

How to quote this text: Perrin, M., 2001. Ideology of the city & utopia of dwelling: the urban coexistence in paradox, Translated from French by Anja Pratschke, *VIRUS*, [online] June, 5. Available at: <<http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/virus05/?sec=4&item=4&lang=en>> [Accessed dd Month yyyy].

Ideology of the city & utopia of dwelling: the urban coexistence in paradox

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Abstract

It is hereby proposed to use the concepts of ideology and utopia to explain the contemporary tensions that may exist between the scale of the city and that of dwelling. Such a reading leads to rethink the issue of balance of power and the manner it influences the morphology or even the segregating patterns within Western cities.

Keywords: ideology/utopia, dwelling/city, residential enclosure, segregation, democratization.

Introduction

Ascertainments of a fragmentation at the heart of the contemporary urban environment are increasingly numerous. The city struggles to constitute a society (Donzelot, 1999). There is no longer this binder which once made of the urban area a set of relatively interlinked spaces. Since then, many areas have emancipated themselves, resulting in a diversification of destinations. Urban geography then relates some complexity, particularly in the residential scale. The home no longer offers only a life situation. It became a target of sectoral interests. In other words, it turns itself into a vector of a relationship, highly political, with the rest of the city. Such a development may seem surprising or even anachronistic since most Western societies tend to show today a more democratic face. More and more people are taking part in the practice of citizenship. And at least in the political status a greater equality seems to be respected. However, this dynamic is not much translated into the space. It would even be

rather the opposite. The phenomenon of openness in political and social fields is offset by increasingly strict closure of spaces in Western settlements. The extent of public domain is gradually restricted and the prohibitions to access to places multiply, where formerly citizens circulated freely.

The diffusion of gated communities seems to indicate a radicalization in this process of closure of urban space, as they confiscate surfaces of the open city. However, some intermediate settings, less visible, had already started this trend. For example, long ago, the allotments have been reducing the public sphere area of influence, directing the fate of internal spaces under the control of a private administration, dedicated to a highly localized cause. Thus, security concerns may certainly explain the raising of walls, but generally more immaterial borders surrounded already residential neighborhoods of the elite in the late 19th century. Even today, many residents of gated communities say they were especially attracted by the living environment, the services and equipment quality, the neighborhood sociability, or by the efficiency of the excellent internal management, rather than by the safety devices.

The main goal is then twofold. To identify the reason for this contemporary valorization of living, which had begun even before the physical closure of residential areas, and to grasp the mechanism which allows to explain the intense segregation processes in Western societies, which have been yet largely democratized. This text will propose an answer to these two questions based on the concepts of ideology and utopia. They seem well suited to understand the contemporary tensions that exist between the city and the living, between a more open universe and a more private world.

1. Urbanisms: ideology and utopia

Initially, the terms ideology and utopia had a distinct history. It was only in the early 20th century that the German sociologist K. Mannheim (1929) associated them to understand two antagonistic ways of thinking. Utopia is the process used by those who are in lack of power, who have not the ability to act on the real. It is not by chance that utopia emerges first as a literary style, because usually the ideal world described by the authors is not free of ulterior motives. Between the lines, it is often perceived a condemnation of the real society, which is considered faulty and unfair. The criticism appears more or less covert, depending on the writer's freedom of expression, but is usually expressed with some caution, because the real is threatening¹. Thus, the author distances him very early from the society in which he lives, describing a world without defined time and space. The presumed etymology of the term "utopia" would be revealing. The creator of the neologism, Thomas More (1516), would have added the prefix "u" to a form derived from the Greek *topos*, meaning place. Not geographically locate was indeed described the island idealized by the English intellectual. This distancing through abstraction

¹ The majority of writers having tried the literary utopia had very difficult lives. Authors, such as More, Harrington, Bacon, Campanella or Cabot, all experienced at one time or another an isolation during their journey. This could be exile, imprisonment or isolation, and sometimes even a sentence to death which haunted these utopians.

guarantees the especially fabricated world not to be tainted by the misdeeds striking the real. But again, it's also a way for the writer to escape a repressive daily life. Utopia is thus not a simple image, or a simply invention of the mind, but more widely a way of thinking which tends to develop in people suffering from not being able to act and effectively transform the society. Probably, we should even find the origin of this mental process in the unconscious. (Dadoun, 2000) Conversely, K. Mannheim uses the concept of ideology to describe this mode of thinking that fits directly into the real and the history. There is no longer talking about avoidance or distancing, as the battle may be conducted within society, in politics or the media sphere, for example. It exists the place and even hope for those interventions having a weight on the future. The ideologue thus enjoys a freedom and power that no utopian knows. The former can work in the background, swarming his ideas openly in public debate, while the latter should be confined to the form, mutedly drawing a world of the unreal.

