

Basic Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism

Raoul Vaneigem, Attila Kotányi

1961

Contents

1. NOTHINGNESS OF URBANISM AND NOTHINGNESS OF THE SPECTACLE	3
2. CITY PLANNING AS CONDITIONING AND FALSE PARTICIPATION	3
3. TRAFFIC CIRCULATION, SUPREME STAGE OF CITY PLANNING .	4
4. DISTANCIATION FROM THE URBAN SPECTACLE	4
5. AN INDIVISIBLE FREEDOM	4
6. THE LANDING	5
7. THE ILLUMINATION OF DÉTOURNEMENT	5
8. CONDITIONS OF DIALOGUE	5
9. RAW MATERIAL AND TRANSFORMATION	5
10. END OF THE PREHISTORY OF CONDITIONING	6

1. NOTHINGNESS OF URBANISM AND NOTHINGNESS OF THE SPECTACLE

Urbanism¹ doesn't exist; it is only an "ideology" in Marx's sense of the word. Architecture does really exist, like Coca-Cola: though coated with ideology, it is a real production, falsely satisfying a falsified need. Urbanism is comparable to the advertising about Coca-Cola — pure spectacular ideology. Modern capitalism, which organizes the reduction of all social life to a spectacle, is incapable of presenting any spectacle other than that of our own alienation. Its urbanistic dream is its masterpiece.

2. CITY PLANNING AS CONDITIONING AND FALSE PARTICIPATION

The development of the urban milieu is the capitalist domestication of space. It represents the choice of one particular materialization, to the exclusion of other possibilities. Like aesthetics, whose course of decomposition it is going to follow, it can be considered as a rather neglected branch of criminology. What characterizes it at the "city planning" level — as opposed to its merely architectural level — is its insistence on popular consent, on individual integration into its bureaucratic production of conditioning.

All this is imposed by means of a blackmail of utility, which hides the fact that this architecture and this conditioning are really useful only in reinforcing reification. Modern capitalism dissuades people from making any criticism of architecture with the simple argument that they need a roof over their heads, just as television is accepted on the grounds that they need information and entertainment. They are made to overlook the obvious fact that this information, this entertainment and this kind of dwelling place are not made for them, but without them and against them.

City planning must be understood as a society's field of publicity-propaganda, i.e. as the organization of participation in something in which it is impossible to participate.

¹ The French word *urbanisme* usually means "city planning," but it also refers to the general policy and ideology of urban development. For more analysis of urban "territorial domination," see Chapter 7 of *The Society of the Spectacle*.

3. TRAFFIC CIRCULATION, SUPREME STAGE OF CITY PLANNING

Traffic circulation is the organization of universal isolation. As such, it constitutes the major problem of modern cities. It is the opposite of encounter: it absorbs the energies that could otherwise be devoted to encounters or to any sort of participation. Spectacles compensate for the participation that is no longer possible. Within this spectacular society one's status is determined by one's residence and mobility (personal vehicles). You don't live somewhere in the city, you live somewhere in the hierarchy. At the summit of this hierarchy the ranks can be ascertained by the degree of mobility. Power is objectively expressed in the necessity of being present each day at more and more places (business dinners, etc.) further and further removed from each other. A VIP could be defined as someone who has appeared in three different capitals in the course of a single day.

4. DISTANCIATION FROM THE URBAN SPECTACLE

The spectacle system that is in the process of integrating the population manifests itself both as organization of cities and as permanent information network. It is a solid framework designed to reinforce the existing conditions of life. Our first task is to enable people to stop identifying with their surroundings and with model patterns of behavior. This is inseparable from making possible free mutual recognition in a few initial zones set apart for human activity. People will still be obliged for a long time to accept the era of reified cities. But the attitude with which they accept it can be changed immediately. We must encourage their skepticism toward those spacious and brightly colored kindergartens, the new dormitory cities of both East and West. Only a mass awakening will pose the question of a conscious construction of the urban environment.

5. AN INDIVISIBLE FREEDOM

The main achievement of contemporary city planning is to have made people blind to the possibility of what we call unitary urbanism, namely a living critique of this manipulation of cities and their inhabitants, a critique fueled by all the tensions of everyday life. A living critique means setting up bases for an experimental life where people can come together to create their own lives on terrains equipped to their ends. Such bases cannot be reservations for "leisure" activities separated from the society. No spatio-temporal zone is completely separable. The whole so-

ciety exerts continual pressure even on its present vacation “reservations.” Situationist bases will exert pressure in the opposite direction, acting as bridgeheads for an invasion of everyday life as a whole. Unitary urbanism is the contrary of a specialized activity; to accept a separate urbanistic domain is already to accept the whole urbanistic lie and the falsehood permeating the whole of life.

Urbanism promises happiness. It shall be judged accordingly. The coordination of artistic and scientific means of denunciation must lead to a complete denunciation of existing conditioning.

6. THE LANDING

All space is already occupied by the enemy, which has even reshaped its basic laws, its geometry, to its own purposes. Authentic urbanism will appear when the absence of this occupation is created in certain zones. What we call construction starts there. It can be clarified by the *positive void* concept developed by modern physics. Materializing freedom means beginning by appropriating a few patches of the surface of a domesticated planet.

7. THE ILLUMINATION OF DÉTOURNEMENT

The basic practice of the theory of unitary urbanism will be the transcription of the whole theoretical lie of urbanism, detoured for the purpose of de-alienation. We have to constantly defend ourselves from the poetry of the bards of conditioning — to jam their messages, to turn their rhythms inside out.

8. CONDITIONS OF DIALOGUE

Functional means practical. The only thing that is really practical is the resolution of our fundamental problem: our self-realization (our escape from the system of isolation). This and nothing else is useful and utilitarian. Everything else is nothing but by-products of the practical, mystifications of the practical.

9. RAW MATERIAL AND TRANSFORMATION

The situationist destruction of present conditioning is already at the same time the construction of situations. It is the liberation of the inexhaustible energies trapped within a petrified daily life. With the advent of unitary urbanism, present

city planning (that geology of lies) will be replaced by a technique for defending the permanently threatened conditions of freedom, and individuals – who do not yet exist as such – will begin freely constructing their own history.

10. END OF THE PREHISTORY OF CONDITIONING

We are not contending that people must return to some stage previous to the era of conditioning, but rather that they must go beyond it. We have invented the architecture and the urbanism that cannot be realized without the revolution of everyday life – without the appropriation of conditioning by everyone, its endless enrichment and fulfillment.

Library.Anarhija.Net



Raoul Vaneigem, Attila Kotányi
Basic Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism
1961

Retrieved on January 10, 2011 from www.bopsecrets.org
“Programme élémentaire du Bureau d’Urbanisme Unitaire” originally appeared in
Internationale Situationniste #6 (Paris, August 1961). This translation by Ken
Knabb is from the *Situationist International Anthology* (Revised and Expanded
Edition, 2006). No copyright.

lib.anarhija.net