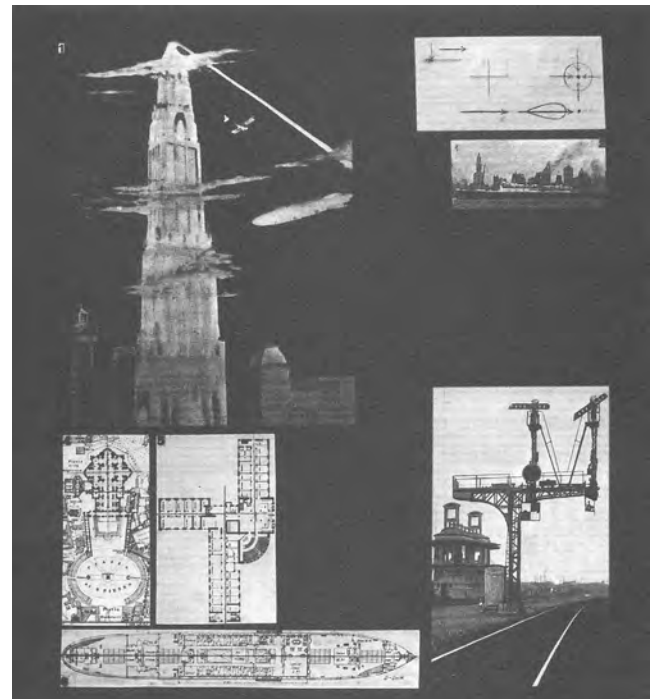
To see his vision of artistic utopia materialised, Ladovskii, however, had to wait until 1928, when Krutikov based his diploma project on the ideas and methods of his teacher. The project was a result of Krutikov's experimental research at the

Psychotechnical Laboratory, opened at VKhUTEIN in 1927 by Ladovskii in order to further the research of spatial perception. As a real psychological research laboratory, the one at VKhUTEIN was filled with equipment measuring human reactions to various environmental changes, in particular, the perception of various spatial parameters. In the spirit of architectural Rationalism, the purpose of these experiments was to develop new formal solutions adequately responding to the challenges of today and the future. Krutikov contributed by inventing machines that measured the perception of moving form. One of those, a moving band with an attached 'dynamic element' that was run in front of a fixed scale with two 'static elements' of the same size, allowed the evaluation of the perceived change of a size caused by movement; another, a rotating wheel, demonstrated the changes in the perceived remoteness of an element from the centre, which depended on the speed of the wheel's rotation (Krutikov archive).

The results of these theoretical experiments were applied by Krutikov to his project that dealt with the future direction of evolution of architectural form, which, according to Krutikov, was to be determined by changing speeds. Krutikov's 'The City of the Future' included two parts, a theoretical and a visual. Entitled 'A Study of a Moving Form' [*Issledovanie dvizhushchejsia formy*], the former consisted of sixteen illustrated tables, which juxtaposed the formal evolution of human dwellings with the evolution of the



**Figure 2.** Georgii Krutikov, A Study of Moving Form. Table 1: Visual Deformation of a Dynamic Form. Diploma project, VKhUTEIN, 1928. Courtesy of A. V. Schusev State Museum of Architecture, Moscow.



**Figure 3.** Georgii Krutikov, A Study of Moving Form. Table 2: The Composition of Dynamic Structures. Diploma project, VKhUTEIN, 1928. Courtesy of A. V. Schusev State Museum of Architecture, Moscow.

means of transport. Only the first three tables stood apart as the 'three major problems in the theory of architecture of a dynamic form,' that is, three aspects of the perception of the latter.

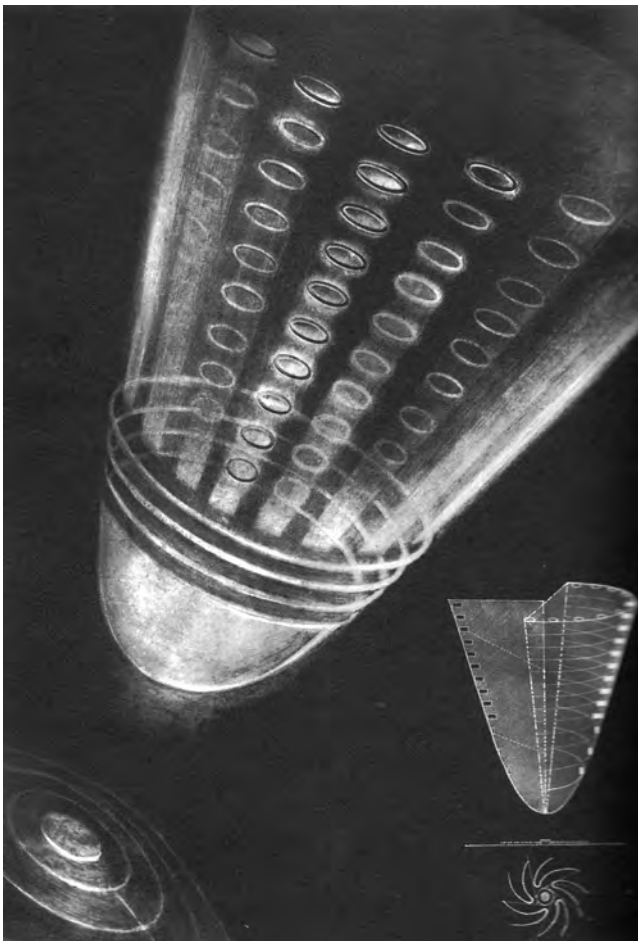
The first of them presented the 'Visual Deformation of a Dynamic Form' (Figure 2). It distinguished between two possible scenarios: when the trajectory and the moving form were perceived separately, and when they merged, creating a new form and, as it were, a new body endowed with new physical qualities. The idea was illustrated by several examples: 'Lightning under the "microscope of time" (in 1/100,000 part of a second)', where the extremely short exposure of the photograph elucidated the structure of lightening; the movement of an aeroplane and the fall of a meteorite, conversely, were imprinted on the photographic plate by a very long exposure. The second table dealt with 'The Composition of Dynamic Structures' (Figure 3). Krutikov described connections between static and vertical compositions (e.g. a skyscraper), on the one hand, and between

dynamic and horizontal compositions (e.g. a profile of a city) on the other. A railway line illustrated this contrast of statics (vertical semaphore) and dynamism (train). Similarly, Krutikov distinguished between the static and dynamic architectural compositions. In the former, represented by St. Peter's, the point of intersection of compositional axes (the goal of the movement) was located inside the building, while a simple cross plan was complicated with an additional parallel axis. In contrast, the plan of a dynamic structure (e.g. a dirigible gondola) was based on a single horizontal axis, longing to leave the boundaries of the construction. 'The Form-Making of a Dynamic Element' was the subject of the third table, in which Krutikov presented the discovery he made with the help of machines designed by him at the Laboratory: 'when moving, two equal forms are perceived as having different sizes depending on their location on the axis of movement.'

The remaining thirteen tables mobilised the methodology of historical materialism to explain why the urbanism of tomorrow would inevitably soar in the air. The evolution of the design of the automobile, train, ocean liner, dirigible, and airplane demonstrated an increasing smoothness and improvement of aerodynamic qualities. Western 'movable dachas' (automobile trailers, tents, and sleeping places in boats, airplanes, and cars) were ready prototypes of the future movable dwelling. The lightness of materials and constructions allowed for the 'Portability of Moving Trains'. The evolution of power engineering implacably led in the direction of the diminution of machine size. Confronted with these challenges of the environment, a building developed from a cave to 'a house in the air', while man was preoccupied with conquering 'new spaces and novel viewpoints' (an aeroplane view of the earth, open air spaces, the stratosphere, a sky-rocket for interplanetary connections, outer space and the expanses of the universe) (Khan-Magomedov 2008: 48–59).

Krutikov's tables attempted to respond to the challenge of Ladovskii, who urged architects to develop shapes that respond to and facilitate human perception. Postulating the future multiplication of speed and mobility, Krutikov discussed the consequences of this multiplication for the formal language of architecture and transportation design. Had Krutikov's project consisted only of the theoretical part, it would have perhaps remained a perfect illustration of Ladovskii's notion of artistic utopia – the notion that appeared during the New Economic Policy. But it did not.

The second, visual part of Krutikov's diploma project offered a graphic representation of 'The City of the Future', in which the theoretical formal discoveries presented in the diagrams were embodied into a vision of a city. The unusual – experimentally determined – shapes of high-speed vehicles and objects



**Figure 4.** Georgii Krutikov, *The City of the Future*. House-Commune. Perspective. Diploma project, VKhUTEIN, 1928. Courtesy of A. V. Schusev State Museum of Architecture, Moscow.

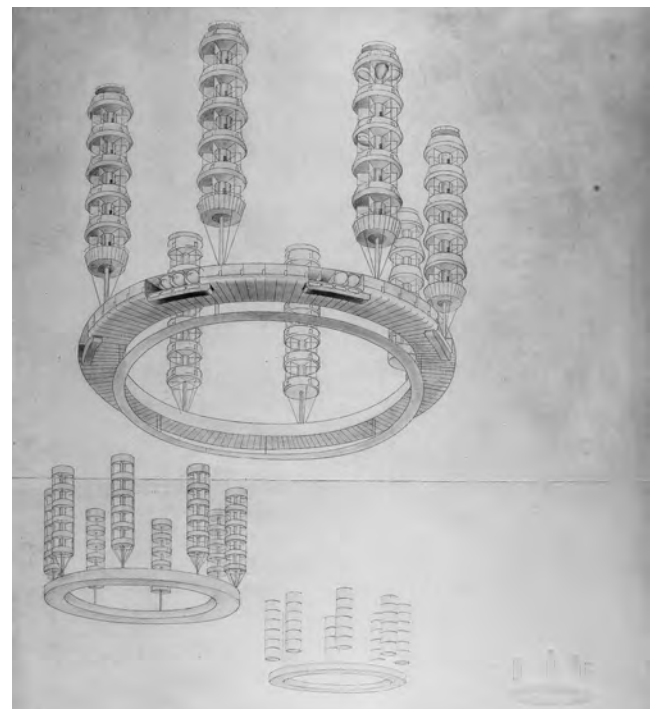
perceived from those, represented by Krutikov as spaceships and hovering houses, reminded Levochskii of the science fiction fantasies of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, while for Krutikov himself they made him think of the moon adventures of Baron Münchhausen (Krutikov, 'Arkhitektura buduschego'). Moreover, subjected to the conventions of the discipline and to the new concerns of Soviet society, Krutikov's utopia acquired the form of a city – and with it, the static, proto-dystopian regularity of a machine. Artistic utopia became supplemented with dashing science fiction rhetoric and merged with the dominant narrative of utopia as a social structure.

Represented by Krutikov, 'The City of the Future' consisted of two parts: the vertical one (the residential zone), which was suspended in the air, while the horizontal one (the production zone) was sprawled on the surface of the earth (Figure 4). Both parts were immobile and were tightly connected with each other, thus betraying the fixation on the relationship between life and production within a city, which was so characteristic for modernist urbanism. The plan of the earthly production zone resembled a whirlpool twisting towards the centre; each of its segments contained one of the industrial or agricultural sectors. The residential zone, which appeared to be a paraboloid with a top facing down, was suspended in the atmosphere exactly above the production zone: the surface of this paraboloid was formed by many layers of hovering individual residential complexes, located in tiers one above another. As both zones of the city were static, the connection between them was made possible by flying capsules – 'individual moving cells.'

Nevertheless, in spite of its new utopian form of a city and a social machine, the visual part of Krutikov's project reflected Ladovskii's vision. It applied to architectural practice the experimental and theoretical discoveries made by Krutikov in regards to the distortion of moving form. The paraboloid shape of the city, for example, existed only in the perception of the beholder, which united the rings of hovering residential complexes into a gleaming thimble. Looking at Krutikov's drawing, one might have thought that the city was falling down like the meteorite whose photograph was presented in theoretical part of the thesis – perhaps foreseeing this possible misunderstanding, Krutikov had cautiously notified us that the city is stably attached to the production zone below. A careful observer would, therefore, have suggested that the view presented by Krutikov was taken from an individual moving cell that was just taking off from the earth to its harbour in the residential part of the city. Perhaps the same perceptual distortion of form in the mind of a moving subject explained why the swirling 'petals' of the production zone were depicted on the view as a series of circles. At the same time, the juxtaposition of the horizontal and the vertical parts of the city recalled the discoveries presented in the project's analytical part

(the composition of dynamic and static structures), while the usual plan of the earthly sector of the city without straight lines ensured that the sector was perceived as static (as opposed to a possible plan of a circle divided into segments) in contrast to the dynamism of the residential zone. However, being observed from above, it presented a quintessentially dynamic form of a revolving wheel.

As the new 'moving' architecture was in fact static, the movement of the observer and, therefore, transportation played a crucial role in Krutikov's project. The main 'thoroughfare' coincided with the axis of the paraboloid, from which sprang 'side streets', radial in the residential part (hovering above each other) and bending in the working one (coinciding with the axis of an industrial area). The communication between the Earth and the hovering edifices was provided by a universal individual means of transportation, the individual moving cell, which could move in the air, on the earth, in and under the water, and was easy to park within the immobile hovering structures. The vehicle was comfortable enough for a short-time dwelling and served as a movable living cell, where one could live en route and during the stops outside the city. It was suitable for one and was provided with foldable furniture hidden into the walls; its shell was elastic and could modify its shape depending on the pilot's position.



**Figure 5.** Georgii Krutikov, *The City of the Future*. Perspective View. Diploma project, VKhUTEIN, 1928. Courtesy of A. V. Schusev State Museum of Architecture, Moscow.



In consonance with his theory of evolution of architectural form, Krutikov's first projects for 'The City of the Future' (preserved in his archive) included mobile habitations grouped around a static (administrative and cultural) core and loosely connected to movable production and agricultural zones. In case of an epidemic, Krutikov, explained, the city could easily fly asunder (Krutikov, 'Panarkhitektura'). Consequently, if initially the theory of 'movable architecture' required an invention of new standardised, light and collapsible constructions, they were afterwards rejected in favour of a fixed core of residential blocks (Krutikov, 'Sotsialisticheskii gorod'). These were of three different types. The first was a labour-commune, a complex vertical organisation of eight five-storey residential blocks and a horizontal communal block underneath (Figure 5). In the second type, a static dwelling, the 'compact labour-commune', individual living cells were assembled into one giant cylindrical volume. The third type was a hotel for city guests. It comprised a vertical block, which consisted of a multi-tier system of honeycombs for short-term parking at the bottom, the lodging area in the middle, and the spaces of communal use at the top.

According to Krutikov's notes, his utopia, on which he began working a few years earlier, did not acquire the static form of 'The City of the Future' until after 1925. That year, Krutikov made the first public presentation of his project – it failed completely. 'They fell on me heavily, as the Russians do, – lamented Krutikov to himself, – giving heavy advice, which was nevertheless petty comparing to the generality of the idea' (Krutikov, 'Gorod buduschego'). The solution that Krutikov found for this problem was probably influenced by the emerging cultural revolution. In the second half of the 1920s, quotations from the classics of Marxism-Leninism found a permanent place in his notes. He became preoccupied with the vanishing of traditional family, Lenin's concern for children, and collective time-spending. He had to realise that an industrially-efficient machine-like society was based on a superior organisation, an organisation of work, recreation, social structure, and urban environment. And it was precisely organisation that was so difficult to achieve in an anarchic agglomeration of individual flying cells. Now the displacement of the city into the atmosphere was explained by its organisational advantages: the earth was freed for production and cultural establishments, gardens and reading-houses (Krutikov, 'Gorod buduschego'). An industrial city required a definite location even if had overcome gravitation; it was rooted not in the earth, but in the relationships of production that were no less static than plains and mountains.

## Conclusion

This article assessed Krutikov's 'The City of the Future' in the context of the historical transition between the situations of the New Economic Policy and the First Five-Year Plan. It argued that this transition was accompanied by a shift in the understanding of the function of art and architecture. If in the early 1920s architecture was perceived – first of all, by the architects themselves – as an autonomous aesthetic project, by the end of the decade its functions, in accordance with the new economic goals that the country was facing, were reinterpreted as organisational. Likewise, Krutikov's 'The City of the Future,' a utopia exploring the consequences of new means of transport and new distances for urbanism, in the course of the 1920s evolved from an avant-garde artistic utopia, utopia as a hope and a direction, into a Mumfordian utopia-as-a-machine, in which some traces of the initial idea – elusive dynamic connections between the city's static parts, flying capsules and shifting perspectives of experimentally-determined shapes – were still recognisable. Along the way, movement was refracted into statics and freedom into order, reflecting the ongoing mutation of early-Soviet limited freedom and pluralism into a rigid totalitarianism.

