

Building a Way to the City? Asking about Objects, Conditions, and Essence as a Methodology for Approaching the Urban

Vacher, Mark

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Vacher, M. (2019). Building a Way to the City? Asking about Objects, Conditions, and Essence as a Methodology for Approaching the Urban. *Hamburger Journal für Kulturanthropologie*, 9, 9-26. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-8-13925>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-SA Lizenz (Namensnennung-Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-SA Licence (Attribution-ShareAlike). For more Information see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

BUILDING A WAY TO THE CITY? – ASKING ABOUT OBJECTS, CONDITIONS, AND ESSENCE AS A METHODOLOGY FOR APPROACHING THE URBAN¹

Mark Vacher

An Attempt to Sense what Hides in a Question

The perspectives under exploration here are inspired by a lecture by Heidegger. However, they were not, originally, meant to be used for the study of cities, but they emerge from his concern with technology. The reason why I am applying Heidegger's perspective on technology to an analysis of cities is not that I consider cities to be technologies, although they could certainly be viewed as such. What I want to pursue is his methodology.

In his lecture, Heidegger sets out to explore technology not as something technological, but as a powerful essence that pervades everything we can think of as such.² He warns us that technology represents »a supreme danger« placing mankind at »the very brink of a precipitous fall«.³ The danger he describes lies in mistaking the essence of technology for the technological devices we can manipulate and control. In doing this, he warns, we risk disregarding how we are becoming increasingly dependent on, and controlled by, technology.

Despite its ominous ring, Heidegger's lecture does not call for a dismissal of technology nor does it suggest alternatives to contemporary practices involving technology. What he aims at is not to change technology, but »to experience the technological within its own bounds«⁴ by »preparing a free relationship to it«.⁵ In other words, he wants to provide a position free from illusions of mastery and dominance from which technology, instead of repre-

1 I would like to thank cultural anthropologist Sebastian Topp for the invitation to develop and elaborate my thoughts on Heidegger's analysis of technology in relation to urban anthropology. I also want to thank ethnologists Marie Riegels Melchior, Marie Sandberg and Mette Kamille Birck for productive sparring and critical comments on earlier drafts. Last but not least, I owe a huge thanks to cultural analyst Drew Thilmany for helping me develop the structure of the paper and for critically challenging the analysis.

2 *Martin Heidegger: The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. New York/London 1983 [1954], p. 6.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 26–27.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

senting a potential threat, can be encountered as a ›saving power‹ enhancing the lives of its users.⁶

My concern with the city has similarities to Heidegger's concern with technology. Firstly, cities are also often regarded as entities conceived, designed, and produced by humankind. Secondly, they also represent endangering forces that control and limit the lives of people who live in them. Thirdly, like the dark side of technology mentioned by Heidegger, the response to urban perils like congestion, pollution, crime, and decay, is often an attempt to master the phenomena in question as if they were subject to specific rules and submitted to specific logics of domination. This is not to say that visions or solutions are irrelevant or dispensable. The problem is, as I will demonstrate, that visions and solutions (like plans, policies, and programs) from their very outset tend to alter the constitution of what they are intended to be visions ›of‹ and solutions ›for‹.

Inspired by Heidegger, I will explore whether there is a dimension of the city we do not sense, not because it is absent, but because it is being drowned out by attempts to plan, manipulate, and master.

Thus, what I set out to do is prepare a free relationship with the city in order to experience it within its own bounds.⁷ What these bounds are, like anything else, is open for questioning. However, according to Heidegger, what they do as bounds can be determined quite precisely: they set boundaries. These boundaries constitute contours, signs, and traces of what is being confined within or bound by them.⁸ Thus, ›the bounds of the city‹ can be determined as ›the conditions by which the city emerges as a city‹. Or, as Heidegger puts it: »With the bounds the thing does not stop; rather from out of them it begins to be what, after production, it will be.«⁹ My hope is that what emerges from questioning will present, if not a saving power, then perhaps an increased attention to the forces shaping the cities we live in.

Whose Bounds?

In January 1997, two days after arriving in Marseille, I took a picture¹⁰ showing the view from a famous landmark overlooking the city: cathedral Notre Dame de la Garde (Ill. 1). The city was lying right before me, but standing where I did to take the picture, I felt distanced and very far away from what I had come to study.¹¹ After a while, I went down from Notre Dame de la Garde

6 Ibid., p. 28.

7 Ibid., p. 4.

8 Ibid., p. 8.

9 Ibid.

10 The original picture has been lost. The present one was taken 20 years later from the same vantage point by my friend and local resident Brigitte Fabre.

11 The fieldwork I set out to conduct in 1997 was the first in a line of ethnographic enquiries that later became the empirical foundation for a MA thesis and a Ph.D. dissertation



Ill. 1: Marseille in a picture. Photo: Brigitte Fabre

and into the city, where I was absorbed in a swirl of people, cars, buildings, sounds, and smells.

The two experiences just described are clearly very different, but the city, I am convinced, is the same.¹² If the city is the same, then what is the city, and what constitutes the difference between the ways in which it appears?

