# The single-house issue in the society of individuals

## Residential aspirations and technical doctrines

**Philippe Genestier**

One only has to listen to the announcements of national and local authorities and town planning professional organisations to hear recurrent hostility expressed towards one-family housing and urban sprawl. But, at the same time, and for the last thirty years at least, regulations concerning land-use and home ownership finance mechanisms have generally been in favour of low-rise housing. How do we explain this contradiction? What function can such announcements fulfil? To offer some input in reply to these questions, let us examine the political role attributed to one-family housing and let us compare the appropriateness of proclaimed town planning principles in relation to the practices of urban and residential space of our contemporaries.

### One-family housing: a political and town planning countermodel[1]?

For roughly a century, the official French town-planning model has been that of the organised built-up town. It can be either dense and concentrated, in accordance with the morphological type of "the European Town"[2], or more spaced out and with more nature present[3], but their common feature is that positive value is attributed to public and commercial facilities, as elements of centrality producing a centripetal effect. In the first decades of the 20th century, whether they were "modernists" or "culturalists" (to use the categories suggested by Françoise Choay), town planners promoted garden cities or large housing developments as alternatives to low-rise housing. Currently, *via* the "urban project" and "urban architecture" model, they are defending urban continuities and densities, by referring to Haussmann's city. Town-planning doctrine therefore remains constant in its hostility – with a few exceptions (Roux, Bauer, 1976) – towards one-family housing and scattered urban development even though, in practice – due to market forces – town planners often contribute to its development *via* estates. New towns, for example, have of course been cobbled together and located far from the centre of old conurbations, but they were from the beginning marked by the construction of large blocks of flats with innovative architecture supposed to engender a new kind of architecture conducive to communal life (Devisme, 2005). As for plot subdivisions, small land ownership and divestiture in the private sphere supposed to go together, they are seen as the result of reprehensible speculative activity leading to dysfunctional, anti-aesthetic, anti-economic and anti-social urban growth. Furthermore, environmental arguments have recently begun to reinforce the denunciation of this type of urban growth. In short, town planners generally see the one-family house as a town-planning disaster, and also, and perhaps above all, morally blameworthy and politically catastrophic[4]. In fact, the authorities regularly endeavour to provide an alternative to sparse urban growth, which in their eyes is a countermodel; hence the famous words of General de Gaulle to Paul Delouvrier as they flew over the Parisian suburbs in a helicopter: "bring some order to this chaos!"

1. We must explain that it is a counter-model from a strictly doctrinal point of view, because in practice its effect was and remains modest.

2. Up to the 1950s, most town planners had as a model the city polarised around its historic hub, increasing in concentric circles, each ring road being expanded to absorb the suburbs.

3. This considers mainly the French, and not international, town-planning point of view, as in Anglo-Saxon culture, from its origins to *New Urbanism*, there is expressed a suspicion of the dense city and a search for solutions in reconstituting a community view outside the industrial city. In addition, in all western countries there has existed an urbaphobic attitude for which peri-urbanisation has sometimes appeared to be the lesser evil.

4. Of course, it was not always so, garden cities attest to this.

AKG-images

Balthus, La rue.

In contrast, in some countries, notably the United States, the detached one-family house on its own plot of land represents the residential ideal. Is not the one-family house, as isolated and distant from others as possible, the model for F. L. Wright's *Broadacre City* (although in fact, proximity and connection to traffic infrastructures play a fundamental role)? What are the reasons for disapproval here, or appreciation there, of the one-family house freely located in the territory[5]? In order to understand this volte-face of the judgement made on these types of urban growth, one must see them in the broad context of a cultural tradition and, more precisely, ideological inclination that value the autonomy and uniqueness of individuals. The reluctance (linked just as much perhaps to political orientation as to professional ideology) towards urban sprawl and individualism must be seen in relation to the philosophical and moral postulates that overdetermine urban issues.

The social and progressive thinking dominant in the 1960s[6] led town planners and sociologists to be, by and large, in unison with government public action[7] and, on the whole, sing the praises of collective housing supposed to "modernise social structures and mentalities" (Clerc, 1969). Then, criticism of large housing estates began to grow in the 1970s, partially and temporarily by extension rehabilitating low-rise housing, which allows residents to

appropriate their space[8]. Also at this time a policy of support was launched for home ownership in low-rise estates. Although there already existed a favourable attitude to one-family housing, it was for no less ideological reasons. This was attested to by a speech given by President Giscard d'Estaing in Orleans in July 1977: "we must move on from this period when we built mainly rented accommodation in apartment buildings. We must now encourage the build-

---

5. In fact, in the United States *urban sprawl* more often comprises estates than fringe development. On the other hand, the Italian *Citta diffusà*, and the French *Ville étale* are characterised by a greater dispersal of constructions. Thus, according to CERTU, around 80% of building permit applications concern *communes* without a PLU (land development plan).