Krutikov's utopia – alongside all the other utopias of the Soviet Cultural revolution – became obsolete in the early 1930s, when the transition from First to Second (1933 – 37) Five-Year Plan marked the completion of the creation of the material base for industrial production. The ensuing cultural turn, known in western historiography as 'The Great Retreat,' was seen by many as a de facto abandoning of socialist aspirations and a tacit return to tsarist politics (Timacheff 1946). For art and architectural historians, this turn signified a violent assassination of the avant-garde by the state. Indeed, what was needed now was not a social organisation of people that could replace the non-existing machinery, but people's hard, devoted work on the machinery that had just been acquired. The new totalitarian utopia was one of real, productive labour.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> VKhUTEMAS (Vysshie Khudozhestvenno-Tekhnicheskiye Masterskiye – Higher Art and Technical Studios), the famous avant-garde school of art and architecture was reorganised as VKhUTEIN (Vysshie Khudozhestvenno-Tekhnicheskii Institut – Higher Art and Technical Institute) in 1926.

<sup>2</sup> Nikolai Ladovskii (1881 – 1941) – Soviet architect, one of the leaders of Soviet modernist architecture, was the head of the Association of New Architects (ASNOVA), a prominent VKhUTEMAS/VKhUTEIN pedagogue, and the leader of the 'Rationalist' movement, which affirmed psychophysiology as the methodological base for the new architecture.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the distinction between 'utopian' and 'scientific' socialism suggested by Engels. Engels, *Herrn Eugen Dühring's Umwälzung der Wissenschaft*. Leipzig, Druck und Verlag der Genossenschafts-Buchdruckerei, 1878.

<sup>4</sup> Manilov is a protagonist of Nikolai Gogol's novel *The Dead Souls* (1842), who entered Russian culture as a symbol of fruitless wishful thinking.

<sup>5</sup> Here and throughout the rest of the article the translations from Russian are provided by the author.





## 4- Fixing Space through Infrastructure

*Nikolaos Katsikis*

'Space-time no longer corresponds to Euclidean space. Distance is no longer the relevant variable in accessing accessibility. Connectivity (being in relation to) is added to, even imposed upon, contiguity (being next to)' (Offner 2000: 172).

This quote by Jean-Marc Offner is illustrative of the constant struggle in urban studies to conceptualise the spatio-temporal attributes of distance and understand its role in the construction and evolution of the urban condition. This complex condition of distorting space and time in order to channel interaction has largely depended on the development of technological systems, specifically transport and communication infrastructures. While according to Soja (2000), this interweaving has characterised the last 7000 years of urban history, a number of factors has made the study of this interrelation even more crucial in the last decades. First of all, the intensity, power, spread and reach of technological developments, which has largely led to the pervasiveness of reliance on urban life on material and technological networks. Second, the duplicate, increasing variety and density of networked infrastructures. And finally, the speed and sophistication of the more powerful and advanced infrastructures (Urry, 2000). The resulting social, spatial and technological interrelations, that make the very notion of a modern city possible, have thus created an extremely complex infrastructural landscape of urban transformations.

Developments in transport infrastructures have always been central to the debate around overcoming the fringe of distance by technological means. However, neither their impact on shaping distance, nor the actual definition of space and distance itself has been static in urban studies. As a result, the first task of this paper will be to offer a rough summary of the changing concepts of space in defining distance by tracing two parallel shifts: first in the conceptualisation of space from absolute to relative and relational; and second in concepts of causality from technologically or socially deterministic to more relational socio-technical models. While the later relational models offer flexible and dynamic explanations of the fluid hyper-mobile globalised

condition, it is the understanding of the actors and processes constructing and constraining these potential relations that will be the second task of this paper. The starting point will be to explore what Harvey (1985, 1989) recognises as a paradoxical condition: that in order to overcome distance, sustain mobility and maximise potential relations, processes of urbanisation have to fix space, equip it with massive and rigid material structures and infrastructures. The exploration of the rigidity of this dense infrastructural equipment of the earth's surface, what Soja (2000) calls a hybrid natural, social and technological landscape will be the second task of this paper. The general scope will be to offer a platform for theorising how infrastructural systems, that are usually abstracted and reduced to their operational attributes, are co-evolving with the regional landscape, not only institutionally, socially and technologically, but also physically and materially. The focus will be to understand how systems that are broadly responsible for the dynamics of urban and regional landscapes are crystallised and slowly transform and how this complex process creates specific territorial typologies. The final goal of this paper will be to link these territorial typologies to the growing debate in design disciplines around how these systems can inform design strategies that could lead to an integrated approach to the design of contemporary urban landscapes (Allen 1999; Belanger 2010; Waldheim 2008; Wall 1999). The greater ambition is to explore how concepts that interrogate the material and socio-technical fixity of infrastructural systems could help start defining elements towards a typo-morphological understanding of the urbanised territory. This understanding could also contribute to a more generic approach to urbanisation processes beyond the city by overcoming explicit and restricting contrasts like core – periphery, city – countryside, urban – rural, etc.

### From Absolute Space to Relational Space

This understanding first requires clarifying how the spatial concept of the territory is constructed, or more simply, understanding what kind of space is redefined through socio-technical systems. In briefly discussing this shift from absolute to relational concepts of space the main points will be drawn from a methodical analysis

on the topic offered by Harvey (1969), and, more recently, Jones (2009).

According to Harvey, the initial definition of absolute space dates back to Kant and his conception of space as a kind of framework for things and events, an organising factor for the study of phenomena. In this definition, space is a discrete and autonomous container, a condition that exists independently of any objects or relations. For Callon and Law, this approach implies that things in space have analytical fixity and complete affinity to their spatial reference point such that 'distance and scale can be determined without ambiguity' (2004: 3). In the context of such an 'absolute space', distance is easily defined as a constant measurement on an isotropic plane and Euclidean geometry and elementary trigonometry is absolutely sufficient for its definition.<sup>1</sup> The weakness of this approach is, according to Jones, the preoccupation with environmental determinism and agency-free landscapes. For Harvey (1969: 209), since the interest in urban studies is not the understanding of space per se but of spatial activities, and since these activities form fields of influence, which distort the properties of space, the homogeneous, absolute view of space is not acceptable.

The concept of relative space came as a response to these concerns. According to Jones, relative space is based on two main assumptions: first that it can only be defined in relation to the object(s) and / or activities being considered in space and time, and second, that there is no defined or fixed relationship for locating things under consideration. A non-Euclidean perspective is adopted, where distances are relative and change over time and across space. This conception suggests that distance can only be described in terms of process and activity. In the discussion of the location of economic activity, distance may be measured in terms of cost, in the diffusion of information distance is measured in terms of social interaction etc (Harvey 1969: 210). Once this relative nature of distance is recognised, i.e. that the closeness of two places is not simply a function of the Euclidean distance separating them, but of the intensity and ease of spatial interactions connecting them, the endogeneity of distance in the activities observed becomes evident. This introduces the second aspect that is central to this paper for the understanding of distance – infrastructural systems. Graham and Marvin (2001) offer a simple framework interrelating the structure and density of urbanised landscapes with the empowering nature of infrastructure. On the one hand, cities aim to overcome time constraints by compressing spatial parameters, while on the other hand, infrastructures aim to overcome spatial constraints by compressing temporal parameters. While, according to this, it would be easy to imagine distance being constructed along iso-time curves relative to the speed of transport and telecommunications networks, the point that should be

made here is broader. Since in the context of relative space infrastructural systems are assumed to empower space, they largely shape a relative and anisotropic envelope of possibilities. If then relative space is defined through activities and processes, and infrastructural systems increasingly mediate these activities, it is easy to end up in concepts of technological determinism for the definition of distance. In these definitions developments in (transportation) infrastructures 'drive' processes of urbanisation through a rather linear causality. Moreover, returning to the conceptual definition and applications of relative space, Harvey points out the difficulty in defining the source and structure of space-time and the bounded or 'boundary conditions' that permit certain activities and relations to take place (Harvey 1969). If relative space is defined through activities and objects, how space defines the existence and direction of these objects and events as an underlying structure remains unclear.

While debates on the difficulties of relative space in delivering analytic and narrative forms revolved around how to uncover, explain, and represent the interrelationships between spaces and objects, the more recent relational perspectives of space suggested a paradigmatic departure dissolving the boundaries between objects and space, and rejecting forms of spatial totality. While for absolute models space exists as an independent container and for relative models it is defined through its relation to objects and activities, in relational models space is only defined through the relations between objects and activities. Space does not exist as an entity in and of itself. In short, according to Jones (2009: 491). objects are space, space is objects, and moreover objects can be understood only in relation to other objects – with all this being a perpetual becoming of heterogeneous networks and events that connect internal spatio-temporal relations. In this context relational approaches avoid the danger of social, technological or environmental determinism. As it will be further discussed below, the relations that shape space are socio-technically constructed, contributing to 'radically relational and symmetrical understandings of the city, challenging distinctions between global and local, close and far, inside and outside, notions of place, propinquity and boundedness, ceasing to attribute priority to sociocultural symbols and practices over urban natures and technological infrastructures, radically rethinking the basis of urban power, economy and knowledge and the notion of urban regimes' (Farias, 2010).

The relational approach to space and distance offers a promising theoretical avenue to explore the contemporary mobile world and its circuits of commodities, people and ideas. However, it seems rather uncomfortable with spatial relations of permanence that could also offer elements towards a typo-morphological understanding of the territory that this paper would like to initiate. Despite the multiple potentials of space flagged up

in relational thinking, factors can still constrain and structure space. All things considered potential do not necessarily become actual. Harvey also highlights this in the reduction of everything to fluxes and flows, and the consequent emphasis upon the transitoriness of all forms and positions has its limits and in the end says nothing about nothing (Harvey 1996). In the same line of critique, it is rarely questioned if topology, privileged to describe relational space, has certain properties that ensure that its relational constituents and coordinates return to their spatial form, thus limiting the open-endedness inferred by geographers.<sup>2</sup> In short, what seems to be missing from relational definitions of space are the restricting features through which all kinds of objects (social, technical, natural, etc.) would enter into certain patterns of relations and not others. Pushing this further, for Dainton, relationism needs to 'embrace a richer collection of spatiotemporal relations and also consider inertial paths, i.e. conceptualise forces that restrict, constrain, contain, and connect the mobility of relational things' (2001: 197). Summarising, the conceptualisation of relational space helps avoid deterministic and teleological traps, but it cannot remain totally fluid. It is rather constrained by anisotropically constructed, already-structured relations influencing future trajectories due to path-dependent and path-shaping logics.

### The Infrastructural Fixity of Relational Space

This is exactly the area of research that this study aims to start framing: the infrastructural attributes of territorial and socio-technical fixity that help make more specific this dialogue of structure and flow and thus offer potential elements for a typomorphological understanding of the territory. It is suggested that this process could be framed through an evolutionary and developmental framework. As noted above, the nature of the relations constructed in concepts of relational space are synchronic. This synchronicity and the flat ontology assumed leave the envelope of possible relations undefined. While accepting this possibilist framework, it is suggested that historical socio-technical and geographical periodisation could explain how in this world of possibilities, relations do not happen automatically. They are rather deeply processual and practical outcomes of strategic initiatives undertaken by a wide range of forces produced through a mutually transformative evolution of inherited spatial structures and emergent spatial strategies (Brenner et al. 2003). In short, in this redefined world of possibilities, while space and distance are still defined through relations, these relations are constrained and directed by what is already there, but still not always evident in the landscape.<sup>3</sup>

The rest of the paper will start exploring these path-dependent and path-shaping logics behind what is hard to consider as a constraining factor in the urban condition: infrastructural

systems. Generally conceptualised as the major empowering factors equipping the urban landscape and thus expanding the space of possibilities (enabling flux, change and mobility), it is often forgotten that the large and complex transport and communication systems are persistent material structures embedded in the urban and regional landscape. With this and the three points summarised above in mind, we can now revisit what Harvey (1985, 1989) sees as a paradox. Space has to be fixed in immoveable structures of transport and communication nets, in order for relations to be flexible and mobilised.<sup>4</sup> According to this idea, the development of transport and communication systems faces a clear dichotomy. On the one hand it is meant to facilitate this desire for producing a 'spaceless world', but on the other hand, in a world where infrastructure networks must be embedded in space, this is impossible. In this context, capital has to be fixed in space in order to be able to overcome it. In order to frame an understanding of this tension the main characteristics of infrastructural systems that seem to make them obdurate will be summarised.

As already discussed, concepts of relational space developed together with concepts of sociotechnical construction and co-evolution of cities and technological systems led to an understanding of cities as 'socio-technical hybrids' (Graham and Marvin 2001). Interestingly, this concept dates back to Lewis Mumford, who emphasised the relationship between the historical development of cities and the invention of 'megamachines', that could be described as a first conception of socio-technical systems (Mumford, 1963).<sup>5</sup> The main advantage of sociotechnical relational approaches is that they can suggest a coherent theoretical framework for analysing the co-development of urban and technological systems across different scales, for different cities and infrastructures, without falling in the trap of oversimplification or technological determinism, while offering more open ended, flexible and heterogeneous chains of causation (Farias 2010). The focus of this research will not be a deep analysis of such frameworks, but an understanding of how socio-technical systems (like transport infrastructures) stabilise and become rigid. Following Neuman (2006), who tries to offer a complete description of the nature of technological systems, the main characteristics that may help understand their rigidity are discussed below.

First of all, transport infrastructures (for example motorway networks) are physical networks that channel fluxes or enable activities with the purpose of supporting superordinate systems. As such they regularly have immobile physical networks and structures with restricted substitutability, which often require large investments of finance capital in order to build and maintain them. These fixed components have relatively long life spans and are designed to be refurbished, or replaced at the end of that span

so that the networks survive indefinitely, or until obsolete. In this way they confer economies of scale by the performance of the entire network due to low per capita costs and long amortisation periods for repaying finance capital. Another important characteristic for this study is their interdependence among components within the network, among entities they support, and among other interlaced infrastructure networks. This leads to an added or subtracted value, not only regarding other systems they support and other interconnected infrastructure networks, but also to real property and organisations connected, adjacent, or proximate to them. Another important issue of immutability is their low-price elasticity because of the physical and operating characteristics of their networks, as well as their restricted substitutability. Moreover, high degrees of standardisation of their physical networks, operations, and management in relation to technologies, pricing, controls, and measurement systems also produce certain patterns of spatial embeddedness and social diffusion. For example ground transportation systems (like motorways or railways) are often interwoven with numerous other technological and institutional systems like power and energy grids, telecommunications systems, rules and codes that regulate the behaviour of their users etc.

Summarising, it is highlighted that two interrelating aspects characterise the rigidity of infrastructural systems. First, the fact that they consist of huge material, technological and economic investments in space and time. And second, their complex material, operational and institutional integration, co-evolution and interdependency with various social and technical systems. In order to conceptualise how these two aspects participate in shaping the envelope of possibilities of the path-dependent and path-shaping relational approach, we shall turn to the field of History of Technology Studies (and specifically the Large Technical Systems approach) as a growing body of scholars in urban studies has also recently suggested (Hommels 2005; Farias and Bender 2010; Graham and Marvin 2001; Moss 2003; Monstadt 2009).

Inspired by the path-breaking study of Hughes (1983) studies on Large Technical Systems (LTS) try to demonstrate how innovations in infrastructure systems are initiated through the cooperation of various urban 'system builders' and how they generally diffuse and stabilise, starting from spatially limited urban niches (Mayntz and Hughes 1988). But according to LTS how do these processes of stabilisation unfold? For the purposes of this paper the focus is on three points. First of all, studies of LTS describe the structuring of socio-technical systems as having three stages. The initial stage is the development phase, which then leads to a stabilisation phase where systems crystallise, in a way, the interrelation between their elements and environment. The third stage regards the mutation, restructuring or dissolving

of these systems in their effort to always reposition themselves in a dynamic setting. The second point of interest is that the more elements the development of the large technical systems incorporate and the more complex they become, the more fixed is their condition of stabilisation and the less adaptive to change. The third point of interest, is that exactly this complex state of stabilisation is not easy to maintain, but requires enormous and continuous effort to keep the interrelation of all the elements of the system and the environment in balance (Summerton 1994). It could be argued that even in their stable state these systems are in a fragile and dynamic balance.

