

BERNARD PELLEGRIN

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ON

THE CITY

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**RECYCLING
THE CITY,
ANTICIPATING
ITS NEEDS**

**THE
RESOURCER**



Antoine Frérot

is CEO of the Veolia Group, world leader in community services. For him, a company must include environmental concerns into its objectives.

“CITIES NEED TO BE LESS SUBJECT TO DANGERS, LESS FRAGILE, AND LESS EXPOSED TO DIFFICULTIES.”



What do you think are the challenges of the city today?

“They are multiple, as they have always been, but I think they are changing. I would therefore say that cities must first be more pleasant to live in than they used to be, then they need to be more resilient towards the difficulties they may have to address, more resource-efficient, more inclusive of all the populations living in them, and, finally, cities need to be better connected.”

What a challenge! What do you mean by resilient?

“We need to ensure that cities are less subject to dangers, whatever they may be, less fragile, and less exposed to difficulties in the event of a dysfunction.”

Are you talking about industrial accidents, like that of the fire at the Lubrizol factory in Rouen, France?

“Yes, exactly. But cities also need to be better equipped to cope with certain natural phenomena, such as floods, as well as economic accidents, like bankruptcy or a sudden decline of a specific business.”

“CITIES MUST BE MORE EFFICIENT IN WATER, ENERGY, RAW MATERIAL CONSUMPTION.”

Yes, this brings to mind the car industry crisis that devastated Detroit in the United States ...

“In general, we must make cities more resistant to anything that can attack them, and it is up to companies like Veolia to imagine how to deal with this kind of problem.”

The efficiency that you evoke as a challenge for cities relates to consumption, I imagine?

“Yes, cities must be more efficient in water, energy, and raw material consumption. For example, a city consumes much more water and energy than a rural area, but it also consumes far more raw material per capita. We must therefore move towards better resource efficiency. How? Basically, by increasing the uses of the same resource.”

What do you mean?

“For example, we could reuse all the energy that, in cities, escapes from the chimneys of homes, factories, and offices. This energy literally goes up in smoke, and it is imperative to reuse it by recycling it.”

“THE ENERGY THAT ESCAPES FROM CHIMNEYS NEEDS TO BE REUSED BECAUSE IT LITERALLY GOES UP IN SMOKE.”

Resource-efficient and resilient, ok, but inclusive?

“A city must absolutely seek to keep the essence of the urban promise (water, electricity, heating), including for the most socially excluded and the poorest populations. For solidarity and social inclusion to be real, we must offer solutions shared with the public authorities. For example, in the Paris region, where we are the main service provider (except Paris itself), the municipalities have implemented a series of binding obligations to ensure that the least privileged populations benefit from a basic water service. However, many of these populations are not aware of this, which is why, in connection with associations and socially responsible companies, we have developed a process to inform these populations on their water rights.”

How can a business like yours grow if it includes everything you just described: resource efficiency, resilience, and inclusion?

“By offering cities multiple services. For example, for drinking water, we can use rudimentary systems, like in Montreal, where half of the water is lost due to the very many leaks, or more sophisticated systems, like in Singapore, where recycled water provides pure water to all high-tech companies.”

But, these concerns, related to saving resources and their reuse, are more those of public officials and elected officials than private companies, right?

“We just offer services, we do not decide on them. Our offers are simply made on the basis of new technologies and innovations. For example, we suggested to Nice that it could produce the energy necessary for its public transport network using heat from the sewers.”

Do the big environmental issues, such as global warming, fuel the company's research?

“The issue of greenhouse gas emissions, responsible for global warming, is typically the kind of issue that the company wants to provide solutions for. If our water, waste, and energy solutions were fully implemented, we could reduce the impact of greenhouse gas emissions by about 30%. What are these solutions? First, energy efficiency, particularly that of buildings and industries, and then recycling, of plastics or metals, for example. Did you know that a recycled plastic bottle releases 70% less greenhouse gas than a virgin plastic bottle?

Waste necessarily emits pollution, whether you bury it or burn it, so it is better to reuse or recycle it so that this polluting energy becomes useful energy.”

The other issue that humanity will have to face in the coming decades is water scarcity. Water is really wasted by cities, what do you suggest?

“You are right when you say that in the future cities will be largely responsible for water issues because this scarcity will result - in addition to the consequences of global warming - from the increase in uses and needs that are, above all, urban. I believe that solutions will first reduce waste and technologically adapt to this scarcity. In other words, systems that use less water will be required for the same purpose. Drip techniques for agriculture, especially peri-urban agriculture, are already very effective. Again, more needs to be done to recycle wastewater. There are three immediate advantages to trying to collect all the water used and recycle it: 1 - we no longer pollute, 2 - we have a resource that increases with use, 3 - the resource is available where we need it.”

“DID YOU KNOW THAT A RECYCLED PLASTIC BOTTLE RELEASES 70% LESS GREENHOUSE GAS.”

I came to see the CEO of a listed company and I am hearing the words of an environmentalist!

“Our business is intrinsically linked to the environment. In fact, as early as 1920, our company treated wastewater. Since then, we have broadened the scope of our activities. It is true that our work to address the scarcity of resources is much more recent but it is still going in the same direction, once again the environment is our field of action. Environmentalists, like Nicolas Hulot or the young Greta Thunberg, highlight the problems, and it is up to us to seek solutions to at least mitigate them and hopefully even resolve them.”

For an industrial company like Veolia, is there a real interest in listening to civil society and organisations about environmental issues?

“And not just them, all economic stakeholders with polluting businesses should be looking for solutions to manage their pollution; anyone managing a city should be too. Our customers come to us when new problems arise, sometimes with pressing needs. For example, the city of New Orleans called us during Hurricane Katrina. We had to quickly find solutions to manage the water and secure key locations in the city.”

“FOR WATER, SOLUTIONS WILL FIRST REDUCE WASTE AND TECHNOLOGICALLY ADAPT TO THIS SCARCITY.”



“WE STILL DO NOT KNOW HOW TO RECYCLE POLYSTERENE YOGHURT POTS AT AN ACCEPTABLE PRICE.”

The last few decades have seen the emergence of computer and electronic waste, all these old computers and obsolete phones end up in landfills today. How do you manage this new waste?

“First, in France, they never end up in landfills. We were the first company in the world to open an electronic waste plant in Angers. We opened a solar panel recycling centre in Provence last year. Finally, Veolia opened a plant in Moselle to process old electric car batteries, which are beginning to arrive with the take-off of this market. Of course, there is still residual waste, such as rare earth metals, and we must continue research to be able to extract it competitively, at the best cost. But, regarding electric car batteries, which contain lithium and cobalt, we now know how to recycle lithium at lower costs than China, which is the third largest producer of this metal in the world after Australia and Chile.”

Do these plants recycle the majority of electronic waste in France?

“Almost 99% of electric car batteries are processed. For electronic and computer waste, 80% of the weight or volume is recycled. Regarding solar panels, most of the panel is processed but not the electronic board.”

**“INITIALLY,
PLASTIC WASTE
COMES FROM
CITIES WHERE IT IS
LITTLE OR BADLY
COLLECTED.”**

What about plastic?

“Pollution from illegal dumping has exploded in recent years and, since this plastic is not biodegradable, it remains in the environment for a very long time. Today, we know how to industrially recycle the five main kinds of plastic, but for others this is not yet possible, such as polystyrene yogurt pots which we still do not know how to recycle at an acceptable cost.”

This is especially a problem for cities which are overwhelmed by plastic waste, especially yogurt pots...

“The real challenges lie in the marketing of the 80% of plastic that we know how to recycle. How can we convince manufacturers to use our recycled plastics, which are still a little more expensive than new plastics? We need to find customers, and plastic users are still very reluctant. Virgin plastic, however, emits a lot of CO₂. Recycled plastics will become really competitive the day we apply a carbon tax at around thirty euros per tonne on new plastics.

The other problem is that of plastic waste which is not collected but abandoned in the environment, ending up in the oceans, creating these floating continents of plastic. Initially, it comes from cities where it is little or badly collected and it reaches the sea via rivers and streams. It often comes from cities where the authorities are unable to organise them. To remedy this, one of the solutions is to make up for the inadequacies of public services by setting up an alternative collection, but you need to get people involved and pay them, which is no easy task. The best solution is to dry up the flow of this waste at the source.”

In cities, like the major African metropolises, such as Lagos in Nigeria, how is this being addressed?

“In these cities that are developing in a fairly chaotic way, it is very difficult to take action. It should be understood that waste management begins with collection before reprocessing, which pre-supposes that collective organisation and infrastructure is put in place and amortised over the long term. Investments are very heavy at the start and it is therefore necessary that the initial contract is respected by both the company and the city.”

**“IN THESE
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ACTION.”**

If I understand rightly, you consider that waste management is a question of political stability.

“It is a governance problem of placing public action in a long-term policy followed over several years. This stable governance is really lacking in some cities in Africa and Asia which is why Veolia does not approach cities like Lagos, or Djakarta in Indonesia: they do not have the capacity to implement the solutions we offer and respond to what we know how to do. Unfortunately, this is why, in these cities, waste is often informally collected by children or the underprivileged, in deplorable and dangerous health and safety conditions.”

But when the country emerges from underdevelopment ...

“It is not about being under-developed. Once again, it is a governance issue. For example, in India, which is no longer an underdeveloped country, there is a serious governance problem which is particularly visible in the management of waste in cities. Compare India and China. In China, as in Europe, policies commands and companies offer their products and services within the legal or regulatory framework determined by the policies. In India, it is the companies that decide and the policies that follow. In our field, I have never seen a polluter pay for its pollution without being required to do so by law or regulations. China and India both emerged at the same time, both have developed their economies, but when confronted with this problem, they adopted two extremely different attitudes.”



**“THERE IS NO MORE
POLLUTION NOW
THAN BEFORE.”**



Pollution problems are not about to diminish, you are guaranteed exponential growth, right?

“ I would like to correct you there, there is no more pollution now than before and, when it is dealt with, pollution does diminish. For example, in 1975 there were only three species of fish in the Seine, today there are more than thirty. Imagine that! 27 species of fish have returned to the Seine in 45 years. The policies that followed in favour of wastewater treatment, both industrial and domestic, enabled a very large part of the pollution in the Seine to be resolved today. Another example is when the Berlin Wall fell, the European Union made it a condition for the entry of the Eastern countries that they achieve a level of environmental protection equivalent to the European average in 30 or 35 years. We are at this deadline now, and water pollution in these countries has decreased considerably. All of this shows that the *polluter pays* principle is the right one, because when polluting costs more than cleaning up, everyone starts cleaning up. And what has been done for water can be done for other types of pollution, such as air, waste, and even carbon. This, of course, pre-supposes a real collective organisation and, when it comes to carbon, this can obviously only be global. You know, I am not global warming sceptic but I do not share the millennial fears either. Solutions exist. ”

**“ IMAGINE THAT!
27 SPECIES OF FISH
HAVE RETURNED
TO THE SEINE
IN 45 YEARS. ”**

The growth of Veolia’s turnover is increasingly indexed on remediation and, therefore, on the increasing pollution which needs to be treated. So there is a market that is doing well!

“Yes, there is a market that is doing well and it is the market of finding solutions and showcasing them to solve problems. This market grows on the condition of finding new solutions as new problems arise. Such as, for example, the processing of old electric car batteries which is in effect and becoming a global market.”



In China, every “community” has more than a million inhabitants. Is the planet’s pollution by cities the most worrying issue today?

“Absolutely, and it is undoubtedly the main factor limiting China’s economic development. It could also soon be the main source of political contestation because the level of air pollution in cities has become almost unbearable for the population. This is why the Chinese authorities are asking for help from foreign companies like ours. We have contracts with a lot of Chinese cities, but China is developing its own companies in the pollution treatment sector and will become our main competitor in the next five or ten years.”

Does Veolia have forward-looking tools to determine what the future will be like? Do you have research laboratories or experts? Scientists of course, but what about sociologists, economists, or philosophers?

“We have various tools. For example, the Veolia Institute which focuses on analysis and forecasting. We are working on subjects, such as urban agriculture which may develop tomorrow and could change the situation in cities. The Veolia Institute brings together thinkers, academics, and major stakeholders who reflect on problems relating to our businesses. Among them, we are proud to count Esther Duflo from France and Amartya Sen from India, both Nobel Prize winners in economics. Our Institute develops its own studies and also monitors what is going on worldwide in the field of foresight.

We also have actual technical research laboratories. Finally, we have a whole series of testers and experimenters of the solutions that come out of these laboratories. For example, the solutions we recommend for tomorrow’s cities are tested to verify their feasibility.”

**“ THE SOLUTIONS
WE RECOMMEND
FOR TOMORROW'S
CITIES ARE TESTED
TO VERIFY THEIR
FEASIBILITY. ”**

“ IN SOME CITIES, PEOPLE PAY FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF THEIR HOUSEHOLD WASTE BASED ON ITS WEIGHT. ”



How can digital technology change waste and pollution management in cities?

