

## The shape of a city

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**Poet Jean-Christophe Bailly argues that contemporary urban spaces, whether sites of historic importance and cultural heritage or serving a purely functional purpose, no longer lend themselves to wandering and strolling. He compares the memories imposed in museums and on the construction sites of new cities with those of passers-by as they wander through the cityscape, the latter pensive memories he believes are the sole source of utopia.**

Reviewed: Jean-Christophe Bailly, *La phrase urbaine* [The Urban Discourse], Seuil, 2013, 288 p., 21 €.

*La phrase urbaine* is a collection of texts on the subjects of architecture and urbanism written by Bailly and published between 1997 and 2012. The underlying argument which runs throughout is based on the idea that cities exist solely through the movements of those who pass through them and who thus bring them to life. Bailly believes memory to be the vital link which connects urban spaces to those who use and who inhabit those spaces. This memory is not set in stone, immutable, but is dynamic, constantly renewing itself in the footsteps of those who explore and wander across these spaces, a memory which creates a desire in the onlooker to describe the city and to express what they see around them through language. Bailly's *phrase urbaine*, or urban discourse, can be defined as the relationship between the act of walking and one's use of words, a dynamic union between foot and tongue. According to Bailly, the reason why it is so difficult to recognise the city and to distinguish its shape in and among the contemporary urban sprawl that surrounds it is because urban spaces are becoming increasingly inhospitable for those who seek to roam across them. The physical obstacles to urban exploration are reflected in the disintegration of a discourse about the city.

While the text contains both theory and criticism, its literary contribution should not be overlooked; Bailly creates his own urban discourse, shares his own stories of wandering across cities, and offers his very own Proustian terms (such as *La grammaire générative des jambes* and *Passages des heures, passages des noms*). Through his literary observations of the cities he has traversed and loved (Paris, of course, but also Barcelona, New York, Saint-Étienne), he finds the language to describe his own memories of being a wanderer and thus brings his theory to life. It remains clear to the wandering Bailly, however, that both the older more established cities and the more recent towns and suburbs have become increasingly hostile settings for strolling pedestrians and now represent little more than a backdrop for journeys of a purely practical, perfunctory nature. Urban discourse appears to be vanishing, and the outline of the city becoming increasingly obscured and shapeless against the wider urban landscape.

## **Obstacles to roaming in contemporary urban space**

To transform the city would require that we also transform the many shapes, joints and links so crucial to the *movement* which brings the city to life. As Bailly explains, the city discourse is created first and foremost by the wandering onlooker as he moves through the space. This introduces the wider topic of urban exploration which is so important in a discussion of the city, ranging from the *flânerie* (wandering) so beloved of Walter Benjamin to the Situationists' urban *dérive* (drifting). The strength of Bailly's commentary lies in its study of the physical arrangements of the urban landscape which today pose such a threat to the free and unplanned movement of urban explorers. The tragic disappearance of streets from across many suburbs and residential areas has made strolling impossible, and zoning, a utilitarian doctrine according to which residential, commercial and industrial developments are kept separate, further hampers the freedom to roam at leisure across an urban landscape. As a result, movement across city spaces is reduced, leading to a loosening in the emotional ties between these spaces and their inhabitants. Bailly argues that there is a strong 'emotional bond between cities and those who move through them; the more cities are observed and contemplated in this way, the more they take on shape and become real' (p.191). The disappearance of streets as spaces capable of evoking feelings in the onlooker is described as catastrophic, for if these spaces no longer affect inhabitants as they once did, inhabitants will no longer recognise them and be moved by them in any way. In other words, and bearing in mind that it is those doing the 'feeling' who define the city's *collective* mood, the city ceases to be something which can be 'felt'.

Another factor to consider is the way in which designated heritage sites can interrupt the cityscape's continuity, so crucial for strolling, by creating '*zones de regards obligés*' [must-look-at zones], certain areas which compel onlookers to study them (p. 192). Certain buildings and areas of special interest are singled out and signposted for special attention, referred to by Bailly as '*signes signalés*' [signaled signs](p. 180). Disconnected from the urban flow, they are objects of pure cultural consumption. This cultural focus on objects rather than on the bonds one has with one's environment is further emphasized by modern architecture, which has itself fallen victim to this obsession with grand structures and monuments (*'l'objet grand objet'*, p. 257). The National Library of France and the Opéra Bastille, both in Paris, are recent examples of the solipsism of these '*grands objets*' which fail to integrate with their urban surroundings (p. 81). It is through structures such as these, both new and old, that cities have come to resemble museums of signposted tours, the very opposite of a city in which those who seek to roam undirected are left free to choose their path.

