

About the challenged notion of “curve of a city”: the example of the pilgrimage of Lourdes (France)

Olivier Lefebvre

One finds in the book of the French urban planner Marcel Poete “Introduction à l’urbanisme” (“Introduction to urban planning”) two main ideas:

- the “curve of a city” is the history of the city: in general some power is beneficial to the city during a long time, and the “curve” is the story of its successes and its decline.
- the “mysticism” of a city is when the particular values of this city are displayed by monuments, everywhere in the city.

We argue that these notions can explain the past, but are no more valid . The pilgrimage of Lourdes (France) is a good example.

But how is the historical center of cities fashioned today? We propose two answers: (1) it is “artified” (2) there is some role for the “meaningless and seductive city”.

The French sociologist Baudrillard has shown how the destruction of meaning creates “cool seduction”.

The plan of this presentation is:

- why the “curve of a city” and “mysticism of a city” are no more valid?
- the example of Lourdes
- Conclusion about the “meaningless and seductive city” and the consequences of “Airbnbizing”.

Why the “curve of a city” and the “mysticism of a city” are no more valid?

Today the cities want competitiveness and play games, to win thanks to strategy and ... chance. The rules of the game are the same everywhere. The city being very much dependent on the rest of the world (it is a fragment), it does not allow a specific “curve”, a particular story.

The “mysticism” is out fashioned at the time of the consumers’ society and individualism. Instead, the historical centers are artified: all is nice, there are parks, fountains, squares, whitened facades, cultural quarters ... But this nice décor is for fun, entertainment and consumption.

The example of Lourdes

The “curve of a city” explains how Lourdes became a great pilgrimage a century and a half ago. It was the time of a “revival” of the Church, from 1815 to 1920. All this is well documented: Zola and Huysmans for Lourdes itself, the sociologist Gabriel Le Bras for the revival of faith at the start of the pilgrimage ...

What happened recently?

According to the Tradition of the Church, it keeps the “speculative role” (faith, Revelation) and lets Science to the secular people: so doctors check the possible miracles. But the consequence is that there are no more miracles (two in twenty years). All holds together: the narrative, the miracles, the religious space ... All this is necessary to the prestige of the pilgrimage. The narrative is less successful.

The religious space is threatened by contagion: many tourists visit Lourdes, which is a nice city, and appreciate the spectacle of the pilgrimage.

A theory of the “religious space” is possible, using the ideas of the sociologists Durkheim, Mauss and Caillois. The sacred and the secular are separate.

The sacred fears the contagion of the secular and is protected by rites (“rites of lustration”). When religion becomes a spectacle, this contagion occurs. The ultimate state of deterioration of a religious space is these quarters (Le Marais in Paris, Kazimierz in Cracow and some places in Vienna) where religion is only a sign, which makes picturesque the place, so the tourists are attracted (there the religion which is concerned is the Hebraic one).

Finally the tourists trigger the destruction of the meaning of the places they visit ...but it is seductive. One uses the theory of “cool seduction” of the sociologist Baudrillard. In the consumers society, the meaning disappears because of simplification, replicated reasoning and manipulation of the signs (TV and advertising are concerned). But this disappearance of meaning does not mean void, but vertigo and inertia (cool seduction). These are two examples:

- the post catastrophe tourism
- the urban landscape s of the surrealist Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico .

One can notice in these images:

- the shock of ancient art and modernity (trains)
- the obsolete gestures of the statues
- the city without dwellers
- ancient art without viewers
- the meaningless quantitative (the clock)
- etc.

