Swedish author and scholar Michael Azar weaves together a patchwork of narratives in which people matter just as much as the places in which they live; a practice that provides the key to the long overdue task of fashioning cities in accordance with human needs and hardships.

In his vision of the ideal city the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle required that it should not only be self-sufficient and independent but also be “easily taken in at a glance”. Attempting to thwart the dangers of the invisibility of the soul and the potentially antagonistic parts of the polis he pleaded for a society where everybody knew everybody and where the flows of libido would be restrained within the confines of the citizens of the city. Aristotle thereby foreshadowed the logic of surveillance that thrives in the gradually unfolding pan-optical and bio-political regime. The crux is of course that there always seems to be a remainder, something that almost per definition slips out of the gaze and therefore hampers the dream of the totally transparent community. To date, no technology has been able provide the means for penetrating the invisible and elusive depths of the human soul. Modern life in its urban forms – characterized by “the ephemeral, the fugitive and the contingent” as the French poet Baudelaire would have it – always finds out new ways to trick the eyes, new lines of flight in order to curb the all-embracing grip of Big brother and new forms of pleasures beyond the alleged Common Good. Every city contains at least two cities: on the one hand the visible, predictable and controllable city, on the other hand the invisible, unforeseeable and indeterminable city.

Already from birth man is obliged to enter into an empire of signs, a written and spoken discourse, materialized in the rituals and life forms that frame our existence. The empire of signs is the bedrock for an inexhaustible number of narratives, recounting the stories of our ancestors and the expectations that they had of our future. In the framework of the nation-state, our appearances are already marked out in accordance with certain prototypes, revealing the correct standards of the ideal citizen. Once again there is one glitch: the inner life of human beings is invisible. Whereas the city is the arena where power, resources and pleasure are to be distributed, we are always in the grip of complicated procedures and rituals sorting out who is who and what is to be expected by whom.

The life of Man unfolds within the narratives that give his existence purpose, direction and a sense of belonging. It is by virtue of these narratives that both things and human
beings become charged with meaning. By pervading our dreams and desires they convey to us what is worthy of love and hatred. They divide the world into different categories, marking out certain forms of existence from others. Narratives are the counterparts of the infrastructure of the cities into which we are flung. When we enter a city we enter a story and our destinies are conditioned by the way this story is designed and by the way it evolves due to our own intervention in it. It might isolate us, set up firm boundaries between the other and ourselves, or it might open up spaces for interaction and active participation. Occasionally, and this is the worst-case scenario, the story is already written and there is no way to change it. The usual fallout of such a narrative is isolation, a mentality that in all its stupidity views the world as formed, once and for all, by given essences.

Nevertheless, there is, at least for the most part, a space for creativity: we participate in writing the books in which our life stories are told. No one can hide from the storytelling that is at the root of human existence: from everywhere voices call upon us to be a part of one narrative or the other, they try to seduce us by offering us interesting tasks to fulfill, by promising us pleasures unheard of. Or they refuse us any kind of admission because of our accent, our looks and our background. The church bell, the muezzin, the university discourse, the media talk, the drivel and rumors of the streets, et cetera, all urge us to adopt one identity or another, sometimes by pitting them against one another (“It is either this or that!”) but in other cases they can give rise to new forms of hybrid identifications. “Men are like rabbits, you have to catch them by the ears”, as Comte de Mirabeau pointed out during the French revolution.

Narratives are carved into the walls, plastered on the houses and ingrained in the streets of the city. Occasionally one and the same city is engulfed in divergent and polarized stories that shatter it into parts. Different streets and monuments belong to contradictory empires of signs (to use an expression from the French writer Roland Barthes). During the civil war in Algeria the choice stood between the mosque and the bistro, symbols of two different perspectives on how to organize the very substance of life. Sometimes one and the same piece of matter gets inscribed into different narratives. Let us recall how the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul has gradually been overtaken by different rulers and thereby forced to abide by varying empires of signs. The site of the building (and parts of the building itself) that once served as a Greek Orthodox basilica was converted into a Roman Catholic cathedral and then into an imperial mosque during the Ottoman Empire. Now it serves as a museum, initially secularized to the point that all kinds of worship were strictly prohibited (this ban has been modified in recent years). The power game of signs applies to everything from choosing the name of a street, to the construction of a new museum and the erection of a wall. Every city, and every part of it, is prone to be the object of competing stories and their material counterparts. For every new church in downtown Beirut and Mostar there must be a mosque.

