

URBANISM AND URBAN PLANNING FOLLOWING THE THOUGHTS OF HENRI LEFEBVRE

TERESA VASCONCELOS E SÁ

University of Lisbon, Lisbon School of Architecture, CIAUD, Portugal

ABSTRACT

The starting point of this communication is Henri Lefebvre's thinking on urbanism and planning. We find, in Lefebvre's works, two great themes of reflection: daily life and the city. His preoccupation, in simultaneously analysing the urban way of life and the city, reflects an insight which is central to Lefebvre's thought: the idea that space is a social product. Since it is a social product, space cannot be thought of as external to society, to society's values, to the dominant culture, or to the existing power relations. Thus the proposals presented by urbanists are not just technical works: they are ideological interventions. Urbanism is not a value-neutral technique which transforms the territory; it presupposes a set of values attached to an idea of the city, and those values should feature clearly in urbanists' proposals. Let us consider two proposals Lefebvre made towards "a new urbanism": the need for new concepts and the importance of developing an experimental utopia. We shall conclude by presenting some examples displaying elements of "new planning" as argued for from Lefebvre's perspective.

Keywords: Henri Lefebvre, urbanism, new urbanism.

1 INTRODUCTION

Henri Lefebvre's book *Du Rural à L'Urbain* [1] was published in France in 1970. In it, the author reflects on a range of topics, issues, and problems that he would later develop. Among those topics, I would highlight the following: rural society versus urban society, urbanism versus everyday life, scientific specialisation versus science of the whole. This article will fundamentally focus on the critique the author makes of urbanism and on his proposals for the construction of "a new urbanism".

2 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE URBANISM OF THE 1960S AND 1970S

Lefebvre's criticism of urbanism in the 1960s is shared with other authors. Their thinking differs from his own but they clearly state that it is a mistake to consider urbanism a science. I should mention, albeit briefly, the stances taken by Choay [2], [3], Rittel and Webber [4], and Lynch [5].

When Françoise Choay published *La règle et le modèle* in 1980 [2], she stated that in a previous book, *L'urbanisme* [3], she had wanted to "denounce the imposition of a discipline that, at a time of feverish construction, imposed its authority without conditions" [2], [10]. In fact, when analysing the long introduction of the now classic anthology of texts on urbanism, we find that even in 1965 Choay was arguing that urbanism was a term fraught with ambiguity, and by wishing to be a scientific discipline it confused value system with scientific knowledge. She gives Le Corbusier's work as an example of that falsely scientific stance when he mentions the "true plans" and "scientific solutions" of urbanism. According to Choay, "the very idea of a scientific urbanism is one of the myths of industrialised society" [2, p. 74].

In her line of thinking, urbanism is based on a misconception: making the production of the city similar to the industrial production of objects. Just as in the production of an object we search for the optimal form that meets the desired function, when "producing" a territory, if we have in-depth knowledge of the context and the needs of its residents, we will create an optimal space. Urbanism errs by favouring function over meaning: "The creators of industrial



design let themselves be obscured by the function of the objects' use, by their "utensility", neglecting their semiological value" [2, p. 77].

In 1973, an article was published in the USA by planning specialist Melvin Webber and science of design professor Horst Rittel entitled "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning". In the article, the authors defend what seems obvious, but nobody dares to say about planning, as in the story of the "Emperor's New Clothes". Making a clear distinction between the problems of the exact sciences and the problems of planning, Webber and Rittel say that the latter are "wicked problems". The difficulty comes from the definition of a problem, since this contains a solution in itself. An example of this is the issue of social segregation in a particular place. If we suppose that segregation is the result of a "natural" incapacity of populations in different social classes and cultures to manage to interact with one another, a proposal will be made to create separate territories with well-defined boundaries for each one. If, on the other hand, we suppose that the urban space is a space where populations with different social classes and cultures should live together, another organisation of the space will be proposed in which boundaries will be diluted. The definition of the problem itself contains a solution. We cannot therefore say that the problem has a definite answer, since the solution does not come from scientific thought but instead from taking a stance regarding values, i.e. a political position, "(...) it should be clear that the expert is also the player in a political game, seeking to promote his private vision of goodness over others. Planning is a component of politics. There is no escaping that truism" [4, p. 169].

Later, in 1981, Kevin Lynch published *Good City Form* [5], the title of which, simultaneously provocative and innocent, raises two fundamental questions about urbanism-planning: discussing what the relationship is between built spaces and experienced spaces and openly introducing normative aspects to the production of the city. Lynch, referring to the work of planning specialists, states that: "The insides of those immaculate scientific structures surreptitiously hide many assumptions of values" [5, p. 8].

