

FIELD, PLACES, URBANITY: A QUEST FOR FIELD URBANISM!

Conversation with René Boomkens

authors:

Joachim Declerck - Dieter Delbaere

René Boomkens is a cultural philosopher. (University of Groningen, the Netherlands)

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In the Middle Ages the Belgian landscape was already characterised by a dense network of villages and towns in a rural setting. Today it has evolved into a real patchwork of different forms and programmes. It is neither city nor landscape, but a mixture of villages, small towns, cities, bits of landscape adulterated by much ribbon development, commercial areas, industrial estates and petrol stations along one of the densest infrastructural networks in Europe. In contrast to American and Dutch suburbs this Belgian suburban reality is not a monofunctional residential reserve. It is an urbanised zone, an 'urban field' with dense and less dense zones that house a broad range of functions.

This heterogeneous patchwork is on the one hand the result of two centuries of decentralist policy. On the other hand the spatial characteristics of this urbanised landscape are both the cause and effect of a more global condition. The car, a connection to the Internet, telephone and television have made radical changes to the life of every Belgian. Wherever one lives in the urbanised Belgian landscape, the same lifestyle can be adopted almost everywhere. The distinction between spatially-determined social types such as 'farmer' and 'city dweller' has thereby disappeared completely. The universal distribution of modernity has destabilised the direct relationship between society and space.

Whereas in the pre-modern world personal identity was still connected to spatial identity – life was organised around a place, and within the community that was tied to it – we observe that in the modern world each individual composes their own 'personal city'. This city comprises places and social groups which the individual considers to be their own. They are no longer in the immediate surroundings of the home, but – depending on the individual radius of action – are spread throughout the urbanised landscape.

The conception of the Belgian urbanised landscape as an 'urban field' goes along with both the contemporary spatial reality and the changed use of space. It is an attempt to bring an end to the classic dichotomous thinking in terms of 'city' and 'suburbs'.

The universal accessibility of urban amenities in a highly urbanised Belgian landscape does not result in an isotropic condition. Although it is possible to adopt the same lifestyle regardless of where one lives in the Belgian landscape, we cannot say that the space in which we live has become unimportant with regard to our contemporary way of living. On the contrary, spatial development and use of space also display an anti-urban trend and mentality. Suburbanisation or the pursuit of one's own home (often detached) with garden (private utopia) is the same time also an escape from the complexity and dangers of the city. To the average Belgian, the city embodies danger, chaos and criminality, often related to the presence of ethnic minority communities. The 'personal city', comprising a series of places and experiences in the urbanised landscape, and which the individual considers to be his own, in this way

becomes a collection of positive places, and a method of avoiding negative places, social groups and experiences in the urbanised landscape.

In this context there is a need for collective commitment and research into the urban culture of the Belgian urbanised landscape, of which specific forms of urbanisation and the typical use of space are major ingredients.

Interview:

JD: Your book, *'Een drempelwereld. Moderne ervaring en stedelijke openbaarheid'*¹ ('A Threshold World. Modern Experience and the Urban Public Domain'), highlights the power of the notion of 'urbanity'. How exactly could this power be described?

RB: The title of the book, 'a threshold world', does not refer to urbanity as it is traditionally conceived, namely equivalent only to density. In fact it's a combination of very dense public elements with the possibility of dwelling, living or feeling at home there. So it's a combination of private and public elements, and this is what I call *the threshold world*: cities are famous for the many thresholds they have produced. It makes them unique. In a closed society or a closed community, a threshold is immediately also something of a bunker, something that excludes difference.

JD: You state that the existence of this threshold world has the power to establish a kind of open collectivity, as opposed to the closed society as a bunker. Has this open collectivity become a general condition of the urbanized landscape?

RB: Well, on the one hand you could call the city the success-story of the twentieth century. All the ideologies failed: communism failed, socialism failed. In essence liberalism was very successful, but for a number of reasons it has a lot of critics. Urbanity has never been a real ideology: it has developed with these ideologies surrounding it. And, looking back at the twentieth century, you could say that maybe this is the one utopia nobody really wanted, but it has to a certain extent been achieved.

In the meantime, urbanity generated a lot of fear, feelings of anxiety, feelings of insecurity. These feelings produced a very strong tendency towards the ideology of reshaping the city in the twentieth century. And that resulted in all kinds of new visions of urbanity which in fact were anti-urban. Not only the quasi-natural suburbanisation process, but also the visions of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and of *Le Corbusier* were in a way all remedies for things the city produced in a negative way. The city was chaos, but the city was freedom too. New visions of urbanity in the twentieth century all tried to eradicate chaos, hoping that freedom could be stabilized, or in some way rescued.

Well, the problem is that most of the processes since the forties concerning urban development or urban planning resulted in less urbanity and in new forms of closure, new types of capsulated environments and a loss of the traditional sense of openness.