Cities communicate with its people in different ways. Sometimes its walls and houses whisper or shout, sometimes it urges them to arm themselves or to escape from it. Beirut’s residents use graffiti, political logos and religious slogans in order to divide the city and to instil a sense of security and unity within their own communities. In an odd mixture of fear, distrustfulness and self-righteousness, they mark out their preserve and display that it belongs to a certain party, an ideology, a clan or a religion. Each district has its own graffiti plastered on its walls, defining its territorial boundaries. The objective
is to tattoo as much of the city as possible with flags and statues, posters and slogans, in order to clearly state the empire of signs its people obey.

There are many layers of meaning condensed in a single name and that is the reason as to why every new conqueror changes the names of the streets in the city. During the brief occupation of Beirut by the British, the legendary Hamra Street was suddenly renamed London Street. The list of examples is endless. When rival forces seize control of key locations they attempt to wreck all remnants of the old empire of signs (as was the case with the “Committee for Removing Symbols of the Saddam Era” in post-invasion Iraq). As long as there is no single ruler and as long as the city remains politically divided you will have a variety of names that stand in stark opposition to one another. In cities that have been riven by civil strife it is very difficult to find symbols to which all warring factions can subscribe.

In the City Park of Mostar we have an interesting example: a life-sized bronze statue of Bruce Lee. After months of intense debate the American martial artist of Chinese descent was selected as a symbol of the fight against ethnic divisions. The project of the statue was spearheaded by the youth group Mostar Urban Movement, who saw the statue as “an attempt to question symbols, old and new, by mixing up high grandeur with mass culture and kung fu”. In Bruce Lee they found somebody who at the same time was “far enough away” from the Bosnian society (so that nobody for instance would ask on what side he took part in during World War II) and close enough to be a “part of our common idea of universal justice”. In the eyes of the immortalized Lee it doesn’t matter if you are Muslim, Serb or Croat. As one of the members of the Urban Movement put it: “We hope that the good feeling he gives will encourage communication between two divided sides of the city.”

Let us consider this remarkable passage in the Book of Judges:

The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan River opposite Ephraim. Whenever an Ephraimite fugitive said, “Let me cross over”, the men of Gilead asked him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” If he said, “No”, then they said to him, “Say ‘Shibboleth!’” If he said, “Sibboleth” (and could not pronounce the word correctly), they grabbed him and executed him right there at the fords of the Jordan. On that day forty-two thousand Ephraimites fell dead. (Judges 12:5-6)

The incident presents a stunning staging of the logics at play in so-called identity conflicts. Firstly, it makes obvious that any set of signs can function as a marker of difference and partition. Your dialect, the colour of your skin, your gender, what you eat, how you dress, the music you listen to, et cetera. They serve as passwords, opening up or closing down the space within which your life may evolve. It entails a double procedure: while inscribing some people into the community others are proscribed. The logic of inclusion is correlated with the logic of exclusion; together they form the never ending process of establishing the boundaries between different communities. If the naked eye can’t disclose the soul of a certain body its hidden identity must be carved out on its surface by tattooing it with symbols, making it obvious to everybody that this particular
body belongs to a certain group. The cross around a human neck, the number engraved on the camp prisoner’s limbs, the foreskin which is cut off – human bodies are the site of identification policies that inscribe them in contending empires of signs. Wherever there is a body there is some sort of power imposing itself upon it. Marking and labelling it. Secondly, the scene reveals to us that the drawing up of boundaries may invade any kind of space – the river Jordan can be matched by an invisible line between trenches on the battlefield, a mountain range that separates two territories, a boulevard that splits a city in two parts, a workplace that is closed to men with turbans or women wearing veils, a park-bench with the inscription Whites only or a nightclub that shuts the door on dark-skinned peoples. These dividing lines do not only decide who is who, they also organize the distribution of resources and delights, of power and rights. The urban space is imbued with both invisible and visible borders that tend to enhance the citizens’ distrust of each other and constantly remind them about the materialized zones of vulnerability in the urban landscape.

The interrogative logic of “Say ‘Shibboleth’” comes in many forms and many of us can easily remember the discriminatory measures that targeted “foreign-looking” individuals throughout Sweden in the wake of Operation REVA (Rule of Law and Effective Enforcement Work). The law was issued in 2009 in order to render more efficient the deportation of undocumented immigrants. The police stepped up their efforts by questioning so called suspicious looking people in the transit systems of Malmö and Stockholm. Given that the aim of these procedures was to clearly identify the invisible mind of the Non-Swedish Other through the prism of the visible body, these identification checks promptly mirrored the practice of racial profiling. In the blink of an eye all seemingly non-Caucasian citizens were suddenly perceived as guilty until proven innocent. As one leading critic put it: “The police operations have turned the metro turnstiles into a life-threatening danger zone for the most vulnerable people in our society.”