In Lefebvre's view, urbanists have until this point been resolving the necessary short-term problems for industrial society to grow, but they have not asked questions about the society they were building. What is at stake for the author are not the new techniques used but the fact that urbanists hide their political side in transforming the city. Lefebvre [1] argues that urbanism is an ideology that hides itself in the myth of technology. He shows how a technicist and rationalist vision of society places a world full of social inequalities – but also full of meaning and "social bonds" – to one side, as if it did not exist. This is not a nostalgic position of a lost past, but rather, as Marc Augé so often reminds us, knowing how to see what is being lost in the society we build.

Let us return at this point to the *dwelling/habitat* dichotomy, highlighting three aspects regarding dwelling as understood by Lefebvre: its anthropological character; its transposition to everyday life in which systems of objects and different modes of dwelling are expressed in language; the dual system connected to dwelling: sensory/verbal, object-based/semantic. Lefebvre reveals the fragility of urbanistic thought compared to philosophical thought regarding the notion of *dwelling*. While philosophers like Bachelard and Heidegger sought to understand *dwelling/inhabiting*, believing it a fundamental trait of the human condition that cannot be reduced to a mere function, Le Corbusier restricts *dwelling* to the satisfaction of needs which emerge from a technical and scientific analysis, reducing urbanism to a function and a limited objective of the human being: "having a certain space to organise their "individual and family lives" [1, p. 159] – thereby transforming *dwelling* into *habitat* (for an analysis of these two concepts, see Paquot [10]).

The *habitat pavillonnaire* – i.e. the habitat corresponding to *pavillons*, small, cheap houses with a small garden area, keeping a rural style in the middle of a modern city (standing out



from the urban landscape next to large residential blocks)-, represents, on the one hand, a stigmatised space compared with the big city – the old prevailing over the modern – but, on the other hand, that is where *dwelling* prevails over *habitat*, according to Lefebvre: “in his small, cheap house [*pavillon*], although undoubtedly in a shabby way, the modern man ‘dwells like a poet’. We should understand by this that his dwelling is a little bit of his work. The space he has available to organise according to his trends and routines retains a certain plasticity. Amenities [*aménagements*] are provided” [1, p. 172]. Everyday life is not focused on *habitat*, it takes place between the house and the garden, the garden and the street, the street and the square, the square and the café, the café and the house – inside and outside. This type of building – cheap, single-family residences with a small garden – enable an appropriation of space that is not possible in that great blocks of cement of the “new towns”, (from 1965 onwards, the “new towns” (“*villes nouvelles*”) project emerged as part of the Paris region master plan, inspired by ideas of technical and scientific rationality) nor in bourgeois homes.

Lefebvre highlights the importance of the sociological idea of “appropriation” that is connected to *dwelling*: “dwelling for the individual, for the group, means appropriating something” [1, p. 222]. While the domination arising from technical operations destroys nature, appropriation involves another relationship with nature, space and time. Life in the ancient or medieval city was marked by that qualitative time-space appropriation. Lefebvre highlights the simultaneity between the rationalised urbanism connected to growth in the Western city in the 20th century, and the end of a spontaneous urban civilisation: “Reasoned (rational, or rather, rationalised) urbanism has never been able to understand the secret of the qualitative appropriation of time-space” [1, p. 173]. There is an inversely proportional relationship between appropriation of individuals and the power of technique.

3 THE NEW URBAN FABRIC: “URBAN SOCIETY”

But it is with the power of technique, using a rationale similar to that applied to the production of objects, as Choay said, that the urbanist will produce the city, will build the urban fabric. That urban fabric, for Lefebvre, is not formed merely of the buildings constructed in the city, but includes the spread of an urbanisation [6] that will deeply transform the rural landscape, that is projected onto the territory through buildings, communications channels, objects, forcing new ways and paces of life to be followed: “(...) a secondary residence, a motorway, a supermarket in the middle of the countryside, are part of the urban fabric” [7, p. 10]. As well as the mass production of objects that technology and a new organisation of work enabled, the urbanisation of the globalised society in the latter half of the 20th century have made space into a global commodity – “today, all space joined production as a product through buying, selling and exchanging parts of space” [7, p. 205]. And the urbanist plays one of the main roles in that transformation.

Lefebvre observes the swift metamorphosis of the rural space and the city, since with industrialisation and urbanisation, a new space is born, a new society that he calls “urban society”.

The phenomenon of total urbanisation of the planet, which is today a reality, was not the case in 1970 when Lefebvre was writing *La révolution urbaine* and stated: “The virtual object is no more than a planetary society, a “world city” [7, p. 28].

Lefebvre acknowledges that it is very difficult to understand what is happening, calling the moment when all those transformations take place the *critical phase*, in which reality is like a “black box”: “one knows what enters; sometimes one understands what comes out. One does not know what happens” [7, p. 28]. In this *critical stage*, Lefebvre places the destruction of nature that arises from the planetary industrialisation-urbanisation process in

the foreground. And he puts forward a prophesy: in the year 2000, perhaps all the goods that were rare will become abundant – for example, food products; while goods that were once abundant become rare: water, earth, light – space, time, desire.

