

The Risk of Illustration

If the visual keeps us from seeing (because it prefers that we decode, that we decipher, that we "read"), the image always challenges us to carry out a montage with others, with some other. Because in the image, as in democracy, there is "free play", unfinished pieces, gaps, openings.

Serge Daney

The city is dead. Long live the city

The city as handed down to us in history no longer exists. The medieval city consisted of a hierarchy of specific sites, holy and profane spaces, protected places and open ones, urban and rural conditions, life on heaven, life on earth. The modern city too that revolved around work, career and family is as good as dead. The present-day city is a network of information flows. This undefined metropolis consists of a diffuse field of events in active flux; these may be individual or collective, transnational or economic. They may involve service industries or the media. At first sight this city seems extremely chaotic, because we do not dispose of any concepts for grasping this highly complex urban order. What is more, urban datascares develop at such a pace that we are unable to grasp the apotheosis this data gives rise to. This causes many designers to cast doubt upon any form of future, whether radical or better. Typical of this generation is its fanatical, naive and irrational belief in dystopia. Social and demographic facts are seized on without question. Nothing is commonplace any longer. Even *Bladerunner* is passé... the new, the end of ideology is far more absurd and thus far more sensational as material to work with. This attitude conforms perfectly with a new cultural paradigm that seems to be all the rage today; the key words here are deconstruction, difference, the other or alterity. Difference rules. This attitude prevents us from imagining that people might have any deeper dreams that could crystallize to form a livable future. Never mind solidarity; difference is all we need.

The thing that is lacking in the language of alterity and deconstruction is any terminology for democratic interest. We are confronted with just how limited the space for citizenship is at the present juncture. Our society is becoming increasingly individualized and deregulated by international financial markets. We need to learn to look closely at this supermodernity so as to escape its hypnotic character and to assess at their true value the features that lie just under its surface. New concepts need to be devised if we are to operate within this second modernity in a fashion that is both democratic and new. The West Arc competition, which is looking for new collective spaces in Thessaloniki, is an important initiative to stimulate new fantasies and experiments to promote a better future for the people of the supermodern city we all live in today.

Much of our lives today are lived as though we were on film

Many public sites in the city are designed in such a way that differences between the different social groups won't be noticed. People's inner lives are

protected from any exposure to the other or to otherness. Richard Sennett argues that this means that people rely on their intimate surroundings to give them everything they do not find in a public life that has become increasingly alienated. Self-knowledge is treated today as a goal in itself and is no longer an instrument for discovering the world. This is why the public space in the contemporary city is as good as dead. One activity in particular - that of viewing TV - is a prime mover in this development. Along with other factors - automobiles for instance - TV alters both the dimension of time and the spatial organization of one's lives. The visual monopolizes the stage, driving the narrative dimension (the consequences of one's behaviour) into the background. The aesthetics of the visual is the dominant aesthetic and the viewer is seduced by the kaleidoscopic freedom of the excessive bombardment of images. One pays a price in depth of content. The meaning of the public realm is thus not only altered by the profession that designs it and by its economic foundation; it is also profoundly affected by the visual that to a great extent determines one's connection with the outside world. The visual gives rise to an aestheticization of both the public domain and of our everyday lives, ensuring, according to Müller and Dröge, that our individual and collective capacity for attention gets swamped by reality. The public space has become an interior. We no longer make any distinctions between who is talking with us. What's more there is no longer any "self" behind the outward form. It is these "decentered selves" that, according to Zukin, are only too pleased to be seduced by the "dreamscape of visual consumption". In this condition the processing of sensations or experiences has become virtually impossible. With the utmost intensity we enjoy aestheticized experiences of a fragmented perception and division of time. The media and the culture of consumption are the agents par excellence that create the visible form of an aesthetic concept of reality. Increased aestheticization is made possible by the mask of perfection (technology, design, planning, etc). Like a collage without any coherent spatial organization, these narratives penetrate our lives without our knowing it. The visual controls the popular ideologies of everyday life in a new manner. Transport networks link everything with everything else, without this leading to any authentic opportunities for neighbourliness. Even when different functions such as housing, entertainment, shopping and work are either juxtaposed or interwoven, there is no question of any interaction. In this urban space virtually every form of dialogue has been made impossible; everyone's gaze is turned inward.

