

# RECONQUERING THE STREETS

examples and paths of action from around the world

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NICOLAS SOULIER

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## INTRODUCTION

When we step out the door, if babies in strollers are on an even level with car tires and tailpipes, if children cannot go into the street alone or go to school by themselves, if we waste precious time in long commutes, if senior citizens and idle people no longer have a place or know where to go, if local shops disappear, we can begin to question our habitat.

As soon as we consider the street as simply a means of getting from one point to another, where all is occupied by the automobile, whether for parking or driving, we are in their realm and no longer at home. But it is not just a question of cars. It is also a question of people. Residential streets need to be inhabited and not simply traversed or bypassed. If we tolerate that the street in front of our house is only a circulation pipe it is because we no longer understand the street as being a part of our habitat. When our homes close in on themselves and we turn our backs to the street, we lose contact. The street becomes dull, deserted and lifeless. The habitat is inert.

I was led to this grim conclusion within the context of my practice as an urban planner and architect, and through experiences which I present in the first part of this book. Nowadays one could think that the situation of perishing streets is inevitable, and that it is better to accept, without being nostalgic, the fact that residential streets without shops and services are bleak.

But, other experiments ( especially outside of France) show that residential streets can be alive and given the right conditions, people actively invest themselves and take care of their street. The street is metamorphosed. I develop some of these inspiring examples, and propose a journey through a selection of streets in Europe, North America and Japan, paying equal attention to successes and failures.

These examples show us that we should not be discouraged, our neighborhoods could be much more pleasant. We can reconquer our streets without demolishing or rebuilding everything. All that is required is that we, the adjacent habitants of the street, no longer turn our backs and lock ourselves behind privacy screens, walls and solid doors. If we turn to the street, we could take very different actions, and consider that the street is also our business.

It is difficult to influence the vast operations of urban planning. But we can take concrete action in our everyday life right in front of our homes, at our doorsteps. It is action at the individual, human scale and very much in the realm of possibility. We, the habitants of the street, can improve the streets where we live, and for an essential part we are the only ones who can do it. We must find collectively ways to stop the sterilization of our streets and to stop blocking initiatives.

This book is an attempt to contribute to this awareness. It is based on my experiences, travels and studies as an architect, urban planner, and teacher. This is neither a textbook nor a scientific theoretical book: more an investigative report, a practitioner's notebook. It is an attempt to show and provide evidence of understanding, and to propose tools and notions to those who want to know how to debate and act, how to bypass and overcome blockages, and how to find good entry points to reconquering our streets.

## **STERILIZED HABITAT**

### **Sterilization by rules**

When one examines the regulatory framework of French housing (urban planning regulations, transportation regulations, home-owners and renters associations,...), we see that many of the rules prohibit residents to use or modify the exterior of their homes. For example: no storage in public or in the public domain, no modifications of the exterior appearance of their home, no plants (or private gardening), no hanging clothes to dry, no furniture in full view of neighbors or passers-by, no playing except in authorized places, etc.. One can understand in each case the reason behind the rule or prohibition : to avoid conflicts with neighbors, or accidents. But the consequences of this regulatory framework are detrimental. The site is designed, managed and regulated so that nothing is going on and nothing changes, in short nothing happens. The residents are reduced to inaction. The habitat is frozen. It is sterilized. On residential streets we no longer see habitants, the streets are no longer alive.

### **Sterilization by road securitization**

A logic of road security can be applied to street circulation. Which leads us to consider residential streets as major roads (multi lane thoroughfares, safety barriers, roundabouts, railings, minimal pedestrian crossings, minimal meetings, minimal mixtures, and minimal points of exchange with adjacent residents). In the name of security, processes specific to residential streets are blocked: the mixing or sharing of different modes of transportation (car, bicycle, pedestrian) and the interactions between people.

### **Sterilization by residential securitization**

Another security logic can be applied to housing. Security is achieved through barriers, gates, door codes, guards, intercoms, CCTV, controlled entrances to parking lots, buffer zones. If a home is opened to the street, it is considered in danger. The secured community is closed in on itself and minimizes inputs and exchanges at the edges. In the name of security, it blocks another process specific to streets, interactions between the traffic and adjacent residents.

An underlying principle is behind these sterilizations : "cannot be trusted."

- Motorists, pedestrians or cyclists cannot be trusted. Road safety obliges the multiplication of devices to guide them, to separate them, to control their itineraries and to remove spontaneity.
- Residents cannot be trusted either, we should avoid all that is accidental or spontaneous.

But, more securitization produces more distrust. To restore real security requires restoring confidence. These two movements are antagonistic. Far from contributing to security, excessive securitization can lead to critical situations, and be counterproductive : the cure may be worse than the disease. Far from building an environment where we are safe, we are building a sterilized habitat, characterized by the absence of informal social life in the streets. The result : the streets are barren, uninhabited.

## FERTILE PROCESSES

In a different context, we see examples of ordinary residential streets with no shops or commerce that are very lively. This fact in turn contributes to the safety of the place : children play in the street, the fences are not defensive. We can also see that people contribute to the upkeep and production of their street.

