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## An Urban Pilot Project

A New Figure of Urban Spots for the Poor and the Homeless  
 A Figure of Urban Left-overs placed in Manhattan as a cipher of the Big Rich City

Elisabeth Blum

Englische Übersetzung:  
 Thomas Root

*Im Wintersemester 1996/1997 war ich als Visiting Critic Gast an der Syracuse University, N.Y. In einem neunwöchigen Entwurfskurs haben wir im Anschluss an das kurz zuvor veröffentlichte Buch WEM GEHÖRT DIE STADT? ARMUT UND OBDACHLOSIGKEIT IN DEN METROPOLEN<sup>1</sup> ein realutopisches städtebauliches Projekt für Manhattan entwickelt.*

*Dem Vorschlag Paul Virilios folgend, dass das Mobiliar der Stadt der Zukunft in Form neuer Einrichtungen für die Ausgeschlossenen revolutioniert werden müsse, haben wir dem Plan Manhattans eine neue Figur einbeschrieben. Diese Figur städtebaulicher Überbleibsel oder Restflächen nutzt den Broadway als symbolisches Rückgrat des Stadtplans und verbindet neu geschaffene Einrichtungen – Übernachtungsgelegenheiten, Wäschereien, Einrichtungen der ärztlichen Versorgung, Weiterbildungsorte, Reparaturwerkstätten, Läden, Volksküchen und anderes – wie Perlen an einer Kette anschaulich zu einem markanten neuen städtischen Layer: ein Versuch, die Lebensbedürfnisse derer zu repräsentieren, die Ausgrenzungspraktiken entgegen-treten, wie man sie inzwischen in vielen grossen Städten antrifft. Mit dem nachfolgend dokumentierten Text wurde die Arbeit eingeleitet.*

*Exemplarisch für die Projekte, die entlang der im Text beschriebenen FIGURE OF URBAN LEFT-OVERS organisiert sind, ist das Projekt „Downtown Athletic Club – Social Program Shift“ abgebildet.*

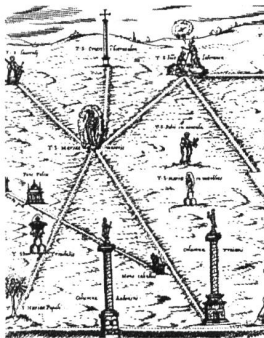
*1 Wem gehört die Stadt? Armut und Obdachlosigkeit in den Metropolen, Elisabeth Blum (Hrsg), Lenos Basel 1996*

### PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Michel de Certeau, a French historian, member of the Ecole freudienne and a specialist in linguistic philosophy and sociology – wrote a small essay entitled „Reading: A Misunderstood Activity“.

First, he states that we can understand any kind of reality as a text – so that the two basic social activities, production and consumption, can be replaced through the binome writing and reading.

Second, he states that the social and the technical functioning of today's culture is a hierarchization of the two basic activities writing and reading a text: to write usually means producing the text, to read means to register the texts of others – without marking one's own standpoint, without re-forming them. At least one aspect in this view has to be shown up as an illusion: What has to be called in question is the imposed parity of reading and passivity! Reading is to take a certain perspective of the given text. Reading – he asserts – is to walk around in a given system, like in a built-



Abbildungen aus: E. N. Bacon,  
Stadtplanung von Athen bis Brasilia,  
Zürich 1968



up city or supermarket; „every reading changes its object“ (Jorge Luis Borges); what differentiates literatures is less the texts themselves but the different ways in which they are read. In this view reading is the reader's production. He invents within the texts other aspects than those intended by the author. Now, are these statements about reading only pertinent to literature? Or are they valid for every kind of cultural consumption?

They most certainly are. – Let's consider the basic wordpair of the architect's profession: analysis and design. It's easy to understand that we usually construct the same wrong opposition: perceiving analysis as an objective examination – without changing reality, only observing it – while perceiving the process of design as a process of invention. This view is equally as questionable as the one mentioned by de Certeau.

We assert that to analyse an architectural or urban situation is to produce a certain view or perspective of a certain reality. Analysing a given urban situation means deciding what facts of reality will be articulated into a project and what aspects of reality will not, what aspects of (more or less hidden or obvious) city life aspects will appear in the future city reality or which won't. This fact is a really dramatic element in an architect's work. Do we trust aside parts of reality or do we allow them to appear?

