

The Question of Identity in the Contemporary City: Spaces of Tactical Resistance

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PLACES AND NON-PLACES

The increasing homogenization of urban space is probably one of the most influential aspects of urban analysis in the last decade. Critics like Michael Sorkin (1992) and Christine Boyer (1996) have argued that one gains identical experiences all over the world in the controlled environments of theme parks, shopping malls, airports, new residential enclaves, and - by extension - whole zones of entertainment and consumption in the post-industrial city. These new urban spaces no longer possess a clear-cut identity, a particularity or an individuality, but have become 'generic'. The unalloyed particularity of traditional spaces (the agora, the piazza, the park or the city center) is absorbed into the endlessly stretched field of what Sorkin calls the *ageographical* city. "The new city replaces the anomaly and delight of such places with a universal particular, a generic urbanism inflected only by appliqué" (Sorkin, 1992, p. xiii). Rem Koolhaas describes 'The Generic City' as a city "liberated from the captivity of the center, from the straitjacket of identity" (Rem Koolhaas, 1995, p. 1249). Although Koolhaas' observations are more evident in parts of Asia and the United States - where the urban tissue is more fragmented between dislocated objects, and where urban edges are almost infinitely expandable and consumable - the physically decentered or generic city is rarely experienced in its purest form. The present-day urban landscape is not entirely defined by global homogenization, but also by the often dramatic tension between the generic and the specific, the global and the local (see a.o. Rowan Moore, 1999). This tension produces distinctive moments of incongruity and ambivalence in the post-industrial city, such as strange juxtaposition and the sudden changing of scale or intensity.

Marc Augé (1995) argues that 'non-places', by which he simply means those generic spaces we have come to associate with modernity (such as airports, motorways, bus terminals, underground railways, shopping malls, theme parks and the like) are proliferating, and so modernity is slipping silently into what he calls 'supermodernity': a condition he describes as motivated by the complex conditions of advanced capitalism and the desire for speed, efficiency and economic success. The 'non-places' he describes seem to have no exterior and apparently require no physical connectivity to worlds beyond their controlled interior environments, except through the presence of exit signs, toll-booths, ticket barriers and the like. However, the borderlands between place and 'non-place' are necessarily incomplete and only variously 'completed' through habitation and individual interpretation. Place and 'non-place' are contrary poles, but - as Augé argues - the place never disappears completely and the 'non-place' is never fully established; they are palimpsests on which the confusing game of identity and relation finds its own reflection over and over.

In his essay entitled 'Terrain Vague' Ignasi de Solà-Morales (1996) explores places and sites that, in economic terms, momentarily exist outside of the city's effective circuits and productive structures, as

described by Marc Augé. His comments have an obvious potency in a European context, where residual urban spaces or fallow terrains often prove to be the ideal breeding ground for the development of new social and spatial practices. According to de Solà-Morales, these interstitial spaces or 'terrains vagues', are "the privileged sites of identity, of encounter between present and past, at the same time as they offer themselves as the last uncontaminated redoubt in which to exercise the liberty of the individual or the small group" (de Solà-Morales, 1996, p. 23). Thanks to the absence of activity, the loss of its original meaning or the change in its status, these sites often have a liberating potential. The specificity of the urban terrains vagues is revealed in the unexpected or unplanned everyday use - the use of a space as a place in which to meet, live, rest, consume or stage a performance. They constantly acquire changing meanings and identities because users keep on reorganizing and reinterpreting them.

EVERYDAY URBAN SPACE

Beyond the scope of the critical views on the contemporary urban condition, is the body of work that addresses how people use popular environments like malls and theme parks and the way everyday practices can be seen as vital elements in the process of making those environments meaningful. Shut out of the analysis is the multiplicity of micro-narratives projected onto these environments by people who actually visit/use them, the personal narratives that impart significance and gauge the degree of authenticity in reference to the visitor's/users own lives. Hand in hand with personal narratives and use go individual practices of signification, which manipulate the appropriated objects and temporarily transform the property of another into a new, autonomous 'space'. These activities are characterized by a resistive occupation of what Marc Augé called 'non-places'. Slacking off from the obligation to consume, they colonize the urban space temporarily rearranging the spaces created by the logic of consumption and production and deliberately operating through forms of tactical engagement to deform and obstruct commodifying tendencies. They continually short-circuit the contractual rules of 'non-places' and although they may leave traces of their colonization they cannot, and by definition do not desire to, strategically alter the physical environment, but only to disturb it.