It is not what an identity is that’s important, but what it is possible to do in and against its name. Not what a certain group really is or has been, but what is signed with its name. There is no such thing as an identity that is given once and for all – there is only the construal of identifications stirred up by the different empires of signs that surround and pervade our lives. Humans navigate in an uncertain terrain, constantly beset by birdcalls and warning cries, trying both to define and identify them: “Join us!”, “You are either with or against us”, “Stick to your own race”, et cetera. Through a certain way of life you take part in the narrative by confirming the logics of the boundaries that it proposes. At any rate, we all deliver answers to the invisible questionnaire underpinning the community: Who is who? Who will do what? By adhering to a specific empire of signs you are adding your own life to a certain narrative that is in the process of being written. However, if you refuse to partake in the hegemonic narratives of your age you may uncover their contingent and imaginary character: remember the heroic acts of Rosa Park in 1955 when she challenged the materialized infrastructure of the prevalent empire of signs by refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama. Rather than ranting about identities we would be better off if we conceived of communities as conjurations. We live our lives within the confines of more or less contingent coalitions, anchored in narratives that are set up in the historically conditioned interplay between different political forces and socioeconomic realities. This agonizing dependence compels the subject to erase the external conditions of its own
existence: “I must forget the fragile foundation upon which my life is erected and close my eyes to the fact that no identification can ever be entirely materialized nor reach and touch the totality of my existence.”

* Cities are besieged by the dead. The deceased somehow remain on the side of the living no matter how hard we try to send them off to the “other-side”. Sometimes it is through the very act of dying that some-body becomes more alive than ever before. That is why the struggle for the future always turns into a struggle about the past. Demons, ghosts, zombies – the city is a Phantompolis and our daily lives revolve around these invisible inhabitants. They haunt our homes and dreams with their demand for retribution and rehabilitation. In the aftermath of a war people find themselves embodied in Prince Hamlet: the murdered find their strength in the survivor’s feeling of guilt. The crucial logic of martyrdom resides in this grim demand from the dead to the living: “Don’t let this sacrifice be in vain!” It falls upon us to render possible their resurrection on the battlefield and the taking of revenge upon their tormentors (this is for instance a central motive in the recurrent patriotic Serbian narrative about the slain heroes at the Battle of Kosovo Field in 1398).

In the wars of the living the deceased become pieces that move about in a rather unpredictable way. In divided and polarized cities – especially those on the brink of violent clashes – people seem to be convinced that the past can be altered. “Not even the dead”, writes the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, “will be safe from the enemy if he wins”. (One obvious example would be the large-scale devastation of the Partisan Memorial Cemetery during the shelling of Mostar, originally opened by Tito in 1965 in honour of the Yugoslav Partisans who were killed during World War II). In war-torn times conflicting groups nourish narratives in which the dead and the living are brought together as transhistorical subjects that oppose each other. The power of attraction of a political ideology appears to be less dependent on its internal rationality than on the blood that has been shed in its name. In the mental infrastructure of the city the dead walk again on the legs of the living. The martyr’s square, common to so many cities around the world, is one of the most prominent ways to materialize this imaginary community of the dead. The problem resides in deciding who is to be considered a martyr and for what specific reason.

* In this way the city repeats its usual life by moving back and forth on its empty chessboard. The people constantly play the same scenes, but with different opponents, they repeat the same phrases but with different intonations, they yawn together with different mouths. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1972)

* The politics of life (bio-politics) and death (thanato-politics) go hand in hand. The power of the prevailing order is set to work through this double movement: on the one hand it deals with destruction, subjugation and mere annihilation (with regard to its enemies); on the other hand it operates through the creation, construction and mobilization of new life forces (regarding its friends). Hence, while the enemies must learn to fear death (in order to remain in the grip of power) the friends must learn how to surmount their fear (in
order to be able to sacrifice their particular lives for the preservation of the life of the nation, et cetera). In this manner death is put in the service of life, preferably of course the death of the Other. It is as stewards of life and survival, in respect to the conjurations of “race”, that so many regimes have considered the slaughtering of the enemy as vitally important. Even flagrant massacres of civilians and the laying waste of entire cities are thus proclaimed as necessary for the security of the nation.