#### PROJECT INTRODUCTION – FIGURES OF THE CITY

When we think of cities, a sequence of figures conjure up – whether it might be that of ancient or medieval or baroque Rome with its figures of churches, palaces, market places and halls or villas, or whether it be Franz Kafka's Prague with its figure of his life there rising for Kafka fans from the confusion of the city, an image which could be compared in character with a pilgrim's figure of Rome or a theatergoer's figure of Manhattan – a sequence of overlapping and overlying figures which constitute but also change the character of the given city and determine the nature of its public life.

Let us look at some elaborated drawings of Rome, realizations of networks in the urban space which are like mirrors of historical ideas how the city was to be, what the city had to represent as a cultural creation. Networks of ideas what the core structure of a city can be prism images (Vexierbilder) of a city: a sum of different layers showing images which characterize a particular city.

Our contemplation of the city will focus on the role which these figures of public institutions play in the life of the city. Focusing in this way is highly interesting for the reason that the history of cities – whether they be Rome, Paris or New York – cities which we have idolized as primadonnas, shows clearly that it was in visions and images which determined the design of these cities and which determined, abetted or hindered the quality and nature of life there. Which figures are in fact extant? Which forms of living do they favor, suppress or ignore? These questions mirror the social-political dimension of these urbanistic figures.

#### MISSING CITY-FIGURE

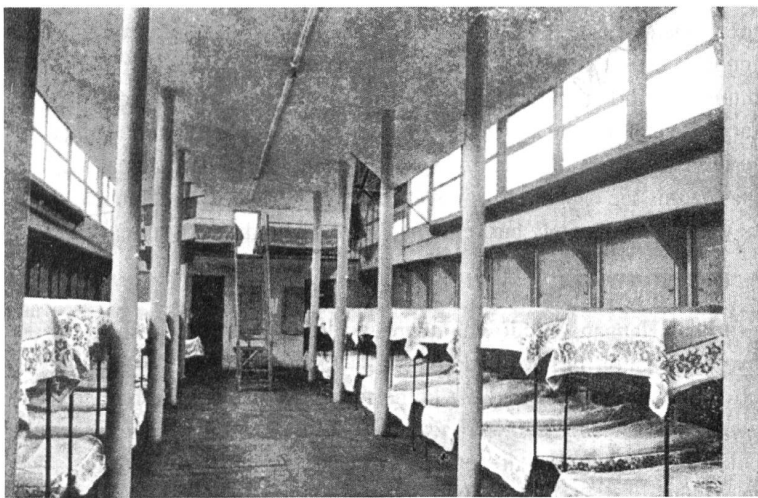
These thesis underlying our project is that one figure in particular is lacking in today's cities, namely the Figure of the Urban Spots for the Poor and the Homeless or the *Figure of Urban Left-overs*.

The assignment at hand is of such current interest and is politically and socially so explosive that it has either been ignored entirely by architects, urbanists and government agencies, which tend to prefer to concern themselves with attractive themes, or at least been relegated to some distant shelf. It is precisely this fact that would have us seriously contemplate urban inventions which are nothing short of extraordinary as they pertain to the city as a whole, the image of life, rather than behave like marauding crusaders, eliminating everything and everyone perceived as inappropriate to the city and thereby maintaining an image of the city which is in fact obsolete, namely the image of the city as a „fortress of the rich“ (Lopez).

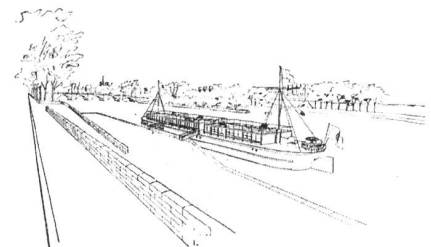
## VIRILIO'S COMPETITION: „URBAN BUOYS“

The idea for our project – to start with – has its roots in Paris. The French urbanist and philosopher Paul Virilio in cooperation with the professor of architecture Chilperic de Boiscuillé have championed an unpleasant and unpopular cause, that of the unemployed as well as that of the poor and homeless.

Virilio and de Boiscuillé predict that the number of poor and homeless familiar to us are „only the beginning of a wave (...), such as we have never seen before (and) which will be able to destabilize any political power“. In their view, our cities would need to be newly equipped and civic facilities revolutionized in order to even only minimally anchor the new „city nomads“, as Virilio calls the homeless, in the city. As a member of the „High Committee for the Accomodation of the Underprivileged“, which François Mitterand had called into life, Virilio cooperated with de Boiscuille in initiating an international architectural competition in 1994 entitled „balises urbaines“, that is, urban buoys or life islands. 507 projects were submitted, and the 11 winners were presented at the exhibition *La Ville* at the Centre Pompidou.



