



ANDRÁS CSEH

## MANY IS BEAUTIFUL

The confrontation of differences is the basic human need to be present. The larger diversity surrounds us, the more possibilities we have to sense ourselves against an other entity – either human, object-like or spatial one.

This patchwork of existing and becoming structures is subconsciously apparent for us in our natural environment. It seems that however we fight against it, we still remain undetachable parts of this spherical home that we're trying to over-inhabit. It feels natural and evident to walk in a field or a forrest, to see creatures appear, thrive and disappear, emerge and decay. We don't experience our contrast towards these processes and maybe that becomes the reason behind our complete ignorance towards them.

Nevertheless, as we drive towards a human created settlement, the tension of living starts building up. In this built environment, which is the background of our everyday life, we consciously get face to face with each other and all that is around us. Every action becomes more aware, planned and carefully executed. We make lists to keep in mind what and how to organize.

This is my list about the city: a patchwork of new schemes in the framework of upcycled blocks of thoughts in recent years.<sup>0</sup>



## In the face of each other

Emmanuel Lévinas talks about the decent nudity and essential poverty of the face, which presents the Other to us in the most intensive and provocative way. The deepest attention in our human experiences is paid in the moments when we really meet another human being – when just watching each other’s faces is a discourse, response, and responsibility. “It is difficult to be silent in someone's presence: this difficulty has its ultimate foundation in this signification proper to the saying, whatever is the said. It is necessary to speak of something, of the rain and fine weather, no matter what, but to speak, to respond to him and already to answer for him.”<sup>1</sup>

This responsive obligation grows on us in urban situations. Our self-articulation works as the echolocation of bats: we express our feelings and thoughts and wait for the reply generated in the surrounding ones and spaces. The citizenship of a place consists of this network of connections that can be a web to get trapped in or a web to surf – based on if we have the skills to use it. Therefore learning the spatial, infrastructural, social, cultural and informational systems of cities is becoming the key competence in the 21st century.

We respond to the multiple irritation of our overwhelming surroundings by getting involved in a continuous action sequence, where awareness of the Other becomes a secondary element for us. The creation and perception of our environment can work as a learning model to understand our role in these connections. Hence the urban tissue becomes a constant reminder of ourselves as social beings through the memory of the erection of the city, which starts with constructing a building next to another.



This traumatic event takes our confrontational development to a new level. It is more easy to cope with the situation when we build in nature – we experience architecture as the original discrepancy between the two spaces: “ the horizontally oriented space of our experience and the vertically oriented space of nature; it begins when we add vertical walls to the horizontal surface of the earth.”<sup>2</sup> We protect ourselves against outside forces and influences. However, when we erect a house next to a previously built one, we are creating a completely different challenge to face: ourselves, one another. The justification of war against the different is over – we have to come to terms with war against the alike.

## The One, the Two, the Many, and the Whole

The differences and similarities of the one, the many, and the whole emerge from the origin of cities, the act of settling and construction; while the apparent importance of the two comes from our biological and human existence.

All construction processes include adding or subtracting elements to create a spatial structure. Modularity displays this phenomenon in an anthropomorphic way with the role of individuals and communities composing the more complex structure of society. While building, we are modelling our own behaviour, providing ourselves with the possibility of taking a conscious step towards social responsibility.

According to Lévinas<sup>3</sup>, the appearance of the face of the Other is the ultimate human experience that, due to its incomprehensible nature, challenges the individual to become alive through stepping out of the self. The self is under attack also during the course of building, especially in the large scale, when achieving the inner 3D – though here the self is rather partially dissolved by stepping into a world



while it is being created and becoming a symbiotic part of it. The double identity here allows the creator and the creation to influence and form each other, so the actor is on both sides – provocateur and spectator at the same time – while perception and reflection keep the process moving. The ethic that results from this event<sup>4</sup> overtakes the existence of the individual and focuses on the ability of sharing existence itself, so far with – or rather in – other entities. The obvious retreat from this personified conflict is palpable in today’s virtual existence in the online communities which are built on parallel monologues rather than dialogues; we are provided with the feeling of belonging to others without the intruding presence of the other itself. Moreover, in opposition to physical reality, the existence of the Other in the virtual space is in our hands on many levels.

András Visky, one of the leading theorists in contemporary Romanian and Hungarian theatre, argues that the act of theatre presumes three entities: “The actor and the role are not enough for the event to manifest – another one, the spectator, is necessary for any contemplation and understanding.”<sup>5</sup> This trio is also based on contemplation and sharing similar to spatial creation, however, by placing two human beings in the equation. The experience of codependence in a community commonly happens in building exercises when one holds something until the other checks or fixes it, or even on more primal level, when a thing is too heavy for one person to carry. Coordination and simultaneous action are the basis of our coexistence, codependence, and, on a more socially sophisticated level, on our participation in the commons<sup>6</sup> balancing between the individual and the universal. Lévinas states that for only two individuals the whole spectrum of acknowledgement and responsibility could take place, but based on the traditions incepted in our plurality, we are bound to aim for an equilibrium of shared attention.