The visual and the other

The pressure of modernization has resulted in the death of the collective space. This fact however is no cause for mourning. There is after all another city that, in its new guise, is something virtually all of us can celebrate, without as yet feeling obliged to investigate the hidden qualities and pitfalls of this urbanity. In short, we need new concepts if we are to design another sort of urban life. In my view, these concepts should also preserve a critical distance with regard to any future privatization and to the increasing stereotyping that is a product of the communications industry. We need concepts that will make us less dependent on the numerous conventions that prevail in the collective domain. Our aim should be to ensure that, between the logic of a total, complete uniformity and another of infinite differences,

the experience is available of a new form of democracy that acknowledges the multiplicity of social conditions and allows for their various modes of expression. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2) these modes of expression need to be recreated in a state of continual interchange; we will never arrive at a definitive point where everything is harmonious. And it is this democratic process that has to be given its say, particularly in the new collective space.(3) Every project of such a character must also display a social dimension - in other words, there is such a thing as political responsibility for the other; but one should reject the notion that this responsibility should lead to the abolition of contradictions or even inequalities. The point I am trying to make is that "difference" is essential because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the "other". This difference however should also be different in that it transcodes existing meaning, thus reappropriating it for a new emancipatory meaning.(4)

Towards a new strategy of urbanism

Many of the contributions to the West Arc competition explore the possibilities of a new form of collective everyday space. Distance and objectivity are shunned; instead the designers seek contact and interaction with some "other" in everyday reality. This architecture aims to coincide with reality; it is a plea for acting and experiencing. It is an architecture against architecture; it does not attack the profession; rather it is a response to the presence en masse of the "other" and of everyday reality - even at the risk of eating the other! These projects aim to liberate us from space in the sense of demarcation, dependency, central management, centralized order and control. They aspire to link up a number of places simultaneously, so as to escape from the suffocation of the enclosed. A world is opened up where the presence of the past in the present has ceased to mean anything. Research and analyze reality is their motto. Cooperate with the system, the market, the rules and the norm. Don't reject them; make them work for you. Discover the gaps and holes in our ever-changing condition. Be optimistic and don't be afraid of one-word answers; more is possible after all than your prejudices ever dreamed of.

If we were to make a map of our contemporary landscape, with its shopping malls, theme parks, garden allotments, discos, flyovers, eclectic housing developments segmented by freeways, overground subways, railways and power lines, the result would be a splendid cartographic patchwork. This traditional map however does not tell us anything about how life is lived in the carpet metropolis. This is why many plans have devised another set of instruments to get a grip on the realities of everyday life. Photomontages, datascape diagrams and videos are the means we use to explore this reality. The interest in everyday images and demographic data proves Benjamin's point that "The construction of life is at present in the power of facts far more than of convictions, ..." (5)

It is a paradoxical but undeniable fact that, while our visual culture provides us with a self-assured stereotype identity that makes us blind for the unexpected, it also has its positive, progressive side. It can offer us an image of another world that transcends the spectacle. A new sort of cartography emerges; the panoramic viewpoint no longer has a monopoly of truth.

I will now take a look at whether the images in a number of plans in the collective space are capable of generating a dialogic process of heterogeneity, difference and solidarity with the other. It should be a new space that is on familiar terms with our supermodernity, while also containing something incomparable. The different modes of analysis and presentation have prompted me to come up with a pragmatic classification into three groups of design: 1) "Just there" modernism; 2) Anecdotalizing and/or folklorizing a situation; 3) The other. I would like first however to preface my remarks by quoting the film critic, Serge Daney on the pragmatic distinction between the image and the visual: "Maybe we're heading towards societies which are better and better at reading (deciphering, decoding through reflexes of reading), but less and less able to see. So I use the word 'image' for that which still holds out against an experience of vision and of the 'visual'. The visual is the optical verification of a procedure of power (technological, political, advertising or military power). A procedure which calls for no other commentary than 'reception perfect, AOK'. Obviously the visual has to do with the optic nerve, but that doesn't make it an image. For me, the sine qua non of the image is alterity. Every culture does something with that more-or-less empty slot, the slot where 'there is an other'"(6)

"Just there" modernism(7)

In response to the impossibility of achieving a valid future, our present-day motorized flaneurs prefer to immerse themselves in the "just there" world of the everyday. It is a form of empirical activity that aims to banish every ideological prejudice. A universal ideology blinds us to the facts; first of all therefore one has to inquire what specific things reality has to offer. The new and the surprising are after all there for the taking. The motto here is "don't look. Find". And what one does find communicates excellently with what exists, since it issues from it. The aim of this approach of course is to discover that which we do not recognize as such, but which is fully present as a desire under the surface.