This dialectic opposing ideology and utopia has a definitive potential, susceptible to enrich the analysis of the contemporary urban. Are there not more integrated ways of investing in the city, working the urban substance? There does not exist, conversely, more detached modes of investment, modeling particularly localized forms? So no doubt we should design two urbanisms, one ideological and other utopian. For example, the spirit of the Haussmannian manager's gesture, which transformed radically and massively the central tissues and life of the city, differs widely from the developing act, intended to provide a framework for housing of quality for a specific clientele. Admittedly, these two urbanisms are sometimes complementary, but they reveal very different logics. Scales of intervention are generally not the same and the involved players in the planning work also vary. On one side there is a more general involvement of public authorities taking care to design the town, and on the other side an investment from private developers, focusing on the factory of the inhabited world. And we should not believe that the residential issue has always been treated in an utopian way, left to private developers seeking more interest in the neighborhood rather than the urban community. Residential areas and housing policies developed during the modern period, by a government extremely influential, show especially the opposite. Housing was even frequently monumentalized (Pinson, 1997). The home was therefore quite directly integrated into the life of the city, limiting opportunities for privacy throughout the neighborhood.

The way the population inscribes itself into space is absolutely not neutral, and consequently also into the life of the city. The proof is the debate that began with the phenomenon of residential enclosure. The multiplication of these barriers and walls, coming to protect residential areas in many cities, is fairly regularly considered as violence, as an offense done to the life of the city. The reason is that generally affluent populations distance themselves, at least spatially, from the rest of the city, although the phenomenon is then distributed to more modest residents. However, and contrary to the original idea, this evolution in the elite ways of living likely reflects a weakness, especially in the light of the historical evolution. While elites have historically been able to reshape large areas to organize space according to their

convenience and their own interests at the beginning of urbanism in particular, here now they appear concentrating their efforts on restricted areas. The influence of the dominant strata on the city would be at minimum. There is no more question of working the urban fundamentals, and thus to decide the overall structure of the city with a certain authority, but to increase the effort on the form, that is to say, especially on the living environment on which it is still possible to keep a grip. In other words, it is by default, and after a capability loss to act on a democratized urbanity, that the elites attach themselves to define more locally the space which is likely to wear their own interests. Lacking the means of ideological investment, and facing a city no longer always drawn to their advantage, these populations would have opted for a form of resident withdrawal, qualified as utopian.

2. Democratization and segregation

Urban segregation reveals largely the balances of power existing in the city. But it should not be established a direct relationship between the two of them. The most discriminated areas are not necessarily illustrative of the most unequal societies. For example, little geographic distance was separating the master from the slave in the urban environment, whereas an extreme dominant relationship existed between these two figures. However, despite this contiguity, spaces clearly expressed the hierarchy. The architectural symbolic or the conduct to be adopted in different places of the city reminded constantly the slave of his inferior status. Why then the master would want to hold off a labor force at distance, knowing his servility and meeting his needs? Rather, when the dominant tends to lose its authority, when he tends to regard the coexistence as threatening more than as interesting, a drastic reorganization of space seems necessary to him. Paradoxically, the use of violence is often significant for a loss of authority (Arendt, 1969). In other words, voluntarily segregated planning practice is generally indicative of some weakness among elites. They certainly have the power to decide yet, to explore the space, but they feel the need to use this capability to print a hierarchy on the city, challenged at the social level.

If the spatial segregation can be a paradoxical consequence of the democratization of Western societies, without doubt we should further refine the reading. Because different segregationist models exist, influencing the urban at rather different periods of history. The democratization of a society is done at a long period of time, and includes distinct phases. The space reflects this, not discriminating itself in the same manner according its stages. It is then necessary to distinguish at least two segregative models, one excluding and enrolling in a mainly ideological planning practice, and the other exclusive and more consistent with an utopian version of planning. The first one is essentially based on operating devices in the urban background, ready for example to exclude undesirable large populations from the historic centers, while the latter depends primarily on local actions taking place, guaranteeing to certain forms and certain enclaves a populational desired identity. The boundary between these two segregative models is sometimes subtle, but the nuance is important. Because the exclusionary devices

assume an authority over the life of the city and the public power through the actors, who engage broadly in this discriminatory policy. Whereas the exclusive measures are only asking for control over a small area, often residential in nature, and in which its local demographic becomes homogeneous. In other words, it is necessary to differentiate the municipal enterprise, which would launch large Haussmannian interventions, and by this way redefining social and / or ethnic identity on a large scale, and the management office of a co-ownership being able to select its future residents. The discrimination of space is done following a downward logic (top-down) in the first case, and upward (bottom-up) in the second one. And if both segregative forms, exclusionary and exclusive, organize the urban space for a very long time and with some concurrency, we must nevertheless identify a historical evolution.