Heidegger talks about the “disintegrated multiplicity of the disciplines”<sup>7</sup> in the field of science, held together only by universities artificially after their roots “in their essential ground have died”. The various sciences separate them due to their subjects and their methodology. At this point, knowledge becomes questionable, which causes us to also question education: Are we teaching parallel independent bundles of expertise that have hardly anything to do either with each other or the world itself? If we accept the unprocessable diversity as the reality for our life, then universities are the institutions that prevent the real flourishing and evolution. However, if our goal is still to understand the bigger, or in this case the whole, picture – as mankind have been aiming to do since the dawn of time – then we need to make the connections that universities do on a more general level starting earlier in education and as an integral part of our everyday lives, starting with understanding our cities. Separating and reemerging the different layers and disciplines that are present can help us discover the general behaviour of various systems while still maintaining a primal physical experience, which helps us staying emotionally in the event of learning. This intense experience can allow us to advance on to more abstract levels of learning and education, where we are now able to preserve our curiosity.

## **The City as the Ultimate Whole**

“A city’s central function is exposing us to diversity. It’s the job of a city to make us fully human. And we become fully human by moving in an environment in which contestation and negotiation are constants of everyday life. And as we are exposed to an extremely high number of people who share maybe very, very little with us. They might not speak the same language, have the same politics,



might not eat the same food or hold to the same fundamental beliefs regarding the nature of the universe as we do. And yet we are all in this giant machine together. And we have to come up with a way to not only coexist but even thrive together. My own personal definition of the function of a city is based on the psychic potential of life in the urban environment.”<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to compare the first step from the self towards the other within Lévinas and Adam Greenfield’s thoughts above of the ultimate human presence as part of a system that is full of unknown elements for the individual. Based on this narrative, in the city we always perceive in inner 3D; not only in space, but in many other aspects too (social, cultural, etc.). Instead of peripheral vision, we have to introduce the term of peripheral perception, which includes all of our senses. When walking around the city, we open up to the multi-sensory environment and experience a different awareness of here than that of the almost meditative tasks in the classroom or workplace. Our connections and reactions to the environment start to define our presence. On this level, the socio-cultural forces paradigm of environmental cognition provides the premium level of perception, and we move back through the opportunity structure paradigm to the adaptive paradigm in a process in opposite direction to our early childhood learning development.

Here the spatial environment provides the urban code<sup>9</sup>: the connecting medium of the historical, cultural, social, and scientific layers of our life allowing a synthesis of general knowledge. The connection of the individual with the objects of learning becomes experiential in a setting that not only allows but requires multi-tasking from the participant. Existence and learning become palpably the same at their core. The city as a learning ground physically models the data-procession and decision-making events we are used to in all our activities and also in our so-called virtual reality.



“Buildings and cities provide the horizon for understanding and confronting the human existential condition.”<sup>10</sup> This revelation presents a key event on different social scales. Spatial perception is able to connect seemingly distant areas of our personal lives, and it also improves systematic skills for handling the surrounding challenges. A deeper understanding of the human existential condition leads to a more accurate analysis of our situation in the world; hence, it can provide a starting point for the development of future strategies concerning not only our survival, but also our well-being as human beings, persons, and communities as well. Alas, simply being in a city can be perceived as the cornerstone of the a democratic world.

<sup>0</sup> In this paper I freely copy, alter, contradict, rethink and reuse some of my thoughts from past years research, articles and notes on the city without quoting myself.

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, Philippe Nemo: *Ethics and Infinity*, translation by Richard A. Cohen, Duquesne University Press, 1985

<sup>2</sup> Dom Hans Van Der Laan: *Architectonic Space*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1983

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas: *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, 1969

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek: *Event – Philosophy in Transit*, Penguin Books, 2014

<sup>5</sup> András Visky: *The Many and the One*, lecture, MOME, 11/16/2011

<sup>6</sup> “We speak of ‘commons’ every time a community of people is led by the same desire to take charge of a resource that it inherits or it creates and it organises itself in a democratic, friendly and responsible manner in order to ensure accessibility, usage and permanence for the general interest and the well-being of the community and of generations to come.” Alain Ambrosi, COMMONS Un-conference lecture, Pixelache, Helsinki, 06/05/2014



<sup>7</sup> “Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten” Das Spiegel–Gespräch mit Martin Heidegger, Der Spiegel 23/1976

<sup>8</sup> Smart phone, smart bomb, smart city – Interview with Adam Greenfield by Hannes Grassegger in Abstract No12 White Noise, W. I. R. E. 2013

<sup>9</sup> Anne Mikoleit, Moritz Pürckhauer: Urban Code, The MIT Press, 2011

<sup>10</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa: The Eyes of the Skin, John Wiley & Sons, 2005