

René Boomkens

MODERN- ISM, CATAS- TROPHE AND THE PUBLIC REALM

During a visit to New York in the summer of 1988 I witnessed, both in person and through the media, the spectacular effect of two diametrically opposed forms of 'public life'. In the New York suburb of Yonkers, one of the countless, largely homogeneous communities that surround American cities, the predominantly white residents rose up en masse in protest of a decision by the state of New York to build low-income housing in their community. The planned apartment complex was sure to attract poorer (read: black) tenants. Tensions were running high and eventually the courts had to be called in to settle the dispute. If I understood correctly, the city council and the municipal officials were slapped with an injunction.

*In his 1977 book *The Fall of Public Man* the American theoretician Richard Sennett describes a similar case of a deeply homogeneous suburban community revealing itself to be a defensive, inward-looking mechanism, bent on excluding 'strange blood' from its midst. 'Community becomes uncivilised' is the unambiguous title of the relevant chapter. In a situation like the one in question, public life in these kinds of suburban communities takes on a highly destructive character or, to put it differently: the public realm is turned against its own laws and rules.*

The other manifestation of public life occurred in the heart of Manhattan, in and around Tompkins Square in the East Village, a small park that doubled as a refuge for many of the city's homeless. In the middle of the hot summer of 1988, Mayor Ed Koch decided to close the park at night – except, oddly enough, for the homeless, who 'belonged' there. The park had become a meeting place for anarchist punks, heavy metal enthusiasts and neighbourhood activists who disturbed the slumber of the people living in the surrounding area. The latter group, which was relatively new to the area, consisted mainly of young professionals who were paying a great deal of money to rent recently restored apartments that had previously been occupied by junkies, squatters and vagrants. In other words, the East Village was undergoing a process of gentrification. Koch's decision led to a brutal police crack-down and outright urban warfare. And since several yuppies were on hand with sophisticated video cameras to record the event for posterity, the rest of the city could watch the battle between the punks and the police from the privacy of their homes. After that tumultuous night Koch rescinded his decision for the remainder of the summer.

Whatever one may think of the controversy, the situation in Tompkins Square is fundamentally different from the one in Yonkers. The former was a complex public sphere in which a wide variety of interests and needs were at stake. There were upper middle class yuppies, artists, the homeless, anarchists, poor blacks, young white activists, students, Hispanic groups, Asian shopkeepers and tourists: every one of them was involved in some way in both the decision-making process and the dispute about who should have access to the park. In contrast to the conflict in Yonkers, the situation in downtown Manhattan was far from predictable. In Yonkers it was a community pitted against the state and the courts, while in the East Village, by contrast, the controversy centred on a highly unpredictable, variable and diverse public sphere, in which a riotous police operation ended up back-firing on the authorities. It is questionable who the real winners were and what that victory was worth.

This article is about the public realm in an urban context. This public realm includes more than just public spaces, as I hope should be clear. And yet, as I will argue, those urban public spaces form an indispensable element of the structure and viability of the public realm as such. The question before us now is how the urban public realm has evolved over the

past century. I will attempt to answer that question by way of a critique of the twentieth century modernist attitude towards urban development and urbanism. The concept of catastrophe will play a prominent part in that critique. At the conclusion of the article, my arguments will be applied to a commentary on the new metropolitanism that seems to have captured the imagination of municipal officials and urban planners in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, and elsewhere.

My central thesis is as follows: twentieth-century modernism conceives of itself as a response to a global catastrophe, but over the decades it is modernism itself that has proven to be a catastrophe. Or, to put it in different terms, modernism sees itself as a movement of universal communication, as a universalised public realm. Yet it revealed itself to be one of the greatest enemies of that realm.

CATASTROPHE

The myth of modernity confronts its audience with the idea they have somehow passed a point of no return. Modern people are confined within a linear model of time in which every human action only points in one direction: forward. Every relationship with the past seems to be either non-existent or disrupted. There are no traditions that can be experienced as meaningful aspects of present-day life. Modernity appears to be the result of a comprehensive, global break with not only traditional values, but also with the traditional concepts of time and space.

Tenacious though it may be, this myth is clearly ripe for demystification, if for no other reason than because it has long since lost the ability to give meaning to the practices and experiences of 'modern' individuals. Of course, this process of demystification has been going on for decades in the form of various debates on the crisis or deficit of avant-gardism in politics and the arts. But instead of revisiting the well-worn polemics directed against modernism or the Avant-Garde as such, I would like to address the diverse roots of the modernist tradition. Or, in the words of Walter Benjamin, the 'prehistory' of modernism, its infancy as it were.