The planners of West Arc 3Fold, IA 121 have made a detailed diagnosis of the planning area with the use of technically remarkable videos and diagrams. Under the manifest reality we suddenly see the potential of that which is already present. For the lay person Thessaloniki is perhaps everywhere the same, but this analysis shows how rich this apparent chaos is if one only looks at it properly. In order to reveal this wealth of "facts of life", the designers have devised what they call a "stimulator". These Stimulators are also the stations on the railway. They form a sort of spatial intervention that adds a new specific public identity and programme to the urban tissue already existing. This "just there" modernism shows clearly that there are "others" out there in the domain of everyday life; once the shape of these Stimulators becomes clear however, the plan ceases to be interesting. Political correctness is a pitfall when the spatial intervention does not contain any vision of the tissue in question. Unfortunately this particular stimulator does not go any further than a *laissez-faire* tabula rasa system whose uses are flexible, even unclear. The photo montages of Thessalonikipolis, Cahier Synthetique, TH 009 also display a high degree of political correctness. Here too the aim is to achieve a certain density of the urban tissue, full of difference, but the sort of views it offers us from the railway are no better than what the average

advertisement means when it talks of meeting the other. It is a lifestyle architecture full of stereotypes. There is no open interaction here, only "business as usual", an aesthetically tailored costume. The folded landscape, or at any rate the "data section" in the proposal Global Urbanism, IZ 101 also reveals a "just there" approach. A variety of different programme parts are meshed or overlap in a truly impressive three-dimensional drawing. The "just there" data is given celebrity treatment in the computer, but apparently it did not inspire the designer to make an architectural design with a host of overlapping programme activities. In the end what we get is a modern suburb à la Ciam.

2) Anecdotalizing and/or folklorizing a situation

When a designer does not adopt a deliberate distance with regard to "just there" modernism, the risk is that the design will get bogged down at the prescriptive stage. The data are given an illustrative form with the designers merely responding to what "comes on their screen". They are reactive, not active. They remain stuck in the world as it is, illustrating it rather than trying to intervene in the speed of our present juncture and preserve a distance. The AT417 plan transforms the Arc into a huge Fantasy island complete with DNA skyscraper. Then the plan is bombed by NATO into the stone age. On the resulting post-bombardment moon surface a passionate utopia is projected. In this region the designers want to found the first industrial poetry factory. All power to the designers: "The world will be the stage (...) of a perpetual performance, the world will turn into an immense Fairground, generating new emotions and new passions". Reading the manifesto, we get a picture of a new utopia, but if we look at the visuals, all they give us is MTV stereotypes. The "just there" modernism of our TV culture is elevated to folklore. We are bombarded with fragmentary impressions so that we see too much and register nothing. No longer are we using a cognitive mode that is "in touch" with reality; this aesthetics ends by blocking out reality altogether. Like West Arc 3Fold, IA 121, Arterial system PM 711 restricts itself primarily to Stimulators along the railway line. In this project however they are called Nodes. Unlike the Stimulators, these Nodes are meticulously designed, but their shape has little to do with the wealth of possibilities inherent in any railway station. In these Nodes the only factors considered are the speed of the trains and the intensity with which the station is used. As though reality could be captured in this sort of functionalist unit. Here too mixed uses and congestion serve as open sesame; but there is no description of the quality of the collective life that is supposed to flow through this Node. The form of the Node is colourful and enthusiastic: will we finally get to meet with the other? I'm afraid not; instead we are dished up with a populist piece of ornament. The plan Culture washed ashore, XA 124 spreads a number of different carpets over the sites of the Arc. It is a diagram architecture filled with trendy textures and showy publicity pics; the rhythms are juicy, colourful and fashionably abstract. The cross-sections offer us programmatic overlaps that are potentially interesting. The abstraction and the superficial photo-collages with ads for cigarettes and drinks amount to no more than a modern folkloric visual. Not meeting the others, but eating them. The construction with billboards on the boulevard in P.L.A.S.M.A., AZ 707 is more subtle. One might call it "Learning from Las Vegas". The billboards serve as a sound barrier and liven up the railway. The

best chance of meeting the other is formed however not by the billboards themselves, but by the interface structure to which the billboards are fixed. Unfortunately the plan does not give us any clue as to how an interface like this can spark off a dialogic process. It fails to do so moreover precisely because it does not distance itself from prevailing conventions. Publicity and a sports school are brought together due to the transparent construction, but nothing challenges them to do something different from what they have always done. So far then the collective space is mainly anecdotal in its "just there" modernist exhibitionism.

