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BOOK REVIEW

PARADOXICAL URBANISM (2021, PALGRAVE MACMILLAN) BY MALCOLM MILES

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As pointed out by Malcolm Miles in the introduction to *Paradoxical Urbanism*, this book is written from discontent, and also from the need to take a critical position from the ways our convivial spaces are conceived, planned, and executed by those in power positions to decide over the use, distribution, and representations of such spaces. Using different examples, from a utopic image of the countryside, as opposed to the *chaotic* city, to the reinterpreted industrial zones in Germany, the author draws on the imagery behind some of the shifts in modern urban architecture.

The book is divided into six chapters, which could also work as different essays, although there is a clear progression of ideas, if one decides to ignore the (very) few cross-references along the book. The first chapter, *Colliding Utopias*, discusses the concepts of "urban" and "city," in order to provide a clear framework for their use in the following chapters. Furthermore, this chapter is also built upon a double articulation between "city" and "rural". This double articulation relies on a distance game: from the "rural" looking towards the "city", the promise of a different life, unrestricted by family and blood, being open to new possibilities; and, on the other hand, from the city looking towards the "rural," the nostalgia for an imagined past in the countryside, where "community" was the norm. This will allow the author to explore some of the literary images that have helped to build upon these ways of conceived spaces.

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In the second chapter, *From Arcadia to Plotlands*, Miles explores Port Sunlight and Rousham, two examples of how architectural design is also key in the development of what dwellers should find "desirable." In his first example, Port Sunlight, an industrial village near Liverpool, where workers of the soap factory (Sunlight Soap) were given homes during the turn of the twentieth century, Miles points out that, beyond the fact of the modern and progressive commodities which the construction of these houses represented at the time, they were also built following a "countryside desire," which tries to merge "city" with "nature." This resulted in what was imagined as a "rural village" where gardens and open spaces were built in order to display a utopic sense of community, which had been attributed to them, despite doing so in an artificial and patronising way. As for the second example, the author draws on a series of ideas around the park at Rousham, that shows a constructed landscape for the bourgeois community, in which they can recreate and project their own images of the wild and of nature. This is, again and according to Malcolm Miles, part of an effort to deliver to the dwellers, a way to accomplish the pastoral fantasy of nature as opposed to their relationship with the modern city. About these two first chapters, maybe it would be also interesting for the reader to take a look at Malcolm Miles' article *Urban Narratives: Nostalgia or Engagement*, published in **Diffractions 3**, where he discusses these issues in some different terms.

Chapters three and four, *Drawing a Line* and *The Contradictions of Mordernism*, are, perhaps, more deeply related to one another than any other chapters in the book. In chapter three, the author brings into consideration René Descartes' spatial conceptions, and discusses their influence on modern urban projection. According to Miles' theoretical discussion, Cartesian space's influence in urban projection sees space as an abstraction and only as abstraction, without considering, he argues following Henri Lefebvre's critic in *The Construction of Space* (1974), that these spaces are meant to be inhabited by persons with visions and desires of their own. In this sense, the author remarks that Cartesian rationality flattens and divides the space in sections, with pre-attributed uses and meanings, depriving the dwellers of the space of their agency, or at least *planning* to. However, the author, following on from Lefebvre's theory, suggests that it is against the "right to the city," to assign functions to spaces beforehand, namely,

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the dweller's occupation instead of their desires regarding the inhabited spaces. In other words, to take away human interaction with space – its agency.

Chapter four further develops this theoretical discussion by bringing a practical example into consideration. According to the author, after the bombing of Plymouth by the Luftwaffe, during WW2, a plan to re-build the city was issued by the British government. The plan became the responsibility of Patrick Abercrombie, who "drew" the new city following a "Cartesian" logic. As explained in the previous chapter, this means that "his" city was imagined as a set of grilles, in which each section was given a particular use. This reductive approach to the dweller's role in the city, leads the author's argument towards a generalised space conceptualisation within modernist architecture, namely a tendency to "organise" society, from the top to the bottom, through the division of spaces. For instance, the author shows how LeCorbusier's plan for *The City of Tomorrow* (1929), involved a sort of spatial segregation, with divisions between "city workers," "suburban workers," and "mixed workers." In this sense, it is interesting that Miles points to the fact that these ideas were welcomed in the fascist press at the time. From this point, the author traces on architecture's conceptualisation of the urban space, from the Cartesian perspective, to the humanistic dweller-oriented conception of spaces through the years, following particularly the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM, in its French acronym) narratives, in a dialectic dialogue that leads ultimately to a re-structuring of the "Lived Space" concept.

In the previous chapters, Malcolm Miles has taken care of urban planning from an almost historical perspective; in the book's last two chapters, he takes care of a more contemporary perspective regarding the appropriation of space. Therefore, chapter five, *Post-Industrial Ruinscapes*, offers a look at the former industrial Ruhr area in Germany. Here, a variety of *wastelands*, using a term the author takes from T. S. Eliot's well-known poem, are presented as a territory to be reclaimed for urban use. According to Miles, the process followed by these old mining spots, starts as peripheries outside the urban space. In this way, such places found themselves in an outlaw position, and were occupied by outcasts. Therefore, these spaces became subject to appropriation by urban planners, who aimed to reintegrate them "into the city" by adopting a post-modern aesthetic point of view. In which the former industrial space's scale is mixed with human

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scale activities, such as gardens or parks. Hence, the space becomes "usable" again, regaining its value within an utilitarian scope, that demands all space to be used to fulfill some objective, as discussed in the Cartesian perspective in the previous chapters.