The turn of the nineteenth century is often regarded as the start of modernity, with the French Revolution as its glorious opening salvo. But in that same nineteenth century we find highly divergent interpretations of the roots of modern life. Running counter to the triumphant image of enlightenment and revolution is a current of thought that distrusts the very triumphalism that had accompanied the break with tradition: Romanticism, a modernist movement par excellence. Not in the glorious sense of the myth of modernity, but as a movement preoccupied with what might be termed problematic individuality or, alternatively, the problem of the individual. One of its chief preoccupations is the inner processes of the psyche of a lost, isolated and guilty subject. It focuses on the patterns of a private discourse which, in many respects, supersedes the safe and familiar discourse of the traditional community. In that sense Romanticism can be seen as the first artistic and philosophical reflection on the modern individual's experience as an inhabitant of the modern town or city.

This is even more true of the decadent movement of the second half of the nineteenth century, which in many respects pursues and radicalises themes that had first been brought to the fore by the Romantics. As with the Romantics, the attitude towards the city espoused by the decadent

poets and writers was at best ambivalent and occasionally downright antagonistic. More so than during the Romantic period, an attempt was being made to accept the new conditions of urban life and examine them as opportunities for a new, 'modern' way of life. The latter issue – the question of what form this new way of life should take – should be seen as the central problem of the decadent poets. Their literary experiments were also lifestyle experiments. This is plainly the case with a figure like Baudelaire, whose definition of modernity as 'the transient, the fleeting and the contingent' has since become classic. Here we also see the roots of the ambivalence mentioned above: the question was how a modern, urban individual could capture and maintain an identity in the light of the realisation that everything that could serve that end was, by definition, fleeting and contingent. Ambivalence: the state of being adrift among the modern masses, reliant on one's own deeply private thoughts and experiences, an enduring social and psychological instability.

The typical nineteenth-century themes, such as the problematic individual, the transience of social and private identity, the isolation in the midst of the modern, urban crowds, resonate well into the 1980s. Nineteenth-century modernism has remained current. But in order to understand 'our' late twentieth-century modernity, we are missing one experience that would change the face of twentieth-century modernism: the experience (or myth) of catastrophe.

Jürgen Habermas defined modernity (and with it modernism) as the condition or movement that is compelled to derive its standards and values from itself, from the process of modernisation and modernity. Under such a system, an appeal to any form of tradition becomes impossible. Habermas neglected to say where this compulsion originated. One is struck by the crucial difference between the nineteenth-century modernists and their twentieth-century successors on this question. Marshall Berman has already pointed out this disjuncture in his *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. The nineteenth-century ambivalence betrays a still vital contact with pre-modern ways of life and with 'tradition' as such. The twentieth-century modernist avant-garde, by contrast, seems to derive its self-image from the belief that it bears the responsibility for designing and building an entirely new world after the old one has met a catastrophic end. Any productive ties to traditional ways of life and experiences seem to have been severed. Ambivalence has been supplanted by schizophrenia. To paraphrase Berman, modernism has split into two: on the one hand pessimism and the apocalyptic undertones of much of modernist philosophy and litera-

ture (from the German expressionists to Adorno) and, on the other, optimism and constructivism – in film, in the International Style in architecture, in the work of the futurists, etcetera.

Similarly, factors like industrialisation, capitalism and the First World War played a role in the process by which the notion (and the experience) of catastrophe – a disastrous, but more importantly, irrevocable break with the past – is given a central and constitutive place in the development of the modernist avant-garde. In a sense this concept of catastrophe destroys the empathetic character of modernity: we are no longer part of it. Rather, it manifests itself as an autonomous process, an anonymous destiny. From that point on, the modernist presented himself as someone whose task was to point the way to the future, riding the waves of fate and not looking back. There is still only one direction open to us: forward, but this time without the spontaneous commitment that typified nineteenth-century modernism. Rather, there is a tendency among some to resign themselves to a destiny of permanent change, modernisation and revolution. And if we can speak of optimism, of the variety that permeates the manifestoes of Bauhaus and CIAM, it is an austere, strict, Calvinistic brand of optimism. Charles Jencks described the modernist movement in architecture as a Protestant revolution, which abandoned the ornamentation, symbolism and the narrative force of traditional forms. They were all replaced by a rigorously formal and functionalist brand of architecture and urban planning, which was essentially already a blueprint for an entirely new, modern social order. This new order envisioned a society that would be built on rational foundations, with the help of the latest technology, and ruled by a political system rooted in scientific principles.