According to urban anthropologists Edwin Eames and Judith Goode, the difference is a matter of scale and perspective. In 1977, they have published ›Anthropology of the City: an introduction to urban anthropology‹.¹³ What they called for was an approach to the city that seeks to grasp it as an object of study in itself rather than presenting it as a vaguely defined context for studies of local neighborhoods, minorities, or institutions located within it. To Eames and Goode what constitutes a city are »components and units« that can be pieced together to provide a representation of the city as a whole.¹⁴ In other words, what makes my two experiences with Marseille differ has

within urban anthropology, see *Mark Vacher: Byen og antropologien*. MA Thesis. Aarhus 1999; *Mark Vacher: Urban transit: En antropologisk analyse af gennemrejsendes indflydelse på urban form og fremtræden i den franske havneby Marseille*. PhD thesis. Copenhagen 2005.

12 Over the years, I have returned to Notre Dame de la Garde several times and despite a new building here and there, I have always been able to recognize the city before me as Marseille.

13 *Edwin Eames/Judith Goode: Anthropology of the City: An Introduction to Urban Anthropology*. Prentice-Hall 1977.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 260; »Only if the unique physical, demographic, and ecological characteristics of the city receive primary emphasis, or if the effects of migrants on the city as an entity are

nothing to do with the city, but with my positioning and with the way, I stitch and piece it together.

Although understanding the city as an assembly of parts may at first glance seem like a straightforward approach to exploring what the city is, trying to reach the whole from its parts and vice versa soon presents us with a range of challenges. What constitutes the parts and how do they relate to each other? Is it possible to trace the city as a whole through its parts? Is a city in reality just a set of correlations stitched together from distant observations and experiences of absorption?

Finally, if the differences have nothing to do with the city, but depend on the way I approach it, the way the city emerges remains a matter of mastery and skills. In other words, the bounds from which the city emerges do not belong to the city, but to me.¹⁵

As already mentioned, my intention is not to suggest new visions or solutions for mastering a city. My aim is not to improve the ways we stitch or piece the city together. What I want, with the help of Heidegger, is to find a way to experience the city, not as my construction, but within its own bounds. In order to achieve this, he argues, we have to rethink our approach to the city (or in his case technology). To Heidegger this does not imply changing the way in which we experience what is bound. Instead, we have to change our approach to experience itself: we have to question it.

Building a Way

›Questioning builds a way.«¹⁶ This ›way‹ – as a path, a trajectory, a line of thought – can not only take us through landscapes that expose us to new and different perspectives, but also create room for unexpected encounters with what we think we already know on new terms.

If we want to question what we experience when experiencing a city, we can start by asking ›What makes it an experience?‹. Following Heidegger, by asking this question we are articulating an important distinction, namely between ›the city‹ *and* ›what makes it an experience?‹. Thus, as he states in the case of technology, it is important to understand that: »Technology [as we experience it] is not equivalent to the essence of technology.«¹⁷ Heid-

explored, can these studies be viewed as anthropology of the city«. Ibid., p. 33 italics in original.

15 This line of thought has led the anthropologist Clyde Mitchell to dismiss the idea of doing anthropology of cities. What he rejects is not that the city constitutes an entity. The problem is that the city represents »a vastly complex set of human activities and interactions about which any one observer can only appreciate a limited part«, see *Clyde Mitchell: Cities, Society, and Social Perception*. Oxford 1987, p. 8. In other words, the city is too big and too complex to grasp as an entity within the bounds of anthropology.

16 Heidegger, as in fn. 2, p. 3.

17 Ibid.

egger explains this distinction through the following analogy: »When we are seeking the essence of ›tree‹ we have to become aware that which pervades every tree, as tree, is not itself a tree that can be encountered among all other trees.«¹⁸

In other words, we can examine every tree in every forest on the planet, dissect the tiniest detectable part, or carve out the innermost fiber of the largest trunk, without ever uncovering the essence, or ›treeness‹, of the tree. The same, I argue, goes for the city. Looking for what makes the city a city as a part among parts is like cutting up a tree to find its ›treeness‹.

Following Heidegger, the essence of a city cannot be equated with experiencing its bits and pieces. This, I think, more than size or complexity, is one of the reasons why attempts to compose a valid concept of the city from units and parts never really manages to capture the city as a whole.¹⁹ However, if the essence of a city is neither a part nor an experience thereof, what is it and are there ways to uncover it?

Identifying what to ask about

To Heidegger the path towards uncovering the essence of a phenomenon lies in the method of questioning. Thus, in our case, we should remember to examine not only what we ask about when asking about the city, but also how we ask. So far, our questioning has led us to the concept of the city ›as a whole made up of parts‹. This approach, says Heidegger, has implications for the outcome of our questioning. When we ask about ›basic components, units‹, or ›parts‹, we are, as I have argued confining the city within certain bounds. In order to be made of parts, what we think of as parts have to be pieces of some kind of totality and whatever emerges has no other option than to take on the shape of such a totality. Thus, by asking about parts we impose bounds that force the city to become an entity and to be explored as such.²⁰

It seems that, if we want to include ›that which pervades‹ the city in our inquiry, we have to develop an alternative to approaching it as a totality con-

