

1. Essential Reading



La transition urbaine ou le passage de la ville pédestre à la ville motorisée - by Marc Wiel

By Yann Dubois (Géographe)
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Marc Weil's *La transition urbaine ou le passage de la ville pédestre à la ville motorisée* sheds light on the impact of "facilitated mobility" on the city, including the transition from compact cities with pedestrian metrics to spread out, "splintered" ones founded primarily on car metrics, and the search for a new cultural and institutional identity.

Cities transformed

Our way of being mobile has radically changed over the past two centuries. While the 19th century experienced a first revolution with the arrival of the train, it was the automobile that marked the 20th. The new mobility made possible by the car – easier, faster and free from the constraints of fixed transit lines – contributed to changing the city both morphologically and in terms of the lifestyles of its inhabitants. A number of concepts have appeared to describe these changes and the new spaces on the outskirts of cities undergoing urbanization, including "peri-urbanization," "Zwischenstadt" (Sieverts 1997), "Edge city" (Garreau 1991), "Città diffusa" (Secchi 2005) and "ville-émergente" (Dubois-Taine, Chalas 1997). However and more importantly, today it is the definition of the city itself that is being challenged. Certain characteristics of the traditional city, such as density, centrality and social heterogeneity, are disappearing. At the same time, the urban sprawl phenomenon calls into question the governance of urban areas, which often exceed the administrative boundaries of the city at the center of the agglomeration. Consequently, functional and residential areas no longer correspond to institutional areas, thus calling for new forms of inter-municipal cooperation.

From pedestrian metrics to car metrics

Marc Weil devotes the first part of his book to the destabilization of the “inherited city” by the changing conditions of mobility and the transition from “limited mobility” to “facilitated mobility.” In the first chapter he tackles the theme of housing, retracing the different phases that have marked the growth of cities and planning, focusing in particular on the traditional city (i.e. dense, “pedestrian” cities) and housing development before addressing peri-urbanization. One of the key points of this work, he explains the peri-urbanization phenomenon by the abundance of affordable buildable plots rendered accessible by the spread of the car: “We have blamed the popularity of the individual house on Monsieur Chaladon [1], on new lifestyles, on the substituting of qualitative aspirations for quantitative needs, etc., but little on facilitated mobility’s impact on the land market” (p.58). Thus has “facilitated mobility” allowed city dwellers to find housing on the outskirts of cities, mainly in the form of individual homes, without necessarily increasing their travel time budgets for home-work commutes. This centrifugal movement in which essentially middle and upper classes leave the traditional city for the outskirts fosters a certain spatial segregation of the city, leaving the disadvantaged classes in the city center. This process poses an additional problem, since a significant portion of the charges resulting from increased mobility in cities is based on those who reside in the center, not those who can use and benefit from this opening towards new areas to urbanize.

Like housing, commerce has also undergone profound changes in terms of its spatial organization. Weil shows how commercial areas are built near major roadways on the outskirts of cities, and thus enjoy the space they need as well as increased catchment potential thanks to “facilitated mobility,” to develop a new form of concentrated commerce: hypermarkets. He also shows the historic role of commerce in organizing the city and citizens’ identification with it.

These new suburban shopping centers, often dissociated from residential and recreational functions, can no longer play this structuring role and challenge the centrality so inherent to the business structures of city centers. While “urban transition” - the shift from the walking city to motorized city - has reached its peak phase with respect to housing (peri-urbanization), the author feels that for business, it would only be at a phase that corresponds to housing developments, meaning a functionalist location strategy rather than a post-industrial one, to which the author equates peri-urbanization. For him, the future of retail space lies in the response to qualitative aspirations and search for social differentiation, eventually allowing for the involvement of shopping centers in regional organization. To conclude this first section, Weil looks at movement management and the urban dynamics that result from it. He notes in particular a profound lack of anticipation regarding the impact of public intervention on infrastructures. Thus, the improvement of road infrastructures, for instance, helps to meet a need but at the same time increases the demand by allowing more vehicles to travel faster, which then calls for further improvements, etc. In a context where the construction of new infrastructures proves increasingly complicated (pollution, financial costs, opposition by residents), Marc Weil proposes a paradigm shift in movement management; instead of responding to the demand by developing new infrastructures, he proposes reducing the demand most notably by reducing the speed at which we travel.

Peri-urbanization: What political responses?

In the second part of the book, the author, drawing on his own experiences attempts to link the aforementioned changes in the city with the roles of different political and institutional actors, as well as develop proposals aimed at confronting the problems faced

by “motorized cities.” In analyzing the role, implication and resources at different institutional levels (national, departmental/regional and city), as well as the association of municipalities in dealing with peri-urbanization, he shows that some of the tools and skills/financial means currently used are not capable of solving the problems caused by the expansion of the city into the outskirts. According to him, a better way of managing the city and mobility is by implementing coordinated policies, not technological innovation; above all, it is the difference between the functional and institutional areas created by facilitated mobility that poses a problem. In the last chapter, Marc Weil proposes several courses of action to better control facilitated mobility’s impact on cities. These proposals center around three axes: harnessing the peri-urban (promoting the development of new centralities in peri-urban areas that are easily accessible by public transportation by land planning), reconstructing the existing city (strengthening the business structure of downtown areas, redesigning housing developments and urban wastelands) and shifting the usual levers of government initiatives (setting up new structures that better correspond to daily living spaces, “rehabilitating” urban planning to regulate private initiatives, and better allocating the financial burden resulting from “facilitated mobility” to those who truly reap its benefits).

Contribution to research on mobilities

Marc Weil’s *La Transition Urbaine* provides a thorough discussion of peri-urbanization and the city in general. The author does not merely describe the processes associated with these phenomena, but outlines a series of proposals in an attempt to restructure the city and its lands. While some may be seen as bold and may displease the general public (like reducing demand by reducing speed), they have the merit of asking pertinent questions and opening up discussion. One can, however, criticize the author for having given too small a place to the definition of the book’s two core concepts: facilitated mobility and the agglomerated city. Nonetheless, it is unquestionably an important contribution to urban issues, and the courses of action the author proposes are still valid today, ten years later, although the context has changed. City centers have seen a certain revival since the beginning of the new millennium, with increased renewal efforts and their populations on the rise. Similarly, public transportation and other modes such as bikes (with the success of systems like “Velib’”) are becoming increasingly popular in downtown areas. Weil’s negative, highly-critical view of urban development can as such be nuanced.

About the author

Marc Weil is an urban planner and, more notably, was director of the urban planning office for the greater Brest region. He is author of numerous works on the city, mobility and land-use planning issues.

[1] Minister of Public Works and Housing (1968-1972), Albin Chalandon greatly contributed to the construction of new highways as well as being a strong proponent of individual housing.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up

their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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Géographe

Yann Dubois is a Doctor of Science from the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) and holds a Master's degree from the University of Neuchâtel in Geography and

German studies. He wrote his doctoral thesis on mobility and borders at the Laboratory of Urban Sociology at EPFL, where he also worked as a scientific collaborator. After a two-year experience in the urban planning department of the City of La Chaux-de-Fonds (Switzerland), he now works for the Mobil'homme office and at the University of Lausanne as a scientific collaborator. His expertise and research are focused on various aspects of mobility, such as modal choice, high mobility, individual mobility potentials, urban planning & transport coordination, and more broadly urban and territorial issues.

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