That society was not to be, but its architecture took hold and eventually became dominant. No longer as a social blueprint, but primarily as a formula, a cheap way of building, a cheap way of creating a stir: anonymous, inward-looking and arrogant. And thus functionalism, formalism and prefabrication became goals in themselves, especially during the massive reconstruction necessitated by the next catastrophe.

THE PUBLIC REALM AND PUBLIC SPACE

Let me begin by reiterating what might be called the ideal definition of the public realm, courtesy of Hannah Arendt in her book, *The Human Condition*. The 'ideal' public realm and the 'ideal' public space could be found, in Arendt's view, in the ancient Greek *polis* (city-state). The activities of the



polis existed in opposition to the practices of the private sphere, the latter being dominated by matters like (economic) necessity, self-preservation, and the need to care for and feed one's family and humanity as such. In the public realm of the polis, by contrast, everything revolved around 'speech as a way of persuasion' (page 26). 'To be political, to live in a polis, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence' (Ibid.). The public realm was preoccupied with issues that lay outside the sphere of material necessities. Here a citizen could form his opinions without the pressure of brute necessity.

Arendt's definition is important because it embraces four different elements, which have remained crucial to the modern history of the public realm:

- first of all, the thesis that the public sphere exists in opposition to the private sphere as the domain of free will (voluntarism) exists in opposition to the domain of (economic) necessity;
- secondly, the emphasis on the essentially *practical* character of the public sphere (with speech as a central feature);
- thirdly, the fundamentally *open* character of the public realm, which is not bound to any system. The public realm is certainly not coterminous with the world of organised politics or that of the State (whether democratic or otherwise), and it has nothing to do with formalised notions of freedom or equality;
- fourthly, the spatial aspect of the public sphere. This last point is critical. Only in highly concentrated and diversified spatial situations is it possible to achieve the kind of communication that is the hallmark of modern, pluralist societies.



Berlin, Anhalter Bahnhof

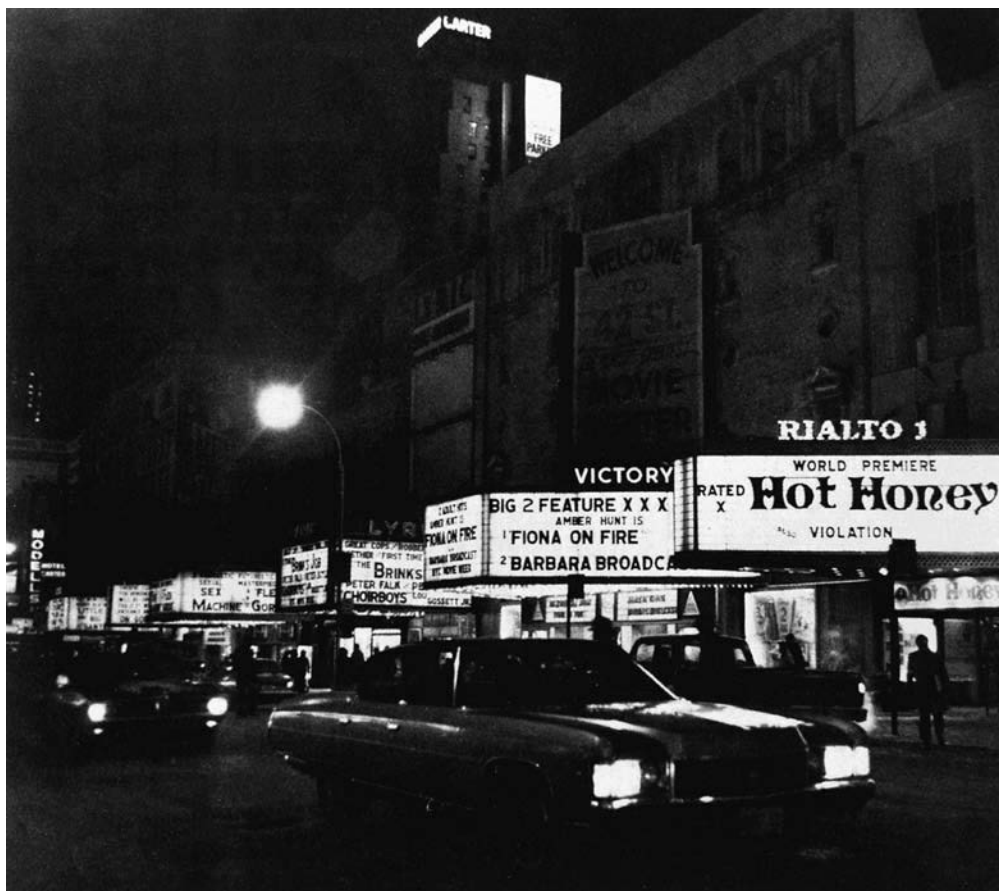
The agora, the marketplace, the major town squares, the coffeehouses, the parks – these were the traditional urban spaces in which public life was acted out. With the rise of new means of communication the situation changed dramatically. Newspapers, the telephone, radio and television did not only affect the quantity and availability of information, they also implied a change in the subject of the public discourse. It is even conceivable that the new media blocked the public realm as such. Yet this means that the media are not identical to the public realm; they remain media: resources that exist for the use of the public realm, or resources that ultimately turn against it. They cannot replace it.