18 Ibid.

19 Mitchell, as in fn. 15.

20 In his inspiring paper ›The Gestalt of the Urban Imaginary‹, the German anthropologist Rolf Lindner turns this perspective upside down. Inspired by Max Wertheimer's Gestalt theory, Lindner traces notions of specific cities like Berlin, Vienna, New York, Boston, Los Angeles and Chicago in literary characters. According to Lindner: »The plausibility of a literary figure is a fine indicator of what is imaginable and above all what is unimaginable with regard to a particular city«, see Rolf Lindner: The Gestalt of the Urban Imaginary. In: Urban Mindscales of Europe 23 (2006), p. 39. Lindner's approach definitely points to individual cities as being of their own and individual kind. Furthermore, his reference to the French anthropologist Pierre Sansot, who defines the imaginary as the reverie of the real (see *ibid.*, p. 36), also indicates that he sees the city as a reality existing beyond the imagined.

sisting of parts. The challenge, however, is not only that we have to examine the city in a different way, but, also, that what we seek to examine ›is not itself a city that can be encountered among all other cities‹.²¹

To summarize, what we see when we are looking at a city is not and cannot be its essence. We see people, cars, buildings, streets, historical places, cultural stereotypes, circulation, exchange, etc., but none of this can be isolated as the essence of the city. However, this does not imply that the essence is not there! In fact, like the ›greenness‹ of trees, the essence of the city has to be present in every version of it.

Taking a Picture of Essence

To explore these aspects further, let us revisit the concrete version of a city I presented in the picture of Marseille. As have already mentioned, I took a picture of it in 1997. I took it with a camera, a device that allowed me to capture the city as a motif. This is what I asked my friend to repeat in 2017 – to recapture the city. Of course, the picture reveals a lot about us (my instructions and her ability to use a camera), but as a version of the city it also reveals something about the city itself. What it reveals is the city's ability to let itself be captured like this in a picture.²² In order to become this particular motif, the city had to possess certain qualities when my friend photographed it. Among others, it had to lie before her and to stand out in front of her. It had to emerge in the given way in order to enter the picture.

Unlike looking at the city as parts that produce a whole or vice versa, the version of the city that emerges in the picture ›becomes what it is, because it could not help but emerge as such‹. In this sense, the city would not have been forced to become something it might not necessarily be. Rather it would have been (re)captured or uncovered as something that, in its own right, it could not escape being when put in front of an optic lens.

The essence of the city in the picture is not dependent on the city being a motif or being in a picture at all, nor is it visible as such. Nevertheless, I will argue, we sense a trace of it within the picture. The trace has to do with ›the way‹ the city emerges before us. Therefore, as a next step in our questioning, we will try to follow the trace by examining this particular way further.

21 *Heidegger*, as in fn. 18.

22 This is not to say that every city allows itself to be captured (or recaptured) in a picture or that photography is a privileged way of producing versions of cities. But, following Heidegger, perceiving the mentioned picture as a picture of Marseille does make it a version of it and thus pervades it with the essence of the city.

Questioning the City as Objects

When something lies before us or opposes us, we call it an ›object‹. According to its etymology, the word object dates back to the late 14th century and has the following connotations:

›tangible thing, something perceived or presented to the senses‹, from Medieval Latin *objectum* ›thing put before‹ (the mind or sight), noun use of neuter of Latin *objectus* ›lying before, opposite‹ (as a noun in classical Latin, ›charges, accusations‹), past participle of *obicere* ›to present, oppose, cast in the way of‹, from *ob* ›against‹ (see *ob-*) + *iacere* ›to throw‹ (see *jet* (v.)). Sense of ›thing aimed at‹ is late 14th century. *No object* ›not a thing regarded as important‹ is from 1782. As an adjective, ›presented to the senses‹, from late 14th century. *Object lesson* ›instruction conveyed by examination of a material object‹ is from 1831.²³

Following this definition, objects are ›everything that can be perceived or presented to the senses or the mind‹. From the picture of Marseille, we can see that this particular version of the city is capable of being an object. Although at first glance this seems very tangible, it also addresses the trace of a pervading essence we have already come across in our questioning. If we examine the definition carefully, we discover that an object becomes an object by being:

›put before‹, ›lying before‹, ›opposing‹, ›cast in the way of‹, or ›thrown in front of‹ someone.

Here, a precondition for the emergence of objects becomes apparent: ›for an object to be an object there must be distance and opposition between the object and a specific other‹. Furthermore, if an object is a ›thing aimed at‹ and ›regarded important‹, then this precondition is ›imposed by‹ or ›imposed on someone‹. The imposition of ›lying before somebody‹ is exactly how Marseille stands out and opposes us as a city in the picture.

As an object, the city is not only confined in a perceivable and presentable form, it is also confined within relationships of opposition and distance. Without this confinement, the city in the picture would not be capable of appearing as an object, a version of what it is.

