Horizontal Metropolis: Issues and Challenges of a New Urban Ecology Statements

Michiel Dehaene

Prelude: The Urban as an Afterthought

If we try to think the urban within a context of distributed urbanization, we need to suspend the classical associations with the traditional, dense and compact manifestations of cityness. For this reason, I would like to proceed from a rather abstract and generalized understanding of the urban. I turn to the work of Jean Remy, one of the early interpreters of the Belgian Horizontal Metropolis, in order to develop a possible working definition of the urban (Dehaene 2013).

In *Ville, phénomène économique,* the book version of his doctoral dissertation, Jean Remy tackles a particular question (Remy 1966). What is the specific economic function of the city that cannot be explained in terms of the workings of the market or the internal economy of the firm? However general this question may sound, it came from a specific place. When Remy had finished his studies in economics he joined the Center for the Study of the Sociology of Religion led by François Houtart at the Catholic University of Leuven. Houtart had been asked to study the region around Charleroi, reflecting on the process of secularization, but also on the socio-economic prospects of this declining industrial region (Leclercq 1998).

The environment he was looking at could in retrospect be catalogued as a fairly interesting piece of Horizontal Metropolis. Remy felt poorly equipped by his economic training for the task of studying that reality. He started from the observation that, in order to explain the settlement patterns of this region, one does not really need the category of the city. Charleroi qualifies first and foremost as an industrial landscape: the product of a particular form of industrialization aimed at

M. Dehaene (✉)
Professor, Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium
e-mail: Michiel.Dehaene@UGent.be

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the mining of natural resources from the subsoil. The industrial installations used to extract coal are combined with housing settlements next to the mining pits. These industrial *cités* mainly provide the necessary conditions for the reproduction of the labor component of this industrial operation.

As Remy explains in later interviews, the perspective changed when he began to study statistics concerning the amenities in the area (Remy and Paquot 2003). Charleroi counted at the time almost 100 cinemas, 17 of which were located in 2 streets. These 17 cinemas, however, represented more than half of the ticket sales. The two cinema streets defined a new reality. One that none of the individual entrepreneurs could account for, one that had nothing to do with industrial development. This group of 17 cinemas gives its visitors a range of options and makes the experience of going to the movies into an exciting evening out. Remy compares this different experience to a product with the same function but with a different finish.

In Remy's analysis, the cinemas serve as an example for an interpretation of the city as an ecology of choice. The urban ecology of the 17 cinemas in two streets gives the experience of going to the movies a different quality, different from the experience of frequenting the cinema in the mining village, where one has to settle for the movie that happens to be on show. Through Houtart, Remy was well acquainted with the work of the Chicago School. Remy would be instrumental in introducing a different reading of the Chicago School within Francophone sociological circles, no longer dismissing this intellectual tradition as a form of physical determinism. In Remy's analysis, the urban ecological perspective reads the city as a mosaic of opportunity, albeit of choice and non-choice (Remy and Voyé 1974, 1981).

What then, in the end, was his answer to the leading research question of his doctoral research? The city is the site that organizes external economies, and this not only in terms of the socialization of the collective cost of urbanization, but—as is shown in the example of the cinemas of Charleroi—also in the form of positive externalities and the surplus of use value and meaning. The urban appears in this analysis as the product of a constant trade-off between internal economic logics and the structuring of the social and cultural benefits these produce. Urbanization is first encountered as a negative externality, as congestion, pollution, conflict. The true urban moment, however, is encountered when urban communities are able to overcome this state of permanent crisis and succeed in deriving positive externalities from the process of urbanization.

Let me illustrate this with a classic example: the hygienic crisis of the nineteenth century city, i.e. London at the time of the great stink in the summer of 1858. During a hot summer in which the water levels in the Thames were particularly low, the city's slumbering hygienic crisis hit the noses of the Londoners. This time in 1858, not only the noses of those living in East London were affected but those of the entire city. Rich and Poor, West and East. This produced a new momentum, a new urgency that raised the hygienic crisis to the level of an urban problem, a collective concern for all. This would quickly lead to large scale action under the lead of Joseph Bazelgette (1819–1891), who proposed to construct collector drains

that would make it possible to discharge sewage further downstream, beyond the city limits.

