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Tony Vidler is a rarity among architectural historians in that he has created in effect his own genre of writing. His twin obsessions - psychoanalysis and cities - are fused together endlessly in a complex dialectic within his work, tied by Marxist critique. His analysis tends to oscillate between the uncanny feelings we get in interior rooms and the more delirious states we experience in exterior streets. In his remarkable book Warped Space (Vidler, 2000) those two aspects were used to investigate a miasma of psychological conditions created by the ruptures and pressures on ordinary men and women when compelled to live in the buildings and urban spaces of the new cities of industrial capitalism. Indeed, there is always something of a medical feel to Vidler’s texts, as if he were a kindly physician who is constantly worried by the effects of the hard, constructed elements of the city on its soft, fragile inhabitants. As such, Vidler interprets streets and urban squares as intellectual mental constructions which are framed in space, thereby providing a reading of urban topography that tries to map the mind and the body along with each other.

In this latest volume, consisting of a collection of fifteen essays written from the mid-1970s to the present day, these themes recur. The book emphasises very much the urban condition in its relation to architecture. Indeed, the very first sentence of the book’s preface sets out the tone, with Vidler declaring openly:

‘I have always resisted the continual attempts to separate the discussion of modern architecture from that of modern urban planning’ (p.6).

This of course was also a cri-de-coeur of the Italian Marxists of the 1960s and 70s, most notably Aldo Rossi and Manfredo Tafuri. Yet it is a necessary step to reassert it once again today given the renewed attempts by architects to escape into a disembodied meta-theory - currently with tropes like parametric design or digital manufacturing - in a seeming attempt to remove (or indeed obliterate) the only too powerful effects of urban life on architectural design.

Vidler’s book is therefore timely, and his essays sparkle with insights. He shares with Walter Benjamin a near-fixation with Paris, famously called the
'capital of the 19th century' in Benjamin's essay. The first essay up is the title one, 'The scenes of the street', but to call it an essay is to seriously fail to describe its importance. The piece clocks in at 111 pages, making it around a third of the entire book, and it is more like a novella in feel. First written in 1975-76, and published in Stanford Anderson's magnificent collection *On Streets* (1978), this essay by Vidler is a masterpiece which has stood the test of time, still being as fresh and readable today. While alluding to many other historical moments, it is essentially about how the city of Paris was transformed by Haussmannization, and what the political and cultural consequences of that massive street-clearance programme were for writers, workers, capitalists, politicians, urban rioters, etc.

If anything, it is the psychology of the masses of Paris, as described at the time by authors such as Hugo, Balzac, Baudelaire or Zola, which act for Vidler as the testimony of the speed and brutality of the urban transformations in the city. Vidler notes the impact of the urban clearances and civic aggrandisement in changing the subjective experiences of ordinary people, such that whereas the typical flaneur in Honoré de Balzac's epic collection, *La Comedie Humaine (The Human Comedy)*, had gone out in search of individuals and representatives of different classes and communities, precisely at the time when capitalism was starting to take a grip on Paris, when it came to the later denunciatory novels of Emile Zola, all of that had been stripped away to create an urban milieu based on financial accumulation and a palpable absence of human individuality. In Vidler's most memorable phrase from the essay, he writes:

'In some fourteen years, Louis Napoleon ... and Haussmann had transformed the Paris of Balzac into the Paris of Zola.' (p.108)

Another sub-theme in 'The scenes of the street' is the concomitant role of the urban institution such as the museum or prison or factory, as well as of attempts by reformers like Owen and Fourier to reshape these built concentrations of human beings into tools for social benefit. This utopian edge, which Vidler characterises as representing the 'ideal', is however continually crushed by the harsh 'reality' of the capitalist system. This emphasis on the institution as representing the battleground between forces of dominance and forces of opposition within capitalism is clearly influenced by Michel Foucault, and crops up time and time again in the rest of the essays in Vidler's new book.

This worry over the institutionalisation of social control (read coercion) as an instrument of capitalism is why Vidler's writings also frequently make reference also to what was happening over in 19th-century Britain. As someone who was born in Britain - albeit moving to the USA long ago - Vidler is extremely aware that industrialisation was essentially born in English cities. In 'The scenes of the street' there are plentiful references to Engels' writing on the anguish of working-class life in Manchester (1845), or to the social experiments of Bentham's Panopticon or Owen's New Lanark. But while these British forms of institutional architecture are seen as salient, they always play for him second fiddle to the more intellectualised and formalised examples in France.

Indeed, the single example which seems to haunt Vidler throughout is that of Claude-Nicholas Ledoux's remarkable salt factory for the Ancien Regime at Arc-et-Senans, later so brilliantly mutated by the architect, after the French Revolution, into his 'paper architecture' vision for the ideal city of Chaux. Ledoux is of course an architect that Vidler has written a seminal monograph on, but it becomes even clearer due to its frequent recurrence in this volume of essays just how important the Arc-et-Senans/Chaux project is for Vidler's reading of modern architecture and urbanism. In many ways it encapsulates all of Vidler's concerns: the development of a design that transcends dull conformity to
create a layout of true innovation, the pull between the ideal vision and its less exalted reality, the tension between efforts at social liberation and social control, and the psychological experience that people got from finding themselves working and living in a constructed machine. Ledoux’s project serves for Vidler as nothing less than a microcosm of modernity.

Other subjects covered in this new book are things for which Vidler is also well known: Le Corbusier’s complex but troubled ideas when it came to urban planning, the impact of museums on how knowledge came to be constructed under capitalism, or Guy Debord’s subversion of French schoolbook geography to help the Situationists remap the backlands of 1960s Paris. If there is a place where Vidler’s impressive intellectual array doesn’t quite work so well, it is when he tries to deal with more contemporary architecture and urbanism. The nearest we get to the present day in these essays is the demise of Mitterrand’s Grand Projects into the banality of Dominique Perrault’s National Library in Paris, but it is too easy a target.

Then again, Vidler’s approach is essentially akin to that of Klee and Benjamin’s ‘Angelus Novus’ (Benjamin, 1940), looking aghast at the urban and psychological destruction that happens in the wake of capitalist development, rather than celebrating the supple forward-looking aspirations of design proposals. That said, this is undoubtedly an important book. One really hopes that it will be influential, for its vital messages - the need always to link discussions of architecture to the city, and the need to record the psychological stresses and strains experienced by people as a result of new buildings or regeneration schemes - are as important now as they were at any time over the last four decades in which Tony Vidler sat down to write these deeply impressive essays.

References