3) Montage with an other

It is striking that many plans fail to devise any vision of exactly what a network, a congestion, an advertisement, a mixed use or a void may mean for a city. We are dished up with predictable visuals. If you want a plan that is really convincing, you must indicate precisely what it aims to achieve. The plan itself must contain something new, some sign of the other. The fascinating collective voids in IF 308 of nighttime light and flowery fields are indeed "other". The ontological feelings that IF 308's images evoke give the city a new collective space that, through the specific identity of its void and its programme, invite one to engage in a dialogue with the other - in this case the mysterious poetic quality of the artificial landscape. Looking closer at the collages in BJ 007, I also come across voids. We stroll along long footpaths through a green arcadia and across large traffic-free areas that continue right up to the patios of building blocks. These voids are less mysterious than those of IF 308. It is not so much the encounter with passers-by, but with the park and the stone squares that are crucial here. With both voids (IF 308 and BJ 007) the emphasis is on the aesthetic encounter between individual and city park. It is unclear in these spaces how the collective can relate to the programme of activities. An innovative beauty is installed, that is certainly "other" in kind and which distances itself from that which is there already. A new kind of functionalism is created - that of the atmosphere - something that should certainly please the collective, but I have my doubts whether these atmosphere parks will also open up a dialogue with the existing culture of Thessaloniki. Once upon a time we were afraid of the power of the void; now the void has itself become an ornament. The emptiness of terrains vagues and non-places, has also ceased to surprise us. Only when a photographer, for instance, works with sufficient conviction can a void help the viewer to develop an understanding and sensitivity towards the subject documented. These poetic voids that emanate both repose and happiness in the heart of a hectic city, do not generate any urban differences or otherness; they do not surprise us or stimulate our sense of the city. Rather they form an ecstatic flight into beauty. Precision Oculist, PA 001 goes a step further: "Our objective is to place the subject within a public battlefield of visuality and to simultaneously reveal the critical stance one is already equipped with. (...) Each strategy is thus not a mere illustration of an existing social condition but becomes Janus-headed, a two-sided entity." It is a pity that the plan itself is difficult to read. It is not clear that the different "tactics" - with titles such as "voyeur", "from place to non-place", "camouflage", "normalization", and "Velasquez's displacement of the subject" - are done justice in the plan. The photo-collages and perspective drawings do give an impression of a complex

spatial segmentation with a variety of points of interaction between city and people's lives. Unfortunately the very appealing-looking play of lines in the plan, that recalls the patterns used in the garment industry, does not really enable us to discern the intentions of the photos in the plan. In terms of its plan, Terres, LN 230-2 is much more convincing. The separate sections are developed in detail and they all have their own unique identity without being totally autonomous. The voids for the four sites, with their surprising infill, are called: "Stone Land", "Art Land", "Nature Land" and "Air Land". These areas are linked together by the railway so that a complex relation is established between the new city and the old. In combination the four sites and the railway form a sort of huge "golf course". It is a place of refuge - somewhere where one can get one's breath back after leaving the hectic city. The other is almost buried in a comfortable, above all, cosy park. OR 001 could fit into LN 230-2 without any difficulty. This project gives the "golf course" back its urban character. In LN 230-2 the railway links the different areas in an urban fashion without belittling the refreshing qualities of a park. OR 001 shows how the qualities of park and city can interact with a few slight interventions. Public buildings loom over the city square and green corridors link the different areas. In many cities the public atmosphere is split up over different specialized quarters that are mainly interesting for a specific public. Such spaces are not genuinely public. Different public needs are swamped by private concerns. This plan does not reject the efficiency of a functional organization, but situates it in a concept where everything can converge in interactive fashion. In the city collective spaces and private interests are linked up with each other. It is not the aesthetics of the image that gives rise to the other as in IF 308; rather the spatial organization allows room it to develop. A dialogic process between the quality of the private and the collective is investigated here. In these final four projects the risk of just illustrating our existing situation is more or less avoided by not simply reacting to the world as it is, but by creating an "other there". Many private and collective dimensions of urban life are brought together. These designs stimulate a dialogic process between the one and the other in a way that is both solidaric and ambivalent. Full account is taken of a dialogic process of oppositions, concordances and ambiguity in the collective space in a way that makes it possible to experience a less conditioned and segmented life alone and with the other. The risk of illustration is overcome by images that challenge us "to create a montage with others, with an other. Because in the image, as in democracy, one finds 'free play', unfinished pieces, gaps, openings."

Roemer van Toorn

NOTES

1. See Michael Müller and Franz Dröge, *Die Macht der Schönheit, Avantgarde und Faschismus oder Der Geburt der Massenkultur*, EVA, 1995. 2. See Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe (note follows later)³. This collective space of permanent dialogic processes is not a means of achieving a consensus that transcends every particularism (Habermas); nor is it dedicated to the celebration of pure particularism and contextualism, proclaiming the death of the universal as in most postmodernist theories. The dialogic space is rather a mediation between the particular/contextual and the universal.⁴ It goes without saying that one should never forget that architecture can never satisfy any direct social need. The instrumentalization of architecture to suit social needs is nonsensical and even dangerous.⁵ *One-Way Street*, Walter Benjamin, 1928. Verso, London [?] 1979. ⁶ *Before and After the Image*, Serge Daney, Documenta X, The Book, 1997. French original first published in: *Revue des études palestiniennes* 40, Paris, Summer 1991. ⁷ "It is just there" is a design technique devised by Joost Meeuwissen and Matthijs Bouw of *One Architecture*. I apply the concept here in a different way than its originators intended. From the catalogue "West Arc competition Thessaloniki", edited by Yorgos Simeoforidis and Didier Rebois.

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