All of the above suggest a paradoxically persistent state quite contrasting the usual notion of fluidity, change and innovation in technological systems. As Summerton summarises 'the reasons for this inertia are to be found not only in the capital intensity and the long amortisation periods of the technical infrastructure equipment. The momentum arises especially from the organisations and people committed by various interests to the system. Once a certain technical system has established the system's established culture of expert communities, who developed, supported and operated the system and benefitted from it, have vested interests in the growth and durability of a system. This tendency to institutional inertia is reinforced by the enormous momentum and longevity of the material-physical system components. Once a technical network is implemented, it is complicated and time-consuming to substitute it by other technical options and it defines a development path for the future' (1994: 4).

These concepts from LTS can be used to start shaping a broad understanding of the persisting nature of urban environments. A recent attempt in this direction is offered by Hommels (2005). Her main interest is in examining the nature of urban obduracy; the fact that once in place, urban structures become fixed, obdurate. Three distinct concepts for obduracy are presented. The first category of 'frames' consists of conceptions of technology's obduracy that focus on the role and strategies of actors involved in the design of artifacts, and the constraints posed by the socio-technical frameworks within which they operate. The concepts of this category apply to situations in which town planners, architects, engineers, technology users, or other groups are constrained by fixed ways of thinking and interacting. The second concept is 'embeddedness': since technological artifacts are not analysed in isolation but as part of a larger system, network, or ensemble, urban obduracy can be explained precisely because of technology's embeddedness in socio-technical systems, actor-networks, or socio-technical ensembles. This category involves a relational conception of obduracy, because the elements of a network are closely interrelated, the changing of one element requires the adaptation of other elements. The extent to which

an artifact has become embedded determines its resistance to efforts aimed at changing it. Such efforts according to Hommels may be prompted by usage, societal change, economic demands, zoning schemes, legal regulations, newly developed policies, and so forth. Finally, the category of 'persistent traditions' comprises conceptions of obduracy that address the idea that long-term shared values and traditions keep influencing the development of a technology throughout a longer period of time. According to Hommels, the notions of momentum, city-building regime, and archetypes embody this conception of obduracy. Hommels's approach offers a framework for understanding the tension between infrastructural fixity and motion, central to this paper: that in the ever-changing urban condition, urban infrastructures that are remnants of earlier planning decisions, the logic of which is no longer applicable, may prove to be constraining obstacles for those who aspire to bring about urban innovation.

The first two parts of this paper tried to theorise how urban infrastructures shape, limit and constrain complex spatial relations like distance. The explanation of the shift from absolute to relational concepts of space and hybrid sociotechnical models of social, technological and environmental causalities tried to reveal the complex interrelations shaping what was defined as an envelope of potential (spatial) relations. If space and distance are defined through sociotechnical relations based on dense transport infrastructures, the constraining factors in these potential definitions should be sought in these supporting systems. Having as a starting point the 'urban surface' as a relational concept of a space of potential actions, the question is not the flexibility of this surface but rather elements defining a constraining envelope. It has been discussed how the continuous tendency to transform existing infrastructures has to undo not only the rigidity of their spatial and material embeddedness, but also the patterns of their social and technological diffusion. The discussion on infrastructures tried to specify and theorise these characteristics and processes and understand the limits of their mutability. The role of infrastructures in defining and 'grounding' these relations aspired to question not what they enable but the process of how. Again, the rigidity or plasticity of this process was not only attributed to their obvious material embeddedness in space but also to the path-dependent process of evolution and diffusion in all kinds of social, natural, economic and technological systems.

### **Beyond Explanation: Tools for Designing the Territory**

Until now this effort has been strictly explanatory, trying to bring together concepts from various fields in and around urban studies. A new potential emerges, however, by trying to understand the prescriptive value of these observations. During the last two decades a growing debate has largely influenced

the design disciplines on how infrastructural systems can inform design strategies that could lead to an integrated approach to the design of contemporary urban and regional landscapes (Allen 1999; Belanger 2010; Waldheim 2008; Wall 1999). This discourse has highlighted the ability of this infrastructural landscape to adapt to operational transformations and has suggested an investigation of its capacity to serve as a mode of programmatic change. For Allen, for example, 'infrastructures are flexible and anticipatory. They work with time and are open to change. They do not progress toward a predetermined state (as with master planning strategies), but are always evolving within a loose envelope of constraints. [...] Although static in and of themselves, infrastructures organize and manage complex systems of flow, movement, and exchange. What seems crucial is the degree of play designed into the system, slots left unoccupied, space left free for unanticipated development' (1999: 55). While for Wall 'if the goal of designing the urban surface is to increase its capacity to support and diversify activities in time [...] then a primary design strategy is to exchange its continuity while diversifying its range of services' (1999: 233).

This paper actively embraces this new potential for design and also the effort to escape the fixed notion of the city and the obsession with forms and objects. Although designing at the supralocal scale level is not a recent phenomenon, it is certainly true that under the influence of changes in the spatial and institutional context, the regional planning process – and more specifically the role of the design within the process – is presently the subject of a thorough revision. However, it is argued that much of the discourse around it tends to overemphasise the adaptability and indeterminacy of this 'urban surface' and its ability to deal with continuous change, without taking so much into consideration the nature of the various constraints that limit its operational reconfiguration and transformation that were discussed above. On the contrary, it is argued that an interesting opportunity for design emerges by identifying the fixed elements that could help structure a typological understanding of the territory. While the concept of typology has a long history in design discourse, it has not addressed so extensively the regional scale or the infrastructural systems that largely shape the region. This paper has started identifying a number of elements that could lead to a typological understanding of the region. This understanding could be framed in three ways.

First of all, a functional reduction of the infrastructural elements shaping the territory (as in models of relative space) prevents other knowledge that can be obtained by considering them as belonging to a group of formal, historical, technical and sociocultural aspects. It is argued that their essential ability to adapt to change and transformation should not be related to their operational definition but seen as a derivative of their gradual

crystallisation in what is referred to as territorial typologies. By this is meant complex stratified sets of technical, economical, institutional, natural and cultural processes of urbanisation, materialised as artificial structures, shaping the face of the earth. The scope of the two previous parts of the paper then, has been to start creating a platform for theorising the way urbanisation processes are crystallised in material infrastructures, how they become fixed and how they are stabilised. However, the question of whether design disciplines can manipulate typologies defining processes and not forms and objects remains. While one can claim that infrastructural systems can be engineered to serve particular functions and optimised according to certain parameters, the question for designers is how to coordinate territorially complex environments that meet, but are not constrained by, initial purpose. At the time, there seems to be a quandary exactly around this question. There seems to be a gap between abstract planning and territorial organisation on the one hand and the engineered nature of infrastructural systems on the other. It is argued that the typological understanding of the material shaping of the territory could bridge this gap.

The second point that should be highlighted regards the recent tendency to emphasise the representation of processes. It is argued that the mapping of various and potential service ecologies speculating the operational reconfiguration of the urban surface should be better informed by the deeper understanding of the systems they try to integrate. As already mentioned, it is suggested that a number of concepts from History of Technology studies and Science Technology Studies (like the second order LTS) could add a valuable level of theorisation to these questions. Such an understanding could also lead to the development of critical normative frameworks for channeling change through the manipulation of the elements of the 'urban surface'. Even if flows and processes are clearly mapped this still tells too little about their interrelation to the physical configuration of the underlying geographies. This of course draws back to the most fundamental design question of the relation between form and function, a relation that typological formations highlight as rather indirect (as typological configurations appear very adaptable to change and to different functions).

If the adaptive operational reconfiguration of this infrastructural landscape is suggested to be a driving factor in design strategies, then the exploration of the limits, constraints and plasticities of these potential reconfigurations is crucial for any normative design theory aspiring to lead to an integrated synthesis. Since urban environments are suggested to co-evolve under this framework and if design disciplines aspire to take a lead in shaping these transformations, an understanding of the limits of the flexibility and adaptability of the 'urban surface' could offer a reference point for decision making and a base

for developing design concepts that could exploit and redefine them. The understanding of this redundancy should not be taken for granted, but rather conquered through a process that should take into consideration numerous socio-technical variables and not only their actual material expression in space.



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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Most of the pre-1950s models in regional geography and early urban ecology were based on this container space concept. In these models space is taken to be exogenous to the activities studied, and generally homogeneous, in much the same way as in physics Newton (unlike Leibnitz and Einstein) took space to be an external Cartesian grid.

<sup>2</sup> On topology in relation to spatial description see also Harvey, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Jones goes back to Poincaré and his concept of 'phase space' to better define this condition. Two aspects of Poincaré's work are particularly relevant to human geography. First, Poincaré offers a qualitative system dynamics that has possibility without having to demonstrate existence. This non-Euclidean geometry disturbs the Kantian viewpoint that the true structure of space can be known a priori but does not fully embrace the relational world where inner logic and inner connections take precedence over structuring external structures. Second, extending this, Poincaré advocates a philosophy of ontological and epistemological 'conventionalism' – that which rejects all forms of synthetic a priori geometric intuition and follows instead a heuristic based on the study of groups.

<sup>4</sup> Harvey in his discussion of historical 'spatial fixes' from colonisation to contemporary globalisation tries to highlight this dependency of capitalism on geographic expansion, seeking out 'spatial fixes' for its problems (Harvey 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Mumford's Megamachine conceptualises systems that consist of interchangeable mechanical, institutional, and human parts and that are centrally organised and controlled. Mumford argued that the development of cities and the progress of these socio-technical systems (megamachines) were largely interdependent. However, as Simon Guy, Stephen Graham, and Simon Marvin (1997) note, since then only a few urban historians have attempted to understand how cities and technical networks co-evolve. Moreover as Konvitz, Rose, and Tarr suggest (1990), in most of the historical literature on cities before the 1980s, technology is largely considered as an exogenous force influencing directly society as a whole, while little attention is given on how specific urban and social conditions shape technological transformations.

<sup>6</sup> As already attempted by Grin and Rotman who tried to extend STS and Urban theory approaches by incorporating ideas from rationalist / functionalist perspectives, associated with evolutionary economics and the study of complex adaptive systems (Grin & Rotman 2010).



## 5- Locating Distance: A Methodology for Mobile Urban Subjects

*Sebastian Schmidt-Tomczak*



Figure 1. Motorway images (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

The city means different things if seen from different perspectives.<sup>1</sup> I therefore have to ask myself: what is my perspective, what is yours? What is our perspective, and what is that of others? Whatever our epistemological outlook may be, what all such perspectives have in common is that they all maintain a relationship with the city that I will here describe in terms of distance. I am not referring to a geographical distance, but to distance as a concept that marks a relationship as inherently relational, as reliant on constantly changing coordinates, as never absolute. With this as a tool, we can avoid focusing on codified disciplinary approaches to urban research. Instead, we can focus on different degrees of metaphorical distance, on different types of relationships.

In this paper, I will be tracing my photographic journey to and through Chicago, scrutinising my own distance from the city, and how it relates to that of other urban explorers, namely Baudelaire's flâneur, the Situationists' drifter(s), and Michel de Certeau's figure of the pedestrian. The exploration of the city and that of the method are here linked, with the aim of bringing city and method closer to each other. In fact, I argue that the two need not be seen as entirely separate at all. Just like cities can emerge from methods – from urban grids and building codes – so methods can emerge from cities. For the mobile urban subject – the protagonist in this narrative and the 'we' in this text – the method for researching the city can be developed in relationship with the city, through a careful observation of the changing degrees of distance from it.

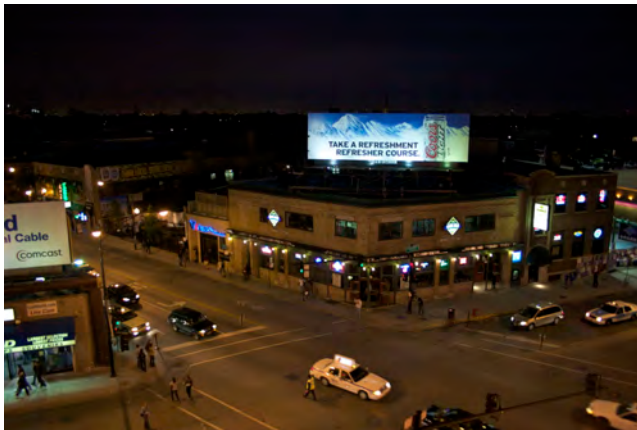


Figure 2. Crossroad (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

For example, the physical distance from the city can be differently mediated, depending on one's means of transport. A pedestrian's and driver's experience of waiting for the lights at the crossroads is dramatically different, although both are ostensibly waiting for the same thing. They could find themselves in an almost identical location, and yet their relationship with the city would be very different.

Going back to the question of methodology, there can thus be said to be a difference between the *method* – what we do while exploring the city – and the *methodology* – what we do to explain our exploration after the fact. This, in turn, means that at the time of the initial exploration, our activities can indeed be *methodical* without already having to be *methodological*, that is, they are not necessarily aimless just because they do not have a pre-formulated goal. There is an opening here for building a methodology from an urban experience and retroactively locating it with the help of other methods, rather than having a methodologically developed experience to begin with. Further, the contemporary city can no longer be seen as a coherent and monolithic object, and as such we cannot expect that a preformulated methodology would be able to accommodate that which has lost its physical boundaries.<sup>2</sup> I argue that in this way we have a much better chance of accessing the inherently diverse nature of the contemporary city, and what there is to learn from it for our own method.



Figure 3. 'United we stand' (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

This multifariousness is embraced by our methodology for mobile urban subjects, for travellers who seek answers not in the completion of an itinerary, but in understanding how the itinerary unfolds. We will be moving, looking, reading, and each of these activities puts us in a different relationship with the city, or, to be more precise, puts us at a different *distance* from the city and from others who explore it. Our goal will be to frame those distances, to consider our shifting frames of reference, more so than understanding the city as an object. Despite the focus on difference and distance, there is this common goal; we do indeed stand united.

## Locating Distance



Figure 4. Distortion (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

A few words are necessary on the notion of 'locating distance'. I borrow the term 'location' from James Clifford; it is here not just a matter of coordinates in space, but of an ontological positioning of the subject. Clifford sees it as a key term pertaining to the question of subjectivity in ethnographic encounters: 'I do not accept that anyone is permanently fixed by his or her "identity"; but neither can one shed specific structures of race and culture, class and caste, gender and sexuality, environment and history' (Clifford 1997: 12). Such limits of our own perspective are the boundaries that are still in place between us and the city, and that allow the building of relationships. Locating as an activity thus means not just to become aware of those borders and boundaries, but also to be attentive to the differences and distances between the corresponding ontological and ideological positioning. The act of 'locating distance', however, seems a paradoxical suggestion, for a distance is in-between locations, and thus can only be described by means of specifying those same locations. The distance itself escapes localisation and is inherently referential. Thus, it is the mutability of the distances between us and the city and between our approaches and those of others that are of interest here, and that can be understood through an apprehension of different locations. Just like in the above image, there are always shaping powers at work. There is no naïve eye, just like there is no absolute relationship or distance. We never only look at something, but always also from somewhere and through something.

The main premise for the present argument is that there is no one methodology for understanding the city, because there is no coherent and monolithic object to apply it to. Because the idea of the city as a material thing or object in space is dissolving, we need new ways to gain access to 'it', an 'it' that is much more fleeting than the linguistic signifier would have us believe. Especially with the development of increasingly sophisticated technological



Figure 5. Blurry distant lake (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

infrastructures and high-speed data streams, the meaning of the city has long surpassed its own physicality, and it already inhabits a profoundly theoretical dimension of existence. It is now more a network of different understandings of what a city is than any one thing to be understood. Thus, physical and representational urban layers can no longer be separated, and every encounter, be it in person or 'in image', with the city has to be seen as expressive of both physical reality and representational capacity. It is this 'melting together' that the above photograph exhibits, where the city appears to melt into both the sky and the water, where we can no longer make out and hold on to distinct boundaries.

However, in thinking about methodology and the fluidity of the city, we must not ignore that we can still explore it, and that others have explored it before us. Let us start, then, with modernity's archetype of the urban explorer – Baudelaire's *flâneur* – and ask what we share with 'him'.