“In two ways. First by adding efficiency to our technical solutions, which allows us, for example, to consume fewer spare parts, less energy, and, in short, to optimise our resources. Then, by allowing interactivity with the users of our services which, in the long term, can also allow us to develop new solutions. We already benefit from this interactivity in Lyon, France, for water management. We collect data that is freely available to users and, of course, the municipal team.”

Generally speaking, data collection can result in what kind of new solutions?

“There are already cities that have set up selective collection, meaning that people no longer pay for household waste management according to the number of square metres of their accommodation but according to the weight of their waste, one data item among others.

Digital technology can also make it possible to report usage in a detailed manner and in real time. For example, for water, inform the user of their daily consumption and report an abnormal consumption peak which may correspond to a leak that has gone unnoticed until then.”

“ FOR WATER, FRANCE HAS THE BEST VALUE FOR MONEY IN THE WORLD. ”

This use of data and of the interaction between the provider and the user characterises what we call Smart Cities. Is this already a reality for you?

“Yes, for example, again in Lyon, the city and Veolia have taken the initiative of a technical platform on which data on water management is available but to which the municipality has added the data provided by transport and cultural services. All this information is freely available and can be used by anyone who wants to use it to develop, for example, future applications. This platform already provides real time information on where the free spaces in the city's car parks are.”

In general, are French cities good students in terms of water or waste management? We sometimes have the impression that northern European countries are light years ahead of us.

“For water, that is not at all the case. I believe, even if I am judge and jury here, that France has the best value for money in the world when it comes to drinking water and urban wastewater management. In Switzerland and Denmark, prices are three times higher than in France and double in Germany. This comparison is for an equivalent level of services. In our country, a third of water services are managed directly by cities and the other two thirds by companies like ours; so there is an emulation between the two systems which helps achieve these excellent results.”

**“FOR WASTE,
FRENCH CITIES
ARE LESS
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THE LEAD.”**

What about waste?

“For waste, French cities are less effective and not as far in the lead. This is partly due to the historical distrust of our fellow citizens regarding waste incineration. We still prefer landfills, which is not the case of our English and German neighbours. However, the best solution is, of course, recycling.”

What about air? Are we starting to take action to make the air in cities less polluted?

“We recently began offering solutions to guarantee constant air quality inside certain buildings, such as schools and offices. We want to spread these solutions to hospitals, shopping centres, etc. in the future. We are also looking at soil remediation, and this issue, increasingly present, emerged from our work on waste treatment. Generally speaking, we clearly see that solutions are increasingly at the crossroads of our various business lines. For example, wastewater treatment produces sludge which can, when mixed with organic waste, become compost, and this compost can also generate energy.”



**“SOUTH KOREA HAS
A POPULATION OF
51 MILLION BUT ONLY
900 COMMUNITIES.”**

Faced with all these questions, are French cities the right size?

“It must first be said that the concerns of cities have changed. Thirty years ago, there was no competition between cities. Today, they are all looking for an attractiveness that will make the difference with neighbouring cities. Attractiveness is now a key issue for elected representatives. On the other hand, cities have really increased in size, not just because there are more inhabitants but especially because they have merged. As a result, they are much better equipped than before, but, at the same time, they have also become more bureaucratic, and elected representatives have strayed a bit from the decision which has often been confiscated from them by municipal officers, who are more numerous and more permanent. Decisions are increasingly elusive for politicians and that is a real concern.”

Does France have too many communities?

“Yes, we have 36,000 communities, which is ten times too many. However, cities have reached the right scale, that is to say the living area, the place where we live and where we work, the place where we can properly pool what is poolable. However, larger-area local authorities, where communities merge, are not advanced enough. Communities need to merge more with, at the head of the new community thus created, a single mayor and a single team, as is the case in Paris, Marseille, and Lyon, where there is a central city hall and district town halls. We would really gain in efficiency with this structure. South Korea has a population of 51 million but only 900 communities.”

THE URBANISATION OF THE WORLD THROUGH THE CENTURIES

THE HISTORIAN



Boris Bove

is a historian specialised in Middle Age cities. He has written extensively on Paris and how the capital has evolved over the centuries.

“IT IS THE DENSITY/DIVERSITY COMBINATION THAT QUALIFIES A CITY.”



What is a city for a historian?

“A city is obviously very different depending on the era and civilization, but, if I had to attempt a definition, I would use geography to define it. I would say that a city is above all a population density which itself induces genuine diversity. It is the density/diversity combination that qualifies a city. For example, in the Middle Ages, a city could have a population of just five thousand as long as there was diversity.”

Are any geographical features required for a city to appear?

“Not necessarily, however, most cities, 80% in Europe, are near a watercourse for fairly obvious reasons of supply and even, before that, to build the city itself. To sustain density, you need supply, and in the pre-industrial world, the safest, cheapest supply were waterways.”

“IN THE MIDDLE AGES, THE PLAGUE CAUSED URBAN AREAS, FROM CHINA TO BRITAIN, TO CONTRACT BECAUSE DENSITY FOSTERED THE EPIDEMIC.”

Once the structure is laid, almost naturally, almost necessarily, does a city grow over the decades and centuries?

“No, urban areas breathe, alternating expansion and retraction, according to political, economic, and demographic circumstances. The expansion of this area is a factor in development for a civilization, but there can be accidents. For example, the plague caused urban areas across Eurasia, from China to Britain, to contract because density was a factor in the epidemic. There was therefore a long period of retraction of European cities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries under the impact of the epidemic. This is an example of an accident as this epidemic was not caused by overcrowding but by a virus from Central Asia. On the other hand, there are also civilizations which developed without cities in the true sense of the word. This is the case of civilization in the early Middle Ages which developed without any real urban centres because the cities of Antiquity, the Roman cities, had collapsed, retracted, and become a shadow of what they had once been. This is particularly the case for Rome which, during the early Middle Ages, floated in its ramparts. Certain cities of Roman origin die, even if the complete disappearance of a city is very rare (for example, Aregenua in Normandy which is the village of Vieux today).”

Are these periods of retraction linked to dark periods, to hard times, as if cities wait for better conditions to start growing again?

“They are more linked to trade. In civilizations where trade is very intense, cities develop. In the early Middle Ages, society had become very rural and self-sufficient. Trade still existed, of course, but it was reduced to a minimum. Cities were therefore not really useful, the power settled in the countryside; elites owned large estates with thousands of hectares. They were self-sufficient. In this context, cities declined because there was not much work there and those who stayed, stayed more out of inertia than out of choice.”

“CITIES BECAME PLACES OF POWER LATER. WHAT FIRST CHARACTERISED A CITY WAS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.”

How, in these conditions, did cities become the very centre of power?

“Cities became places of power later. What first characterised a city was economic development through trade. Power ended up settling there because it found amenities and possibilities that were not available elsewhere and, in particular, products that only pass through cities, including capital and skills, intellectual, in particular. For all these reasons, cities became attractive hubs again. There were also, especially in Europe, cities of residence or capitals which were created ex nihilo because the king or the emperor decided on it. The city was traced in a chalk line and built from scratch with the desire to create a utopian capital. Sometimes they stayed in the pipeline, like the Italian Renaissance dream cities designed by architects. This kind of city is generally rarely built.”

Precisely, Italy is the very example of a country that has developed thanks to and by its cities.

“Yes, these are city-states which appeared in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Italy due to an unprecedented boom in international trade, which enabled them to develop and secede, and to free themselves from the Holy Roman Germanic Empire. They became so economically powerful that they could defy their lord, the emperor. At that time, a city like Florence had the same budget as the King of France, Philippe le Bel. On the other hand, its land was a thousand times smaller and it could only feed its population the first five months of the year, which meant that it had to import wheat for the rest of the year. However, the size of its budget allowed it to raise an army or negotiate a form of independence with the Empire. The case of Italian cities is quite atypical; it is rather an exception than the rule when compared to the rest of Europe.”

“PARIS AND LONDON WERE NOT FIRST AND FOREMOST CAPITALS, THEY WERE FIRST AND FOREMOST RIVER PORTS.”

If we now focus on the two largest European cities, Paris and London, how did they become the capitals of powerful nation-states?

“Paris and London were not first and foremost capitals, they were first and foremost river ports. In addition, in the Middle Ages or, more precisely, before the plague, there were major differences between the two cities, particularly in demographic terms, because London was an average city with a population that did not exceed eighty thousand while Paris, at that time, had a population of at least two hundred and fifty thousand. The two cities were economic hubs, but, in the thirteenth century, Paris was also a religious hub, with a bishop and an entire ecclesiastical hierarchy, and an educational hub, with the university, while in England the faculties were in Oxford and Cambridge. In addition, Paris was also where royalty lived making Paris the seat of the court. Paris became the capital in Philippe August’s reign. Remember that a capital function is not a court function, the seat of the court does not have to be in the capital and vice versa. So, all these functions that have accumulated in Paris explain or help explain the urban success of the city. However, beyond that, this success can be explained more by the demographic density of the countryside in the Paris basin.”

What do you mean?

“It is a very ancient phenomenon that probably dates back to the Neolithic era, eight thousand years before our era. The Paris geological basin is very fertile and therefore capable of feeding very large populations. As the city grew through immigration, it was the settlement basin that made it a city. Therefore, this was a phenomenon that existed well before the Middle Ages created Paris.”

“ IN A CITY YOU ARE OFTEN FREER TO DO WHAT YOU WANT THAN ELSEWHERE. THIS IS TRUE IN ALL RESPECTS. ”

Some demographers, like Hervé Le Bras, who is also participating in this issue of Au Fait, explains that the Paris basin has always been a region ahead of major historical and political developments, such as the dechristianisation of France.

“Yes, a sort of laboratory of French civilisation. It is quite mysterious in fact and, in desperation, the first explanation is perhaps the richness of the soil that fed the population, which, as it grew, fostered trade and allowed the emergence of a city where all kinds of innovations quickly appeared.”

Cities are therefore places of development and progress. Yet they are also seen, over the centuries, as a place of perdition, always somewhere between good and evil. How did this idea come about historically?

“Two levels probably need to be distinguished: that of reality and that of ideology or fantasy. On the reality side, cities are above all a place of trade and therefore of diversity which permits the loosening of social control and norms. In other words, in a city you are often freer to do what you want than elsewhere. This is a phenomenon that can be seen in all latitudes. In the city, morals are freer than in rural areas where social control is very tight and the reproduction of identical norms very strong. While the urban melting pot induces a kind of shift that allows evolution. The city is open to experiences from elsewhere while the rural world remains permanently in a kind of innocence in quotation marks. I use this word because light years from the Middle Ages, I remember a comment by the writer François Bizot in “Le Portail”, when describing the entry of the Khmer Rouge into Phnom Penh in 1975. He talks about the “innocence” of the rural population. For them, the city is the very place of vice. Of course, it was the Khmer Rouge chiefs who instilled this idea in them, but without any opposition because they already viewed Phnom Penh as the city of money and free customs, of everything that confused and concerned them.”

Moreover, to describe cities as places of vice and debauchery, they are often called Babylon...

“Or Sodom...”

That’s right. For example, New York is sometimes nicknamed Babylon and a recent German series on Berlin in the 1930s was called “Babylon Berlin”.

“It is always the same pattern. For the Jews in the Bible, for example, Sodom was a city of perdition because they themselves were a rural pastoral people who lived from their herds and had no experience of diversity. In addition, cities are where the powers that oppress them reside. It is exactly the same hatred and distrust that the Khmer Rouge felt. In the medieval West, the negative image of the city was conveyed by monks - who lived isolated in the model of ancient hermits - steeped in biblical culture.”

Beyond this divide between rural and urban, the city will eventually win...

“ FOR THE JEWS IN THE BIBLE, SODOM WAS A CITY OF PERDITION BECAUSE THEY WERE A RURAL PASTORAL PEOPLE. ”

“Yes, in order to achieve a world in the fifteenth century that the historian Patrick Boucheron called “the archipelago of cities”. This archipelago resulted in today’s world, where everything is urban. In the Middle Ages, ramparts very concretely separated the city from the countryside, then, little by little, this separation disappeared until it became completely invisible. The archipelago gradually absorbed all economic life into its network, so that the vast majority of the world’s population today lives in this urban fabric. Now, wherever we are, we belong to this network.”



In short, this urban network has spread everywhere and has become what we now call globalisation. More than a mosaic of countries, globalisation is often described as a group of world cities, from New York to Shanghai, from Dubai to Tokyo.

“This is effectively the result of the archipelagisation of the world. In the fifteenth century, the plague, which is a marking point in urbanisation, did not spread everywhere and revealed the limits of urban civilisation, it did not spread across the African continent beyond the Sahara, nor, of course, America. It was the urban authorities which invented the principle of quarantine in the fifteenth century. Then European viruses spread through Central America with the conquerors causing the demographic fall of indigenous populations (and cities). However, the first example of a global pandemic comparable to the Black Death, was the Spanish flu in 1918, which killed a hundred million people representing 5% of the world population (compared with the seventy-five million from the plague of 1346, which represented 30% of the population!). It is no coincidence that the Covid-19 epidemic went primarily through metropolitan airports, with an epicentre in New York in the United States.”

You wrote a book called: “Paris, des parcelles aux pixels” (Paris, from plots to pixels), what do you mean by this?

