

The posturban paradigm and where street art and graffiti are not (going to be)

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Abstract

Over the past decade, we faced a great outcome and success of urban creativity because cities started to adopt it for image branding within a global competition. This output is tied to the possibility of diverse aesthetic experiences in the urban space. But is this development also meant to last in the future? What can be said about the urban imaginary, planned by global investors or the military complex? The aim of this working paper is to shed light on the desired future urban space, already realized in ambitious projects around the globe. By adopting the post-contemporary critique on the discourse of the urban, it appears that the future is already present in 'ghost-cities' that do not embrace urban creativity anymore, but overtly try to avoid or even fight it.

Keywords: posturban, street art, graffiti, post-contemporary, future cities, smart city

1 The post-contemporary critique

In recent art theoretical debates the category of time is of increasing importance. After the long *spatial turn* in the humanities, we now encounter the rise of a *temporal turn* (Ross, 2012). Like the former, also the latter turn puts aside strictly physical notions, concentrating more on social, political, scientific and artistic interpretations. Within these discourses, Malik/Avenassian (2016) criticize especially the term 'contemporary' and the related aesthetic experience of the present. They state that the term 'contemporary' became a dominant paradigm in art and politics after the wall came down in 1989. They refer to the concept of *Empire* (Negri/Hardt, 2000) as an endless present in a globalized world order, beyond historical and spatial boundaries. After Malik/Avenassian contemporary art stabilized this system, in which the individual experience of the aesthetic has been extended to all areas, including the city as a space of incessant urban creativity. The merging of producer and consumer into the so-called prosumer, as can be observed especially for the production and reception of street art (Glaser, 2017), has led to a fetishism of the contemporary. The natural living space of this prosumer is exactly the smart city, which has "turned into a kind of permanent biennial." (Malik/Avenassian 2016, 25) Politically speaking, this means that the left-wing project of contemporary art does not disturb the neo-liberal mechanisms, but effectively supports them. Its goal is only to install an aesthetic experience of the present as an endless

moment, forgetting about historical or future implications or possibilities.

The attack on the conventional time construction began with the emergence of so-called speculative realism, a philosophy that has led to recent theoretical approaches such as posthumanism. The prefix post- is fundamentally different, as e.g. in postmodernity. It is an attempt to reconsider temporality as a time-complex that merges past and future in favor of the present. Postmodernism had been conceived with regard to its predecessor, the modern age; a succession as we know it from other art historical epochs such as baroque and classicism, in which one period is consciously set against its precursor. The post-contemporary complex, however, speculatively relates the future to the present, for example, when digital technology is transferred to a system that cannot be derived from the past, calling it post-digital art. Among other things, the radical nature of this thinking consists of designing projects for the future and of anticipating their utopia for our present. Some systems already work like this, such as derivatives trading on the stock exchange, pre-emptive strategies by the military complex or the police, like in the film *Minority Report*, where preliminary arrests should prevent possible crimes in the future.

2 - The posturban paradigm

The term 'posturban', as I have developed it here, transfers

this speculative and systemic approach to the discourse of urbanity. From this it follows that we already live in an urban age, in which the historic city is no longer the leading model. Instead, the global societies are living already in extended urban spaces or within the urban sprawl. Moreover, I have not taken the post-contemporary complex purely as an art theoretical approach, but rather as a method for research. I adopted it to analyze the discourses on the contemporary urban and to search for models that have already anticipated the technologies and scenarios of the future in their planning of the present. My outcomes meet perfectly with results from other disciplines as architectural theory and urban planning. There, the term 'posturban' was apparently first coined by Anthony Vidler, who describes it as a reaction to the uncanny effects of cities, like the so-called Paris-Syndrome (Shaw 2017). In this context all aspects of what the contemporary discourse on the urban tries to imply, like heterogeneity, density, ethnic or visual diversity are conceived as dangerous and annoying. The posturban space aims therefore to overcome this uneasiness with a capitalist hyperreality. The examples that I found via my analysis are perfect examples for such an urban imaginary that tries to avoid a multifaceted urban space to which unsanctioned urban creativity belongs.

