

BUSINESS/CULTURE

MARTIN KORNBERGER

We are swiftly moving at present from an era when business was our culture into an era when culture will be our business.¹

MARSHALL MCLUHAN

Whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration as well, whether it is his intention or not.²

ADORNO

URBAN/ISLAND

As Rem Koolhaas notes in his essay *Junkspace*,³ there is a new wave of oxymorons that transgress any old-fashioned concerns for incompatibility between concepts. The recently united oppositions include life/style, reality/TV, museum/store, food/court, waiting/lounge etc; the concept of urban/island might be one of the latest additions to this list of unlikely alliances. In fact, one might argue that urban islands are rather strange entities. Let me explain.

In his highly entertaining trilogy entitled *Spheres*⁴ the German philosopher Sloterdijk reconstructs history as an ongoing yet incessantly failing effort to create an 'inside' in which humans can survive. In this perspective culture is the creation of stories about places that are exclusively ours. From the biblical Arc Noah to

the omnipresent air conditioning, culture is an effort to create a more liveable, less hostile inside that protects us from a hostile outside. Globalisation is but the latest move in this game of creating an inside that no longer faces an exterior.

Given this ontological and epistemological condition, islands have always exercised a magical yet ambiguous power over our collective imagination. Think of Kant's description of our faculty of reason as an island in the stormy ocean of darkness and chaos.⁵ Think of Robinson Crusoe and his spiritual enlightenment that could only take place with maximum distance from the urban chaos⁶. Remember what Percy Bysshe Shelley said about London: "Hell is much like London, a populous and smoky city."⁷ In this and other stories, islands are utopias in which mankind is able to travel back to its destiny and unveils its reason d'être. Simultaneously such islands are a critique of those chaotic, all- including and transforming engine rooms called cities. In fact, cities become dangerous oceans themselves, as Balzac writes in *Pere Goriot* about Paris:

Paris is indeed an ocean. Sound it: you will never touch bottom. Survey it, report on it! However scrupulous your surveys and reports, however numerous and persistent the explorers of this sea may be, there will always remain virgin places, undiscovered caverns, flowers, pearls, monsters – there will always be something extraordinary, missed by the literary diver.⁸

In *The 100 Mile City*, Sudjic arrives a century later at the same conclusion:

The city is a complex organism, never entirely comfortable, always a place with its dark corners and suffering. But it is precisely that edge of danger and instability that makes the city such an extraordinarily powerful force. ... it is in its role as an engine for change that the city is most alive.⁹

The fact that cities are about intensity, about interference and about change makes them both a powerful force and a dangerous organism. Not surprisingly, the inhabitants of such 'virgin places,' 'undiscovered caverns,' 'flowers,' 'pearls,' and 'monsters' will find themselves transformed as well. Simmel speculated that the psychological basis of the metropolitan individuality consists in the

“...intensification of nervous stimulation,”¹⁰ turning the city dweller into a neurotic homo metropolis. The good news is that, beside other things, cultural production might be a function of this intensification of nervous stimulation. In their *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels are in praise of the bourgeoisie society and its cities that “rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life.”¹¹ However, their optimism and praise for the bourgeoisie society’s city policies was not always shared. For a long time in history it was not evident that cities would be a sustainable sphere for human habitation. As Louis Wirth put it, up until the 20th century cities had higher death rates than birth rates and were dependant on migration from the country.¹² Only relatively recently have cities become net producers, not net consumers of people. For Wirth, a city “is like poetry: it compresses all life, all races and breeds, into a small island and adds music and the accompaniment of internal engines.”¹²

Cities have turned into islands themselves; but rather than offering a portal to a pre-societal, utopian order they are rhizomatic zones of maximum intensification. Hence, urban islands constitute a paradox: islands defy the intensity that distinguishes the urban. And almost by definition cities extinguish the solitude and the purity of an island. Cities are heterotopias; islands are utopias.

PRODUCTION/CONSUMPTION

Luhmann’s systems theory tells us that a paradox is nothing other than a subtle hint that our trusted ways of connecting things and making sense of them might not work any more.¹³ The point we want to make is simple: urban islands must appear paradoxical if we conceptualise them as urban + island. Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari we could argue that both concepts change when brought in proximity to each other.¹⁴ It’s a story of becoming in which one part frees up particles of the other and changes them. Think of Kafka’s transformations where humans become animals, but at the same time animals become human, creating something new, monstrous and unheard of.¹⁵ An urban island that moves beyond the admittedly boring paradox of utopia vs. heterotopia will have to do exactly this: create a new intensity, a new zone, an in-between in which elements of both collide in order to transform each other.

Cities are places of deterritorialization and exchange; intersections of streams of people, money and ideas; monsters that have turned from net consumer to net producer. As per definition, an island is what is not connected and where exchange is made impossible. We speculate that an urban island is a space in which both logics are intensified, cumulating in a simple yet compelling formula: production = consumption. What do we mean by that? The traditional division of labour between production and consumption is breaking down. People that were meant to passively consume suddenly turn into producers that author and edit their own realities. Linux makes you a programmer; ebay.com transforms you into an entrepreneurial selling-buying agent, etc. Behind these examples there is a new and powerful driving force: people become involved in the creation of value. This might well be the most important news for a while since it questions the established capitalistic idea that institutions produce and people consume.