Here is an evocation of such a street:

*On this new block, where just after the construction there was nothing, we find new elements. A tree has grown and transforms the street, a wisteria vine envelopes a trellis. This entrance is now welcoming: a shed with open wood siding for bicycles and mailboxes, a tablet to put one's bags in order to open the door, a hedge to protect from prying eyes and to hide the garbage cans; a trellised vine protects this facade, where one finds a balcony, awning, blinds ... The frontages look a bit like gardens. You can leave toys, bicycles, things. Cats, dogs, birds like it there. There are places for do-it-yourselfers, where one can produce, repair or store things, or just to tinker. Benches from where one can watch the children play, or read the newspaper.*

Because of these plants, these additions, these activities, it is no longer the same home, it is no longer the same street. A real production took place after the buildings were built. Each resident continued to add bits and pieces. The accumulation of these small changes have had great effects. And as the seasons change so does the scene.

Initially, everything was not in place, but everything was done to allow these changes. We could say that this habitat is fertile.

## Second sites

I propose the notion of "second site" (*deuxième chantier*) to describe these productive processes that graft onto and metamorphose the habitat over time. When nothing happens, and nothing grows, the second sites are impossible. Years pass, nothing moves. The habitat is frozen, it is sterilized. When second sites can occur, our habitat evolves and continues to grow. Second sites can be very productive. Plants, if they have some space, are great allies, not because they are green, but because they produce a part of our habitat, almost on their own, spontaneously and free. If we can be active at the edges, build and change our frontage spaces, take care of our plants and familiar animals, even minimally, then a decisive part of the architecture of our habitat is produced.

## Spontaneity

Second sites are therefore doubly spontaneous. Plants and other natural contributions are spontaneous in the sense that it happens all by itself, growth occurs naturally, like a tree. As for ourselves, the habitants, we are also spontaneous - according to our inspirations and our desires we can *accompany* these processes. Taking care of the flora and fauna, hobbies and crafts, the use of water and air, all play a part in transforming our habitat. And we do so on our own initiative, according to our own will, creatively and naturally, as long as we are not hindered or prevented. The word spontaneous also evokes "improvised, wild, escaping the rules, and that which is outside of calculated expectations." Spontaneity corresponds to the chance dimensions of these processes over time. Chance does not mean danger.

## Room to move

To release these spontaneous processes on the edges of the street, there must be room to move. It's not just the facades, it is the land that is in front of the facade, the sidewalk in front of the home, and the things that happen here. These spaces are the interface between two distinct systems that characterize a street: the traffic on the one hand, and the adjacent habitants on the other. Within a few feet, sometimes within a few inches we pass from the very public to the very intimate. This interface forms a vital part of our environment but strangely no one knows in French what to call this space

between our front doors and the street. No adequate term exists. To increase awareness and as a tool for debate, I propose to use the term "frontage".

## **Frontages**

Frontage is a French word which fell into disuse but is still used in Quebec and which Americans use in urban planning. Much of this book is devoted to "frontages" as a key element of street life. To understand the importance of frontages, I gathered diverse examples from Germany, Holland, London, Montreal, USA, Japan ...

These frontages as we will see, can sometimes be abused and sterilized - nothing happens there: they are used as parking lots, as areas for trash, as green buffers (lawns, flower beds, etc), or they are veiled by screens ( green curtains, cedar hedges, opaque fences...). The entrances can even be condemned, suppressing a key element of frontages.

Contrarily, when the frontages are carefully tended to by the residents and second sites are deployed, frontages become active and adjacent private life is manifested in the street.

There are many factors involved and to learn more about them I suggest to review some actions by local residents and public authorities, which accordingly either sterilize, protect or reactivate the frontages.

## **Shelf principle**

The most carefully designed habitat is unsuitable to everyday scenarios and unforeseen situations, unless it leaves sufficient freedom to the habitants, and leaves open the possibility for second sites. Our habitat is then a work in progress, continually evolving and living. It is not a fixed, finished product that only requires maintaining, neither something to be demolished when it is used up or no longer suitable.

Transform, repair, improve: the process of reinvention specific to life is a key to building a more livable habitat and to appropriate it. For these reasons I think the architecture of a habitation and its frontages in order to offer spaces for action must in some respects remain un-finished, such as shelves ready and waiting to be filled,

## **Modal sharing of the roadway and active modes of transport**

The atmosphere of the streets depends on mastering the ways we use and park cars - road design and traffic rules. I devote a chapter summarizing many such experiences in European cities. They show us that we must prioritize walking and cycling, so-called active modes, and confirm that this is not only possible but necessary, being in fact the only lasting solution. Modal sharing of the street, more precisely the sharing between different modes of transport, needs to be rebalanced in favor of active commuting. Streets should be walkable and cyclable. Changing our ways of movement does not involve major modifications, but a coherent organization (parking and traffic, public transport, networks) that free up local regulations, and individual choice.