### Flânerie or not? - Baudelaire's *flâneur*

This journey relies on images of the city,<sup>3</sup> and is thus not dissimilar to what Baudelaire describes as the method of the *flâneur* in the early 1860s: 'He is an "I" with an insatiable appetite for the "non-I", at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive' (Baudelaire 1964: 9). While, on the one hand, the static image must seem too inflexible to express or represent our constantly shifting position, it is, on the other hand, through these images that our thoughts about this movement can be mobilised. The power of the image lies in the fact that it is recognisably an image and is thus allowed to point to something much larger than itself. But whereas Baudelaire's *flâneur* works with sketches, our medium here is photography; this difference is consequential,





Figure 6. Motorway (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

and it would be for Baudelaire himself, but it is not of primary interest for our purposes.

We are also quite different from the *flâneur* in other respects, and especially in our relationship to the world. Baudelaire writes: 'To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define' (Ibid.). One of the goals of locating distance is precisely to step out of the centre of the world, and to acknowledge both our own alienness in an unfamiliar place and our visibility in it.

Our entry into the city cannot be understood without a movement towards it, that is, without an approach. The blurred appearance of the car in the photograph above hints at a velocity the image is not privileged to express. What constitutes the city here, what constitutes Chicago? Is it the skyline – that array of building outlines seen from, aptly, a distance; that image of the built environment that is slowly changing vis-à-vis us as passive spectators? Or is it our proximity to the expressway that invites us to physically approach the city by car? It is hard to even speak of an approach in this image, because we have already entered the city, and now signs guide us to its many different parts and localities. The closer we get to the skyline, the less of its formidable appearance will it retain – once it can no longer be apprehended with a single glance. Seen up close, the individual skyscrapers instil a different, neck-bending kind of awe.

Within the semiology of the expressway signage, we are never really anywhere. The names on the signs never specify our geographical location, but only inform us about our relative distance to locations beyond our immediate field of vision. They



Figure 7. Skyscraper (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

point to a narrative of boundaries and limits – limits to vision, to local access and interaction, even limits to slowness in the shape of minimum speed limits. It is also a narrative of the handling and shifting of distances. As the distance to downtown is decreasing, its visibility as a skyline gradually disappears, making it even harder to see Chicago as an object, an image, an emblem (in the photograph, it is hard to tell the city from its image). Different distances are here in motion, but they shift in opposite directions. With the physical distance decreasing, the visual access to the city as an imagined physical whole is itself moved into the distance. Also important is the notion of disorientation, of not knowing where exactly we are. Our own positioning in relation to the city depends on a number of predetermined relations, vectors, and traditions. For example, let us assume that our goal is to go to Chicago. We are already in Chicago, but whether we *are there yet* depends on a different set of parameters, because the Chicago we are going to is not that of a skyline in the distance, of a gradually approaching and growing image, or of a name on a map or road sign. Japanese architect Maki Fumihiko says that 'the city exists as the sum total of the actions people take daily to create their own individual realities out of a hypothetical (or virtual) reality' (Maki 2008: 119). The city is a sea of such possibilities and potentials, among which we move, sometimes active (as a driver), sometimes passive (as a passenger). Our photographs are not like the *flâneur's* sketches, they are not more living than life itself, but they provide an entry into thinking about this liveliness, about the constant shifting of perspectives, spatial and mental. We are never firmly located at the centre of the world, which only exists as an epistemological fiction, nor are we hidden from the world, for we are visibly moving in it. However – and this is something we have in common with the *flâneur* – wherever we are, we realise that our coordinates are more a question of visibility than geography; it is, ultimately, our perspective that locates us.

### Drifting along - Debord's *Dérive*

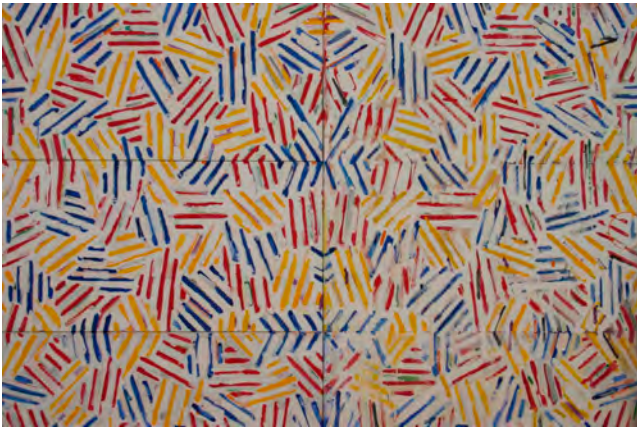


Figure 8. Jasper Johns *Corpse and Mirror II*, detail (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

As we are still in the passenger seat, drifting towards denser and denser parts of the city, I cannot help but think of Guy Debord and his technique of *dérive*. In 1956, one year before the Situationist International was founded, he wrote that '[o]ne of the basic situationist practices is the *dérive* (literally: 'drifting'), a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll' (Debord 1956). While Debord would have disapproved of car travel (which is iterated in the above detail of Jasper Johns' *Corpse and Mirror II*)<sup>5</sup>, or the use of any kind of vehicle for the successful execution of a *dérive*, there are overlaps between his methodology and our own. We, too, want our experience to be neither planned out beforehand, nor completely random. Debord sees *dérives* as being 'wanderings that express not subordination to randomness but complete *insubordination* to habitual influences (influences generally categorized as tourism, that popular drug as repugnant as sports or buying on credit)' (Debord 1955). What is crucial for us, and unaddressed by Debord, is that, in order to identify our experience as non-habitual, we need to become aware of what defines an experience as habitual. Our habits are of course subjective, and rarely shared, certainly not in their entirety. The *dérive*, being non-habitual, hence has to be non-subjective: 'In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there'<sup>6</sup> (Debord 1956). *Dérive* thus means giving up our subjectivity and, ideally, inserting ourselves into one of multiple small groups, with the goal of reaching 'the same level of awareness, since cross-checking these different groups' impressions makes it possible to arrive at more objective conclusions' (Ibid.). However, we

have to be doubtful whether there can ever be such a thing as 'the same level of awareness' between different people. We are not interested in sacrificing subjectivity to the greater good of objectivity in the perception of unities of ambiance. Yet there is a great appeal in some aspects of the *dérive*. By means of surveying the 'psychogeographical articulations of a modern city', '[o]ne arrives at the central hypothesis of the existence of psychogeographical pivotal points. One measures the distances that actually separate two regions of a city, distances that may have little relation with the physical distance between them' (Ibid.). This multifaceted understanding of distance resonates well with our understanding of the city as both physical reality and representation. But still, the situationist notion of objectivity remains problematic for our approach. For while Debord derides tourism as a habitual influence to be avoided at all cost, the drifting in groups and shared level of awareness is, ironically, strongly reminiscent of some standard tourist activities, highly structured and communal, such as boat tours in Chicago (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Boat tour (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

Participation in such a tour is certainly non-habitual, and we literally allow ourselves to be drawn to the attractions around us, despite the fact that the commercial nature of the tour and our passive seated position are at odds with the situationist project. But even within this group experience, we cannot forfeit our subjectivity, for how could we be drawn to anything, if not by virtue of how we (individually or not) respond to attractions and encounters?

If we want to be attentive to everything around us, we cannot give up our selves in the course of it. Also, we are not after objective conclusions about how the environment affects our emotions and behaviour, which is the declared goal of psychogeography (Debord 1955). It is not surprising that the Situationists were preoccupied with the actualisation of maps, aiming at exposing the boundaries of different perceptions, performatively expanding the possibilities of spatial exploration. Any given map, with its predetermined view on the world, could potentially be subjected to these kinds of alterations, with new, and not only strictly geographical, distances being inscribed as the result.



Figure 10. Millennium Park map (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

Maps are designed for very specific purposes, emphasising information of relevance and filtering out unnecessary details. The above map of Millennium Park is designed for pedestrians, the roads fading into the background. Important parts of the infrastructure, such as public bathrooms, are marked in a landscape in which we are the centre of attention – a bright orange circle that cannot be overlooked. Maps also tell us where we are ('You Are Here'), maybe even where we stand. As such, they work in ways very similar to those of academic disciplines, of which methodologies are representatives. Katherine Hayles applies the notion of lenses to disciplines: 'when we are trained in a discipline, we put on a set of conceptual lenses which limit even as they focus. [...] By the time we reach fully professional status, our disciplinary lenses have become transparent to us, yielding

no more resistance than the air we breathe' (Hayles 1994: 25). It is therefore questionable whether Debord's 'objective *dérive*' would be able to escape this sedimentation into a fixed discipline-like method, in which your impressionistic openness to attractions and encounters will ultimately exclude those not compatible with the Situationists' anti-capitalist ideology. This resonates with James Clifford's highlighting of the artificial nature of disciplines: 'All knowledge is interdisciplinary. Thus, disciplines define and redefine themselves interactively and competitively. They do this by inventing traditions and canons, by consecrating methodological norms and research practices, by appropriating, translating, silencing, and holding at bay adjacent perspectives' (Clifford 1997: 59). Just like every cartographical representation changes along with the demands made of it, the workings of disciplines change over time. However, they only accept changes motivated by practices that still adhere at least to their more general framework.<sup>7</sup> This is based on the fact that for disciplines, inside and outside are distinctly demarcated places, that is, boundaries are of great importance and the keeping of specific distances becomes crucial for building and maintaining an identity. At the same time, while in many instances it might indeed be easy to distinguish between inside and outside, we also have to be careful not to follow the fallacious thought that disciplines are homogeneous entities.<sup>8</sup> Hayles points out that this is what makes thinking of *one* set of lenses for each discipline a difficult matter. Rather, 'a discipline appears as a heterogeneous discursive field through which multiple fissures run, with boundaries of fractal complexity' (Hayles 1994: 31). This is where the cartographical parallel to Debord's psychogeography becomes apparent, because, for Hayles, an inquiry conducted in this type of disciplinary field would 'seek to understand the complex interplay of differential gradations in assumptions across regional divides. [...] Any such inquiry also embodies presuppositions of its own, so that the work must proceed reflexively as well as reflectively, aware (as Steve Fuller has put it) that disciplinary "knowledge is *in* the same world that it is *about*"' (Ibid.: 31 – 32). In other words: the focus is on the relative proximities and distances between different modes of thinking, rather than their assumed ontologies.

This resonates strikingly with the readjustments of distance between areas in the psychogeographical project, with the 'exposure of the boundaries of different perceptions'. While we, the mobile urban subjects, may share Debord's concerns about the exclusivist practices of mapping, we are probably at odds with his own exclusivist approach to our subjectivity, and with his project's investment in pushing forward a political agenda for what an experience of our cities should be like.



### Walking at Last - Michel de Certeau's Pedestrian



Figure 11. Robot (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

We get out of the car, following the situationist predilection for pedestrian travel. While walking in the city, Michel de Certeau's writings on the everyday come to mind, and it occurs to us that his reading of the city is not so different from Debord's. For de Certeau, spaces are constituted in the binary tension between strategic control and tactical adjustments made to those strategic spheres (Dünne 2008: 161). We can see this in the photograph; the pavement is here turned into a canvas, from directing our pedestrian movement it is turned into something that diverts our gaze. The robot itself exclaims 'ROBOTS NEVER DIE!', but it might just as well have said 'TACTICS NEVER DIE!'. And yet the robot depends on the pavement, on its canvas, to make its point, to, so to speak, stand its ground. In our case, it is our 'walking in the city' that constitutes tactics. For de Certeau the extremes that exist in the city are not so much separated by sharp boundaries as they are coincidental in the 'texturology' (de Certeau 1984: 91) of the city seen from above.

He asks: 'Is the immense texturology spread out before one's eyes anything more than a representation, an optical artefact? It is the analogue of the facsimile produced, through a projection that is a way of keeping aloof, by the space planner urbanist, city planner and cartographer. The panorama-city is a "theoretical" (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices' (Ibid.: 92 – 93). This means that any map that positions the city as a fixed object and solid entity – and that is the kind of map at the core of Debord's critique – is necessarily 'theoretical', as it represents an environment that cannot be experienced in the same way in reality. Thus, de Certeau's tactical pedestrian – ignoring, circumventing, or undermining the urban strategies of the government, architects, and planners – follows a path not dissimilar to that of Debord's *dérive* – against the simulated whole of the city.



Figure 12. Dense architecture (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

However, while the *dérive* is defined by its departure from habitual practices, de Certeau's walking embraces the everyday, uncovering unconscious acts of navigation that are deeply rooted in the individual and their subjectivity. He compares our walking to linguistic formations, likening our spatial practice to a speech act imbued with all possible types of stylistic expression. We are therefore seen as rewriting the urban fabric without reading it, abdicating the position of the totalising eye from above. As much as we might like the idea of contributing to the rewriting of that fabric, we cannot help but feel alienated from the role of de Certeau's pedestrian. His is a local figure that can lay claim to the city by virtue of everyday exposure and navigation. It appears that we, however, are mere visitors in this context; too distant, aloof like a *flâneur*, and also joining the tourists in their ascent to the top of Willis Tower (formerly known as Sears Tower), taking the obvious photographs (see above). Remember Baudelaire: 'To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to

see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define’ (Baudelaire 1964: 9). Our understanding of home and of the everyday is different, however. Making everywhere our home means that our first home has lost some of its privilege of being an ideal beyond scrutiny – it may even be made part of our walking analysis. As for the everyday, for us it is not marked by the same routine processes, but it is a source of endless variation and change. In this, it seems that our perspective is much closer to the one de Certeau implicitly claims for himself. He could not be merely the grass-roots pedestrian of which he speaks, for he would not know of the ramifications of his own actions. We, similarly, are well aware of the ways in which we bend perception, of our double role as insiders in practices and outsiders to the everyday.

### Arrival of the Mobile Urban Subject



Figure 13. 'Cloud Gate' (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).

In other words, the distances between the macro- and micro-perspectives on the city are not as great for us as they are for the strategic planner and tactical pedestrian, respectively, in de Certeau's analysis. We cannot very easily pick a side, just like we would have trouble subscribing to the ideology of the situationist project. Our goal is not to find a home base from which to apprehend and investigate other approaches. Rather, we shoulder our own ideological baggage – which we undoubtedly have – and bring it with us, making it part of the investigation, keeping our mobility to get away from the assumptions and presuppositions that would come with being at the flâneur's centre of the world. We constantly and repeatedly assess our relations to the methods around us, our shifting frames of reference, and our distances to the paths others have taken in trying to understand the city. We always look through some type of lens, relying on representations of the city that are already shaped by specific interests and projects, and that can take an endless number of forms – from

sketches, maps, shapes of skylines, to the reflections in Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* (Figure 13) in Chicago. Here we see the city where it is not, while at the same time we have to acknowledge that it exists nowhere else but in such mirror reflections and other images. That is precisely the type of paradoxical suggestion at the core of 'locating distance': a distance is about more than just the physical distance between two points; it is about the space and terrain in-between, about specific details in local (and always changing) contexts. As such, it is tied to individual locations, to moments and nodes of reflection. While our own subjective and ideological locations are not the same as the distances between us and different positions, it is only through the former that the latter can be worked out.

We do not speak from an isolated position like the flâneur, we do not pursue the objectivity of our political peer group like a



Figure 14. Chicago flag (Schmidt-Tomczak 2012).



situationist drifter, and we do not behave quite like the everyday pedestrian of de Certeau's spatial narrative. Or rather: we may choose to do all or none of the above, but any such choice will form part of *our* approach to the city and of *our* methodology. Our distance to these approaches is never measured from a fixed position we can call our own, but from the changing locations in which we find ourselves on our journey as mobile urban subjects.

We stop for a moment in the middle of the bustling city, enjoying the warming rays of the sun with our eyes closed. Just as we begin to think that we can fade out the city around us, the sound of a flag in the wind captures our attention. We listen carefully, and hear a clear pattern and an imperfect rhythm. It is a collision between the fabric and the wind, a sound that neither of the two could produce by itself, and it is thus both pronouncement and pronunciation of their inseparability. We open our eyes and look up, squinting at the sun. And then we see parts of the two cities of Chicago – the building as symbol of physicality, and the flag as symbol of representation; or is it the other way around? Is the network of human interaction that the flag stands for any less physical than the single building that at best hints at the presence of a city that it is a part of? The flag might even be waving goodbye to this architectural signifier of urbanity, or could be wrapping itself around the building, seeking a rigid support for its own surface. Or is this reading merely forced upon us by the scale in the image that makes the flagpole appear as if it was touching the sky? Whatever the case may be, we realise that these readings come down to being questions of distance – distance from the physical and symbolic city (or from physical and methodological encounters, if we decide to hold on to these categories) and from the meanings and readings that we ourselves, and others around us, see in it.