Hence, the right to life is as conditioned as the prohibition of murder. By proclaiming a state of emergency, in the name of the security for a certain group, the door is set open for the annihilation of the Other. Even in our times of universal rights these states of exception flourish across the globe, increasing the authority of the governments by giving them a legal pretext to diminish, supersede or blatantly reject the rights of certain individuals or groups. These “outlaws” (for instance the so-called terrorists and fanatics in the war on terror) are deprived of any legal rights, inside as well as outside a given polis, and are thus merged into some kind of nameless and unclassifiable being who only understands one language – violence.

To literally eradicate one part of the social body – the Other – is of course the most extreme form of trying to get rid of it. Yet, there are other more subtle ways to come to terms with the enemy. From Ancient Greece we inherit the devastating procedure of ostracism where the declared enemy of the state is exiled from society and in modern times we have seen how the camp in its various forms (from Goli Otok to Guantanamo) has been turned into an efficient way of depriving targeted groups of their legal rights. Marginalized from and reduced to silence in the urban scape they are converted into impotent spectators of their own destinies and identities. Not entirely dead yet, but diminished into living a zombie-like existence. The modern neoliberal state tends to administer these marginalizing procedures in a totally different way: by siding with capital and being deaf to the needs of the masses it renders possible the distribution of resources and pleasure to the already affluent while spreading the sense of powerlessness and isolation to the impoverished portions of the urban fabric. In the suburbs (which etymologically speaking means under the city) of the gentrified Metropolises of Europe there is a growing fear of being reduced to powerlessness in the face of urban development. These people run the risk of ending up outside the field of vision, like invisible ghosts and zombies destined for silence and disappearance.

A staggering example from Beirut may shed some light on the mechanisms of the neoliberal state at its purest: on 16 February 1996, during the rebuilding of the old city centre by the powerful private company Solidere, its bulldozers crushed a bombed-out home in order to build new houses and hotels for the well-to-do on its ruins. The only problem was that the edifice was occupied by a family of homeless Palestinians – and they were still in the building when it was razed. With their deaths it became clear to many that the new Beirut would in fact be two: one for the privileged and one for the country’s zombies.

A similar setting appears to be making its way into some of the most abandoned parts of the major urban centres of Europe. Instead of one polis for all, it is split in two, one for the wealthy and powerful and another for the powerless. And, as in all blatantly class-based societies, this division is not merely economic and political but also linked to ethnic and racial differences. An essential part of the recurrent eruptions of riots and violence (from Clichy-sous-Bois in Paris to Husby in Stockholm) in socio-economically
marginalized areas stems from this resentment.

* The call for "public order" is a call for transparency. The invisible is to be made visible. No one shall be able to hide behind a veil, of any kind. Every single body of the community must be counted, be given a name, a number and a code. On the ontological level there is no abyss between inscribing a sign of power directly on the skin and identifying the subject through the DNA of his skin. Invisibility becomes synonymous to danger and risk. There is a constant dialectic between the level of visibility and invisibility in a society. The unknowable is then only conceived of as disorder.

When the call for order becomes more poignant every remnant of ambivalence – pertaining to the question of who is who and what is what – must be repressed. Obscurity and in-distinctiveness are banned. The discourse of security beleaguer the minds of the people. In such a city of panic everybody tends to make up imaginary worlds in order to feel safe from the turbulence outside. At the end of the day there seems to be only one emotion left in the urban space: fear. And fear is indeed a tremendous tool for scrupulous politicians as it feeds on the limitless vulnerability of humans.

It appears as though there are no boundaries for what we can allow ourselves to do in the name of our horrific fragility. To begin with nationalists of all sorts endeavour to turn the historical record into a narrative of self-justification. During the wars in former Yugoslavia the contestants had a particular interest in converting their history into fate, so that the past could serve to explain away their hatreds. The nationalists’ narratives of the past become part of the materialized infrastructure that galvanizes our memories of the wicked deeds of the Other while helping us to forget our own abominable crimes. The problem is of course that even outside observers tend to subscribe to the stories. As a result everybody started repeating the tale that the roots of the wars between Serbs and Croats laid in the fact that the Croats were Catholic, European, and Austro-Hungarian in origin, while the Serbs were essentially Orthodox, Byzantine Slav, with an added tinge of Turkish cruelty and indolence. Yet it is not how the past dictates to the present, but how the present manipulates the past that is decisive.

