

Poor but Still Sexy: Defining Urbanity in the Context of Emerging Spatial Paradigms Through Contemporary Sociological Lenses

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Abstract – In the wake of the global pandemic, urban landscapes are no longer just physical spaces; they have become battlegrounds for complex socio-cultural and economic dynamics. These transformative shifts have led to new patterns of socialization and, in turn, are aggressively reshaping the texture of urban settings. Such changes expose a range of deep-seated contradictions and paradoxes, one of which is encapsulated in the phrase 'poor but sexy,' suggesting that cities may be economically challenged yet remain vibrant cultural hubs. This essay sets out to explore these transformations through a multi-faceted theoretical approach. I engage through the lense of contemporary social theories—like Network Society and Late Capitalism—that explain hyper-connectivity and consumer-driven urban spaces, as well as traditional frameworks—such as Structuralism and Human Geography—that provide age-old wisdom on spatial relationships and social structures. The 'Public vs. Private' space conundrum, questioning who really 'owns' urban spaces in an era where public commons are increasingly commercialized draws on a variety of case studies. I try to discuss how these issues contribute to the evolving identity and function of urban environments. I also engage with Barrett's notion that any theory is 'bon à penser' when applied in the right context, asserting that multiple theoretical lenses can not only co-exist but also offer complementary insights into the complexities of urban life. By doing so, this essay aims to offer a multi-layered understanding of contemporary urban spaces, inviting the reader to reconsider established norms and paradigms in light of current socio-cultural changes.

Keywords – Sociological Problem, Second Modernity, Urban Scenography, Collective Consciousness, Simulacra and Simulacrum, Reflexivity, Transgression, Linearity

I. INTRODUCTION

In a 2003 interview with Focus Money magazine, then-Mayor of Berlin Klaus Wowereit responded to a question about the relationship between money and attractiveness by declaring, 'No! Just look at Berlin. We are poor but still sexy!' Wowereit's statement, which challenges the notion that wealth

is intrinsically tied to allure, has intriguing implications for the city's development. It offers a modern, sociological lens to explore the tensions between development and growth, or form and texture—tensions that have led to problematic outcomes in many urban contexts. This is exemplified by the 2014 project aimed at

redeveloping Skopje, as noted by various scholars (Janev, 2015; Skoulariki Athena, 2020; Véron, 2012). In the post-truth era, Skopje, the capital city of North Macedonia aims to simulate historical narratives to establish a new urban identity.

II. THE URBAN CONDITION

This invites us to reconsider the city as a construct and to perform a critical review—an 'anamnesis'—of urban conditions through what has been built. In an architectural context, we can learn much from the individual components that make up a city. However, as seen in the 2014 Skopje project referenced above, the built environment doesn't necessarily define urbanity; instead, it often serves as a mere backdrop for simulated experiences.

The quest to interpret truth through simulation encounters numerous sociological challenges. Jean Baudrillard provocatively asks whether even God can be simulated or reduced through an interpretation of the symbols that constitute faith (Jean Baudrillard & Translated by: Sheila Faria Glaser, 1994). According to Baudrillard, this line of questioning ultimately leads to the creation of a 'simulacrum,' a higher form of falsehood that changes the very nature of how cities are represented. This simulacrum not only deeply infiltrates the sociological landscape but also renders it impervious to critique, masking what Baudrillard calls the 'absence of deep reality.'

Within this framework, we explore emerging paradigms that function like fresh archaeological finds—newly recognized and suddenly altering our understanding of reality while leaving their own marks on urban landscapes. The question then arises: where does this narrative stem from? Is it rooted in a new urban theory that fetishizes decaying cities, as evidenced by the ruin-bar trend in Budapest? Or did it originate from the pop art movement in New York's decaying neighborhoods of the 1960s, which have now, through aggressive gentrification, metamorphosed into the ultimate socio-urban machines? Klaus Wowereit's famous remark about Berlin being 'poor but sexy' may encapsulate more than just a media-driven spectacle; indeed, the phenomenon of gentrification may very well be draining cities of their inherent allure.

In contrast, cities in decline offer a fresh narrative, one that emerges as a unique theory derived from reactions to long-term urban strategies and interventions. The sweeping political-ideological changes to urban life, particularly in the second half of the 20th century, have fundamentally altered the essence of the city. This trend can be traced back to the new social ideologies of European cities like Barcelona, Berlin, and Paris, which experienced massive transformations in the 19th century. For example, in 1848 Paris, under the newly established republic led by Napoleon III, Baron Haussmann was commissioned to overhaul the city in several crucial areas: public health, slum clearance, improved air circulation, traffic development, modern housing, and social order stabilization. Within 17 years, Haussmann's bold strokes led to the demolition of 20,000 homes, laying the foundation for the Paris we recognize today (Hildegard Schröteler-von Brandt, 2008).

III. THE SOCIAL CONDITION

This brings us to the concept of social order. In a world increasingly shaped by technology, the city functions as a primary apparatus for socio-political communication. Cities act as catalysts for change while serving as tools to reshape the social fabric according to ideologies that emerged in the 19th century. This theme of the city as a social tool originated in Renaissance Italy, extending and adding depth to an urban strategy that has lifted cities from the mire of medieval times. Cities transitioned from fortresses designed for external defense to platforms aimed at creating new social orders and citizenships. In 14th-century Italy, the cityscape became a living theater for modern cultural thought, redefining the concept of 'belonging.' Here, a citizen isn't just a resident but has a clearly defined role in a carefully designed social hierarchy—a trend dating back to ancient Roman concepts (Spiro Kostof et al., 1995). This transformation is enabled through innovative urban planning methods that redefine public spaces, creating new communal environments designed with the citizen as a prime subject.