“This was a rather technical scientific project, directed by Hélène Noizet, intended to create a digital map of Paris in the Middle Ages and therefore to transform, in a manner of speaking, the plots of the plans of the Ancien Régime into pixels. The great difficulty of classic mapping is that maps are never superimposable because they are never on the same scale or the projections are not identical. This project involved transforming all the study objects into comparable and usable data. This method made it possible to move forward in many directions and, concerning my own research, made it possible to answer the question “who governed the city of Paris in the Middle Ages?”. Who ensured that two hundred and fifty thousand people managed to live together without starving and without killing each other in a very small surface area of 180 hectares? In the thirteenth century, the city’s organisation was actually very complex.

**“ ROYAL AUTHORITY
ENDED UP
ESTABLISHING ITSELF
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DETRIMENT OF ALL
OTHER AUTHORITY. ”**

First there was the King, who theoretically dominated everyone. He lived in the city where he kept his financial treasure, but he was far from dominating it. There were actually a dozen great lords, mainly ecclesiastic, who owned the land. But who was the main lord, given that there were about twenty in the city? Most were landowning lords linked to the monasteries, and the city had gradually developed on their land. At first, they did not belong to the city, but the expansion of the urban area on their lands gave them authority de facto over the people living in it. Finally there was the bourgeoisie, the merchants who enabled the city’s development by organising trade. The latter had different imperatives to those of the King or the lords: in particular, they wanted traffic on the Seine to be constant to ensure that goods transport was always possible. All of this was a bit confusing but, thanks to the pixelation of Paris’s maps, we saw order emerge from this complexity. I then studied who, at that time, exercised policing authority in Paris, the King or the lords of justice. At first, the person who exercised this police authority was the lord who owned the plot of land on which the crimes and offences occurred. However, it often happened that the sometimes deadly fights - a great classic of the medieval town - occurred in the streets, therefore on the border between two seigneuries. Who had jurisdiction? Who judged the offenders? We decided that it must be the King. And as the seigneuries were completely interwoven, in two thirds of the cases, arbitration could only be submitted to the King even though, at this time, he did not own more than 10% of the city’s land...”

**“ THE CITY
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**“ IN PARIS, IN THE
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TO LIVE TOGETHER
ON A SURFACE AREA
OF 180 HECTARES
WITHOUT KILLING
EACH OTHER. ”**

Which therefore considerably increased his authority...

“That’s right. Thanks to this digitisation of the city’s plots and the establishment of the contours of the various seigneuries, we were able to determine that, two thirds of the time, the King had the policing authority allowing us to understand how royal authority ended up establishing itself in the city to the detriment of all other authority. This digitisation method also allowed the historian Caroline Bourlet to determine with precision the population density in the various districts of medieval Paris, in particular, by superimposing the data concerning those who paid tax over that of dwellings. She discovered that within the Wall of Philip Augustus, the city was very heterogeneous since, on the left bank, population densities were those of rural areas, while, on the right bank, between Chatelet and Les Halles, there were hyperdense areas with nearly 1,500 inhabitants per hectare. This density is comparable to that of industrial Paris in the nineteenth century, before Haussmann.”

Cities are often also locations of revolutions, particularly in France, and of social transformation. Why?

“Simply because the protest develops where the power is. When the power is in the countryside, which was the case in the Middle Ages when the lord resided in his fortified castle, the revolt is a group of peasants who attack the castle and not the neighbouring town. No, what is more systematically associated with the city is innovation which is linked to the density/diversity combination that we have already talked about. The city concentrates the experiences of different people, and from this alchemy is born the capacity to create new things. Innovation and novelty also prosper, in the city, due to the time that some of the inhabitants have to reflect. This is less the case in the countryside where everyone is absorbed by the work in the fields linked to the seasons. Economic activity makes it possible to produce capital and to diversify the urban economy, by increasing specialisation of producers, in particular, in the craft sector which verges, for certain sectors, such as cloth, on industry. A very diversified urban economy is also a necessary condition for the development of universities which need booksellers, parchment makers, scribes, etc. The concentration of capital in cities promotes the possibility of freeing up time to learn and the development of the couple formed by the patron and the artist or craftsman.”

“PARIS, WITHIN THE LIMITS OF THE BOULEVARD PÉRIPHÉRIQUE (INNER RING ROAD), IS ALMOST EXACTLY THE SAME AS THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CITY.”



“WHEN 97% OF THE POPULATION DOES NOT LIVE FROM AGRICULTURE, THIS MEANS THAT 97% OF THE POPULATION LIVES FROM THE CITY.”

Later, in the nineteenth century, Paris became the bourgeois city par excellence. What is left of this?

“Everything. The current city, within the limits of the Boulevard Périphérique (inner ring road), is almost exactly the same as the nineteenth century city. It was the industrial revolution that gave birth to Haussmann’s city; it forced the government to rethink Paris entirely to adapt it to the new economic situation. At no time in Paris’s history was the city demolished and rebuilt as much, especially over such a short period of time. This transformation was directly linked to the demographic explosion that the industrial revolution brought about as well as to the immediate wealth it generated. The mass of available capital was such that investors of the time had the means to undertake this mammoth project. In addition, as the working class populations needed to be forcibly evicted from the old insalubrious central districts to allow new constructions, the political authorities were involved. This nineteenth century Paris was the product of three phenomena: a social crisis linked to the industrial revolution, a considerable mass of available capital, and the authoritarian power of Napoleon III. Perhaps this unprecedented restructuring of Paris would not have taken place if the regime had been democratic or simply respectful of law and individual property. The Second Empire did what the monarchy failed to do. The Louvre, for example, took centuries to build because the kings were unable to evict the inhabitants concerned.”

And Haussmann’s Paris exported well!

“First of all, because it was a great success. If we look at present-day Paris, the entire city has retained this nineteenth century mark: the boulevards, monuments, squares, sewers, stations, and so much more. This model persisted through the twentieth century and today, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, we are still on the edge of this model, even if things are changing with Greater Paris.”

For a historian, is this Greater Paris a revolution or an aberration?

“Greater Paris is the archetype of the transition of the City into Urban. Let me explain: a city is a space surrounded by ramparts, endowed with a very strong political, economic, and cultural identity, which opposes the countryside, an urban area, a concept put forward by geographers, like Françoise Choay, is an area where there is no longer any difference between the city and the countryside; everything is urban. ‘When 97% of the population does not live from agriculture, this means that 97% of the population lives from the city.’”

From the city or in the city?

“From the city, because regardless of whether these populations live in the countryside or not, they are, in fact, totally connected to the city. Today, intramural Paris, the part inside the ring road - which is a kind of modern rampart - represents the city’s ultimate manifestation of a city born around the twelfth century which is disappearing at the beginning of the twenty-first. The Paris we have inherited is a little archaic, both economically and politically. It’s a very beautiful city, but, objectively, it needs to change scale and go global. Historic Paris has dissolved in the city for decades; the aberration is not Greater Paris, it is our collective inability to rethink the organisation of the population on the scale of the Paris region (which represents 18% of France’s population). Paris unilaterally decides what is good for itself, without considering the populations living beyond the ring road, as if it were not part of a much larger organic whole. We are now just beginning to use the A86 as a benchmark for certain traffic restrictions, but Greater Paris’s roots go beyond it!”

Is it a world city?

“Of course, although this question can be interpreted very differently: does it refer to the polyglotism, mainly upper class and European, of children who visit the Luxembourg gardens, or that, mainly lower class, Asian or African, of the 19th and 20th arrondissements, or the incredible brand image of the city in the world’s imagination, demonstrated when Notre Dame burned down?”

“PARIS HAS ALWAYS HAD MANY FACETS: INDUSTRIAL, FINANCIAL, INTELLECTUAL, ARTISTIC, AND SCIENTIFIC.”

I have a funny question that follows this line of thought: are cities one of the factors of development of the capitalist model in the world?

“Yes, obviously through the economic stakeholders who are all located in the city. More precisely, one could say that the stakeholders of this development have always been the bourgeoisie, who are etymologically the inhabitants of the city and who, from century to century, have shaped the city through their trading activities. It started with Bruges and Florence, and it continues with London and New York. Paradoxically, in the case of Paris, the city has always been seen as a major capital, an emblem of intellectual life, but rarely as an economic hub; and yet, it is a long-standing industrial city. For example, in the thirteenth century, Paris was a city where hundreds of weavers produced tonnes of cloth which were exported all over the world. However, this Parisian cloth trade is little known while everyone knows about the cloth towns of Flanders in the same period. In the nineteenth century, Paris was also a very industrial city with a very large number of factories producing all kinds of goods, but this city is hidden behind that of the great monuments which make its reputation, such as the Eiffel Tower ... despite the Eiffel Tower being an industrial product. In fact, Paris has always had many facets: industrial, financial, artistic, and scientific, which have made it a global capital without being able to highlight a particular aspect, unlike London, which was primarily a financial and industrial capital. This kind of over-determination of Paris led to an enlargement of the capital compared to the rest of the country and resulted in the well-known *French desert*.”

**“INTRAMUROS,
PARIS HAS BECOME
A MUSEUM CITY.
AND, IF THERE ARE
STILL INHABITANTS,
IT IS A MIRACLE.”**

So, to paraphrase a famous song, ‘Paris will always be Paris...’

“Probably, but, at the same time, Paris is constantly changing. For example, in classical times, Paris was a secondary administrative authority, the main one being Sens, Burgundy, which was the province’s capital. This is why there was an archbishop in Sens and not in Paris. At that time, Paris was essentially a bridge city because, thanks to the two islands, it was easy to cross the Seine. In the Middle Ages, Paris became a port city as shown by the east-west orientation of housing and the economy, unlike the Roman city which was north-south, with the bridge in the middle. As we said, the bourgeois city was both a city of factories and a city of monuments in the nineteenth century.”

What about in the twenty-first century?

“Intramuros, Paris has become a museum city. It is a city with a political vocation, a capital, and a tourist city: ministries and museums in short. And, if there are still inhabitants, it is a miracle, especially since property prices are responsible for making them leave. In the long run, will only inhabitants of the ministries and globalised elites be left? One of Paris’s characteristics over the long term is the endless increase in property prices. From the thirteenth century to the present day, and, of course, apart from periods of economic crisis or war, they have continued to rise. This phenomenon is also accompanied by an increasingly marked concentration of land between very few owners. Parisians are traditionally tenants and their landlords are decreasing: the buildings are owned by very few people. But, at the same time, in Paris, as in other western cities, land speculation has favoured the city’s development by allowing the accumulation of capital. In summary, during the Ancien Régime when credit was illicit, it was through real estate rent that trade could be invested in. This rent was productive, unlike the image literature gives of people of independent means in the nineteenth century, for example in Balzac’s books, and perhaps even different from rent today which is often a sterile payment with no real economic outlet.”

In the future, are these European cities, like Paris, Berlin, or London, condemned to be museums for tourists and bases for the ultra-rich?

“The major European cities have always been places that attracted the world’s very wealthy, on the other hand, the transformation of a city into a museum is a very Parisian characteristic. Firstly, because Paris’s architecture is seen as an open-air theatre, with its views, its boulevards, its squares, etc., and, secondly, because Paris has been very little affected by the destruction of the last wars. For example, things did not go at all in the same way in London and Paris during the Second World War. In France, the fear was that the conflict would damage the city. Politicians were ready to give up the country to keep Paris safe. As soon as there was a problem, they moved to Bordeaux or North Africa. In London, they held out and finally accepted that the German bombing campaigns would destroy most of the city.”

Yes, by the way, the towers in London are in the city centre, in Paris they are on the outskirts, in La Défense or in outlying districts, like Place d’Italie or Beaugrenelle.

**“WHEN WILL THERE
BE JUST ONE MAYOR
FOR THE PARIS
REGION?”**

“Effectively in London, destruction during the war made it possible to redesign the architecture of the old urban centre, the City, while in Paris major urban planning could only take place in wasteland or slum or sparsely populated areas.”



Could we say that war allows cities to regenerate?

“No, not necessarily, we all have examples of failed reconstruction in mind. In addition, one of the major effects of the First World War was the destruction of the city centres of many European conurbations, and this destruction of real estate capital partly explains the weakening of old Europe in the face of the United States. What we can say, however, even if it may seem a bit cynical, is that wars save having to pay for the destruction of old buildings which, in peacetime, is sometimes difficult to achieve. So, war offers the possibility, as long as there is subsequently time, projects, and capital, to start from scratch and innovate. But this is not the only issue, authoritarian regimes also allow this forced renovation, as we said about Paris in the Second Empire, and as we could say about the major Chinese cities which economic expansion allied with the communist regime have totally transformed, probably for better or for worse. The big question of the city is how to develop, transform, and create the buildings and infrastructure necessary for these innovations in a space already saturated with buildings and owners. It should not be inferred from the above that only wars and authoritarian regimes are capable of transforming cities. Democracies obviously can do it, and that is the function of certain state bodies. But we must also have the appropriate political tools, for example an electoral redistribution, to negotiate urban renewal and, in the case of Greater Paris, we have clearly fallen behind. When will there be just one mayor for the Paris region.”