## **Fluidity of time and space**

The use of zoning, the disappearance of streets, the excessive granting of heritage status and a fixation with '*grands objets*' are all specific to a vision of urban planning and architecture which reduces the freedom to explore and which progressively destroys what Bailly refers to as the *phrasé urbain*, a discourse of and about the city. As we have seen, this discourse emerges from and is constantly reborn in the footsteps of those who explore, in their endlessly evolving memories of the city, and in the words they use to describe the feelings generated by the urban landscape. It is through these footsteps and ever-changing memories that the city is able to constantly rewrite its physical self. However, this 'generative grammar of the legs' and its corresponding urban discourse is very different from 'the discourse the city has about and with itself' (p. 174). Indeed, a city full of heritage sites is far from silent; its *zones de regards obligés* generate a significant amount of formulaic discourse based on artificial self-awareness (official memory) which is entirely removed from the fluid movement of urban vitality. Bailly juxtaposes the memories of those who wander freely,

which he describes as being 'like stars, passing, alive yet disappearing, like echoes which reverberate through the wanderer' (p. 192) with those generated by the heritage sites.

These latter memories are artificial, for they freeze time, whereas the memories gathered by strolling onlookers bring time to life and constantly regenerate themselves. As Bailly writes: 'The wanderer is a product of the passage of time as it wears on [...] He is someone who passes through, who inhabits time, time's shifting habitat which the city also inhabits as it wears on...' (p. 179). A city without streets does not age well, for without its passers-by, its products of time, without those wandering through, there is no one to shape and mould time, it loses its elasticity (p. 93); the city-as-museum refuses to allow the 'past's dormancy<sup>1</sup> to be handled freely' and instead 'tries to exert control over its awakening'. The duty of remembrance' has been disastrous' for the city, Bailly writes (p. 87). Façade restoration, monuments singled out for special attention and excessive granting of heritage status all contribute to keeping time fixed in place and reducing the freedom of spectators to let the past come to them by chance, according to whichever path they choose. There is a direct link between the fluidity of space and the fluidity of time (p. 192), between unplanned wandering and the passage of time; cities can only truly be said to exist when there is this synergy between time and space, something which the city-as-museum destroys in itself. It is this new 'city' which ultimately robs the city of its shape.

### ***Utopia povera and the dormancy of time***

Given the many obstacles to the formation of a distinct, coherent city shape, we are left wondering what possibilities remain. In his astonishing text '*Utopia povera*', Bailly outlines how the utopian vision which gained such prominence in the world of architecture and urbanism might be transformed. While the radical idea of creating a new social fabric may no longer seem possible or even desirable (since present time is the past in action), the wealth of thought on the subject of utopia is worth preserving. Bailly argues that utopia resides in the dormancy of time, in the potential stored within objects from the past, in 'preserving the potential for chance and changeability in what has already been completed' (p. 159). Utopia is in uncovering the different possibilities buried within objects. It is a 'poor' utopia, for it can be found everywhere; the author discovers it in simple objects and in the Creusot homes of labourers (p. 148). Thus, utopia is the ideal that survives in all that has been created by mankind, much like a construction *plan* which endures the process of its own completion. If all human creation carries within itself a part of the ideal, utopia can be understood as being connected to the memory which constantly revives this ideal, as long as the completed past is not excessively 'signposted', that is to say, not singled out for heritage status. An open and fluid connection to the past and its material existence: such is the new role Bailly proposes for his strolling 'bearer of utopia'. One might even say that the urban stroller unknowingly brings to life a part of utopia within his own evolving memory, for his wandering brings into the present a past vision of the shape of the city. The new concept of poor utopia should inspire architects and town planners in their work to reconnect spaces; instead of mindlessly preserving scattered heritage sites or demolishing everything in order to rebuild everything once more, they might employ a more humble approach, in which our collective past, both as it currently exists in its material form and as it could be in all its future potential, is subtly reshaped and reworked into the form of a city which enables freedom of movement. In another text titled *Sur les délaissés parisiens* [On Paris' Left-out Spaces], the author proposes concrete measures to ensure the existence of spaces set aside especially for

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<sup>1</sup> Bailly uses the botanical analogy of 'dormancy' as a synonym for the potential of time held within objects: 'This 'potential' (used in the same way as dormancy when talking about seeds) is nothing more than that which keeps existence open to possibilities, and which saves it from being ordered and controlled (p. 151).

the passage of time (the correlation between fluidity of time and fluidity of space having already been pointed out). The various unused urban spaces would be left intact, he explains, as '*temporary spaces for an indefinite period of time*' (p. 206) and then transformed into 'observation posts to study the passage of time; this urbanism would not only be well thought out but also *thought-provoking*' (p. 216).

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