With these thoughts on our mind we move on, until we can no longer make out the sound of the flag fluttering in the wind. And we keep moving, for there is always more to discover.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> To give only one well-known example, think of Paul Virilio's essay 'The Overexposed City' (published in French in 1984), in which he comments on the changing boundary of and access to the city: 'From the palisade to the screen, by way of stone ramparts, the boundary-surface has recorded innumerable perceptible and imperceptible transformations, of which the latest is probably that of the interface. Once again, we have to approach the question of access to the City in a new manner. For example, does the metropolis possess its own facade? At which moment does the city show us its face?' (Virilio 1991: 12).

<sup>3</sup> While the most common association with the flâneur might be that of an urban pedestrian, my focus is here on the mode of documentation, rather than that of movement. I am therefore more interested in the different types of image-making (sketching versus photography), rather than in a discussion of the acts of walking and driving, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Consider Baudelaire's vitriolic commentary on photography and what he saw as its detrimental influence on the production of art in his 1859 text 'The Modern Public and Photography'. He sees the public as enamored with the new medium and mimics them: "'Since Photography gives us every guarantee of exactitude that we could desire (they really believe that, the mad fools!), then Photography and Art are the same thing'" (Baudelaire 1965: 152). He goes on to express his conviction 'that the ill-applied developments of photography, like all other purely material developments of progress, have contributed much to the impoverishment of the French artistic genius, which is already so scarce' (Ibid.: 153).

<sup>5</sup> Johns painted *Corpse and Mirror II* (oil on linen) in 1974 – 75, inspired by an experience of passing traffic. On the Art Institute of Chicago's website it says that 'John [sic] first glimpsed this pattern on a passing car, recalling: "I only saw it for a second, but knew immediately that I was going to use it. It had all the qualities that interest me – literalness, repetitiveness, an obsessive quality, order with dumbness, and the possibility of a complete lack of meaning"' (The Art Institute of Chicago 2012).

<sup>6</sup> We might then even be inclined to suspect that Jasper Johns was himself 'drifting along' when he found his inspiration for *Corpse and Mirror II*.

<sup>7</sup> Hayles's description of the exchange between Derrida and Searl gives wonderful proof of this: 'Many philosophers who take issue with Derrida's style [...] understand only that [it] is deviant and irresponsible, not that it seeks to bring into question the assumptions that enable them to judge it as deviant and irresponsible' (Hayles 1994: 44).

<sup>8</sup> Hayles points out that this is exactly the presupposition forming the base for Stanley Fish's thinking about the impossibility of interdisciplinarity, the impossibility of taking off that lens. In Hayles's view, disciplines are not nearly as monolithic as Fish makes them out to be, and they do in fact communicate with one another (Hayles 1994: 30).

## 6. Appearing In or Out of Time: Temporal Rhetoric in Mexico City Modern

*Adam Kaasa*

Distance is often referred to in terms of space. The distance between two objects, between two cities, between origin and destination. Writers on modernity claim that transformations in transportation and communication technologies change the way we relate to our understandings of places as being near or far, and our relationship to the time of social and production processes. Famously, Fredric Jameson and David Harvey have both written on the compression of space and time such that in a post-modern condition, the movement of people, goods and ideas globally shrinks in terms of distance and thus our perception of the time it takes to move, to produce to consume changes as well (Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991).

However, modernity and its inventions did not just bring about faster travel, or more communication. Modernity also shaped a new temporal relationship with history, the division of the modern from the traditional. These signifiers soon became attached to geographies, to cities, such that a temporal referent marked spaces, and a normative hierarchy privileging the modern over the traditional appeared. Emerging out of the powerful universalising trope of progress, and linear development, we begin to see the continued assembly, or as Harvey would put it 'framing' (Shonfield 2000: 155), of a world composed of different *times* in different *places*. Here we have not the distance in time as related by the hours it takes to travel from one city to the next, but rather the distance in historical time represented by the temporal rhetoric attached to a geography. Is a city traditional, in the past, backwards, developing? Or is it modern, in the future, forward thinking, developed?

Similarly, and referring to contemporary urbanism, architectural critic Charles Jencks reminds us that while '[i]n the past, important public buildings, such as the cathedral and the city hall, expressed shared meaning and conveyed it through well-known conventions' (2005: 7), something new is happening now in terms of iconic architecture, urban branding and inter-urban competition on the modernist developmental paradigms that translate today into world or global city status, languages of developed or developing, industrial, advanced, or emerging cities. Jencks goes on to show the value of appearances speaking

for those cities like Bilbao and others getting a second chance at youthful, if not ephemeral, relevance: 'Put me on the map,' they say, 'give my industrial city a second chance, make me the centrefold of the Sunday supplements, the cover of in-flight magazines, the backdrop for fashion shoots, give me an iconic landmark, give me – architectural – Shock and Awe!' (2005: 8).

While Jencks references the present moment in architectural history, his description is making present a narrative of modernity or modernisation that relies on developmental theories – different cities exist in different 'times' some 'pre-modern', some 'modern', some 'advanced modern' – a Bilbao, nowadays, does something like time travel, bringing an expired industrial town into the twenty-first century of cultural capital. Only by actively engaging in this framing, this narrative of 'becoming modern' do cities 'appear' on the world scene, one that continues to be divided in a hierarchy of time. This framing can be considered a kind of rhetorical violence. As Renato Rosaldo, drawing on Fabian (1983) and Tsing (1994), argues, 'to speak of certain groups as if they inhabited another century or millennium smacks more of metropolitan prejudice than considered judgement' (1994: xvi). The political question Rosaldo raises so astutely is one that while left unanswered by this short paper, figures strongly in its key consideration: 'who determines the designation modern as opposed to traditional?' (Ibid.).

This paper aims to articulate the complexities of a temporal framing in the built environment. It does so through the use of an historical case study highlighting two concurrent temporal projects operating on two scales: the global and the national. It considers the tensions between, on the one hand, urban modernity as a global temporal project that, as Jennifer Robinson (2006) and others argue, has squarely positioned the origins of modernity, of the future, in the West and subsequently ordered the geography of the world in a hierarchy of time (Mitchell 2000; Robinson 2006; Roy 2009). And, on the other hand, mid-century processes of nation building that deal with the internal relationship of a people to their own history (Anderson 1983: 187 – 204; Alonso 1988; 1994). Specifically, I turn to two events in Mexico City in 1947 that highlight both a relationship to an

internal temporal reorganisation as part of a nation-building project, and to wider global structures of modernity. The first analyses a competition by the city's leading daily newspaper at the time, *El Excelsior*, to represent Mexico City in a painting as one instance where the temporal negotiations at play internal to national processes surfaces. The second considers the Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán, the first large-scale high-rise social housing complex in Mexico City and built between 1947 and 1949, as a means to discuss the relationship between appearing modern and the necessary visual and rhetorical ties to international aesthetic movements in architecture and urbanism. My argument sits within contemporary histories of architecture and urbanism in Latin America that attempt to answer the question of why modern architecture 'took off' in that region, or perhaps more succinctly why it 'appears' to have taken off (Fraser 2000; Guillen 2004). Specifically, I aim to relate the well-researched proposition that the remnants of a specific colonial history in Mexico lead to a resurgent and reactionary indigenism that in-part relied on latent pre-Columbian tropes to construct a new national identity in the post-revolutionary years (Alonso 1988; Canclini 1995: 107–144; Batalla 1996). This return to a deep history was a political tool, but also realigned the temporality of the 'nation' of Mexico from that of a new nation born of the 1910 revolution, to one steeped in thousands of years of Meso-America. This is not to say that the indigenous in Mexico were any better off after the revolution. In fact many argue quite the opposite, that they enjoyed no fairer representation in political, social or economic processes (Graham et al. 1990). Rather, the indigenous return was a surface level temporal reengagement with the iconography, myths, and histories of a pre-colonial 'Mexican' nation – partly embodied in state-sponsored mural and arts projects, films and music. Before entering the case studies, I examine one tangent of this reengagement through Octavio Paz's discussion of the 'malinche' – both a historical figure and a national myth – that elicits the notion of rupture, of being born from 'nothingness', and its particular effect for considerations of modernity in Mexico. If modernity were a project that relies on the distinction of the old and the new, of the past and the future, or as I. E. Myers would put it 'the reconciliation of the universal and the regional, the mechanical and the human, the cosmopolitan and the indigenous' (1952: 45), then the urban and architectural landscape of post-revolutionary Mexico would appear particularly modern because of the specific temporal distances between the burgeoning internal national myth, and the internationalised built environment. Negotiating a relationship to the future, to a kind of distance in time, both nationally and internationally prove fundamental to understanding how urban modernity appeared in Mexico.

## Appearing modern

Appearances matter. In the OED 'appearance' takes on the following, though not exhaustive, definitions: it can refer to 'The state or form in which a person or thing appears; apparent form, look, aspect'. At the same time, appearance is 'distinguished from reality: outward look or show ... to save or keep up appearances: to maintain artificially the outward signs, so as to conceal the absence of the realities which they are assumed to represent.' It also takes to mean 'The action of coming forward into view or becoming visible', akin to appearing modern on the world stage, to become visible.

In her book *Ordinary Cities* Jennifer Robinson critiques the geographic privilege of modernity as originating in certain cities at certain times:

'The very promiscuity of Western modernity itself thus proposes a different, cosmopolitan cartography of modernity, one in which origins are dispersed, outcomes differentiated and multiple and the spatial logics those of circulation and interaction' (2006: 19).

What Robinson provokes is a rearticulation of the narrative built around the appearance of modernity in those geographies of the 'primitive', 'developing', non-modern, from that of a referent mimetic or hybridic, or cannibalising of, or appropriating of, some origin in the historicised modern West, towards 'seeing all cities as occupying the same historical time, open to new kinds of futures, contributing to the inventive modernities of the present' (2006: 39). In short, Robinson asks us to consider alternative narratives that mark the appearance of modernity through more nuanced, relational and global processes. In this sense a historical resurgence of indigenism in post-revolutionary Mexican visual culture and architectural debates, is not the site from which a glass, steel and concrete, modernist structure of a housing block or a monument acts as a rupture, but affirms that what has come to be temporalised as the past – tradition – and the future – modernity are operating at the same historical time. It is precisely not a rupture, but the coevalness of a reorientation towards a deep national history *and at the same time* an orientation in rhetoric to a future grounded and represented by an artificially homogeneous European modernist aesthetic and building technique, that provokes the appearance of a surging modernism in Mexico. In the same instance, it is the inability to account for, or understand, this coevalness, particularly in a global hierarchy of time where Mexico is decidedly positioned in the 'waiting room of history' (Chakrabarty 2000: 8), that interprets this occurrence in line with the OED's second definition of the verb 'to appear'

as to 'maintain artificially the outward signs, so as to conceal the absence of the realities which they are assumed to represent'. The temporal ranking of Mexico within a world of times creates the precondition through which during the 1950s, the country is described as a deficient modernity, as creating modern aesthetics without the institutions or capital to be representative of a true, read European, modernity. Or, put more concisely, as an example of 'modernism without modernity' (Canclini 1995: 41–65; Guillén 2004).

However, the use of a temporal framework offered by Benjamin's 'time of the now' to think through the simultaneity of histories made politically relevant by shooting through the present fails to capture the relationship of time and concept in post-revolutionary Mexico, as described by several of its prominent thinkers in the twentieth century. In the same way, but through a different set of motivations altogether, Judith Butler considers what Robinson called 'the same historical time' but layers it with the incommensurability of a pure presence with the present – the time of the now. Working closely with historical materialism's critical distance from working within progressive time, Butler reminds us in quoting Benjamin that '[t]he historian who understands how the past flashes up, how the past is not past, but continues in the present, is one who understands "the time of the now" as "shot through with chips of Messianic time"' (Butler 2008: 20). Part of what Benjamin offers here is the recognition that the past is what is made 'recognisable' to a present political moment, and therefore, the construction of multiple geographies of temporality is a political act for this paper. When Butler links the 'problem of temporality and politics' demanding a 'critical consideration of the time of the now' (2008: 2), she provokes the kind of critique against, which Robinson would describe as 'a deeply colonial move' (2006: 13). Robinson continues: 'it is the West that has been seen as the site of modernity and other places that have been entrained as not-modern or less modern through the transformation of historical time into geographical difference' (2006: 13–14). This time travel that would have many writers hoping through geographies of time provokes Judith Butler to ask, in a question that reminds us of Rosaldo (1994), 'what time are we in? are all of us in the same time? and specifically, who has arrived in modernity and who has not?' (2008: 1). Who has arrived? Who appears at the right time, and in the right place?

But the 'time of the now', Octavio Paz reminds us, emerging from western urban modern theory in Germany in the early twentieth century, might not translate to the uniquely American (in the broadest sense) and Ibero post-colonial context of post-revolutionary Mexico. As such, a brief diversion to investigate what Paz has termed the time of the 'until now' (Paz 1988: 30–35), rather than 'the time of the now' elicits Mexican peculiarities. Where Benjamin is excavating traces of past potential futures, writers like the Mexican Carlos Fuentes introduce us to alternative

conceptions of time, time whose potential futures are bound by the completeness of the present. Fuentes relates that

'[t]he Mexican *mañana* does not mean putting things off till the morrow. It means not letting the future intrude on the sacred completeness of today ... What a bore, says Julio Cortázar of Argentina, to have all the time in the world in front of you. How uncomfortable, say I of Mexico, to have all of the past behind you ...' (1994: 17–19)

Rather than liken a search for the traces of past futures in the present, Fuentes conditions us to reconsider the privilege of futurity as a particular historical, and possibly cultural, trope. Rather than the politics of temporality being concerned with, as Butler astutely argues, 'who arrives?' the question should be: in the fluctuating politics that create global hierarchical geographies of time, 'who appears', where and when, and what can this tell us about political, social and economic relationships.

### Appearing Out of Nothing

Appearances matter – particularly in the reconstruction of the temporal 'appearance' of a nation. The idea of nothingness, of a clean break, appearing out of nothing – of a revolutionary birth is very strong in post-revolutionary Mexico. Every year, on 15 of September, the President of Mexico re-enacts the 'Grito' – the revolutionary call – the birthing scream. 'Viva Mexico' he cries, ringing the bells of the National Palace in the same way as the priest Miguel Hidalgo rang the cathedral bells in Dolores in the town of Guanajuato to incite the independence movement in 1810. Over a hundred years and several revolutions later, the crowd now answers 'Viva Mexico, hijos de la chingada'. That phrase, 'hijos de la chingada' – sons of the violated one – is an intensely cultural statement. Historically, the 'chingada' refers to a Nahuatl woman, La Malinche or Doña Marina, given as one of twenty slaves from the indigenous in Tabasco in 1519 to Hernán Cortés, the Spanish Conquistador whose invasion ended the reign of the Aztec emperor and transferred much of modern day Mexico to Spanish rule.<sup>1</sup> La Malinche is also thought of as a traitor, and there are many weaving narratives of her that depend on a similar gender dynamic of female treachery to Biblical or other traditions. Still, as the Mexican people imagine themselves as *mestizo*, and their origin or birth comes of treachery, deception, and possibly violence, this narrative creates a strong national caption. Born of a violation, of a rupture, 'The Chingada is the Mother forcibly opened, violated or deceived. The hijo de la Chingada is the offspring of violation, abduction or deceit' (Paz 1985: 79). But it is a word with a thousand meanings – from the obscene to the absurd. As Octavio Paz relates:

'The *chingada*, because of constant usage, contradictory meanings and the friction of angry or enthusiastic lips, wastes away, loses its contents and disappears. It is a hollow word. It says nothing. It is Nothingness itself' (1985: 79).

So what does it mean to be born of Nothingness, that the Mexican people, the Mexican nation is born from Nothing? The offspring of nothing is to start from a point without referent. It seems to relate to a denial of history, a denial of the past, a rupture from, a break from, a discontinuous temporality. Paz goes on to relate the following:

'The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian or a Spaniard. Nor does he want to be descended from them. He denies them. And he does not affirm himself as a mixture, but rather as an abstraction ... He becomes the son of Nothingness' (1985: 87).

