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**AN INTRODUCTION TO «READING THE CITY. URBAN
COMMUNICATION, CULTURE AND BUSINESS»**

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“The revolution has to be urban or nothing at all.”

Henri Lefebvre

Cities are repositories of social networks and interwoven interests that compete and cooperate and, by doing so, constantly redefine their frameworks, identities and even their names. Cities create themselves in the tension between the rules of good governance and the demands of people’s lives. City governance, land use and the design of spaces determine the quality of the resulting ecosystem, the visibility of people, groups and social classes. **The symbolic management of the city**, how its heritage is managed and its cultural infrastructures regulated, open up or close down its residents’ access to cultural activism, to the circulation and spread of culture, to the inclusion or segregation of diversities. The communicative practices of urban local authorities determine how citizens communicate and how the assets and values generated in the city are disseminated.

In addition, **the way people are managed**, the city’s social policies, determine the dynamic of the inevitable social tensions, the emergence of protest movements or citizen resistance to the plans and intentions of the economic powers that want to break ties with the city and its inhabitants.

In all these ways, the city is a tangle of communications, a bedlam of discourses on what to do with the city and what the city decides to be on its own, without asking anyone.

The city cannot be understood merely by reading the official regulations, executive rulings and plans. Indeed, it will remain incomprehensible if there is no interpretation of the subtext of what people do, the way they infringe and amend town planning projects through their movements, the way they use and abuse the regulations, pro domo sua; this all requires a deeper, broader reading of the big data in the footprints and marks people leave by simply living there. Without all this input of knowledge, we can understand neither where the city comes from, nor where it is going.



The city is a permanent agglomeration of interdependent individuals, but beyond the “structure”, the city is what its citizens, its residents, “do”. Through the millions of micro-decisions residents make in their daily movements, the routes they prefer, the way they use the space, their dialogues, what they approach and what they avoid, the text of the city is gradually defined. The city is, therefore, a consequence of its inhabitants’ urban practices, which complement or rectify administrative decisions and market choices. Residents’ uses and abuses endorse or veto normative or customary frameworks. This, therefore, is the “practiced city”; the use residents make of the city is a system of signs waiting to be interpreted.

This practice, the message of this practice, must be read. Michel de Certeau was probably musing along the same lines when he wondered how the urban text was written, a collective writing with no beginning or end, with no obvious readers or writers.

Yet this collective writing, the catalyst of numerous, what Zygmunt Bauman would call inevitably liquid, stories, is subject to a dialectic that puts it under strain, constant processes of individualisation and a certain disoriented location in a globalisation that has been structural for a long time.

The city also harbours a reasonable hope for politics and democracy, for the pursuit of a sufficiently solid anchorage, a demos imbued with a collective identity. Something like the polis that illuminated the first democracy, the absence of which may be driving the worst form of politics and the impoverishment of the democratic game. In this context, our confused gaze turns to culture, the values and conditions that feed it, the spaces that make it possible and fruitful, that allow us to read and understand it, perhaps define it and recreate it in all its complexity, perhaps help to configure **the right to culture** and the resulting institutional obligations to uphold this right efficiently, and the necessary civic awareness to sustain and nourish it.

This issue of kult-ur explores this system of signs that makes up urban practice in the hope of providing a minimum understanding of the city and its citizens.

In his reflection on the **Symbols and Democracy in an Interpretation of the City**, Manuel Alcaraz starts from the idea of the city as a “process” that establishes the dynamics and tensions between “freedom and necessity” and between “equality and inequality”, and on this basis, defines large cities “as manifestations and representations of power” through which global networks are sustained and articulated. From this rationale and this complexity, he invites us to consider three reflections before making any proposal to renew the institutionalisation of local power: first, he draws on the powerful concept of the “non-place”, as a “space of anonymity” and of the inequality that drives the need to create a public space in which “the values of the democratic are debated, shaped and consolidated and where the business of institutions is therefore legitimised”; second, this public space needs a “public time with intelligible rhythms that make daily life and far-reaching projects legible and meaningful”; and third, an element that demands governability, the good governance of the local institution, a sphere in which to explore formula of “deliberative democracy”.