In the aforementioned book, *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett examines the development of the public sphere in modern European cities from the eighteenth century onward. Like Arendt, Sennett regards the urban public realm as a central feature of and a prerequisite for democratic, pluralist societies. More than that, it is the prerequisite for an open and experimental lifestyle. The urban and practical dimensions of the public sphere are fundamentally important to Sennett as well. As it is used here, 'urbanity' signifies a concentrated, diverse and even somewhat anarchistic and dangerous lifestyle, while the 'practical dimension' denotes a public realm that exists as an unlimited series of acts (especially linguistic acts), lifestyles and cultures. Sennett describes eighteenth-century urbanity as the stage of a theatre: the public sphere offered the opportunity to put on a refined and civilised 'performance' with various masks and roles. Public life was a play of *presentations* in which masks and roles liberated the individual from the world of necessity and 'nature', which formed the heart of the private sphere. Public, urban life played a civilising role with respect to the 'lower' sphere of private life.

The story of *The Fall of the Public Man* is the story of the decline of this theatrical and 'civilised' urban public life. In the nineteenth century Sennett discerns the advent of a new culture of intimacy. Together, capitalism and secularism fostered the belief that individuals could derive their identities from (and manifest those identities in) the world of material objects with which they surrounded themselves. The belief in a transcendent order gave way to an immanent order, which centred on the inner emotions of the individual. Earlier, I referred to the Romantic movement as an example of this concentration on the problematic inner self of the modern individual. From Sennett's perspective the Romantic movement is a good example of the transition from an era of the public man – who was outward-looking and proud of his refined manners – to that of a new, inward-looking private man, who became immersed in the turmoil of his intimate life. Public life became the arena where the *re-presentation* of the personality's inner essence was played out; all manner of external traits – objects, clothing, make-up – suddenly became psychological symbols.

It was not until the present century that this new culture of intimacy began to spread in earnest, eventually becoming – in Sennett's view – the greatest enemy of public life: an entire society permanently tyrannised by a mad quest for a deeper essence, for true passions, for the hidden secrets of the navel-gazing, 'authentic' individual.

Sennett's historical criticism of nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban culture should be seen as a polemic attack on prevailing notions of urbanity and urban planning. On occasion he exaggerates the level of the intimist tyranny for the sake of argument. More important for our purposes here is

