

OBSERVATIONS ON URBAN AESTHETICS
London, Paris and New York

Wim Denslagen

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*'On oublie trop que New York a été ce que sont, ce que furent
Londres ou Paris'*
*(One forgets too much that New York was also what London or
Paris once were)*

Paul Morand, New York, 1929, 315.

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THE CITY AS A WORK OF ART

Jane Jacobs

‘A city cannot be a work of art’, Jane Jacobs tells us in her famous book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). Jane Jacobs, born and raised in New York, was a champion of the struggle against the urban renewal of her time, symbolized by skyscrapers and highways. She fought for decent and safe neighborhoods, but never for urban beautification. Another New York citizen, Lewis Mumford, the author of *The Culture of Cities* (1938), reviewed Jacobs’s book and, of course, read the statement cited above. He was very surprised because he could not believe that this well-educated author seemed so insensitive to the artistic aspects of cities and accused her in *The New Yorker* (1 December 1962) of ‘aesthetic philistinism with a vengeance’.

Mumford thought that Jacobs had overlooked an essential aspect of urban planning, but I think Jacobs didn’t overlook anything. She meant what she wrote: for her and many of her colleagues it is utterly irrelevant what a city looks like. A city is something to use as you would use a kitchen or a farm. In this respect, Jacobs’s opinion belongs to the Modern Movement where the function of buildings and cities is essential and their outward appearance of minor importance.

Jacobs’s opinion may seem outrageous at first, but after she said this, we might want to learn more about what her reasoning was for coming to this conclusion. She must have been aware that in the eyes of many people, cities can be admired solely for their urban beauty. She must have been aware that some cityscapes have been immortalized by renowned artists. For instance, she must have seen – like so many have – Johannes Vermeer’s painting of Delft (1660). Here Vermeer revealed Delft’s particular beauty, a beauty nobody had captured before. This painting of Delft defined the way we see its cityscape: it

became part of our collective memory. Did Jacobs ignore artistic representations of cities? Probably not, but these representations seemed to have little meaning in her work. She also wrote about other aspects of cities. She opposed the destruction of old neighborhoods and the urban renewal plans that mirrored modernistic ideals, like those, for instance, of Robert Moses, her most important opponent. Modernist urban planners believed that cities should be redesigned to accommodate the flow of traffic and to separate its various functions, such as housing and industry. Jacobs vigorously opposed these ideals and she never worked up the slightest bit of admiration for the modern highway or highrise. Perhaps her battles with people like Moses prevented her from admiring the parkways of Robert Moses. Anyway, for her and her supporters, *beauty* remained a thing of minor importance in urbanism. That is perhaps why in her book she never mentioned Sigfried Giedion, who described Moses's parkways as works of art, as 'creations born out of the spirit of this age', the beauty of which is only to be grasped as one moves, 'by going along in a steady flow, as the rules of traffic prescribe. The space-time feeling of our period can seldom be felt so keenly as when driving'¹

Historic Cities

Moses destroyed the old neighborhoods that Jacobs cherished. Both rejected the idea that a city could be a work of art. They were not unlike many other professionals in the field of architecture. This raises the question of whether there is a connection between the negation of cityscapes as works of art and ignoring their beauty. Before trying to come up with an answer to this question, it may be instructive to reread some

¹ Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 1941, 823.

laments about the loss of historic cityscapes in the past, such as *Lost London* (1971) and *Paris Perdu* (1991). The authors of these two books, among others are very distressed about what these cities have lost to the point where their work sounds more like mere complaining that shows no hope for the future. The aim of these types of studies is to make the reader aware of the fact that beautiful things have often been destroyed without any justifiable reason.

These authors do not want to be consoled by what these perhaps historically beautiful things were replaced with. They prefer to wallow in sorrow and regret, which I think can be an honourable and noble task. We should read all of these laments to lost city pasts. But after we read these laments, we must ask ourselves where this nonchalant neglect of historic cityscapes came from.

If *beauty* is of secondary – or no - importance, as numerous influential urbanists believe, how do they approach the study of historic cities? Do these experts truly believe that the beauty of these old cities is also just a secondary consideration, compared to, for example, the liveliness of a city's culture or the quality of its living conditions?