STITCH AND REWEAVE THE URBAN FABRIC THE ARCHITECT



Jean-Michel Wilmotte

belongs to the small group of world-renowned French architects. He has given a lot of thought to the grafting of modern architecture onto the ancient city.

Is it the city that makes the architect or vice versa? In other words, should an architect respect a city or transform it?

“Both. The historical aspect of a city needs to be respected, but the chaos that sometimes constitutes it, especially at its periphery, needs to be transformed.”

It is funny that you use the word chaos to describe cities, the filmmaker Cédric Klapisch, who is featured in this issue, also uses it. Why this reference to chaos? For you, is it a positive or negative concept?

“Chaos can be very interesting. Recently we had a customer who wanted to build a hotel. There were two possible sites for his project: one on industrial wasteland, a kind of vacant site made up of abandoned factories, and the other on a more bourgeois Parisian boulevard. I advised him to take the first site which was better suited to his project. He took my advice.”



“THE HISTORICAL ASPECT OF A CITY NEEDS TO BE RESPECTED, BUT THE CHAOS THAT SOMETIMES CONSTITUTES IT, ESPECIALLY AT ITS PERIPHERY, NEEDS TO BE TRANSFORMED.”

“WE BRING CONTEMPORARY ELEMENTS TO OLDER ENSEMBLES.”

So, you could say that an architect clears cities...

“Yes, or rather they decrypt them, they try to understand them, and read them. What happens next depends on this reading: sometimes they conclude that they must respect the city in which they are working and, at other times, that it must be awakened to avoid a kind of urban drowsiness. When everything is monochrome and smooth, when the city is bathed in a very classic atmosphere inherited from centuries past, our architecture can quickly become boring if it does not break with this uniformity. This is one of the challenges addressed by the principle of contemporary grafting, which we have been developing for over thirty years, which we are trying to pass down to students and recent graduates in architecture through the Wilmotte foundation and the Prix W. We bring contemporary elements to older ensembles. It can be an extension to a historic building and/or its adaptation to a new function. If, for example, the project envisages the extension or the renovation of a place from the past, I absolutely refuse to accept any pastiche or *fake old* addition. I cannot consider anything but a contemporary design and will therefore use today’s materials and technologies; but, this does not mean denying what already exists. Many cities have developed without anyone thinking about the articulation between the different urban layers. They are made up of architectural ensembles that have been stratified without consultation. In this case, architecture boils down to an accumulation of buildings disconnected from each other. The architect’s role is to offer a comprehensive and coherent project. If the city in which their project is located is made up of a succession of warehouses, buildings, and garages, their role will first be to reweave links between these heterogeneous constructions, generally by grafting contemporary elements on them.”

Today, do cities use architects to sew up and repair all this loose urban fabric?

“Yes, more than before.”



“ IT WAS INCREDIBLE, THERE WERE FOUR OR FIVE OF US ARCHITECTS, INCLUDING PHILIPPE STARCK AND JEAN NOUVEL. ”

You are known, among other things, for having worked on Nîmes, a historic, ancient city. Is that where you laid the foundations for your architecture?

“Nîmes was effectively the starting point for what I call *contemporary grafting*. Particularly when we extended certain buildings and when we redesigned the Museum of Fine Arts, the town hall, the school, and the opera house. It was the first time that a mayor, Jean Bousquet, the founder of Cacharel, fought to bring coherence back to his city. It was incredible, there were four or five of us architects, including Philippe Starck and Jean Nouvel. We toured Nîmes with him. He showed us all the places he wanted to work on to improve the city. It was done without any invitations to tender, which would not be possible today.”

You also rubbed shoulders with another “prince”, François Mitterrand, when he asked you to redesign the presidential apartments at the Élysée. What was that like?

“The project began at the very beginning of his first seven-year term. François Mitterrand was discovering his function and it was actually quite easy. He loved everything contemporary. He owned Knoll furniture at home, for example, which was quite rare at the time. There were five architects, including myself, working at the Élysée. Everyone was able to express themselves with their terminology and showcase their expertise.”

François Mitterrand then became the archetype of a “prince” who leaves his mark on the city, perhaps he was even the last one?

“I believe that. In his case, there was an entire entourage who shared the same vision, namely the Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, and the Minister of Building Projects, which was a new role, Émile Biasini. These two men advised François Mitterrand and advised him well. For example, the choice of the Chinese-American architect Ieoh Ming Pei for the Louvre pyramid was very wise. The choice was not easy to impose, but, at that time, you could choose an architect without tenders then. Today, there can be up to eight hundred projects included in a single tender and, ultimately, the sheer number of projects leaves just a few minutes for decision-makers to judge the interest of all the designs on the table. Generally speaking, architects are increasingly mistreated today.”

“ ARCHITECTS ARE INCREASINGLY MISTREATED TODAY. ”

Mistreated by whom?

“By those who are making the choices, by the principals. For a project, five or more architects are called, but when you are sick, you do not call five doctors. Doctors or surgeons are not put into competition. We really need to succeed in establishing a new relationship between the person in charge, the architect, and the builder. Things need to be made easier for young architects, which tenders do not allow. Before, there were workshops with young architects, gradually working up the ladder, as in medicine with the internship system. The other inconsistency in architecture tenders is the absolute lack of contact between the person in charge and the architect. How can you build something relevant if you have not spent at least four hours talking with the person making the request or if you have not trudging around the ground on which the building is to be built?”

“ WITH 68 NEW STATIONS AND AS MANY VILLAGES AROUND THEM, GREATER PARIS IS A MAJOR OPERATION. ”

After Mitterrand, we have the feeling that public procurement has died. Regarding Paris, there is an impression that there is no major institutional work in progress today.

“ No, I cannot let you say that, there are a lot of areas that have been transformed, including Batignolles and the 13th arrondissement. And then there is Greater Paris. When 68 new stations are planned and as many villages are to be created around them, this is a major operation! Today, it is partly the transport means that decide what kind of architecture there should be. Architecture is developed from redesigned traffic based on demographic imperatives and environmental needs. This architecture must above all be a humanist architecture where new balances between work, travel, and leisure will be found. ”

For you, humanism is the watchword of architecture in coming decades, light years from the urban planning site plans of the 1960s.

“ Yes, humanism and architectural quality need to be combined. ”

You also often design street furniture. Is street furniture important?

“ When I started out, I designed a lot of furniture for individuals. Then, one day, I had had enough, and I started to work on furniture for the public, for cities, and for communities. I began to design benches, lights, planters, and telephone booths. It is also with this type of object that we can create a humanist city that is more pleasant to live in. Lights bring warmth, benches, comfort, and planters, vegetation. In my firm, we developed the idea of interior design for cities, just as there is interior design for homes. Today, we are regularly contacted in this field, thanks to our expertise. For example, we won, with Antoine Grumbach, the design of the Greater Moscow master plan, a project called Joy of life, one of the objectives of which was to bring workplaces and living places closer to each other, and, therefore, once again, reweave the links. ”

“ RETAILERS ARE AT THE HEART OF THE DYNAMICS OF A CITY. WITHOUT THEM, IT CANNOT LIVE. ”



And in Moscow, there was a lot of work because it is not a very warm city...

“ On the contrary, Moscow is an exceptional city and it is the European city with the most green spaces; I think it is 27 square metres per capita! For this project, we identified all the brownfield sites and imagined how we could develop the quality of the city with these unused spaces. ”

“ I WOULD LOVE TO DESIGN AN “OPEN-AIR SUPERMARKET”. YOU WOULD ENTER AT ONE END OF THE STREET AND PAY AT THE OTHER END. ”

In cities, architecture is also punctuated by the presence of shops. How does an architect use shops and commercial spaces to redesign urban space?

“ Retailers are at the heart of the dynamics of a city. Without them, it cannot live, develop, or change. When designing a square, for example, you need to think of cafes and social areas. We are in the process of redesigning an entire district in Marseille and, from the outset, the cafes, and the terraces, in particular, were included in the project. You need bookstores, newsagents, and bakeries for a district to exist. A city without bread, and therefore without a bakery, is frankly impossible! I dream of moving shopping centres from the outskirts back into city centres. Or better still, giving new life to all these medium-sized cities, the main streets of which are often abandoned, by reopening small shops. ‘I would love to design an “open-air supermarket”. You would enter at one end of the street and pay at the other end. All of these businesses would be open during the day and be closed at night, with the exception of restaurants and bars. I am sure that I will be given this project one day. ”

You have also worked a lot for luxury brands, haven't you?

“Yes, for a while. For example, we designed the Cartier flagship store in New York, on Fifth Avenue, and stores for Chaumet. The owners of these major luxury brands, Bernard Arnault, François Pinault etc., want renowned architects to work for them. It is part of their marketing strategy as well as their desire to leave an architectural mark, which is not really reprehensible. We have all done it: Christian de Portzamparc, Tadao Ando, and me. The luxury sector is one of the fields of action in our line of work but not the only one. We can also, as in Ris-Orangis, in the Paris region, design 140 high-quality houses with a budget limited to 2,500 euros per square metre.”

One of the great challenges of architecture in the city will be adapting to climate change, making it possible to live in an urban environment with an additional one or two degrees in temperature or more. What solution is there to this change?

“You actually just need to think about insulation. Everything is and will be dependent on insulation. Cooling the interior when it is hot outside is not a durable solution. If we fix the insulation problems, we can already lower indoor temperature by 4 or 5 degrees. In fact, most of the time, old houses are cooler than more recent constructions because their insulation was carefully considered when they were built. Generally speaking, air conditioning is an aberration, but insulating well has a cost. The wooden buildings that we construct are 10% to 15% more expensive than those built with concrete blocks, like the wooden unit that we are currently building in Rueil-Malmaison. But with wood, we divide the carbon footprint by eight! We can also bring coolness through the use of plants, but with restraint because I am against what I call «sauerkrauting» architecture. I do not like all these projects with green walls and roofs all over the place. Today, on some competition submissions, you cannot even see the architecture for all the plants. Plants grow in soil, they belong to the soil, and should remain there, but a green wall, designed with moist felt, here or there, why not. If this is a highlight, it is good, but no more.”



When the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, suggested planting “mini-forests” in Paris, what did you think of that?

“Why not, after all, Paris was once a forest.”

Carefully said!

“No, I just want to see how that pans out. For me, the forest, well, it is in the forest, please excuse the tautology! Let us say that I have nothing against groups of plants, but leave the word *forest* out of it because it implies something else, some other imagery. But trees in the city can be a very good thing because they cool the air and provide shade, because, in a city, it is important to have shaded areas.”

“ A BALCONY DOES NOT CHANGE ANYTHING. ”

How do you judge the architecture of the 1960s and 70s which is often responsible for everything that people hate in cities: large complexes, wide roads for cars, council housing blocks, etc.?

“Architecture was an emergency at that time because a lot of housing needed to be available for a lot of people very quickly. Architects were building by the metre. Despite this, very beautiful things were still achieved, even in prefab, with very interesting facades. We are rediscovering them. The generation that followed that of the 1960s also has its share of responsibility because they believed they could “arrange” these large complexes by adding a balcony here and there, by covering the buildings with tiling, terracotta, or fake slate to give them “character”. I hate these cosmetic makeovers. If you want to do something with these buildings, you need to go back to the original structure, hollow them out, and then rebuild them. A balcony does not change anything. On the other hand, if you knock down an apartment on the ground floor to create a large hall with pleasant spaces, shared spaces, you are doing something really useful for the people living in the building.”

**“ I THINK
HIGH-RISE BUILDINGS
ARE A GOOD THING
IF THEY INCREASE
PUBLIC SPACE. ”**

Does urban planning still exist?

“Yes of course, urban planning is especially useful to anticipate the future of a city, to avoid what is called urban sprawl. Urban planning can make it possible to delimit the different zones, according to the functions allotted to them: work, leisure, sport, etc. Urban planning is therefore not an obligation but rather the best way to envisage how a city will develop. Urban planning is useful when it brings architectural issues back down to human scale and not when architecture is seen from an airplane, hundreds of metres above sea level.”

And high-rise buildings, do they have a place in your humanist architecture?

“I think high-rise buildings are a good thing if they increase public space. If, instead of building fifty houses, we build a high-rise building, we very substantially increase the available floor space. But high-rise buildings are only possible if there is public transport nearby.”

But for you, as for many people, are high-rise buildings the striking sign of modernity? Paris is still one of the few cities in the world to have no high-rise buildings in its centre. Unlike London, for example, to compare with other European cities...

“The only high-rise building in the centre of Paris, the Tour Montparnasse, really has not done much for the city. No more than what those built in the 13th arrondissement have done in any case. Aside from Renzo Piano’s new Palais de Justice and the future Triangle Porte de Versailles tower, designed by Swiss Herzog and de Meuron, Parisian high-rise buildings have not brought much architectural quality to the city.”

You are also a great museum architect. You have worked on the Louvre and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. How do you deal with such prestigious places, do you tiptoe around?