* The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them. George Orwell, “Notes on nationalism” (1945)

* At times the slaughtering of people has in it a larger purpose beyond the act of killing itself: killing is administered in order to instil a visceral fear in the population and to display who is the true master of their destiny. When the climate of fear pervades a city its inner divisions erupt and the urban space turns into a site for trench warfare. There have been many instances where entire cities have been placed under siege. Let us recall that it didn’t take more than a couple of snipers to destabilize the state of Ohio, USA during the summer months of 2003. Schools and institutions shut down and an all-pervasive fear spread among the people. Just as in the case of the so-called “Laser-Man” who, in the early 1990s, targeted and killed “foreign-looking” individuals in Sweden causing vast areas of the urban landscape to bear the traces of panic. In the case of the
besieged cities of Mostar and Beirut (and we must of course never forget the murderous assault on Sarajevo that lasted 1395 days) its citizens came to understand that it was only by defying the imminent threat of death that they could overcome the growing feeling of impotence and the loss of inner dignity. Somehow life must go on. There are occasions where fear itself might be shrugged off through the identification with something presumed greater than the individual; in its own right it might be the nation or the city. As one of the characters puts it in the movie Welcome to Sarajevo: “The siege is Sarajevo.” In the end only the city is real and lasting, everything else becomes more or less contingent and transient. The city itself is turned into the essential hero of the historical drama. The dialectic between fear and resistance, panic and resilience, pervades the city as though it were a living subject protecting itself from the impending urbicide of its aggressors.

*In one of his lectures Sigmund Freud recounts a story that pinpoints one of the essential mechanisms of group psychology. The blacksmith of a minor village has committed an atrocious crime that must be redeemed in order to restore harmony to the community. The problem is that the court soon realizes that there is only one blacksmith in the entire village and that he therefore is indispensable. After close scrutiny it is compelled to draw the stupendous conclusion: as the village has no less than three tailors the court selects one of the them and passes him over to the hangman.

With his Jewish background Freud was well acquainted with the logic of the scapegoat within European anti-Semitism and he constantly tried to unearth the way that this mechanism, which he called Verschiebung (i.e. displacement), operates. Instead of directly confronting the shortcomings within a group, they are covered up by channelling them onto an outer instance, this displacement enables a convenient outlet for the otherwise threatening inner aggression of a particular community. In addition, it consolidates the frail cohesion within the group. Freud remarks that “we are all but haphazard members of the herd” and concludes that it is only possible “to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness”.

* One might wonder why the scapegoat has been such an essential feature of human strife and antagonism throughout the centuries. It is fascinating that so many repressed drives can be projected onto one and the same person or group. Freud took note of the fact that the act of displacement often is contiguous to what he called Verdichtung (i.e. condensation). We know for instance that racist discourse joyfully accuses the Other of being guilty both of stealing our jobs and exploiting the social allowances. He is, at once, disgusting and capable of stealing “our” women. At the same time too different. “He refuses to assimilate, to learn our language, to be a part of our way of life” and too look-a-like. “He pretends to be like us by behaving in strict accordance to our formal manners – but we know, of course, that behind the visible mask of the body there lurks the invisible and dreadful soul”. Whatever he or she does the Other can never be anything but almost the same, but not quite. No matter how much they want to change, they will remain essentially different.

The essential function of displacement is that of diverting attention from the real antagonisms of a society, its injustices and inequalities, its poverty and lack of democracy. The presumed Other is said to be not only a threat to our biology, our lives,
by infusing disorder and diseases into the community, he also attempts to undermine the core of our social existence, our way of life, disrupting the narratives and practices by which we organize our enjoyment. It is through this image of the ominous Other that our own grandiose self-image is constructed. It is indeed an arduous task to surpass this “narcissism of minor differences” that, according to Freud, is at the core of all kinds of identity conflicts. Sometimes even the tiniest of differences, hardly noteworthy before conflict has erupted, is exalted to the point that it becomes an insurmountable obstacle for coexistence. It is in this context that the historian Michael Ignatieff: “The smaller the real difference between two peoples the larger it was bound to loom in their imagination. [E]nemies need each other to remind themselves of who they are. A Croat, thus, is someone who is not a Serb. A Serb is someone who is not a Croat.” The innumerable massacres perpetrated throughout history between different Christian sects is another daunting illustration of this Other, who indeed is almost the same, but not quite, and therefore comes to epitomize all that is evil, dirty, sick, ugly and disordered.