They may very well believe this and may sometimes even end up placing the beauty of an old city after the beauty of its newer developments. That seems pretty strange considering that one would expect that historic cities are admired and appreciated precisely *because* of their historic value. How do some experts end up rejecting the idea that historic cities should, to some extent, be protected from new architectural interventions?

If ever there was a beautiful city, it is Paris. One would expect that authorities responsible for its preservations, in this case the Ministry of Culture, would be constantly engaged in protecting its cityscape. However, this is not always the case. The Ministry seems to have no objection to the obscuring of

historic façades behind new ones, as long as the new façades are themselves considered important works of art that contribute to the aesthetics of the cityscape. This notion is essential: the intervention must be a new artistic contribution of the highest quality. So, the metallic screen that has covered the offices of the Ministry of Culture in Paris (rue des Bons Enfants) since 2005, based on a design by Francis Soler, must indeed be an excellent piece of art then. However, it disguises the stone façades designed by G. Vaudoyer in 1919 which were at least in harmony with their surroundings. The work of Soler subverts the harmony.

The old façades have basically been made invisible by Soler's artwork. He explained his intervention with the following words: 'Add, transform, move the materials, their uses, remain, in a way, faithful to the normal evolution of our cultural heritage and the pluralist goals of the Ministry of Culture.'²

What did he mean by all this? Did he want us to believe that the transforming of existing architecture belongs to a cultural tradition, at least one defined by the French ministry? Soler's explanation implies that the cultural heritage also includes today's culture and it is therefore necessary not only to preserve but also accept modern interventions.

Soler's explanation seems puzzling. He claims that transformations are not necessarily contrary to preservation. This is difficult to understand, but strangely, his statement acknowledges France's policies regarding its cultural heritage. Readers who don't fully trust me are invited to read Sebastian Loew's *Modern Architecture in Historic Cities* (1998).³

The urban harmony created by the stone façades in this part of Paris has been changed radically by Soler's work. Perhaps the

2 'Ajouter, transformer, déplacer les matières, les usages, c'était, en quelque sorte, rester fidèle à une évolution patrimoniale normale et à la vocation pluraliste du Ministère de la Culture', *Archithese* 2 of 2005.

3 Sebastian Loew, *Modern Architecture in Historic Cities*, 1998, 14 and 181.

renovations could have been carried out with fewer contrasts, but the Ministry probably is of the opinion that historic preservation is an old-fashioned concept.

In 2010, I went to Antwerp together with some colleagues, all of whom are experienced architectural historians. We also took a look at the new MAS museum, designed by Dutch architect Willem Jan Neutelings. It is a huge, red, 60-meter-high tower, composed of four layers of building materials separated by strips of glass. The building's outline is simple, and consists of a large container with four levels of irregularly shaped casings. The red stone, exterior walls enhance its imposing presence in the middle of an old harbour.

When I first saw it I was startled by its obtrusive presence in these surroundings, because the much-taller museum tower dwarfs the warehouses on the three sides of the harbour. It seems to consume the entire harbour, thus spoiling the view of the open water dotted with its many floating ships. My colleagues, however, disagreed and truly admired the new building and believed it enhanced the power of the place.

After its official opening in 2011, one Dutch architectural critic referred to it as a masterpiece.⁴ His opinion was of the building itself and not about its relationship to the surrounding space. He apparently failed to notice that the space surrounding the tower had actually been reduced. Antwerp's new tower belongs to the kind of architecture that is currently being praised by the architectural elite, with the connoisseurs declaring the tower a work of art. They probably think that the harbour was just an old area without any intrinsic artistic or art historical qualities. So, in their eyes, the new tower inevitably enhances the quality of its environment. The supposed artistic quality of the intervention justifies the transformation, as was the case of Soler's intervention in Paris.

⁴ NRC *Handelsblad* 19 May 2011.

What are the origins for this type of strategy regarding historic cities? Is there any connection between this strategy and modernist ideas regarding the arts as the expression *par excellence* of a living culture? Many modernists consider it absurd to try to mummify the past because a static culture is a dead culture. Some of these artistic ideas emerged from the Modernist movement and are rooted in Romantic theories on art.⁵

The Power of Place

There are numerous cities that are described as exceptionally beautiful in the authoritative textbooks on urbanism. However, a high rating in these types of textbooks does not guarantee the preservation of the character of these cities, not even when they are officially protected by laws. Thus it seems that even famous cityscapes are not safe from modern interventions, especially when these interventions are said to enhance the artistic significance of a particular place. I venture to point out the fact that destroying admirable historical architecture to make room for questionable new structures, has been a daily routine since time immemorial.

