

From flâneur to arpenteur

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Abstract: The nineteenth-century flâneur perceived the transformation of the city through urban wanderings. The practice of urban wandering was adopted and adapted by several cultural avant-garde movements of the twentieth century (Dadaism, surrealism, situationism). Thus, each avant-garde movement and its cultural producers observed, through haphazard urban wanderings, the transformation of the modern metropolis.

The objective of this article is to illustrate how a cultural practice, that of haphazard urban wanderings, was transformed by the Situationists International into an urban-planning technique of surveying the city and identifying its psychogeography in order to design the metropolis of the future.

Introduction

During the twentieth century, the process of urbanization swept the developed and developing world. By the middle of the century, urban planning and its different schools of thought became a major force in shaping the cities around the world. In North America, the rise of the suburbs gave way to a new lifestyle and a new expression of the American dreams, while in Europe, the challenge of rebuilding its cities after World War II offered new opportunities for architectural and urban development. During this process, many countries adopted the International style of architecture and the principles of functional and rational urban planning. At the same time, the urbanization process in the industrialized countries was accompanied by the rise of the consumer society, which, by the end of the century, had become global.

The growth of urbanization and the transformation of daily life under capitalism slowly became a major preoccupation of the cultural avant-garde movements and influenced their programs and actions. From futurism to Dadaism, from constructivism to surrealism and finally with situationism, we witnessed the ongoing development of a method of critiquing architecture, urbanism, and daily life. These critiques culminated in the

architectural and urban programs and practices of the Situationist International (S.I) movement.

To illustrate the influence of urbanism and architecture on twentieth-century cultural avant-garde movements, this article explores the practice of urban wandering, which was adopted and adapted by several cultural avant-garde movements (Dadaism, surrealism, situationism) of the twentieth century. Through haphazard urban wanderings, each avant-garde movement and its cultural producers observed the transformation of the modern metropolis. While for some movements, these wanderings were completely spontaneous, others integrated this practice in a more sophisticated and formal matter. The objective of this article is to illustrate how a cultural practice, that of haphazard urban wandering, was eventually transformed by the Situationist International into an urban-planning technique of surveying the city and identifying its psychogeography in order to design the metropolis of the future.

The City as a Space of *Dérive*

The nineteenth-century flâneur perceived the transformation of the city through urban wanderings. Much has been said and written about the notion of the flâneur (Benjamin 1976, Bernam 1982, Pichois 1993). It is suffice to say here that, for the flâneur, the city is a spectacle: a place in which experience, positive or negative, is fleeting and ephemeral. The flâneur is aware and notices the short-lived character of the form of the modern metropolis.

Suddenly inundates my memory
As I cross the New Place du Carrousel.
Old Paris is gone (no human heart
Changes half so fast as a city's face)
(Baudelaire 1982, 90)

The flâneur observes and enjoys the constant alteration of the city landscape. According to Benjamin, “la flânerie” (i.e., strolling) was born with modern capitalism, its architecture, and the phenomenon of the crowd. The arcades and cafés of the boulevards allowed the individual to observe the crowd in the square. The individual, sitting on the terrace of a café, is alone and at the same time part of the crowd. For the flâneur, the public place is an exhibition of both private life and public life. The crowd is, for the flâneur, a spectacle: it provides an occasion to study and to observe individual behavior and a multitude of hitherto private acts under the public

eye. For Baudelaire, to “enjoy the crowd is an art”, and the flâneur “enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able at will, to be himself and an other” (Baudelaire 1997, 21). Finally, Benjamin believed that “the department store was the flâneur’s final coup” (Benjamin 1976, 170). In other words, the flâneur contributed to “the formation of the new consumer of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Chorney 1990, 130). Today’s urban practice of window-shopping in malls is the modern equivalent of flânerie. The modern flâneur is the consumer who roams the shopping malls where, spread out in all their magnificence, are the consumer goods of the capitalist society. Today’s flâneur is far removed from the revolutionary dimension (as a critical observer of the city life and form) of his nineteenth century counterpart.

