

Less Me, More Others. On Designing Disorder: Experiments and Disruptions in the City, by Pablo Sendra and Richard Sennett

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The contrast between two Manhattan neighborhoods such as Hudson Yards and the Garment District allows the authors, in the foreword to the book, to draw attention to what urban DNA should be for “the overlap of so many different kinds of life”, such as those already suggested by Richard Sennett in *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (1970), and within the framework and context of the new left and the counterculture of the sixties. An overlap of lives that he himself proclaims by continually citing Aristotle's maxim from his *Politics*, “A city is composed of different kinds of men; similar people cannot bring a city into existence.”

The functionalist city, developed by capitalism, observed by both authors in the fixed and predetermined forms at the north end of the High Line, are contrasted with the diversity and disorder, unstable and in perpetual change, of the Garment District, to initiate the dialogue of two complementary voices in theory and practice. On the one hand, there is Sennett's sociological vision, and on the other, that of the joint understanding of architecture and urbanism contributed by Pablo Sendra.

The common objective is to explore open urban configurations for a city that fosters an intense and unplanned social life in which the moral formula “less me, more others” is prioritized. It is used as an argument to solve the identity crises that occur in the transit towards any maturity. The purpose is to present outlines on how to design urban spaces that integrate the *ville*, when taken to mean the physical materiality of the city, and the *cit  *, associated with the inhabiting of a cohesive citizenship. That is, to coordinate the constructed matter with the real life that passes through the space delimited by this materiality, specifying its aspiration to synergy, already discussed in Sennett's previous text *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City* (2019). A hypothesis that touches on the critique of functionalism made by Aldo Rossi in *The Architecture of the City* (1971) where, from a positivist perspective, he speaks about the built environment as a mirror or stone manifestation of civil life in which time, place, and culture shape its form and its function.

The book is structured in two complementary parts, with the 42 pages written by Sennett, compared to the 126 pages with text and plans by Sendra, proof of the prominence that the cosmopolitan sociologist gives to the theses of the young researcher. Both approaches precede an extremely interesting conversation between the two, woven together with incisive interpellations from the editor Leo Hollis.

Under the heading “Civil Society”, and subdivided into “The Politics of the Hidden City” and “Open Forms”, Sennett's hypothesis of today's flexible capitalism struggling to fit into the reality of some inherited cities, whose rigidity he attributes to functionalist homogenization or sectorization, is reached by means of references to literary, psychological, and sociological notions. To do this he goes back to the birth of the Napoleonic Civil Code as the precursory mechanism of equal rights and freedoms that inaugurated modern social engineering. A code that, despite having been brought down with the fall of the empire, marked the emergence of Benjamin Constant's concept of civil society attributed to the agglomeration of inhabitants who were provided with strength and commitment to live together. A society that, from a utopian point of view, is willing to take advantage of the ambiguity, contradiction, and complexity of the diversity of any urban life for collective benefit. An idea that he discusses when comparing literary protagonists such as *Adolphe*, by Constant himself, who consciously eluded passions by limiting his contacts with certain places, as opposed to Stendhal's Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black*, whose move to Paris propels an inordinate ambition that would be unthinkable in a smaller, more homogeneous and therefore more intrusive, social and spatial framework.

These ideas are linked to the necessary recognition that human beings demand from their social environment in order to feel fulfilled. To do this he alludes to Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, underlined with references which are relatively helpful, such as the cosmopolitanism of Immanuel Kant, the concept of the ‘masses’ by Gustave Le Bon, or that of the ‘iron cage’ by Max Weber. Such a mobilization of references leads him to reject the functionalist city, considering it absolutely obsolete for flexible capitalism, which he never questions as an engine. In fact, in *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (2006), he himself already pointed out the alteration of absolutes such as ‘time’ and ‘space’ that he observed, for example, in the dissolution of the ‘iron cage’ in stable sector-based work. This is also visible in the idea that nowadays we are able to identify with the profusion of ‘connected rooms’, as Remedios Zafra puts it.

These very contemporary premises incite him, as an anthropologist, to advocate for flexible places to accommodate this new social reality, termed generically “Open Forms”. Spaces for disorder—or for Zygmunt Bauman's ‘liquid life’—that are still to be resolved, yet which he believes have the right and capacity to be pre-designed in advance. In the absence of material specification, he resorts to the biological metaphor of adaptation to the existing or mitigation of the obsolete. For

this, he resorts to what he describes as ‘passing territories’, characterized by new meanings for terms such as walls, ramparts, or boundaries. Constructed elements that, far from acting as insurmountable borders, must assume a new porosity and permeability; and in which incomplete forms must coexist, yearning for the creativity of non-linear narratives, with which the urban designer invites the citizen to explore the unexpected.