This probably comes as no surprise to many of you. It is in fact nothing more than a description of a certain state of affairs in urbanism. This norm is certainly unacceptable to those who believe that famous and beautiful places, as described in our textbooks, should be exempt from modern artistic interventions (albeit, they may be very welcome in other places, under other circumstances, one might add). In other words, historic cities are admired precisely because of their architectural beauty and thus the preservation of those cityscapes seems obvious, at least to some.

⁵ Wim Denslagen, *Romantic Modernism*, 2009.

However, this notion is not at all self-evident to many prominent architectural experts. One of them, Edward Soja, professor of urban and regional planning at the University of California in Los Angeles, for instance, during an international academic conference on the monumental heritage of Amsterdam, stated that architectural restorations should not be the aim of Amsterdam's city government. He believes that it is far more important to preserve 'its dynamic and constantly evolving and adaptable, real and imagined, lived spaces, what one might call the *power of place* in shaping human life'.

Soja does not like 'overzealous and inflexible efforts at *historic preservation*', because these may distort our understanding of the past. He condemns the kinds of restorations that are nothing more than 'simple projections from the past to the present'. He believes that the reproduction of historic façades is a superficial activity and creates a fairy-tale world. He dislikes illusions and prefers to be confronted with the real world, the world as it is. This sounds very thoughtful, but what he does in the process is ignore the fact that the beauty of Amsterdam is partly the result of architects and government showing a particular concern for architectural preservation over the past century. Soja's views seem to have been developed more on the basis of modernist practices than on any historic research.

Another expert in this field is the Dutch historian and author Geert Mak who was born in Schiedam and saw how his hometown was restored during the second half of the twentieth century. He has written that the Schiedam of today is clean and everything has been nicely restored, but, as he emphasises, the old city was quite different: there is 'no hint of the darkness, stench, decadence and decay that used to prevail'. What has been restored is 'not the past but an illusion thereof, a nostalgic Utopia of bygone days'. Mak rejects these types of restorations because they produce Potemkin cities and historic façades 'that

do not reflect the history that was’.

But what if Schiedam’s architecture had not been restored; what would have been the result? The city would probably have been modernised, resulting in the ultimate disappearance of the old cityscape. Would Mak have preferred this kind of result? Probably not, but Mak never asked himself this question. The inhabitants of Schiedam, however, might have thought quite differently about this issue. Surely the government officials who found the financial resources to make the preservation possible held very different views from those of Mak. Thanks to these subsidies, the cityscape has been preserved more or less in a state that Mak saw in his youth.

Everybody knows that reconstructions are to some extent illusions of the past. But nearly everybody prefers the creation of these kinds of illusions to simply erasing the past. The inhabitants of Schiedam may be living in an illusion, but what is wrong with that? In other words, should the entire strategy of restoring a historic cityscape simply be rejected, leaving cities totally unprotected from future interventions?

We can’t be sure how Mak would respond, but we do know that his views were endorsed by the sociologist Abram de Swaan, who analysed this issue in the same volume. De Swaan concluded that a restored city simply looks old, even though it has been recently produced, making it very difficult to distinguish the authentic from the reconstructed. This further fetishises authenticity and the preservation of fetishes should not be the aim of those responsible for maintaining historic cities. He believes that it is far more important to allow history to evolve. Preservation, De Swaan concludes, is not sufficient because a city needs to maintain its vitality by introducing ‘additions and transformations’.⁶

6 Léon Deben, *Cultural Heritage*, 2004, 20, 31 and 41.

Additions and transformations are, as scholars teach us, necessary ingredients for the preservation of historic cities. In other words, conservation *tout court* should be rejected. But what if the place is exceptionally beautiful? Yes, they seem to insist, even then, because if this place were only of minor importance, nobody would object to modern architectural changes.

