

# >> The Urban Image – Becoming Visible

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### An urban world

We live in an urban world – where, for almost every one of us today, the way we live and what we experience is captured within what we think of as ‘the urban’. Our lives have become suspended and constituted within fast-moving, connected, and technologically mediated worlds. But at the very moment that ‘the urban’ comes to constitute our whole lives, the term itself, it seems, loses its foundation. It loses its opposite – the countryside or the periphery. That which is ‘not city’, which is ‘outside’ to the ‘inside’ of the city, and which the city needs, as the figure needs the ground, in order to specify its outline and its form, becomes something viewed through the windscreen of a fast-moving car or from the window of a high-speed train. It becomes a scenery for a still urban existence. Pointing out today that our world is urban is to point to the only remaining pole of the duality, and to realize that we point only at a state of our being. The problem for us at this point in time is not so much, as Lefebvre could still proclaim in the last century, a problem of ‘the urban’ as a distinctively *different* mode of existence, as it is simply a problem of existence itself and of our *being* in a contemporary world.

The once particular quality of ‘the urban’ has become a base-line experience, and we can expect no remission from this plain state of affairs. But in shifting the angle of our take on the problem, we can also redefine it in a way which preserves a continuity with the past even while noting a discontinuity – a non-linearity – at the level of our experience. The modern world of the 19th and 20th centuries has gone as surely as medieval and early modern worlds. This condition – of standing at the beginning of something new, something unformed and uncertain – leaves us feeling rudderless and trying to find our bearings; trying to understand and manage what is happening around us by referring back to better-known, apparently surer times. What I hope to demonstrate here is that we live in a world which was always provisional – that as long as there has been change in our worlds and in our surroundings, our experience has always been one of being on the brink of an unspecified outcome, and within a succession of events *bracketed in the frame of an open ‘urban’*.

### The substance of ‘the urban’

The presumed ‘shift’ to the urban as a universal condition, a shift Lefebvre signaled at the end of the ‘60s<sup>1</sup>, was also – and this was a cause of the controversy his book caused then – a shift, in his analysis, away from categories such as the political, the economic or the social, understood as sufficient as generators of an urban condition and as frames for understanding the city, and towards an analysis which was ordered and layered at a *spatio-temporal* level – around a monadology of ‘everyday life’ – and which was radically heterogeneous or hybrid as it concerned these other

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1

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categories.<sup>2</sup> Lefebvre was signaling that the instruments of the analysis of 'the urban' were failing, and that we were on the cusp of something new – something that he himself, committed Marxist, dialectician, and humanist, was clearly also uneasy about. Lefebvre noted the way the city was asserting a forceful autonomy; under the very eyes of the theoreticians it had begun a relentless and accelerating drift in directions given by attractors set by no human hand and framed within no contemporary explanatory diagram. The human artifact *par excellence* had broken free of the moorings we had constructed for it and was charting its own course. It was a course that was drawing an ever denser creeping web of urbanization over the globe's surface, driven apparently by the energies of a 'groundless ground of lived/living concatenation, conglomeration and visceral cross-reference'.<sup>3</sup>

The urban world had seemed suddenly to change in substance; from being a ponderous construction built towards the social end of the overdetermined poles of society and nature<sup>4</sup>, it had become something pulsing, alive, polyrhythmical, contingently eventful, and inexorably spreading and thickening. The 'black box' Lefebvre referred to has turned out in the end to be both more forceful *and* more ordinary, *and* more alien and autonomous, than even Lefebvre had imagined. It has forced us to reconsider our constructions of a bounded 'social' and revise our ideas of the elements and substances of societies and cities. What this has meant for a 'science of the city' has also been highly significant: in the first place the 'moorings' that had traditionally anchored the city as a human and social construction and object of study, had been called into question. All of a sudden, it seemed, and concomitantly with massive regularizations and compressions that processes of connectivity and mobility at a global scale were inducing, we were being confronted with the limits of some presuppositions that had been around so long we had forgotten they were creatures of our own making. The city had become something other than unambiguously 'social', something more than unambiguously 'artifact' and instrument of our civic and technical deliberations and wills, and something closer to that of 'force of nature'. It had become a site of autonomous creation and not simply a human product, a simple effect of humanly creative action. The urban had 'become "objective", that is creation and creator, meaning and goal.'<sup>5</sup>

To approach 'the urban' as 'objective', as 'autonomous creation' and as 'force of nature', is to approach the constitution of the world differently. The ordering apparatus and thinking procedures of previous analyses have been turned on their heads, and we have begun to understand that the city, in its dynamic order, is linked to universals which are more concrete and self-propelling and *real*, less transcendental and differentiated from the material of the world, and less inclined to follow or reflect the orders we use to make sense of these things.<sup>6</sup>