## ***Frontal sharing of the street and active frontages***

To reconquer the streets, rebalancing modal sharing is not enough. Another sharing of the street is involved, between those who live along the street - residents of the block, and those that pass through, the passers-by.

We can call it *frontal sharing*, as it involves the street frontages. Reactivating and reclaiming our streets, and making them an integral part of our habitat, does not, from a spatial point of view, necessarily require grand means nor spectacular actions. Giving space in our streets for habitants and providing frontages, changes our way of living on the street. It takes only a narrow strip of land on the banks of the street.

## ***Accompanying the self-production of streets***

"Accompany self-production" is an expression of social workers; it means to help people to produce for themselves a part of what they use or consume. A street which is well designed for balanced modal and frontal sharing is only half of the job. Self-production must be accompanied and chaperoned by the community. preparing the minds, providing know-how, and helping to solve social problems, conflicts between neighbors. Accompany does not mean doing in the place of, but helping to do. Accompanying is especially important if we start from a sterilized habitat. Refertilizing is a difficult process, it takes time because we must modify collective and individual priorities, but it is necessary. Once the informal social life of the street has taken roots, self-productions and second sites can work more or less by themselves. Mediations and arbiters in one form or another will always be necessary. Self-productions prove necessary in many cases in order to collectively build a friendly and lively habitat. They can be a substantial element of everyone's life, and represent an important resource in times of economic crisis. And plants are great allies.

### **The part of plants - gardening in public**

To mitigate conflicts and allow sharing in the streets, plants are incomparable allies. They intertwine our daily lives with their rhythm, their fertility, their calm and living presence. They help us by introducing an element of another order into the streets: the order of spontaneous natural processes. Our habitat is also their habitat.

There is a strong association between garden and frontage. In Germany and England there are no other words for frontage than *front garden* and *Vorgarten*. Why interpose a garden between the facade and the sidewalk? It is so hard sometimes to do without the power of plants, that in one way or another language imagines frontages as gardens.

Many streets do not need plants, street trees, or adjacent gardens. Spontaneous informal social life can still thrive in their absence. But when the situation is difficult, when the street life is sterilized, gardening the frontages can become a strategic **issue**.

### **RECONQUERING OUR STREETS - paths for action**

In short, what is at issue, is the balanced sharings of our streets:

#### **1- (re) balancing the modal sharing of the roadway**

(Sharing between different modes of travel: by foot, bike, car etc..).

If the modal split is skewed towards motorized traffic, it must be balanced to the benefit of walking and cycling in particular - active modes. The street must be walkable. And bikeable. We must build a coherent global system of movement that offers real alternatives to the car, and not only gives room for but also supports active transport.

#### **2- (re) balancing the frontal sharing of the street**

(Sharing between adjacent habitants and passers-by)

If frontal sharing is unbalanced, and unfair advantage is given to traffic or parking cars, the street life is canceled or sterilized. Balancing the frontal sharing means giving some leeway to adjacent habitants, and reactivating the frontages. If the frontages are nonexistent, they need to be recreated, and simple robust frontage architectures should be designed to allow second sites.

**3- A third type of sharing is also at issue** : sharing the production of the habitat between the formal and informal, between monetary economy and non-monetary domestic economy (home economics...). We must give back space for second sites and self-production of the habitat and its streets. We must know how to welcome second sites, both spatially and socially,. And therefore, know how to design flexible and robust architectures and how to write flexible and robust rules that regulate and restore possibilities for spontaneous actions to the habitants, and how to accompany them.

## OVERVIEW

We could set goals such as those already achieved by other neighborhoods or cities and which can serve as examples:

- « **modal sharing 50 / 50** » = travel by car should not represent more than 50% of trips in an urban system, the rest being active modes and public transport.

- « **frontal sharing 50 / 50** » = ensure that cars ( traffic lanes and parking spaces) do not occupy more than 50% of the street space, the rest being dedicated to public and private active frontages.

These goals require large scale, collective decisions.

If these goals seem far away, let us not be discouraged, there are no prerequisites. We can start by acting locally and experimenting wherever possible, at the scale of our block, our neighborhood. It begins at our doorstep. It is within our reach and we can concretely improve the situation in small steps, if we allow ourselves. A few principles could guide our actions :

**Brook principle:** small streams make a mighty river. No matter how small, every source counts. Nurture all initiatives and potential second sites no matter how trivial they may seem.

**Shelf principle:** design adjacent architectures a little bit like shelves to be filled with appropriate frontages that can host second sites.

**Gardening principle:** once the site is prepared, care must be taken to cultivate spontaneous processes - they must not be abandoned. Instead they must be welcomed and accompanied, they require incentives, mediation, arbitrations - the work of an attentive gardener.

The decline of our streets is not a new thing. But the economic crisis and development of the Internet and social networks transforms the situation even more. This new context emphasizes the need of rebalancing on both sides of the frontage line our public and private lives, to constitute a vibrant and practical public space. The streets are the heart of the issue. When streets are in bad shape, missing or dull, there is an opportunity to take action, as long as we are aware of possibilities and paths of action. This book is an attempt to contribute.

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