The end of the first chapter of *La révolution urbaine* aims to show the uncertainty and perplexity that go with this critical phase. To do this, he uses an apparently very unscientific literary form, very much in his style, imagining a dialogue between two people with opposing thoughts on certain aspects of the city. Below is an example of the opposing perspectives of each of the speakers, underlining the positive and negative aspects of the street, according to the Table 1.

4 HENRI LEFEBVRE’S “NEW URBANISM”

The *critical phase* that society is going through, according to Lefebvre, is due to the increased complexity that accompanies the transition from industrial society to urban society. Marc Augé effectively illustrates that complexity when defining *non-places* as the joining of circulation and communication spaces with consumption, the extent of which characterises current globalisation [8], [9]. Lefebvre mentions the existence of a multiple complexity related to space and time: “Because the complexity of space and the objects that occupy it does not happen without a complexification of time and the activities that take place in time” [7, p. 221].

Bearing in mind this brutal transformation that urban society represents and referring to industrial society, Lefebvre points out the existence of a *blind spot* in the scientific gaze. A *blind spot*, as the term itself suggests, relates to something that is there but we cannot see, or that seems insignificant or meaningless to us. According to Lefebvre, it cannot be possible for us to understand “urban society” if we keep using the previous concepts that were useful for analysing industrial society. Analytical, fragmented and specialised thought does not allow us to see the new reality. To overcome this, a new intellectual approach, new methods, new concepts are needed. We should remember Brenner and Schmid’s 2015 article on the epistemology of planning in which the authors defend the need for a critical urban social theory: “This entails an insistence on the situatedness of all forms of knowledge, and a

Table 1: Positive and negative aspects of the street [7, p. 29–33].

STREET: POSITIVE ASPECTS	STREET: NEGATIVE ASPECTS
Meeting place A “spontaneous theatre” Place of disorder	Place of superficial encounters
Functions: informative, ludic and symbolic	Reduction of the street in the middle of the journey
<i>Appropriation</i> of places by people	Parade of shops – consumption
Reduction in crime	Accumulation of objects in space
Place of the word	Colonisation of places by advertising, spectacle of objects



relentless drive to reinvent key categories of analysis in relation to ongoing processes of historical change” [11, p. 159].

Urban society – where time dominates space, the virtual overlaps with the real, new information technology releases and constrains everyday life – imposes, for all these reasons, a new reflection strategy, the creation of a new urbanism that combines scientific and political aspects at once.

It is based on this that Lefebvre creates two fundamental notions for analysing the urban: transduction and experimental utopia.

4.1 Transduction and experimental utopia

Transduction is a way of thinking about reality in which it is not viewed as static but instead as a process of continuous transformations: “It can be said that transduction goes from the real (given) to the possible” [12, p. 121]. What is at stake is not the current situation, but the process that must transform one reality into another.

It is a form of reasoning that complements the inductive and deductive scientific methods with a temporal and utopian dimension: “Transduction creates and builds a theoretical object, a *possible object*, based on information about reality, as well as a question raised about that reality. Transduction supposes an unending feedback between the conceptual framework used and empirical observations” [1, p. 155].

The idea of “urban society” is a good example of this way of thinking that Lefebvre called *transduction*. The author builds the concept by creating a virtual, non-existent reality: “urban society”. It is not an abstraction from reality, but rather the denial of the present reality and the assertion of another that will come into existence: “we shall give the name of ‘urban society’ to the society that arises from complete urbanisation that is today virtual, and tomorrow real” [7, p. 7]. It is a society that does not yet exist, that is still under construction, that will produce a process of transformation inscribed in the industrialisation-urbanisation relationship of today’s society.

Are we dealing with a deterministic vision of the future of urban society? Not at all. It is, on the contrary, about our becoming aware that the object of the architect-urbanist – the future city – is always a virtual object that is gradually metamorphosed by the action of several actors, and that the action of the architect-urbanist will contribute to the transformation of the urban reality based on a conception of the world, whether this is conscious or otherwise.

To better understand present society, Lefebvre seeks to analyse the changes that have happened in the past and that have gradually changed the rural world, first into an industrial society and now into an urban society. In the analysis of the present, we can find traces of the past and of the future. That is what Lefebvre does when he compares the transformations that the village where he lived as a young man, Navarrenx, underwent with the construction of a “new town”, Mourenx, which rose up beside it. The object of the architect-urbanist is a virtual one, in which the past, the present and the future combine into a single time in the urban space [1, p. 109–129].