In an intensified urban island scenario this tendency might be pushed even further. Our new economy mainly produces cultural goods, i.e. meaning, symbols and discourse. The point is that these 'products' only exist and in fact are created during the act of consuming. In fact, the act of consuming gives these cultural products meaning. Think of the value of a film, a book or a piece of design: it is only the act of consuming, reading, feeling, seeing, touching, interpreting it, that brings it alive and makes it valuable. Simultaneously, consumers create their identity through the very act of consuming. Historically, identities were defined through what people do and what they produce: you are a blacksmith, working class or a creative person. Today, identity is defined through what one consumes: I consume therefore I am. Our society is glued together by the individual choices one makes that constitute one as consumer and therefore member of our society.¹⁶ One's social status is defined through the levels of consumption one can maintain. In this context, consumption becomes inextricably intertwined with production; we are what we consume; and while we consume we engage in production.

This challenges the traditional view that cultural production has to happen outside the sphere of administration and business. Rather, we'd argue that cultural production and consumption become key economic drivers. As we have said with Adorno, "whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration as well, whether

it is his intention or not.”¹⁷ Culture and administration, business and creativity, production and consumption might collapse into each other. As Adorno suggests, the commercial character of culture causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear. Of course, ‘commercial’ means that everything is a currency that can be exchanged and consumed. When production = consumption everything becomes commercial. This also means that culture and business are no longer opposites. Le Corbusier was simply wrong when he complained: “Business! What a dilemma! If you try to please people, you become corrupt and sell yourself; if you do what you feel you must do, you cause displeasure and create a void around yourself.”¹⁸ We would rather argue with Adorno that cultural production never happened outside of business or administration. Business is the very means by which a message is multiplied and a powerful effect can be created. In the context of an urban island, this would mean integrating business with cultural production as much as possible. This might be pushed to the point where the difference between both starts to blur and business becomes a form of expressing symbols and meanings. One could say that this is already happening: think of branding as a new universal system of signs that refer to each other, can be read by most people and that denotes nothing but itself. In this perspective, an urban island is an experiment; it’s not a location but an event, an experience where intensity and connectivity are increased to a maximum.

Three final remarks follow. The collapse of business and culture might create a new and exciting aesthetic language. Umberto Eco suggested that there are two conflicting aesthetics – an aesthetic of provocation and one of consumption.¹⁹ We are not sure on which side this new experiment would occur. It might well be that it produces an aesthetic that is similar to the beauty of endless rows of suburban houses – something we are only able to understand when we see it in the safe environment of a gallery through the eyes of an Ed Ruscha painting.

Such an experience might also give rise to new experiences of who we are. Robert Park listed *reporter, bartender, stockbroker, shopgirl, police officer*, etc as “...characteristic products of the conditions of city life.”²⁰ Urban islands might produce a different kind of personae – traders of cultural and symbolic capital; experience engineers; designers of systems and entire organizations; etc.

In his book *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, Vilém Flusser argued that the modern human being isn't a homo faber but a homo ludens.²¹ Life is no longer a drama but a performance; it's about sensations, not actions; and programs have replaced things and problems. Speaking critically (again with Adorno), such a cultural industry is always in danger of breeding conformity and replacing conflict and debate with shock and sensation.

In any case, the new will always look monstrous as Derrida remarked.²² An urban island might be the perfect opportunity to start experimenting.

- 1 McLuhan quoted in Lampel, J, Lant, T and Shamsie J: 2000, *Balancing Act: Learning from Organizing Practices in Cultural Industries*, *Organization Science* 11(3), pp. 263-269.
- 2 Adorno, T: 1991, *The culture industry: selected essays on mass culture*, Routledge, London.
- 3 Koolhaas, R: 2002, *Junkspace*, October 100, Spring 2002, pp. 175-190.
- 4 Sloterdijk, P: 2004, *Sphären III: Schäume*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.
- 5 Kant, I: 2003, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- 6 Defoe, D: 1944, *The life and adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, Oxford University Press, London.
- 7 Shelley, PB: 2004, *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Kessinger Publishing, Montana.
- 8 Balzac, H: 1962, *Pere Goriot*, New American Library, New York.
- 9 Sudjic, D: 1992, *The 100 Mile City*, Harper Collins Publishers, London, pp.32.
- 10 Simmel, G: 1969, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, in R. Sennet (ed) *Classic essays on the Culture of Cities*, Appelon-Century-Crofts, New York, pp.47-60.
- 11 Marx, K and Engels, F: 1967, *The Communist Manifesto*, Penguin Books, London, pp.84. (first published in 1848).
- 12 Wirth, L: 1969, *Urbanism as a way of life*, in R Sennet (ed) *Classic essays on the Culture of Cities*, Appelon-Century-Crofts, New York, pp. 131-142.
- 13 Luhmann, N: 1995, *Social systems*, translated by J Bednarz, Stanford University Press, California.
- 14 Deleuze, G and Guattari, F: 1987, *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- 15 Kafka, F: 1960, *Die Verwandlung (The Metamorphosis)*, W. W. Norton, New York. (first published in 1915)
- 16 Reinhold, M., 2002, *The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media and Corporate Space*, MIT Press, Cambridge and London.
- 17 Adorno, T: 1991, *The culture industry: selected essays on mass culture*, London: Routledge.
- 18 Le Corbusier: 1998, *Essential Le Corbusier*, Architectural Press, Oxford.
- 19 Eco, U: 2004, *History of beauty*, Rizzoli, New York.

- 20 Park, R: 1969, *The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human behaviour in the Urban Environment*, in R Sennet (ed) *Classic essays on the Culture of Cities*, Appelton-Century-Crofts, New York, pp. 91-130.
- 21 Flusser, V: 1999, *The shape of things: a philosophy of design*, Reaktion Books, London.
- 22 Derrida, J: 1990, *Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seisisms*, in D Carroll (ed) *The States of Theory: History, art and critical discourse*, Columbia University Press, New York.

