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OBSCURE SACRIFICES IN THE CITY. A CROSSROADS BETWEEN PSYCHOANALYSIS, ARCHITECTURE, URBANISM, AND ECONOMICS BASED ON THE TV SERIES *THE WIRE*

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RESUMEN

Multiple voices can be heard in this text compilation that brings together architecture, urbanism, psychoanalysis, and economics around *The Wire*, an American series set in Baltimore. In this crossroads, the effects of the market on public and private institutions are highlighted, as well as the transformations that spaces go through, generating highly segregated population sectors. The transformations of the urban fabric and their consequences on social groups are also pointed out. In this sense, readers will be able to grasp the shift from a way of understanding the city in an extensive space to the idea of an overlap of layers where the different strata live together.

PALABRAS CLAVES

Cities | Economics | The Wire (series) | Segregation | Power | Baltimore | Urbanism

INTRODUCTION: THE WIRE: FROM THE SCRIPT TO THE SCREEN AND FROM A CITY TO THE CITIES

Juan Pablo Duarte

Maldonado, Yapeyú, Bella Vista, Colonia Lola, Bajada San José, Ampliación Altamira, Renacimiento; the list could continue. It takes only 20 minutes to drive away from downtown Córdoba and reach any of these neighborhoods. There is hardly an inauguration of construction works, nor are major sporting events organized in these areas. Drug dealing, with the chaos and violence associated with it, has been spreading for decades in these parts of town. Little is known about life in these places, or the way economy affects family histories, households, the urban environment, and social bonds. More is known about deaths. To become informed, one has to skip the headlines and go straight to the police and crime section. What gets to the news are violent deaths for a few pesos or some grams of cheap drugs. But it is necessary to know the stories behind those deaths to understand much of what happens in Córdoba, the sacrifices the city demands of a majority whose voice does not appear in the

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newspapers. Voices and stories like these make up the building blocks of *The Wire* (HBO:2002-2008), a TV series about Baltimore City that allows us to better understand our city as well.

In *Lacrónica*, Martín Caparrós shares an idea about what is written and what does not cease not to be written in the media:

Today's journalism is looking at power. Those who are not rich or famous, or rich and famous, or busy, or soccer players can only make it to the newspapers with catastrophe's only option: different forms of death. Without disaster, the majority of the population cannot—should not—be news. Unless they merge into that collective, bundled form we call statistics (Caparrós, 2016, p.49).

It is no coincidence that *The Wire* synthesizes two extensive chronicles: *Homicide and The Corner*. Neither is it the fact that both were conceived by a journalist named David Simon. In the last season, Simon stages the sacrifice to which he himself was called upon by using the figure of one of his characters, Gus Haynes. From a fictional newspaper editorial, he tells and shows that the sacrifice demanded by the corporation that had just acquired it somehow resembled the sacrifices imposed by the other institutions of the city. The need to satisfy readers—many times by publishing scandals and lies—left no room for important stories in the media. Like drugs, the news ended up generating higher profits as they got worse, and so did politics, education, and justice in the city. In each season, *The Wire* tells the stories of those who wander through the different strata of the city, those who only appear in newspaper catastrophes and statistics. For this reason, it does not look like a newspaper; it is better than a newspaper.

As José María Rinaldi explains, *The Wire* allows us to understand the extent to which changes in the economy affect the way of life of a population, particularly from the moment the economy begins to function beyond the law, eroding a fundamental aspect of the social bond: work. As Cristian Nanzer and Marcelo Fiorito state, the urban fabric expresses the social fabric. *The Wire* shows social bonds—or their impossibility—from street corners. Segregation, the abandonment of public space, the processes of gentrification and *tugurization* result in the unstoppable proliferation of open-air drug markets that turn the west of the city into the “home of the misdemeanor homicide” (Simon, 2013).