The tradition of flânerie was adopted and adapted by many avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. The Parisian Dadaists, for example, experimented with this urban practice. Having almost exhausted their bag of tricks in Paris - that is to say, their shocking performances were becoming “accepted” - the Dadaists began to look for other sources to renew their energy and activities. On April 14, 1920, therefore, under the influence of Breton, as well as Aragon, Arp, Eluard, Tzara, and Soupault, the Dadaists organized an excursion - the first of what was to become a regular event - to the Church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre in Paris.¹ The program was announced as follows:

The Dadaists passing through Paris, wishing to remedy the incompetence of suspect guides and cicerones, have decided to organize a series of visits to selected spots, particularly those which really have no reason for existing... It is a mistake to insist on the picturesque (Lycée Janson de Sailly), on historical interest (Mont-Blanc) and on sentimental value (the Morgue)... The game is not yet lost but we must act quickly... To participate in this first visit is to become aware of human progress in possible works of destruction and of the need to pursue our action, which you will want to encourage by every means. (Ribemont-Dessaignes 1951, 115)

The Dadaist Ribemont-Dessaignes regarded these excursions, which were characterized by improvisations such as a guided tour of the churchyard and the reading of definitions taken at random from a dictionary, as “more than anything, demoralizing”.

Breton later repeated the experience with the surrealists. In turn, Breton’s and Aragon’s novels reflect their urban experience of wandering through the city streets and they furthermore underline the surrealist’s

interest in the city (Breton 1928, Aragon 1926, Bancquart 1972). In fact, the surrealists were not indifferent to the psychological impact of the milieu on the individual: "The course of a single street - Richelieu Street for example - although one must be careful, delivers, within the interval of numbers which one could specify, alternative areas of well-being and unease" (Breton 1967, 276-277).² Breton's comments echo the future phenomenological and existential study of place in the field of geography. Hence, the influence of the milieu on people's emotions anticipates the studies of the existential zones of the city (regions of boredom versus regions of stimuli, etc.). For example, the existential perception of the urban space revealed that the closer you are to the centre of the city, the more your stress increases; likewise, the greater your distance from it, the more your sense of security grows. This phenomenon also characterizes the city center as a region of stimulus and the suburbs as a region of boredom. Their interest in the urban space lead the surrealists to experiment with different kinds of urban wanderings.

In 1923, Aragon, Morise, Vital, and Breton began a "wandering" from Blois, a rural town chosen at random. The four surrealists went to Blois by train and roamed through the area by way of Salbris, Gien, Cour-Cheverny, and Romorantin. Although the experience was intended to last ten days, it ended after three days in an atmosphere of discord (Breton 1952). Nevertheless, it was, according to Breton, "not at all a disappointing investigation, whatever the exiguity of its scope, because within the confines of the "vie éveillée" and the life of dreams, there one cannot meet more the preoccupations we had during this period" (Breton 1952, 30). In other words, the "wandering" was a mitigated success and the experiment was not repeated by the surrealists.

These excursions are significant because many of their elements eventually came to characterize the practice of future avant-garde movements. First, while Breton and Aragon had yet to truly develop the surrealist movement, they nonetheless, under the Dada umbrella, experimented with urban wanderings. Second, both the Dada and surrealist experiences were a success, though a mitigated one, and, although the objectives of the two movements differed, they introduced new elements and goals to the experience of the flâneur. The Dada excursion was all about shocking behavior and playfulness, while the goal of Breton's wandering was to bring forth the surrealist experience of the subconscious associated with automatism and the technique of the "sommeil éveillé". In short, whereas the Dada excursion introduced the aspect of playful behavior, the surrealists aimed for an "unconscious" dreamlike behavior. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that these urban wanderings transformed daily life.

Finally, these experiments by the flâneur, the Dadaists, and the surrealists highlight the emotional responses to the urban environment. The same can be said of Baudelaire's and the surrealist movement's cultural productions, whose descriptions of urban spaces and daily life are the result of an emotional experience of the milieu. Baudelaire's "urban poetry" is a critique of urban modernity by means of the flâneur, who tries to seize the short-lived character and ever-changing life of the modern city. On the other hand, surrealist's works feature a flâneur whose daily life in the city is guided by chance, coincidence, the unconscious, and desire.

