

“Insecure” cities, urban shielding and urbanistic simulated urban planning.

Social fragmentation, lack of communication and phobias and the cause and effect of modern urban planning

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Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation. Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing. Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating? It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined. A world of fear and treachery is torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as it refines itself. Progress in our world will be progress towards more pain. The old civilizations claimed that they were founded on love or justice. Ours is founded upon hatred. In our world there will be no emotions except fear, rage, triumph, and self-abasement. Everything else we shall destroy, everything. Already we are breaking down the habits of thought which have survived from before the Revolution. We have cut the links between child and parent, and between man and man, and between man and woman. No one dares trust a wife or a child or a friend any longer.

George Orwell. 1984

City, neo-liberalism and “Risk Society”.

The growth and development of cities has been, throughout history, the territorial expression of the needs and way of life of urban society.

Today, in the geographical context of our so-called civilized world, urban and suburban growth is the territorial projection of the ways of life of a society set up under the oppression of neo-liberalism. A socio-economic doctrine focussed, on the one hand, on the satisfaction of economic and market motivation and interest, and, on the other, on maintaining and increasing the privileges of the powerful elite at the expense of depleting natural resources and the progressive dismantling of the protection offered by a the system to the needs of a whole society, which is increasingly structureless, individualistic and lacking in collective or class awareness. As a result of neo-liberalism, and more so in its current phase which has become known as globalization, our eminently urban (⁵) society is exposed to a multitude of uncertainties and threats which plunge us into what Ulrich Beck has defined as “Risk Society”. These risks have different solutions in each different case. On the one hand, in general when it is not convenient for the system for these risks to be clearly seen, or they are very vaguely evident and taken on as something inevitable and inherent to our way of life itself, they are minimized by the development of psycho-social mechanisms of self-complacence which lead us to have an irresponsible blind faith in the technique as an infallible neutralizing factor. On other occasions they are maintained or magnified in order to allow and abusive establishing of guidelines for social control serving the economic or political elite.

So, the urban reality is, in our geographical and historical context, the territorial projection of consumerism, squandering, inequality, phobias and an opulence-versus-misery factor that shape the capitalist way of life and its cult, exacerbated into individualism as a means of achieving success. A way of life that leads our cities into a permanent state of deconstruction of common or collective areas both on a physical and psycho-social level, and a fragmentation and progressive segregation of (non) urban areas. Our cities, by feeding all these neo-liberal habits, have ceased to be a social project and in the process we citizens, ever increasingly isolated, both physically and mentally, and more and more defenceless in the face of a physical, economic and political environment which is gradually growing more aggressive and less democratic. And as an aberrant reaction to the ineffectiveness, biased or not, of public powers to get around the situation, instead of constructing common gathering points via community initiatives, we opt for shuttering up our homes, neighbourhoods, cities and even out minds

⁵ While this article refers to the eminently urban society and territory of the so-called “civilised world”, it is no less true that the main global current day threats are applicable around the planet.

in an attempt to mitigate the fears that cause those threats that we perceive, almost always at an angle, in those surroundings.

The economic motive as the basis for urban segregation and social fragmentation. The role of the transport model and infrastructure in the fragmented, segregated and anti-democratic city of neo-liberalism.

One of the most relevant processes experienced in our cities in modern times is the consolidation of differentiated and isolated urban sectors, characterized by the predominant or exclusive and excluding role that they play.

However, the mono-functional vocation of the different areas that make up a sectorised city is not a new phenomenon. Its origins can be found in the profound transformation seen in our production methods and means of transport ⁽⁶⁾, with the advent and development of railways, as a result of the Industrial Revolution, which led, on one hand to a unprecedented growth of cities and, on the other hand, to the laying out of differentiated urban sectors. Industrial areas and working class neighbourhoods then begin to appear and grow in residential periurban areas meant for the upper classes trying to escape the congestion and the pollution of industrial capitals. With this sectorisation we begin to see the first symptoms of the inherent social fragmentation found in the development of segregated urban sectors.