Questioning the city as object relations

How does this bring us closer to uncovering the essence of the city? At first sight, what I have argued so far seems tautological: *It is a city, if it stands out to someone as a city!*

However, keeping Heidegger's approach to questioning in mind, we can now begin asking a number of uncovering questions. Emerging from the object

²³ Online Etymology Dictionary: Object. 2001–2018. URL: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/object>.

relation we can ask: *How, to whom, and as what does the city stand out as a city?*

According to the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, for perceptions to stand out as something implies a decryption (or ›bounding‹ in Heidegger's terms).²⁴ This decryption from perception to ›perception of something‹, he argues, is how »the imagination seeks to change and appropriate« that which is being perceived.²⁵ Thus, the perceived opposition is transformed from a relation ›between the perceiver *and* the perceived‹ into an identified object ›conceived as a city that possesses *its own* shape and appearance‹. In other words, like the treeness of trees is thrown into specific shapes (trunks, leaves, roots, forests etc.), so is the essence of the city when standing out to someone as a city. As an example of how decryption impacts the ways in which cities stand out as cities, I introduce what Lefebvre refers to as the conceivers of space.²⁶

Conceivers

Conceivers are those who envision, plan, and design. We know them as architects, social engineers, and urban planners. Their tools consist of maps, pencils, rulers, and computers, and their practices often involve highly transformative skills. They conceive through metaphors, metonymies, and by changing scales from maps and models.

What they envision, plan, and design are not cities, but visions, plans, and designs for cities. They experience distance from and opposition (object relation) to the city when seeking out what is missing or needs to be added. The city they relate to, points towards a city somewhere ahead of them, presenting the present city as unfulfilled, incomplete, and an opportunity for creative and transformative action.²⁷

As conceivers, their perceptions are deciphered, changed, and appropriated (become something)²⁸ in contrast to a future version of the present city. In this relationship between the city and the perceiver, what gets the most attention is the future. It is pursued, designed, and prepared by the perceiver to be conceived first in tangible concepts, models, and renderings and then realized as a completion of the incomplete present.²⁹

24 Henri Lefebvre: *The Production of Space*. Oxford 1991 [1974]; Heidegger, as in fn. 2, p. 4; 8.

25 Lefebvre, as in fn. 24, p. 39.

26 Ibid., p. 38.

27 Michel de Certeau, who presents the architect as someone who sees a challenge or an opportunity, transforms the existing, and then moves on, makes a similar point. See *Michel de Certeau: The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley/Los Angeles 1984, p. 127.

28 Lefebvre, as in fn. 25.

29 La Cité Radieuse in Marseille designed by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, completed in 1952, and inscribed as UNESCO world heritage in 2016 is an iconic example of a modernist vision for the future city. See *Cité Radieuse: Unité d'Habitation*. Le Corbusier. Marseille 2018. URL: <http://www.marseille-citeradieuse.org/>.

However, along with the future comes the past, first and foremost in the shape of the perceiver's experience. In the cases of architects, social engineers, and urban planners, their education and training will most likely influence how their perceptions are decrypted and turned into conceptions. Another, and maybe less obvious, way the decryption of perceptions can be flavored by the past is when it is attributed to what the German cultural analyst Walter Benjamin labeled ›weak messianic power‹. This, he argues, happens when moral and cultural values displayed in past events are used as guidelines for explaining the nature of the present and as a compass for navigating the future³⁰ – in other words, when the future is envisioned as a legacy of a defining past.³¹

Thus, the shape and appearance of the city as it appears before the conceiver as an object is flavored not only by his or her perception of it, but also by decryption through imagined futures and experienced or ›messianic‹ pasts.³²

Lefebvre's example supports our analysis of the city so far by confirming the hypothesis that an object is: 1) inseparably related to someone perceiving it as an object, and 2) a version of something, which is not itself an object. Just as importantly, it concretizes the analysis by providing an empirical manifestation of not only what stands out as an object, but also the entire relation, including someone the object gets to stand out before.

Above, the exploration of the object relation to the city has been limited to a very specific group of professionals who represent a particular orientation towards the city. However, if we continue down the path laid out by Heidegger, the discoveries we have made by applying Lefebvre's perspective invite us to explore other ways of entering into an object relation with the city. Of course, this exploration can never be exhaustive, but as we shall see in the following, there are important questions to be formulated by comparing Lefebvre's conceivers to other concrete approaches to the city as an object.

30 *Walter Benjamin: On the Concept of History*. Cambridge/London 2009 [1940], p. II.

31 In Marseille a clear example of the city's past becoming an inspiration for futurist design can be experienced at *Le Mucem* (The Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations) designed by the local architect Rudy Ricciotti. The physical location as well as the thematic framing relates strongly to Marseille being an ancient European and Mediterranean port and a historical maritime gate to the entire world. See *Mucem*. 11.10.2018. URL: <http://www.mucem.org/le-mucem>.

32 For an extensive analysis of realized and unrealized plans and visions for Marseille and their impact on ›the urban grammar‹ see ›La grammaire d'une ville‹ by geographer Marcel Roncayolo. *Marcel Roncayolo: Les grammaires d'une ville*. Paris 1996; *Lefebvre*, as in fn. 24; *Benjamin*, as in fn. 30.