To approach 'the urban' in this way – as a genesis of form out of a field of 'moments' or 'events'<sup>7</sup> rather than as some representative or reflective form consequent on 'the social', 'the economic' or some other such framing – is to say that we no longer subsume this term within some social 'structure' whose levels and connections are guaranteed as if its integration belonged to 'the order of things'. It is to say that the condition of the urban is 'of the world', and working on its own terms, rather than being an issue of our structures and representations – but it is also to suggest the possibility that 'the urban' has *always* been of this 'objective' generative order, and that 'the urban' may not be about one way of life, one mode of social organization over another, but rather about the way an urban phenomenon and experience of the social emerges everywhere, and everywhere differently, out of the ways life intersects with situation in the very 'moment' or the 'event'. It is to say that a monadology of everyday life could belong to an imbricated *urban* ecology – each moment a new whole subsisting as one additional part alongside all the other parts. The process

of moments and their succession becomes in this framing *intrinsically open* as the 'multiplicity' expands with each new gathering of another moment.<sup>8</sup>

This becomes then an attempt to locate 'the urban' in the concrete universal of the situation rather than with the abstract universals of our categories. It is an attempt to link the moment of *social* experience directly with the material and with urban situation and to assert that the urban is fundamental to the constitution, and to an everyday *emergence* of an everyday social in its everyday appearance and visibility.

### **The city 'from above'**

The concrete universals that open a new and *visible* urban-social experience *in situ* are a gathering together of heterogeneous elements in fields of movement and encounter.<sup>9</sup> But this is a gathering just as emphatically from fields of movements and connections which are for the most part entirely *invisible* to us at the level of everyday experience. The contemporary urban world, in its pervasively creeping connectivity, drawing together what we imagine to be far, spreads a veil over its workings as it spreads its influence over us. We absorb it uncritically, falling like innocents for, and taking as given, the already there and materialized, which is itself the immediate evidence that we are connected to a world of whose workings we know next to nothing. The pathways to the global from the local are for the most part hidden to us, revealed only in more regularized and regulated forms; mass travel and tourism, phones and faxes and the internet. The global meanwhile appears *in* the local, brought to us along multiple inflected, regulated, unregulated, controlled, uncontrolled, and variably accessible pathways.

We begin in situation rather than in 'the social' and it would be a mistake to imagine that what is gathered to this local is in some way necessarily 'for' the social. It will in fact be one of the principle points made here that situation in its generative and open indeterminacy, is to a huge extent simply *found*, before it is appropriated and transformed – that our world is in the first place, and out of the processes which make it, a given, and that there is then a process of social translation and *remaking*.

The doubts Lefebvre started to articulate revolved in the first instance around a loss of a direct 'linearity' between the urban world and the social, but drew out also a more general problem in understanding the relation of knowledge to a complex and non-linear and variably transparent world. The city as it is manifest to us, in its simple visibility, often reveals, in a highly charged and intricately folded local, little more than our own projections onto its surfaces. It is one of the wonders of the city that it can mean so many things to so many people. This is one of its great strengths, and a sign of its openness, but these projections, taken individually or collectively, are a lousy starting point for analysis.

The city is one of the most compellingly visible manifestations of contemporary life. It is the reason we know something is changing – but it is the evidence, not the analysis. The image and the visual of today's city identifies a particularly contemporary form of modernity, different to that of New York of the 1960s or Berlin of the 1920s or Paris of the 1890s. It *represents* modernity in its visibility, while it *constitutes* in its invisibilities and indeterminacies the potentiality of the endlessly open of becoming. It is part of the very possibility of the new. It is part of the enabling power of the city that there is always something open and unexpected, even violent and alien, about the image we are confronted with. The city is not tailor made for us; it is not made to fit at all, is less than perfectly hospitable. It seems in fact often to be geared better to a life at another speed and scale, as if for another race of people, faster, bigger, stronger than we are. It is often encountered as exotic, unfamiliar, uncanny, while at the same time it frames the most ordinary and everyday of lives. It is in this tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the mundane and extraordinary, that it frames also the representations

we make in diverse media of who we are and what we would like to be. We exploit this tension to open ways to the glamorous, the novel and the forbidden. The city becomes more than the background; it becomes subject and character also in thousands of movies, music videos, advertising and fashion features and stories of contemporary life. It absorbs lives while often transforming them in the representations we make of them; blessing them with a halo, sometimes insubstantial and delusory, of novelty, of the contemporary, of the moment, of now.

But there are problems with this pervasive and expressive visibility as a way to the knowing of anything substantial about the city. Part of this relates to our situation as participants in the middle of a process we are not in a position to see in any totality. Our vision of the city is obscured by the overflow, the noise and excess, of what exists in our immediate field of view; we have no way of seeing the big picture while the clamor of the small one dominates our perceptions. It is a paradox, because of course the whole is *in* the monad; the problem is that the whole overflows its basic nature, and besides that we don't know in any immediate way by which pathways the whole got to be there. A veil of invisibility has been drawn over both substance and means.