What is interesting, however, is that these works did not only produce a technical solution mainly situated underground, literally seeking the internalization of all these negative externalities and alleviating the burden and stench of urbanization. These works also created a new reality above ground, a new system of public spaces. Particularly impressive is the incorporation of a collector drain in the new 'shores' of the Thames, producing public spaces that we know today as The Strand and Embankment. The new reality of sanitized London was not conceived merely as a condition free of stench, but also produced a public landscape accessible to the citizens of East and West London alike (Fig. 1).

It is the vital importance of utility systems, such as a sewage system, that led Manuel Castells in the seventies to construct his understanding of the urban question around issues of 'collective consumption' (Castells 1972). Proceeding from Marx and Althusser, Manuel Castells would squarely place the importance of the urban in handling questions of reproduction. This is particularly clear in the central role of the housing question and its role in the reproduction of labour in an industrial society. David Harvey would in the same years insist on the role of urbanism in coordinating the relationship between production and consumption,

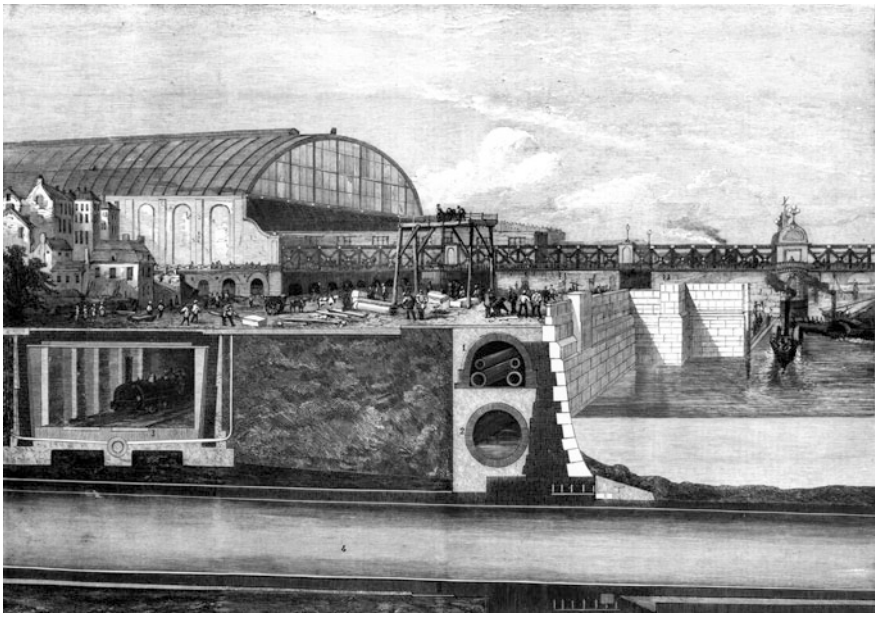

Fig. 1 Section of the Thames Embankment showing not only the subway but also the sewage collector, the Metropolitan Railway and the Pneumatic Railway [Sir Joseph Bazalgette, Illustrated London News, Vol 67/1, 1867, p. 632 © Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library]

and the role of the urban in converting reproductive labour into surplus capital (Harvey 1973, 1985).

The focus on reproduction is particularly relevant when we seek to address environmental questions in an urban context. In questioning the environmental sustainability of our cities we question the collective arrangements, infrastructures that were historically produced in order to absorb the negative externalities of an urban way of life. We realize how much the current state of collective organization represents the current ecological status quo. When we move into the Horizontal Metropolis we move into places that have been poorly equipped in terms of the collective arrangements needed in order to face urban questions (Phelps et al. 2010).

Generally speaking, in the Horizontal Metropolis the collective trade-off between the cost and benefits of urbanization has been neglected. More than elsewhere, actors have been able to externalize the social and environmental cost of their individual choices. The distributed patterns of the Horizontal Metropolis have been successful in diffusing the consequences of urbanization, avoiding questions of congestion, avoiding the need for intensive forms of collective consumption and infrastructure. Infrastructures in the Horizontal Metropolis have often been borrowed from the rural constellations historically in place (i.e. ribbon development, historical drainage structures, etc.) or have been reduced to the needed infrastructure for housing, relying on urban amenities available in existing urban centres. The strong feedback loops between negative externalities and collective investment that still propelled the nineteenth century city forward at the time of the hygienic crisis, are in the Horizontal Metropolis replaced by weak signals producing infinitely delayed urban effects.