2.1 The smart city Magarpatta, India

The first example is a city in India, which is the first perfect smart city. Magarpatta is located near Pune, which has become a stronghold of the IT industry. A real estate developer bought land from various farmers and communities to create a perfect resort-city that is privately organized. Many global companies have established themselves here because they appreciate the sophisticated IT expertise, and at the same time can bypass the many urban problems such as traffic congestion, pollution, crime, poverty and homelessness. Magarpatta is organized like a gated community. You can only live there if you have a job. This then allows the possession of a badge card, which you have always to carry with you. A private security service regularly checks the IDs and 24-hour video surveillance promises complete safety. Everyday life is regulated smoothly, as all activities and services are digitally controlled. However, the slum is growing at its limits, as can be seen in a documentary by Patrick Hafner.¹ Despite the symbiosis of slum and gated community, the model is considered highly successful and adopted by the Indian state, which plans 100 such cities. Some will be implemented in existing infrastructures; others will be built completely new. In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced an ambitious plan to link Bombay with New Delhi through a 1,500-kilometer industrial corridor consisting

of smart cities, such as GIFT-City (Gujarat Finance Tec-City). However, the government is not planning to buy land for these projects, but rather expropriations, which of course are highly controversial.

2.2 The neoliberal city New Ordos, China

The second example can be described as the perfect neoliberal city, since it is purely economic in nature and does not have to take account of its inhabitants, since there are none. New Ordos was born – so to speak – on the drawing board in Inner Mongolia. By the year 2000, large coal and gas deposits had been discovered nearby, which provided a phenomenal economic boost in the region. After 2004 the project was implemented as a counterpart to an older settlement and designed for 300,000 inhabitants. Most of the town was already finished in 2011. The 1.5 km long main square is lined with a library, cultural center and museum - elements of the classic European city. However, not one of these buildings are in use. According to press reports, the population is estimated at 20,000, but most of them seem to be construction or service workers.² Nevertheless, both public and private investors see the investment as a major financial success that will pay off in the future.

2.3 The new military urbanism

The third example shows how the military complex feels threatened by the expansion of global urban societies. The video by the Pentagon *The future is urban* explains the need for a complete changing of military tactics, because most future conflicts will be in urban spaces.³ There the typical urban qualities like heterogeneity, density and diversity are seen to be major challenges for military success. In order to counter these dangers, the military complex no longer exercises only in mockups, but, as soon in Germany, in "real" cities. By 2020, the practice town of Schnöggersburg north of Magdeburg is to be completed, including high-rise buildings, stadium, airport, slum, canals, artificial river and subway. The site covers approximately two by three kilometers and the total cost is estimated at 118 million EUR. "The conflicts are increasingly taking place in cities," said Colonel Becker, head of the exercise center in an interview. "The operating conditions are very complex - it goes over roofs, underground, into the sewage system. Usually the visual contact to other soldiers or vehicles is missing. During the fight, the population lives in the city. Then the soldiers must be prepared for their own protection and for the protection of the population."⁴ It is said that the plan did not follow a concrete model. However, in the so-called religious building Christian and Ottoman elements had been

integrated. Here, of course, an enemy image is indicated, which is located in a diffuse Orient; and also the video of the Pentagon shows no blond and blue-eyed people, but especially men of dark skin. A similar plant is called *Junction City* in the Mohave Desert, where the US Army exercises. To this artificial city belongs a kind of mosque too, pointing again to a sort of 'Islamic' enemy. Apart from that, these training areas are clearly useful for urban counterinsurgency strategies, whatever enemy may be at target.

3 - Conclusion

The examples show very clearly that the urban is no longer perceived as a life-style phenomenon, where creativity can be of use for city branding. Diversity and density are rather considered problematic. Segregation and control seem to be the more desired parameters for the future. While the urban is associated with unpleasant experiences, the post-urban projects offer a capitalist hyperreality. In these scenarios, urban creativity find its expression only in tamed ways. For example, graffiti and street art may appear as photographic images in restaurants. Finally, we can deduce that unsanctioned urban creativity in general continues to embody resilience, being a metaphor for the chaotic, heterogeneous and diverse urban that the posturban wishes to overcome.

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Fig. 1: Songdo in the metropolitan area of Seoul in South Korea is another famous example for a smart neoliberal city project that failed, because nobody wants to live there. Even though it is nearly empty, construction on high-rise buildings still goes on, in hope of future developments.