Finally, in chapter six, *An Urban Revolution?*, Malcolm Miles aims to discuss the contemporary British trend in architecture: the piazzas. The author comments on this by underlining their predictability and lack of performing liberty. In this sense, he calls them out to be merely "decorative." They do not aim to solve any of the current housing problems, but only to cover them by aesthetic views, such as gardens in the suburbs, as part of the utopic image of the countryside. Also, he advocates for a balance between designed and lived spaces, mentioning some examples (MACBA in Barcelona, for instance, or Hafencity in Hamburg), places that accomplish their assigned function, in the Cartesian sense, but that have also been re-appropriated by their dwellers and users, in a function re-assignment.

After this brief survey of the chapters, I think it is necessary to acknowledge the pertinence and importance of works such as the one presented by Malcolm Miles. His reflections on the development of concepts in urban planning and design, add value to the current debates on the subject; particularly during our time, when cities around the world seem to be surrendering to a purely aesthetic gaze that has led ultimately to a "Disneyfication" process that, on the one hand, this is turning the urban space into an object, ready to be consumed. And, on the other hand, the natural consequence of this urban reification is gentrification, which pushes the cities' inhabitants to new peripheries. The latter is imagined, perhaps, as something between city and countryside, as Miles stated in the book's first chapters, but finding themselves in dorm-cities, or what Marc Augé has called "non-places", we see neither of the advantages of the urban space nor those of the idyllic, pastoral life.

The first criticism that can be made concerning *Paradoxical Urbanism*, is that it only deals with European cities, which Miles acknowledges in the introduction of the book. However, given the global nature of the issues presented here, Miles' critical apparatus can be extended to cities around the world, which have seen their architecture, and the use of it, compromised to the same function.

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We see 'country' residential developments, surrounded by walls, which do not allow the outsiders to see the interior, entire neighborhoods deprived of sidewalks, and 'ghettos' growing around the cities. Furthermore, the examples presented by the author to illustrate his arguments, are helpful to establish some similarities with our contemporary cities, and their design. Also, they could be a good starting point for theorists from around the globe, in order to understand the modern situation that capitalism has imposed upon 'cosmopolitan' spaces, which have found themselves needing to integrate into global dynamics.

Secondly, it is also important to notice that there are some issues that need to be touched upon. First of all, the examples given across the book depict clearly two types of space: one that aims to fulfill some nostalgic fantasy for an urban bourgeoisie, offering safe contact with nature, something exotic perhaps; and a second one, a space that relies on paternalism and social design, that denies the user their agency, in order to assign a space for each human group and activity. However, these examples fall short when it comes to looking more deeply into the consequences, both symbolic and pragmatic, for their inhabitants. Here, I would like to point out the possibility to enhance this discussion, by considering concepts such as Baudrillard's *Simulacra*, for instance, in order to discuss the countryside's utopic vision, or the reclaimed spaces in former industrial areas, or even the British piazzas. This is because, from the perspective of Baudrillard's theory, these spaces have become commodities, though not always luxuries way we might think, but also as "wastelands" to follow on from Miles' ideas. Their objective is to substitute and represent some original, habitable, space, but now find themselves integrated into the consumption sphere, in the "system of objects" that satisfies the inhabitants' needs, whether they be real or artificial, and, furthermore, into the safety of urban imagination.

Following on from this train of thought, other concepts that would be worth discussing, are Marc Augé's *Non-Place* or Byung-Chul Han's approach to *transparency*. As for Augé's concept, we can recall that his *non-places* are spaces that once belonged, in a symbiotic relation, to a community but that have been deprived of their past and meaning (what he calls "anthropological space"). This has left only an urban, estheticized version of history-emptied shells, which make the Cartesian planning of the city possible. However, this also reaches some other places that are built with the intention of holding no memories, with a

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transit/transfer objective that does not allow the formation of a community attachment. This 'non-place-ness' leads to Han's idea of "transparency", since a place, a space, without memory, has nothing to be read in it, so it becomes a mere image that proposes no meaning to the inhabitants, finding themselves alienated from the place they inhabit.

Furthermore, and in order to better understand Miles' demand for a balance between design and the dwellers' agency, it may be useful to consider that planning should not only be done from the Cartesian perspective, as discussed in the book, but from a shifting gaze that negotiates between abstraction and inhabitants. This negotiation reminds us of De Certeau's discourse on how we live the city, from above as voyeurs or from a pedestrian position. This is reading or writing the lines of the city; which can also be related to, maybe in a more abstract way, the passing between map and territory, as explored by Deleuze and Guattari. For instance, with their *Lisse* and *Strié* concepts, they demonstrate that none of these perspectives can exist on their own, but that they need to transit from one to another, in order to exist.

The use of these concepts in Malcolm Miles' work, could lead to a fruitful discussion on the reasons behind the urban planning he rightfully criticizes in his book, thus allowing the reader a deeper understanding of the implications of such gaze over the urban spaces we share. In this sense, maybe 'deprivation' of meaning, reification, of the urban space would be central concepts that we could discuss, taking Malcolm Miles' book as starting point.

In general terms, I think this book is a great start for a reflection regarding some of the current issues in our cities, concerning their design, and the direction we want them to take for us, the people who walk their streets, and sleep under their roofs. But, also, for those who are not as lucky, and need to start to be considered when planning future urban spaces.

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