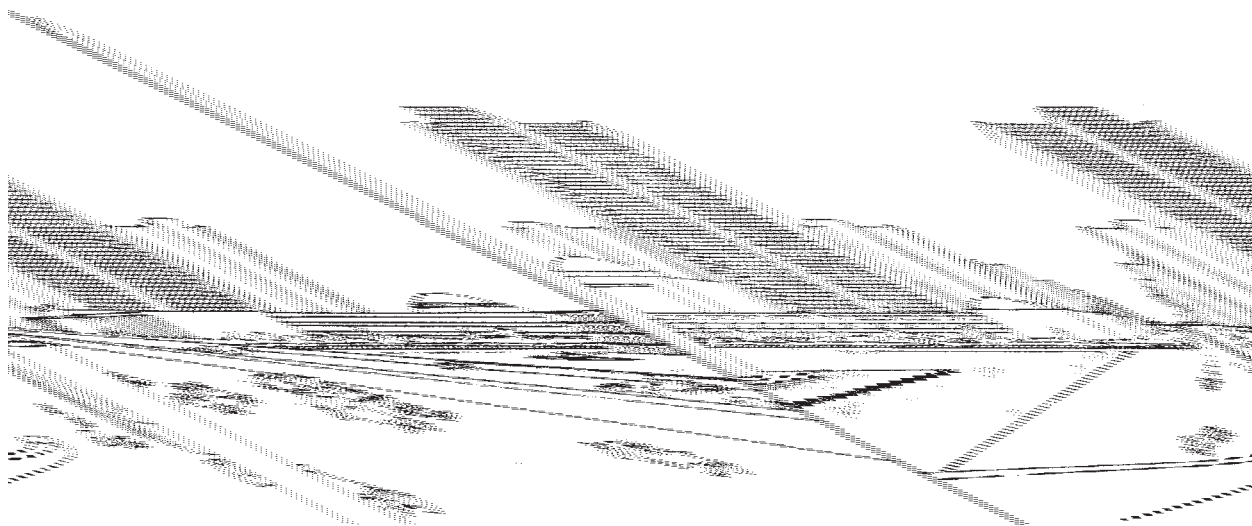


New York, 42nd Street

the fact that the urban planning and modernist architecture of the twentieth century can indeed be analysed (and criticised) quite adequately. They are shown to be an instrument for the defence of an inward-looking culture of intimacy against the dangers and shocks of the urban public realm.

This becomes all the more clear when we combine Sennett's analysis with the research done by the British-Israeli criminologist Stanley Cohen. In his *Visions of Social Control*, Cohen puts a radical spin on Sennett's thesis of the anti-urban attitude of modern urban development and urban planning in his fascinating overview of the significance of the 'city' as metaphor. Cohen, too, identifies the fundamental anxiety about urban life as the most important source of inspiration for the projects of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban planners and developers. In their eyes, cities were places dominated by the rationality of the market, where impersonal relationships, segmentation, deprivation and above all disorder reigned supreme. The answer to this put forward by the modern urban planners was less modern than expected. The views on urbanity held by the modernists and their contemporaries were anything but an absolute break with the past. On the contrary, they consisted of a combination of pre-modern, traditional social ideas with a deep-seated belief in the problem-solving power of modern technology and modern materials. From the theories of Ebenezer Howard to the grand visions of Le Corbusier we can observe an infusion of a pre-modern ideal of agrarian community life into the disarray of urban public life. It is plainly not a struggle against tradition, though it is a fight against the dangers and the unpredictability of public life in the city streets. Vertical construction reduced the dangers of the street while simultaneously providing a solution for the shortage of space. Zoning laws aimed to functionalise the various urban activities, stimulating a clearer organisation and control of urban life as such. Suburbanisation achieved the dream of a safe and intimate community life of isolated monads, at once close to and far away from the dangers of the inner city. Crowning this urban blueprint is the creation of 'zones of neglect', areas of the inner city that were deliberately abandoned, thereby giving rise to a home for the homeless and a semi-legal netherworld where drug dealers and petty criminals can ply their trade. The Zeedijk in Amsterdam is an example of just such a zone.

In the outskirts of the city or suburbs Cohen suggests that we can see an afterimage of the cleansed community, the model that was used in the fight against leprosy in the Middle Ages. It is his contention that the zoning of urban life grew out of strategies that had been employed against the



Le Corbusier, city for three million inhabitants, 1922

St. Louis, demolition of Pruitt-Igoe, 1971



plague. Segmentation, diffusion, classification and various forms of statistical and social research all helped control this lethal epidemic. Together, these measures form the ideal of a disciplined, mechanically organised and monitored society that is supposed to be capable of holding the plague of the urban public realm in check and keeping its lepers at a distance.

In early twentieth-century modernism, these notions of a cleansed community and disciplined society were still subordinate to an overarching vision of social progress or indeed of utopia. After the Second World War, by contrast, this politics which drew its motivation from a fear of the city became imbued with an air of crisis and decay. This laid the foundation for a politics centred on societal blueprints that aimed to achieve a systematised social order. While the critique of the countless blind spots of modernist functionalism is already some 30 years old, few attempts are made, even now, to cure the ill by seeking out its causes. I think we need to seek the virus in the intellectual heritage of modernistic planning and urban development itself: the permanent fear of the uncontrollable effects of urban public life as such.

AN URBAN ROMANTICISM

The mechanistic models and theories of our modernistic predecessors and contemporaries are now the history of *our* present day. But were the modernists cognizant of *their* own history? I don't think so. The modernists took catastrophe (whether real or metaphorical) as their starting point. Their politics aimed to build a 'future' out of nothing; to create, in other words, an utterly new, perfectly homogeneous, modern space. What was forgotten in the process was the anxiety that lay at the foundation of those politics. On the other side of the catastrophe we recognise the ambivalent roots of modernism in the Romantic and decadent movements. Romanticism articulated a non-rationalist view of the newborn modern individual. It offered a fresh and typically modern take on the relationship between man and nature, expressing for the first time the modern city-dweller's 'alienation' from the natural world. Typically modern and urban themes like the isolation of the individual and the ironic distance of the intellect play an important role in the work of authors like Goethe, Schlegel and Schiller.

