



What is the city?

The authors of the Bible were not mistaken in their forever wary attitude towards cities and their founders. When Cain breaks with his family circle, “he sets about building a city”. And it is in cities where the challenges arise (Babel, Sodom) which provoke the anger of Yahwe. Because cities, to put it in the words of Lévi-Strauss, are “the humane thing par excellence”. And, as we well know, those who speak in the name of the gods always fear the things of men. Power takes its name in the city. And only the thing which has a name can be a founder. Maybe for this reason, in spite of its wariness, the Bible had to confront the celestial city with the earthly city: Jerusalem, as a place of salvation. When “humane things” acquire autonomy (culture distances itself from nature) the disenchantment of the world begins. The contemporary city represents the culmination of the process of disenchantment which Weber called “modernity”.

This modern city has been the object of Jean Dethier and Alain Guiheux’s project. Their selection of works is highly illustrative of the limitations of every process of disenchantment, in a century which—like Yahwe—has so often chosen to destroy or close off the city which has shown resistance.

1. As the modern city puts an end to the external and unitary legitimisations of the political community, it builds its own internal and, if I may say so, technocratic and ideological prejudices. The dream of the perfect, rational city engenders monsters.
2. The physical imprint the process of rationalisation leaves on the city reminds it of its limitations. Every time we try to forget that all things are not possible it embarks on a process of destruction. And all too often, attempts have been made to tear out the memory as it represents an obstacle to the dream of a new city for a new man. The memory is scattered across the city, leaving evidence that there can be no break without the continuation of a process, because, as Aristotle saw, every city is a fact of nature insofar as it is the end of any community.
3. During the construction of the modern society it is clearly shown, more than ever, that utopia is on the side of the person who aspires to power. Politicians and architects are the agents of utopia in the modern city.

The modern, open city puts an end to the non-philosophical justification—in other words, theological, religious, ethnic, etc.—of the community. The open city not only has nothing to do with unity, the country and the power of the king, but it could even be subversive with regard to these units and these powers because it breaks the transcendental and naturalistic frameworks of adherence to the political community. And in this regard, the modern city is facing a problem which Greece also faced: to objectivise the question of the gods in order to organise freely the conventional order of people. In order to do so, philosophy put the myth in its place: the myth isn’t the fundamental thing, the myth is strictly conventional, an accepted convention in everyone’s interests once the fact that the world isn’t delighted has been established.



However, the modern city comes up against one difficulty: the idea of rationality and transparency has led some people to believe that the city was perfectly malleable, before considering what this form of community was; a community already left to the free will of men. And it was enough to build an idea of the city in order to attain the dream of the perfect city. The dreams of the modern, rational city have peopled cities and suburbs with monsters. And often they have gone hand in hand with the dream of absolute power, tragically experienced on a large scale throughout this century. Few cities express this alliance so cruelly and with the sarcasm with which reality adapts to perfection, as Dessau, where the modern Bauhaus myth is seen surrounded by its offspring, the monstrous matchbox constructions (the daughters of that folly) destined to accommodate the privileged Stalinist working class. This century has destroyed cities through bloodshed and fire, but also through planning, prohibition and the absurd. The gods, the powerful, tend to hate everything which has its own meaning.

The urban planner has often believed that the city was a mere technical problem and that he was the professional. There was but a short step between the studio project and the reality. And this step was called power. Hence the alliance between the urban planner and the leader. An alliance which has run the full gamut of moments and circumstances which have characterised modernity and, in which, depending on the case, the urban planner has ruled over the political or vice-versa. The result has been uneven, according to the strength of the city. Encouraging results have been achieved in those cases when we have been able to hear opinion. Monsters have been engendered in those places where opinion has no means of expression. This confirms that the modern city can only achieve the true disenchantment of the world within the framework of an open society.

However, in any case, two important things are confirmed:

1. The city isn't just an urbanistic or political concept. Treating it as such amounts to a reduction which ends up provoking conflict or disaster. The urban or political planner who looks at the city like a plan on which he has to intervene, ends up destroying it or hating it when he comes up against harsh reality. And we have seen this in the urbanistic sphere: with hugely simplifying proposals concerning the unnecessary destruction of memory. And we have seen this, and continue to do so, with the political: the hatred of the city insofar as it represents an obstacle to the liquidation of memory, as is the case of Dubrovnik or Sarajevo. Sarajevo symbolises the hatred of the open and plural city by those who wish to pick up the thread of the homogenous and closed society. In other words, the hatred of the true city; Aristotle already affirmed that unity isn't the objective of the city because this is pluralism.

2. The city is a concern of men and, therefore, can never be a strictly rational construction. The city is, at one and the same time, organised memory (to quote Hannah Arendt) and conventional construction, nature and culture, past and future. The century's artists have often had to remember that they can't reach every hidden corner of the city with reason alone. The rational city is an absurd notion, just like Ballard's skyscrapers in which hatred and revenge end up devouring the inhabitants of the perfectly planned, perfect construction. And the exhibition shows that it was the artists who have had to raise the alarm time and time again. Change is certainly something characteristic of the city. However, this change has a history, protagonists and a web of individual desires and projects. All too often, the facts have proved Simmel right. He said that purely rational man is indifferent to everything which is strictly individual. And everything which is strictly individual is part of the web of the city.



I wish to use all the above information to express a very simple idea which strikes me through this approach to the modern city which is *Urban Visions*. A philosophical concept of the city is required to prevent it from being removed by the urban planners and politicians. The city is something more than a space to be manipulated by power; it is something more than the skilful handling and placing of stones and is something more than this fragmentary place of the artists' experience. It is all these things and much more, because, as Aristotle said, the city—the community—is the precursor of the family and of each of us taken individually, although it is the sum of ourselves taken individually which has built it.

The history of the modern city through its artists and architects, as presented by *Urban Visions*, is the history of a dialogue, often at cross-purposes, between the artists, who reveal the contradictions of the modern city and point out those trees which the forest of the perfect rational city may make us forget, and the urban planners, ready to take the city as a space for experimentation and conquest in order to mould it in their own guise. It is at the points of contact between these two attitudes (the imagination and experience of the artist and the invention and representation of the urban planner) where the complex concept of the city emerges. It sounds trite to say that cities are their men. It is trite and untrue, because cities are also their streets and their memory and institutions. And many more things besides. Let's leave it to the poet—in this case Borges—to say it: the city is also "the other street, the street I never set foot in, it is the secret centre of the housing blocks, the backyards, it is what the façades conceal, it is my enemy, if I have one, it is the person who does not like my verses (I dislike them too), it is the modest book shop, now forgotten, which we may have once entered, it is the refrain of a whistled *milonga* which we do not recognise and which touches us, it is what has been lost, and what will be, it is the subsequent, the alien, the lateral, the district which is neither yours nor mine, it is what we ignore and what we want".

Politics and urban planning have been influenced by the ideologies which have given power control of space and the location of people. Create a suitable environment and you will have a governable society. However, precisely, if the open city, as a place of change and disenchantment of the world, has any meaning, it is to prevent this dull dominion from triumphing. Because it is the plurality factor which distinguishes the modern city from the other forms of institutionalisation of the political community which are always devised in terms of a dominant factor (state, nation, closed city), and always create an exclusion factor (of foreignness). Let us view the exhibition and ask the question: What is the city? And we will see that the city continues. And perhaps we will understand that it is necessary to fight against the permanent attempts to close it.