“No, not at all! On the contrary, you go head on, but it is the collections presented that are the starting point. They often express the history of a country or a civilization. Visiting the Rijksmuseum, for example, immerses you in Dutch culture and you discover its richness. You learn that the Dutch were navigators who traded in porcelain, fabrics, and, of course, tulips. We therefore needed to design a museum that reflected both a whole and a diversity. What I enjoyed about working on the Rijksmuseum was that we were closer to a cabinet of curiosities than to a “conventional” museum. Today, in the same room, the visitor can discover paintings, furniture, weapons, clothing, etc. It has taken eleven years to redefine this monumental museum around the civilizational aspect of collections. Works even took a year longer than expected because they had to be stopped to allow the bikes to pass underneath. Another specificity linked to the Dutch civilization.”

And it wasn’t a «problem» that a Frenchman staged the life of the Dutch?

“Obviously not! And our firm has real expertise in this field as we have worked on about thirty museums. It is especially good at mastering the technologies around light and display cases, which is essential in a museum. The big revolution, from this point of view, took place with the Department of Primitive Arts at the Louvre’s Pavillon des Sessions. Before, we had to secure the collections by protecting the display cases in the rooms, but when the main security was moved to the museum entrance with the installation of security gates like those in airports, we were able to lighten display case structures, and remove excessively heavy frames. There are not even any frames anymore: the panes are glued together and everything is much lighter, almost invisible. The equivalent revolution in fibre optics allowed us to include lighting in specific locations. Again, the Department of Primitive Arts was a pioneer. In addition, lighting no longer heats up the interior of the display cases, which is a major improvement.”

**“ WHAT I ENJOYED
ABOUT WORKING ON
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WERE CLOSER
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A “CONVENTIONAL”
MUSEUM. ”**

“ I AM RATHER FOR WAREHOUSE-TYPE MUSEUMS, EVEN IF I PUSH THE CONCEPT A LITTLE. ”



Today, museums seem to have become, for many cities, the obligatory focus of renovation or urban planning, as if there was a one city, one museum principle. In addition, we have the feeling that this museum must be designed by a great name in architecture for the operation to take on its full meaning. I am thinking of, for example, the Louvre in Abu Dhabi built by Jean Nouvel or the Guggenheim in Bilbao built by Frank Gehry...

“There was a time when very attractive museums needed to be built. I personally do not like “putting works of art in a work of art”. I am rather for warehouse-type museums, even if I push the concept a little. Museum architecture is sometimes excessive, so much so - as you mentioned it - that in Bilbao you needed to work out how to hang pictures on curved walls and work with the shadows cast by the building’s curves. It is a choice, but, it seems to me, what is best suited are very high-ceiling rooms, that are extremely well lit, which benefit from overhead light during the day, etc. In short, a succession of rooms, like at the MoMA in New York or the new Tate Gallery in London. I am for an architecture that disappears, which does not take the place of what it contains. I would not say that about the Louvre in Abu Dhabi, for example, because inside the dome there is a structure specifically for the museum.”

But where is the architect’s «touch», as they say, if a warehouse is preferred to a more complex form?

“ The architect’s touch, I think, should be saved for other buildings serving other uses. By definition, museums require respect and modesty. There is something sacred about a museum because of the works kept inside it.”

Going back to this omnipresence of museums in today’s cities, how do you explain it?

“It all started in Bilbao, which was a completely deserted city that has become a very attractive city again under the impetus of a museum. Perhaps we could consider this idea for deserted medium-sized cities in France, like Nevers or Vierzon, for example.”

Your firm also works on a lot of religious architecture projects; I am thinking of the Collège des Bernardins in the 5th arrondissement of Paris, in particular. What do you recommend for the reconstruction of Nôtre-Dame? I understand you are in favour of using today’s technologies and materials...

“Of course, a steel frame and a titanium cover should be considered, for example. These materials can be used to obtain exactly the same appearance as before the fire but with much less weight. Titanium is three times lighter than lead and it does not readily burn. The structure needs to be lightened because the walls have been weakened by the fire and the heat. It is just common sense. In fact, for the Collège des Bernardins, we used a steel frame. And in their time, the Metz and Reims cathedrals, damaged during the Second World War, were repaired with materials of their time: the frame of the first was repaired in cast iron and that of the second, in concrete. Architectural terminology needs to include the technologies of the time. When Gustave Eiffel designed the Eiffel Tower, he immediately thought of iron and its potential. Titanium and carbon are, in our time, what iron was in his. For example, the bulb structure of the new Orthodox cathedral in Paris, designed by my firm, is made from a laminated composite material, a mixture of fiberglass, resin, and PET foam, which allowed us to make them in six months when it would have taken three years if we had used conventional materials. This composite material was supplied by Multiplast which also built Impulse, the solar plane!”

And this was not a problem for the Russians?

“Not at all, they thought it was very interesting, and, besides, we are going to build a new cathedral in the Moscow region using the same technologies.”

“ THERE IS SOMETHING SACRED ABOUT A MUSEUM BECAUSE OF THE WORKS KEPT INSIDE IT. ”

Regarding the new Orthodox cathedral in Paris, how was the relationship between the prince and the architect? I mean between you and Vladimir Putin?

“When he came to open the cathedral, after having been invited to Versailles by Emmanuel Macron, I spent an hour and a half with him on site and the conversation was exceptional. The relationship with the Patriarch of Moscow, Cyril, was also extraordinary. He scribbled exactly what he wanted on the plans we showed him. He was the one who approved the project when the Orthodox hierarchy found it too contemporary and not classical enough. We also had to consider the canons of the Orthodox church. For example, bulb bell towers have a special shape, specific to each Autocephalous or Orthodox church; they are not the same shape in Moscow, Kiev, or Sofia. There was no way we could change the shape of the onion domes.”

What about the colour?

“For canonical reasons, they had to be gold. But I found that a little too heavy, even a little vulgar. So, I decided to use a palladium and gold alloy which gives a slightly silvery hue called moon gold and which, depending on the time of day, takes on tones, different hues. Palladium, therefore, gave the touch of modernity that we were looking for.”



THE FILMMAKER

FILMING
THE HAPPY
CHAOS OF CITIES



Cédric Klapisch

is the filmmaker of cities par excellence, with films such as *When the cat's away* (1996), *Pot Luck* (2002), and *Paris* (2008).



It seems to me that the city is the main character in your films...

“Undoubtedly. It wasn’t voluntary at first, but I realised, when I made my penultimate film (*Back to Burgundy*, 2017), that I had never made a film about the countryside, and I also realised then that I had only made films about the city before. So, it isn’t voluntary, but it is true that the themes that are of interest to me are urban. I like to portray how people live together. The main theme in all my films is the relationships people have with each other. The obvious decor of my films is that of the city.”

“ I LIKE TO PORTRAY HOW PEOPLE LIVE TOGETHER. ”

*A city that is constantly changing, which we can actually see changing before our eyes. I am thinking, in particular, of *When the cat's away* (1996) the story of which takes place in a neighbourhood undergoing renovation/transformation...*

“Yes, but without any negative judgement. In this film, there is a confrontation between the older generation accustomed to the working-class Bastille area of yesteryear and young “hipsters” who have moved to this district and who work in the fashion industry. Through this opposition, I tried to show that Paris is in a perpetual site of demolition and reconstruction, that this has always been the case, and that this pattern applies to every city without exception. We must accept this perpetual reconstruction as the very mark of city life. This film did not seek to alert the destruction of old Paris but sought to show that this city is always shifting. This point of view was not well understood when the film came out because some thought that the character of Mrs Renée (Editor’s note, the old lady who rescues stray cats in the neighbourhood) symbolised the values of old Paris that promoters were destroying and that I supported those values. But, I was actually trying to show the process of transformation; how a city is made. Again, it was about filming change through this confrontation between old Paris and the new city that was being born, between the Paris of the old and that of the young.”

“ I READILY ADMIT THAT I AM STRONGLY INFLUENCED BY FILMMAKERS LIKE MARCEL CARNÉ, JULIEN DUVIVIER, AND JEAN RENOIR. ”

*You clearly show the two worlds that overlap each other. For example, the key role of small shops. In your films, there are always bakeries and cafés which, in France, are irrefutable symbols of the city. It seems to me that there is a kinship with French cinema from the interwar period, which was both very working-class and very urban, Such as *Hôtel du Nord*...*

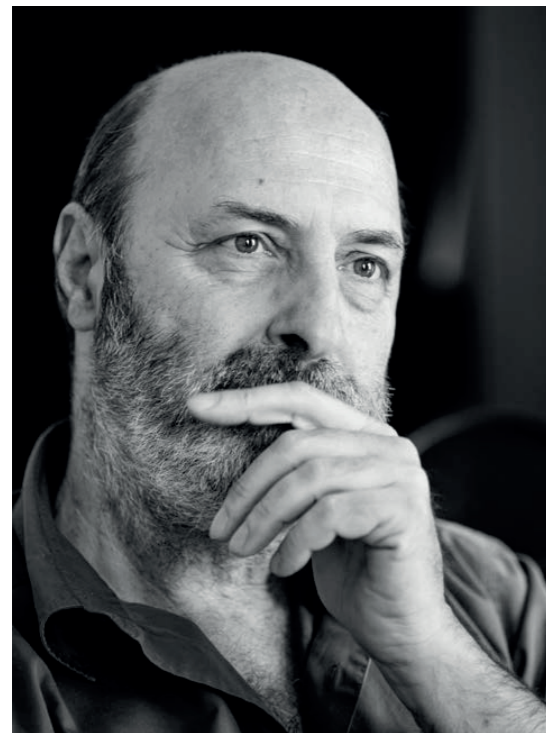
“I readily admit that I have a strong bond with filmmakers like Marcel Carné, Julien Duvivier, and Jean Renoir. Their films always portray the social classes who live together and the way in which they co-exist. For example, Renoir filmed both the wealthy and working classes. Carné also had this approach of portraying society in its entirety, of looking at how each class lives, even if there is precariousness for some. How solidarity works among the poor, how the wealthy manage. It is all about emotion and that is what I find most interesting.”

In other words, social cinema which is not intended to be solely social?

“That’s right. You know, I grew up in the 1970s and, as it was the great era of militant cinema, I quickly saw that cinema which is purely political is often problematic because it is too dogmatic and interventionist. I prefer a cinema that suggests and asks questions rather than a cinema that brings truths. I used to follow movements that I no longer believe in now - let’s say I have evolved - I prefer to put myself on the side of the human, of the individual. I favour poetic values rather than political values because they are more durable. In any case, I find the city more poetic than political. You know, when I first started out, I was a photographer, and the photographers who I immediately felt I understood at the beginning of my career were Cartier-Bresson, Willy Ronis, Édouard Boubat, Doisneau, and Brassai who photographed Paris. It’s really surprising how these artists, who were really portrait photographers of Paris, influenced me, including in my films. First and foremost, because they had a way of attaching themselves to reality, to what they saw before their eyes. They took pictures which were never staged or posed for, and, at the same time, there is a constant search for a kind of poetry, an urban poetry, in them. This is even more the case with Carné and Renoir; I feel I have a bond with them and their work.”

“ I FAVOUR POETIC VALUES RATHER THAN POLITICAL VALUES BECAUSE THEY ARE MORE DURABLE. ”

**“CARTIER-BRESSON,
WILLY RONIS,
DOISNEAU, AND
BRASSAÏ WERE REALLY
THE PARIS PORTRAIT
PHOTOGRAPHERS
WHO INFLUENCED ME
THE MOST.”**



You made an explicitly urban film called Paris. It is an ensemble film that depicts several special destinies. It is also a definition of the city: do you think living in a city is a form of ensemble?

“It is a place where people cross paths, or not because they could just miss each other. Cities are like one big concourse. For me, this comparison sums up the very principle of city life. Encounters that are made or unmade. I made *Paris thinking* too much of Robert Altman, who is, for me, at the origin of ensemble films. He practically invented this style. When he made *Nashville* or *Shortcuts* (which is a portrait of Los Angeles), Altman tried, above all, to relate a city, to see how it can be described by looking at it from several perspectives at the same time. This is kind of what I did in my film *Paris*. I said to myself, right, describing a city is mission impossible because it is very difficult to relate a city with several millions of inhabitants. You know, this was the challenge Georges Perec set himself with his book *An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris*, he tried to describe everything he saw. He sat outside the Café de la Mairie, Place Saint-Sulpice, and he said “a bus drove by”, “a pigeon flew off”, but that does not describe anything because it is not possible to depict, relate a city in movement, stop this dynamic. For a filmmaker, it is exactly this challenge which is of interest. There are many ways to film the city, but, as it changes constantly, we must favour places and moments that we consider symbolic or representative. That is what I tried to do when I made *Paris*. I chose a bakery, a market, fashion, migrants, etc. all these themes which, put end to end, like a puzzle, make Paris or, in any case, recount its multiplicity.”

You also tried to be everywhere, because, when we draw up a list of filming locations, we discover that you used your camera in almost all the arrondissements...

“That is what I was just thinking, I multiplied perspectives to achieve a sort of Parisian kaleidoscope. In fact, I took a completely opposite view to that taken for *When the cat's away* which was set in three streets in the Bastille district. I described the city metonymically (choosing to show only a part to represent the whole) by filming a block. For Paris, I decided to talk about the city in a broad sense, through its neighbourhoods and its social diversity. It was important to evoke the 16th and 18th arrondissements at the same time.

