

Turning the corner

By

Fabian Faltin Before we rush towards an analysis of the relation between urban-architectural form and ideology, politics or power, it may be helpful at first to consider if ideology itself is as an urban form. For not only is it difficult to think of an ideology that didn't originate in an urban setting; ideology itself, taken in the most basic sense of a 'logic of ideas', appears to have many, if not all the characteristics of urbanity. An ideology isn't just one idea but several, densely packed and highly communicative amongst each other, short-circuited even, just as we might find a commune of citizens packed within the circular perimeter of a city wall. The communication between certain ideas creates a community of ideas, just as traffic, municipal pools and bustling market squares are often thought of as the benign creators of urban community. Ideas in an ideology are connected via arteries and nodes, along which their energy is transmitted and exchanged with various degrees of efficiency, much like in a city we find networks for transporting bodies, materials, information. Just as we see it happening in the polis, so an ideology will police its idea-citizens, administrate them, punish the free-riders who haven't paid for public transport or suppress the street gamblers who interrupt the orderly flow of communication. Finally, at the fringe of ideologies we often find a suburban belt of retired or secluded ideas, that don't participate in the democratic communion as vigorously as they could, for which there was no central place in the logos.

The comparison is certainly appealing (particularly once we parallel historical evolutions, for example decentralisation of urban forms and decentralisation of ideologies),

yet should not be overstretched. There are important differences, and these seem far more valuable than the analogies. For instance, except at a very embryonic, medieval or indeed mythological stage, cities are built and modified from within; they are explosive. Ideologies, by contrast, tend to be implosive: they are contained, enclosed, wrapped. They are ideas in a neat package, masterminded from an outside: 'here stand we, there stands our ideology.'

Even in a totalitarian twentieth-century setting, ideology takes the form of a book that can be closed; ideology rests when we rest, and disappears when we concentrate upon other things, such as physical labour, or pursue routine, non-ideological behaviour. It is a thing apart. In this, ideology reveals itself as a child of philosophy, which also rests when we rest.

Practised as a conscious processing, as a making non-sense or sense [logos] of ideas, as the making of ideology, philosophy too is experienced as a momentary suspension of 'ordinary language', 'ordinary thoughts' and 'common sense'. There exists a repertoire of existential, everyday routines, from which philosophy seeks to deviate and differentiate itself, and into which the philosophical 'state of mind', once it is exhausted, collapses again. You have to want it to get it and that, incidentally, is why philosophy often becomes a test of will-power. Thought doesn't tend towards a solution, it tends to contract and disappear when the will-power fizzles out. 'We recognise that the problem of life has been solved when it disappears', writes Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus logicus-philosophicus* 'on the last page (§6.521).

Can a city ever be 'closed', stored away, laid ad acta in this manner? When philosophies and their ideological offspring talk about 'appearance versus reality', 'structure versus super-structure' or indeed 'the possibility of the impossible', they are trying to articulate and come to grips with themselves: trying to interpret in a complex way the simple fact that they only work when you happen to be in the right mood for them. But for the city-dweller, the city is a place of many different moods. Our subjective 'relationship' to the city is one of constant companionship, not of provisional spectacle.

Unlike a book, a city is never closed. Over a certain space of time, we will have felt hope and resignation, love and hate, impatience and acceleration etc., all within the city. Sometimes the fact that the city is

always there, indifferent to our mood-swings, can in itself be a source of an 'urban mood', a potent mix of claustrophobia and escapism, of radical confrontation and invisible resignation. Because of this constant companionship, the urban form affords a depth of situation that ideologies never do. Cities account for a lot of the most stimulating inquiries humans have undertaken, be they in film, literature, art, architecture or politics. By contrast, all that we have ever gotten from ideologies is propaganda.

These cursory indications can help us sense why it might be misleading to 'think about urbanism' or to construct a 'relation' between ourselves and architecture. The city is a place of constant approximation and proximity: we don't stand outside it and negotiate freely the terms of a relationship, nor are we inside it, engaged in a perfect, and perfectly circular communication. Such moments do exist, but they are occasional. They punctuate the life of a couple, they are the commas and full-stops that provide temporary, ecstatic relief. Relief from long stretches of complex proximity, intimacy and diplomacy: the constant suspense and tension created by collisions, confrontations, contacts, by sensitive touches and vulgar injuries, by caresses that cannot in any way be summarised. All of this gets glossed over every time we talk of 'having a relationship'.

In the city, we cannot stand back, little as we can step forward. Strictly speaking, it also isn't accurate to say that we are 'immersed' in an urban form. Rather, it seems we are situated or indeed trapped in a constellation or matrix of elements, living in proximity to one another, in proximity with ourselves, with architecture, objects, ideas. The urban 'form' can never be a synthesis or a communication, it can just be a sort of concentration.

Similarly, living in a city is hardly about figuring things out systematically and acquiring professional competence; in the city everyone is an amateur, trying to get by, trying to squeeze between or get around the next obstacles by some form of do-it-yourself. We don't ever really know about each other, we just find ways of getting in touch, getting by, finding some points of contact or orientation. Even deep love for a city can never be possessive: it is accumulative. Fragments, moments, memories are simply collected, gathered without ideology or system. They become the basis of a repertoire

of urban life, a mixture of awareness and forgetting, of skill, routine and ritual, where nothing is decided upon in advance.

Because the repertoire is already a form of submersion, it cannot be a subversive concept. There is no way of getting around this approximate state of being, of being ahead of urban life or falling behind it. Which points us to the utopian dimension of our initial question ("how is ideology itself an urban form?"): if in the future the ideologies of philosophy, architecture and urbanism were themselves to be such approximate urban life forms (and we have seen that they are not), what would they be like?

It seems they would no longer be spectacle and theatre, just theatrics laid bare. They could be neither distinguished from nor confused with reality. Instead, such utopian thought would be a way of inserting ourselves in the gap that exists between the life of a city and the life of an idea, in tangential proximity to both. A utopian ideology wouldn't go all the way as we expect it to, just half the way. It would be a medium-point characterised not by forceful argument and spectacle, the eloquent communiqués architects and philosophers have become accustomed to, but inspired by something akin to the actuality and natural immediacy that can sometimes be felt when turning a street-corner.

Fabian Faltin is a writer, ghost-writer, and translator. He is currently completing a philosophy of the repertoire at Sciences Po, Paris, and can be contacted at fabian_faltin@hotmail.com