After these reflections by Sennett, the architect Sendra, in the second part of the book, entitled “Infrastructures for Disorder”, arrives in present time, with an attractive prose, invoking the modification of the relationship between space and time in the city. An interrelation in which he places the time factor as a compositional matter of the urban project. Something that refers to the question “Shall we dance?” by Manuel de Sol  -Morales with which a military march is contrasted with a real dance in order to metaphorically define the urban project as the configuration of a rhythm of beats that combine land, buildings, and infrastructure. This idea also refers to Rem Koolhaas's criticism of Le Corbusier's functionalist city for its rejection of the characteristic and provocative congestion of Manhattan. In the section “From the Paper to the Plan”, he contextualizes the activist moment of the 70s, using Sennett's book *The Uses of Disorder*, equating it to a present day in which both endorse the real possibility of *Designing Disorder*. Thus, in the face of the disorderly urban forms of postmodernity, they invite us to domesticate that informality from an infrastructural flexibility. His generational closeness and his attention to the globalized activism of the last decade (the Spanish 15M, the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement) lead him to believe in decentralization and localism, referring to successful events in the past, such as the case of Frestonia. Other contemporary examples highlight his reflection on the importance of generating networks in continuous interaction, advanced by a municipalism that must be creative in order to foster alliances between communities. An activation, more or less spontaneous, that leads him to reflect on the sections of “Below”, “Above”, “Disorder in Section”, and “Process and Flux”. In my opinion, these four sections, grounded by their practical approach, are the most suggestive of the book.

In “Below”, he aspires to the symbiosis between physical and social infrastructure, alluding to the concept of assembly and to the transfer of the architectural mechanism of the technical floor to the city, something which is very successful in the landscape office typology and which, on an urban scale, is reminiscent of Archigram's Plug-in City project. A mechanism that would be in harmony on a social level with the promotion of a, perhaps utopian, citizenry with an adult identity capable of negotiating the conflicts of collective coexistence, and that relates to current experiences such as Barcelona Energ  a, or Uriel Fogu  's project for Plaza Vara del Rey, where the social benefits derive from agreeing on the collectivization of energy resources such as water and electricity.

In “Above”, he points to the design of mobile equipment that facilitates a wide range of changing activities, through continuous negotiation. A redevelopment that transforms closed and stable urban ‘spaces’ into ‘places’ where the unforeseen is made possible, for example, through the use of a variation in the pavement textures that avoid any material homogenization that results in usage specifications. Both locations—below and above—collude with the attention to the section of the street as a generator of public life. A vision that underlines the political dimension of the vertical layout or profile—longitudinal and transversal section—of a street, and ties in with the point “Process and Flux”, underlining the participation of the local community in urban projects of both transformation and growth. In short, a compliment to the collective management of shared space and the effort for negotiation, which is never easy as it is slow and conflictive.

In the final dialogued debate, “Do and Undo”, the shared and conflicting views of both authors emerge, coming from different generational and professional contexts. Among these views, the questioning of an initial admiration for Jane Jacobs and Oscar Newman stands out, considering both the invocation to build after living and the approach to closed communities to be naïve. In response to this, they advocate for maximum heterogeneity, alerting of extremely current social issues such as the *gilet jaunes*’ targeting a supposed excessive immigrant population in France. The confrontation of ideas regarding the degree of activism assumed by the theorist raises two aspects regarding the political role of the urban planner, with different positions that are the product of particular professional experiences of great interest. The introduction of what is infrastructural by the architect is collected metaphorically by Sennett’s musical facet, as a cellist, through the possible variations of a single composition, and also through the form-type concept with an infinite number of final configurations.

In short, a modern text that addresses theoretical and practical approaches that are necessary when discussing the future of urban space, where the material aspect is as important as the immaterial or invisible-infrastructures, such as the availability of a Wi-Fi connection, etc. A future, which is undoubtedly exposed to emergencies such as climate change and migratory flows to the city and a set of reflections, encapsulated in the maxim “less me, more others”, which points at being interdisciplinary, participative, and finding consensus on everything related to urban processes for a better life together.

Richard Sennett
Open city
Disorder
Design
Infrastructure