In between journalism and literature, the chronicle deals with stories that should not be news. Television series associated with the name of David Simon can be seen as a double expansion: from the script to the screen and from a city to the western cities. In this article, *The Wire* serves as a common language for psychoanalysis, architecture, and economics, among other things, because the stories told in this TV series allow us to see the sacrifices that never cease not to be written, even in our own city

URBAN FABRIC AS AN EXPRESSION OF SOCIAL FABRIC

Cristián Nanzer & Marcelo Fiorito

A city is a plane of tarmac with some red hot spots of intensity and consumption.
Rem Koolhaas

The city is the place of promises.
John Berger

In the TV series *The Wire* we can see Baltimore as a portrait of civilization. The city is both the stage and the main character, the place from which it is possible to think about the way we live in the West of the new millennium or, as David Simon states, “fail to live together” (Simon, 2010).

The city represents the most complete collective construction of civilization; it is the supreme

form of history; there is no politics without the city, there is no existence of history without the history of the city; as Giulio Carlo Argan explains, the city is the sensitive form of civilization (1983).

Understanding the historical dimension of the city can give us guidelines to explain contemporary phenomena, making it possible to interpret processes and ruptures, repetitions and singularities, mutations and permanences. The city, understood as a historical construction, shows us in space the different strata of time consolidated by the magma of events. As Aldo Rossi says in his *Scientific Autobiography*, “I have always claimed that places are stronger than people, the stage more than the event. This possibility of permanence is the only thing that makes the landscape or constructed things superior to people” (1998).

The city is a collective construction which human beings devised to facilitate interactions among their peers; concentration and density increase the intensity of exchanges, favor the production of wealth, multiply the conception of ideas, build culture, diversify the interpretations of the world, help improve the quality of life. If humankind has a future on this planet, this will come from the reinvention of cities, not from their negation or disappearance.

The city constitutes a space platform, a techno structure where complexity develops and multiplies its synergies: it is the scenario where all the conditions of the contemporary world overlap with history, the place of plurality, coexistence, simultaneity, where the permanent tension between the State, the Market, and Civil Society is expressed.

For her part, Jane Jacobs defines the city qualitatively, when she states that a city is not its buildings, nor its streets or its infrastructures, but the interaction between its people (1961). The impossibility of this interaction in the context of late capitalism is one of the aspects shown by the city of Baltimore that we can see in *The Wire*.

Turned into open-air drug markets, the corners of this city are the “red hot spots of intensity and consumption”. Bubbles, a cocaine and heroin addict, gets his daily drug doses by selling junk. The abandoned social housing units in the eastern part of the city are ransacked on a daily basis by an army of addicts who, like *Bubbles*, compete for garbage. In *The Corner*, Simon and Ed Burns interview Gary McCullough—one of the junkies who inspired Bubbles’s character—to talk about the meaning of this practice that is reconfiguring urban space in Baltimore. It is not about the future satisfaction that drugs will provide; they have long stopped being effective. Those pieces of copper and the handful of dollars obtained in the foundry provide a satisfaction of another kind, the one that comes from getting something out of nothing (2011). This satisfaction cuts across the different characters in the series—politicians, police officers, teachers, judges, journalists, drug dealers, or port unionists—and it is what really determines the social bond or its impossibility in the city. The contemporary notion of city can be assimilated to a topography of programmatic agglomeration which abandoned the smooth two-dimensional and horizontal zoning of modernity to become a construction of geological layers of juxtaposed mestizo uses which provided thickness and space to the floor and ascended vertically, generating overlapping landscapes, in step with the multiplication of capital. This very same capital intensified the speed of its nomadism because of globalization, eroding the territory in its path, and when it migrates, it leaves other layers of cities, solid and anchored, on the margins, at the bottom, or at the hilltop, the increasingly extended landscape of the city’s socially excluded, the inhabitants of sustained underdevelopment, sub-inhabiting, surviving within the walls of the same city that expels them. The city can also be that immoral matter we are made of and it expresses itself sordid and truthful in space. The city is the mirror, the portrait in space—symmetrical, sublime, and atrocious—of the society we make up.

The contrast between the thriving city and the ghetto-city is a key axis in *The Wire*’s plot. As the children and grandchildren of the harbor workers sink into poverty and drug trafficking in the western part of the city, *Inner Harbor*—one of the architectural symbols of its industrial identity—

is transformed into a tourist attraction where businesses and the real estate market flourish. Earning profits in an intangible economy equally cuts across those who have managed to remain on the viable side of the urban space and the socially excluded. These are a mirror that brutally reflects the ways of survival in the metropolis of the new millennium.