*ASILE FLOTTANT DE L'ARMEE DU SALUT, 1929. On a acheté une des péniches de ciment armé dont l'essai avait été tenté pendant la guerre. La péniche a 80 mètres de long. On a construit, depuis son fond jusqu'au sommet du gabarit, autorisé par les services de navigation fluviale, un vaste local divisé en trois compartiments. On a aménagé 160 lits, une salle à manger, des cuisines, W.-C., lavabos, douches, appartement du marinier, appartement du Directeur, et un jardin suspendu sur le dessus de la péniche. En hiver, la péniche vient devant le Palais du Louvre héberger les clochards que les froids chassent loin des arches des ponts. En été, elle devait servir de colonie de vacances pour les enfants, aux environs de Paris. aus: Willy Boesiger (Hrsg.), *Le Corbusier 1929-34*, Zürich 1964*

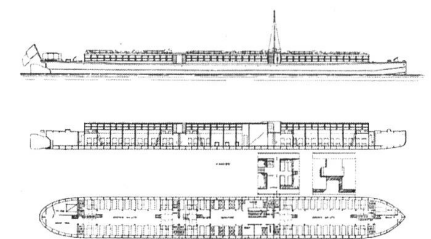


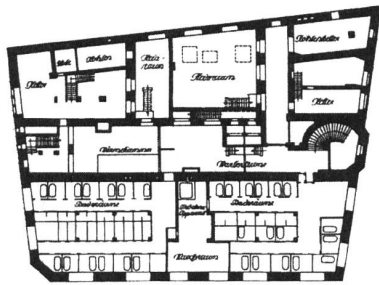
## LE CORBUSIER'S SHIP METAPHOR

Based on Le Corbusier's metaphor of the city as a huge ship, Virilio asks: „Where are today's metropolises' life islands?“ With eating and drinking not at the heart and core of the competition, Virilio chose rather to make us aware of other dimensions of survival, other dimensions of that which public establishments will need to represent in the future, if the social descent into utter desolation is not to be the only way. In the unfilled gaps of the city the *balises urbaines* are to be the place where the homeless can store their possessions in lockers, where they can wash and shave, mend their clothing and have access to telephones, faxes, modems and whatever other technology telecommunications are predicated upon. In Virilio's view, clean clothing and access to telecommunication are prerequisites to being able to inquire about potential jobs or to even creating one's own, in other words, to being able „to continue to participate in the social game“. The facades were supposed to serve as advertising space as a means of financing the projects. The *balises urbaines* are springboards to at least temporarily becoming settled in public space. Sites were designated in Paris, Nantes, Marseille and Lyon, and the prospect of implementation was held out. (These plans, however, seem to be floundering.)

## VIRILIO'S LESSON

What does Virilio's and de Boiscuillé's project show? Which lesson do they teach us? A lesson in what an urban analysis can be or can reveal. By insisting on given perspectives or ways of thinking, urbanists can by their





Im Untergeschoss befinden sich die Badeanlagen für Männer und Frauen mit den jeweiligen Warteräumen; zwischen den beiden Abteilungen - zugänglich von beiden Seiten - der Waschraum. Die Männerabteilung weist 13 Wannenbäder und 16 Brausen, diejenige für Frauen 16 Wannenbäder und 4 Brausen auf. Die Wände der 'Zellen' sind mit weissen Plättchen belegt; es ist 'auch hier alles einfach und doch freundlich', findet Erismann.  
aus: Susanne Eigenheer, Bäder, Bildung, Bolschewismus, Zürich 1993

projects, in a very passive way, reflect only given norms of public life and so help to maintain a normative life in a normative city. Virilio's tries to extend existent forms or even install new forms of interaction between a „lost“ group and the city, not unlike a project initiated by *Archigram*, a group of British architects of the sixties, with which they sought to reformulate possible new kinds of relationships between individuals and the city.

What Virilio also did was attempt to point to the fact that the tradition of integrating new phenomena in an extended city-life has throughout time characterized cities as cultural-historical phenomena, as – in terms of a parallel historical situation – has been the case with all disasters of the era of early industrialization. The *Volkshaus* (community house), which has become a standard element of European city plans at the beginning of our century, is nothing but the result of the immense poverty of the new working class which had arisen out of that era. As you can see, the *Volkshaus* program included bathrooms, community kitchens, dining halls, meeting halls, libraries. It was the institution which provided the poor with the facilities lacking in their living quarters. One century later, we find ourselves in a similar situation with a new class of poor.