### **Continuity and becoming visible**

The image of the city and of urban life of our photographs and of our films exists in the time frame of the unitary event and moment, and the slices of reality of the photograph or the frames of a film interrupt the succession of one event into another. We can decompose reality into slices, as in a CAT scan, but there is not, nor should there be, any expectation that by this means we expose the way urban reality is brought to life. We don't any more bring the city to life, or reveal its life force, by dissection than we do that of a body on the slab. In joining with this problematic of the time of life, we join the argument Bergson had with Bachelard and Deleuze with Badiou over the relative primacy of continuity over the event.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to an emphasis on things or events as entities that can be disengaged from their succession, it is central to the ideas of both Bergson and Deleuze, and also Whitehead<sup>11</sup>, that there is a realm of continuity which exists as a creative integrator and life-giver to the discontinuous realm of events and things we see around us. Real time is for them an *engine* of a *vital* succession rather than a simple scale in a succession of events.

In order to approach this continuity and its full implications, we have to throw off some of our preoccupation with, and our preconceptions of the unitary event, and indeed of the atomistic and divisible as a basis of existence. In order to do this we are lucky enough to have recourse to the spectacular disclosures of electromagnetism and quantum physics, which inspired much of this discussion in the first place, and which suddenly a century and more ago offered up some very different and for then, counterintuitive ways of approaching questions of existence. Joel Kovel refers to a 'plasma of being' as a grounding of existence that is not objectifiable; a primordial continuum that underlies all knowing and all knowledge of objects. The most surprising and most unfamiliar part of this idea is that it suggests that identity and identifiability, something we in our common-sense presumptions regard as fundamental to all existence, is founded not on ever smaller underlying identifiable units, as Leibniz for example believed, but rather on a fundamentally continuous (and fundamentally dynamic) substrate. 'In the universe as a whole there is no real separation between things; there are only, so far as the most advanced science can tell us, plasmatic quantum fields; one single, endlessly perturbed, endlessly becoming body.'<sup>12</sup>

Events emerge out of this continuous substrate as eruptions in the field – events which take on identity 'for us' but are 'in themselves' part of a fundamentally indivisible underlying continuity (a continuity which is nevertheless activated always and entirely in the local)<sup>13</sup> and remain connected to this continuity which is the source of their

power to be dynamically integrated into a world – which is the source indeed of the *force* of their ‘creative’ capacity to be and become in the world. A shift in perspective – from object to process and from the visible to the ‘becoming-visible’ – is an attempt to make contact with an order of the world which we are not in a position to observe directly. It is an attempt to see beyond the noise of the everyday and to go beyond the limitations of our everyday perceptions – and beyond perspectives within which we perceive and experience things first hand. It is an attempt to extend our visibility of an urban world far more rich and complex (and ultimately more ordered) than anything we could be directly responsible for constructing, either in our conceptions or on the ground.

A different being, an extra-terrestrial say, observing the processes of our planet and its urbanization from a different perspective, would see pattern erupting on the surface of the earth; pattern like a growth, apparently the result of underlying organic order. We, immersed in this growth, as part of the hybrid symbiotic stuff which constitutes these emerging patterns, do not see any such emergence directly, or, while we are immersed within this process and restricted to our perspective of the everyday local, even the possibility of such an order. At the same time such an order, emergent at a scale beyond our direct observation and experience, will return to affect and reconstruct our worlds. It will also return in rather counterintuitive and hidden ways, to integrate and structure our experience of the world. One could say that every emergence implies a ‘convergence’ – an entirely identical process whose difference is the perspective from which it is experienced.<sup>14</sup> We have learned from the sciences of complexity to be comfortable with the idea that large-scale patterns or properties may emerge from, without being reducible to, complex micro-dynamics at a smaller scale. What I am talking about here is more like this kind of complexity in reverse, where the minute and the minutely detailed and complex emerges out of *simpler* larger scaled processes and spatial orders, as *effects within* – like a sort of ‘fractal space-filling’<sup>15</sup> – of a much larger body.