The fabric of a city—understood as the physical framework which is a product of accumulation throughout its history, of the realities and the habitats diverse social groups occupy the territory with—is the way in which a community collectively constructs and expresses its ways of existing and dwelling in that space. This is defined by the grain or irreducible point of the warp and weft, the sign that ends up writing the urban text, containing the essential elements of a population's identity. The continuities and ruptures of the urban fabric determine the good health of the social fabric. The fabrics of a city sustain urban life; they define and express in its space the society that inhabits them. They make up the physical expression of the different ways of inhabiting; constant transformations take place on its basic structure, by dint of time and collective actions, giving form and character to the urban conglomerate; that is where history and the possibilities of new changes take place.

Our times redefine our way of interacting with the world, the *digital age*. We can explain it by using network or rhizome notions: the links between people are weaker than in the past; on the other hand, new relationships are easily multiplied, albeit much more fragile and volatile. Francois Ascher sums this up in the following words: “the contemporary social fabric changes its texture: it is made up of multiple fine threads, of all kinds, which do not take away its solidity, but give it much more fineness and elasticity” (2001, p.41).

Society is structured and functions as a network, or rather as a series of interconnected networks. Individuals move through different social universes. And this social fabric is inevitably reflected in the physical fabric: the city has become diffuse, fragmented into singularities, but it has hyperlinked virtually in homogenous layers. The Catalan writer Jorge Carrión refers to the city in *The Wire* as a polycentric network:

A network that expands, chapter by chapter, season by season, establishing links between spaces and between characters, without any of them being central. If Baltimore's symbolic capital has been plundered, if the entire city is a succession of tensions between slums, residential neighborhoods, autistic neighborhoods, and neighborhoods on the path to speculation, the only way to narrate it is through that polycentric network, creating a small, fleeting center in each encounter between people and places (2011, p. 188).

By studying the constitution and evolution of urban structures, we recognize specific problems which, in turn, are common to our cities: urban dispersion and socio-spatial segregation, gentrification and *tugurization* processes, abandonment of public space as a place for collective social exchange. Both private real estate developments and public housing schemes (mainly mono-functional and located on the periphery) have favored a fragmentation and spatial segmentation of different social groups, forming homogeneous zonings of “equals”, favoring archipelagos of differentiated access according to the characteristics of their inhabitants. Under these conditions, the “other” or those who are “different” become virtually suspicious or threatening to my condition and to the group I may belong to.

In large cities there are many causes that condition or deliberately make an attempt on their inhabitants' state of well-being: alienation, massification, anonymity, increasing pollution, alienation from leisure time, among many other reasons; but there is one in particular, social violence, which has a direct impact on the conditions of the domestic habitat and which is reflected in the explosive rupture of the social contract.

Where violence erupts, when the physical integrity and vital interests of the members of a social body are threatened, the survival of communities, their cultural identity, and their psychic balance are jeopardized.

There is a debate over whether urban violence comes from an erroneous perception resulting from the multiplication of events in the media or, by contrast, whether it reflects true dimensions of insecurity. In any case, alarm and fear have settled over the population and constitute a dissuasive component for the development of residential projects, either because of their location, in relation to the location of the city's red areas, or because of a typological conception (variations of the "bunker"), innumerable real estate developments mounted on this argument contribute to the expansion of exclusive segregation, elitist enclaves, or simply gated communities or neighborhoods for "equals". The geometric reproduction of "bunkers" in cities, equipped with all kinds of security systems, the exodus of the middle and upper classes toward these places, the abandonment of public space and central areas express not only how decisive this phenomenon is in the conformation of contemporary cities, but also how fear is one of the great real estate developers, a guarantor of fabulous earnings for those who profess it as an urban development strategy.

The notion of welfare requires defining thresholds below which it ceases to exist. Transformed into a war against the poor, one of the effects of the "War on Drugs"—initiated by Republican President Richard Nixon in 1971—is materialized in the distribution of the population that *The Wire* denounces. On the other hand, exclusion and the attempts to provide protection against its effects constitute the main incentive of the city's institutional economy.