What does all this mean? It means that scholars believe that the promotion of additions and transformations does not conflict with the preservation of a historic cityscape. This is, however, not what we have come to expect. We *expect* beautiful historic cities to be protected so that future generations can admire what we are able to admire now. One may not be able to stop a changing world, but one can at least try to conserve the appearance of beautiful cities to the liking of its inhabitants. This is what one would expect, but it is clearly wrong to have this kind of expectations.

Historiography

Various modern studies on urbanism are coloured by a certain condescension toward the notion of preserving historic cities. M. Christine Boyer, author of *The City of Collective Memory* (1994) and very much influenced by Walter Benjamin, denounced ‘museum cities such as Venice or Florence, or historic districts such as Le Marais in Paris or London’s Westminster areas’ because they ‘present the spectator with tragic stage sets revealing an antiquarian’s taste for the dead past’. Boyer believes these preserved areas have been deprived of their ‘transitions of time’ and of the ‘heterogeneity of chance events.’⁷ Boyer’s attitude is clearly rooted in modernist thought and related to the ideas of scholars like Edward Soja. They

7 M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, 1994, 192.

probably still believe that architecture should be truthful in the tradition of John Ruskin, but modern theories on heritage have taught us that all restorations are, to a certain extent, illusions and that there is no need to avoid them.

It is, however, not the modern expert we are interested in here, but the experts of the past. What were the opinions of earlier generations of urbanists? In her new book on nineteenth-century, Dutch architectural textbooks, Petra Brouwer surprised many readers with her discovery that urbanism was not part of the architecture curriculum in the nineteenth century: ‘urbanism as an exercise in design did not form part of the textbooks on architecture in the Netherlands.’⁸

Furthermore, this means that the historiography of urbanism was rarely acknowledged as an academic subject. The situation in the Netherlands was probably not exceptional because influences from abroad were most readily incorporated into Dutch culture. Urbanism as an academic subject emerged in the course of the twentieth century, but mainly in the form of research into the spacial and temporal development of cities.

In this sense, some architectural historians have defined urbanism as: ‘The study of the history of cities means the study of the growth and appearance of cities, including the study of the history of the inhabitants and their political, governmental, economic and social activities, as far as these have been of significant influence on the plan and cityscape.’⁹

The modern approach implies the explanation of how cities came into being and what advanced or obstructed their development. The historian also tries to understand the cityscape in terms of its formal aspects: Why certain streets are curved (as well as the actual age of streets) or why a certain marketplace was situated in a particular part of a city. Modern

⁸ Petra Brouwer, *De wetten van de bouwkunst*, 2011, 51.

⁹ Ed Taverne and Irmin Visser, *Stedebouw*, 1993, 9.

research has tended to concentrate on the analysis of the growth of the built environment and not on the appreciation of the cityscape of the past. Why this is so remains to be elucidated. Modern historians may possess a keen eye for a cityscape's aesthetics, while overlooking the question of how people in the past appreciated their cityscapes. How do we know whether people in the past appreciated their cityscapes in the same way as we do now? In fact, the details we appreciate today, may have been rejected in the past.

In his *Histoire de l'Urbanisme. Renaissance et Temps modernes* (1941), Pierre Lavedan described the urban history of London, by using only a few textbooks. Apparently he wasn't interested in the views of John Ralph (1734), John Gwynn (1766) or James Stuart (1771), for instance, who, among many others, wrote extensively on the cityscape of London. Lavedan was interested in the history of great cities, not in the history that historians may have written in the past.

The modern urbanist approach may to some extent explain why the appreciation of cities as works of art has remained underdeveloped in the world of architectural history. This, plus Petra Brouwers's conclusion, may offer us some indication of where we might find an answer to the questions of why famous cityscapes are seldom protected and why they can be so easily defaced. The historiography of urbanism was not part of an architect's education in the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century. We can safely say that the Modernist Movement pretty much completely rejected the past.

Donald J. Olsen

I have not overlooked Donald J. Olsen's famous book, *The City as a Work of Art* (1986). However, his study is anything but a history of the appreciation of cities. Instead, it reveals more of Olsen's personal appreciation of the city. When he writes about London's Regent Street, which was designed by John Nash in the 1810s, Olsen notes that 'to the late Georgian eye' Regent Street 'came as an aesthetic revelation'.

