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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Barbara Tirone, Elena Cogato Lanza, Luca Pattaroni, Mischa Piraud (eds), *De la différence urbaine. Le quartier des Grottes / Genève*, Genève, Métis Presses, series: vuesDensemble, ISBN: 978-2-94-0406-5-00, p. 344, 2013.**

Is it possible to find a working-class neighbourhood located in the center of a city? If it is the case, how long will it be possible to find it at the same place and in the same shape? Which kind of shape does it assume? How can it transmit its potential through different periods and generations?

*De la différence urbaine* focuses on the case study of the working-class district *les Grottes*, situated at the heart of Geneva. The Grottes district has long history of conflicts which have occurred in the past forty years that have shown its resistance to external pressures brought on by the market and institutional regulation. The book deals with the current context of accelerating changes affecting the city: it has a descriptive mission, aiming at giving evidence to sensible forms of experience, considering the perception of the city through the senses as important as functional structures.

The authors, architects Cristina Bianchetti, Elena Cogato-Lanza and Barbara Tirone, sociologists Marc Breviglieri, Luca Pattaroni and Mischa Piraud and photographer Alice Dunoyer, have teamed up to carry out the task of underlining the features which produce the urban difference of the Grottes districts through their varying perspectives on the subject.

In the book's four chapters we can see the point of view changing from a historical and geographical description through the eyes of a curious and critical traveler, to the analysis of data of four years of ethnographic research, which puts us in direct contact with the inhabitants of the district. The following book review will try to eviscerate the main interesting points of the book in terms of critique. The final three paragraphs will be dedicated to an overall assessment of the originality of this work, focusing on the methodological innovations.

The expected and unexpected features of the city as they have emerged from 1850 until 2013 constitute the subject of the first chapter. Through the use of photographs and accurate schemes, the authors show how the Grottes district has, above all, disregarded the role of a central district in terms of space, social composition and its value on the real-estate market. It is, paradoxically, an example of the stable presence of marginal people and outsiders in the city center. The different scale, between the functional role of the district as part of the city center and the Grottes' spaces characterized by the lifestyle of its unusual population, helps to strengthen the Grottes identity and represents a crucial factor in its conflicting evolution.

Porosity is pointed out as one of the main features of the district: the Grottes is almost completely accessible by foot or by sight. The ambiguity of the limits and the borders between what are supposed to be private properties, mixes a public register of action with a domestic and intimate use of space.

As a product of the scale conflict, the authors illustrate some scenes of resistance such as concrete flower-pots made by the inhabitants to avoid invasive parking, the occupation of the squares and side-walks with personal objects as a form of private use of the public spaces. Assuming the stance of the curious traveller, the authors introduce ambiguous situations that will be treated later: the coexistence of the personalization of public spaces and the collective way of living that has been traditionally promoted in the district.

Keeping this perspective of a distant observer, the authors provide a historical review of the remarkable events which made the Grottes district's history from the 19th century until 2013. *Modernomachy* is the title chosen for the second chapter of the book, to enhance the opposition between the resistance of a particular collective, village-like way of life and the city's modernization plans. These projects, based on a rationalistic perspective, were aimed at creating a district which had to be functional towards the rest of the city. The demolition – following the *tabula rasa* procedure – of the Grottes was a priority for the productivist paradigm, which insisted on assigning a function to the district, to make it able to take part in wealth production.

During the 70s these kinds of projects generated a counter-reaction implying occupations and demonstrations against the *tabula rasa*. Thanks to these conflicts, the patrimonial importance of the Grottes has been recognized by its inhabitants, calling for the respect of the existing urban fabric of their district. In a period when the capitalistic model was showing its greatest weaknesses, the City of Geneva accepted to consider the Grottes' heritage value by creating an institution in charge of the negotiation with its inhabitants. Hence the Grottes became a district because of its peculiarities and differences: 75% of public property, average square-meter price lower than the 50% of the rest of the city, its iconic buildings.