The history of planning and urban management could be written as the attempt to manage fear in the city: generically, fear of disorder and fear of dis/ease, but specifically fear of those bodies thought to produce that order or dis/ease - at different historical moments and places these have included women, the working-class, gays, youths, and so on.

*Leonie Sandercock, Cosmopolis II (2003)*

The vulnerability of the human species makes it very inventive. Never knowing entirely what’s going on inside the frontal lobes of the other we tend to construct our own version of it. As the dangers to our lives are manifold we must constantly be on our guard. The spreading of rumours flows from this predicament and it is one of the most injurious and dangerous mechanisms in any society. It can make the already frail fabric of our life burst at its seams. The interplay of harmful rumours and the murderous roaming of political speech are in themselves triggers for urban disintegration. If the other is said to be gunning for your life you’d better strike first. The civil wars in Lebanon and former Yugoslavia are cases in point. A rumour has the enigmatic aptitude to be considered more truthful for every time it is pronounced. The rumour can change the very mental landscape within which people conceive themselves in the context of the urban milieu. The urban environment might be constructed out of steel and concrete but ultimately people shape their lives on the basis of the idea that they have of their city. For the citizens of Beirut it must have been a dreadful experience to observe how quickly the very notion of the city as a symbol for peace and freedom (“Beirut as the Paris of the Middle East”) was disrupted and transformed into its opposite: a space where bleeding bodies were scattered all over the streets. Here is how its citizens were portrayed in the guide, *Album des guides blues*, published just before the war broke out in 1975:

“Welcoming, open, tolerant, these words that usually seem abstract in the extreme, permeate the Lebanese even in their most modest gestures and daily life.” Not long after the same people were characterized as barbarians, fanatics and terrorists. Through rumours, blatant lies about the Other merge into self-fulfilling prophecies. In virtue of our inclination, to fear, unfounded suspicions lay the groundwork for new pugnacious empires of signs that permeate and divide the city. An old Arabic proverb remarks that
the sword brings to a close what the tongue once started. Truly the words of the reckless can pierce like swords.

Overnight Beirut seemed
to have been transformed
from something beautiful and friendly, bordered by the sea, the sky and the trees,
to a magnet that attracted even the needles that lay hiding in crevices and corners. Hanan al-Shayk, *Beirut Blues* (1992)

How can we curb the fear of the Other and the narratives that turn the Other into an exception and a scapegoat that lawfully can be annihilated? How are we to overcome this mentality of isolation where everything and everybody is measured and estimated through the prism of difference and division? By what means can we restrain the spreading of fear and its sinister companion, the forming of spiteful rumours, from haunting the urban space? Are there ways to mend the tattered confidence between different communities within one and the same polis?

It seems to me that there are two chief ways of situating oneself in the world. The first one takes the autonomous and transparent subject as its point of departure. Introspection is the order of the day: first we know how we are, and after that we may continue our search for knowledge and truth by discovering things outside us. Step by step we move on, gradually from the centre (ourselves) to the periphery, until we reach the most far flung regions of the world. This applies also to History: we are what we are and we have forever been the same (the transhistorical subject somehow lives through time as though time didn’t change the subject itself). At the beginning was the home and everything else is measured through the norms and standards of that which is already familiar. Life becomes more risky and complicated as we take on new things. In order to preserve the security of our community we need to shut off, and even annihilate, parts of the unknown world. As former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once said: “Absolute security for one part means absolute insecurity for all others.”

By contrast, the other way introduces a radically different perspective: instead of starting out with some kind of absolute identity (the I, the We, the Here and the Now) everything is considered to be entangled in the intertwining of ages and places. If we wish to understand a certain element, it might be a human being or a political event, we can only grasp it in its historical and geographical context. In such a framing everything must be analysed through the prism of, more or less, everything else: you can never understand yourself solely by introspection, you have to reflect yourself through others, through the political and economic realities of your surrounding and through the history that has preceded you and shaped the very language and culture in which you are embedded.

Any genealogy of the self will hence reveal that you are not an essence but a relation and that this relation is mediated through the particular empire of signs in which you are formed. Here you don’t start off by separating yourself and your home from the rest of the world and then gradually expanding to understand what is outside it. Instead you understand that everything is connected in more or less boundless ways. There is no such
thing as an isolated island of self cut off from the fluctuations of history and the vicissitudes of global political economy.