However these factors of growth, fragmentation and segregation, and the suburban dispersion of cities, do not gather their real and unstoppable momentum until the first or second half of the twentieth century, depending on the area, with the consolidated use of the private car and the development of the road transport network. Within the framework of neo-liberalism, this “revolution” of the transport model constitutes an ideal catalyst for the extension and dispersion of cities and for an unprecedented isolation and physical fragmentation and segregation, not only of urban functions into sectors, but also of different, of clearly differentiated residential areas. This division into different isolated residential areas which are generally also occupied by differentiated communities, formed by individuals with similar characteristics, is an ideal “breeding ground” for an increase in and a consolidation of phenomena of fragmentation, segregation and lack of social communication.

This social segregation may be due to any number of apparent reasons, such as racist or religious issues, but its prime origin is almost always found in economic interest ⁽⁷⁾. So, for example, in the “black” ghettos poor only blacks live. And sometimes poor white people. The rich blacks, however, live in sumptuous mansions on luxury estates or in residential areas of key urban centres. And there, rather than being discriminated against, they are envied.

Furthermore, the physical segregation and fragmentation of space and the socio-economic reflection of this mark enormous differences in terms of the chances each segregated social group has of accessing the various elements of the (non) urban system, the transport model playing once more a dominant role in this case. The transport model, being clearly incompatible with public and collective transport systems as a result of the territorial and urban model of the sprawling city and being based, consequently almost exclusively on individual and private methods of transport this is a classist, excluding and exclusivist model, non-democratic and closed. Those who are excluded, and the weaker social classes, who have little or no financial means of acquiring private transport discover that their mobility is considerable reduced, and subsequently so the accessibility to them of different urban sectors, areas and services.

In addition to this, in the urban areas occupied by these social classes, or in the immediate surroundings, certain basic services and facilities tend to be insufficient or non-existent. In the segregated and widespread city the relevant authorities do not usually have the financial capacity, nor, quite often, the political desire, required to make these services and facilities available and equally

⁶ Although perhaps in this regard an observation by Lewis Mumford should be taken more into account, in the sense that “the clock, not the steam engine, in the key invention for the modern industrial era”. This reflection leads me to wonder is perhaps the clock could be a significant factor in the attempt to understand the underlying motives that explain or make possible the current structure of the western urban world, as it allows us not only to compartmentalise the parts of “our” time that we dedicate to work, leisure or shopping, but also to calculate and “organise” the hours and minutes that we must waste each day in traffic jams in order to arrive on time at the different areas of a segregated city in which we carry out all these activities.

⁷ In Gattaca, the troubling film by Andrew Niccol, we are presented with a non-specified moment in the future, where racial discrimination has been overcome. On the ship Gattaca, only accessible to the “valid”, those who are genetically perfect, three main races live together in harmony. Racism has been overcome by a new form of discrimination: “eugenism” or discrimination for genetic reasons. However the control and handling of, and access to genetic material are not governed by political or social decisions or priorities, but by economic ones. In the Gattaca society, the richer you are, the more privileges you have and the better chances there are of control the destiny of the brood.

accessible to all citizens, almost always resulting in a discrimination of those areas where the residents have a lower level of income.

In this way a non-democratic (non) urban planning comes into being, if we consider that one of the ultimate aims of democracy should be for all citizens to have the opportunity to live in equal conditions.

Ransacking of Community Areas

Furthermore, the new dimension acquired by community areas, which in practice cease to be of a public nature, is an added factor which impedes social relationships, communication and involvement. Public communication points are substituted by new areas of thoroughfare such as high-speed transport routes or large retail centres where people are permanent slaves to speed, lack of communication and solitude which, paradoxically, emerge within the crowd. Social areas therefore become pathologically impoverished and are reduced to those (non) areas of thoroughfare or to specific circles of social interaction such as the work environment and finally, the family home, which becomes, with the help of mass media and new technology an almost exclusive window on to the great world on display, a showcase of a misleading (i) virtual reality.

Inhibition of social relationships, poverty and insecurity. The response to fear: private security, city patrols and fortification of urban spaces and scenes.

In this way an urban (in reality non-urban) society (weak on social relationships) is moulded, gripped by different phobias. Inequality generates poverty within the underprivileged and excluded, and this poverty, with its misleading, biased and aberrant association to violence within the imaginary community, grows into an ever increasingly patent and potent phobia stretching right across society from the most privileged upper classes to the working class. A classless, class society “united” against and due to a fear of outsiders.

