

BOOK REVIEW

Forma urmează situației: Orașul contemporan anticipat de situaționiști (The Form Follows the Situation: The Contemporary City Anticipated by Situationists), Silviu Medeșan, București: Ozalid, 2021, 334 pages.

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The book “The Form Follows the Situation: The Contemporary City Anticipated by Situationists”, written in Romanian, focuses on a theoretical analysis of the contemporary city and its practices, in this case Cluj-Napoca, from the standpoint of the concepts developed by the Situationist International (SI). Silviu Medeșan aims for an alternate understanding and researching the field of urbanism, by rejecting the functionalist paradigm and switching to a see-from-below point of view (hence the title which intentionally distorts the modernist motto: *Form follows function*). The book is structured around three parts which develop the theory and the concepts used (as the first part), the three case studies (as the second part) and, lastly, tries to put them in dialogue and draw some conclusions. Besides these three main parts, the book also contains a photographic documentary which serves as an illustration for both the theoretical and empirical sections.

As I have mentioned above, the first part of the book is concerned with building (or, adapting) a theoretical framework for the research by referring to the writings and the artistic products of the *Situationist International*. The author underlines in the Introduction the need for a critical approach in architecture, in its imaginary of the public space and in its usage via experiments. It is divided in 9 chapters, each following certain concepts central to the Situationist practice, such as: *Détournement*, *Dérive*, *Psychogeography* or *Unitary Urbanism*. Although the concepts are separated in different sections, they are analysed by their relation to each other and seen as an integrated network (inspired from a leaflet of the IS movement) which is named *New Theatre of Operations within Culture*.

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The first 2 chapters, focused on Permanent Play and the artistic method of *Détournement*, are aimed at changing the relationship with the present and the existing conditions. Play is seen as central to live directly and act creatively. By becoming permanent, it needs to break away with the existing working relations and assure that human actors have unlimited time for playing. The following 2 chapters, building upon the concepts of *Dérive* and *Psychogeography*, are engaging with the way the contemporary city is felt by individuals and how their behaviour is influenced by it. If *psychogeography* is concerned with a rather abstract relation between the city and the inhabitants, the *Dérive* is seen more as an individual method of exploration and understanding the city, without accounting for a *specialised* definition. The problem of the *Situationist Architecture* is not so clearly determined, mainly due to the lack of such projects and its focus on the necessity of experimenting at a 1:1 scale, but it is mentioned that the architect should stem from the practice of *Unitary Urbanism*. The next 3 chapters (*Unitary Urbanism, Experimental Behaviour, Construction of Situations*) examine the possibilities of creating new forms which are set to start from people (being involved in the action) and their relation to the city. The most important is *Unitary Urbanism* which presupposes “the usage of all arts and techniques as means in contributing to compose a unified environment” (p. 65). It can be achieved by accounting for the *Psychogeography* a space dictates and by multiplying both the *Experimental Behaviour*, which aims for occupying spaces inside the town, and the *Construction of Situations*, which should break the duality of spectator and actor.

Lastly, the author tries to reflect upon the theoretical framework that he uses by claiming that it “is not a dogma, each concept serves as a starting point” (p. 79). Moreover, he examines critically the legacy of the Situationist International, its shortcomings and how some of its practices were used in modern urbanism and architecture.

The three case studies are focused on alternative urban practices and are localised in the city of Cluj-Napoca. Their aim seems to be common: by actively involving the local citizens, these projects try to break with the classical perspective in architecture and offer a different approach in building the city from below. They are all examined through the Situationist framework which has been developed previously.

The first project is the one that the author pays more attention to, due to his active role within it. „*La Terenuri. Spațiu Comun în Mănăștur*” is the initiative of a local NGO, by which the actors try to create a common space used by its inhabitants who are supposed to act as a community. Choosing the place, namely the neighbourhood of Mănăștur, implied Situationist methods (such as *Dérive*), but was also important due to its exemplary character (as an Eastern

European Socialist neighbourhood). The author follows the project in its temporal development, from assessing similar practices which inspired *La Terenuri* to spreading the project across a big part of the Mănăştur neighbourhood and trying to revive cultural institutions and cultural practices across it. The initiative started initially with the preoccupation for the green area within the larger space and how it is used and transformed daily by its inhabitants. Here, we can see the author's preference to use different Situationists methods and concepts to understand daily processes and their own activity as facilitators. Moreover, he is interested in exhibiting a new perspective of the architect, as an active participant within a certain community, working with the inhabitants in transforming the space according to how they perceive it (the psychogeography of the neighbourhood). When working with people, the group pay a close attention to the dissolution of the dichotomy between them as project implementers and the so-called beneficiaries of their initiative. That's in accordance with what the writer described previously as the *Construction of Situations*, where the prescribed roles seem to melt, and the people act together as creators of a new urbanism. Moreover, we can see his inclination for what he describes as an *Activist Architecture*, whose goal is to implement micro-policies and create a network between them which should act as a countermovement to what he describes as the hegemony of the process of uniformization.