Janitors

When we visit the official website of the city of Marseille, we find references to another category of people who relate to the city as a challenge put in front of them.³³ They are the civil servants or janitors of the city.

Janitors oversee, survey, and read the city as an entity to be maintained and protected. We know them as police officers, road and construction workers, emergency service providers, garbage collectors, social workers, park officials, etc.

Their tools consist of repair kits, rescue equipment, and control devices and their practices are often of a preventive, preserving, or renovating nature. Although they relate to the city as an entity, this is not how it stands out to the janitors. What they register, perceive and respond to are deviations and anomalies. Deviations and anomalies are hard to predict, hard to control, and tend to escalate if they are unnoticed or ignored. Therefore, janitors have to stay on guard, be alert, and be prepared. To stay ahead of challenges, what they oversee, maintain and protect is often broken down into manageable sectors, systems, standards, shifts, schedules, and procedures.

Unlike the conceivers who relate to the city through scalable metaphors or metonymies, janitors tend to act on a one-to-one scale with their observations. They stuff, control, repair, remove, prevent, clean and rescue on the spot. The successful outcome of their relations to the city as an object consists of ›a dissolution of objects‹. They remove graffiti, garbage, repair damage, prevent terrorist attacks, and sweep up dead leaves, dead bodies, chewing gum, and dog feces. The janitors' aim is not to transform the city into a new version of itself, but rather to make sure that it stays in shape and in order. In that sense, the horizon by which the janitors decrypt their perceptions is of an adverbial nature. The city should be orderly, livable, predictable, organized, clean, safe and normal. It should constitute a safe and clean environment, in which traffic flows safely and where lives and businesses can flourish successfully.

Since janitors maintain the city according to adverbial standards (good enough, clean enough, safe enough, smooth enough, etc.) the temporal orientation folded into what stands out before them as objects differs from that standing out to the conceivers. While the full and complete city through which the conceivers' perceptions are deciphered into objects is located in a conceived future (which as argued by Benjamin may draw on the past), the temporality folded into the complete city before the janitors appears as a race against erosion and decay. Janitors repair, restore, reinstall, and reestablish. In that sense, janitors tend to perceive objects with reference not to

33 *Mairie*: Administration de la commune. Le fonctionnement. Marseille 2018. 11.10.2018.
URL: <http://mairie.marseille.fr/administration-de-la-commune/le-fonctionnement>.

an ideal future, but to an authentic order under constant threat from undermining forces.³⁴

Thus, like in Lefebvre's example, the objects standing out to the janitors are also determined by a specific decryption and a version of something, which is not itself an object. In the janitors' case, this something emerges as a perceived absence of order. Objects become objects by deviating in relation to the anticipated order of the city. The absence of this order is not only perceived, but also meticulously searched for in fragments and details. It is the search for, as much as the perception of, this absence that constitutes the decryption through which the city appears to the janitors.

Conquerors

The object relations discussed so far, all share references to ideal versions of cities in the light of which the perceived city appears incomplete or damaged. This raises the question whether this is the case in all object relations or if there are ways of decrypting perceptions that allow a city to enter into an object relation as a complete version of itself.

As a final example of object relations, I will introduce a category of people who approach the city as the one and only authentic version of itself. Unlike conceivers and janitors, they are not there to build, develop, maintain, or protect. What these people seek out in object relations is a tangible reward for investing time, energy and resources. For them, objects are a confirmation not only of the city's presence, but also of their own presence in an authentic moment. Filled with expectations, this category of people purposefully engages in object relations with the city with the ambition of conquering it.

Conquerors approach cities from the outside. They are arrivers, foreigners, and newcomers who take in and consume the city as a new place. They come by different means: by air, by sea, and by land. They come in different versions: as immigrants, as hostile invaders, as tourists. The city is a new experience to them, even if the city itself is very old. Unlike conceivers and janitors, distance and opposition are not installed by conquerors in the process of engaging with the city as an object: 'they are the very outset'. As a destination, the city is something out there to be encountered, experienced, taken,

34 Janitors mostly carry out their tasks in modest anonymity, but depending on the nature of the undermining forces, their involvement with the city may put them in situations demanding extraordinary bravery and heroic actions within the call of duty. A famous example of heroic janitors are the New York fire fighters, many of whom lost their lives in the line of duty during the 9/11 attack in 2001. In Marseille, Bishop Belsunce is an example of a celebrated janitor. Unlike other wealthy citizens and members of the nobility, he stayed behind to help the poor and the sick during The Great Plague of Marseille in 1720, which killed 100 000 people in the city and the surrounding areas. See *Roger Duchêne/Jean Contrucci: Marseille, 26 000 ans d'histoire*. Fayard 1998. To honor his deeds, the citizens of Marseille later renamed the former Cours Royale in the center of town Cours Belsunce. See *Vacher*, as in fn. 11.

and grasped. In other words, it is not to be invented or detected in reference to something else – it already is that something else.

Approaching the city from the outside makes the conqueror's arrival a spectacular event in regards to the object condition. Often, what appears in front of the conqueror gets to manifest itself as crucial entry points, behind which the city is waiting to be taken. Some of these entry points, like airports, train stations, harbor terminals, and immigration offices, may require documents and proof of the conqueror's identity and intentions.³⁵ Others, like city walls or moats, have to be climbed unnoticed or taken by force.

