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City of And's

Incidents on the Periphery

Marc Angélil & Cary Siress

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970).

Drawn, as with a fine camelhair brush, the line registers subtle oscillations of the horizon. Before us is the skyline of Buenos Aires, depicted with the swiftness of the architect's hand in the famed sketch by Le Corbusier from 1929 as he approached the city on a steamboat by night—as if lured by sirens. Were this line to be redrawn today, it would waver and lose its clarity, for the edges of the city are blurred. Not merely an architect but crusader of a modern vision for the city, Le Corbusier arrived in Argentina to peddle his urban wares in a corner of the world, however, where a very different mentality reigns. We are in foreign territory and are reminded of a sensibility so poignantly captured by the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, who made us aware that other than familiar landmarks of *our* thought exist.¹ Laid out on a table in which animals are sorted according to unprecedented categories, the difference of this sensibility is made more than clear. Borges's Chinese encyclopedia, so often cited by those spellbound by the charm of exotic taxonomies, bears witness to another mode of thinking whereby the sequential ordering system of the list does not cohere with the unexpected associations set free by the individual items listed. It might be said that rationality and irrationality operate in close proximity to each other. Strange bedfellows intermingle in a struggle where both vie for the upper hand. The laughter that ensues from unlikely juxtapositions shatters the ordered surface upon which the masterplan for the city is inscribed. This laughter, as a matter of fact, shatters the sober foundation of unified urban models so cherished by generations of architects and

urbanists in the past, namely those who foregrounded the rational while suppressing the irrational.

Conventionally, visions for the city aspire to a coherent relationship between part and whole, a desire, though, left more often than not unfulfilled. And so it was for Le Corbusier, as it was for so many others. Comparable to the periphery of other cities—innumerable ones—we find on the outskirts of Buenos Aires conditions marked by a radical disjunction between individual elements and the projected image of the city as a whole. Despite relentless planning efforts to plan “out” accidents, conflicts, the incidental, and anything that is unforeseeable, contemporary agglomerations form an unruly amalgam and a wild profusion of things. Not dissimilar to Borges's bizarre assortment, the territory of the city is made up of individual episodes—including those in the present classification—that manifest a loose sense of order in and of themselves, yet have little or nothing to do with neighboring circumstances. The parts seem determined by given type forms—a petrol station, a motel, a suburban housing tract, et cetera. Their overall arrangement, however, follows a logic of indeterminate assemblages—the fortuitous encounter of a cow pasture, a favela, a shopping mall, and those having just been demolished—, assemblages criss-crossed by stray dogs. Recalling the playful drawing technique *cadavre exquis* promoted by the Surrealists, pieces abut to form an unpredictable body, yet an urban species that this time does not succumb to a unitary order. Whatever this form of organization might be called, another factor complicates this

2 John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* (New York: B&T / Dramatists Play Service, 1964).

game, that of time. Far from being a closed and stable system, the city is an open and transient site, partially formed and always in process. In the case of Buenos Aires, no sooner are plans laid for a new gated community than to be abandoned and thereafter encroached upon by informal settlements—echoing John Steinbeck’s insightful aphorism: “the best laid plans of mice and men often go astray.”² But rather than continuing to portray such conditions in negative terms, the circumstantial must be accepted on its own terms, if not understood as an untapped opportunity from which to learn.

Before addressing what such a prospect might bring to urban discourse, one might consider the logic of the part. At this micro level everything follows a molecular rationality as specified by goal-oriented thinking, cost-efficient methods, and time-saving means of implementation. As in Borges’s list, the parts maintain their identity and thus can still be recognized for what they are. Their signature presence is not threatened by that of others. These components exist in an almost monadic autonomy, seemingly closed in on themselves: a mall, is a mall, is a mall. Standards form the rule of the game which in turn determines the form of the part. This was typically the domain of the architect—those that are trained—, yet a domain increasingly challenged by developers, contractors, and real estate agents, for the rules are so clear that anyone can play the game. We find ourselves within a managerial space circumscribed by a matrix of rational decision-making that infiltrates every crease of convention. Generic protocols and logistical production are deployed to format spaces

3. See Keller Easterling, *Organization Space: Landscapes, Highways, and Houses in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 2.

that normally override any aesthetic consideration. Architecture is thus tamed. Norm is king, efficiency its mode of operation, control its objective. With strategic precision, freeways are built, buildings erected, and landscapes carpeted with roads. Their genesis is driven by rote procedures which are kept on course by automatic pilot. Production becomes reproduction, a mechanical repetition where parts are churned out as if on an assembly line. “Make it simple” is the motto of this practice, a microphysics of sorts, that defines the order of things and its institutionalized expression. Despite the preponderance of this formulaic process, what ultimately results when the parts are cast onto the urban plane is anything but ordered. Arrangement gives way to disarray.