The other 2 projects do not occupy the same central space in the book as the first one, being rather used as comparisons. They are useful illustrations of working with the public space regarding their position in the city's geography. The first case study follows the complicated history of the *Parcul Est* project, which was supposed to be situated at the periphery of the town. Being imagined during the socialist regime as an important place for recreation, sports, and other leisure activities (like concerts or exhibitions), it never came close to happening and it is now in the focus of the real estate agents. The other case study follows several activities known under the name of *Acțiune pe Someș*, being concentrated on the river flow through the city, especially the city centre. This project aimed to change the relation between the inhabitants of the city and the river by having different small interventions within the course of the river.

The last part brings into light the perspective of the author regarding the transformative value that the process of the *Construction of Situations* has. Following Debord's claim that the spectacle has a decisive role in fragmenting the society, the author claims that *Situations* should aim for a reunification of the society. To achieve that, he argues for the need of communication between different *Situations*, so a network could be established. This network is supposed to fight against the top-down logic imposed by both the capital and the state. The immediate goal should be the creation of *Common Spaces*, which would help the communities reclaim their resources and use it according to their desire.

Furthermore, the author proceeds for an analysis of the concepts used in the first part of the book (the theoretical one) and how they relate with the field experience he had during the 3 projects examined before. Although arguing for the importance of these processes, he finds the *Situationist* utopia to be almost impossible to attain. After he describes the main hinderances, he still claims his support for the network-building process as a tool for weakening the spectacle.

The book accomplishes its main objectives. By building a theoretical framework which starts from the concepts of the *Situationist International*, the author brings forward a new and meaningful perspective in the study of contemporary urbanist practices. Moreover, his own experiences (in the case studies) seem to take a common shape when they are examined via the constructed framework. Being able to integrate them at a theoretical level, might pave the way for what he calls the need of network-building. His perspective comes as well as a critique of the Modernist Architecture (or, how he calls it, Architecture with a big A) which encompasses a new way of seeing, that from below. The author's preoccupation, in the case study of *La Terenuri*, for how the inhabitants made their own use of the land, against the bigger logic of the state (the example of community gardens) seems to point in that direction. Also, the transdisciplinary dialogue between architects and sociologists/anthropologists is another strong point of this book.

Another contribution of the book is the description of the emergence and the dynamic of the teams who carried out the three projects. The author describes both the actual workings of the team, and the effort to even out the inherent power inequalities of the members. The book is filled with empirical examples that tackles the organisational issues and the challenges in creating a vivid dialogue between different professions involved in implementing the projects. This self-reflexivity can be seen is welcomed and a valuable contribution. Moreover, the author tries to put in perspective the case studies into the wider picture of Cluj-Napoca's left-leaning activist scene, formed mainly by students and young people.

There are sections in the book that could have benefited of a more attention. When discussing the legacy of the *Situationist International* movement, the author claims that different concepts were integrated in the practice of everyday architecture, but he stops at mainly naming them. It would have been useful for the reader to see how this framework, which came with a revolutionary promise, was domesticated and incorporated in the dominant perspective once the actual projects were carried out.

In addition, the issue of scaling up is of prime concern when discussing the transformative power of the *Construction of Situations*. Can the networks of *Situations* produce a larger urban change? Bottom-up approaches are becoming

increasingly popular across the European urban landscape. Although their aim is to produce a change, there is a wider concern whether they are genuine popular democratic initiatives or symptoms of wider neoliberal rolling back of the state. There is an important body of literature (Brenner and Theodore: 2002, Leitner et al: 2007) which examines the emergence of new models of urban governance as being simultaneous with the retreat of the state's intervention. Consequently, there is a territorial reorganisation of how social problems are approached and who should be responsible for tackling them (NGO's importance is growing in this sense). Bottom-up approaches are one of these forms of urban governance, which use local interventions as a mean for addressing the structural problems that stem out of the retreat of the state. Considering this existing tension, is it possible that local agencies (such as NGO's) to be rather working within the wider logic of the system? It is a certainty that local initiatives are fighting against the consequences of the neoliberal transformations, but here the issue of scaling up appears to be more evident and the transformative power of the network of local actions needs to be questioned. Furthermore, when studying the evolution of Cluj-Napoca, we must account for the ongoing transformations of the past 10 to 15 years, as the city became a favoured destination for outsourcing and offshoring business models. This tendency, aligned with the retreat of the state, produced a peculiar development which shaped the internal structure of the city and it gained Cluj-Napoca an important status within the region. Therefore, this begs the question of how local interventions might be interlinked with the city's developmental path and, if it is the case, how does it facilitate the existence of such initiatives?

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