When the modern urbanistic discipline is born from the second half of the 19th century, the city appeared as an object largely unsuitable to its time. The massive industrialization and / or the disintegration of the patriarchal system, sometimes even enslaver, led to migration of large numbers to the city. Cities were being thus faced with a massive influx of new populations, changing broadly local densities and sociologies. The traditional balance was therefore no more. Faced with the inadequacy of urban patterns and major dysfunctions, a strong intervention was indispensable. But then developed urbanism was not satisfied to offer only technical solutions to the cities' problems. Or if that was the case, the realized choices nevertheless showed certain guidance. Planning therefore also proved to be a business of space organisation for the benefit of the society's dominant strata. As if it became necessary to redesign the city after the heterogenization of the urban demography. The waves of migration have actually democratized the city, as having entered into its heart a new populational diversity. The adopted urban measures, which found their legitimacy in particular in a sanitary emergency, also provided the means to review the conditions of such a coexistence. Thus, in the largest Western cities, municipal authorities have often worked to set up a huge segregative apparatus. On behalf of hygienist regulations, when many neighborhoods at that time had indeed deplorable living conditions, many homes were destroyed and their residents were expelled, these latter having no other choice but to join equally precarious suburbs. The haussmannisation policies, aiming at modernizing old urban tissues, also provided a pretext for dislodging the poorest population from central areas. Such actions were often conceived as civilizing enterprises: while the city grew in cachet, the public power was hiding in the peripheries this and those that should no longer be shown. Thus, the diffusion of zonal regulations has often restricted the occupation of the central areas by ethnically or socially undesirable population by prohibiting certain types of residential settlements or economic activities in which the targeted communities excelled. Finally, the state-level administrations have participated in the development of this segregative institutional apparatus by conducting highly discriminatory housing policies.

Only after the Second World War, and at different rates depending on the different western countries, this institutionalized, segregative excluding model lost force. The public power

behavior in this domain has been moving rather positively. Certainly much would remain to be said, but legislators, supreme courts or simply popular pressures have gradually limited the discriminatory capacity of public administrations. The claims made by minorities, civil society and the opening of local and national political issues to previously excluded populations have changed the balance of power. The public urbanism is no longer subservient only to elitist interests. Nevertheless, segregation marks today's urban just as much. But something has changed, particularly in the distribution of space. Generally, the segregative excluding model clearly opposed major regions through sharp boundaries. The identity of the center often distinguished itself from that of the suburbs, or the standard between the west and east neighborhoods has varied. Through inertia, this geographical rather dual model continues to organize many cities. However, it tends to disappear, making way to a more complex organization model, designed largely by private actors, as the spotlight of the residents territories. The space then often shows a more exploded face, more fragmented and more difficult to read. Without doubt this is the morphology of a city being more and more widely developed on an ascending mode (bottom-up)². And probably this transition should be considered between a first segregative excluding model and a second one, of an exclusive nature, at least in part significant of an evolution in the balance of power. After having gradually lost their ability to organize the whole agglomeration according to their interests, the elites would have found it advantageous to concentrate their investments in a residential setting over which they have a wider control. In the end, and although there is not always a directly segregative will in the residential choices made by these population, the space is discriminated, as they look for the residential setting simply best matching their expectations. The residential market is then segmented, reducing the possibilities of coexistence.

3. Residential closure and resident utopia

The gated communities show finally close characteristics to the cities imagined by utopian writers. R. Ruyer (1950) had been able to identify a number of elements constitutive of utopian worlds. Such cities are first of all isolated entities, island-like, autocratic, and often protected by large ramparts. Thus, a foreigner who, by pure chance would encounter the path to access this imaginary destination would yet need to cross the walls. The protection offered to the utopia is a guarantee against the real. The drifts of this latter could not come to corrupt the described society, because the imagined world is very often an antithesis, opposing itself in many points to the real environment. In response to an ambient chaos, the author offers a

² In some cities such as Rio de Janeiro or Sao Paulo for example, very early, private developers have contributed to the development and expansion of the urban. In the late 19th century, these actors often proposed to the elites a living environment that public authorities, then too poorly organized, were not able to offer. The city had not yet been shaped by the authorities to make it suitable to the needs of the more affluent strata. The dynamism and influence shown gradually by private developers in the city since the end of the Second World War, were thus not non-existent in earlier contexts. Some cities, since their beginning, show therefore a very fragmented occupation, indicative of a more exclusive segregation. Only in the early 20th century, space was worked with a more exclusory model. It is only in its outlines that excluding and exclusive segregated models, or even ideological and utopian urbanism can be differentiated.