According to Margaret Crawford (1995), it is by taking account of the daily practices of these 'counterpublics' that a truly democratic public sphere emerges; one that is based on contestation rather than on unity and created as much by conflicting interests and violent claims as by reasonable debate. Crawford makes clear that public space is not fixed in space and time, but is constantly subject to change as a result of the reorganization and reinterpretation of the physical space by different users. In practice, the meaning of what is public is constantly redefined

by various public interactions which actively restructure the urban space. By rethinking and enlarging the definition of 'public' in this way, Crawford manages to deal successfully with the by now well-known narratives of the 'loss' or decline of public space. At the basis of this perception of loss lies a trace of nostalgia for traditional public spaces and places (the agora, the forum, the piazza, the boulevard) which according to Michael Sorkin, Mike Davis and others suggest a 'more authentic urbanity', but which in reality were as much structured by a significant exclusion of particular social groups, such as slaves, women and workers.

The collection of essays entitled *Everyday Urbanism* (Chase, Crawford and Kaliski, 1999) looks more closely at the 'power' of practices and uses, to give meaning and identity to the everyday urban space. Since the different contributors are aware of the way the everyday is pushed aside in the urban environment, they pay particular attention to apparently ordinary or trivial practices in the post-industrial city and even attribute to them a liberating political, or at least micro-political, force. The urban activities referred to in *Everyday Urbanism* range from creative bricolage and territorial demarcation, through the sometimes illegal practices of street-vendors and the homeless, to strikes and immigrant riots. However, in these examples, the everyday soon falls prey to fetishization and aestheticization, because it is very easily assumed that the homogeneous and generic character of the post-industrial city is neutralized by the site-specific everyday practices. Those practices can at best put the supposed generic character of the city under tension again and - where possible - create distinctive moments or sites. However, one of the greatest merits of this publication is that the various authors try to rethink the 'everyday' - as conceived philosophically and culture-theoretically by a.o. Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau - in terms of the present-day urban space.

SPACES OF RESISTANCE

The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre made a substantial investigation into the almost completely ignored spheres of everyday life. According to Lefebvre (1991), the concrete space of everyday life is the domain that is restricted and colonized by the abstract space of the commodity (the economy) and the territory of the state. Abstract space is an instrument of domination, suppression and control by which the urban space is homogenized. To this extent, Lefebvre's views do not differ that much from present-day criticism of the homogenization of urban space. However, Lefebvre argues that the capitalist or abstract space not only eliminates differences but also produces them. Abstract space

"continuously heightens the contradiction between the production of space for profit and control - abstract space - and the use of space for spatial reproduction - the space of everyday life, which is created by but also escapes the generalizations of exchange and technocratic specialization" (Deutsche, 1996, p. 76).

The instability of abstract space allows users or displaced groups to contest, occupy and reappropriate the urban space. The 'resistant' space against the dominant order ensues from the suppressed, peripheral or marginalized position of its users.

In his fascinating study of the 'invention' of the everyday, the French philosopher Michel de Certeau finds himself attracted to the illusive reality of subversive practices and forms of infra-political resistance, which he clearly regards as being in some substantial sense constitutive of 'everyday life'. In de Certeau's model of the city, owners and organizers possess the 'places' of power. These are points of concentration 'proper' to them and from them emanate their strategies of control over citizens. 'Space', on the other hand, exists between and beyond its places. The weakness of city dwellers in having no proper place, turns out to be their strength, for it designates the possibility and even the necessity of invention and creative use. According to de Certeau, 'space

is a practiced place': space is 'a place you deal with', 'an intertwining of moveable elements'. He sees creative practices as tactical operations which take place within the network of calculated strategies followed by designers and power blocks (planners, architects, institutions, political leaders, ...). The space of a tactic is never fixed, rarely visible and always constituted through the fleeting and unexpected appropriation of the spaces of established power. In the fissures in-between the institutionalized normative procedures and their spatial inscriptions, everyday practices always unfold in time. Tactics are clandestine, almost guerilla-like in the way in which they take advantage of a given situation. Some people always have interest in producing and controlling public space (by applying normative procedures, for instance), and others take interest in utilizing it (by practicing freedom of movement and speech, for instance). Negotiations thus happen in the fissures between these two realms of interest. Gradients of exclusion in urban public space can be intermittently eroded through tactical occupation. Urban tactics are effective in forging distinctive urban cultures and, on occasion, cultures of resistance.

CONSUMPTION AND RESISTANCE

A serious problem with theories like de Certeau's that find heroic behavior in the daily lives of ordinary people, is not that individual acts of defiance and resistance lack praiseworthiness but that finding satisfaction in small daily acts of defiance and coping overlooks, for those dedicated to meaningful social change, the larger and bleaker picture. This includes the consequences of exclusion, of exploitation, of poverty, of the social acceptance of the widening gap between haves and have nots, and so on. As bell hooks (1990) argues, there is a definite distinction between the marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance, as location of radical openness and possibility.