The Renaissance city precisely set the tone for the new urban concepts. This transformation subtly but authentically wove the idea of social order

throughout. Through the second urban revolution and the sweeping changes like those implemented by Haussmann, the plans of urban planners and social reformers were mercilessly co-opted to serve higher objectives, turning the city into a "terra incognita" archipelago.

In the latter half of the 20th century, Skopje, following the international wake, transformed into a city capable of housing more than double its original population. Adopting modern currents as envisioned by planners like Soria y Mata, Miljutin, and Le Corbusier, the city underwent a complete transformation through top-down processes. It transcended into a contemporary state that attracts a different kind of responsibility—namely, social responsibilities that increasingly allude to society as a process or network rather than a structure or solid (Bauman, 2007). The city becomes an indivisible texture founded chiefly on socio-communal conditions as the binding fabric of the solid. These processes are shaped by instability and various interconnected relationships through a vast number of potential permutations (Bauman, 2000).

Weber would ask: "What is a city?" Likely, with this question, he would first define the kinship between urban design and sociology, finding the threads of his answer in sociological theories that announced the birth of urban theory in the early 20th century in the USA. To effectively address the city's issues through sociological theories, we need to understand the psychological backdrop of the urban form that engendered individuality. This passage is a deep dive into the development of cities and urban planning, touching upon both historical transformations and contemporary responsibilities. It frames the city as not just a physical space but as a complex socio-cultural entity continuously molded by varying influences. This understanding allows for a richer, multidimensional approach to urban studies.

IV. THE SOCIAL PROBLEM

According to Georg Simmel, the city stands as a pivotal element in the destiny of modern man (Weber Max, 1958). From his sociological standpoint, Simmel contends that the most profound issues of modern life involve the preservation of

autonomy and individuality amid the social contexts shaped by historical legacy and culture. Here, in line with Immanuel Kant and later Simmel himself, there emerges a stark tension between form and content, perhaps representing the most significant repercussion of the technocratic ethos that would follow the second urban revolution.

Sociologically speaking, the narrative of individuality within previously assimilated patterns is the one that is shifting and directly influencing urban discourse. The roles of urbanity that have fostered linear (reflective) individuality (Beck et al., 2003) are transgressed, altering the traditional institutions and systems that, in their new "postmodern" guise, set forth a narrative of non-linear individuality striving for reflection but functioning only through reflex. As Ulrich Beck terms this new individuality, a product of the "second modernity," it operates rapidly—through reflex—making instantaneous decisions in the epoch of the new postmodern narrative (Beck, 1992). So, what is at stake here? Beck contrasts reflexivity with reflex, comparatively through the tenets: "I think, therefore I am" in the context of reflection, while "I am me" in the context of reflex (Beck et al., 2003). The former provides space for summation and appropriate reaction, whereas the latter is action at the very moment. Individuals in the second modernity lack the space for contemplation and are unable to create linearity. The theory of second modernity, closely aligned with postmodernism, furnishes a narrative that aptly explains the sociological conditions of the city, subtly penetrating contemporary instances and the fluidity of contexts that transgress.

V. REDEFINING THE URBAN PARADIGM

Newly emerged paradigms reconfigure the playing field! Here, Kant's dualism, the discourse of the mental and the physical, is read through a socio-urban prism that transgresses this dualism. The sociological versus the urban creates a fluid space of conscious awareness, thereby configuring a new narrative (Beck, 2014). The fictive barriers defining this narrative, in a sociological context, transform the subject into a quasi-subject that both constructs and emanates from these barriers. We speak of a new spatiality of "urbanness," the new urban fabric through which, by sequencing the processes that construct it, we discern ad hoc conflictual situations

that are carriers of ambivalence, contradiction, and the internationalization of uncertainty (Beck, 1992).

But faced with understanding this process of re-modernization, or understanding the meta-changes of modernity, we collide with the need for self-critique and a radical overhaul of modernity's cognitive core. However, Beck's theory is born out of the turbulent contexts of postmodernism, during times when society was (or still is) on a path outlined by political entanglements. One thing is certain: contemporary societal fragmentation has indicated (rather than warned) a transformation of modern rationality, namely transgressions through autonomous, unplanned, and unpredictable processes. Let's not forget Paul Virilio's interpretation of Aristotle (Paul Virilio, 2005); 'excellence is a completion' while continuing: 'and perfect accomplishment is a definitive conclusion'. Most likely, through epistemological play with coherence and the interpretation of the urban form's completeness in its second modernity, we provoke spatial intelligence and negate memory. The city, however, stubbornly resists and deeply carries within itself its memory as a cumbersome yet grandiose mnemonic device.

Here, postmodern theory serves merely as a tool enabling us to understand the limitations of knowledge amid a cacophony of information and brings awareness to the political discourse of insecurity (Dunn Cavelty & Mauer, 2009). Will Foucault's genealogical and archaeological analyses (Foucault & Faubion, 1998) be supplemented by the structural contexts of the urban? Are we entering the era of post-second modernity where the recycling of histories will create a new linearity that the modern city must skillfully balance? The very deconstruction and transgression of urban contexts have led reality into profound confusion, thereby depriving the city of its capacity for constructive criticism. At the same time, it calls into question the applicability of new sociological theories, transforming the city into an archipelago of endemic models.

Yet, despite all obstacles and challenges, the city remains a resilient sociological entity. Its resilience has been tested across millennia, surviving even the most devastating disruptions. It is the city's collective memory that serves as its constructive framework, allowing it to stride forth with pride and

upright posture. And in doing so, it exudes an inescapable ideological sex appeal—proving that, much like when we first described it, the city will always remain sexy!

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