

The situationist city, by Simon Sadler

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The book *The situationist city*, by Simon Sadler, published by MIT Press in 1999, reflects on the group Situationist International (SI) and its position regarding experiences in the city. Focusing on its urban and architecture theories, the book aims to integrate the SI in history (p.3), namely in the artistic context of the 1950s. Sadler conducts an “autopsy” (p.3) of the action in context by Situationist International as a contribution to withdrawing some mysticism (p.3) identified by the author in previous studies. To do so, he proposes “to extract the situationist theory on architecture from a revolutionary program that attempted to face the ideological totality of the Western world.” (p.3). Nevertheless, this is not an unbiased study on SI. Though Sadler states that he aims to present an objective perspective, the use of negative adjectives and repetition of the term ‘situationism’ - though the members of the movement rejected the term - evidences a perspective that I would describe as passionate as that which the author criticizes, though, in this case, it is used to describe the opposite of fascination for Situationist International.

In fact, the relevance of the book lies in its contextualized approach to SI and how deeply it studies Situationist International thought on construction, organization and life in the city - that included actual proposals such as routes, maps and urban and architecture structures - without resorting to architects or urban planners. As Simon Sadler reiterates, though in a critical tone, it is in this matter that the group stands out and is different from other artistic and aesthetic proposals of their time.

The creations made in the context of Situationist International have a specificity that the author of *The situationist city* explores very adequately. The maps, the texts and



publications, the films, the models of urban structures, etc. include a poetic and aesthetic assumption that is both a documentary and practical meaning. Though the dimensions coexist and define the identity of these creations, Sadler uses them essentially for their usefulness as a document or as an example. Therefore, though it is of unquestionable interest to use many diverse works produced by the group, the book under review lacks a more in-depth exploration and description of this specific feature.

The book is divided into three chapters. The first, "The Naked City: Realities of design and space laid bare", focuses on the critical analysis that SI made on urban environment. The second, "Formulary for a New Urbanism: Rethinking the city", identifies and describes the main situationist principles on life in the city and the third chapter, "A New Babylon: the city redesign", analyses the conceptual and practical proposals for a situationist-based city.

At the end of the 1950s several trends and groups appeared that were interested in discussing the concepts of space, daily life and life experience. These concepts were studied from different perspectives and using different approaches, the aggregating factor of many of these proposals being the blurring between art and life. There are similarities between some aspects of the actions of Situationist International and those of other contemporary groups or members, as those associated to art in action, namely in regards to the discourse on art and life. Additionally, there are some similarities between SI and the *Independent Group* and the *Nouveau Réalisme*, in terms of the attention given to the current economic and social context. The three movements discussed the effects of socialism on society and the increased influence of media and consumerism. Nevertheless, as Sadler refers in this book, the influence of sociological thought in Situationist International – in particular that of Henry Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau or Paul-Henri Chombart de Lauwe – “led to a greater awareness of the actual social structure of the city” (p.20). Besides, states Sadler, the situationist never left the Marxist concept of society based on class conflict - unlike, for the example, the Independent Group - leading them to develop a guerrilla mentality (p. 43) that influenced their behaviour and choices.

These aspects, discussed in the first chapter, are reflected on the concept that the Situationist International had of architecture and of urban planning at that time, in particular, in Paris. For its members, the relation with capitalism is very clear in the sense of developing and maintaining a society of the spectacle, which strategically controlled the citizens and socially isolated them because of the individual's life organization. The reorganization of space proposed by architects such as Le Corbusier or, in a more encompassing manner, by CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*) were viewed by SI as extending the modernist aesthetics (p.49) based on a bourgeois space reorganization (p.50). For Simon Sadler, the situationist, aware of “there being little chance to alter the established interests in rationalist architects and urban planners (...) focused on identifying the weak theoretical bases for that restructuring (...)” (p.22).

The situationist idea to allow for the creation of a cultural sphere outside the entertainment of capital (p.43) led to a proposal to reorganize city circulation and infrastructures, issues discussed in the last two chapters. Sadler analyses in more detail the concepts of *dérive*, *situation*, *detournement*, *psychogéographie* and *urbanisme unitaire* in these chapters. More than concepts, the first three are mechanisms of space recognition of the city and of the discovery of everyone's place in the city. On the other hand, psycho-geography and Unitarian urbanism introduced a psychological dimension in terms of reflection on the urban space, which had not been widely explored in art thus far. The maps that Debord produced



in 1957 – *Guide Pschychogéographique de Paris* and *The Naked city*, which Sadler mentions, materialize this dimension.

The concept of psycho-geography, which Sadler believes offers a sense of emotional violent ownership of the streets (p. 81), was closely linked to the theory of Unitarian urbanism, which emerged as situationist activity focused on the integral practice of urban environment. It focused on the use of different techniques and arts to take control of all aspects of the city's environment. The reason for this wide control lies in the situationist belief that there is an equivalence between physical elements - related to architectural structure and urban planning - and behavioural and affective elements, including the relations among individuals, the importance of daily life, political, affective, and emotional behaviours. For this reason, Situationist International considered that architecture and urban planning, more than focusing on poetic and free forms, should consider the existing environment, i.e., the environment of each area of the city.

Though Guy Debord was responsible for theorizing Unitarian urbanism, Constant, a multidisciplinary artist, was the one who projected an urban model that took into account the relation between environment and life. The New Babylon project, developed around 1956 and 1974, applied the concepts of Unitarian urbanism and psycho-geography to architecture and this book devotes a good part of the last chapter to this project.

Constant designed a vast inhabitable system made of mobile urban structures meant to foster leisure, interaction and individualized space, as well as a nomad lifestyle. In truth, it was the opposite of the practice in which increasingly known urban paradigms were being recognized, such as the incentive to home ownership, place frequency and usual routes, etc. This was a project considered for another society, for an idealized environment according to the political and ideological thought of SI members. This is one the aspects most vehemently criticised by Simon Sadler, who states that situationist architecture became only an idea waiting to be put in place once revolutionary production means were activated (p.69).

The conclusion of *The situationist city* unquestionably reinforces the critical tone of the whole book. Simon Sadler affirms that at the core of the situationist project there was no methodology, which, regardless of the designed tools and mechanisms, did not allow for the development of a coherent program (p.157). Besides questioning the application of *urbanisme unitaire* or the objectives of *situation* (p.157), Sadler considers that Situationist International did not know how to prioritize the elements of its program, particularly in what concerns “art versus politics, technology versus expressionism versus conceptual, collaboration versus specialization” (p.158). Though Sadler's reading - both in this matter and in his critical tone throughout the book - has been and still is criticized by several authors, he identifies an essential issue, which can be summarized in his concluding sentence, that “(...) architecture defined the revolutionary wish” of Situationist International. For the study of visual art, *The situationist city*, almost twenty years after its publication, is still a relevant study for the clarity it positions SI in the artistic context of the time, in particular because it sets it against other proposals that aimed at having effective consequences at social level.