I suddenly needed to show monuments, which I had not done in *When the cat's away* where there was only the Genie de la Bastille in some shots. The rest of the decor was made up of mundane streets, a Paris that was the deliberate opposite to a postcard. For *Paris*, it was the opposite; I said to myself “you need postcards”, you need to show the Eiffel Tower and all the Paris emblems, each so different from the other, from the Lutetia arenas to Nôtre-Dame and including the catacombs. It was another way of looking at the city, but it is still the city.”

Paris is probably the city which has featured in the most films. In general, do you think cities acquire a second life thanks to the film industry? Do you think they become something else when they are discovered through films? For example, did Barcelona become a different place after Pot Luck?

**“A REPORTER FROM
BARCELONA ONCE
SAID TO ME, “YOU
HAVE SPOILED MY
CITY”, AND
THE FILM IS
EFFECTIVELY PARTLY
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EXPLOSION THAT
BARCELONA IS
EXPERIENCING.”**

“A reporter from Barcelona once said to me, “You have spoiled my city”. I do think that the film is partly responsible for the tourism explosion that Barcelona is experiencing today, and I am sincerely sorry for that. That, of course, was not my intention. I had wanted to shed light on a city that was not really known and frowned upon. This phenomenon is also at work in Rome, because it is a city that was visually built by Fellini, both in *Dolce Vita* and in *Roma*. It's true that when we now visit the Trevi fountain, we can almost say that this place has been sublimated but also “spoiled” by the film. The monument is now completely linked to the *Dolce Vita* scene where Anita Ekberg, thigh-deep in the water, calls out “Marcello, Marcello!”. Tourists buy postcards from the film or photos of the fountain indifferently, creating a kind of mixture between what we perceive of the city and what cinema has made of it. This is the same with Paris, even if the interesting places to film are not just the tourist attractions. Unlike Rome or Venice, Paris is a city where there is charm linked to the twentieth century which does not necessarily attract tourists. For example, the last film I made (*Someone, Somewhere*) was shot in the 18th, 19th, and 20th arrondissements in places that are not at all touristy, which are not in the guides. But, at the same time, it might make tourists want to visit them. There is clearly an interaction between cinema and the reality of a city, for example *Amélie* has undoubtedly brought an additional interpretation of Paris. And I don't think it should be complained about a city is also fiction and fantasy. Reality and imaginary.”

**“A CITY IS ALSO
FICTION AND
FANTASY, REALITY
AND IMAGINARY.”**

*When you watch the films by other filmmakers which have the city as a backdrop or, even more, which take place in Paris, does it annoy you or are you a little jealous of the way in which they film what might have eluded you? I am thinking of Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*, for example...*

“For *Midnight in Paris*, I first thought that he had seen American things, let's put it like that. It is like for *An American in Paris* which is really a vision of someone who does not live in Paris and who finds what they want to find there. He wanted to see Hemingway in Paris, so he put Hemingway there. It is what the American audience expects of Paris, and I find it charming, but nothing more. However, I love the journey through time that he put in the film and there, yes, I am jealous, I would have loved to have had that idea.”

In other words, and sorry for the pun, cities in cinema are pot luck?

“Absolutely. Firstly, because a city changes very, very quickly. I really felt that with New York. I lived there for two years when I was a student, when I was about 25, and then for another year to make *Chinese Puzzle* when I was 50. And there, a quarter of a century later, I realised the huge difference between the New York I knew as a student and that I experienced when I was 50. It was not just the architecture, the new buildings or shops, it was the very soul of the city that had changed. New York had become completely upper class whereas it had been a dangerous and unpleasant city when I lived there. It was an “Asphalt jungle” as the film said, a genuine urban jungle. Now, it is ultra-cosmopolitan and ultra-upper class. It is Trump's city, a city where you can feel the money flowing, which was unimaginable in the 1980s. So, of course, for a filmmaker, filming such changes is exciting. In *Chinese Puzzle*, I mainly shot in Chinatown to try to describe the last working-class area of Manhattan, but I was fascinated by the divide between the two cities, that of the 1980s and that of the 2010s. Baudelaire said that “The Form of a City Changes Faster, Alas, Than the Human Heart”. It's from *Paris Spleen*, I think. He watched Haussmann destroy old Paris, the Paris he loved, to make way for the modern city that he didn't like at all. I can understand that: things happen that are not just about architecture they are of the soul, of the heart, uses of the city that disappear, which we will never see again.”

**“NEW YORK IS
TRUMP'S CITY,
A CITY WHERE YOU
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IN THE 80S.”**

**“BAUDELAIRE SAID
THAT “THE FORM OF A
CITY CHANGES FASTER,
ALAS, THAN THE
HUMAN HEART”.”**

Going back to Paris, for almost the entire world, it's the world's romantic city and the ultimate destination for lovers. A filmmaker must necessarily be interested in love: do you find some truth in this portrait or is it just silly?

“First, clichés are always true. When you are in love, you go watch sunsets at the beach. It is a cliché but there is something that hits home in this desire to want to experience these kinds of moments together. It is the same with Paris, when you are in love you go put your little padlock on the Pont-Neuf. Love is a positive thing. Oddly, this feeling is very strong in Paris but not in London or in Berlin, for example.”

Why is that?

“It is a bit basic but I think that it is essentially due to the architecture which is old and present in its historical dimension all over the city. There is an impression of eternity in Paris. There are only two cities like that: Venice and Paris. We like to stand in front of something old, it's related to this idea of eternity. From this point of view, the Paris quayside is very effective, it is incredibly beautiful. It's one of the reasons for the very strong reaction to the Nôtre-Dame fire in so many countries, starting with the United States. A place steeped in more than a thousand years of history was going up in flames. At the same time, Paris is a happy mix of modern and old, and the city is wonderfully balanced from this point of view. That is what I like to film. In Rome, for example, there are not enough modern buildings. But it must also be said that this idea of Paris's eternity as a privileged setting for love is a permanent construction. For example, to go back to Nôtre-Dame, this Middle Ages cathedral has been constantly redesigned. This is the case for many emblematic monuments in Paris as well as pieces of heritage that are unrelated to architecture, such as fashion or gastronomy. Very old elements redesigned by modernity, by movement. Once again, Paris is an example of this alliance between old and new, between tradition and the contemporary. This is particularly striking in fashion. You need tradition and centuries-old skills to be able to create novel and avant-garde items.”

“AMONG THE FILMMAKERS WHO SUCCESSFULLY FILMED CITIES, I THINK JOHN HUSTON, MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI, AND WIM WENDERS ARE OF NOTE.”

And yet, you have not really filmed the modern areas, like La Défense, have you?

“La Défense, for me, is failed modernity, a fake modern area, or, at least, modernity that is already dated and a little absurd. I prefer what is currently going on in Avenue de France or Batignolles. For a long time, after the war, Paris feared novelty. I think this syndrome is linked to the architectural failures of the 1970s, the rush to create «rabbit cages» without thinking. For a long time, these failures reinforced the idea that modernity is always ugly. Nobody thinks that in Tokyo or Manhattan... Luckily, the Louvre pyramid changed all that in a blink of an eye. Thanks to the simplicity of a glass and steel shape in the middle of the Louvre, in the very centre of the former castle of the French monarchy. Beaubourg also awakened the minds, and it has become, in just thirty years, a symbol of Paris in the same manner as Notre-Dame and the Arc de Triomphe.”

Which filmmakers do you consider city filmmakers par excellence?

“Woody Allen and Martin Scorsese are clearly the best in portraying New York. Among the filmmakers who successfully filmed cities, I think John Huston, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Wim Wenders are of note. There are also great filmmakers who are not good at portraying the city. I am thinking of Alfred Hitchcock, for example. There is, of course, *Rear window* which is set in New York but you never see the city. Hitchcock’s films are like those of Pedro Almodóvar, there’s a studio, theatrical side to them which distances the city. We have already talked about Renoir and Altman who were, for me, major urban filmmakers.”



“IN ROME, FOR EXAMPLE, THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH MODERN BUILDING.”

“A FEW YEARS AGO, WE WERE BETTER RECEIVED WHEN WE WERE SHOOTING A SCENE IN A STREET.”

*There are also films that evoke an urban space more than a city. I am thinking of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* which will always be associated with the Champs Elysée. For Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows*, it is Place Clichy...*

“Absolutely, but I didn’t mention them because, for me, they are more in an abstraction than filmmakers like Fellini. You cannot go to Rome without seeing Fellini, you cannot go to Madrid without thinking of Almodóvar, less for what he filmed of the city than for the *Movida* associated with it. However, we can go to Place Clichy without thinking about Truffaut and Jean-Pierre Léaud.”

Is the city an easy place to shoot a scene for a filmmaker or, on the contrary, is it complicated?

“It is complicated, and it is increasingly complicated. Filming in town means really a lot of constraints, and when I made *Back to Burgundy* which is mainly set in the middle of a vineyard, I realised just how much easier it is to film in the countryside where you are not bothering anyone and nobody bothers you. The city has toughened up: there are more and more people, more and more film shootings, and people are less and less tolerant of film shootings. A few years ago, we were better received when we were shooting a scene in a street, people were happy; it was kind of festive. Now, people are almost hostile. It’s clear, we are a nuisance to them.”

You also filmed in Saint-Petersburg, including in the street which is called “the perfect street”, why?

“Yes, Rossi street. First of all because the film was linked to dance and the great Vaganova dance academy, which is attached to the famous Mariinsky theatre, is in this street. And then because I liked the story about the Italian architect Carlo Rossi giving ideal dimensions to a street to get as close as possible to an ideal or an absolute. In the film, I link this search for architectural perfection to my main character’s, played by Romain Duris, quest for the ideal woman, the perfect woman. Little by little, he realises that she does not exist and that, even if she did exist, she might not necessarily be the ideal woman for him.”

“ I ACTUALLY LIKE CITIES THAT ARE CHAOTIC. ”

Was it a way of showing that the ideal city does not really exist either?

“I actually like cities that are chaotic. And a city is necessarily chaotic because it is made up of a stack of eras, architectural styles, as well as an accumulation of political ideas. For example, in Paris, the city is made up of pieces of monarchy, revolution, empire, several republics, etc. This diversity has made it possible to juxtapose places, squares, and buildings, which are all unique elements. Then the modern era, which reveals the power of money in the heart of cities, is on top of this. All this “hotchpotch” creates a chaos, and, I think, a prosperous city is a city that has organised its chaos. This is the case for New York, Paris, and Tokyo but not Dubai, for example, because it still believes in perfection and novelty. As a result, it does not create its own chaos made of strata, accumulations, and failures. It may come. Other cities have lost the charm of chaos, such as London and Berlin which were destroyed by the Second World War and have failed to find a new life or soul, at least that is how I see it.”

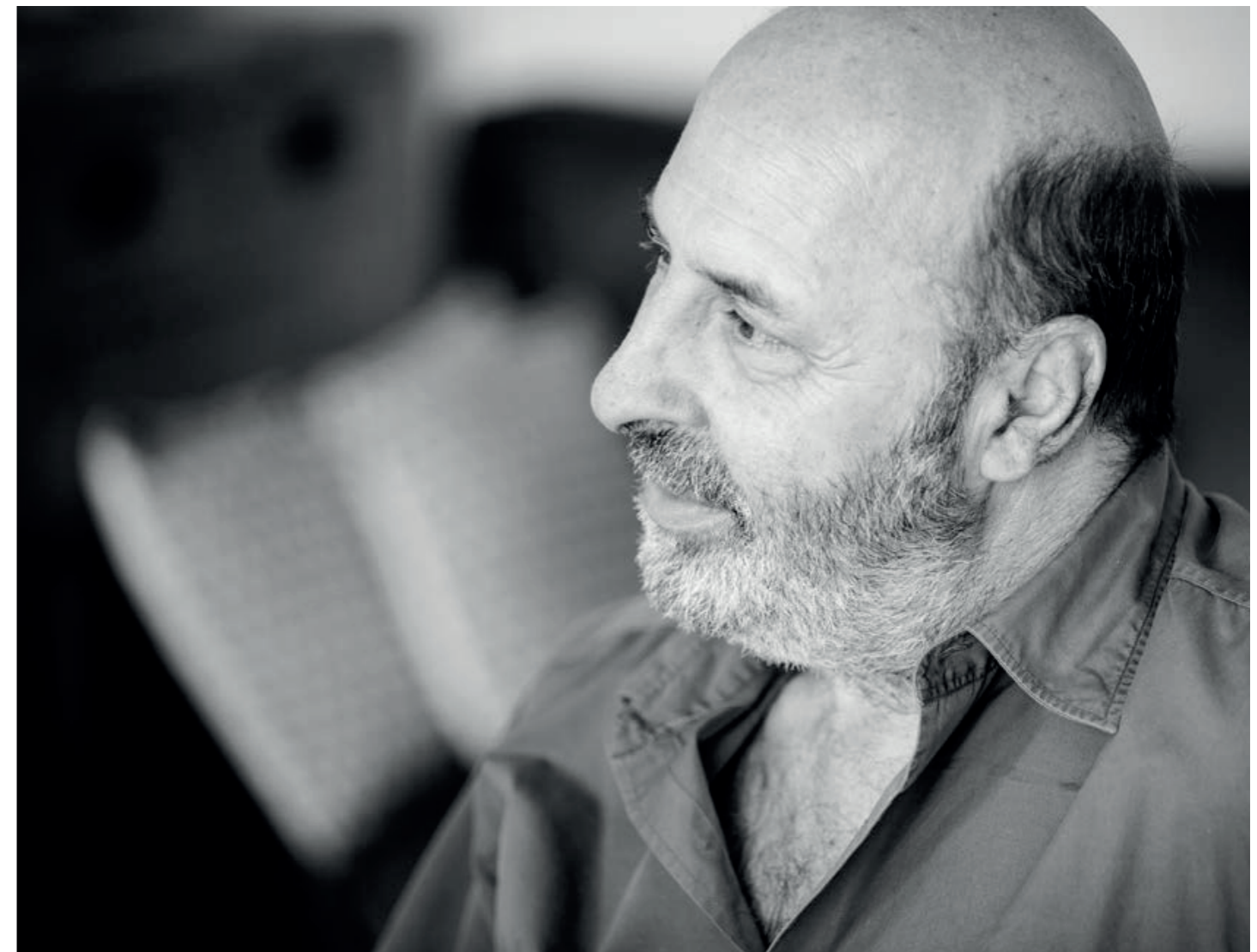
Berlin might have lost its soul, that of the Weimar Republic, cabarets, etc. but London...