From Flâneur to Arpenteur: The Situationist International

The Lettriste International (1954-1957), which eventually becomes the Situationist International (1957-1972), radically transformed the meaning and purpose of urban wanderings. From its inception, the Situationist International (S.I.) demonstrated its interest in architecture and urbanism through a critique of functional planning and an articulation of an urban utopia. During the fifties and early sixties, the S.I. focused its actions within the cultural arena and produced a plethora of cultural productions. Yet, contrary to previous avant-garde movements, the S.I. refused to be identified as a new cultural movement. In fact, this avant-garde did everything to sabotage any attempts to elevate its activities into a doctrine; they even went so far as to declare that all of its cultural productions were anti-situationist. Finally, during the sixties, the S.I. oriented their activities within the political arena. Even though situationism became very popular in France during the upheaval of May 68 and soon gained international recognition, by 1972, the S.I. had dissolved.

The S.I. was a cultural, political, and architectural avant-garde movement. The development of its interdisciplinary focus over nearly two decades illustrates the slow process of radicalization of the avant-garde movement in the political field and the relationship that always existed between architecture and urbanism (Internationale Situationniste 1997, Martos 1989, Sussman 1989, Rapaud 1972, Debord 1972).

The S.I. believed that urban space was not neutral; rather, it was and is the living space influenced by capitalism and communism. For the S.I., urbanism "is the mode of appropriation of the natural and human environment by capitalism, which, true to its logical development toward absolute domination, can (and now must) refashion the totality of space into *its own peculiar decor*" (Debord 1995, 169). In other words, the urban space of the modern city is another form of spectacle that has reduced citizens to the role of spectators in a fragmented, functional, and

homogeneous space. Urbanism is a form of domination that imposes a way of life and alienates human beings. Functional planning (i.e., urbanism) was therefore believed to be one of the principal sources of alienation that limits individual action, social interaction, and that suppresses imagination and playfulness. Hence, S.I. puts forward the concept of unitary urbanism, “the theory of the combined use of arts and techniques as means contributing to the construction of a unified milieu in dynamic relation with experiments in behavior.” (Internationale Situationniste 1958, 13-14)

For the S.I., the integration of art into daily life, as well as the overthrow of the state, bureaucracies, and capitalism, necessitated the transformation of space since “architecture is the last point of realization of all artistic endeavor because to create an architecture means to construct an ambiance and a fixed way of life” (Debord 1996, 96). This transformation required a reorganization of the city according to a simple principle: give the individual the power to determine the space and architecture around him. Hence, the city must be conceived in harmony with the psychological needs of people. One must convert men into *homo ludens* by a revolution that occurs on two grounds: daily life and urban space. The principal objective consists in establishing a passionate structure of life through the experimentation of “behaviors, forms of decoration, architecture, urbanism, and communication that provoke attractive situations” (Debord, *Potlatch*, 1996, 86). The architectural expression of this urban program or utopia is expressed in *New Babylon*, the life work of situationist architect Constant.

From 1957 to 1961, the cultural and political orientation of the S.I. was based on the “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action,” written by Guy Debord (1997). The objective of the movement during this time was the construction of situations, that is to say, “the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passionate quality” (Debord 1997, 697). Unitary urbanism is therefore considered the principal means for transforming daily life and space.

“Flâneur” - to stroll - is the act of physically slowing down one’s activities in order to observe the crowds and the transformations of the modern city. While the flâneur is a critical observer, the practice of flânerie does not result in the transgression of space (whether through its meaning or through the actual appropriation). The urban practice of the flâneur does not lead to the transformation of the city. The S.I. evaluated the experiments of the Dadaists and the surrealists and, in sharp contrast, developed the concepts of “dérive” (drift) and “psychogeography.” These concepts were incorporated into a radical critique of the city and into the

S.I. programs of unitary urbanism. *Dérive* is defined as an experimental mode of behavior associated with the urban condition of life. It is a technique of wandering through various urban ambiances. *Psychogeography* is the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals³. Accounts of *dérives*, psychogeographic analysis, and maps (Paris, Amsterdam, Venice) were published in the official bulletins of the Lettriste Internationale (*Potlatch*) and the journal of the S.I. (*Internationale situationniste*). These accounts tended to focus on the inner city's historical neighbourhoods and the centre of the city.

More than any other component of unitary urbanism, psychogeography reveals the phenomenological and existential character of the perception of space by the situationist. Hence, psychogeography echoes the humanist current of geography at the end of the sixties and during the seventies. The geographical and architectural studies of Relph (1976), Entrikin (1991), Ley (1989), and Norberg-Schultz (1980) on the sense of place concentrate mainly on the analysis of the geographical milieu and its affective and cognitive impact on people. Many of these studies offer conclusions similar to the S.I.'s critique of the rational and functional planning of the city. For example, the situationists would have easily integrated in their critique of the city Relph's notion of "placelessness" because it expresses the homogenization of place and the dissolution of the quality of place.