The resulting spatial organization is

comprised of simple elements whose complexity arises only from their relative position to each other.³ At this macro level, the homogeneity of the components now surrenders to a heterogeneity of the assemblage. Again recalling Borges’s additive series, a straightforward practice is put into play, that of setting dissimilar parts adjacent to each other *ad infinitum*. This also resonates with the Deleuzian concept of disjunctive synthesis summed up by the unlimited string *...and, and, and,...* And it is this condition encountered on the periphery of Buenos Aires as in so many other places as well. Whereas the logic of the individual elements follows a local rationality, large-scale conditions tend toward anarchical organizations that are irreducibly heterogeneous in their make up. Pieces are left scattered as if one

4. *Op. cit.*, Michel Foucault.

5. Georges Bataille, et. al., «Dictionnaire critique», published in the journal *Documents* from 1929 to 1930. See also Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-39*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

had just broken the water pitcher. The classical model of the city as a unified organism is eclipsed by an entirely different creature, one with *organs*, but this time without the support of a cohesive *body*. The fabric of the city consists of “organs without a body,” so to speak. So what we find on the fringes of Buenos Aires is a bizarre mish-mash of infrastructure, slums, canals, gated communities, nature reserves, farmland, and so forth—all interspersed with fragments of land not yet earmarked for any specific use. Pieces are placed in close proximity with no regard for any existing plan that might alleviate the situation. In this sense, urban territories are the setting for a showdown between a will to order and the tendency to formlessness. Frenzied attempts are nevertheless made to maintain control through endless planning measures that inevitably go astray. For an entirely different logic abounds, a logic of dispersed irrationality underwritten by order and rationally produced. The sheer impossibility of thinking the irrational with the rational is intoxicating. Yet it is also unsettling, for here we encounter not only “the exotic charm of another system of thought,” but “also the limitation of our own.”⁴ In other words, contemporary urban terrains distribute the multiplicity of things in ways that seem impossible for us to think *that*. Other logics are called for.

Borges’s Chinese encyclopedia does

not stand alone as a sole effort to fathom what such logics might entail. Georges Bataille’s *Dictionnaire Critique*,⁵ for example, forwarded a compilation of randomly assembled terms countering classifica-

6. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *L’Abécédaire*. Interview on DVD, (Paris: Editions Montparnasse, 2004).

tory systems of meaning. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze’s *Abécédaire* advanced a comparable collection of episodes—from A for *animal* to Z for *zigzag*—to undermine the linearity traced out by conventional trajectories of thought.⁶ By no means are these models set in a fabulous world elsewhere. Instead, we find ourselves in our own world, yet confronted with the possibility of another take. What is common to these efforts is a tactful game of positioning whereby existing conditions are pitted against the *status quo*. Key to this game is that no preconceived ends dictate the moves. No origins are taken for granted. No ideal state is pursued. Instead, we operate from the middle and are thus cast into the very foreignness of our own condition. Taking flight from secure tenets of urban discourse upheld in the name of control and order, tactics must be sought for using situations just as they develop, taking advantage of the indecisiveness of the moment. For design to make use of situational potentials necessitates operating from within rather than from above or beyond. In urban design this would mean that charting the paths must be given as much importance as to that which is designed. These paths are not linear—i.e., plotted in a straight line from A to Z—nor are they given in advance. To navigate along potential paths suggests a transversal movement across territories, whether conceptual or material. This has an impact on the form of the city, now understood as a malleable set of variables. Since these variables are transient, due to the dynamic of time, the city must be viewed up close relative to constant and often subtle transformations, transformations within which urban design practices must allow themselves to be caught.

To draw the city thus suggests to be drawn into the maelstrom of the city rather than safely viewing it from afar. Would Le Corbusier be given another chance to redraw the line today, he would have to take a closer look, as the outlines of Buenos Aires now from a long way off look like flies. For indeed, things are abuzz out there on the horizon.