It is for this reason that the products of direct visual imaginations, narrative or painterly, cinematic or photographic, in partitioning the flow of life and experience, will always miss an essential aspect of urban experience – which has to do with the integration or convergence of *whole* worlds<sup>16</sup>, and not just with the imaginative construction or reconstruction of those aspects of it that appear at the scales of that apparition or in the time frame of the narrative. This is to say that there is another part of urban experience, a part that comes from beyond experience; a part that is tied to a direct involvement with real successions at the leading edge of becoming. This is a becoming that is open, as we saw before, but is nevertheless framed within a ‘convergent’ and ‘whole’ urban – and it is by means of this convergence that the frame holds together for us. This is an issue of *form* and of a corporeal knowing and intelligibility; it is an issue of the ‘flesh of the world’, of the status of the city as ‘body’, and of ‘knowing before knowing’.<sup>17</sup> Actual urban experience encounters the genuinely novel, the unthought and surprising. But it encounters it through and alongside the ‘urban alien’ that is a product of a larger coherence that we encounter real-time in the urban continuity that reveals its form.<sup>18</sup>

### **Extending visibility**

We can, and do, develop imaginative understandings of the ‘extra-experiential’ ‘urban alien’ patterns contributing to such experiential ‘wholes’. We can begin to understand the orders supporting (and driving) the ‘fractal space-filling’ we encounter on the ground. Our visibility and our imaginative understandings are aided by technological means including satellite and aerial photography, or by simulations or diagrams of the matrices of the world’s ‘technological skins’ of connectivity. Again by means of our imaginations – this time of eco-systems which deliver complexly ordered ‘objective’ ‘founds’ and ‘givens’ rather than socially or subjectively ‘constructed’

worlds to the direct experience of participants in those systems – we can imagine how effects generated outside of the scales of our direct experience nonetheless very substantially contribute to the constitution of the world in which we perceive and act. This aspect – of the found and the *already*-constructed of our experiential urban worlds – is one which we tend to overlook when we emphasize the artifactual or ‘socially-constructed’ nature of the city and its space. It is one we overlook anyway given our particular perspective and natural-enough bias to the scale we know best. The urban ecology of which we are a part is a product in large measure of processes outside of the immediately visible or discernible of everyday lives; we can to all intents and purposes regard it more accurately as a socially-found ‘natural’ order, produced very substantially somewhere else and encountered as a somewhat alien given and found in the world of our everyday experience.

The veracity of this perspective, when held up against that of the naively imagined ‘social city’ – understood as something hand-made by and for us – is something that is becoming ever clearer today, in the hard-edged realities of increasingly pervasive global and metropolitan urban processes. But such a position once stated, returns the question back through urban history, seeking for the origins of such a state of affairs, and failing to definitively find them. It is possible, indeed probable I believe, that the city has always tended to be in the first instance something given and found, *not* made to measure; a creation of processes taking place outside of the scales of our immediate lives and our immediate visual and perceptual fields – and beyond the powers of our immediate agency or volition. The city has in all likelihood *always* been something more like an eruption out of a field of much wider scope, and our difficulty in understanding the nature of the urban, and our propensity for misunderstanding it, has probably always had to do with the fact that it was a factor of processes which were larger than us and our immediate lives – more widely distributed, material, dynamic and spatial – less the product of humanly or socially scaled and located social, cultural, or economic ‘structures’. This is to say that the urban world has always been a found world, delivered to us substantially ‘from above’ through layers of regulating and systematizing networks and infrastructures.<sup>19</sup> These infrastructures form and control what they distribute. They gather things to themselves, and their systematizing power has as much to do with the ‘agencies’ of the complex networks themselves as they have to do with the ‘agents’ who use them.

The movement of human and social appropriation of an environment *not* ‘made to measure’, has been one counter to this production of the given – a movement of creative remaking, of *making again*, that which is already made. It is *also* between these two processes that the openness of our urban world is maintained – similar ‘givens and founds’ can be variably interpreted and remade to variable ends. It is in the complex and unpredictable space between these two processes, that *we* have in fact influenced the way the city is continually becoming visible and social, and continually becoming different.

### **The emergence of urban identity**

It is one of the most basic errors of urban thinking that the city emerges from within, a product of ‘swarming’ processes at the level of experience and everyday life. The city is more and more evidently *not* simply a form which spreads out from within; growing from the inside, as a pattern in the landscape. Rather it emerges for the most part as local ‘thickenings’ of pre-existent forms of a dynamically constituted whole whose scope exceeds by orders of magnitude the thing we in the past (and still too often today) hold as being the city. As paths and trails pre-exist the first settlement as an object in the landscape<sup>20</sup>, so also the ‘object’ city today exists in the first instance as thickenings of the wispy traces of stuff passing through – and this thickening, like any conrescence, is a work of alchemy; of the transformation of one kind of energy into another.

The story of the city is therefore one of the eruption of identifiable stuff out of a plasmic and non-differentiable substrate. In fact, the 'non-place' discussed in the 'anthropology of modernity'<sup>21</sup> is composed of the antecedent, the unformed stuff, of the place it misses. Jane Jacobs' obsidian traders tracing pathways over the Anatolian plateau<sup>22</sup>, Hanseatic cogs plying the Baltic sea-routes, the silk traders and the spice-laden caravans threading their ways through the mountain passes between the near and far east, all the way through to the 20 tonne Oshkosh thundering down a transcontinental motorway – all are antecedent to the identifiable location we recognize in actual urban places.