Clearly neither poverty nor its psycho-social association with violence are exclusive to urban areas. However it is in urban areas, and in particular where the urban landscape has been “devoured”, denaturalized and taken over by the sprawling (non) city, where inequality is most in evidence and poverty is most visible and, therefore, where a growing sensation of insecurity among the people is most palpable and worrying, insecurity in the light of that, in principal false, poverty-violence ratio (⁸).

Fragmentation, individualism, lack of communication and, among many other factors, the consolidation of the home as the central and almost exclusive space for the “social” (non) relationships that characterized our urban lifestyle, give rise to the deterioration and destruction of the city both from an urbanistic and a sociological point of view. All this “isolates” the citizen, who “should”, either alone or in almost tribe-like packs and via police-style methods fed by fascist-type prejudices, face up to growing phobias, which are ploughed back into the system and to its methods of (lack of) social control, in the light of which satisfactory answers are unlikely to be found. In particular bearing in mind that the wide reach of the sprawling city requires considerable financial efforts in order to provide any type of service, including security. These financial difficulties are increased as a product of demagogic, neo-liberal policies which uphold the emaciation of the State and the reduction of tax payments within the framework of a less and less progressive fiscal system.

In this way, it is above the urban ruins perpetrated by the voracious carcinoma that is the sprawling city where the strongest and most “threatening” agoraphobia, xenophobia, and many other fears emerge, which for the most part sum up or are a result of a pathological fear of the “violence of poverty” and cause the adoption of false and dysfunctional solutions on an individual or, at the most, “tribal” level.

Out of a reaction to fear grows and develops a process of urban “shielding” which begins with residential estates inhabited by the upper social classes and which gradually becomes an extension of the (non) city as a whole, which sees many of its broken off pieces evolve, sociologically and typologically, into fortress-estates full of panic rooms and bunker-style houses in which people cut themselves off and try to protect themselves from “the others” and from their phobias, real or

⁸ The most correct construction or association of ideas would result from the combination of insecurity and violence. Poverty is really a product of violence (of the violence of neo-liberalism and of money, the cause of almost all other kinds of violence), or a means of justification used by those who use violence to their advantage. In addition in our cities we can see more and more frequently the phenomenon of “gratuitous” violence exerted by individuals and groups who do not come from the less favoured social classes or groups.

imagined, surrounding themselves by impenetrable walls and fencing and using sophisticated telematic devices and expensive private security services.

A dangerous process is thus put in motion via which part of the power granted by society to the State, or if preferred, stolen from society by the State in order to deal with insecurity and violence (by exercising a “legal” or regulated violence) becomes “privatized”, sometimes in a guided fashion, but on occasions in a dangerous context of irregularity and official permissiveness. And to top off the “official” process of violence, both in its direct and “indirect” form, be it open or latent, expressed in a variety of abusive methods for the (lack of) urban control, it is finally applied as an arbitrational and “preventative” measure (⁹).

The outcast and “different” are no longer merely “separated” for being considered “inferior”, but simply for being so, their become suspicious and the object of “preventative” violence, given the permissiveness or official complicity, without even the right to presumed innocence. And all phenomena of urban violence, regardless of the social background of the perpetrators (which tends to vary), end up being abstractly attributed to the underprivileged social classes (¹⁰).

In the meantime the most “authentic”, damaging and widespread threats and dangers are belittled or ignored and therefore the necessary measures for dealing with them are not taken or not demanded strongly enough. These threats, inherent in the very roots of the current model for urban living (which is at the same the best way to express the capitalist lifestyle) and in spite of being permanently present, are only very vaguely perceived. They are threats which, however, are difficult to solve without adopting radical measures which are unlikely to be allowed or taken on by those who benefit from the commercialist nature predominant in the (de)construction of our cities. The inhabitants of our urban world, therefore, do not feel the need to protect themselves against the atrocious violence exercised by the imposed mobility upon which the model is based (¹¹). This mobility is the cause of and unstoppable pandemonium of psychological disorders, such as stress, and of physical illnesses which reduce our quality of life, and which also lead to a great many more deaths and financial losses (in road accidents, traffic jams etc.) than can be attributed to the “violence” perpetrated by outcasts.