As the Horizontal Metropolis is coming of age, however, the attention shifts increasingly from questions regarding the financing of the logics of production that made horizontal development possible in the first place, towards questions of reproduction, addressing aspects of what it takes to maintain and sustain the historically produced distributed living patterns. The current reproductive crisis of the Horizontal Metropolis fosters the debate on new urban questions around the increasingly popular issues of water, energy, waste and food. The reproductive crisis provides the solid basis to begin to build an urban agenda for the de facto urbanized landscapes of the Horizontal Metropolis.

Hence, rather than immediately calling them urban, let alone metropolitan, I am interested in asking the question what would make the distributed socio-spatial ecologies of the Horizontal Metropolis rightfully deserve the epithet urban. The Horizontal Metropolis is full of distinctive situations that stand at the threshold of an urban way of functioning and can readily be reconfigured in light of a new balance between collective investment and collective benefits.

Statement 1. Horizontal Urbanization Beyond Methodological Cityism

Planetary Urbanization?

Building on Henri Lefebvre's *Urban Revolution* (Lefebvre 1970), Neil Brenner and Christian Schmidt have argued that we need to move away from urban theory built around the object of the city, towards a perspective built around the process of urbanization (Brenner 2014). If Lefebvre's announcement of an industrial society being replaced by an urban one was still a bold speculation, today we seem to be living an age of 'planetary urbanization'. The work of Brenner and Schmidt is contested. Geographers in particular point to the fact that there are enormous differences in degree of urbanization, and that there are still large parts of the earth that remain free of any urbanization. Many of these critiques, however, seem to be missing the point. The planetary urbanization perspective is by no means trying to suggest that the urban condition has spread evenly over the entire surface of the globe. Quite to the contrary, it portrays an urban landscape of uneven development and differentiation.

More importantly, however, the position of Brenner and Schmidt should be understood as a direct critique of the urban age discourse that situates the future of the planet in cities without qualifying what is meant by the label city. For the urbanist it becomes increasingly important to build the defence of the urban not around the extraordinary and privileged centres that come to mind when we think of the city. After periods of hollowing out and suburbanization, many cities across the globe have seen a marked reinvestment in the urban core. This city-centred bias is today reinforced by an increasingly dominant discourse that seems to assume that the only ecologically sound form of urbanization is dense, intensive and compact.

Hilary Angelo and David Wachsmuth point to the ideological nature of what they define as 'methodological cityism' (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2014). In order to continue to defend the urban as an emancipatory force, in order to construct the nexus between the ecological crisis and the process of urbanization, in order to think the contemporary urban project, a new epistemology of the urban is needed: an epistemology that is not built around the old centres and their urban elites. The planetary perspective in urbanization is such a call for other points of reference, looking at urbanization in the Lefebvrian sense as a process of spatial differentiation, a call for the careful interpretation of the differences this process produces (Brenner 2013).

New Modernities Beyond the Metropolitan Bias

Within the notion of Horizontal Metropolis, the urban is qualified through a historically charged term, i.e. 'the metropolis'. The idea of marrying horizontality to

the metropolis which in its historical manifestations was anchored in the vertical core presents us with an interesting oxymoron. The term metropolis might not be the right entry, however, to open the discussion on the type of urbanity characteristic of the ubiquitous horizontal urban landscapes. If I think of Flanders as a potentially paradigmatic example, its urban landscape is diverse and may be qualified in various ways, but the social conditions we find in Flanders are anything but metropolitan.

The modern metropolis has historically served as the privileged site to study the process of modernization. It was the place where the process of modernization first became manifest in its most tangible and exacerbated form. Many of the founding fathers of urban theory were not necessarily studying the city in its own right, but share the city as the privileged site of their inquiries. Marx was studying the process of industrialization and the circulation of capital. Weber was studying the process of rationalization and the emergence of bourgeois governance. Simmel was studying the process of individualization and the replacement of traditional communities by new forms of socialization. Their laboratories of modernity, the factory, bureaucracy, the metropolitan public domain—all define dimensions of the process of modernization still centered on the city. Their theories, however, do not necessarily amount to a full blown urban theory.