In de Certeau's version of urban society, consumers are *a priori* resistant to the functionalist rationality of the city's grid-plan, imposed by bureaucracy and administration. Michel de Certeau treats consumption as an active, committed production of self and of society which, rather than assimilating individuals to styles, appropriates codes and fashions, which are made into one's own. Contrary to the widespread opinion, consumption is, as Michel de Certeau emphasizes, by no means characterized by a purely passive reception, but rather by the 'secondary production' of the consumer, although this production remains concealed in the manner of use. In the process, hegemonic systems find themselves undermined,

"confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called 'consumption' ... characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation..., its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products, but in an art of using those imposed on it" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 31).

However, like much recent publications in the field of cultural studies, de Certeau's efforts to privilege consumption as resistance traps him in an abstract utopianism, whereby consumption must, by its very definition, constitute an act of defiance. Consequently, Kristin Ross (1996) counterposes de Certeau's political naiveté against Henri Lefebvre's more precise understanding of the global capitalist city. Yet such a reading partly obscures what is genuinely original about de Certeau's grasp of the relationship between consumption and space. His emphasis on tracking consumers in motion, as they move through the city, demands a new kind of research and involves mapping particular subjects in specific urban settings. In other words it demands ethnography of consumption. The turn to ethnographic work delivers insights into the relationship between identity and place, which cannot be supplied by the formal maps of the consumer city. It was this concern to deepen

understanding of the space-identity relation and the role everyday practices play within this relation, which characterized my own research in Brussels and my study of the site of the *Mont des Arts* in particular.

A CASE STUDY: THE BRUSSELS' MONT DES ARTS

The site of the Brussels' *Mont des Arts* ('Mountain of Arts') cannot be reduced to one of the above-mentioned categories of urban space. It is neither a controlled or spectacular environment nor a generic site; it is neither a non-place nor a terrain vague. In fact, the site is all this at one and the same time. The *Mont des Arts* is an emblematic urban space, a 'national' and 'royal' space that has outlived its *raison-d'être*. While many thousands roam everyday through its underbelly in the uncanny spaces of the underground metro and train corridors, the surface of the site is emptied out and is strangely non-urban, both in its experience and its functioning.

The site of the *Mont des Arts* embodies the actual manifestation of the complex political-economic and cultural history of Belgium. Situated on the slope between the Lower and the Upper Town, the site derives its character and identity from the exceptionally high concentration of national cultural institutions and monumental buildings that were constructed in the shadow of the Palais Royale.

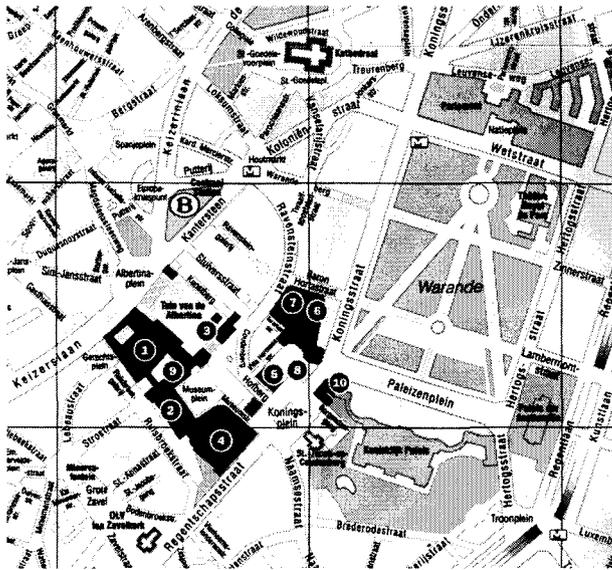


Fig. 1 / Map of the *Mont des Arts*

In the 1950s, new programs and functions (the Sabena Airline, the RTT telecommunications corporation, the Banque Nationale, the Bibliothèque Royale and the Gare Centrale) have nestled close to the palaces, libraries, archives and museums and have contributed to the representative character of this space. However, at the time of their completion in 1958, these symbols that were to embody the Belgian nation had already lost momentum. This politico-ideological shift is primarily characterized by the empty space on the *Mont des Arts*, that developed around an important underground railway link and that was never completely filled. The representative value of this central location has been further eroded by the simultaneous processes of globalization (the denationalization of companies and financial institutions) and ongoing federalization (the increasing autonomy of Flanders and Wallonia). What once constituted a relatively coherent power configuration (national capital, the state and the king) that shaped the area to enshrine and represent the Belgian nation, has now become fragmented, partly exploded, partly imploded. There are signs of this, not only in the partial neglect of the architectural heritage, but also in the new uses and meanings of the public space of the *Mont des Arts*.