We need to get back to the substance of this thing we call city, in order to consider again what this architecture we inhabit is made of and how it conditions us and our everyday lives. For too long we have looked at it through notions of existence informed by everyday visibility and the immediate actuality of the material stuff that surrounds us. We presume too quickly that a 'logic' of our imagined orders underpins what happens in our urban world; we imagine that the world makes itself according to linear laws of accumulation – laws which do not in the end have the power to represent this thing or its process of becoming. We can today, when the fact forces itself on us, begin to see the city for something closer to what it is – something radically open, integral with what appears to us to be its outside, integral with a continuity that gathers a heterogeneous visible world to place.

The city is something constructed within dynamics which take place very substantially beyond what we take to be its borders, and which becomes itself according to its own laws. This view contradicts those of the great urbanists of the modernist humanist city; Geddes, Mumford and Wirth understood the city as being organic in the sense that it could be conceived as having integrity as a spatially bounded and social entity – as being a socio-spatial system with its own vital internal dynamic.<sup>23</sup> In this view I am outlining the city is 'machinic' in the sense Deleuze & Guattari use the term, where the dynamics of the 'organic' are conceived 'not in terms of organs, organisms and species, and their functions, but in terms of the affective relationships between heterogeneous bodies ... '[A] "body" can be anything – an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea, a social body or collective ... [T]his means that evolution speaks in fact of an involution, that is the dissolution of forms and the indeterminacy of functions, as well as the freeing of times and speeds.'<sup>24</sup> I would go further here to say that this involution manifests itself as a progressive generative folding or pleating or 'space-filling' at ever finer scales as we zoom in from the ultimate scale of the city which is given by the (ultimately global) limits of its connective and communicative networks and infrastructures.<sup>25</sup>

It becomes questionable whether the city could ever have been organic in Mumford's sense. If in the past it was possible, and perhaps this was so as a rather crude approximation, to conceive the city as a contained socio-spatial system, today there can be no doubt the city and its parts are *points of articulation* in variously scaled circuits and that their processes are constrained and ordered for the most part by the networks and infrastructures which constitute and convey them rather than by any bounding limits.

The speculative model which is here proposed, presumes firstly therefore, as Jane Jacobs has already done, that a 'virtual' first city pre-existed its actualization on the Neolithic Anatolian plain, and that this 'virtuality' consisted in the long-distance trading routes that criss-crossed the sub-continent. The idea that cities emerge, or just *happen* at the level at which we encounter them; that at some stage in history a population just found themselves to be urban or becoming urban, and that at later stages in history populations found themselves becoming urban in new and

unprecedented ways, recognizes also the difficulty of inventing forms – life forms or social forms – out of nothing. The possibility would first have had to be seen to exist, in at least a rudimentary way before it could have occurred to our proto-urban ancestors that polis or civitas may have been a possibility for social existence.

If we just run this line of thinking – that we may require a phenomenal expression of some social form to exist in the concrete before we are capable of abstracting from it to its social ‘structure’ – it may be possible to argue that cities (and perhaps other settlement forms) preceded and were the impulse for much that we today regard as social, and for our expectations of what social life is and can be. Developed social forms may be a creative addition to, a building upon, a matrix of encounter that is urban. This could be a story of social becoming at the same time as it is one of urban evolution/involution.

This cannot on the other hand simply be a story of cities evolving continuously in time – otherwise it would not explain London or New York or Hong Kong as hubs in a global financial network in the form we find them today; it could not explain Bilbao or Manchester or Lille, reinvented from out of their industrial pasts as hubs in networks of tourism. Instead it attempts to explain cities as *discontinuous* in the sense that they are continuously new; reinvented and reconstructed on the back of networks which are themselves in a continual process of construction, revision and reconstruction. What we are seeing in cities today are the transformations as cities adjust to shifting patterns of ‘virtuality’. And these virtualities can be very *concrete*, very real, built as infrastructures; activating the concrescences or ‘alchemic becomings’ of the city as an object. What we experience is not a death of the city, nor for that matter a ‘new’ city built on principles entirely different to those of cities of the past; we are facing rather at each turn in history a revision of the translations and transductions of urban substance *on the back of changing substrates of continuities*. When we understand this we will be coming to terms with the provisional and dependent and derived thing the visible city has always been.