The market dictates lifestyle trends that translate into some residential stereotypes. We can recognize in real estate sales announcements what kind of city and what type of consumer ideals are behind them; we can identify similar commercial trends linked with security imagery, status, the presence of nature, a certain nostalgic atmosphere of a suburban residential neighborhood. A certain escape from the city (a concept associated with insecurity, congestion, pollution, stress) is evoked to arrive at a differentiated space of comfort. In any case, these ads inform truthfully about what is happening and are revealed as commercial impulses that have to do with real desires of contemporary society.

If the contemporary paradigm is the crisis of sustainability, cities constitute the epicenter of the crisis. There are indicators that have weakened the illusion of progress based on the permanent increase in productivity and consumption. Some scientists speak of the "Anthropocene Epoch" (a new man-made epoch) to describe the current period in Earth's history since human activities have had a significant global impact on terrestrial ecosystems; the somewhat diffuse beginning of this could be traced to the Industrial Revolution (late 18th century). The concept refers substantially to the fact that terrestrial history and human history are already interconnected; today we have to question the relationship between culture and nature posed by modernity: it is the human being who models nature.

It is the interpretation of the complexity of the situation that makes it possible to think of a transformation. A critical reading of reality commits us to strengthening a will of transformation. In this context, we must promote actions inscribed in a compact city model in order to develop a dimension of full citizenship and civility.

A territorial strategy oriented toward a more compact development of the city, seeking to make use of the existing urban infrastructures and restraining its irrational expansion to a low density (which generates high infrastructure and service costs) by means of the recovery, revitalization, and/or rehabilitation of already-consolidated sectors. Density is the operative concept that summarizes this idea. Density not only as the relationship between occupying population and occupied territory, but in a deeper sense: density understood as quantity and quality of space and simultaneous or mixed uses available per person.

Assuming architecture as inextricably linked to the city, and considering it as substantially composed of equipment, fabrics, public space, and infrastructures, urban transformation will come from spatial and multi-programmatic actions in the city's fabrics, and it will promote

changes in its physiognomy (its physical structure), its behavior (uses, programs, ways of life), and its signification (its identity, appropriation, legibility, etc.).

Making a city over the city instead of expanding ghettos or urban enclaves in the territory involves intervening on that which already exists: a strategy of internal extension, avoiding the colonization of natural territories, infiltrating into a context with an already-established identity, adding diversity to the neighborhoods, and generating new dynamics. The promotion of a mixed, diverse, intense, collective, and, above all, denser habitation will provide us with platforms that guarantee a diverse lifestyle with higher thresholds of quality of city life for society as a whole.

THE WIRE THE ECONOMIC VISION IN THE HISTORICAL PANORAMA

José María Rinaldi

The world usually works under great economic paradigms that leave a mark in history, cultural and demographic processes, geopolitics, and people's daily lives in general. The economy has become a part of everyday life. If we do not understand the parallel march of socio-cultural and economic processes, someone will make decisions for us, but not in our favor. This should be a closing remark, but it is worth using it as a warning to understand both processes shown in *The Wire*.

Shifts in economic paradigms gathered a great speed in modernity. In 1982, Marshall Berman described modern life as the pre-modern nostalgia maintained over five centuries. From this perspective, he defined modernity as a radical threat to that history and its traditions. For this reason, he named his book *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (Marshall, 1989), paraphrasing Karl Marx. Thus he provided a dimension of the maelstrom of modern life, the great discoveries that changed our image of the universe and our place in it, the industrialization of production that transformed scientific knowledge into technology, the creation of new human environments and the destruction of the previous ones. An accelerated pace of life, new forms of power and class struggles, demographic alterations that banished millions of people to new lives stripping them of their ancestral habitat, increasingly powerful and bureaucratic states: all this takes root in modernity. A fast and chaotic world emerges in which people and institutions are determined by an ever expanding capitalist market, drastically fluctuating and now digitized. This fabulous break in economic evolution, which in the field of social sciences generated considerable debate about the end of modernity or the beginning of a post-modern stage, requires a brief exploratory analysis of the paradigm shift throughout time, its misfortunes, ironies, and ambiguities. This is the context in which *The Wire* is set.