As we saw, Virilio interprets cities as servants of social changes, and urban history as a continuity of cultural integration. Instead of generally ignoring the interests of an ever increasing underprivileged group of inhabitants, Virilio articulates them as urban reality. He articulates what is in fact a current dispute about the right to use urban space by proposing a different concept of utilizing that space, a concept related to actual realities. He regards the city as an „innovative milieu“, that is, environment. Until now, his unfortunately has remained a solitary individual initiative.

#### ROBBED TWICE

It was Hannah Arendt who expressed that *human* life is characterized by participation in two kinds of space: the *private* and the *public*. It is obvious that the poor and the homeless in our society are robbed twice over: it is not only public space and public institutions which they are being denied, they also do not have any private place of retreat. According to Arendt, freedom in the original sense means „something manifest, namely freedom of movement.“ In this view, the destruction of the space of freedom goes hand in hand with the destruction of other relationships between human beings.

#### AESTHETIC THINKING

The German philosopher Wolfgang Iser defines philosophical thinking as thinking which agitates his terms as well as themes into movement. His focus is not on that which is extant but rather on that which has not yet been brought to the level of awareness or converted into language. The focus is on that which has not come to expression yet. The aim is to transform an-aesthetic aspects of reality into perception, into language.

These are the points of departure for our urban project! We are starting from Virilio's idea of urgently required prerequisites for lifestyles for a social group which is continually increasing but continually forgotten in urbanism.

Social and political – and as a consequence – today's aesthetic thinking attempts to eliminate the presence of the poor and the homeless. Official strategies aim at keeping this phenomenon away from visible city-life. The struggle centers around the visibility and/or non-visibility of this phenomenon. The poor and the homeless are not represented in the urban facilities and institutions of today. Urban culture – represented in a huge part of the most important and most famous buildings of a city, a major part of Aldo Rossi's primary elements of the towns – belongs only to „normal“ citizens.

TO BRING INTO APPEARANCE

What we are trying to do is to bring into appearance this repressed group by representing them in urban facilities. Not in form of palaces - this past has no future! - but in our new *figure of urban spots for the poor and the homeless*, which looks more like a „fragmented palace“, a *figure of urban left-overs*. We set into motion the meaning of what city-life is or can be. We are going to extend the limits of the question to whom does the city belong. We are going to alter the concept of who has the right of being represented in the city.

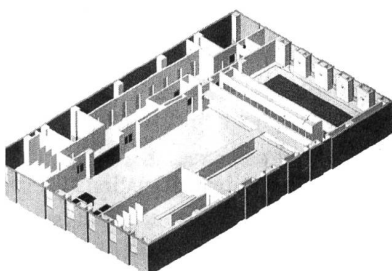
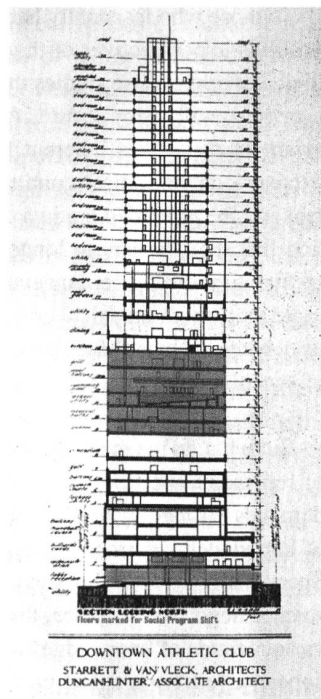
Or, in the words of David Graeme Shane in one of his essays (in: Elisabeth Blum (ed.), *Wem gehört die Stadt? (To Whom Does the City Belong?)*, Basel (Lenos) 1996) paraphrasing Krzysztof Wodiczko, „he stressed the necessity of challenging the norm that only the „History of the Victors“ is inscribed in public monuments“. The expression „History of the Victors“ can easily be identified as a quotation of Walter Benjamin. (1940)

MANHATTAN

Manhattan serves as a model-site for our real-utopian urban project. The individual projects and the chosen sites are not realistic with respect to actualisation. Real-utopian is an expression of another German philosopher Ernst Bloch, who - in his volume *The Principle of Hope* - fights for the idea that an as yet non-existent reality has the right to repress the possibilities of the horizon of today; the focus of his thinking is on the as yet non-existent. Our project represents a model-situation, in Bloch's terms a real-utopian project.



Albergo dei poveri, Palermo  
aus: hdbvxfgb, *Il trionfo della miseria*, dsd19xy (folgt)



Die einzelnen Projekte sind mittels der „Figure of Urban Left-Over“ organisiert. Exemplarisch ist hier das Projekt „Downtown Athletic Club – Social Program Shift“ abgebildet.