There is no reason to doubt this statement, but Olsen offers no references, so we have no idea how John Nash's contemporaries thought of the then-new neoclassical architecture.¹⁰

Olsen was probably not that interested in the opinions of nineteenth-century authors. For instance, when he quotes John Tallis's *London Street Views* (1838), he uses a quote from Hermione Hobhouse's *A History of Regent Street* (1975).

Olsen's study, interesting as it may be as an introduction to the nineteenth-century transformations of London, Paris and Vienna, fails to analyse any contemporary sources, which could provide us with some greater understanding of how people appreciated their cities. Olsen mainly offers us his point of view, now and then underscored by an appropriate quotation. It is difficult to understand why Olsen thinks that by giving his personal observations, he has done enough to inform the reader on the art and architecture of the past. Does he really believe that the variety of opinions from other periods of time are not worth mentioning? I do not know for certain, but Olsen does offer us some clues.

In his caption for a photograph of the *Produktenbörse* (Taborstrasse 10) in Vienna, Olsen notes that the Neo-Baroque decorations on the building's façade were so exuberant that he

¹⁰ Donald J. Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art*, 1986, 18.

could understand why the Sezession style caught on in Vienna, because of the fact that the style's creators were terribly annoyed by all this extravagance. How did Olsen know who was annoyed by what at the time? Obviously it was Olsen himself who was annoyed by this Neo-Baroque style of architecture. Why was he so annoyed? Because he had learned to judge art by the standards of modernism and, according to modernist ideals, frivolous, decorative details are despicable. His tastes were probably moulded by the artistic traditions of modernism. But it is not reasonable to judge Neo-Baroque architecture by the standards of modernist culture. One should judge it using contemporary criteria, not those from another period, at least that is what I learned as a freshman.

Olsen distinguishes between the architecture of the Ringstrasse and that of Vienna's suburbs: 'Architectural forms, which in the hands of serious designers in the sixties had intellectual content, by the eighties became frivolous disguises, intended to flatter the social ambitions of modest suburban flat dwellers.'¹¹ Olsen was undoubtedly irritated by the light-hearted and humorous sculptures that decorated these façades, such as the two Atlantes with their strangely arched backs who appear to have trouble sustaining the projected structure on the façade of Schottenring 21.

How anxious must one be to frown upon architectural frivolity? And how credible it is to propose that the Ringstrasse architects were actually more serious than the Schottenring architects? Olsen, in the preface of his book, explained how he believed in Jacob Burckhardt's notion that art is a reflection of society. The study of any society's art, according to Olsen, reveals 'the essential nature of their civilization'. Cities are the 'legible documents' of a society and Olsen thought that he could understand these documents directly, without consulting

11 Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art*, 1986, 272 and 280.

contemporary documentation. Modern historians have a very different approach to teaching. For instance, they propose that cultures do not have an essential nature. They believe that we should abstain from directly projecting our own tastes onto the world of the past.

Place Vendôme

Pierre Lavedan's studies are impressive in scope and depth. As a distinguished urbanist, he was not always interested in the opinions of authors from earlier periods. For instance, what he wrote about the column at Place Vendôme in Paris in his *Histoire de l'Urbanisme. Époque Contemporaine* (1952). The square was built in 1697 based on François Mansart's designs and completed in 1699 with the erection of the equestrian statue of king Louis XIV in the square's centre. This statue was removed in 1792 and replaced in 1806 by the column, although it is not the same column. Lavedan believes that this column is far too tall for this square, which had originally been designed for the equestrian statue: 'Its height of 43 meters are not to scale for buildings designed to enhance an equestrian statue that was broader than it was tall'.¹²

He further observes that an architect prior to 1792 would never have made such a mistake: 'An architect during the Ancien Régime would not have made such a mistake'.¹³

Pierre Lavedan produces no references for this statement, which, of course, doesn't necessarily mean that his observation is not true. Although it may be true, he presumes that the profession of architecture changed dramatically after the Revolution.

12 'Ses 43 mètres ne sont pas à l'échelle de bâtiments conçus pour encadrer une statue équestre plus large que haute.'

13 'Un architecte de l'Ancien Régime n'eût point commis pareille faute', Pierre Lavedan, *Histoire de l'Urbanisme*, 1952, 23.