

Introduction : The Paradoxes of "Being at Home in the City"

Marion Segaud

Plan Construction et Architecture

Arche de la Défense

92055 Paris la Défense Cédex 04

France

Being at home in the city is a provocative title containing a lovely paradox that is certainly to be found in all countries which, like post-war France, have caused the first great council housing developments to spring up on the peripheries of their cities. Welcomed with relief by the homeless populations, the proposed "at home" appeared to be the realisation of dreams, and the attainment of comfort and modernity for these housing applicants. Everything was there, at least provisionally. But very quickly it appeared that this "at home" feeling had been eroded from the outside by an invading feeling of not being "at home". The urban disease (the disease of high-density housing schemes, new town blues) was born and, for 30 years, those responsible for these constructions continued to chase this urban concept, which continually eluded them, yet became more pressing with each day.

One can piece together the different times of this sense of being *at home in the city*, because the history of cities has, since the birth of housing estates, been driven by fluctuations between what is in the private and what is in the public domain. Is it not one of the aspects of town planning to propose a set of rules (occasionally organised into doctrines) intended to mark the frontiers between the two spheres?

A whole series of privileged times in urban life is condensed into the expression *at home in the city*: a dual condensation because it contains both the image of the home, therefore of the private sphere, and the ease of urbanity, therefore of the public domain.

But everyone intuitively perceives what this is: Kafka, for example, seems more at home in his Prague environment than he is amidst his family. One can say as much of Restif de la Bretonne, whose exploits in the buildings of the Marais in Paris make us think that the streets of Paris were dear and familiar to him; Borgès (Fervour of Buenos Aires), Wenders (The Truth of Images) and so many others describe this paradox.

Urban history, which pieces together the life of the lower classes in large cities, also shows that they *inhabit* urban space.

But this feeling amongst the under-privileged of *being at home in the city* is present by obligation, through lack or decay of domestic space. Zola and Balzac retrace these powerful times.

Alberti was taken up by Le Corbusier who, quite naïvely, illustrates his urban scheme with striking images where the harmony of the shapes is supposed to stimulate individual serenity and social peace: Architecture or Revolution.

One could vie with one another to multiply the references: history is full of these good fairies, who, by waving their magic wands, transformed pumpkins into modern buildings overflowing with sociality.

Post-modernity invites us to be sensitive; this is what a colourful crayon might bring to the harsh materials of computer-aided planning. But is it necessary to see in this sensitivity the cure for the ills engendered by an iron age? It is essential not to confuse the sensitive and the social. There is an architectural use of the word sensitive - no doubt partly taken from W. Morris (and one knows to what point one is still in Utopia here). But this usage would not prompt us to mix the plastic effect and the benefit a community can expect from it, specifically with respect to feeling *at home in the city*.

"The ghetto of Chicago, with Maxwell Street and Jefferson Street as its centre, then acquired its own unique, colourful atmosphere which it owed to its tenement blocks and street markets, its kosher shops and basement "sweat shops", not forgetting its Christian missions". (Wirth, 1980, 238)

This is one of the rare allusions of L. Wirth to the physical aspect of the ghetto where Jews could actually feel at home in the city, because, if there is one aspect which is sensitive to the physical configuration of the ghetto, that aspect is still subordinate to social existence. What this means is that, when the sociologist talks about the environment, he is interested above all in the social aspect, while the architect leans more towards the sensitive aspect.

We would like to suggest some frontiers: the previous indications do not mean that utopia is banned from urban schemes; because it is true that, for decades, all French research into urban life has been directed towards the pursuit of the town. It seems that we are incessantly oscillating between the nostalgia of privileged times and mirages of the future.

If these times fascinate us, it is because *urbanity and civility* appear as the *concrete values* we would like to see develop.

Is it still necessary to think that these are *the products of civilisation* and that one cannot assign too grandiose a task to architecture when all social dynamics are being questioned.

Civility and urbanity are not sensitive effects susceptible to any mimesis. They are the results recorded *a posteriori* by the social sciences which, like Minerva's owl, only take flight at dusk.

In his domain, the architect can hope for less and for better:

- less, because his work will always be more insignificant than the civilisation which produces it;
- better, because (as P. Valéry stressed), since civilisations are mortal, his work can survive great disasters: are cities not, even when they have become the realm of ghosts, what civilisations pass on from millennium to millennium?

But that is another story which will be told at another EUROPEAN meeting on destroyed cities - which might be rebuilt.

The landscape of this session is punctuated with paradoxes and impossibilities: the workshops which accompany it put the finger on these multiple contradictions,

the results of the reciprocal porosity between the public and private domains, but also of the unique, specific and often irreconcilable ways, in which urban spaces are produced, arranged and inhabited by architects and citizens. These are, perhaps, all paradoxes which help to avoiding the feeling that, at all events, one is never *nowhere* in our cities.

This is what we have intentionally organised, a bit like a bric-à-brac sale, like something which is not very ordered, a sort of communal pot from which we hope architects will come to draw according to their desires to contribute towards the creation of a "home" within the city, accessible to everyone; but here I am still swimming in the midst of a complete paradox...

BIBLIOGRAPHY

WIRTH, L. (1980), "Le ghetto" (Presses universitaire de Grenoble, Grenoble).

Text translated by Sue Jenkins / Inter-Translations.