A comparison of the site with the unproductive spaces Ignasi de Solà-Morales displays as *terrains vagues* is somewhat farfetched at first sight. The *Mont des Arts* is not vacant, but is characterized by an accumulation of infrastructure (whether operational or not) and of cultural institutions and offices. Nevertheless, the public space on the site does display striking resemblance to more canonical examples of urban *terrains vagues*, such as disused 19th century infrastructure (areas abandoned by industry, by the railways, by the ports) or undefined interstitial space in the postwar periphery. These are not formal affinities so much as the kind of interaction between the material infrastructure and the public space as shown in the everyday use and experience of the urban space. As a site that consists for a large part of public spaces, the *Mont des Arts* is indeed a physically accessible space, though on the symbolic level this turns out to be hardly the case. The so-called public institutions, such as the conference rooms, the museums and the Royal Library are closed boxes which fail to enter into any relationship with their urban public realm. Strangely enough, these individual programs do not in themselves offer any opportunity for the emergence of an intersubjective space to modulate or break open these 'non-places'. Inhabitants and other significant groups of citizens do not engage in any emotional relationship with these public spaces.

The hub of public life on the *Mont des Arts* is situated in the underground pedestrian corridors of the Gare Centrale.



Fig. 2 / Underground pedestrian corridor of the Gare Centrale

The space of the station itself has been transformed from a prestigious vestibule to a common transit area with many marginal functions and activities, such as (hidden) prostitution and cheap bars. The neighboring Galerie Ravenstein is now a seamless extension of the station and shares the same characteristics.

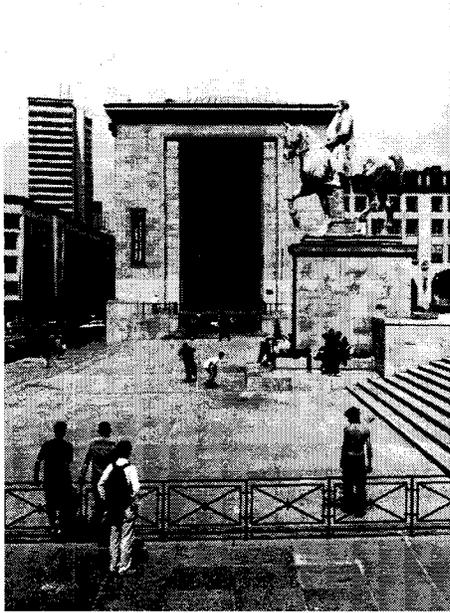


Fig. 3. / Galerie Ravenstein

The former bourgeois shopping arcade has gradually turned into a commuter corridor, with the accompanying tramps and homeless, flashing neon signs and drifting litter. The commuter flows gave rise to an economic micro-system of shops, snack bars and cafés. Commercial spaces that lie off the beaten track of passers-by - mainly on the upper floor of the rotunda - are empty. Break-dancers and tramps take over this part of the public space or have their niche there. The material emptiness of the arcade is accompanied by a shift in meaning (from shopping arcade to commuter corridor), creating new functions and forms of appropriation. Through various forms of tactical habitation, some new 'places' are constituted within the 'non-place' of the arcade.

The surface of the Mont des Arts - is temporarily colonized by the practices of skate-boarders. They are driven out of the Central Station and the metro tunnels, but they nestle in their immediate surroundings: the ashlar platform of the Jardin de l'Albertine or the arcades of the Palais des Congrès.



Fig. 4 / Skaters on the ashlar platform of the Jardin de l'Albertine

Young skaters occupy these parts of the site without participating in the cultural, administrative or economic activity that goes on in the surrounding buildings. Their performances are often disregarded as insignificant rhythms and routines, in which playing the game is all that matters. However, they determine the atmosphere of the site to a large extent. Unlike the temporary engagement of passers-by - that does not require a stable or territorial appropriation of the space - they leave sediment in the form of graffiti, or they make use of *objet trouvés* (paving stones, traffic bollards, etc.). Moreover, they appropriate a part of the vacant urban space, without emphatically dominating it. They implicitly disrupt the representative character of the urban space by a form of active recuperation or 'consumption'. Although other subcultures and marginal groups (such as drug dealers and tramps) also meet - by chance or not - in or around the Jardin de l'Albertine, this does not mean yet that their presence crystallizes as a critical urban practice or a form of social resistance.

CONCLUSION

The case study reveals how the in-between spaces of the Mont des Arts can/could activate new, not preconditioned signs of identity, and innovative places for meeting and exchange. Potentially, the Mont des Arts is a site of *tactical* mediation and opportunity. The everyday practices or tactics of various subcultures which develop in these spaces, might be able to break open the existing/imposed identity of the site. The further emptying out of the symbolic and material origin of the area will no doubt continue to generate tactics or counter-strategies that will attempt to refill, reappropriate, and re-enact the area with urban practices more in tune with the rhythms of the everyday urban space. They could pervert the making or remaking of the site as either spectacular museum or expression of a non-existent nation. Perhaps this may shape the imagination for the reintegration of this emblematic site as part of the everyday life.

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