Although a successful penetration of the boundaries may take the conquerors to inside the city, it does not lead to absorption or dissolving of the object relation. To some conquerors, like immigrants, this may cause frustration and anxiety,³⁶ while to other conquerors, like tourists, maintaining an object relation to the city almost seems to be the main goal of their engagement.³⁷

Again, unlike conceivers and janitors, conquerors are rarely celebrated as heroes in the city where they carry out their activities. Nevertheless, they often contribute more to the city's prosperity than they take away. A city can make a fortune by manifesting itself in conquerable objects like souvenirs, consumable specialties, and other commodities. What makes objects profitable includes not only the objects to be conquered, but the entire object relation: the means of transportation bringing the conquerors to the objects, the markets, the ATMs, etc., but also the sanctuaries, hotels, and resorts in which they prepare their strategies before and rest after a day of conquest. In other words, all the objects, services and facilities enabling the conquerors to fulfill their desires.

Of course, the conquest of cities differs from one conqueror to another. Some conquer by frontal raids, others from below. Some are on a tight budget, while others have almost limitless resources. For some, conquering is a life-risking act, for others, it may be part of a pleasant holiday activity. Finally, some conquerors leave the city in ashes, while others contribute to its growth and

35 This control is typically undertaken by janitors.

36 In Marseille, the material manifestation of insecure newcomers can be found in the so-called ›transit areas‹ located close to the old harbor. See *Emile Témime*: Marseille transit: les passagers de Belsunce. Paris 1995. Here different ›vagues migratoires‹ (waves of migrants) have found their first shelter in a new city among fellow countrymen, who have made a living out of hosting ›the human wrecks of war and persecution elsewhere‹ floating ashore on coast of Marseille. See *Albert Londres*: Marseille, porte du sud. Paris 2000 [1927]. In these neighbourhoods, the spoken language has changed over the centuries between Italian, Armenian, Greek, Portuguese, and Kabyle, but what has remained the same is their reputation among many Marseillais as being a lost part of the city invaded by foreigners. See *Vacher*, as in fn. 11.

37 Like many other cities Marseille has an entire industry devoted to preventing tourists from running out of sights to see, specialties to taste, treasures to be found, and landscapes to be explored. See *Marseille Tourisme*. 11.10.2018. URL: <http://www.marseille-tourisme.com/fr/>.

prosperity. In all cases, the desired city stands out as an object: as a whole consisting of parts to be taken grasped, and experienced as such.

The temporality folding into the conquerors' object relation is manifested as expectations and desires to be met. Thus, conquerors come to conquer and to collect expected treasures that prior to their arrival made them desire the city in the first place. What the treasures consist of, however, is not necessarily very tangible. To some the treasure consist of new memories, souvenirs, or booty to be brought home, to others the treasure takes the form of a pleasant break from home and everyday life, while to immigrants the treasures to be found are opportunities for establishing a new life in a new place. Thus, the kind of object the city constitutes to the conqueror depends on its ability to live up to the expectations, the rumors, the promises and the advertisements by which it has been made desirable. To what degree the city is able to do so, can only be determined through authentic experience.

Which Condition makes the City a City?

What stands out in the examples above, are the ways in which distance and opposition are required for the city to be deciphered as an object. In other words, they form a condition that enables the object relation. This condition is not only spatial. As we have seen, object relations also imply decryptions by which temporal horizons are folded into the experience of something (perceptions cf. Lefebvre) as an object. Without this condition, there is nothing to conceive, nothing to monitor or maintain, and nothing to conquer. This is not to say that whatever constitutes an object disappears when distance and opposition are absent, but it no longer constitutes an object. The house in the city is still a house, the order of the city is still an order, the monument is still a monument, and the city beneath Notre Dame de la Garde is still a city. But they are not objects – not until they are thrown in the way or put before someone to be decrypted as creation, responsibility, or temptation.

When cities are not objects, then what are they? This is a question we cannot answer within the bounds of the object relation. As stated above, objects become objects under a certain condition. Thus, following Heidegger's approach, the next question helping us forward could be the following:

What is a Condition?

According to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, a ›condition‹ can be described as an ›engulfing situation‹. Unlike phenomena, which one stands before or against as objects, ›condition‹ is something one ›is‹ or ›is in‹. In ›The Sickness Unto Death‹ Kierkegaard addresses the nature of conditions through the example of illness: »Then the illness sets in, and from that in-

stant it affirms itself and is now an actuality, the origin of which recedes more and more into the past». ³⁸

Conditions, including the object relation, are born out of the occurrence of the condition itself. I am being opposed, I am being confronted, I am falling ill, but before I am being, getting, or falling, the conditions do not exist.

Conditions can be volatile and passing or sticky and confining. They can vary from unnoticed to overwhelming and from constructive and life giving to destructive and deadly. Some can coexist, merge, and presuppose each other. Others conflict, undermine and destroy each other. Everyone and everything, including cities, is in a ›condition‹.