It would seem, if we follow Octavio Paz as one source to describe post-revolutionary Mexico, that nothingness, or perhaps its equivalent, newness – something 'apparently' inherent to the modern – exemplifies the context of nation building and its visual culture in the urban environment after 1920. But something feels too analytically easy about the connotation of nothingness, of a break or rupture. A 'denial of' does not mean a 'break from', or a clean slate. A denial of, or the construction of newness from the denial of the past, is a specifically modern form of framing identity, and indeed of framing space and time. Modernity is not something new, a nothingness in relation to a non-existent past subject, but rather, the rediscovery of the past, of tradition, as the basis for the repositioning of a new, out of nothing, identity. Modernity is the return to tradition, not that which separates us from it – it is the past becoming present to reposition a sense of the future. At the same time, it creates the myth of rupture precisely because of its development of deep history.

In the visual culture of post-revolutionary Mexico, a return to indigenism was part of the nation building process. Seen in the art of the muralists, the prevalence of archaeological digs, and debates in architecture and urbanism about responding to 'the land' in thinking about urban planning. This representation of a latent indigenism constructed the visual cues of 'national' difference from which 'international' modern forms of being were seen as rupture. Indeed, returning to Mexico in 1951, nearly a decade after touring South America as an unofficial anti-fascist spokesperson of the United States government, the writer Waldo Frank notes that '1910 marked the rebirth of Mexico, the return to its authentic roots, the search for new and legitimate

forms. Influences from Europe started to be absorbed, digested, transfigured, ... amalgamated with the deepest latent reality of the indigenous past of Mexico' (1951: 196).<sup>2</sup> This position of difference returns over and over in the temporal discourses of 'before and after' that pepper the architectural media descriptions of the new architecture in Mexico City. The Rector of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México Dr Luis Garrido, opening the new University City in 1952 described the new campus, located to the south west of the city centre in the lava fields of El Pedregal – the architect Luis Barragán described being 'overwhelmed by the beauty of this landscape', of the 'fantastic, capricious rock formations wrought on soft, melted rock by the onslaught of powerful prehistoric winds'<sup>3</sup> – not simply as a 'mere physical change, but a transformation of all the aspects of this place: pedagogic, administrative, economic: a new University is born': a rebirth amongst the 'prehistoric winds' of El Pedregal (Garrido 1952: 197).<sup>4</sup>

A rupture from the colonial 'present' was meant a return to what Bonfil Batalla (1996) calls 'Mexico Profundo' – Deep Mexico: to that 'destroyed' Meso-American civilisation, to reclaim what was lost during the colonial. In a careful game of time travel in the present, the lost and marginalised 'destroyed' culture of the past, is appropriated to serve as a counterpoint from which the appearance of 'modernity' holds more effect. A position of difference as much a part of modernity as the idea of progress and rupture itself. The contraposition of the extraordinary modernist University City, recognised by UNESCO in 2007 as embodying 'social and cultural values of universal significance' and as being 'one of the most significant icons of modernity in Latin America,' (UNESCO World Heritage List 2007) with the lava fields of El Pedregal, tied to Aztec mythology of Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl, the two largest mountains surrounding Mexico City, and of Xitle, the volcano responsible for the lava field in 100 AD that covered and destroyed Cuicuilco, the oldest Meso-American city and the first important civic and religious centre in the Valley of Mexico dating from 1000 BC, evokes the idea of a rebirth (Torres 2002). In 1952, the modern city of Mexico had not grown so far as El Pedregal, and so the disquieting site of the 1000 hectare modernist project would visibly seem to stand as an even greater rupture in time. However Batalla argues that the pronouncement of 'rupture' demands a 'disquieting tone of superiority': in re-discovering a past, only to use it as a counterpoint for a modern present, is to relegate the Meso-American in the present to archives, temples and museums. Batalla asks: 'That renunciation, that denial of the past – does it really correspond to a total and irremediable historical break? Did Mesoamerican civilisation really die, and are the remaining Indian populations simply fossils, condemned five hundred years ago to disappear because they have no place in the present or in the future?' (1996: 3).





Figure 1. Juan O'Gorman, *La ciudad de México*, tempera on agglomerate, 1942–49. Copyright: Museo de Arte Moderno, México DF/INBA.

### Painting appeared

On Sunday 9 October 1949, the *Excélsior*, the largest daily newspaper in Mexico City at the time, announced a painting contest called 'The City of Mexico Interpreted by its Artists' (*Excélsior* 1949a: 3<sup>era</sup> 7). A team of cultural bureaucrats from the National Institute of Anthropology and History, the National Institute of Fine Arts, and UNAM, the largest university in the country, sat on the jury.<sup>5</sup> Organised jointly by Margarita Torres de Ponce from the *Excélsior*, and Inés Amor, the director of the influential Gallery of Mexican Art, and funded by the Department of the Federal District<sup>6</sup> and the Bank of Mexico, the competition aimed to produce representations of the city that referred to 'the physical aspects of the City of Mexico; to its customs and character, ..., and to aspects that speak to the evolution of the city through history' (*Excélsior* 1949a: 3<sup>era</sup> 7). While in the post-revolutionary years of 1920s, the State Ministry of Education under José Vasconcelos invested heavily in the nation building opportunities of arts and cultures, Mary Kay Vaughan reflects that 'after 1940, neither education nor politics nor the economy can be looked at independent of mass media production' (2001: 485). The importance of a state-sponsored representational project acting through the newspaper medium, then, is of key importance to the now iconic images that emerged from the winners. On 10 December, 257 artworks from over 150 artists

were exhibited in collaboration with the Flora and Fauna Museum in Chapultepec Park, representative of 'an immortal Mexico ... her past, her present and the outline of her future' (*Excélsior* 1949b: Front Page).<sup>7</sup>

There were four winners of the contest. Juan O'Gorman, architect<sup>8</sup> cum painter, won first prize and 5,000 pesos<sup>9</sup> for his painting *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México* [Landscape of the City of Mexico]. Second place, and 3000 pesos went to Guillermo Meza for his painting *La tolvanera* [The dust storm]. Third place, and 1000 pesos, went to José Chávez Morado for his work *Río Revuelto* [Turbulent/unsettled river]. And fourth prize and 1000 pesos went to Gustavo Montoya for his submission *La merced* [mercy] (*Excélsior* 1949c: 3<sup>era</sup> 9).<sup>10</sup> O'Gorman's painting is the main focus of this part of the paper, however, it is worth placing it in the context of the three runners up. The commentary in the *Excélsior* about O'Gorman's work ran as follows: 'the symbolic elements conjoined the idea of yesterday, of today and of always ... The humble image of the anonymous but effective builder of the city, gave the painting a positive meaning, and secured for it a place among the great vistas of the city' (Zavala 2007: 491). Echoing this interpretation, Adriana Zavala argues that many scholars have labelled O'Gorman's painting as an "optimistic" and "meticulous rendition" of Mexico City, particularly when compared with the other works' (*Ibid.*).





**Figure 2.** Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán, 1949. Mexicana Aerofofo, S.A. Courtesy of [skyscrapercity.com](http://skyscrapercity.com).

In comparison with the three other winners, O’Gorman’s painting has been analysed as one depicting the rational and progressive evolution of Mexico City from its mythical Aztec past (the stone wall on the right, and the symbolic serpent God Quetzlcoatl in the air), through its colonial history (the sixteenth century map in the viewer/architect’s ‘Spanish’ hands), to its present becoming modern (the paved roads, tall buildings and in the near-middle of the foreground, is a stark international-style building, the Corcuera Building [1934]), to its destined modernity (the skeletal steel structures of skyscrapers and the blueprint in the mestizo construction worker’s hand) (Ramírez 1995; Pérez Gavilán 2005). While this neat history is productive for an industrialising nation, Zavala argues that scholars have been ‘seduced by the orderly vista’ (2007: 495), and goes on to allude to the symbolic apprehension O’Gorman evokes in his painting towards ‘the transformations underway by 1949’ (2007: 494). Here referring to the Presidential term by Miguel Alemán, commonly known as the Mexican Miracle – the first non-military President, and one to begin the international posturing of Mexico, and opening of the economy to foreign investment, and heavy industrialisation. It was also during this term that heightened urbanisation began.

But there is also something else going on in this painting. There is the comforting allusion to a city evolving over time that the Jury praises, but also the palimpsest of a city with multiple histories operating at one and the same historical time. We are set up to

view brick and mortar and Aztec stone framing the view to as yet skeletal steel structures. The notion of rupture not yet there, a ghostlike appearance of the modern, is made all the more dramatic by positioning the role of constructor of this new city, on the unprepared, and racialised, shoulders of the Mestizo worker, trowel in hand, to make all the more apparent a rupture between the physical built environment of a city in its past, and the steel skyscraper blueprints in his hands. And while this view of progress in Mexico City is seductive, it is precisely the jarring temporalities of the underprepared mestizo worker, of the *criollo* architect holding a map of the past to view the present that require an understanding of modernity as reconstituting the past for the purposes of the present. The effect of this image is achieved through the painting of temporal distances overlaid in the same ‘frame’ of space – through the depiction of national historical narratives, the international style modern buildings and urban planning, along with allusions to the presidential politics of Alemán all at once.



Figure 3. Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán, Mario Pani, 1947 – 1949 (Kaasa 2010).

### The Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán

In the same year that the *Excelsior* held its painting competition, Mario Pani was completing the Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán (CUPA) built in Colonia del Valle just south of Mexico City's centre between Felix Cuevas, Mayorazgo, Parroquia, and Coyoacán. Covering 40,000 square metres at a cost of \$20,000,000.00 pesos<sup>11</sup> this gargantuan housing complex was one of the first of its kind in Latin America and equalled only the El Silencio complex in Caracas, derided by Pani in his influential architectural magazine *Arquitectura* as a 'a low-rise development,' and therefore 'undeserving of the same architectonic status' (Pani 1950: 271).<sup>12</sup> CUPA comprises six zigzagging towers soaring thirteen storeys, each using modern construction methods in concrete and pilotis supports: 'the strategy was to adopt a system of architecture and urbanism of tall buildings distributed in a manner that left the ground plane free for gardens and areas of relaxation' (Noelle Merles 1997: 180). Alongside these gargantuan buildings, six more manageable three-storey apartment blocks rounded off the grounds that also contained educational facilities, a leisure

centre, a library, a community centre, landscaped parks and multiple retail units at ground floor providing a wide range of services (Noelle Merles 1997: 179 – 181).

Built on land owned by President Aléman ('An additional cloud over Aléman's economic record was the constant charge of corruption' [Skidmore & Smith 2001: 239]), CUPA was far beyond the gaze of the genteel man holding the sixteenth century map on top of the Monument to the Revolution looking past the Centro Histórico of Mexico City to the east in Juan O'Gorman's painting. Mario Pani, the chief architect of this and many other large projects in Mexico City built the CUPA to house over 5,000 people, on a site originally intended for just 1,000. The original commission in July of 1947 from the Dirección General de Pensiones Civiles was for 200 single detached homes in an effort to cope with growing housing demand, and skyrocketing rents. What was built just two years and two months later was six thirteen storey buildings and six three storey buildings with 1080 apartments. And yet 80 percent of the land was devoted to gardens and public services.





Figure 4. Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán, Mario Pani, 1947 – 1949 (Kaasa 2010).



Figure 5. Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán, Mario Pani, 1947 – 1949 (Kaasa 2010).



**Figure 6.** Advertisement for the Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán, listing the modern amenities of the apartment complex. Source: *Modernidad habitada: Multifamiliar Miguel Alemán, ciudad de México, 1949 – 1999*. Graciela de Garay, México, Instituto Mora, 2004.

As David Frisby, drawing on Werner Sombart, argues, 'massification and change [are] two crucial cultural features of modernity' (2001: 161). He goes on to quote Sombart:

'The outer size of many things grows into the huge, they become 'imposing': cities, streets, dwelling blocks, railway stations, public buildings, department stores, factories, machines, bridges, ships and thousands of other such things' (Frisby 2001: 162).

The sheer incongruity of the towers and the surrounding relatively sparsely populated suburbs make it appear that this is a rupture in time, newness, progress, this is modern.

### Buildings from Tomorrow

'Time marches forward; but now with a happier, brighter step' (Escobedo 1951: 184).<sup>13</sup>

In the year following the inauguration of CUPA, four articles were published in *Arquitectura* detailing the architectural merits of the building and describing life in what was now being referred to as a *multifamiliar*, or multi-family dwelling. Mario Pani founded *Arquitectura* in 1938 upon his return from studying architecture at the Beaux-Arts in Paris. Faced with an old-guard of engineers and architects dominating built projects with neo-colonial designs, Pani began his magazine to promote and institutionalise certain traits from his understanding of the International Style into Mexican architectural debates, competitions, and, most importantly, commissions. Several scholars have pointed to Pani's editorial instrumentalism in furthering not only his own career through the use of photography and print media, but also the



integration of burgeoning styles different to the leading trends at that time in Mexico City (Noelle 2008). Escobedo's article in 1951 was the first to discuss what life was like in the new buildings. In response to some residents' complaints and popular reporting at the time denouncing the density of the housing complex akin to a concentration camp (Escobedo 1951: 181).<sup>14</sup> Escobedo replies that '... no modern city plans its buildings as monasteries. The Thebaid did not require fortified cement, metallic structures, swimming pools and green spaces, pleasant colours, not sun, air, water nor light' (Ibid.).<sup>15</sup>

When the Dirección General de Pensiones Civiles originally invited entries regarding this site south west of Mexico's city centre, the brief was for 200 single family units, originally intended for state workers. Given that surrounding farmland was still in use, and most buildings were detached one- or two-storey buildings, the notion of fitting 1080 apartments, roughly equivalent to 5,000 people or the population of a small *puebla*, on the same land gives a sense of the scale of the intervention. However, Escobedo relates that no city is a monastery, and figures CUPA in a temporal allusion with the practices of Thebaid. By the fifth century AD, Thebaid (today part of the northeastern coastline of Egypt bordering the gulf of Suez) had become known as a retreat for Christian hermits. In jest, Escobedo compares the tenants angry about this hyper-density with monks living in the desert. Creating a scene spatially distant from the city, but equally important is the temporal contraposition of a historical monastic lifestyle with the present dense urban cacophony. The allusion to the past, and the provocation that the Thebaid had no cement, steel or swimming pools, all modern elements,<sup>16</sup> place the current inhabitants of CUPA not only in a different time, but in a normatively superior one where non-hermetic lives require the sun, air, water and light, 'green spaces' and 'pleasant colours'. While the density of CUPA is far more than was intended, still 80 per cent of the surface of the plot is open space gardens, paths and recreational facilities (Pani 1950: 266).