### **The technology of the path**

Individual stories of caravans and their masters, the ship fleets and their captains and crews, are largely lost, along with the details of their hardships and their achievements and failures. What *does* remain are the trails they wore, the strings of provisioning posts and trading stops and ports they established. We hear little of the details of the complex overlapping arrangements and agreements which underwrite the exchanges in commodities, finance and other formal and informal, legitimate and illegitimate business, not to mention the countless movements and exchanges made for reasons of personal attachment or gain. What we do see, and what do remain, are the more systematized flight and train schedules, the seasons and calendars – and the routes which draw together into one movement all the individual stories lost in every way except as another pair of lights in a moving stream on the freeway, another passenger in a queue at the ticket office or the check-in, another pedestrian in the moving tide on the pavement of the shopping street – or as a particular sequence of pulses in the terabytes of data transmitted down optical cables.<sup>26</sup>

Before the city as we know it therefore, before the visible located city, comes a mobilization: a mobilization of material, data and populations; of mobile mass, masses and messages that is a distribution to all corners. The individual and his or her stories are lost, anonymous, in this mobile crowd. This anonymous population and its movement is the virtual, antecedent to the location or place that is really a *relay*, a passing on of the flow.

**8** Virtual or antecedent centrality finds its most visible expression today in the freeway network – an evenly distributed net of pure movement activity. Flying over the urban

landscape at night, one of the virtual 'engines'<sup>27</sup> of the city is today perfectly visible, perfectly concrete, but prior to anything we would call an urban place in its developed actuality. The very visibility and intensity of this tracery at this scale points also to a mode of growth of cities. The movements of people, goods, money and information at this *regional* scale were in previous times, 'outside' the city as it was then commonly (but mistakenly) understood. Today, there is no question about it; this scale of movement exists 'inside' the life of the (metropolitan) city as we commonly think of it. In fact what has happened is that a new layer of movement, a new stratification of infrastructure and the connection it affords has become dominant and imposed itself over what already existed.

But there are multiple virtual centralities existing at different scales and in different modes in the city at the same time – each comprising webs gathering movements into anonymous and distributed mobilizations. Infrastructural webs *stratify* these mobilizations into layers of different 'resonance'. Time enters this realm of pure quantities as speed or vibration. The impulse of these distributed networks is to distribute, but they also distribute *themselves* as well as the material they are distributing, as they seek to cover every part of the surface they are involved in integrating. A metropolitan freeway network will seek to cover and integrate the metropolitan surface, an urban boulevard network will seek to cover and integrate a functional urban surface, and a global telecommunications network will seek to cover and integrate the global surface. These infrastructures are *built*, they are costly and subject to constraints of economy. In the same way the soap bubble economizes by distributing tensions and energy evenly over its surface, these infrastructures tend, other things being equal, to distribute evenly over the surface available to them.<sup>28</sup>

Urban place – as point of articulation on multiple stratified movement nets – becomes also a place of combination and of translation and transduction; of the conversion of matter or energy of one sort into another. The urban we know, in its complex and actualized form, emerges at the point where virtual centralities overlap, allowing lives to adhere, to inhere, to become entrained and situated, in points of layered and mutually supportive and dependant connectivity. It is the point where multifarious centralities come together; it is not a coming together in one scale, one speed, one time and one space, rather the coming together is of a variety of times and spaces in a process of combination that creates a complex, rich, and active individuated compound out of multiple preindividuated centralities of purer spaces and times. There is a concrescence, an alchemy, a real creative moment, which takes place in these overlaps between virtual centralities, activating situated conditions, enabling individuation; *actualizing* the centralities we recognize as such in real urban places.

### **Remaking, relaying, transforming**

Locus or place is also the point at which the individual and his or her stories comes back into focus, and the actualization of urban place is also its becoming as setting for embedded stories of individual everyday lives. The 'non-place'<sup>29</sup>, the 'concretely preindividuated' simplistically accessible places we more often than not make today, cannot *hold* real lives and stories. It lacks the 'thickness' or 'density' of situation, in a *fabric* of connectivity, as a relay in multiple virtualities. Locus needs layering and overlap with respect to its position within infrastructures; a layering that will allow it to support multiply-folded, complicated, implicated, interaction. Emplaced lives are located within only *somewhat* systematizing multiscalar circuits shared with multiple others.