Regardless of their differences, Kierkegaard argues, all conditions are ›set‹ by occurrence: engulfing and inseparable from who or whatever is ›in‹ them. ³⁹ Although conditions are inseparable from what is in them, it does not mean that whatever is in a condition stays in that condition forever. As we saw in the case of objects, what is an object may cease to be so. This is the case with all conditions. They cease to exist when they are abandoned, after which they dissolve into memories or vanish into oblivion. Once we leave the conditions behind, there are no oppositions, confrontations, or illnesses lying around waiting for us.

Admittedly, conditions are elusive. Just as distance and opposition can be present without catching our attention when facing an object, other conditions may very well be at play around us without catching our attention. With this in mind, how can we identify conditions?

A way forward regarding this challenge lies in a distinction between condition and essence. According to Kierkegaard, conditions are engulfing and ›set‹, they begin and they end, ⁴⁰ while essence is different: it pervades. ⁴¹ In other words, it runs through and transcends.

Although we may have difficulty noticing conditions when we are in them, we can pay attention to what happens when they change. Because they are conditions for who, how, and what we are, their beginnings and endings will inevitably make a difference to us in some way. This difference does not necessarily threaten the existence of who or what is undergoing that change. We may change, but unless the change destroys us, we are still who we are. This may seem paradoxical, but keeping the distinction between condition and essence in mind, we can determine what changes and what stays the same. Change is a change of condition while essence is what makes the changed remain what it is. In other words, what undergoes change must do so in accordance with its essence.

38 Søren Kierkegaard: *The Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton 1941 [1849].

39 Ibid., p. 13.

40 Ibid.

41 Heidegger, as in fn. 2, p. 3.

That which Stays the Same

If we approach changes as the ends of old conditions and the beginnings of new ones, we can now apply Heidegger's questioning approach to explore concrete experiences of change in the way the city emerges.

To address this issue, I will return to what happened, when I left my object relation to Marseille at Notre Dame de la Garde.

»After a while, I went down from Notre Dame de la Garde and into the city, where I was absorbed in a swirl of people, cars, buildings, sounds, and smells.«

Compared to the object relation captured in my picture, the condition in which Marseille appeared as a city clearly changed. In this new condition, the city no longer emerged as an entity or object – it was no longer a thing as in something,⁴² and neither did it set temporal horizons by projecting itself onto imagined futures or experienced pasts. From being an object lying before me to be grasped (conquered) through future research, the city in this changed condition seemed to have almost lost its bounds and to dissolve into many things.

If what I experienced as a city has changed, how then can I argue that it has stayed the same?

What we are looking for is not the city as people, the city as buildings, the city as cars, the city as sounds, smells etc. That would be to repeat the mistake of confusing the essence of tree (treeness) with a tree, or falsely locating it in parts of a whole such as in roots, leaves, or trunks.⁴³

Following Heidegger, the essence of the city emerging when I descended from Notre Dame de la Garde did not emerge ›as‹ many things, sounds and smells, but ›in‹ many things, sounds and smells. Therefore, the difference between experiencing the city as an object before me and the city as many things around me at the same time does not imply that the essence pervading the object before me or the many things around me has changed.

Again, it seems, we have reached a banal conclusion, namely *that cities are cities, but change their appearance depending on from where and in which condition we experience them*. In other words, even if Marseille changes from being an object when we stand above it into many things, sounds, and smells when we are surrounded by it, what appears is of course still Marseille. Should we ever doubt that, we can always return to the position at Notre Dame de la Garde and compare it with pictures we have taken in the past.

As we have already discussed regarding objects, regardless of how we experience the city and regardless of what condition it seems to be in, what we experience is not and cannot be its essence. It may be crowded, vibrant,

42 Cf. Lefebvre, as in fn. 24.

43 Eames/Goode, as in fn. 13.; Heidegger as in fn. 2.

deserted, decaying, flourishing, etc., but none of these conditions can be isolated as the essence of the city. This, however, does not imply that the essence is not there! In fact, like the ›treeness‹ of trees, the essence of the city has to be present in every version of it.

This insight indicates a way forward. We started the enquiry by addressing the distinction between anthropology ›in‹ and ›of‹ the city.⁴⁴ By questioning it, we came to see the distinction between the two as matter of favoring a specific condition, namely the object relation. The condition we experienced was ›set‹⁴⁵ by the city put before us as a ›something‹⁴⁶ laying beneath the hill-top from where it was captured and transformed into the version presented in the picture.

As a final example, I will present a condition in which the city reveals itself, ›set‹ not by the distance and opposition of the object relation, but by a buzzing presence, an eagerness to touch, smell and even taste. In fact, what characterizes this condition is that it tends to evade or circle around the bounds of distance and opposition – even when we try to capture it within them. In other words, it resists becoming an object. I have labeled this condition ›the swarm‹.

Into the Swarm

The crowd of people walking the streets or crossing the squares of the city in a vibrant flow constitutes a classic and recognizable urban phenomenon. In and out of the many border shops found in the narrow streets of Marseille, thousands of potential customers are assessing, more or less consciously, the potential of getting caught in object relations that lead to the acquisition of commodities and services. Some are carefully exploring, others quickly browsing, some critically assessing, and some are easily seduced. Experienced from within, it seems like an almost shapeless and intangible presence of life and noise coming from everywhere.