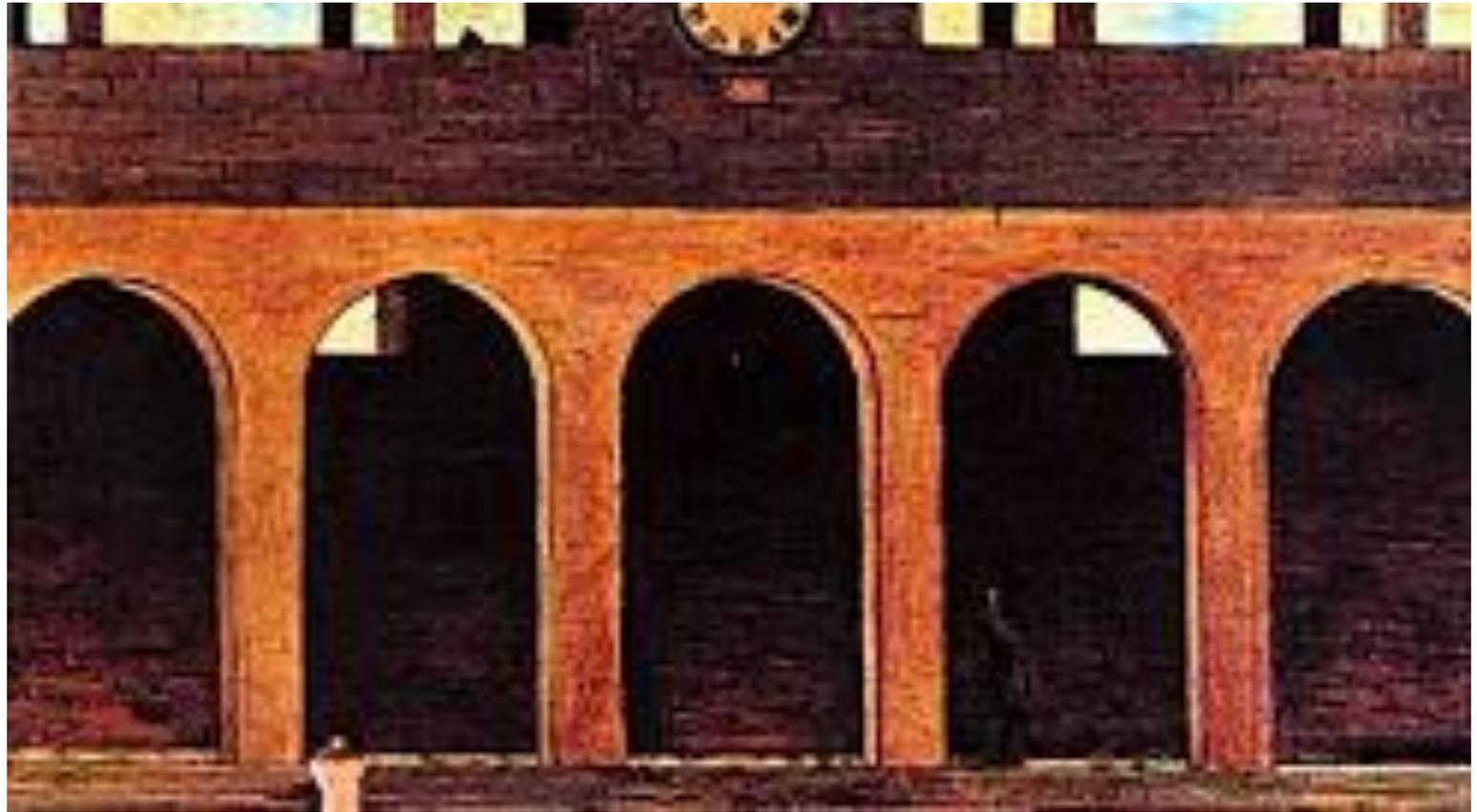
Notice that this “style” of urban landscape is well known and has been often imitated in comics and videogames.











Conclusion

The example of Lourdes is very interesting, showing that the “curve of a city” and the “mysticism of a city” are no more relevant.

One can insist on two topics which concern the way in which the historical centers are fashioned: some role of the meaningless and seductive city and the consequences of Airbnbizing.

There is some role for the meaningless and seductive city.

The historical centers are fashioned by professionals in diverse “styles” (or aesthetic choices): authenticity, historical truth, décor ... We propose to add a way, the meaningless urban landscape which triggers “cool seduction”. For instance, ancient art, modern art and contemporaneous art are mixed in the same place: it has no meaning but triggers vertigo.

The consequences of Airbnbizing.

An offer of low cost transportation, accommodation , the possibility of choosing among many alternatives on Internet when one travels etc. have increased the flow of tourists in many cities. The populace of the cities in the Po valley in Italy, of the villages of Cinque Terre in Italy where quotas of tourists are considered, of Barcelona ... are

aware of all the consequences of this flow, which are detrimental to them: increase of rents, people having to leave the quarter where they live, buildings destroyed and rebuilt, disappearance of shops replaced by fast food restaurants, automatic laundries and coffee houses ... It is well known that the apex is in Venice. Indeed, their feeling is relevant: tourists observe and know that they trigger the appearance of a meaningless urban landscape, but they accept it because it is seductive. Therefore the problem is serious. It is an explanation of the measures which are often taken to slow this flow, not only in Southern Europe but also elsewhere (Paris, Berlin...).