The historical review ends with recent institutional efforts to solve urban conflicts through negotiations. That could potentially end the conflict between the City of Geneva and the Grottes protest movement, neutralizing its critical potential and putting the urban fabric of the district at risk. After having identified the ambiguity of the present context, characterized by the launch of a *district contract* supposed to set compromises and solve the conflicts between the institutions and the Grottes' inhabitants, the authors change their perspective to better assess the peculiarity of the case.

In the second chapter, *The composition of the common*, the focus shifts on the way memories of the urban conflicts have supported the resistance to institutional and market prerogatives. Considering the inhabitants' everyday life experiences as the trigger of the urban conflicts, helps to define the opposition between the district as a residents' heritage, including the memories of the fights and the illegal occupations, versus the recognition of the Grottes district as heritage for the institutions. Thus, another main issue of this work is introduced, since the recognition of the Grottes district as a heritage implies the assimilation of the emancipatory critique provided by the inhabitants' movement, to the general ideal of social justice which guides the institutional intervention. Once recognized as a district, the Grottes has finally been linked to an institutional function: to host social services for its population of outsiders.

The memory of the past conflicts supports the future possibility to express an emancipatory critique. It constitutes a crucial part of the Grottes' heritage and has given shape to space, determining its porosity, based on the practical everyday experience of common life. Here again the authors illustrate the contrast between the individual experience of the personalization public space and the ideal of collective life. These two types of experiences – as shown by ethnographic data – although ambiguous and diametrically hostile on a theoretical plan, coexist in the everyday life and constitute the foundation of the Grottes' heritage.

A meaningful *Epilogue* closes the work providing a sort of sense-related report of the experience of living in the Grottes' district. A series of twenty pictures portrays the everyday relation between two spaces: a platform located in the train station, which marks one of the Grottes' borders, and the tiny room from which the pictures have been taken. This work represents an extremely interesting way to give evidence of the porosity of the space: as the observer has access to a given space – the public space of a train station in this case – through her sight, this simultaneously exposes the observer's intimate space to the outside, through the window of her apartment. In this way, we can practically understand how different registers – public, intimate and domestic – coexist giving shape to a particular experience of the urban difference.

Before this evocative *Epilogue*, we can find, in the fourth chapter, three essays which try to respond and systematize the issues that have emerged in the previous descriptive chapters.

*Is the Grottes an example for a critique breach in the guaranteed city?* The theme of the *guaranteed city* introduced by Marc Breviglieri, is the subject of the first essay of this chapter. The notion of the *guaranteed city* helps to conceptualize what opposes the Grottes inhabitants' critique and lifestyle. The institutional critique of this district follows a conception of a city which aims at ensuring the quality of its properties presenting them as objectively assessable. We can easily understand the demand for such a city, considering the spread of a state of anxiety towards possible catastrophes and the need to be reassured by the accounting of every detail which could prevent these events. This guaranteed space should also represent the best place for the inhabitants to empower their capacity of auto-determination through the possibilities given by the institutional framework, e.g. the *district contract*. On the other hand the city has to be guaranteed for a market purpose, in order to achieve a good position in the cities' attractiveness ranking.

What happens when the critique meets the institutional intervention? The Grottes example reveals some issues related to a *tamed critique*. For a renovation purpose, public spaces can be assigned to a precise function, in a way characterized by standards and anonymity, preventing larger experiences of the space and a larger use-value, neutralizing the space potential. The institutional action is considered as a form of *reasoned prometheism*: the city has to be readable, no violence is accepted, all the militant convictions have to be turned into opinions, since every argument which animates a conflict has to be commensurable by institutional devices such as the district contract.

