



Landscapes of Concrete, Periphery and Memory

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It is difficult to identify with a landscape of a modern city, as it is almost impossible to find personal signs of identity in it. Literature urges us to reflect on public spaces, such as Javier Pérez Andújar's novel *Paseos con mi madre* (Tusquets, 2011), an autobiographical journey through concrete-filled neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Barcelona. This landscape is a shared element of the great cities. Today, a series of new urban development ideas are emerging from feminist groups suggesting alternatives to these barren squares.

San Adrián will continue to be closer to Blade Runner than Barcelona
Javier Pérez Andújar

It is difficult to identify with the landscape of a modern city, impossible to find personal signs of identity in a contemporary city.¹ Literature urges us to reflect on public spaces, such as Javier Pérez Andújar's novel *Paseos con mi madre* (Tusquets, 2011), in which he undertakes an autobiographical journey through concrete-filled neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Barcelona where he spent his childhood and youth. A landscape shared by all big cities. Places that were the entry and reception gate during industrial development, years when many left their rural place of origin in search of an opportunity in the city, where today "the original immigrants who managed to escape these places have left the bed warm

for those now arriving from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe; but with thirty, forty years of accumulated heat and humidity, piled up like sheets. The people who arrived from the poorest parts of Spain are ceding their space to the people arriving from the poorest parts of the world." (Pérez Andújar, 2011: 67).

People in search of opportunities, as difficult to achieve today as they were in the past, neighbourhoods that leave their inhabitants feeling profoundly uprooted. Pérez Andújar casts his critical eye. Walking is about narrating recent history from the perspective of those characters that populated the landscape of the other non-official history. Generations that ended up in no man's land, without the

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rooting of parents who revived the story of their ancestors and without integrating into the new habitat. Being in no man's land, linked to the land of failure, the place of those who did not achieve their goal. "Barcelona is the corpse bride of flamenco" (2011: 135). Walks of return, exercises in memory; memory of the transition that so many corpses left in the suburbs, children of the frenetic economic development policy.

Javier, "Isabel's son" – as he calls himself in this first literary walk through Sant Adrià de Besòs –, returns again and again to these spaces – a term he detests – where his life played out. He is a narrator who inhabits a strange temporal order in which he describes his past to us using future proposals: "Time does not matter [...] because everything, present, past and future, is happening or being at the same time, and this is how it must be written. Everything, everything, everything, at the same time" (2011: 80). He writes his past in the conditional, but the story shows how unconditional or predictable it was.

Javier describes the events of the last fifty years – the writer's age –, in an analysis that tells the story of the recent history of Spain, the end of the Franco years and the Transition, from the perspective of marginal people

Javier describes through his own feelings the shared place of a generation of men of the outskirts: "What we are going through are the blocks of twenty-five years of peace and thirty of degenerated concrete" (2011: 45). He provides numerous cultural references that convulsed a generation, "a photo of a time when ordinary everyday people preferred to go out in a suit rather than a tracksuit" (2011: 142). He describes the events of the last fifty years – the writer's age –, in an analysis that tells the story of the recent history of Spain, the end of the

Franco years and the Transition, from the perspective of marginal people. Javier will escape from there, be a philologist and fight to conquer the power of culture "because at school what I saw is that words are power" (2011: 28). His is a fragmented narration, anachronistic, which begins in the present walking with his mother and goes back to past moments, with a specific temporal order, merely a return: "Every week I return to the periphery, to the river, to the blocks, to the motorway, to the rail tracks, each time in search of a dose of myself" (2011: 14). A dose that is never enough because the origin is something more than a place, and identity is not just a landscape.

With fine irony he talks about the changes in that Barcelona that is not Barcelona: "Now there are ponds with frogs where before there were ponds with rats" (2011: 13). The walk is the search for an identity impossible to find in the city, an exercise in recognition in distant places, while proximity elicits amazement. This is how the protagonist feels: despite his progression, his realised opportunities, he feels he has remained in no man's land, linked to the earth of failure, a workers' struggle that did not manage to achieve its goal. In this sense, the novel is a process of investigating collective memory. Memory, his memory, leads and guides us through other current struggles against alienation because the motives for fighting, multiple faces and mirrors of the peripheral condition, remain. So let's reflect through the urban development that determines and identifies us on the condition of barren places that despite being in front of our Mediterranean Sea, so luminous and inhospitable, turn their back on it. "Barcelona has the *Mare Nostrum* at its feet and erects a *Maremagnum* to cover it. It has no need to look at the Mediterranean because it has externalised that task, which is now the responsibility of the statue of Columbus on his column like Simeon Stylites" (Pérez Andújar, 2011: 43).



Power Plant in Sant Adrià de Besòs (IEMed Collection).