“It is true that in the 60s there was “Swinging London” with the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and, later, the Punk movement. But today, we are a far cry from that. I was at Camden market three months ago, and there was a punk posing for the tourists. I could not believe that the punk spirit had come to this, a cliché. London has gone wrong, it has become the city of Boris Johnson and the like. It is less inspiring than it once was. The same goes for Trump’s New York...”

Are there any cities which you have not yet portrayed which you would love to film?

“Yes. I would love to film Rio. Because it is, without any shadow of a doubt, the most prosperous urban chaos there is. I would also like to film Hong Kong for the same reason: it is complete anarchy. And recent events also echo this chaos, which once again proves that the soul of a city is intimately linked to its history and the political events that made and make it. On the other hand, I have no interest in cities that boil down to their excesses, overcrowding, the cancer of endless suburbs, and permanent pollution, such as Djakarta, or Lagos in Nigeria, or even Beijing. I love cities in moments of time, like London in the 1960s and 70s. For me, a city at a prosperous moment of time is a moment of excitement. But some cities create death due to pollution or overcrowding. A city is prosperous if it creates life, but it can go from life to death in a very short period of time. I have not been to Kinshasa for a very long time, but I remember it was full of life because Zairian music was everywhere. I wonder if this is still the case.”

“ A CITY IS PROSPEROUS IF IT CREATES LIFE, BUT IT CAN GO FROM LIFE TO DEATH IN A VERY SHORT PERIOD OF TIME. ”



“MARSEILLE IS A BEAUTIFUL CITY! EVERY TIME I GO, I THINK TO MYSELF, “I REALLY NEED TO MAKE A FILM HERE.”

What about in France?

“Marseille! Marseille is such a beautiful and attractive city! Every time I go, I think to myself, “I really need to make a film here. But I would not film this city at all like Marcel Pagnol or Robert Guédiguian did, firstly because it was their city and it is not mine. It is a really prosperous city, a tough city like Rio, but really prosperous in its urban, human, united, and poetic aspects. Better behaved cities, like Nantes, Bordeaux, or Lyon interest me less, even though they are very beautiful cities. For example, Bordeaux is a kind of cool Versailles now. Conversely, Montpellier would interest me more. The south-chic-Palavas-wild beaches combination appeals to me. It takes contradiction and sparkle to make a city and give it life.”

What’s left, although I shouldn’t use this verb, what’s left is the suburbs which, for filmmakers of recent decades, is often the very place of the city seen by cinema. Do the suburbs interest you?

“Of course. That is where life is, now more than ever. Besides, all the young filmmakers come from the suburbs today and they cast a refreshing modern look on city suburbs. It is really important to have these new takes on the suburbs. Personally, I’m a Parisian and, for the minute, I live in the capital, but who knows. Anyway, my last film (*Someone, Somewhere*) remains attached to the city since it tells the story of two single people in Paris. I mainly evoke loneliness in cities in the era of social media. Why does social media, which is supposed to create links and closeness, create distance and coldness? Why, in these cities, do people “like” each other rather than just loving each other?”

THE BEAUTIFUL TATTOOED SKIN OF THE STREETS

THE GALLERY OWNER



Magda Danysz

is a French gallery owner with art galleries in Paris, London, and Shanghai. Her areas of expertise include digital art, photography, and Street Art.

**“THE WALL ART
IN LASCAUX OR
CHAUVET IS ALSO
A FORM OF STREET
ART EVEN IF THE
STREET HAPPENS TO
BE A CAVE.”**

Tell us about street art in a few key dates.

“Street art has always existed. After all, the wall art in Lascaux or Chauvet is also a form of street art even if the street happens to be a cave. To define it today, you first have to consider the expression ‘street art’ which artists do not like too much because, like all labels, it stifles them. At first, there was graffiti, then writing and tags. The term *spray* can art was also used as this was the medium used, as was *subway* art because there was a lot of artwork in the New York subway. Over the years, all of these names changed with the different directions creators were taking. The term street art, as such, only began to be used in 2007 while the activity itself dates back to the late 1960s. Today, this term is a bit of a catch-all and it does not reflect the different forms that artists have developed very well, but it is used by everyone, so...”

So, street art has a history?

“We can even accurately date its birth. A few of us have worked on the history of street art and we now all agree. At the outset, the history of street art was essentially *legends*, urban legends. Stories layering stories that were passed on orally. Next came photo books and exhibitions, but the texts needed to explain things more precisely, legends needed to be written down and the story told. The testimonies of those who were there at the very beginning needed to be collected to pick up the trail of those who had disappeared from the walls because street art, like all painting schools in art history, is full of “victims” who did not survive the movement. Anyway, we can say that this movement began, very modestly, during the Second World War. A young American soldier called Kilroy, drew little figures on the ammunition boxes he was packaging to be sent to the front. Next to the little figure, he wrote “Kilroy was here”. We were quite a far cry from street art then, but, curiously, this story already had a United States-Europe axis. On the front, the soldiers who received these packages also started to write “Kilroy was here” everywhere and the sentence went viral. Virality is one of the characteristics of street art which spreads through dissemination. Of course, this episode then fell into oblivion, but we now agree that it was the originating moment.”

**“AND THEN THERE
ARE CENTURIES OF
LOVERS GRAFFITI,
BOY LOVES GIRL
STUFF, OR WHAT
IS KNOWN AS
LATRINALIA.”**

Nothing before that?

“Yes, of course, thousands of things. For example, the election campaigns on the walls of Pompeii where each candidate wrote their name to say: “Vote for me”. The writing was often very calligraphic, to the point that some graffiti artists were inspired by the style of this graffiti. The lava did not erase these names, these *aliases* as we would say today because it was already a way of standing out from the crowd. Then there are centuries of lovers graffiti, boy loves girl stuff, or what is known as *latrinalia*.”

Going back to the twentieth century, where did the movement start? New York?

“No, people always think street art was born in New York but its real birthplace is Philadelphia and, more precisely, the centre of Philadelphia which, like in all major American cities, is poorer than the residential suburbs. In the 1960s, the centre of Philadelphia was very poor and very densely populated. It was a kind of pit that was very difficult to get out of because there wasn’t even a subway. At that time letters and words started to appear on the walls. The first person who became known for this practice - at least as legend tells us, because they were actually dozens - was a certain Cornbread. All this had absolutely nothing to do with art, and Cornbread said himself that he did it to impress the girls. But it was already a phenomenon known to all. For example, when the Jackson Five came to Philadelphia for a concert, they asked Cornbread to paint their plane. Here, we were still at pure graffiti and not any form of artistry.”

“PEOPLE ALWAYS THINK STREET ART WAS BORN IN NEW YORK BUT ITS REAL BIRTHPLACE IS PHILADELPHIA.”

How did the movement come to New York?

“Strange to say, but by train. It coincided with the rise of the train as a transport method between the two cities because the highways were totally saturated. Kids from Philadelphia ended up at Grand Central, Manhattan’s station, and showed their friends in New York what was going on at home. The reverse is also perhaps also true: kids from New York went to Philadelphia on the train and saw the graffitied walls through the window. In New York, it was different. First, because the city does not have the same topography, and then because it is organised into communities, in neighbourhoods that are very spatially delimited, to the very street. The first New York graffiti artists sprayed their names, as in Philadelphia, and their street numbers. This is where graffiti completely changed its meaning bringing identity into the game. This is the case if the graffiti artist sprays his name on a wall in his street but even more so if he does it in another neighbourhood proving his visit there and becoming a provocation requiring a response. ‘Graffiti means “I was here guys” and if “169” is also sprayed then everyone knows that it was someone from East Harlem. And it took off. There was graffiti everywhere, stick letters in black, grey, white, and red, the aerosol colours of the time which were mainly intended for bodywork. Graffiti spread thanks to the activities of graffiti artists, like Taki 183, who became very well known. He was a courier and graffitied walls during his errands. This accumulation of graffiti is interesting but it also made them invisible since they overlapped each other.

Around 1971-1972, some graffiti artists decided to stand out and invent what was soon called *stand out*, a style that got people noticed. For this, they started to draw ornaments around the letters. For example, one of them was nicknamed Stay High because his graffiti was always accompanied by a big joint and a huge cloud of smoke around it. This was a style that would be popular for a long time due to its ornaments. It emerged, and was even present in Jean-Michel Basquiat’s paintings with the cloud, the crown, the star, etc. In this magma of names on the walls, it was necessary to say: “I’m the best” and add a crown or “I shine” and place a star. What is funny is that, today, we know exactly who invented what: lettering, ornament, etc.

“GRAFFITI MEANS “I WAS HERE GUYS”.”

This is why the term *movement* could be quickly used because there were codes, techniques, and jargon. Invention was constant, the same Stay High would add relief by drawing first in blue and then in black. Another, Face 2, created beautiful lettering like flop or dripping lettering. Yet another, Sean Hart painted subway carriages, first sidewise and then upwards with, for him, the need to correctly centre his name and consider the staging of his design. By the way, Sean was also an artist...”

And yet, people still think that these graffiti artists had no arts education.

“Which is often not true. Sean’s first painting was at age 15, and it had absolutely nothing to do with graffiti. Besides, all these kids were often influenced by punk culture and music, which they listened to, and not by rap which was still in its infancy. They also conveyed messages, such as those of Quick, an Afro-American who portrayed Hitler and a member of the Ku Klux Klan under his signature which showed him sitting on a subway carriage. All these graffiti artists often also wrote Amerikkka with three ks. This generation multiplied inventions through political messages, aesthetic flashes, and daring styles. Some even incorporated elements that resembled abstract art. Because, once again, not everyone was without artistic and arts culture. In New York, for example, all these graffiti artists moved around, crossed the city, and saw on the subway or on the streets the posters of major modern art museums, such as the Guggenheim or the MoMa. It should also be noted that not all graffiti artists came from the poorest parts of the Bronx, some came from wealthy families who took them to the museum.”

“THE NEWSPAPERS DEPLORED THESE PAINTED WALLS THAT “DIRTY THE CITY” BUT OTHERS, LIKE THE NEW YORK TIMES, BEGAN TO TALK ABOUT AN ART MOVEMENT.”

Were all these graffiti artists also aware of Mexican muralism and its very political frescoes featuring crowds advancing to demand bread and respect?

“Some of them, yes, those who were of Hispanic descent, but, in most cases, no. In New York of the time, graffiti was still writing, increasingly stylised, but still writing, the graphics of letters. It was in the early 1980s that the movement took on an aesthetic and pictorial aspect, for example, through a kind of funeral art in homage to dead people. In Alphabet City, the famous New York neighbourhood, where the streets are called A, B, C, D, which was extremely dangerous at that time, all the walls were painted. All of them, I remember it clearly, there wasn't an inch of spare space.”

And we started to talk about it?

“Yes, in 1979 articles were published in the press. ‘Some newspapers deplored these painted walls that “dirty the city” but others, like the New York Times, began to talk about an art movement. Face One, the first exhibition that featured work by graffiti artists and conventional articles, such as Sophie Calle and Laurence Wagner, was in 1980. Basquiat and Keith Haring had been crossing paths with them for a long time. Keith Haring said several times himself that his meeting with graffiti artists was a decisive moment for him, and he immediately wondered how he could integrate this aesthetic into his work. There were actually many more exchanges than one would think. For example, at Face One, eighteen street artists exhibited their work. Two or three galleries had also taken an interest in them, and a collector had opened an area where they could come and work. But the real turning point was in 1983-1984.”

“YOUNG EUROPEAN ARTISTS WHO ARRIVED COULD NOT BELIEVE WHAT THEY WERE SEEING”



Why?