Hence, we must replace the notion of the local with the notion of the glocal, stressing the fact that the local is always already penetrated by the global, and supplant the idea that security can be achieved by separating ourselves from the other with the insight that it is only by assuring justice and dignity to everybody that there might be security for anybody. That our destinies are inextricably linked together – and that there are no walls or identity checkpoints that can help us escape this predicament, is more obvious than ever in the era of globalization and urbanization. Think about it, almost eighty per cent of the world’s population will soon live in urbanized areas and the majority of them will be wired to the global state of affairs in one way or the other. This applies furthermore to the dead on the so-called “other-side”. There will never be a barrier between the present and the past that can prevent history from seeping into the present. Let us for instance recollect the still unfolding ramifications of what (allegedly) happened to a poor carpenter almost two thousand years ago. Or the uncontrollable and still ongoing reverberations of a single bullet shot from a tiny corner of our globe on 28 June in the year 1914.

* It is urgent that this shift of perspective from the local to the glocal resonates in urban planning and the way we organize our lives in the polis. First of all, we better move beyond the classic paradigm according to which every city, or country, must have one centre where the values of civilization are to be unified and condensed. This ranges from the spiritual level (the churches, the mosques, et cetera) and the economic level (the banks, the markets, the Exchange, the stores) to the levels of power, language and culture (the offices, the cafés, the theatres, et cetera). The idea of a centralized city brings about a narrative that tells us that the city centre is tantamount to truth, pleasure and meaning – thereby undercutting the poetic and creative potential of all other parts of the cities and fostering a culture where there is only one narrative (or perhaps a pocketful of them) instead of countless versions of what it is like to be, to live and to explore life in an urbanized world. If the opposition between centre and periphery widens and becomes linked with “racial” segregation, it will open the doors for a power struggle regarding exactly how the centre is to be formed and of which empire of signs, which coat of arms, it shall be bear the stamp.

On the contrary, decentralization may promote what Charles Jencks coined as a heteropolis, where the architecture of the urban landscape responds to the pluralism of the glocal by creative and inclusive eclecticism. For far too long the crucial question has been neglected: how can the art of building and shaping cities reflect the essential political features and challenges of the modern era? To begin with we must supplant the traditional idea of integration (“How are we to integrate the stranger into the nation?”) with the much broader task of fashioning the city in accordance with the needs and hardships that afflict humanity in its entirety. How can the dormant energies in all the narrow minded local communities all over the world be transformed into glocal fields of forces to jointly combat poverty, injustice and the threat of global environmental disaster? Beyond the urge for control and unification the heteropolis conveys an image of the city where everybody can actively partake in constructing it, by relating to it in ever-new ways and increasing the number of readings of the city – rendering possible a patchwork of narratives where we are people that matter, living in places that matter.
As narratives speak to us, and about us, within the urban spaces to which we belong, we must facilitate and foster our sense of participation in these stories. No city should be allowed to speak with only one voice. As the world is facing increasing urbanization the heteropolis is bound to become a major urban form of the future. Instead of one single narrative these cities encourage a hotchpotch of narratives and galvanize a seemingly endless coupling of different empire of signs. Thereby inventing new visions able to bring together twisted elements that were not supposed to mix. The heteropolis of Jencks finds an interesting correspondence in the heterotopia of Michel Foucault: a place that is “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several places and several stories that are in themselves incompatible”. He exemplifies this with the theater: onto one and the same stage it brings forth a whole series of places and narratives, one after the other, however foreign to each other they might be. The city converts into a polyglot and an ever-changing stage.

There are certainly many hurdles to be jumped before we get there. There is no ground for any kind of unbridled enthusiasm just yet. Let us for instance recall the imaginary status that Beirut occupied in the Arab world before the civil war. In many ways Beirut was indeed a form of heteropolis as it was founded upon the remarkable encounter between all sorts of religions and ethnicities. And of course upon the bringing together of two categories of fugitives: Arabs fleeing repression in the neighbouring countries and rural Lebanese fleeing from the closure of their confessional and tribal origins. Beirut was a space for freedom and individuality and for a long time considered as the Expatriate Capital of the Arab world, being immensely generous and hospitable to a whole generation of exiles. The problem was that Beirut was not able to assume the consequences of the very modernity it had engendered and to embrace the abundance of the unsettling and often revolutionary narratives that had entered the city. As the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury succinctly puts it: by receiving all these rebellious Arab intellectuals “it was in the throes of laying the groundwork for an explosive mixture that threatened the whole region’s established order”. Lebanon failed to understand “that receiving requires starting over on new foundations and that once started upon that road, there could be no going back, but only carrying through to the end”. Accordingly the dream of revolution was swiftly turned into the nightmare of the civil war.