We note this sedimentation of the visible actual urban out of multiple distributed virtual centralities in the variety and particularity of actualized forms and centralities in the city. The global city emerges with its skyline of skyscrapers at the point where global travel routes, communications networks, *and* the multiple other infrastructures

which support the processes of global finance and tourism come together. But the global is not, as is sometimes naively imagined, produced directly and automatically out of global connectivity, without another process of alchemy or transduction – it requires appropriation and remaking, and *work* in gathering into place, and making the local and the everyday. It requires a work of coordination and relay to make the connections and to effect the exchanges which give everyday reality to global business and culture, and even to make actual, in the local, the *idea* of the global. This work will require as much engagement in local and regional webs of interconnectivity as in global webs. The global is constructed *in* the local through work and organization, and the design, construction, maintenance and provisioning of multiple networks which have to engage and intersect with each other in a particular local time and space. The global as a product exists *in* the local. The increasing pervasiveness of the global in today's local is a factor of an increasing *connectivity* alongside a simultaneous condition of increasing '*criticality*'<sup>30</sup> of the world. This criticality is a work of maintenance and extension and refinement, of a preparation of the ground, but also just of the *evolution* of the city as we see it now, that takes in much of human history. Much of the contemporary discussion of globalization misses the extent to which the global is in the first event produced and sustained *from* the local, and the way in which this global, even when it is seen to arrive 'from above', has to be appropriated, redrawn and *reinvented* in the local condition in which it lands.

Bruno Latour in discussing the 'visibilisation' of the city of Paris introduces his notion of the 'oligopticon':

So, 'localizing the global' means to look at the place where you see the whole not as a panopticon, but as an oligopticon ... [T]he operation is very simple: there are centers of command, there are rooms, inside which Paris as a whole is visualized, but it's a local room, it's not a big room. Paris itself is never big, there is no place where Paris as a city exists, it's always localized at some point where some of the engineers or urban planners, or specialists are actually making Paris as a whole visible. ... '[O]ligopticon' means seeing a little, very well, but just a little. And the visibility of a city like the one I've studied here, is made not in a panopticon, not through this sort of excessive paranoia of complete visual space as demonstrated in the famous example of a prison, where the prisoners are completely visible to the gaze of the surveillance manager. The oligopticon actually describes much better the thready character of the whole being built in a city, where you never have actually a whole which is not connected to a small place where the information is gathered. [...] I must remind you that information is never actually produced, what we mean by information is always transformation. ... [T]he map is not the territory, a model is not the house - and whenever we talk about information we forget the price of putting it into form, and the word information we should never forget, means putting something into a form, and the form is very material.<sup>31</sup>

This is a story, more than anything else, about urban place and situation, and about how situation is established as a *creation* of the urban and then as a *re-creation*. It is a story of the necessarily (and positively open) 'hybrid' and 'alien' of that urban and the way it generates and produces an 'extra-human' and 'extra-social' given; an 'unthought by us', that we have always appropriated, and continue to appropriate and remake to our own ends. I would speculatively propose that we have, for the most part always constructed and structured our social worlds around and by means of these workings and reworkings of the urban.

In all the talk today about situating practices, we need should not to forget that situation itself is always something found and remade, given and constructed; much more than a scenery or a background, it is also an agent and participant in the patterns and visibilities of our living. Our research<sup>32</sup> attempts to uncover the variable

conditions of contemporary urban centrality and social and experiential visibility and patterning, and the relation of these to the constructions of (and our reconstructions of) the urban and the social. In particular we take on the continuous and generative aspects of the city that most means of urban representation divide.