“Because young Europeans began to travel and came to New York, which was then the cultural beacon. Everything happened there and there was a real time lag with Europe. It took six months to a year for things to arrive in London, Paris, or Berlin. Young European artists who arrived could not believe what they were seeing. This was the case for French artist Jeff Aérosol who said himself that New York street art changed his life. He was considering becoming a graphic designer, instead he became a graffiti artist and developed a universe close to what he had seen on the other side of the Atlantic..”

**“ IN BOLOGNA,
STREET ART WAS
CONSIDERED A
REAL PICTORIAL
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THAT DESERVED TO
BE EXHIBITED IN
MUSEUMS. ”**

Was this specific to the French?

“No, this applied to artists from all over the world who visited New York at that time. Two books published in 1948, *Spray Can Art* and *Subway Art*, for example, had decisive influence worldwide. 500,000 copies were sold, which, for a book on art, is exceptional. Photography also greatly contributed to the spread of street art, the internet much less so. Paradoxically, it was when street art spread everywhere that the New York mayor of the time declared war on graffiti artists. Some stopped for fear of reprisals, fines, and lawsuits at precisely the moment when European collectors, in the Netherlands, in particular, began to take an interest in the movement and started to buy works. As a result, the most famous graffiti artists left for Europe both to escape repression and to meet demand because, in Europe, these young people were considered artists. This was the case in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy, in particular, Bologna where street art was considered a real pictorial movement that deserved to be exhibited in museums. They were received like stars. In France, they were invited by the magazine *Technikart*, the RATP ordered an advertising campaign, and they painted at Bains-Douches. At the same time and everywhere, in every European country, street art was taken up by local graffiti artists who added something new to it. In France, the artists developed a kind of “French touch”. A European branch was created. In Paris, for example, there was the Stalingrad site at La Chapelle where graffiti artists weeded the wasteland in order to paint the walls. On the weekends, crowds flocked to watch the artists paint. They discussed techniques, and styles merged. During this period, the French were very good, for example, evolving lettering towards even more complex horizons and some Americans were inspired by this European passion. This was the case for Futura who acknowledged it himself. Unfortunately, in Europe too, communities began to threaten graffiti artists with lawsuits and the RATP changed its attitude and waged a merciless war on them. I remember that an artist who had painted a Métro carriage was fined an exorbitant amount.”

**“ IN THE EARLY
1990S, THE ENTIRE
FRENCH RAP SCENE
SUPPORTED STREET
ART, JOEY STARR
FIRST. ”**

**“ COLLAGE, FOR
EXAMPLE, ALLOWED
ARTISTS, LIKE JR
TO GO HIGHER
AND FURTHER. ”**

Why a war?

“At that time, street art was seen as pure aggression by society and institutions. You could even say that, in their eyes, this movement alone summed up the entire aggressiveness of the streets. It should be noted that, paradoxically, some artists shared this point of view. They claimed this aggressiveness because they refused to be recruited or claimed themselves. One of them said to me then, “Don’t try to make an artist out of me!””

During this period, did the suburbs play a role in the movement?

“Of course. In the early 1990s, the entire French rap scene supported street art, Joey Starr first. This was particularly the case in Marseille with groups of graffiti artists, like Force alphabétique. There were places that were real halls of fame for graffiti artists, places where you had to be if you wanted to count, like, even though it is not in the suburbs, the fences of the Louvre construction site. Everyone from all over Europe and even the rest of the world came to have a look. Although recognition arrived, street art continued to resemble a kind of urban guerrilla warfare. The most interesting thing is that this guerrilla warfare led to new forms of street art, such as sticker art, which is an artistic response to repression. The stickers can be prepared at home, so it is less dangerous than painting a wall in dread that a police car will drive by. From a legal point of view, stickers are different from graffiti because they can be removed. There is no risk of heavy fines. It should nevertheless be emphasised that, despite more reasonable street art, more compatible with society, some remained radical and claimed the vandalism that could accompany their work. They claimed it like an artistic manifesto.”

**“FROM THE 1980S,
IN NEW YORK,
ARTISTS WERE PICKED
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IN STREET ART VERY
EARLY ON.”**

Yet, we sometimes have the feeling that street art is always the same thing...

“Quite the contrary, and graffiti artists have a golden rule: never do the same thing as the next person. Learn from what you see and then find your way, your personal style, your way of doing things. Always with the aim of standing out. This is also why many artists developed new ways of working over the years: stencils, glued paper, and even pneumatic drills, such as the Portuguese artist Vhils who said he “made stencils backwards”. Graffiti is both the need to stand out from the crowd and the need for speed because it is being done in the street. There is therefore a real stylistic issue which gives interest to the movement, that brings it to life, inventing. Collage, for example, allowed artists, like JR, to go higher and further. For his part, Shepard Fairey, who designed the Barack Obama poster, invented new ways of disseminating graffiti by offering people the chance to download his works, print them out, and paste them on walls around cities themselves. French artist Invader is also noteworthy for his mosaic graffiti. The first time I presented him, in 1999, the other graffiti artists did not consider it urban art because he didn’t use aerosols and he didn’t sign his work. In fact, he had just created something else, a new form which also spread all over the world. Artists in China also started to regenerate urban art, for example Zhang Dali, who is, today, a major artist. He began by drawing his silhouette with an aerosol on old houses scheduled for demolition to make way for large complexes.”

Street art is also very political, walls of graffiti rarely portray flowers in a vase...

“That isn’t true. There’s a bit of everything. There are cats, dogs, and small flowers. Street art is like all artistic movements, it is made up of multiple sources of inspiration.”



**“I THINK STREET ART
IS REALLY THE FIRST
MOVEMENT IN THE
ENTIRE HISTORY OF
ART THAT IS TRULY
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UNDERSTOOD BY
90% OF HUMANITY.”**

Yes, there is André and Monsieur Chat ...

“I am not sure that I would include André in the Care Bears category because his sneering figure is a genuine signature, it really is his avatar.”

In contrast to political engagement, can we also argue that street art is regularly claimed? For example Shepard Fairey’s famous Republic, with its Liberty-Equality-Fraternity motto, is hanging on the wall in Emmanuel Macron’s office today. And André, worked for Galeries Lafayette ...

“Art has always been claimed. From the 1980s, in New York, artists were picked up by the fashion industry, among others, which took an interest in street art very early on. Designers quickly joined the movement. For example, designer Virgil Abloh and his Off-White brand recently worked with Futura, the “father” of abstract graffiti.”

Still, there are a lot of communities that decided to keep a wall for graffiti artists...

“They did it for purely electoral purposes; they realised that it was a good way to reach out to younger generations. It’s a shame because these initiatives have somewhat overused street art. Often, what is produced is not of good quality or it’s a simple imitation of what has been seen on television or on the web. In principle, I am not against it but it smacks of amateurism, just as there are amateur theatre groups or choirs. There is a big difference between street artists who have devoted their lives to it, who have created their style and experimented, and the street art wall of the Trifouillis-les-Oies festival, painted once a year.”

“ONE OR TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND EUROS IS VERY EXPENSIVE BUT IT’S NOTHING LIKE THE MARKET PRICES FOR A JEFF KOONS OR A DAVID HOCKNEY.”

But street art can also become part of city policy. I am thinking of the 13th arrondissement of Paris which has become an open-air museum for this movement in the capital, as if the city is trying to assert its foothold in the twenty-first century through it.

“Yes, but there was a real initiative; it was very inspiring. Remember that was when Shepard Fairey was featured for the first time. I am actually surprised that there isn’t a real open-air street art museum in Paris yet, but, with all the museum’s tasks: conservation, mediation, etc. there would undoubtedly be a lot of red tape to obtain the authorisations, in particular, from the architects who often refuse to allow the buildings they design and build to be used to exhibit XXL street art. And yet, the trend is compelling. I think street art is really the first movement in the entire history of art that is truly universal. It is understood by 90% of humanity, from Timbuktu to Paris, from Beijing to New York. This wasn’t the case with artistic trends of recent decades, such as minimalism, even though I have nothing against this movement in particular.”

Has street art got art out of a few dead ends?

“No, because I don’t think that art lets itself get caught in dead ends. For me, this movement turns everything in our society on its head because it takes art out of spaces that were usually devoted and reserved for it, such as museums, religious buildings, castles, and the homes of the wealthy. It makes art accessible to everyone.”

What has street art changed in our perception of art in cities, which was often limited to official statues commissioned by the state or city councils to pay homage to such and such famous man or woman? And, beyond that, city walls were clean and white; there wasn’t this invasion of line and colour...

“It should be remembered that, in the past, colour was everywhere in cities. For example, cathedrals were coloured; some of them have regained their colourful appearance thanks to lighting occasionally projected on their facades. In Pompeii, the houses were painted from floor to ceiling, and the Parthenon on the Acropolis, in Athens, was a blaze of colour. It was really in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the model of a city devoid of any inscription or colour became popular. But this is a very tiny page in art history. It was also around the same time that we were sold the archetype of the cursed artist who condemned to live alone, cut his ear off, and live in a grubby room, etc. Why? Why shouldn’t artists work in groups like graffiti artists? Why shouldn’t they invade our living spaces, especially the streets? The parenthesis of the nineteenth century needs to be closed and we need to reconnect with the traditions of omnipresent and often monumental art. I am thinking of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and Veronese’s giant paintings in Venice as well as JR’s collages.”

**“THERE ARE EVEN
GRAFFITI ARTISTS IN
SAUDI ARABIA
TODAY.”**

The other claim is that of money.

“That’s always been there too. From the beginning of the movement, the market got involved and collectors started buying very early on; especially as, in the USA, making money from art is not an issue. However, it must be recognised that there exists today, and it isn’t specific to street art, a great confusion between art and the art market. These are two things that intersect a little bit, forming a tiny subset because most artists do not make a living from their art and because, most of the time, the art market does not talk about art, it only talks about this pair: art and money. For the moment urban art is not very expensive and, if we put Banksy aside, the prices are quite reasonable. One or two hundred thousand euros is very expensive but it is nothing like the market prices for a Jeff Koons or a David Hockney.”

You just mentioned Banksy, who is the absolute star of street art. As with Daft Punk, we don’t know what he looks like. Invader also followed in his footsteps, and we don’t know what he looks like either. Is there a connection between the omnipresence of graffiti in cities and the anonymity of graffiti artists?

“At first, taking the example of Invader, it was so that he couldn’t be recognised by the Police. Similarly, most graffiti artists had an *alias* to protect their real name. For Banksy, it’s for a different reason, especially as he came on the scene in the early 2000s when the guerrilla war with the Police was over. For him, and he has explained it very well, the issue is that of the relationship with the brand. What is more important when we look at a work of art, the work of art or the signature? You read “Picasso” at the bottom of the painting and you think: “That’s good.” But if “Joe Bloggs” is written at the bottom, you don’t have the same reaction. Banksy rubs our noses in our own prejudices, our own rigidness by saying: “You just wanted Banksy written at the bottom, that’s all that interested you.” And when his works aren’t signed, nobody wants them. That is what he did in the streets in New York and only two passers-by showed any interest. This is how he demonstrated the absurdity of the market, but at the same time, it has to be said, it attracted even more market attention on him.”



Banksy is therefore very political, especially when he graffitied the wall in Jerusalem with his figure throwing a bunch of flowers.

“Yes, but he isn’t the only one, there is JR, and many unknown artists. This also means that today, whenever there is a white wall, it is sprayed on, and the messages left on the wall depend greatly on the talent of their authors.”

The world’s biggest cities are in China. Does street art have a place in this country?

“I went to China in 2008 to find out for myself and add a Chinese chapter to a book I did on street art that was being republished. At first, I only found walls of building sites, authorised by the authorities, covered with graffiti with very tame lettering adorned with large pandas. I was very disappointed and wondered where the legacy of traditional Chinese calligraphy had gone. I finally stumbled across Zhang Dali, who we’ve already talked about. I discovered that he knew about street art because he married an Italian from Bologna which, in the 1980s, was the hub of urban art in Europe. Back in China, he began to spray his silhouette on demolished buildings with his alias of the time, AK47, which, in China, was pretty provocative. But at that time, he was almost the only one. It is only recently that the younger generation has taken an interest, and, as long as their message is not explicitly political, they do not encounter any problems in spraying wherever they want.”

Do you think that street art is durable or do you think that it will pass with time?

“I think that this movement is now part of the history of art. There are still artists who are influenced by cubism. I think this will be the same thing for street art: there will be graffiti artists who will continue. But beyond the artists themselves, the practice of painting on a wall in a street has existed for a very, very long time. However, as for any artistic movement, things change over time, pushing new generations to innovate. For example, some are already moving away from graffiti and going back to the optical and kinetic art of the 1960s and transforming it into mural art. Others are moving towards mapping, which is a video technique where shapes, drawings, and creations are projected on a wall.”

Today what are the most advanced trends in urban art and where are the new places for this art?

“Some, like Felipe Pantone, are working on augmented reality applied to street art. As for places, they are everywhere. I think that, with the exception of North Korea, there is not a single country in the world where graffiti artists are not painting a wall as we speak. There are even graffiti artists in Saudi Arabia today.”





OUVRAGE RÉALISÉ EN PARTENARIAT AVEC VEOLIA