The process of horizontal urbanization is no longer convergent upon a singular centre, is no longer inscribed within coinciding logics of territorialization. Late capitalist urbanization processes define, more than ever, multi-scalar, flexible geometries that produce effects that in some places, such as the global cities and centers of high finance, might still represent logics that reinforce one another, but on the whole produce new realities which are partial, incomplete and deeply contradictory. If in the early twentieth century modernization and urbanization could still be used as almost interchangeable terms, today the process of urbanization produces multiple sites, multiple reflections of a modernization process that engenders complex logics of de- and re-territorialization, cascading through different scales. Thus, the term metropolis might be too much attached to a particular modernity, for the purpose of interpreting the new modernities that co-determine the contemporary multiply territorialized process of urbanization.

The Horizontal Metropolis Never Exists in Isolation

When Francesco Indovina coined the term *città diffusa* (Indovina 1990), he was trying to define and describe a new urban form, one distinct from other urban typologies, such as the historical mercantile cities, their suburbs, the sprawling fringes of the metropolitan areas, etc. While it is important to use terms with sufficient precision, and not conflate the description of particular urban forms with others, there is something problematic about the effort to try to isolate the dispersed fraction of the process of urbanization and to study it in its own right. The process

of distributed development never took place in isolation and was shaped hand in hand with other dynamics.

In the Belgian context, the last two decades produced very good and thorough research on the longue *durée* of distributed urban settlement patterns (De Meulder et al. 1999; Grosjean 2010; De Block and Polasky 2011; Dehaene 2015). A lot of emphasis was placed on the notoriously anti-urban character of the politics of dispersal. However, by writing the history of dispersal as a separate case, as the history of a particular urban form, we run the risk of forgetting that during the same period in which these distributed settlement patterns were facilitated, a parallel project took place under the wings of the nation state. Brussels was recast as the capital of the nation. The same train network that undergirded the politics of dispersal was also centred upon Brussels. King Leopold II refashioned the capital as the home for an affluent national elite. That same elite would make sure that the process of industrialization would not produce an urban proletariat in its own backyard. The nation state shaped a particularly distributed model of urbanization, recruiting excess labor in the countryside, keeping their families in the villages and making the workers commute. In Belgium, the solutions for the reproduction of labor were from the onset situated outside of the city (Fig. 2).

Today's logics of rescaling in the context of the post-national state, affect the multiple manifestations of the historical process of urbanization alike. The current dynamics of urbanization equally touch the historical urban cores, the position of the national capital, as well as the dispersed settlement patterns produced by the historical politics of dispersal. Current urbanization dynamics produce new combinations of old and new urbanities, new territorial selections within a nation that

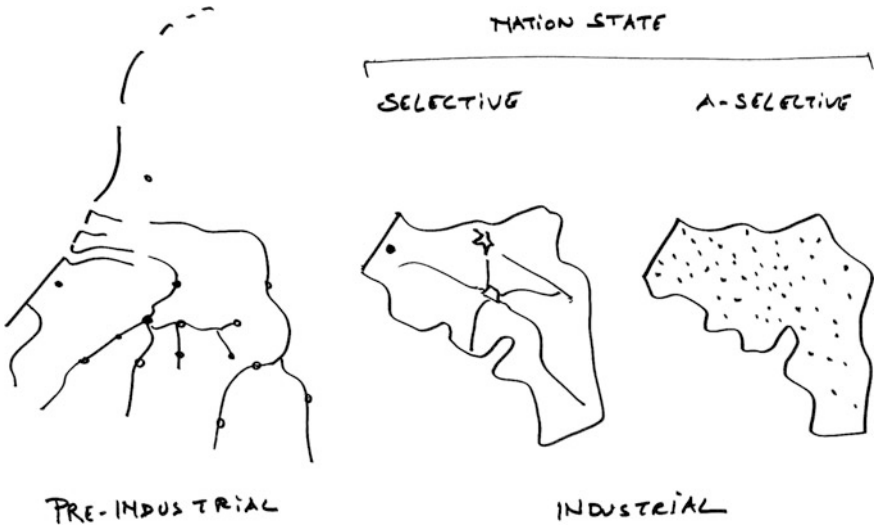

Fig. 2 Three overlapping logics of urbanization within the context of the Belgian nation state

tried to actively even-out difference. These new geometries cannot be understood if we think them as the transformation of the *città diffusa* per se. Rather, they are defined by the recombination of historically overlapping logics of urbanization.