This new mode of analysis, transduction, makes it possible to better understand the project methodology, which Lefebvre would call “experimental utopia”. In its terms, research does not start with a hypothesis that is hoped to be demonstrated, but rather with a virtual object, which when confronted with the experiment should turn into a real object: it is the “exploration of what is humanly possible, with the help of images and the imagination, accompanied by incessant critique and incessant reference to the question given in the ‘real’ [1, p. 131]. This process avoids both a simply empirical approach that accepts the real without



questioning it, and the construction of a pure theorisation that does not take into account what already exists.

4.2 Examples of new urbanism

This last point starts with two key ideas underlying the construction of “new urbanism”: the importance of sociability and the ludic in everyday life and the importance of utopian thought for the construction of urban society.

4.2.1 The importance of the ludic in everyday life

One of the criticisms made by Lefebvre of new urban areas that can today be clearly seen around the world has to do with the destruction of the ludic element that was part of the city that existed before and is inherent to social life. “That ludic element supposes surprise, the unexpected, information. That is what gives meaning to the street because it is what makes that meaning” [1, p. 192]. It is true that the ludic aspect related to culture, fun and spectacles of all types is currently highly economically profitable and therefore “grows” with “urban society”. But Lefebvre is talking about another type of leisure and ludic component, one that is part of everyday life, the public space and is in some way built by individuals in their face-to-face interactions in a real space and time. Passage and meeting places, such as the street, the café, the grocery store, train stations, are highly important in urban residents’ everyday lives. They are the places where the ludic should be invented.

Cafés are spaces that have always allowed for a range of contacts and different forms of sociability in everyday life. Lefebvre gives the example of an SAS (Syndicat des Architectes de Seine) project, the *Bistrot-Club*, which fits into his idea of “new urbanism”. The SAS architects propose the building of a space with dance halls, meeting rooms and venues for every set of 200 homes.

It means building a space that is at once for discussion and for leisure, created by individuals themselves through meetings and joint initiatives. The space stimulates social life, the ludic, celebration, and fits in entirely in the idea of “new urbanism”.

4.2.2 The importance of utopian thought for building urban society

The importance that Lefebvre assigned to utopian thought is connected to his radically critical stance regarding capitalist society, particularly the form of urban society it is establishing. That is behind his investment in “utopian imagination [that] introduces a revolutionary component to conceptions that arise from realism, functionalism and formalism” [1, p. 193].

I will briefly summarise his position regarding preparatory work for the construction of a new urban area: a city of roughly 30,000 residents near Zurich, a project produced by a range of architects and urbanists.

Lefebvre’s stance is critical but interested in the project. While on the one hand he believes that the project does not cut away from CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture) or the Athens Charters, because it also follows a functionalist rationale and seeks to optimise social relations in capitalist society, on the other hand he highlights areas in which the project stands out from current urbanism projects.

The following are some of the positive aspects of the project mentioned by Lefebvre:

- Interdisciplinary work – It aims to understand multiple aspects about the territory: physical, social, historical, cultural, architectural, economic, etc. It contains a critical analysis of the existing “new towns”.
- It uses the “experimental utopia” method – it starts with a virtual, possible object, and compares it with experience.



We could ask, however, if in light of the great transformations that have taken place in society in the meantime, particularly due to new information technologies, whether it still makes sense to look to an author's thoughts on a situation – daily life and the urban – that has since undergone such extensive changes. But, throughout his work, Lefebvre warns us against a tendency to design and build a world in which science is seen as having the main role, in which we, social scientists, planning specialists, urbanists, become mere tools of that construction. By trying to solve the major problems that arose – such as, for example, scarceness of accommodation and transport or access to consumer goods and places – we have created spaces that try to respond to immediate needs with technical rationality but that “force” people to lead a dehumanised daily life and cause the privatisation of individuals. Underlying this critical side to Lefebvre's thought, what we find is a broad conception of rationality that connects scientific rigour with the use of technical resources and means, citizens' political participation and a renewal in the art of “making the city” with “work” (*oeuvre*) and “use value” prevailing over production for the market and “exchange value”.

Lefebvre makes it clear that the urbanist will have to choose one of two opposing positions on the future of urban society: one defending the prevailing rationale that sees the future in a consumerist society of leisure; or one that criticises and rejects the technical-bureaucratic society, instead seeking to produce a space that is not one of alienation, restriction and inequality. The example of Magnaghi [13] fits into an urbanism that is clearly different from the rationale of global capitalism and proposes a different paradigm of land organisation based on the concept of *self-sustained local development* [13].

It is, however, very clear for Lefebvre that, as well as what architects, urbanists, social scientists and politicians may think and propose to create “urban society”, none of them is the real protagonist of “new urbanism”: “Only social life (*praxis*), in its overall creative capacity, has such a power” [1, p. 155].

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