At the end of the fifties, the S.I. reviewed the urban experiences of previous avant-garde movements in order to adapt those practices to their own program. On one hand, having already been influenced by Huizinga's essay, *Homo Luden: Essai sur la fonction du jeu* (1951), which regards the development of any culture as the instinctual result of play and not of rationalization, they easily adopted the playful behavior of the Dadaists. On the other hand, they were critical of the elements of chance that characterized the urban wanderings of the surrealist. Contrary to the *flâneur* and the excursions of the surrealist, the situationist *dérive* was not entirely based on chance. According to Debord, the failure of the surrealist wanderings was caused by an "insufficient mistrust towards the element of chance and its use which is always reactionary" (Debord 1956, 7). The S.I. regarded the action of chance as naturally conservative because it tended "to default to the alternation of a limited number of variants and to habits" (Debord 1956, 6). Breton himself underlined this phenomenon by recognizing that, over the years, his walks in Paris always returned him to the same familiar spaces⁴. In turn, the S.I. supported this claim by quoting the research of Chombard de Lauwe on the daily movement of individuals

in the city. By representing on a map the daily routes made during one year by a student of the XVI^e arrondissement, de Lauwe's research illustrates "the smallness of the real Paris in which lives every individual... geographically an area where the radius is extremely small" (Debord 1956, 6). For the S.I., this map illustrated the strength of habit in daily routes, and the smallness of people's lives in the city aroused their indignation.⁵ The *dérive*, therefore, cannot be completely based upon chance; rather it is "indissolubly bound to the recognition of natural psychogeographic effects, and to the assertion of a playful - constructive behavior" (Debord 1956, 9). Unlike the dreamlike wanderings of the surrealists, the stroller consciously explores during the *dérive* the affective aspects (negative or positive) of space and adopts playful behaviors.

The itinerary of the *dérive* is subordinate to the psychogeographic study of the urban milieu, whose purpose was to identify "units of ambiance," which might be buildings, neighbourhoods, or streets that correspond to or evoke a negative or positive atmosphere. But, in order to determine the psychogeographic character of the urban space, it was necessary to do a *dérive*. The situationist's concept of the *dérive* therefore had a double nature: it is a way of life, characterized by a playful - constructive behavior, for the contemporary and future city, and it is also an analytical method that is used "to establish the first statements of joint psychogeographic articulations of a modern town" (Debord 1956, 9). In other words, the *dérive* is both an urban practice and a method of field research used to determine the different psychogeographic spaces of cities.

The S.I. wished to rationalize the concept of the *dérive* into a technique or a method for the study and development of the city according to the principles of unitary urbanism. In his essay, "Théorie de la *dérive*," Debord establishes precise methodological criteria for the practice of urban wanderings. These criteria apply to the two aspects of the *dérive* mentioned above. So, although a solo *dérive* is acceptable, a *dérive* made by a group of four or five participants is better. Furthermore, various means of communication (walkie-talkies) and transportation (taxis, buses) can be used during a *dérive*⁶. The spatial extent of this practice depended on the objectives of the *dérive*, specifically, whether the "*dérive* aimed to study the city [i.e. field trips] or the various affective results [playful - constructive-behavior]" (Debord 1956, 8). In other words, the area to be covered during a *dérive* is determined according to the nature of the urban wandering; hence, the extent of the area to be explored is more or less precise if one is studying the psychogeographic space of the city and completely vague if one is practicing a *dérive* associated with playful behavior. These criteria are important because their purpose is to make the experience more puzzling and exciting. One must not forget that the

dérive, as an urban way of life, is the complete opposite of the routine of the daily life under the modern metropolis. A dérive, therefore, can take place during a single day or it can be spread out in successive stages over several weeks or months. In fact, the S.I. urban utopia and Constant's *New Babylon* are cities in which the citizens would practice continual drift. On this subject, the situationist, Chtcheglov, revised his proposition of permanent continual drift within the city. For Chtcheglov, a dérive should be limited to "Sundays for some, while a week is a good average and one month is a lot" (Chtcheglov 1964, 38). Chtcheglov felt that the extreme limit of a dérive is three or four months, as he had practiced during the years 1953 to 1954. This revision of the duration of a dérive is based on the psychological impact of this urban practice. According to Chtcheglov, continual drift threatens the individual with "explosion, dissolution, dissociation and with destruction", and leads one to "fall again into what one names the common life, that is to say the petrified life" (Chtcheglov 1964, 38). It is ironic that continual drift can lead directly to what its practice was expected to abolish, that is, the alienation of daily life.