Statement 2. Urban Questions in the Countryside

The Double Crisis of the Primitive City

The urbanization of the Veneto and large portions of Flanders, the self-built suburbs of Bucharest and other Eastern European cities, as well as other samples of the Horizontal Metropolis heavily relied upon infrastructures predominantly rural in origin. The organization of these settlement patterns is not particularly urban, the motivations behind their deliberate creation were often explicitly anti-urban.

In areas such as Flanders, where the politics of dispersal have been reaffirmed time and again, the logics of distributed development have come to define a process of accumulation in its own right. As more and more people have found a place to live within the rural urban continuum, the dispersed settlement patterns of Flanders are slowly but surely subject to a delayed process of becoming urban. Communities living in Flanders in what still may look as the countryside are—and I would say for the first time—confronted with urban questions, finding themselves in a state of relative interdependence that makes it necessary to produce collective arrangements in order to actively organize their 'vivre ensemble'. While the traditional answer to the urban question may have come in the form of dispersal, that option is no longer available nor attractive.

The urban question comes as a double crisis of a 'primitive city', a de facto urbanized landscape without a proper urbanization project. This primitive city could in its genesis simply lean on rural infrastructures that were there historically. These urbanized landscapes are in crisis first of all because of the continuing accumulation of negative externalities. The most recent subdivisions are the first to be confronted with problems of flooding. At first, the primitive city could suffice with the natural drainage structures in place. As development became more intense, these structures were converted into sewage systems. Add to this the excessive soil sealing and you can picture the trouble the primitive city is in.

But more importantly, the crisis of the primitive city is also a crisis of the rural substrate itself. The rural infrastructure that was able to carry this whole structure for a long time, is today no longer reproduced and maintained, as farmers are rapidly disappearing from this landscape. Flooding is, for example, in large parts of Flanders exacerbated by the simple fact that the ditches between the fields are no longer cleared once a year by farmers.

Collective Consumption in the Countryside

By leaning on the rural substrate we have been living on borrowed time. As a consequence of this formula, we are faced today with urban questions in the countryside for which the answers produced within the parasitic logics of dispersed urbanization no longer suffice. These urban questions crystallize around themes that are relatively new to the urbanists who have traditionally focused on questions of housing and mobility. Water, energy, nutrient and soil cycles, localized food production, to name some of the central concerns—all call for new forms of collective organization, new forms of commoning.

And here Bazelgette returns. Again, we see, first of all the very technical version of the exercise to provide answers to these urban questions. Such technical exercises typically focus on settling our losses, on absorbing the negative externalities. A good example is provided by the efforts made to convert the existing sewage systems in which rainwater and waste water are mixed into split systems that keep both flows apart. The technical version of such solutions looks at integrated street sections in which an extra water drain is placed under the street, next to the original sewage pipe. Such technical solutions, however, tend to miss the distinct opportunities offered by the Horizontal Metropolis. In the Horizontal Metropolis we have the option to rigorously handle drainage on grade, in the public domain. Such a project may start by simply reactivating the residualized infrastructures of the rural substrate: the brooks and ditches that handled the drainage problem historically.

Rigorously handling drainage in the public domain gives room to shape the face of the Horizontal Metropolis and extend a new decorum to the urban landscape. We could draw inspiration from a rich tradition of very light collective arrangements that in many instances literally organized the overlap between the rural and the proto urban use of these infrastructures. Think for example of the *lavoirs* that, often in a very precise neo-classical language, combined drinking places for the animals with water retention and public washing facilities (Fig. 3).

Statement 3. Constructing Place-Based Solidarities

The Legacy of Municipalism

The logics that produced the Horizontal Metropolis are not particularly well equipped to construct its sustainable reconversion. The project for the Horizontal Metropolis cannot be thought only through the horizontal forms of governance that deprived the current urbanizing landscape from the needed collective arrangements necessary for handling the questions of reproduction and collective consumption.