This 'oasis' in the city was also positioned in before and after rhetoric. Escobedo relates that CUPA '... is a kind of liberation, for many of families it housed, from the horrific life of these neighbourhoods in the capital in which it seems a sadistic spirit revels in multiplying all that is unsanitary, unhealthy, squalid, uncomfortable, humiliating, ugly and inhuman' (1951: 183).<sup>17</sup> Here, Escobedo is painting a common urban fear at the time, that overpopulation, and not enough affordable housing, is creating central city slums. CUPA is positioned as the solution, the 'after', to the 'before', though arguably continuous, lower income and vulnerable housing of the urban poor. The issue of mass housing influenced Pani's own research for the final design of CUPA, and would carry on to preoccupy him throughout his career (Mexico City could be five times smaller and 80 per cent gardens [Pani

1950: 269]). It was also central to housing policy at the national and international level. In October of 1950, President Alemán held a series of roundtables on the 'problem of mass housing' in preparation for a meeting of the Pan-American Union (now the Organisation of American States) in El Salvador in November of the same year.<sup>18</sup>

In 1945, *Arquitectura* ran a series of articles on mass housing (Kaspé 1945), and in April of 1949, just months before the opening of CUPA, the magazine ran an interview with its editor (and chief architect of CUPA), on his views about the housing issue. Pani argues that there is a global deficit of over 100 million homes, and that where in some places this can be blamed on the destruction of World War II, in Mexico Pani states '...we had never built any' (Mayorga 1949a: 67).<sup>19</sup> Pani argues that the core reason for poor housing is low wages and the inability to save for the private market and as such is a keen promoter of new mortgage laws coming into place and backed by the government. Part of his logic relies on people moving up the housing chain. He argues that his new apartments will take 5,000 people out of humbler dwellings and into modern living. Those humble dwellings, he goes on, can then be filled by the poorest people living in slums. Then, the final step is to clear the slums and make way for parks. The urgency for Pani can be seen in his description of low quality, poorly constructed homes as 'a cancer invading the city of Mexico' (Ibid).<sup>20</sup>

While not the first to use medical terminology to describe the city, Pani's remarks suggest an invitation to perceive the *multifamiliar* as a cure, or part cure, for the social and economic conditions contributing to poor quality affordable housing. Confirming the before and after rhetoric prevalent in *Arquitectura*, the opening weekend articles from Mexico City's leading daily newspaper *El Excelsior* position the buildings decidedly in the future. In a moment that seems to work in tandem with remarks that describe Mexico's City's current demographic and urban explosion in an allegorical past paralleled to Europe's in the nineteenth century, the architect Mauricio Gómez Mayorga, writing in *El Excelsior* two days after the President inaugurated CUPA, describes Pani's buildings as 'a work of construction from a better Mexico, from the only Mexico that should be of interest to all us living men: the Mexico of tomorrow' (Mayorga 1949b: p.10).<sup>21</sup>

## Apparent Modernity

The Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán by Mario Pani needs to be reconfigured and reimagined beyond the narrative of modern architecture that holds it as 'mimicry' by the peripheral, and as a rupture from some deep history: this is not a sign of newness from nothingness, but the modern construction of a historical context within which newness can be fashioned as such. Similarly, Juan

O'Gorman's painting brings into question the national reverence of an emerging urban form that is figured as beyond the brick and mortar tools of the *mestizo*. The steel blueprint in the awed hands of O'Gorman's construction worker is a future chalked in skeletal frames, the verb *anhelar* (an intense desire) in (un)built form. It puts into direct question the hegemony of progress, the political legitimacy of development that seemingly defined this period in Mexican history when, as it so routinely is, placed in temporal dis-alignment with the incongruent rural, indigenous, Meso-American past and recognises the simultaneity of temporalities in the visual culture of post-revolutionary Mexico City. And still, in a country whose national story revolves around being children of nothingness, the temporal politics of appearing are of continuing concern. Recounting a moment in his home, Octavio Paz relates: 'I remember the afternoon I heard a noise in the room next to mine, and asked loudly: "Who is there?" I was answered by the voice of a servant who had recently come to us from her village: "No one señor. I am"' (1985: 44).

The distance between what appears as modern and what is defined as traditional is one space where the political uses

temporal rhetoric aligned with geographies and built forms to champion one national story over another. The political effects of temporal rhetoric, of privileging those who appear modern, who can become visible subjects, bodies or buildings that matter is of key interest here, while the paper, uncomfortably, cannot begin to address them.<sup>22</sup> Who appears in time, or out of sync, out of time? Does the definition of modern and traditional categorise, separate, or create inequalities in cities? What work does the negotiation of temporal distance between cities internationally have to do with developmental discourses, with global city narratives? In post-war Mexico City, a temporal rhetoric of the modern and the traditional entered into debates about the form of the city through an iconic painting contest, and the form of city dwelling in the construction of Mario Pani's Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán. With a re-presented deep national history, and a strategic turn to temporal tropes of a European-based futurity, the urban representations and architectural landscapes of Mexico City in 1949 start to appear modern – the tension between the old and the new in a nation ostensibly born from nothing.



Figure 7. Advertisement for the sixtieth anniversary of the Centro Urbano Presidente Aleman (Kaasa 2010).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> La Malinche was a guide and interpreter for Cortés, but also a lover. They had a son, Martín, who has come to represent the first of the *mezizos* – or people of mixed indigenous and European heritage, an iconography of the origin of contemporary Mexicans.

<sup>2</sup> Original, 'Pero 1910 marcó el renacimiento de México, el retorno a sus raíces auténticas, la búsqueda de sus legítimas y nuevas formas. Ahora las influencias de Europa empezaron a absorberse, digerirse, transfigurarse...amalgamándose con la más profunda realidad latente del pasado indígena de México'.

<sup>3</sup> Mexican architect Luis Barragán won the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1980 (one of the highest awards in the profession), and spoke about the poetics of architecture, of mystery and spirit in his acceptance speech. He described the lava fields of El Pedregal where Barragán and Max Cetto created the modernist housing subdivision of Jardines del Pedregal in the 1950s, near to the end of his speech: 'To the south of Mexico City lies a vast extension of volcanic rock, arid, overwhelmed by the beauty of this landscape, I decided to create a series of gardens to humanize, without destroying, its magic. While walking along the lava crevices, under the shadow of imposing ramparts of live rock, I suddenly discovered, to my astonishment, small secret green valleys the shepherds call them "jewels" surrounded and enclosed by the most fantastic, capricious rock formations wrought on soft, melted rock by the onslaught of powerful prehistoric winds. The unexpected discovery of these "jewels" gave me a sensation similar to the one experienced when, having walked through a dark and narrow tunnel of the Alhambra, I suddenly emerged into the serene, silent and solitary "Patio of the Myrtles" hidden in the entrails of that ancient palace. Somehow I had the feeling that it enclosed what a perfect garden no matter its size should enclose: nothing less than the entire Universe.' For the full acceptance speech, see [http://www.pritzkerprize.com/laureates/1980/downloads/1980\\_Acceptance\\_Speech.pdf](http://www.pritzkerprize.com/laureates/1980/downloads/1980_Acceptance_Speech.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Original, 'El trasladar la Universidad al Pedregal no será un mero cambio físico, sino una transformación en todos los aspectos de nuestra Casa: pedagógico, administrativo, económico ... Nacerá una nueva Universidad.'

<sup>5</sup> Though the jury is meant to be objective in their selection, Fernando Gamboa, Director of the Department and Museum of Plastic Arts at the National Institute of Fine Arts, was also newly appointed, in 1949, head of the 'Plastic Integration Studio' only after it was created by eventual second place winner of the contest José Chávez Morado (Pérez Gavilán 2005: 71).

<sup>6</sup> The Distrito Federal is the administrative body for the City of Mexico as a national 'state'. Something like Washington DC. However, the City of Mexico also has a municipal government.

<sup>7</sup> All of the four winners were men, and out of the twenty honourable mentions, only two were women, both of whom were foreigners (Pérez Gavilán 2005: 75)

<sup>8</sup> O'Gorman's most famous building remains the twinned house of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, 1931. He also built the iconic central library at the Ciudad Universitaria in Mexico City, 1950 - 52 (Burian 1997: 136 - 42).

<sup>9</sup> This is an enormous sum. In 1949, rural wages in Mexico averaged anywhere from 2 pesos per day in the hinterland to 10 pesos per day near the border with the United States of America (Niblo 1999: 4 - 5).

<sup>10</sup> The winner could not have been too much of a surprise. On the 27 November 1949, in the run up to the contest announcement, the *Excelsior* printed an editorial by Roberto Furia tempting readers with a sneak preview, '[t]he works coming in for the *Excelsior's* competition 'Mexico City interpreted by its artists', could not be more fantastic!' He goes on to name both Chávez Morado and O'Gorman, 'I see the painting that Chávez Morado submitted, painted after his return from Europe ... It seems to me, though, that the guy who has his sights on first prize is Juan O'Gorman ... You have got to see these all with your own eyes, I won't say another word!' (*Excelsior* 1949d: 3<sup>era</sup> 7).

<sup>11</sup> In today's currency equivalent, US\$222,000,000, based on the then fixed peso rate of 4.85 to the dollar, and on relative share of GDP calculated at measuringworth.com.

<sup>12</sup> Original: 'En la América Latina, el conjunto llamado "El Silencio", en Venezuela, es el único que podría compararse con el Centro Urbano "Presidente Alemán", pero por estar desarrollado exclusivamente en edificios bajos, no puede tener el mismo alcance arquitectónico'.

<sup>13</sup> Original: 'El tiempo sigue su marcha; pero su ritmo es ahora más alegre y más claro'.

<sup>14</sup> Original: '... aun llegó a aludirse, con evidente falta de buen sentido, a los campos de concentración.'

<sup>15</sup> Original: 'en ninguna ciudad moderna se planean edificios a base de retiros para cenobitas. Las Tebaidas no requieren cement armado, ni estructuras metálicas, ni albercas y espacios verdes, ni colores amables, ni sol, aire, agua y luz...'

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed description of the history of cement in modern Mexico, see Rubén Gallo's (2005: 168 - 198) *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-Garde and the Technological Revolution*.

<sup>17</sup> See Escobedo (1951: 183). Original: 'Se trata de la liberación, para muchas de las familias en ella instaladas, de la horripilante vida en una de esas vecindades capitalinas en que parece que un espíritu sádico se hubiera regodeado en multiplicar todo lo que es antihigiénico, insalubre, sórdido, incómodo, denigrante, antiestético y antihumano'.

<sup>18</sup> The roundtables focussed on four issues related to the housing shortage: 1) Socio-economic; 2) Finance; 3) Architectural and urbanism; 4) Legal (Sanchez 1950, p.110), and Mario Pani would later give a keynote speech on mass housing to the Pan-American Union in Washington in 1954. See Pani (1954) 'Problemas de la vivienda de interés social' in the Pan-American Union symposium *Housing in America*, Washington DC.

<sup>19</sup> Original: '... no han sido construídas nunca'.

<sup>20</sup> Original: 'Siempre que se ha pretendido resolver en forma común y corriente ese problema económico, arquitectónico y social, a lo que se ha llegado es a esas lamentables edificaciones inhabitablemente mínimas y de pésima calidad; a esas casas y cosas mal ubicadas, mal servidas, mal proyectadas y mal construidas que conocemos tanto y que han invadido como cáncer toda la ciudad de México. Esa es la verdad: esa basura es lo único que puede comprarse efectivamente con lo que es posible ahorrar'.

<sup>21</sup> Original: 'una obra constructora de un México mayor, del único México que debe interesarnos a los hombres que estamos vivos: el México de mañana'.

<sup>22</sup> See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (1993).



## 7. Wri(o)ting Cities: Some Candid Questions on Researching and Writing about Urban Riots

*Antonis Vradis*

One of the reasons that led me to focus my research on urban riots – and the case of Exarcheia, Athens in particular – was what I conceived to be an often shallow and misaligned reading of such events in public discourse. In telling opposition to everyday struggles in urban settings, for example, the occurrence of urban riots has been systematically left under-explored. On the rare occasions when they are referred to in literature, this happens mostly from a distance, whether chronological or geographical. The reasons leading researchers to allow for this distance could be fairly comprehensible: chronological distance – that is, the lapse of time – can offer them the reassurance that they are looking into a subject worthy of their research effort. Geographical distance might offer them a feeling of personal safety. And yet, as I want to argue in this chapter, research on urban riots from afar largely perpetuates their misguided representation in public discourse.

I begin by presenting my case study neighbourhood of Exarcheia in Athens, Greece. I show how the repeated concentration of urban riots in the area during Greece's post-dictatorial years (since 1974) has been portrayed in the country's public discourse, with specific reference to its nationally circulated press – the representation of these riots from afar. I start with the premise that the discourse of a subject matter is by definition mediated by distance, whether chronological or geographical: the discourse of a subject is always an external comment on the subject itself.

I then briefly elaborate on part of my methodological approach and my findings on a number of discourses built around Exarcheia, before proceeding to reflect on my own position within this exercise. Throughout my research, and the fieldwork I conducted between 2010 and 2011 in particular, I have tried to deal with this quintessential question of distance to the best of my ability. Originally I conceived this to mean getting as close to the research subject as possible, thereby addressing what I considered to be common pitfalls of its public discourse. And yet this exercise opened up an array of new questions in return.

### **Exarcheia from Afar: A Neighbourhood in the Greek and European Political Context**

In its post-dictatorial times, Greece has seen riots of exceptional frequency for a country that is a long-lasting member of the E.U. and one that had enjoyed – until recent years at least – relatively high levels of prosperity. National and international media have portrayed the Athens neighbourhood of Exarcheia as one concentrating the majority of these riots. In the coverage of the events of December 2008, for example, Exarcheia was described as anything from a 'volatile district' (Reuters, 8.12.2008<sup>3</sup>) to an area that 'anarchists regard as their fortress' (BBC News, 7.12.2008<sup>2</sup>), 'Athens' answer to Harlem' (The Observer, 14.12.2008<sup>3</sup>) and even a 'ghetto' (The Observer, 22.02.2008<sup>4</sup>).

If the media-portrayed concentration of riots in Exarcheia were true, it would also be an extraordinary one given the area's size. With approximately 22,000 residents, this densely populated<sup>5</sup> neighbourhood accounts for just 0.6 percent of the city's total of over 3.5 million,<sup>6</sup> while its land size of 0.9 km<sup>2</sup> equals just 0.21 percent of Athens overall.<sup>7</sup>

The city's two main universities, the Athens Polytechnic and the University of Athens, were based in the area until the relocation of the majority of their facilities to the suburb of Zografou during the 1980s. The anti-dictatorial student uprising of November 1973 took place in Exarcheia. Students confronted military forces at the gates of the Athens Polytechnic and counted many dead in a protest that became a landmark and is now officially commemorated by the post-dictatorial Greek State. Some of the annual commemoration protests of the uprising have turned into fresh riots themselves (including in the years 1974, 1991 and 1995). Riots have also erupted in the neighbourhood after killings by police took place there (1985, 2008) and during police operations that led to mass and often violent arrests. The largest such operation was the so-called 'Operation Virtue', which lasted between October 1984 and May 1986. The operation saw hundreds of arrests in what the police had described at the time as an attempt to 'cleanse'<sup>8</sup> the neighbourhood of undesired populations.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, smaller-scale and mostly spontaneous riots occurred frequently during and following the summer of 2004. The highly visible round-the-clock riot police presence established in Exarcheia at the time (ahead of the 2004 Olympics) has remained since, and skirmishes between police and groups of youths by now count in the hundreds.<sup>20</sup>

The often-encountered media representation of Exarcheia would have many believe that this is an explosive neighbourhood in an otherwise sleepy city, or country even. It is almost too easy to forget that this the same country whose recent history includes not only a dictatorship (1967 – 1974) but a civil war as well (1946 – 1949) and therefore at least two generations exist in the country's population that have experience of war and famine, dictatorship and exile.

One would only expect the country's turbulent recent political past to shine through the present. Indeed, when the Greek state joined the European Union in the year 1981, it carried within it a vivid political past of extreme tension and division – but one that was gradually subdued by the discourse of progress, Europeanisation and prosperity that the EU integration brought with it. Entry to the European Union had become Greece's first post-dictatorial 'national' goal, largely displacing discussion of internal social or political divisions in the name of this newly-found national purpose and unity.

The year 1981 is a key moment in our story so far. On the national level, political discourse was quieting down and becoming more homogeneous. But on the ground, its articulation would start moving in quite an opposite direction. This was the same year that saw the introduction of the so-called Academic Asylum Law (henceforth AAL). Officially known as Law 1268/1982 of the Greek state, the AAL officially prevented police and army from entering academic campuses, in the name of academic freedom. The law was founded on the premise of public memory of the bloody events of 17 November, 1973 and the strong sentiment against their possible repetition: on that night, military force stormed the Athens Polytechnic, quelling the anti-dictatorial protest that was taking place inside and assassinating scores of protesting students.

In one sense, then, the AAL should be read as a demarcation of the spatial limits allowed to the articulation of dissent allowed in the context of national unity formed in a post-dictatorial country in the process of European integration. And what about Exarcheia, the neighbourhood bordering and hosting so many key university spaces? During the time of the introduction of the AAL, a major turn in public discourse saw the neighbourhood come into the broader picture. For the first time, articles appeared that were concerned with the 'Exarcheia issue' – or, as it

was often described, the 'Exarcheia problem'. Published between the years 1981 – 1982 in the national press, this series of articles described the alleged appearance of new, so-called 'tribes' (youth cultures) of people that frequented the neighbourhood of Exarcheia and its nearby areas, including of course the Athens Polytechnic itself – loitering, causing havoc on an everyday level and occasionally rioting against the police. Nicknamed anything from 'Sioux', 'Metropolitan Indians', to simply 'the punks' these youths of Exarcheia were quickly put under the national spotlight as a phenomenon that was new, significant and worrying – but quite tellingly, in no case were they treated as something directly political.