Situationists were more than flâneurs; they were arpenteurs (surveyors). Unlike the flâneur, who took pleasure in observing the crowd and the city, the goals of the situationist arpenteur were threefold. First, the appropriation of public space (from cafés to the occupation of May 68) challenged the meaning of private and public spaces under capitalism and the functional planning of the city. The practice of appropriation of place became a way of life.

Second, dérives and psychogeographic studies were completely opposed to the daily life of the modern consumer capitalist city—a way of life that is radically opposed to the social and physical organization of the rational and functional city. For the situationists, the city was a playground waiting to be appropriated and redefined every day by its citizens.

The dérive of the arpenteur was conceived within the framework of the fight against the alienation and the routine of the daily life. The dérive upsets the safety and conformity of the usual routes of the individual. Its practice destroys the small and restricted universe that one daily frequents in the city. Ultimately, the dérive offered the opportunity to live and to know the conditions of existence of the different social groups within the city. For example, situationist Patrick Straram's metagraphic novel, *Blues clair, tea for one/no more Tea* (1983), is the result of a psychogeographic study and dérive of the different affective spaces along Montreal's very cosmopolitan street: Saint-Laurent boulevard.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to demonstrate how the cultural practice of urban wanderings, actively practised by several avant-garde movements and reflected in their cultural productions, was ultimately transformed into an urban-planning technique of surveying and of identifying the psychogeography of the city in order to design the metropolis of the future. Through each successive movement, this practice was redefined and ultimately conceived as a tool of radical transformation within a new form of urbanism. In other words, the *dérive* became not only a means to study, design, and eventually plan the anti-functionalist city, but also a new way of life characterized by a constructive - playful behavior. This practice was radically opposed to the social and physical organization of the rational and functional city. Furthermore, the success and failure of urban wanderings does not alter the fact that, for the situationist, the *dérive*, psychogeography, and the appropriation of public space was a way of life that corresponded to a living critique of the modern city.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Other excursions to the Louvre, Buttes-Chaumont, Saint-Lazare, Station, Mont du Petit Cadenas, Canal de l'Ourcq were planned.
- ² In 1924, Breton praised the city street: "The street that I thought could only give to my life its surprising detours; the street with its worries and appearance was my true element: I cherish, like nowhere else the winds of the unexpected", (translation by the author). See Breton, A. "La confession dédaigneuse" in *Les pas perdus*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990.
- ³ For the definitions of *dérive*, psychogéographie and unitary urbanism see "Définitions", *Internationale Situationniste*, n° 1, June 1958, pp. 13-14. Translation by the author.
- ⁴ Breton's text "Pont-Neuf" describes the Parisian's affective spaces frequented by the surrealists, in particular the neighbourhood of Pont-Neuf. During the months of December 1953 and January 1954, the members of the Internationale lettriste organized a *dérive* in Pont-Neuf. See "Deux comptes rendus de *dérive*", *Les lèvres nues*, n° 9, November 1956, pp. 10-13.
- ⁵ Ironically, 30 years later Debord described the geographical smallness of his Paris situated "within a triangle defined by the intersection of Saint-Jacques Street and Royer-Collard; the one of Greneta Street; the one of Bac Street and Commailles Street" indicating that he "never or rarely left this zone, which is perfectly suited to me, if it weren't for some historical necessity that obligated me many times to get out of this space." Ironically, Debord's urban space is not much bigger than that of the student of the XVI^e arrondissement studied by Chombard de Lauwe. See Debord, G. *Panegyrique, tome premier*, Paris : Gallimard, 1993, p. 51.

- ⁶ The use of walkie-talkies and public transport (buses and taxis) was adaptable to the *dérive* goal either as a means of constructive playful behavior or for the psychogeographic study of the city's units of ambiance.