And then came the decadents who integrated isolation and irony into a conscious politics within the urban domain: the dandy and the *flâneur* form new urban identities in which the problematic individual is combined with the public personality who puts himself 'on display' and thus wants to be seen (while simultaneously remaining part of the anonymous urban crowd). In their public strategies we encounter an experimental politics of lifestyles, a politics concerned with shaping the new, urban identities into new modes of living with the open and disorienting character of modern urban life. Without a doubt, these are strategies that refine Sennett's one-sided representation of an urbanity that is falling ever more under the sway of intimacy. Perhaps it is in the decadent movement (and principally in the work of Baudelaire) that we first come across the realisation that the foundation of 'modern life' and the 'modern identity' lies in the knowledge that there can be no such foundation. A true measure of progress would be to succeed in translating this realisation into a politics that sees nothing catastrophic about it. History is crucial to this type of vision. Not as a supplier of a forgotten origin or essence but as a Nietzschean wardrobe: history as

a collection of costumes, from which modern individuals can draw inspiration for new articles of clothing. Maybe none of those costumes will fit us, as Nietzsche thought, and we will look even more ridiculous in them than we do already. But at the end of the day, this is no reason to stay undressed. Yet in the view of twentieth-century modernism, this was not only possible but also necessary: the time for dressing up was over. We needed to get back to reality. But what that reality might be – apart from a 'naked reality' – has remained unclear to the present day.

Am I then trying to suggest that a new Romanticism or a revitalised *décadence* could undo 60 years spent denying the public space and the public sphere? No. In pointing out the significance of Romanticism and *décadence*, I am merely trying to point out that our views on urbanity and the public realm, and indeed on the modern identity, cannot be complete if we are unable to see beyond twentieth-century modernism. What is more, such a limited frame of reference severely distorts these views. Over the course of the twentieth century, the public sphere came to be understood increasingly as the effect of a planned system of urban order. Conversely, in the Romantic philosophy and under influence of the decadents, the public sphere was seen as a *practice*, as a network of heterogeneous activities, possibly as a series of conflicts and fights. In this connection I would refer to my earlier remarks about Arendt's notion of the public realm. The relationship between the individual (as a consumer, an intellect, a creator) and his or her surroundings was also defined differently in the nineteenth century than it was by the twentieth-century modernists. For the latter group, those surroundings were little more than the material upon which rational and creative intellects could project their blueprints. For the nineteenth-century modernist (whether Romantic or decadent), those surroundings were something with which to cultivate an internal relationship. The question of whether or not an individual felt at home there was crucial for his or her creative or intellectual attitude to those surroundings. In my view it is this very notion of the creative intellect *as a participant in* the urban public sphere that is indispensable when we attempt to take a position on the current debates on urban renewal, urban development and the use and organisation of public space.