Elena Bianchetti, in her essay *Places and rights. The translation of a collective right to housing* outlines a critique of the district contract and collective rights. The conciliation between individual preferences and the possibility to share the public space represents the main conflict that the district contract has to solve. The limits of the contractualization emerge as the right to the city – the prevalence of the use-value over the exchange-value, as conceived by Henri Lefebvre – has to include the right of the inhabitant to be an outsider. Elena Bianchetti considers these collective rights as neoliberal in the sense that they belong to a tradition of turning preferences into rights. We usually think neoliberal ideology can only lead us to the privatization of the public and the submission to the market's laws. In the case of Grottes, says Bianchetti, we can observe how the deflagration of this kind of rights has paradoxically led to collective rights which include the possibility to personalize the public space.

The third essay, *The politics of difference. Critique and the opening up of possibilities in the city order* by Luca Pattaroni, provides a framework to analyze the coexistence of the urban conflicts' heritage and the institutional intervention through the district contracts. For a better comprehension of the dynamics implied in the Grottes' case, Pattaroni proposes the methodological framework provided by Jacques Ranciere, by using the concepts of police, *la politique* and *le politique*: the police is in charge of maintaining order and administrating a community. *La politique* has to be understood as an emancipatory practice based on the principle of equality. The notion of *le politique*, stands for the process by which the emancipatory act of *la politique* is repressed or systematized by the recomposition of a common world.

Given the heterogeneity of the Grottes inhabitants' social status, a regular class-fight analysis cannot be made, weakening the urban conflict's critical power. However the residents can be considered a sort of homogenous group as they share the same condition of being threatened by the urban plans which could modify their district and their lifestyle. This complex scenario has also made the transition from a critique to a meta-critique – the critique's shift from the local-related urban conflicts to a more general dimension – more difficult.

At the end of his essay Luca Pattaroni – recalling Jacques Ranciere's notions - examines the district contract: what is left after the intervention of *le politique*? The field of the possible experiences has been restricted by the reduction of the emancipatory act. However there is still space to expand this field, since the new conflicts cannot completely meet the demands of the district contract. In this case, what Laurent Thévenot defines as a *government by objectives* – that implies the sacrifice of a plural conception of the reality in the name of a given objective, the negotiation – does not prevent the past conflicts' memories from continuing to express the

potential of what has been excluded by *le politique* and keeps on nourishing the difference of the district.

Readers from disciplines such as architecture or urban planning could be especially interested in this book given the descriptive perspective of the first part that leads to a meticulous analysis of the space. The final essay presented in the fourth chapter illustrates a comparison between the Kreuzberg district in Berlin and the Grottes, illustrating the manifesto by Miroslav Šik *And now the ensemble!* presented at the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale.

Sociologists, on the other hand, could be attracted by the discovery of an analysis starting from the incommensurable difference produced by a conflict. This perspective suggests to examine the critiques delivered by the different actors without reducing the scope of the analysis to a flat dimension, but maintaining a large understanding of the case, capable of taking into account individual perceptions and experiences.

The original contribution of this book is particularly evident in the stance assumed by the authors. In terms of time, through the notion of memory, they have tried to set the analysis between the past and the projection of possible scenarios in the future. On the other side, in terms of space, a standard and stylized micro-macro scheme of interactions has been avoided thanks to the expansion of the analysis to the space of the everyday life's experience. Phenomenons such as the scale conflict have to be considered as a productive process of difference which affects the inhabitants' everyday life and the space they are living in.

The difference represents the main subject of this work and an original choice which enhances its critical aim. The use of a framework which allows us to think of a continuity between past and future as well as between the micro and macro level, does not imply the assignment of a pivotal role to the difference in a sort of meso-level, but confers to it its importance as a key to understanding the critique's transitions and their concrete effects. On the ontological plan, it is particularly interesting how difference is presented as the product of an everyday practice as well as of an untamed field of experience which overpasses the institutional forms of compromise. Thus the production of the urban difference nourished by alternative experiences, gives the Grottes time and space to persist.

(Giovanni Matera, *EHESS, Centre Georg Simmel*)