* Let us return to Mostar and Bruce Lee. There is indeed one other symbol that delineates a common ground for its citizens: the Old Bridge (Stari Most). It is already in itself a kind of heterotopia. In that single space there is the piecing together of all sorts of peoples and narratives. During its long history it has not only interconnected the two banks of the river Neretva (which in recent times has served as the materialized infrastructure that separates the different ethnic communities of the city) but it has also opened up a space where this polarized infrastructure is distorted. Suleiman the Magnificent commissioned the bridge in 1557 and according to some sources the name of the city itself means “bridge-keeper” (Mostari was the name given to the keepers of the guard towers on the two sides of the bridge). Consequently, when the city’s aggressors consciously destroyed the bridge on 9 November 1993, not only did they attack the bridge itself but also the very idea of Mostar. If the bombing of the bridge is illustrative of what might happen when fear of the Other (together with imperial dreams) come to dominate humanity, then the ancient and beautiful Stari Most, finally rebuilt in July 2004, symbolizes the opposite. Becoming both a glade where light and life trickle through and a handshake that stretches towards the unknown in both space and time.
Of all the things man builds, nothing in my eyes is better and more valuable than bridges. Bridges are more import than the houses, brighter than the temples, because they are intended for a greater number of people; they are everybody’s property and equal to all, useful, always erected in a meaningful way, at the point where the highest number of human needs cross.

Ivo Andric, *The Bridge on the Drina* (1945)

*In the beginning there was not the city, but the resistant shard; not the organic community, but more or less the cumbersome fragments. There has never been an original Whole into which all parts could once again harmoniously fit, but only antagonistic pieces that different forces try to exploit and put together in conflicting ways. Consequently there is no point in expecting or even compelling the citizens of a city to love each other (“Heterophiliate or die!” as Jencks puts it). The crucial point is to find ways in which we can find meaning, value and even joy in coexistence, given that our destinies are intertwined in one way or the other – with or against our will. No matter how hard we try, there is no way to escape each other. Neither islands or walls can protect us from the insistent presence of the putative Other. Instead, we need to build (down to the last letter) on the fact that only mental confinement awaits us if we try to pull down the bridges over the troubled waters that surrounds us. We know that there is a continuous dialectic between the material infrastructure and the mental infrastructure of a city. Institutions and imaginations, edifices and narratives, structures and dreams, interact and feed upon each other. The urban landscape is in itself capable of both fortifying and erasing social inequalities and racial segregation. Accordingly, the best way to strengthen the links between people is to promote justice, equality and the opportunity of genuine participation in the construction of the urban scenery. The occupy movement that spread throughout the world in the wake of the Arab spring taught us that any struggle for democracy requires a twofold strategy: not only do we need to have a say about the actual designing and organizing of the urban milieu, we also need to influence the very idea of the city in which we are supposed to live. “Architecture or revolution!” as the Swiss architect Le Corbusier put it.

A first step in such a direction would be to foster a vibrant and democratic urban culture that would also serve as a barrier to the growth of fear-ridden and vilifying rumours, lurking particularly in the parts of the city that are either abandoned (from impoverished suburbs to downright urban slums) or particularly privileged (from gentrified neighbourhoods to gated communities). If the petty and often simple-minded passions of ethnicity and race, with all its narcissism and propensity for scapegoating, are allowed to suck up all space in the public debate, the singularity of our most beautiful passions and the most interesting prospects for the glocal urban fabric run the risk of dropping out. Few things are more vital to a viable city than an incessant critical outlook on its own political life, on its dreams and aspirations, its shortcomings and its assets. As we are all, from birth, too fragile for the world that we are thrown into, there are only a limited number of ways to make us feel somewhat safe in the city. It begins with the more or less convulsive identification with a certain group (the sense of protection that comes with the haphazard belonging to a we) and proceeds to the politics of isolation that may, or may not, follow out of this identification (the building of walls and procurement of arms to keep the Other at bay). Yet there is still the possibility of a creative culture, fertile enough to lead us out of the mentality of isolation by encouraging us to enrich our palette
of emotions and thoughts so that our lives won’t be reduced to the pure dimension of fear and its ensuing companions: stupidity and paranoia.

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