We do not need to know the city in its details in order to experience it as somewhat coherent – we do not need to know the multifarious stories of the city in order to know the city *well enough* personally. The city choreographs those stories alongside ours in ways which make us socially ‘knowing before knowing’ creatures at the level of the urban everyday. It does this however all the time while hiding from our view much of the means it uses. It is part of the enormous contribution of the city to individual lives that it is available to enable and inform *their* stories – as a participant, as a choreographer. But we need to get ‘on terms’ with this choreographer; take it on at its own scales of working in order to analyze and understand how it does this. The city *as an experience* is not observed or experienced ‘from the outside’; we are immersed within it and we experience its enabling and constraining virtualities within a continuity of experience, directly. These virtualities are absolutely real and absolutely part of our everyday experience. *As an object of study* however, we need to understand how the city we see *emerging*, seen from an ‘extra-human’, ‘extra-terrestrial’ perspective, is a somewhat alien given, within which our experience nevertheless *converges* in ways which profoundly form and inform us as the human and social creatures we are.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> See: Gregory J. Seigworth & Michael E. Gardiner, 'Rethinking everyday life', in: *Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2/3, 2004, pp.139-159.
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 141.
- <sup>4</sup> The 'constitutional settlement' of Latour. See: Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- <sup>5</sup> Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, p.28. The layers of 'the rural' and 'the industrial' have turned out to lack the power, even as 'floating signifiers', over urbanization processes that Lefebvre granted them at the time of writing and from his particular ideological position in the 1960s.
- <sup>6</sup> Latour, *op. cit.*
- <sup>7</sup> 'Moments' are from Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. II*, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1992). 'Events' are from A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1979).
- <sup>8</sup> This is a rather Whiteheadian reading of moments and time though it appears to also be implicit in Lefebvre. See Charles Hartshorne on 'Whitehead's novel intuition' in: George L. Kline (ed.), *Alfred North Whitehead: Essays on his Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963).
- <sup>9</sup> See: Edward Casey, 'How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time', in: Feld S. & K.H. Basso (eds), *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996).
- <sup>10</sup> See Chapter 3 of: Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the time of life* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- <sup>11</sup> Certainly in Hartshorne's reading of Whitehead.
- <sup>12</sup> Joel Kovel, *History and Spirit: An Inquiry into the Philosophy of Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).
- <sup>13</sup> This is the problematic which Latour addresses in his work (discussed later) and is one which links us conceptually with the idea of fields developed in physics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. See also: Peter Pesic, *Seeing Double* (Cambridge : MIT Press, 2003).
- <sup>14</sup> See: Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart, *The Collapse of Chaos* (New York: Viking, 1994), p.222.
- <sup>15</sup> Mike Batty, author of *Fractal Cities* (co-authored with Paul Longley, Academic Press, London, 1994) pointed out this point about 'fractal space-filling' to me in conversation (December 2004).
- <sup>16</sup> The whole world we are talking about here is not the managerialist system or machine of multiple organized connections holding a whole together as a global or global regional or metropolitan 'clockwork'. Rather, as will be argued in the rest of the paper, it is the whole that is integrated by the way that multitudinous uncoordinated actions are sorted and then recombined by a dynamic process which differentiates modes and scales by means of their times or 'rhythms'.
- <sup>17</sup> The 'flesh of the world' is from M. Merleau-Ponty; 'knowing before knowing' is from M. Heidegger.
- <sup>18</sup> Putting paid to the most naive forms of social construction.
- <sup>19</sup> Bruno Latour, 'The politics of explanation; an alternative', in: S. Woolgar (ed.), *Knowledge and Reflexivity* (London: Sage, 1988).
- <sup>20</sup> See my 'A brief history of flights to the periphery and other movement matters', in: Read & Pinilla (eds), *Visualizing the Invisible* (Amsterdam: Techne Press, 2006).
- <sup>21</sup> See: Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995).
- <sup>22</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970). The proposal I am making is a speculation built on a speculation, whose veracity, I would argue, is to be determined in its productivity as a model for thinking, rather than in its literal applicability to every settlement form in every historical circumstance. There may have been other types of settlement in the course of history – villages perhaps, towns even, of variable size –

conforming to the conventional model which would see 'community' as providing the 'glue' for social aggregation and settlement forming. My argument is that settlement as a product of and as an expression of 'social aggregation' is an inadequate model for understanding *cities* – and this fact becomes all the more clear as cities distribute themselves everywhere and begin to constitute our whole world.

- <sup>23</sup> See for example: Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harvest, 1970).
- <sup>24</sup> See: Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Virroid Life* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- <sup>25</sup> The model presented here begins to become suggestive as regards the idea of 'omnicausal' systems (when the whole determines the behaviour of its parts) as opposed to those which are 'particausal'. See: G.E. Mikhailovsky, 'Biological time, its organization, hierarchy and presentation by complex values', in: A.P. Levich (ed.), *On The Way To Understanding The Time Phenomenon: The Constructions Of Time In Natural Science (Part I)*, (London: World Scientific Publishing, 1993). There is a potentially rich line of investigation here which goes into the purported 'negentropic' properties of omnicausal systems.
- <sup>26</sup> See the movie *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), directed by Godfrey Reggio.
- <sup>27</sup> This engine is again not that of a system – of a technocratic movement-connective machine – but as part of a 'machine' effecting translation and transformation, and the actualization of urban virtuality or potential. This 'engine' produces at the moment of its encounter with another 'concrete virtualities', creating a 'thickness' of present times (Mikhailovsky). This is a point which will be developed elsewhere. See for a first step: Read & Bruyns, 'The Urban Machine' in: Read & Pinilla (eds), *Visualizing the Invisible* (Amsterdam: Techne Press, 2006).
- <sup>28</sup> This assertion needs some qualification of course because at certain moments in history all roads *did* lead to Rome or London or Paris or wherever. Nevertheless today in the time of Negri and Hardt's *Empire*, it seems that this statement is becoming more rather than less true.
- <sup>29</sup> Augé, op. cit.
- <sup>30</sup> Criticality is a notion taken from science in which a material undergoing phase change transmits this condition *locally*. See also: Pesic (2003).
- <sup>31</sup> The quotation is taken from a transcription of Bruno Latour's lecture, 26 November, 2001, at The Berlage Institute, Rotterdam; transcribed by Aksel Çoruh. To my knowledge, at the time of writing, another outline of the idea of the oligopticon by its author does not exist in the English language.
- <sup>32</sup> In Spacelab. See: [www.spacelab.tudelft.nl](http://www.spacelab.tudelft.nl).