What I was quickly faced with was a set of questions that could potentially worry any riot researcher. 'Is a riot a political act?', is the question we find ourselves confronted with the most. But what about 'can the social context of a riot determine whether it holds a political nature?' Or even, 'is the portrayal of a riot a political act?' In trying to understand what has happening in this small patch of land in the messy swarm that is Athens's map, I found myself embarking on a perhaps unorthodox, but I want to show, necessary exercise. I conducted both a content analysis and a subsequent discourse analysis of major Greek media articles on Exarcheia. I will briefly discuss the results of these exercises here, but my intention is not to produce a merely technical report of any kind. What I want to share is my argument that a discourse that does not try to approach the events in order to interpret them is not neutral. On the contrary – the distance allowed by media discourse (the safety of representation) is one that can on the one hand banish purely political elements to be found in these acts, and on the other, it can act as a type of a self-fulfilling prophecy, coming to shape the neighbourhood itself.

This notion, that the discourse on a given place can shape its structure, is not new: in his much acclaimed *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch (1960) explained how the accumulated perceptions of a city by planners can have this precise effect, eventually shaping the structure of the city to fit their perception. Yet analyses of such perceptions and perspectives on cities tend to focus on the experts or the power-holders: there is a tendency to assume that only the discourse of certain groups with access to power (growth coalitions, entrepreneurial communities and so on) will be potentially constitutive of a place. This follows on the heels of the critique of discourse as constitutive, perhaps most famously argued in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Yet the discourse analysis that I conducted for my research purposefully avoided focusing on the discourse of the power-holders within, or those with an immediate interest in Exarcheia, such as city planners or local politicians. The national media discourse was chosen as the most appropriate, not least because they can show how such discourses potentially act on two different levels: on the one hand,

I examined the discourses on Exarcheia and how these described activities on the ground in the neighbourhood (including acts of violence, its policing and attempted gentrification / regeneration) and then, how they may have acted as a metaphor for much wider social and political processes and transitions.

### Reading the Writing about Exarcheia

The process of analysing the Exarcheia media discourse included identifying, examining and interpreting a selection of articles in three Greek national circulation newspapers, *Eleftherotypia* (Freedom of Press), *To Vima* (The Tribune) and *Ta Nea* (The News). The three newspapers were chosen with the aim of covering as wide a political spectrum as possible, since they are considered to have a moderate Left, moderate Right and centrist political inclination respectively. The archive of each of the newspapers were searched for coverage on Exarcheia during the periods 1981 – 1985 (period A) and 2001 – 2005 (period B). The two periods were chosen in order to include the build-up and the aftermath of two events that placed Exarcheia in the national spotlight. It was envisaged the two allowed space for comparison, given that period A saw mounting social tension that included instances of rioting, while period B also saw mounting tension in the neighbourhood that nevertheless did not escalate in a similar way.

The researched period spans ten years or 3,640 days. During this time the three newspapers issued a combined total of 10,920 issues, containing an average of 70 articles per issue. Out of

this article population an initial pool of 317 articles was drawn which included the key words 'Exarcheia' (Εξάρχεια), 'Exarchiot' (Εξαρχιώτης-Εξαρχιώτισσα, lit. the resident of Exarcheia) and any of their main linguistic variations — 'Exarcheion', 'Exarcheiotikos' and 'Exarcheiotiki' (Εξαρχείων, Εξαρχιώτικος, Εξαρχιώτικη, all literally of *Exarcheia*).

Of this initial article pool, 89 articles were excluded as irrelevant (advertisements, classifieds, etc.) and another 120 were excluded as they referred to the neighbourhood in passing only (e.g. news items strictly related to one of the academic institutions in the neighbourhood, announcements and reviews of cultural events, obituaries, etc.) This left an article total of 108, distributed unequally between period A (73 articles) and period B (35 articles).

As an initial content analysis attempt, an array of keywords were identified that were considered to indicate either a positive, neutral or negative coverage of the area and events taking place within it. The grouping of these keywords is shown in Table 1. Keywords denoting negative media coverage include 'violence' (with its derivatives: in Greek, βία-violence, βίαιος, βίαια-violent), 'crime' (έγκλημα), 'chaos' (χάος), 'anarchy' (αναρχία), 'hoodie-wearers' (κουκουλοφόροι), 'drug-dealing' / 'drug-dealers' (ναρκεμπόριο/ ναρκέμποροι). Keywords denoting a positive coverage included 'bloom' (άνθιση) 'pedestrianisation' (πεζοδρόμηση), 'gentrification' (ανάπλαση) and in some cases, 'policing' ('αστυνομευση') or 'raid' (εισβολή).

#### Positive connotation

Pedestrianisation  
Blossoming  
Intellectual  
Ideas  
Gentrification  
Policing  
Neighbourhood

#### Neutral connotation

Neighbourhood  
Gentrification  
Policing  
Heroin / heroin use  
'Broom' (for police operations)

#### Negative Connotation

Molotov  
Violence  
Crime  
Chaos  
Anarchy  
Hoodie-wearers  
Drug-dealing / drug dealers

**Table 1:** Select key-words indicating positive / negative coverage of Exarcheia and events taking place in the area.

However, in the process of identifying adequate key words, a number of words were initially chosen and then eventually dropped from the selection as they did not indicate either positive nor negative coverage of the area per se including, for example, 'gentrification', 'heroin use', 'policing' and 'neighbourhood'.

The discourse analysis exercise I then conducted revealed at least three clear discursive themes, on *violence*, on a type of *occupation* and overall separation / exclusion of the area from the urban core, and finally, a discourse on the policing of the area as a form of *cleaning / sanitation* operation. Why would such discursive themes even matter? We only have to look at the first such theme, that of violence, for an answer: this theme saw a rapid upsurge both in the lead-up to, and the aftermath of mass violent events such as riots – which is to be expected. As explained by Low (2001) this 'discourse on fear of violence' is expected to 'legitimate and rationalize class-based exclusion strategies and residential segregation' (Low 2001:45). This would therefore lead to the discourse calling for more policing, in the sense portrayed in the third discursive theme, that of the policing of the area as a form of *cleaning / sanitation*. In other words, discourse can act both as an instigator, a catalyst and a harbinger for the materialisation of social events that can shape the entire structure of a place in return.

Choosing to focus on discourses on the neighbourhood from such a distance has also offered an opportunity to shift perspective, and to essentially read certain processes within Exarcheia as a metaphor for much wider social and political transitions. Looking at the neighbourhood, with all its contradictions, its struggles, the attempts at its gentrification, the outbursts of violence in response – all can be read as a way of describing changes that were occurring on the national level. Exarcheia can therefore be seen as a type of discourse in itself. Think of the introduction of the discourse on Exarcheia as a violent neighbourhood in a few years in the early 80s, as discussed earlier. What happened in those few years? Did Exarcheia truly turn from picturesque neighbourhood to an 'anomie ghetto' in such a short period? There exists no substantial evidence that would prove the rise of crime or anti-social behaviour to any extent that could justify the turnaround of public discourse on Exarcheia. And so I would like to offer another explanation of this turnaround, one that is partially based on the reading the urban theorist Robert Beauregard offers for the discourse of 'urban decline' that seems to have dominated the representation of industrial and post-industrial US cities for some time.

In his 1993 book, *Voices of Decline*, Beauregard provides an excellent example of discourse analysis – some analysis that as pointed out by Loretta Lees (2004), is outstandingly lacking within urban studies. The few notable exceptions (Amin et al.: 2000;

McCann 2004; Mitchell 1996 and Rutheiser 1996) mostly prove the rule. Coming to fill this gap in *Voices of Decline* Beauregard shows how 'urban decline' has been used as a euphemism that brings back through the back door the issues of race, of class and of national decline in the United States's national agenda. The suburb versus the urban core discussion, for example, is also one that represents the hidden discussion of race and class. In other words the discourse on 'urban decline' conveniently acts as a metaphor, or, better even, as a euphemism to report on developments that can no longer be reported as explicitly as they would have in the past. Hence the white middle-class flight to the suburbs is read through the ostensibly more 'neutral' reading of a generic population shift away from the core. It is not black populations then moving to the urban core, it is this urban core being in 'decline' – and so on.

There are some revealing parallels that can be drawn with the Exarcheia case, although with some limitations. The first and most important limitation is that Greece, as a country that never quite fully went through the process of US or western European levels of industrialisation, never developed as strong a class stratification in return. In addition, prior to welcoming its first wave of mass migration (in the early 1990s, primarily from Albania and other neighbouring countries), Greece was also – relatively speaking, of course – one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries in western Europe. But, as it was pointed out earlier, what the country has aplenty is a rich past of political conflict: up to the present day, the memories of the civil war and the dictatorship are still alive. This history of political tension and division could not be tucked away overnight once the discourse of progress and Europeanisation appeared in the horizon, in the early 80s. It is therefore possible, and this is my concluding hypothesis here, that the Exarcheia discourse (that is, the discourse of crime, of riot and disorder) has been used as another euphemism, a smokescreen for the political divisions that could still run rife on the ground. Some political divisions that had to be thrown out of public discourse, incompatible as they were to the country's post-dictatorial, EU-friendly image of national unity, development and prosperity.

### Exarcheia from Below — or, the Distance of the Researcher

A strong incentive driving my research from the start was the misrepresentation of Exarcheia that I observed in Greece's public discourse and its national media in particular. As someone who carries both the experiences of living in the neighbourhood but also following the events there from afar for long periods of time, I felt there was a disparity between the two; a gap that needed to be bridged. And yet, in the course of my research I came to realise there is something much more crucial lurking

than a disparity between the lived experience of Exarcheia and its mediatic representation. The absence of what I understand to be some of the neighbourhood's elements from public discourse has the power, as shown via Beauregard's metaphor, to conceal the political tension and struggles that are still rife on the ground. By reading the history of Exarcheia it is then possible to trace many of the contemporary Greek history's hidden tensions and muted struggles. In inverse fashion to Beauregard's examples, then, reading Exarcheia can become a useful metaphor and a tool for reading the Greek state's contemporary political history as a whole.

For the above reasons I quickly realised that an ethnography of Exarcheia, a detailed description of the area's everyday tensions, its struggles and its contradictions, could reveal some invaluable information about the country's recent transformations. Yet this potentially rewarding exercise would not come without serious lingering threats. In the past year – while conducting fieldwork – I have been faced with questions of both practicality and morality while researching urban riots in Exarcheia. Here I briefly outline these obstacles in the form of questions around researching urban riots, before concluding with the possible solutions I try to work on and with some suggestions on why this research is of crucial importance.

First, there have been questions of practicality. During fieldwork it was extremely difficult to approach people who would have been directly involved in a 'riot' or other form of violent mass action and who would be willing to step forward and talk about it – for the most obvious of reasons, that is, the fear of the repercussions and retaliation from the police in particular. Living in the area for a considerable amount of time (over nine months at the time of writing) has allowed me to build everyday relationships of trust with some of the people living there and to enter into discussions surrounding the sensitive issue of riot participation. But at the same time, when interviewing and questioning other informants (older residents, business owners, local authorities and the police) I was also often confronted with refusal to get anywhere meaningfully deep into the topic. Sometimes the conversation was deemed impossible. In other cases individuals agreed to speak under the veil of anonymity, convinced of my relatively neutral status as an academic researcher based in an overseas institution. My tactics in dealing with these two groups of potential informants have been different and yet I believe some similar issues of morality and ethics arise.

The ethical questions I had to deal with do not to some extent diverge from the questions many ethnographic researchers pose to themselves, as articulated for example in Cassell (1980). Nevertheless I did not personally experience the 'comparatively equal basis' (1980: 31) Cassell claims the observers and the

observed often participate in: the subject matter of my research and the confidence shown to me by some of my interviewees has placed an enormous burden of responsibility regarding the nature of the information I have access to and the possible ways in which to manage and interpret it.

Inevitably, the question of handling this sensitive information once again leads back to the question of distance: how far or how close should one stand to their research subject? How far or how close should they zoom and focus when researching urban riots?

### **Researching Urban Riots – or, Tackling the Discourse Distance**

Throughout this chapter I have tried to grapple the question of distance when researching urban riots – distance that can take either chronological or geographical form. In the case of Exarcheia, Athens, there seem to be plenty comments, analyses, and theses on the seminal uprising of the Athens Polytechnic in 1973, for example. But when turning to the unrest of December 2008, only a few yards away from the Polytechnic, one is faced with an awkward silence at best and an outright dismissal of the events at worst. Similarly, commentators outside Exarcheia have often been quick to dismiss events in the neighbourhood and often even the neighbourhood itself as a centre of anomie and lawlessness, a de facto apolitical and anti-social evil lying at the heart of Athens.

In the course of researching Exarcheia I have tried to address the question of distance by effectively researching the area from a number of different positions: I research violent action both past (1985), and present (2001 – 2004, 2008 – present). I have conducted fieldwork while living in the heart of the neighbourhood and I continued my research from afar (since autumn 2011). The questions regarding distance that I have grappled with during my research, as articulated in the previous pages, are far from theoretical.

My questions swirl around distance and perspective. First, and I believe this is relevant to riot research more widely, we cannot answer the question of whether a riot is 'political' or not without examining its wider context first – quite literally, putting riots in perspective, asking what political context they appear within. Second, and this is not unrelated to the first, is the question of distance – how far, or how close should the researcher stand to their riot subject. Answers to these questions might only be offered by shifting distances and perspectives; and the results of this exercise can be extremely rewarding: ethnographic research in Exarcheia revealed the richness of the area's social, cultural and political past. At the same time however, it also revealed that the act of rioting – partaking in mass acts of violence – was far



less incomprehensible than the dominant media discourse would allow us to think.

My reading of the Exarcheia discourses began by looking at how the neighbourhood was read from afar, before taking more of a ground-up take – in other words, it examined the effects of the Exarcheia discourse from two different yet complementary perspectives. First from ‘above’, from its mediatic representation. Here, it conceptualised the Exarcheia discourse from a shifted, national-level perspective and placed this discourse within the national political setting, offering a reading of it as a euphemism for the description of social and political processes that were largely repressed in two distinct historical periods: the early 1980s (in the midst of the Europeanisation dream) and the run-up to 2004 (the year of the Athens Olympics). The second perspective on Exarcheia was from the ground, from the everyday struggles, contradictions and challenges faced by people living in the neighbourhood – and perhaps even more so, the contradictions and challenges faced when attempting ethnographic research with them.

This chapter therefore comprised an exercise in understanding discourse and perspective by focusing on the Exarcheia case. ‘Zooming in’ and ‘zooming out’ of the neighbourhood, is not unlike changing our perspective of a subject that remains locked in the viewfinder of our photographic lens – but in both cases keeping our focus on it. Throughout the research, Exarcheia and its concentration of riots remained at the centre. But this tweaking of distance and perspective opens up an array of questions riot literature must grapple with. The discourse on riots is not ‘neutral’; it can shape the areas it concerns itself with. In return, the occurrence of riots is neither ‘neutral’ or ‘apolitical’ – reading through their political messages can often be a question of ever so slightly tilting our lens.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 'Years of riots, clashes with police in Greece', <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUKTRE4B61DW20081208>.

<sup>2</sup> 'Greek police shooting sparks riot', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7769710.stm>.

<sup>3</sup> Helena Smith 'In Athens, middle-class rioters are buying rocks. This chaos isn't over' <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/14/greece-riots-youth-poverty-comment>.

<sup>4</sup> 'Children of the Revolution' <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/22/civil-unrest-athens>.

<sup>5</sup> Exarcheia has a recorded population density of 24,500 residents/km<sup>2</sup>, according to the country's 2001 Census. As a comparative measure, Athens's Metropolitan Region density according to the same census was approximately 7,600 residents/km<sup>2</sup>, while Greater London's population density for 2007 was 4,863 residents/km<sup>2</sup>, according to the UK Office for National Statistics.

<sup>6</sup> According to the 2001 Census of the National Statistical Service of Greece.

<sup>7</sup> Exarcheia has a size of 0.9 km<sup>2</sup>; the city of Athens spans over approximately 412 km<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> The word 'cleanse' was used in police press releases during the operation: newspaper 'Eleftherotypia', <http://www.iospress.gr/ios2007/ios20070513.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> For a time-line of the operation, the riots that came as a response and the mass regeneration plan that succeeded both.

<sup>10</sup> Documentation of such smaller-scale riots is scarce and will for this reason comprise part of the project's background research. However, an article in the Athens daily *Eleftherotypia* on 20 January 2007 claimed at least six such incidents occurred in Exarcheia between May and June 2005 alone, [http://archive.enet.gr/online/online\\_text/c=112,dt=20.01.2007](http://archive.enet.gr/online/online_text/c=112,dt=20.01.2007).