THE NEW METROPOLITANISM

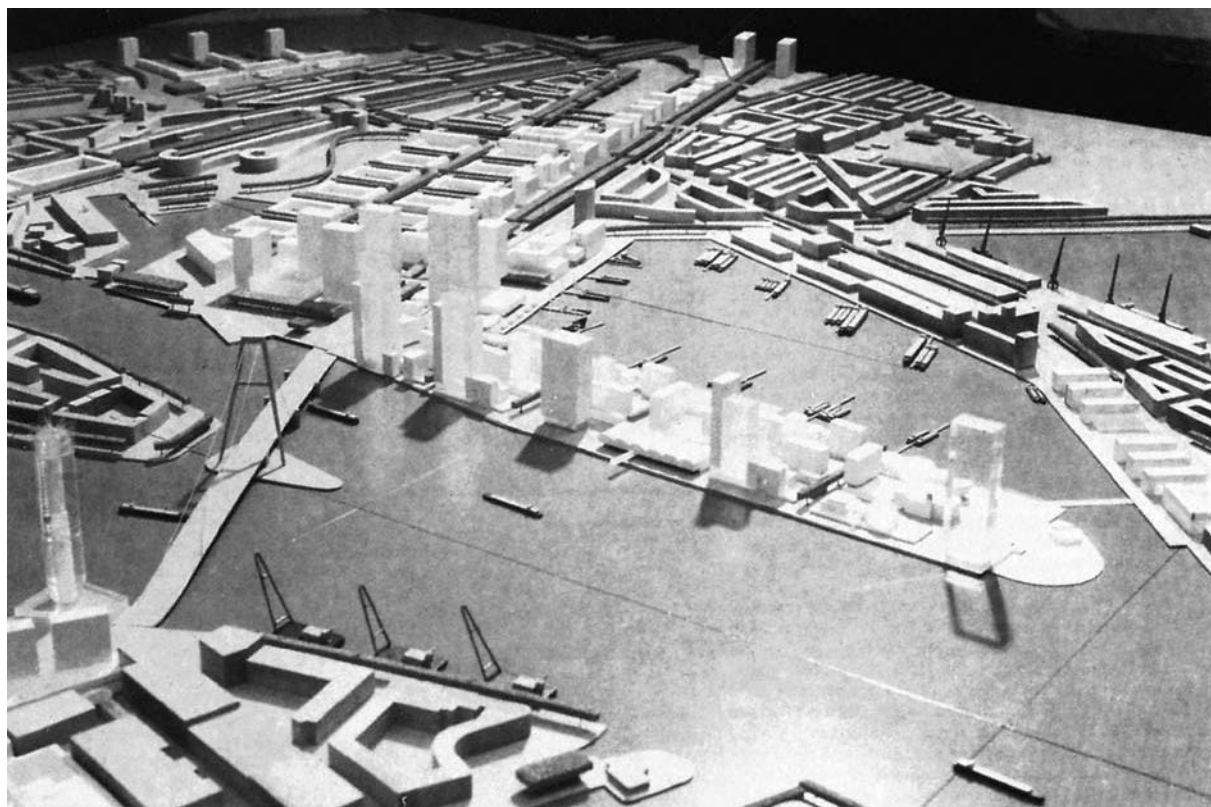
Finally, I would like to take a brief look at some recent trends in urban development, in the light of the foregoing. For the past several years it has been possible to speak of a reassessment of the city, a revival of the metropolis. In the stories told by the new enthusiasts of big-city life, we hear the first echoes of a new voluntarism: we can change, we should change, we have the will to do things differently. It would seem as if we're out to rediscover the city! But a glance at the plans and projects, the background to this re-advertised urban space, suggests otherwise.

A few years ago the municipality of Amsterdam launched a promotional campaign explicitly aimed at the city's own residents. The main slogan was *Amsterdam heeft 't* (Amsterdam's got it). The poster designed to go with this slogan is well-known: the second 'a' of Amsterdam has been replaced by a smiley-face in the shape of a step-gabled house. This banal and self-congratulatory approach was greeted almost immediately by ironic commentary from a variety of quarters. Some 'distorted' the slogan to call



New York, South Street Seaport

Teun Koolhaas, Kop van Zuid, 1987



attention to a range of urban ills. The slogan was also used to spotlight certain urban lifestyles that the municipality may not have been so keen to advertise, such as the city's lively gay subculture (which has actually been quite beneficial, from an economic perspective). With thinly disguised jealousy, Rotterdam countered with *Amsterdam heeft 't, Rotterdam maakt 't* (Amsterdam's got it, Rotterdam makes it), a nod to its own identity as a working-class town. The smiling house should have warned us. It can be seen as the essence of the new metropolitan attitude: the city as *façade*, as merchandise on display.

In one respect we can speak of a step forward with respect to the functionalist notion of the modernist city-dwellers: people are apparently coming to the realisation that the urban space is actually being used, and not merely as a route from building A to building B, or from function X to function Y. But the community of users or consumers is a different one from what had been suggested. This reveals the more germane interpretation of the grinning façade. The new metropolitanism attempts to create scope for a growing tourist market and, in more general terms, for a community of 'temporary' and highly selective users. This applies to all those cities that have lost their original economic functions, particularly ports like New York, London, Baltimore, Amsterdam and Rotterdam. All those cities are discovering new possibilities for their waterfronts, and along all those waterfronts the same three-masters will complete the picture of the metropolitan appeal of these cities.

Behind the new voluntarism of the urban planners, a pattern can be discerned in the plans and programmes they devise. In the various programmes for Rotterdam, we read about economic necessity and inevitable choices. But inevitable choices are not choices at all. In other words we find ourselves shunted back to the domain of the catastrophe. If we can't agree to do the following, then . . . and so forth. This 'inevitable choice' in favour of a new urban economy is connected to two other elements.

First of all there is the overriding preoccupation with the visual dimension of the urban space, which we encounter time and again. It's about giving the 'old' urban centres a new status, a new face. This is not meant as a historic reappraisal of the facelessness of modernistic architecture, or as an ironic commentary on the movement to redesign those centres, but rather as a deadly serious affirmation of midtown Manhattan as the *nec plus ultra* of urban development. 'A city should look like a city' appears to be the underlying thinking, and what else could this signify but a skyline?