The main problem of the legacy of dispersal might not be the lack of critical mass, the lack of density, the relative inefficiency of infrastructures and services. Most of all, the policy of dispersal has literally led to the systematic depolitization

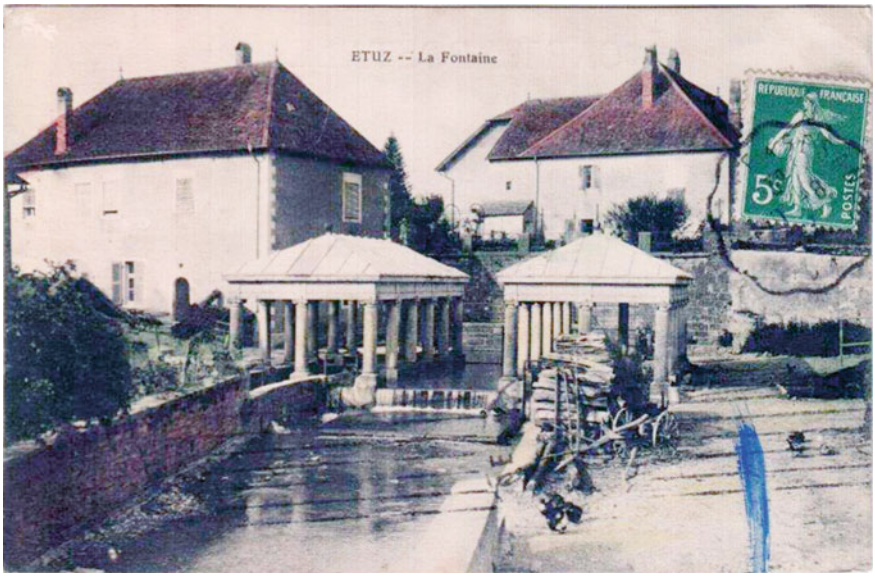

Fig. 3 The lavoir in Etuz is one of the more elaborate neo-classical examples in the Haute-Soane, France

of the urban question. Urban politics are typically articulated around place-based solidarities brokered around the problems people face simply by sharing the same place and being implicated in each other's lives. The problems caused by dispersed urbanization, however, tend to present themselves with two generations of delay and often in other places than where they are being caused. This makes it difficult to hold people accountable or mobilize around urban issues. By choosing for dispersal we have taken the momentum away for the emergence of urban movements.

The de facto urbanized landscape of the Horizontal Metropolis is in that sense not particularly ready—not to say reluctant—to take on an urban agenda. How then can we make the transition from a citizenship that has mainly been shaped inside the boundaries of the nation state to urban forms of citizenship shaped around the politics of place? How do we build a sense of urban citizenship in places that have little experience to offer when it comes to 'living together' in urban terms? (Corrijn 2012).

One very big obstacle to the development of such urban solidarities is the deeply rooted municipalism of the European Horizontal Metropolis. The particular form of local government, installed as part of divide and rule politics of the nation state, may be even considered as the first cause of the policies of dispersal. The municipalist deal is symptomatic for the non-urban character of national politics in many parts of Europe. While the nation state produced the big capital cities and the industrial metropolises, it also installed the strange assumption that urban governance is to be organized on a municipal basis. Cities are conceived of as big municipalities. Urban growth subsequently leads to the incorporation of municipalities within the urban community.

This deeply rooted municipalism reproduces until today logics that do not point in the direction of an urban agenda. '*La commune*' is first of all communitarian rather than urban. Put differently, the notion of community shaped by *la commune* starts from traditional ideas of common background, language, descent, or race, rather than the place-based solidarities and collective arrangements, the simple fact of being implicated in each other's lives that defines the urban.

The Urbanized Landscape (in Visu) as Matter of Concern

Where can we begin to build the urban citizenship of which the Horizontal Metropolis has been deprived? Already twenty years ago, Sebastien Marot spoke in this context of 'the landscape as alternative', a plausible alternative to the public spaces of the traditional metropolis around which the coordinated actions of urban authorities would typically coalesce (Marot 1995).