The paradigm of classical capitalism had undisputed and "pure" validity until World War I. John Maynard Keynes's so-called "readaptation" gave validity to the model of industrial accumulation based on cheap energy until the 1974 "Oil Crisis". In this model, the populous city of Baltimore played a fundamental role in the industrial scheme as a port city—the second largest in the country—on the East Coast of the United States, a true gateway to immigration that fed its manufacturing industry and served as an output for industrial products. Baltimore played a fundamental role in the history of the United States, resisting the impositions of the British free trade scheme and imposing a development scheme that protected its industry to later integrate itself into the world. We only need to recall that the Battle of Baltimore was crucial in the Anglo-American War of 1812.

The paradigm shift generated by the "Oil Crisis" forced the reconversion of the city's productive system. From a scheme based on cheap energy, Baltimore adopted a productive vector with

the imprint of the scientific-technical revolution, favoring *process technologies* over *product technology*. This process spanned the remaining years of the 1970s and the whole 1980s—better known as the “lost decade”—to readapt the new production vector. On a political level, the United States would change colors. The Republicans would reach power under Ronald Reagan, adopting a strongly monetarist economic policy, which came to be known as “Reaganomics”. The entire industrial complex would move to the West Coast, and it would shift from the automotive and metal-mechanic industry—pride of the United States since Fordism’s heyday and the seed of the welfare state—to space technologies in the so-called “Strategic Defense Initiative” program, also known as “Star Wars”. Thus, the East Coast’s industrial complex began to feel the effects of the shift, not only in Maryland, where Baltimore is located, but also in other typically industrial cities like Detroit, today a bankrupt state.

The decline of manufacture—one of the foundations of “American pride”—would be expressed in the shift from the sectoral structure of Baltimore’s productive activity to services. In *The Wire*, the large-scale supply of drugs is portrayed as a true service activity with market rules. In *Lessons*, the eighth episode of season one, *Stringer Bell*—one of the drug market leaders in the eastern part of the city—takes a microeconomics¹ class to run his business efficiently.

The teacher explains the concept of elasticity of demand: “When a small change in price creates a large change in demand, demand is said to be elastic, but some products are inelastic, meaning a change in price does not affect demand. Some key factors that affect the inelasticity of demand are... what?” From his experience in the drug market, Stringer Bell answers that inelasticity is determined by desire and consumer need. A few minutes later, he explains to the managers of one of the businesses he uses to launder money that clients who go there should be treated as such, and not as the drug addicts they usually sell to. He bases his explanation on the fact that while the former consume an elastic product, the latter consume an inelastic one.

Scenes such as the one described above show this and other economic and socio-cultural processes in an excellent way. But even in a realm of postindustrial nostalgia, *The Wire* shows that “American pride”—despite the crisis this country is going through—is intact. The beginning of *The Target*, the first episode of the series, shows Snotboogie, a young man killed after repeatedly stealing the pot in the same dice game called *craps*. When a police detective asks his friends, “If every time *Snotboogie* would grab the money and run away, why’d you even let him in the game?” they answer, “Got to. This America, man”.

Socio-cultural processes go hand in hand with economic processes. This is why the validity of the postulates of the market, competition, and the role of the State, among other economic postulates, became totally obsolete with the paradigm shifts. Although economics is still taught with orthodox contents, these are far from offering possibilities for empirical testing. Product differentiation, the absence of the State, the concentration of economic power, the creation of needs, the absence of consumer sovereignty, and regulatory aspects are made evident in *The Wire*. These are some of the elements that led to the implosion of the model of capitalist accumulation and to the process of global crisis that started in 2008 and does not seem to have an end date.

This is why elusive answers are given to both the scourge of drugs and financial bubble effervescences: if the drug market were freed, the problem would end—which was the position held by the Nobel Prize-winning monetarist Milton Friedman—or that international financial crises are caused by government regulation. Perhaps John Kenneth Galbraith has given a more accurate answer. When asked, “What specifically has happened to the market?” he replies, “It suffers from a peculiar form of affection. Everyone loves it except as it applies to himself or herself or to the organization to which he or she belongs” (1979, p. 54).

¹Although the sign outside the classroom reads “Introduction to Macroeconomics”.

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