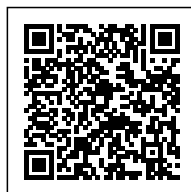


New Babylons: Urbanism for the New Millennium.

Sanford Kwinter

NEW BABYLONS: URBANISM FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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The sinews of modernity may be discerned in three succinct and interwoven social processes of nearly identical origin: the processes of rationalization, of industrialization, and of the more concrete process into which the latter two are subsumed, that of urbanization.

Yet these forces are all too readily associated in the historical mind only with the specific upheavals of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and too rarely with the more bizarre and idiosyncratic developments of our own contemporary world. Indeed a great deal of our intellectual life during the last thirty years has actually sought to minimize awareness of the intricate and increasingly subtle continuities that these fundamental social forces represent through their stubborn, if increasingly invisible, persistence. The recent bankruptcies of two important but obfuscating intellectual movements—the so-called “postmodernist” philosophy on the one hand, and on the other, the retreat within our plastic traditions to increasingly hollow formalisms of “style”—are a sign that a window is now opening up through which we may again apprehend, perhaps with a new clarity, the systematic play of forces that has always driven the historical transformations of social, economic, and mental life. The study of the results and implications of these processes, of their movement, strife, and inter-mixing, is what is increasingly being understood today by “urbanism.”

The term urbanism is admittedly used here rhetorically: it deliberately summons back into existence a type of textual practice that subsists today only in the frailest form. Indeed, what we need today is to revive the urbanism of the essay (discursive or graphic), the urbanism of the speculative historical or philosophical treatise, in a phrase, the semi-“delirious” urbanism of ideas, as a vital alternative to the present ultra-narrow, over-professionalized, sterile urbanisms of the clerical disciplines. No longer content with the milquetoast urbanism of merely remedial design propositions, nor the camp urbanism that transforms the advancing, often savage deprivals of the modernization process into cult objects (i.e., suburbs, nets, edges, and spectacle), what we need is a genealogical urbanism that both invents and unearths embedded histories-in-the-making, and through such invention transfigures and transvalues the very landscape on which it operates.

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An exemplary text of this type is "Stim and Dross" by Lars Lerup. Lerup's text might best be described as a "paraliterary" work (in the sense that this term has been applied to the later work of Roland Barthes), a text that functions as a type of early portolano of the late century metropolis in that it sketches out, with no pretense to exhaustive projection, a provisional series of actantial characters (generative dramatic structures); fixes privileged points of urban threshold and rupture where affects naturally cluster in the landscape; establishes an inchoate lexicon of the increasingly abstract and creolized objects (i.e., "initial corruptions" that emerge into primary use) that punctuate the new urban field; and most important of all, supplies the above elements with a set of algorithms that link them into a mobile syntax of procedures, routines and events. The text is not only notable

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for its expository style (it seems an almost promiscuous amalgam of J.G. Ballard, William Gibson, Reyner Banham, Jean Baudrillard, even Carl Sagan and Lerup's career-long guide, Michel Foucault) but also for the unity and originality of its analytical machine: Lerup's Houston is a marvelously integrated metabolizing beast, an animal rife with tropisms, habits, appetites, exudations, cadences, and transient lifecycles. The mysterious and complex "stimdross" is, moreover, an active concept that targets the city-object obliquely as a fulminating ecology of multiple forces now inhabiting orders of time, and not only orders of space. It gives place to what is certainly the essay's most important concept: the principle of the megashape, a dynamo of spontaneous continual efflorescence not unlike the orgasmic cloud of Marcel Duchamp's untouchable Bride—self-generating, evental, entirely organismic, beyond all totalizing grasp, yet pure solid geometry, and nothing but.

Lerup's text, a kind of "New Babylon" for the Metropolitan Age, might seem an eccentric work, though only in relation to the most diffident, bureaucratic forms of urbanism that, in the last two decades, have become the norm. In reality, its spirit belongs to another confident if sporadic tradition that includes the work of Lewis Mumford, Reyner Banham, Paul Virilio and Rem Koolhaas as much as that of Alexis de Toqueville, Georg Simmel, Max Weber and Walter Benjamin.

The new "urbanism" I am calling for recognizes that it is still art forms—those of the cinema and of literature—that have provided the most compelling urbanist archive produced in the 20th century, and it is to their oblique and infinitely rich documentary spirit, and to their examples as labors of the imagination, that we will need to adhere.

See Lars Lerup, "Stim & Dross: Rethinking the Metropolis," *Assemblage* 25 (1995), pp. 83–101. A wave of urbanist projects emerged after the writing of this essay in 1995, including the Metapolis group in Spain, the Multiplicity group in Italy and throughout Europe, the Harvard Project on the City, the Photodocumentary School around the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam, etc. Sadly, most have now faded away.

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