The urbanized landscape, understood in visu rather than in situ, is the condition in which the mutual implication of distinct life worlds first becomes visible and can be made the subject of debate, can be articulated as a joined matter of concern (Uyttenhove et al. 2015). If the sprawling landscapes of Flanders are said to be full, it is first of all because of the conflicting patterns of expectations that are being projected on one and the same visual horizon. In the absence of shared imaginaries, we see the clash of multiple landscapes, conflicting logics that destroy the mutual possibilities of realizing the expectations of multiple groups within the same landscape. Framing these conflicts in landscape terms is the right entry to trade logics of zoning, fencing and camouflage geared at avoiding conflicts, for the production of new meaning and shared worlds.

Moreover, framing the urban question in landscape terms seems the right lens to prevent a relapse into a functionalist interpretation of the ecological question. Growing ecological concerns have led to the marked return of (eco)systems thinking, industrial ecology and urban metabolism, pointing to the inefficient and wasteful character of the current state of affairs. We need to do more, however, than fixing the broken links, more than closing the metabolic loops. Making meaningful urban landscapes in which people are offered rich, fair and ecologically sound ways of leading their life, requires more than designing functional imbalance out of the equation.

Justice Beyond 'Spatial Keynesianism'

The critical contribution of the Horizontal Metropolis lies in the ways in which it helps to dismantle the ideological bias of methodological cityism. The uncritical reproduction of the language of density, *mixité* and compactness leads to the growing competition over urban premium spaces, reinforces logics of uneven

development and spatial exclusion. The Horizontal Metropolis, however, cannot be a critical concept if it simply amounts to the reversal of methodological cityism, presenting logics of even spatial distribution as the natural way to accommodate distributional justice. The historical development of the Horizontal Metropolis is deeply implicated in politics that organized the redistribution of welfare through what Brenner has labeled as 'Spatial Keynesianism': i.e. giving people a ticket to participate in the distribution of wealth by giving them access to cheap land through spatial dispersion (Brenner 2004).

In order to critically think the Horizontal Metropolis, it is necessary to disarticulate the quest for equal opportunity and spatial equality (in the sense of equally distributing opportunities). This is clear when we look at the historical deal around public transportation in Flanders. The formula was the following. The lenient land policies provided opportunities for people to live virtually everywhere. Subsequently Flanders decreed in the nineties the right of every individual to have access to public transport within 800 m of his or her front door. The rather bleak result, however, is that everybody is given the dubious privilege of access to poor public transport.

Spatial difference is what the urban is made of. Urban qualities are derived from the very fact that certain qualities can only be delivered given specific collective arrangements. The urban as a use value is the result of the different milieus, the various options an urban milieu may offer to its citizens. Everywhere the same, may seem just, but amounts to a logic in which society deprives itself from the surplus created through difference. With Soja and others, also the Horizontal Metropolis, needs a quest for 'those differences that make a difference', always including the question 'for whom?' and the hard task to keep those different spaces accessible for all involved (Soja and Hooper 1993).

The Horizontal Metropolis, a Radical Proposal?

Thinking the urban ecology of the Horizontal Metropolis should start from an active effort to suspend the imaginaries of the old metropolis. The Horizontal Metropolis helps us to dismantle the ideological bias of the urbanism of compactness. In the context of planetary urbanization, it is more urgent than ever to think urbanization beyond the polarity of center vs. periphery, compact vs. distributed, nuclear vs. decentralized. The Horizontal Metropolis may be understood as a radical proposal if we are ready to face the anti-urban ingrained in its prehistory. The seeming contradiction of horizontality and the urban defines a fertile quest for alternative urbanisms that may be played out against the current dogmas. It should be understood as a radical project of urbanizing in place, confronting the de facto urbanized landscape and reading the process of urbanization as a process of historical differentiation that needs to be understood and interpreted, each time anew, in each place in all its particularity. The alternative urbanisms of the Horizontal Metropolis should provide the people already living this urbanized landscape with imaginaries and itineraries that speak to the urban questions as these present

themselves within their concrete lifeworld. The new imaginaries of the Horizontal Metropolis could define the collective arrangements that give these people the real tools to answer the urban questions they are faced with and give meaning to new ways of living together.

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