The interview with **Faustino Villora**, renowned representative of the well-known citizens platform **Salvem El Cabanyal** (Save El Cabanyal), takes us into what we call the **Participant City**: issues such as the relationship between the representatives elected by the residents and the residents themselves, the Salvem phenomenon as a tool for civic intervention and participation addressing a specific objective (normally saving cultural, urban and social heritage from destructive projects driven by blind progress), its relation with traditional organisations such as parties or neighbourhood associations and institutions, and its way of working based on assemblies and exploring a more participatory and deliberative democracy. He refers to successful Salvem campaigns such as the Santa Mónica Pier in Los Angeles, El Born in Barcelona, sa Draganera in Mallorca and El Botànic and El Cabanyal in Valencia, highlighting the need to promote a politics of participation that goes beyond the normative existence of participa-

tion channels that, although not narrow, lack the necessary impetus and conviction on the part of public representatives and the participants themselves.

Carlos Xavier Senso explores the **Ethereal City. Interpretations and Communicative Appropriation of the New Digital Urban Space**, the core idea of which is the need to analyse urban communication in the ever-growing “ethereal digital world”. The study of communication in the city calls for “multidisciplinarity”, for a “cultural understanding of the urban world”, a dynamic study that goes beyond the communicative process and weaves itself into and intrudes in ways of life, identity identifications, consumed culture, citizen participation or appropriation of the territory. In effect, this “digital world” has transformed cities and has multiplied the information they generate, placing citizens as active subjects of communication and of shaping the urban identity. But the new digital city has also generated a space of “interconnected loneliness”, “ICTs have provided urban spaces converted into collective communicational deserts, with a worrying spread of loneliness and isolation”, at the same time as amplifying “the framework for relational possibilities”, in some way clashing with the neoliberal conception of the city, which commercialises the public space and amplifies social distances, and fragments, marginalises and isolates part of society. There is, therefore, a clear need for some kind of counterweight, an institutional communication aimed at “improving integration, strengthening appropriation and identification, sharing rights and duties, bolstering diversity”. The author ends with the positive example of the Valencia City Council and its egalitarian approach, its institutionalisation of urban art through the protection of graffiti as an expression of communication and creativity that must be defended.

Laura Silvestre describes and reflects on **The Museum as a Symbol of the Contemporary City** in a brief historical look at the evolution of museums from the “encyclopaedic approaches rooted in the Enlightenment” to the transformations made to adapt to “mass culture”. It is this sociological perspective, of capturing audiences, democratising access to culture, together with the pursuit of political profitability of urban spaces, that generates political prestige and urban quality and, at the same time, “the protagonism and the charisma acquired by museum architecture” which explains the current museum boom. She also analyses the impact of museums in Spain, demonstrating the vitality of Spanish cities’ museum policies, observing how they have, to some extent, metamorphosed into places for social interaction and greater contact with citizens, giving residents a bigger role and going beyond their traditional function as exhibition spaces.

Pilar Algarra and Emilio Garrido propose a path that takes us **Towards the Creative City**; the “creative cities networks” are an example of the framework of cooperation and stimulation of culture in cities, the “creative economy” posited by Richard Florida, that showcases the value of cities that encourage creativity and talent, their capacity to boost the economy that demands the complicity of local governments, of a strong cultural industry and of creators that must be protected. They also provide examples we can learn from, such as Paris, New York or Berlin, and caution against the inertia that prevents or hinders our cities from participating in this potential, and the need for a paradigm shift in this direction.

In **Art and the Urban Environment**, **Mijo Miquel** revisits the evolution of urban sculptural arts, the cities’ monuments, and how they reflect not only evolving tastes, but the toing and froing of commemoration, in other words, the politics of memory and the speculative processes that define the use of space. Sculptures adorn our cities but in doing so, they reveal things about themselves.

To end this edition dedicated to the city, we invited two town planners and two legal experts in public administration to a round table discussion titled **Municipality, Market and Neighbourhood** moderated by Fernando Flores. On 8 November, 2021, Carles Dolç, Carlos Fernández, Reyes Marzal and Andrés Boix discussed participation and city models, mobility, gentrification and housing, and the role of local councils in the welfare state. The problem underlying all these issues always comes down to the question of how much inequality a democratic city can tolerate.