perfectly regulated society. Quite often this aspect is also visible in the gated community. Many are the families choosing to live in such a place not only for its closure, but also for ensuring a good quality residential setting, whereas public authorities are not always able to provide such provisions. Also the utopian cities are very often strictly regulated, revealing a certain authoritarianism. Social control is extreme, leaving little freedom to the population. If this element is not necessarily true for all gated communities, however a trend does exist. The behavior to adopt, the living timetable, the outsiders visits, the possessions of pets may be examples subject to regulation. And that, generally, in a much more inflexible form than in open residential spaces. Also the initial architectural, landscaped and urban form has to be secured, because a degradation of its original appearance would indicate a certain decline of the residential complex and a loss of standing. In utopia, the spatial dimension is also important, as maintenance failure would cause the city's loss of perfection, resulting in an inevitable degeneration. The harmony and geometry of the whole must be preserved at all costs because they are symbolic of the good functioning of the utopian society. So, a dogma of fixity reigns in this ideal city as well as in the gated community. In these two worlds, degradations are more feared than potential beneficial changes are expected. In utopia, an ahistorical universe, time generally does not hold on institutions and on urban form. The gated community is traditionally managed by a regulatory body more inclined to maintenance of the current than to modification. At many points, to change things, the vote of a qualified majority of owners is required, or even unanimity is needed when the topic is crucial. Finally, whatsoever it is in the utopia or in the gated neighborhood, a certain homogeneity is usually maintained. This can be found for example in the architectural formal solutions, since sometimes only similar architectural forms are allowed, or of course in the resident population. The destiny of the whole is easier to contemplate as supposed to satisfy families and individuals with similar profiles.

It is probably no coincidence that these two worlds, the ideal city and the gated community, appear shaped by similar characteristics. In both cases, it is about a utopian form being constructed in opposition to an ideological background. And in order to emancipate itself, the created entity has to answer to criteria of distinction, of integrity and of consistency. Otherwise, any form disappears into the background, being no longer able to exist. Hence the need for a certain management accuracy, preserving the location particular identity. Moreover, another point is particularly interesting. Whether in the ideal city or in the gated neighborhood an important link between spatiality and institutions is established. One cannot exist without the other. This is a security for the residents to know that their surrounding is managed by an administrative body defending the inhabitant interest and not the collective one, since this latter may be often disadvantageous to him. It is guessed here one of the probable causes of the contemporary urban space fragmentation. The city finds itself in competition with institutions having a quite different sight, much more localized and sectorial. Especially the elites, although then followed by other demographic strata, were the first to have seized the

advantage to relate their destiny at least partially to the inhabitants power. The tension between dwelling and the city exists not only through walls, or even in geographical borders separating these two less physically worlds, but also on a political level, because these spaces uncoupled that way reveal different administrative bodies.

The major assumption offered in these writings invites to interpret this new interest carried by Western elites in relation to their residential surroundings, in particular as the consequence of some loss of power. Having democratized itself, the city is no longer the field that once was modeled to meet their interests. In contrast, very often on a private developers' proposal, these populations have found in the residential products, closed or not, a support to their cause. In other words, by this strategic change to which they were forced, the elites have slipped from a residential mode of ideological nature to a living mode of utopian spirit.

Conclusion

The contemporary valorization of dwelling, which is visible especially in the more or less concrete closing of residential areas, is not a neutral phenomenon. The territorial definition of lodging and of the life environment, as well as the manner in which they cling to the rest of the city, reveal a complex relationship between the household and the city. Very broadly, the economic factors were used to explain the process of making the dwelling a sphere of effective action, allowing the defense of more sectorial interests. A different reading was proposed in this text, more focused on the balances of power and retaking the concepts of ideology and utopia. There is no intention of challenging the quality of early analysis. The two phenomenon interpretations can certainly be complementary.

The concepts of ideology and utopia, neglected by a large majority of contemporary scholars, could help for a new understanding of space and its evolutions. Certainly, the pair has the defect of being too binary, leading to an analysis sometimes rather caricatured, but a potential exists. Science probably did recently set aside these two scientific objects because of their modernist connotation. F. Lyotard (1984) and J. Baudrillard (1994), each in his own way, have respectively defined postmodernity as an era in which there was not anymore place for ideology and utopia. But maybe this is more of our grids for reading the world that need to be adapted. Very often, utopia is conceived as a necessarily progressive way, making itself a challenge of the real or of an ideological background, dominated by elites. Without doubt, with the democratization of Western societies, this relationship needs to be reviewed, because dominant and dominated relations have changed considerably. Why the elites, who once enjoyed a much greater capacity of action, could not adopt a more utopian attitude, in response to more democratic decisions that are less favorable to them?

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