Yet the poverty-violence ratio, despite being borne of a treacherous psycho-social fabrication, finally becomes a reality eternally present in the underprivileged areas left in the wake of the spatial and social fragmentation of our cities. In these areas, which end up forming real ghettos and pools of poverty, part of the population, Esther individually or in organized gangs or urban “tribes”, normally run by various kinds of “mafias”, ends up making violence a way of life because they see no other alternative. This, which to a certain extent is the response of these “violent” groups to the latent violence of the system, installs a permanent fear, this time much more real than imaginary, between the whole population of these urban “ghettos”, which are frequently abandoned by official policies and become authentic “lawless cities”, rife with citizen “patrols” full of arbitrational “men of justice”. Perhaps this is the most aberrant, atrocious and dangerous type of shielding.

In this way the creation of shielded residential areas becomes general, areas occupied by the upper and middle classes, alongside “lawless” suburbs and slums. The immeasurable liking for creating such highly protected spaces in which to preserve the introverted lifestyle of a handful of people leads to “enclosed” and “protected” urban areas, the expression of the risk society and the fear that we are increasingly destined to endure.

Shielding of public community areas and simulated urban planning

⁹ The methods and means of the pre-crime units in “Minority Report”, which only seem to form part of a worrying future that may or may not be possible, are not really a mere probability but have already taken root and are growing in a infirm social fabric, addicted to the imposition of early sentences. Reality has already overtaken the political fiction of Phillip K. Dick y Spielberg. A reality which also brings us closer to many of the features of the society described by Orwell in “1984”, in the middle of the last century, where each individual watching over his neighbours to serve the system and its fallacies: “WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.”

¹⁰ Similar violent actions also often receive “moral” classifications which differ according to their protagonists. From simple pranks or at the most drunken loutishness that is to a certain extent forgivable, when carried out by middle or upper class individual, to dangerous atrocities which jeopardise the stability of our “exemplary” way of life when the protagonist is an immigrant or gypsy.

¹¹ In any case it should be recognised that in this sense we are also witness to an increasing process of “shielding” as offered to us by the automobile industry and its publicity. Cars are more and more powerful and “safe”, almost “war chariots”, which permit us to “play” with the danger of speed in the “best possible” conditions. This shielding process is also in this case greater or lesser according to level of income. A senior manager in a flashy 4x4 is always more likely to survive an accident than a travelling salesman driving a rickety old van loaded up with oranges.

This urban shielding does not only surround residential areas, but is also taking hold with impunity of other areas, theoretically for community use, in a process of exclusive "appropriation" of community spaces.

Thus, for example, parks and garden are "fitted" with enclosures, while other areas of the city (a good example of this are the urban settings of interest to tourists) "fortify" themselves by way of psychological barriers (such as a disproportionate police presence or panoptical CCTV devices) which in fact dissuade use of such areas by those "excluded" from the system, as a cumbersome and unjust mechanism in place to mitigate the phobias of the exclusive classes and to satisfy their insatiable and pathological "voyeuristic" appetite for the artificially established rules of the beauty of empty and lifeless urban scenery. Streets, squares, parks and gardens come to be considered as just another part of the urban scenery, losing their original essence as a setting for urban life and being designed merely according to the visual "perspective" on the architectural scenic space. Public areas are no longer space for living and social communication, and become artificial, merely scenic spaces for looking at, existing to serve private businesses, be it directly or indirectly.

As an overall consequence of a fear of violence and of the perception of the city as a shielded product intended for the "voyeuristic" market actions are taken in urban planning that could be classified as "argumentative" urban planning. Its setting is within the areas of the city that have become severely run down and which, depending on certain characteristics (of a historical, cultural or artistic nature, etc.) may be included in that "voyeuristic" market offering fat economic returns.