Like conceivers, janitors, and conquerors, swarming individuals are readers of the city. They read its advertisements, its potentials, its opportunities, its threats and its dangers. And like the object relation, swarming is a form of condition relating to the city – but unlike the former, it happens in motion. Swarmers do not stand still against the city, they navigate, evade, and they move in and around it. By doing so, the city becomes something else. What it becomes is simultaneously:

- 1) *A condition for the swarming to swarm* (here are potentials to be exploited, journeys to be travelled, dangers to be avoided, and challenges to be overcome – in other words, the city is locatable).

44 Eames/Goode, as in fn.13.

45 Kierkegaard, as in fn. 38.

46 Lefebvre, as in fn. 24.

And:

2) *A condition in which the swarming can swarm* (it becomes a landscape in which there is room for swarming and appears accessible, evadable, escapable, readable, exploitable, and consumable – in other words, the city is swarmable).

If the swarm, as I stated above, is a condition in which the city can reveal itself, how then does it make sense to think of the city as a condition for the swarm? Following Kierkegaard, stating that the city is a condition would imply that it is ›set‹ by the occurrence of the city itself and that it will disappear, if abandoned by the swarm. On the one hand, this of course is not the case. The city is still a city when the swarm goes to sleep. But, if we take a closer look, we will see that the city is in fact to some degree dependent on the swarm.

The swarm consumes, circulates, exploits, and pollinates the city. It enables exchange, businesses, and livelihoods. It produces waste, congestion, and noise. It follows and violates rules and regulations. It increases and reduces intensity. It is sensitive to conditions, like the weather or the time of day. It stays indoors when it rains or snows. It goes to sleep. It leaves the streets empty or fills them up with noises, smells, sounds and moving bodies.

In other words, the swarm changes the city. One could go so far as to argue that the swarm is not only a condition in the city, but also a condition for the city.

How does discovering that the city reveals itself ›in‹ the swarm as a condition ›for‹ the swarm bring us closer to understanding what makes the city a city? Following Kierkegaard, everything, including cities and swarms, is in conditions. There is no way for anything to exist or reveal itself without being in a condition. Clearly, the city is not a swarm and the swarm is not a city, but by exploring their interdependency as conditions shaping each other, we get a sense of something pervading the swarm as well as the city. This ›something‹ confined in mutual conditions is not an object or a condition itself, but of a pervasive nature, appearing in both conditions as what makes them what they are. It is what makes the swarm urban and what makes the urban recognizable in the swarm.

So what Makes a City a City?

By following the question ›what makes a city a city?‹, we have made a journey from objects bound in distance and opposition into engulfing conditions. On that journey, we have identified traces and resonances, which, arguably, count as experiences pointing to an essence pervading the city as city. Although we have not, and could not, encounter the essence of the city outside its many confinements through questioning, we have explored how the city takes on bounds and makes them its own. Thus, we have traced the essence of the city in the ways it takes on conceivers, janitors, and conquerors and

makes them its own by getting in their way as an object demanding attention. Furthermore, we have sensed the essence of the city inside the swarm, pervading it as a ›condition for‹ the swarming to swarm.

Maybe this sensation is the closest we can get to uncover the essence of the city.

We sense the city in its capability of emerging as objects and conditions: When it emerges in visions, conceivers have laid out for it to become; when it emerges in the order and systems the janitors struggle to restore it to; in the treasures taken away by its conquerors; in the daily lives of citizens when they shop, swarm, work, and engage with each other in the city.

These emergences, however, are easily mistaken. The city is more than we can dream, more than we can control, and more than we can desire. As Heidegger argues in his lecture on technology, we may lead ourselves to believe that the city's compliance is due to our mastery of it. This arrogance, he warns, is dangerous. Instead, what I have attempted in this paper is to build a path paved not with mastery and dominance, but with questioning. As a path, it is not a fixed position. It is neither ›in‹ nor ›of‹ (in this paper we have passed both positions), but, as I hope to have demonstrated, it holds the potential of bringing us closer ›towards‹ the city.

We have not yet reached it, but along our path, the city has called to us, giving us indications of an endless number of objects and conditions in which traces of its essence can be encountered. We have followed a few of these invitations by the city (a picture and a swarm), but to the attentive there are so many more ways to become acquainted with it. While the examples in this paper were chosen because of their illustrative potential, what lies ahead could soon turn out to be of a far more serious nature. Not all objects are as easily taken and shared as pictures and not all conditions are as voluntary and pollinating as the swarm. My hope is that a sensitivity towards its essence will potentially save us from imposing ideas, orders, and object relations onto the city, impositions that the city is incapable of emerging from or that force it to reject and resist us by emerging as dangerous obstacles or undermining conditions.



Associate Prof. Dr. Mark Vacher
University of Copenhagen
Saxo Institute
Dept. of Ethnology
Karen Blixens Plads 8
2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark
mvacher@hum.ku.dk