The Mediterranean, far from being a border between cultures, has formed a shared space and point of fusion of civilisations where cultural currents have flowed from one shore to the other. The customs, lifestyles and settlements have been conditioned by a shared climate and a culture that have the same genesis. The particularities of the terrain favour an urban development that is characteristic of the towns in the Mediterranean basin. A journey through the Mediterranean countries observing their traditional constructions shows that there are numerous shared elements, both in the materials and the construction systems. A house in a town like Mojácar is similar to those of the Greek island of Santorini or the Tunisian Sidi Bou Said. Architecture and urban development are the synthesis of the culture in which they

develop. Despite the orography of the Mediterranean coast, with an unevenness that demands that the space be optimised, the public square has been the popular place of expression, while always conditioned by the proximity of an outstanding building: a place of worship or a market. However, the big cities have adapted to the customs of capitalism and the architecture of their urban centres now only invites you to enter their shops and circulate. Town planning was never neutral and power determined the formation of cities from their beginnings. Behind any planning decision there is always an intention that prioritises economic or political questions.

In *City of Fears, City of Hopes*, Zygmunt Bauman notes an increasingly more patent reality in almost all the cities of the world.

This concerns areas whose inhabitants have a kind of universal connection, areas close to the *valuable* places of the urban landscape, to distant regions and, at the same time, completely isolated from places and people very close but economically distant (2006: 17). Quite similar to the abysmal distance, in Pérez Andújar's novel, between Barcelona and Sant Adrià, a town on the outskirts of Barcelona. Moreover, we increasingly see how in the world there are entire dwellings or buildings that only serve to protect their inhabitants. We see this in Barcelona, but also in Rome, Istanbul or Cairo: entire neighbourhoods where life goes on beyond the beating heart of citizens. It is a common characteristic of all cities that they "are places where strangers meet, remain in each other's proximity" (Bauman, 2003: 5). The stranger, by definition, creates uncertainty, and fear tends to be offloaded onto outsiders. Barriers are erected around houses, blocks of flats, parks, squares... The new aesthetic of security imposes vigilance to fortify an unstable existence. The cities increasingly suffer from this segregation and, if they used to protect their inhabitants, today they are more associated with danger than security. The technological innovations in urban development or architecture of security are no more than the modern equivalent of the moats and towers of the old defence walls. But isolation only increases fear: the more unknown and incomprehensible the Others, the more terrifying we find them.

Segregation in residential neighbourhoods is a profitable business for builders. The modern city of the 20th century differentiated places by uses. Property pressure expelled unprofitable uses from the city, and the peripheries mutated into housing estates "where the urban disappears in a succession of dwellings or a succession of spaces for consumption, leisure or work. 'Non-places' or spaces where nothing happens, where there is

no possibility of meeting or exchange" (Velázquez, 2015: 76). A town planning strategy different to the current one, which creates open and hospitable public spaces where different people can share experiences, would help strengthen social links. Mutual understanding comes from shared experience, and this can only happen in a shared space of coexistence. In his novel, Pérez Andújar talks about identity, about memory... the memory that recovers ideals and prepares for the fight. There are still numerous squares blighted by concrete, where the legacy continues, but "there is nothing more revolutionary than a square" (2011: 60).

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In his recent text "Citizen Activism and Mediterranean Identity" (2016), Gianluca Solera explores the rebellious vitality of the Mediterranean. Activist movements since 2011 throughout the Mediterranean basin have generated shared social, political and economic protests against austerity. A revolutionary fuse that spread from Tahrir Square to Puerta del Sol, and Kasbah or Syntagma Squares, creating imaginaries and organisational practices that changed the policies of both shores forever. Precariousness has united distinct identities, classes and generations that once again occupy public spaces in collective actions. A more open and socially-spirited Mediterranean is possible and recent demonstrations like those in Barcelona in favour of the rights of refugees and migrants reveal an authentic socially-spirited Mediterranean identity. We are the result of the mixing of bloods and stocks. The soul of

cities such as Barcelona, Naples and Marseilles is marked by the historical permanence of foreign communities. A reflection on the identity of Mediterranean cities and societies must include this diversity with all its cultural wealth (Angelilli, 2017).

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The heterogeneity of people and the uses they make of the public space must be taken into account in planning. For some years, feminist groups have proposed alternatives to these “barren squares of concrete that do not encourage you to play, or to stop, but to pass through, to walk, to go on producing or consuming” (Alzola, 2017). The lack of trees is only useful for watching over the square. Another kind of city is possible, “the main objective is to make neighbourhoods and cities with adequate networks for the everyday life of all the people who coexist in a territory” (Muxí et al., 2011: 113). The facilities must be interwoven into citizen life so they create vibrant streets. Let us build inclusive cities that take into account environmental aspects and social relations, so that they are a tool of transformation of society and, to this end, all citizens must participate in the definition of the urban model. “It is about building, or rebuilding, neighbourhoods that do not perpetuate the differences and inequalities of gender, class, race or age. [...] The physical spaces condition the right of the city, understood according to article I of the European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City as a collective space that belongs to all inhabitants, who have the right to find the

conditions to realise themselves politically, socially and ecologically, assuming obligations of solidarity” (Muxí et al., 2011: 107).

Urban design is not only a question of aesthetics. Borders are not built on differences; rather it is the borders that build differences. If we look around we see that no two people are the same, each and every one of us is made of differences. This is our essence. The spirit of the city is formed precisely from daily contact between strangers, from small everyday interactions and from fleeting words and greetings that smooth out the rough edges of life. Let us build an integral urban development that enables relations, communication and celebration... “for a song to life that is deep and wonderful like the human condition” (Pérez Andújar, 2011: 155).

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