Faced with an inability or obstacles to the social and urban rehabilitation of these area, either because it is too expensive or due to the difficulty in establishing efficient methods of urban control over the insecurity factors present there, they are duly abandoned and more or less reliable "replicas" are created in the form of "theme parks", quite separate and independent from their original urban context. This is how simulated urban planning materializes. We are swindled by almost virtual replicas which improve on the original from a scenic point of view, at the expense of a cold and inert artificiality which leaves them empty, lifeless and without credibility. Orwellian simulations of urban settings, permanently guarded and with an artificial society to which we turn, gripped by our fears, in order to shut ourselves away "voluntarily" and become just another piece in a totalitarian mechanism under the false, sugar-coated illusion of being "alive" and safe, and free and happy (¹²).

By way of conclusion: keep hope alive

Our cities are a distorted mirror in which we look at ourselves without ever seeing our true essence. They are the product of a fear that destroys our social substance and our ability to find personal and group enrichment through communication and interaction with others, with "the others" and with those who are "different". They are an expression of the "divide and you will overcome" theory applied by the system in order to achieved its own savage strength. They are a gradual accumulation of physical and mental barriers which isolate us and which, instead of protecting us, make us progressively more vulnerable. They have ceased to be the territorial result of a social Project and have become a dantesque expression of inhumane and dehumanized superstructures which remove our personalities and create a structureless and self-exclusive society which perpetually rejects many of those people who, at a certain time in their lives, are among the weakest, and which is indifferent to the depletion of natural resources as a result of greed, or simply due to vanity and fear.

However, in this unfavourable light, it is worth wondering if there is still a chance we can reverse this disintegrating tendency found in urban and suburban areas and the societies living there. If possible, just as society and the system are eventually reflected in territorial structures, so that any alterations, profound or essential to a greater or lesser degree, could be a starting point for the development of processes of re-socialisation in our cities; so that, with a view to offering solutions, we can begin to deal with the real threats and to demythologize the unfounded fears which render us incapable of any group activity; so that we become aware of the imperious need within us to be free of the heavy chains impose on us a worship of speed and space of continuous movement. Quite an enigma which, despite its complexity, we have the right and the obligation to attempt to unravel.

I honestly relieve that if we persist in the task of demolishing the walls and barriers, even in those areas without communication and movement, which divide and make air-raided shelters of our cities, our neighbourhoods, our squares and our parks, we will be taking the first large step needed to

¹² Seaheaven Island in the Truman Show is no longer fiction. It is already becoming a reality or, in fact, and "virtuality" from whose limbo it is very difficult to escape.

start to liberate our minds, to make them more receptive, interactive and communicative, in this way opening up to ourselves a new opportunity to begin to consider and embark upon common projects of human development, sustainable development, in its four aspects - territorial, social, ecological and also economic (from the primacy of a democratic micro-economy to macro-economic "totalitarianism"), for our cities and suburbs.

It is clear that this hazardous affirmation runs the risk of being branded as irrident reformism which drops any direct action taken against the real root cause of the problems afflicting the land and urban society, and which accepts the system and superstructures that it claims to despise.

However I consider that, in the current context in which we citizens are splashing about, defenceless and weary in the swamp of savage globalization, one of the few urban barricades that we still use results from acting on a local level to try to have some effect at global level, in trying, without giving up the utopia as our goal on the horizon, to modify what we can in our immediate surroundings in order to pave the way for another world, at present almost impossible but which is possible on the long term.

The outline of this action on a local level in matters of urban and suburban territories is now much clearer: optimizing the use of land and controlling of urban growth, traffic calming and recovery of the role of communication in community areas, the creation and consolidation of multipurpose spaces, urban planning that reduces the need for transport and strengthens group transport to create an urban space which is altogether more accessible, and a long, long etcetera, which there is no need to list in the context of this article. In short, the construction of cities for life instead of the deconstruction of (non) cities for the speculative market, for which a leading role and active participation of the citizens is indispensable (in particular that of groups, such as children, women, and the elderly, who are "weaker" and more "under threat" from the current aggression of the urban way of life) in all the decision-making processes that affect the organization and development of the metropolis in which they live.

Rather than theorizing, therefore, the moment has come for taking action and, given that political decisions in whatever light they may be perceived, almost always come later than social demands, this is in the first instance, our responsibility, that of all citizens in general and, in particular that of those professionals working in urban planning and land regulation, in addition to social workers and organizations representing citizen affairs.

With everyone's effort for the good of all, ANOTHER CITY IS POSSIBLE! ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE!

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