This openness can be regarded as an ethical quality of combining two different atmospheres: the private atmosphere, the feeling at home on the one hand, and the public atmosphere, the confrontation with difference, on the other.

The problem now is how to relate to the notion of urbanity, without referring only to the distant past, but using the present situation. This present situation is an environment in which suburbanisation has taken place, in which these capsulation effects have been brought about, and are still being brought about. It's a very difficult question, but that's what we're talking about now.

DD: A month ago, you participated in a 'field trip' through the urbanized Belgian landscape. Can you imagine how the notion of 'urbanity' might be a value to work within this specific urbanized context?

RB: Since my own research concentrates on Dutch urbanisation, this trip gave me an unexpected possibility of comparing the Belgian situation with new developments in the Netherlands, the so called

Vinex-locations. These are new suburban environments, which paradoxically are conceived to be cities, or at least have to be dense urban environments. I'm very disappointed about these settlements, because I don't think the ideals of the condensed city are being realised in these Vinex-locations.

Keeping that experience in mind and not forgetting the image of these suburban locations, I had a completely different impression of this Belgian landscape. Most of the time, this landscape was boring, but *boring* like most cities are *boring*. Cities are not very spectacular in most cases. In one sense, this Belgian landscape was much more diverse, much more unexpected, much more influenced by coincidence, which made me believe that it showed great promise. Not that it's very easy to say: '*Well, this is some sort of a background out of which you can develop new ideas or new concepts of urbanity*', but in any sense more so than is the case in the Dutch suburban landscape. That was my first experience: boredom in a lot of places, unexpected vistas in other places. Well, you might call that a quality, from the point of view of this threshold concept of urbanity.

DD: Why should there be any attempt to implement a new type of urbanity, perhaps a '*field urbanity*', in this Belgian urbanized landscape?

RB: Well, you're dealing with a problem of conscience, a moral problem here. The last decade of reflection on urban problems, on urban development, on realizing urbanity, has been characterized by giving specific qualities to certain environments. In that line of thought, the *theme* has become the most important research tool in dealing with a certain area. You thematize a specific limited environment, you say it's hasty, or green, or red, or dull, or full of possibilities, and so on. I think this is a very dangerous trend in urban planning, a trend that normally ends up in rather superficial design strategies. It amounts to no more than giving existing elements a new colour, a new outfit, a new material.

The most important thing is that you start with *the existing qualities* and characteristics of the urbanized environment. The term *existing qualities* is used here with a different meaning than in classical studies of urbanity, which identify quality with density, because this density is something you can't achieve in a quasi-suburbanized or quasi-sprawl situation. But in this sprawl, precisely because it's not an organised, planned and completely controlled sprawl, there are a lot of surprising spots. These surprising spots are now dominated by dullness and uncontrolled traffic.

The thing I can intuitively give as a command is: try to use some of the spots in this landscape to add a new form, a new type of urbanity, in the sense of Walter Benjamin's 'distracted gaze', with which people use this type of landscape. Not just simply build high-rise, or add congestion, but use the specific qualities of a quasi-urbanised landscape. I think the problem is that when you try to eradicate the most negative elements of this environment, which are certainly there, you should not try to create a spectacular location. 'Because that's what's always happening in urban planning, again and again: *we are putting some spots on the map. This is a top location!* The *inbetweenness* is the most promising aspect of the area, I think. You can do little things, enhancing some of the qualities of the landscape, without immediately arriving at spectacular architecture or spectacular urban development. That's what makes me positive about this type of landscape.

JD: What is the importance of this 'distracted gaze'? What is the importance of the way this urbanized landscape is inhabited?

You have to take into account that most citizens nowadays use a lot of spots in a very broad network of places. Not only suburbanites live that way, urban dwellers do so too. They have the same repertoires for using their own environment. They both leave their neighbourhood for eight or maybe ten hours a day, so the whole idea of sticking in one place is no longer relevant. Instead of that, urbanites have a typical criss-cross relationship with their own environment.

When you look at urbanity, you should try to avoid two things: one, identifying it with classical neighbourhood-thinking, which was very popular in the Netherlands, and two, the metropolitan idea of the single centre where it all happens. You have to forget about these two extremes, to a certain extent. In between these two extremes you have to find something new. I think that's the target, the task for thinking about new forms of urbanity.

The only thing you can say in favour of the past is that you have to take some of the elements of the older

forms of urbanity, which are openness (that is the element you must try to inject into the now closed, secluded situation in most suburban areas) and a form of overlapping, of just getting a little bit above the level of neighbourhood thinking (the new urbanism of tidiness, pettiness, 'we are so nice to each other', the Walt Disney fantasy of urbanity which is now injected into older areas and is also identified with suburbia). This means that you need functions, practices or institutions in some places in that network that can bring together or confront social, cultural or commercial activities that are attractive to people from a very wide area. Not thinking in terms of a centre in the classical sense of the word, nor thinking in terms of dense urban neighbourhoods in the classical sense of the word.