Behind the magnificent skyline, however, is the everyday reality of those who live and work in the centre. We now know that new buildings in the 'City' must be attractive and high-grade, that the city should offer a 'metropolitan ambiance' and an 'alluring' public space for the millions of tourists and businesspeople. The plans also have something to offer for the city-dwellers themselves. Metropolitanism should be combined with 'hospitality' (the term is not mine). In the case of Rotterdam, this means 'attractive' residential building in a beautiful setting, for old and new categories of residents alike. Small households end up in the city centre, while new suburbs are built for middle class families (since that was where they were living already). And just to be a bit daring, we mix those two groups together in the area called *Kop van Zuid* (see *Vernieuwing van Rotterdam* [Renewing Rotterdam]).

The metropolitanism of the 1980s consists of three elements: tourist appeal, visual presentation, hospitality ('there's no place like home').

In Rotterdam these concepts go hand in hand with the unavoidable idea of the city's forward-thinking dynamism. 'The future has a future in Rotterdam,' to quote the ironic commentary of poet Jules Deelder in a book on urban renewal in that city. But that classic dynamism will vanish with the disappearance of traditional economic functions, a fact that is only emphasised in the plans for a railway tunnel. The new dynamism will be much less visible.

The new metropolitanism is neither a rethinking of the role and significance of the urban public realm, nor a refusal to prolong a failing modernism in architecture and urban planning. Rotterdam was rebuilt after a genuine catastrophe, and there are few who would regard that reconstruction project as a success. Yet the dynamism remains. It pains me to say so, but the current plans to give Rotterdam a new, metropolitan look are suspiciously similar to comparable plans for the centre of Amsterdam. They include a museum for the twenty-first century, 'high-grade' housing and offices, a greater 'density', a greater appeal . . . all of which is doubtless both necessary and inevitable. Yet when politicians or urban planners talk of necessity and inevitability, you can bet that at least one inevitability will always be overlooked. If we momentarily forget the façade of an excessively cautious, accommodating and occasionally dowdy ('hospitable') metropolis the size of Amsterdam or Rotterdam, we are faced with a very different kind of inevitability. Without optimism or voluntarism, I would like to point out the inevitably *practical* character of all urbanity: practices engaged in by city-dwellers and 'users' of the urban space. Tourists are consumers of urban space; they are not city-dwellers. Indeed, their practices are oriented towards the façade of the city, its visual qualities, its appeal.



New York, West 42nd Street

The practices of the residents, by contrast, are directed at more than just the visual dimension of the city (though the visual aspects do form an obvious background, in a sense). Walter Benjamin once referred to the tactile qualities of architecture, of one's surroundings as such. These qualities do not require a conscious, intentional gaze; rather, they exist for the casual glance of people who use 'their' city day in, day out – qualities that evoke a sense of being at home without the explicit need to feel at home.

The soft-focus advertisement and the story of the happy city deny the inevitability of another aspect of the 'appeal' of city life: its *true* public sphere. In the movements and activities that take place in that public realm, in that space, traces can be found of the ongoing catastrophe of urban planning and urban social control. This sphere contains what could be called the 'sense of the possibility' (Robert Musil's *Möglichkeitssinn*) of urban life. Here we find 'the impossibility' of urban policy, that which is permanently disclaimed by the façade and the colour advertisements: an urban underclass, the homeless of New York, the junkies and long-term unemployed of Amsterdam or Rotterdam. But what is also overlooked is the unpredictable diversity of an 'open' urban realm. Politicians and planners regard all these things as problems, because they are resistant to control. But it goes beyond that: the original sin of modernism has returned, like a form of cancer, especially among planners, real estate developers and municipal administrators. The policy of order and control is becoming increasingly contaminated by the fear of an *internal* catastrophe, the fear that a surfeit of complexity will bring about the implosion of the entire machinery, the mechanism of surveillance and control, the happy (sub)urban family.

Ultimately, this demonstrates that the politicians and planners *and* the users of and participants in the urban public realm all share, to a certain extent, the experience of the possibility and reality of catastrophe. In the near future the debate in the public sphere will play out between the two extremes of a classic and quintessentially modernist fear of catastrophe and a more empathetic and pragmatic attitude, which sees catastrophe as something to be *survived* (as Benjamin suggested). The fact that we can survive catastrophes has already been proved by the history of Rotterdam. It must now be proved again.

Translated by Steve Leinbach