6. A thinking that the political scientist P. Muller (2000) called the "*référentiel modernisateur* [modernising ethos]" in force in territorial policies during France's Glorious Thirties.

7. Michel Amiot (1986) showed how much sociologists shared with the High Civil Service structural and functional analysis grids of society and forecasts of its probable and desirable future. With the result that beyond the surface oppositions between the Gaullist state and Marxist sociologists there prevailed a socio-historic representative identity.

8. The work of Haumont and Raymond on low-rise housing (1966) had a wide audience at this time and to a great extent fed the critique of modernist and functionalist town planning.

ing of one-family housing, which contributes to social order, and help all the people of France own property because this fosters a sense of responsibility in everyone". Such sentiments, taken up by minister Albin Chalandon, now appear as a parenthesis. Because in the 1980s-90s the condemnation of one-family housing made a return through a discourse around the "dispersed town", "urban fragmentation" and "social segregation". Now, it is mainly the theme of the "sustainable town" that is providing arguments and incriminations serving to condemn this type of housing and urban growth[9]. During the last twenty-five years, despite changes in political power, we find, with the odd nuance, the same government condemnation of urban sprawl.

The common feature of the different challenges to low-rise housing is that by this means it seems possible to oppose liberal thinking and individualism. One example, amongst many others, of such use of urban space is provided by an INUDEL seminar held in Isle-d'Abeau in October 2000 entitled "Housing in the face of changing ways of life. Towards a town planning of the house?" The text presenting the overall issue was formulated in these terms "a house for all *but*[10] what kind of town for all?" This simple formulation shows that in the register of town-planning ideas, one-family housing arouses concerns. Another, more caricatural, example of negative connotations can be found in the concluding pages of the work by Jean-Pierre Sueur (1999), which accuses the house on its plot of land, "hidden behind its thuja hedges", of being "a sanctuary of withdrawal and rejection of the other".

Thus, the dense, centripetal and socially mixed town is an officially sanctioned spatial, social and cultural form. A community grouped by and around its institutions (embodied by the belfry, royal square, parade ground, town hall, historic quarter, etc. in the centre of the city) is seen as being the materialisation of the political ideal of social unity; an ideal that comes just as much from Christianity – including with the conservative and organic meaning that this confers on the idea of social unity – as from Socialism.

The question of the town, its form and its scope, is therefore determined by the heavy symbolic burden placed on it by the political imagination. To the extent that figures that are counter to the "town" are regularly decried, in particular that of low-rise housing contributing either to peri-urban sprawl, or to affinity grouping contravening social diversity.

The issue of one-family housing therefore occupies a special place in public debates in France as, in addition to the urban and technical problems it undoubtedly raises[11], it also serves as a vehicle for many social representations and ideological presuppositions which find in it a preferred opportunity for expressing themselves. But this is not without consequences, quite the contrary, as town-planning problems are being overdetermined by concerns that, *de facto*, go beyond them. In other words, one-family housing, which raises both the geographical and environmental question of peri-urbanisation, and the sociological question of individualism, is saturated with symbolic issues; issues the explanation of which seems to me to be a precondition for any reasoned analysis[12].

Already, in the 1960s the urban sociologist Henri Raymond was wondering why in France what he would later call the "technostructure"[13] had in 1945 chosen collective housing when most of society was stating its preference for one-family housing, and when, at the end of the war in other countries in Western Europe, notably in Great Britain and Belgium, reconstruction was taking place mainly in the form of one-family housing; Eastern Europe, on the other hand, was building collective housing en masse.

Likewise, in 2000 France passed the Urban Solidarity and Renewal Law (SRU), one of the objectives of which is to combat urban sprawl, with the space and energy consumption it incurs. The preamble to this law states the desire to encourage density and compactness, and to promote the "Town" and "public space", designed as places that foster human contact and civility. In fact, the text of the SRU is quite ambivalent, playing both on new arguments, of an environmental type ("sustainability", "energy and space conservation") and more traditional political arguments (the Town as a place for "civic participation" and for drafting a local "project"). But what is common to both these registers of argument in the SRU, is that, on the one hand, they index their imagination on a homogeneous and cohesive vision of the social, and on the other hand convey a spatialist vision relating the density of social and civic cohesion to the density of the built environment and

---

9. Of course, the Minister for Social Cohesion J.-L. Borloo says that he is less hostile to low-rise housing than to the lack of social diversity, and his proposal for the 100,000-euro house leads *de facto*, just like the 0% loan, to building far out of town centres. But at the same time, the Ministry of Infrastructure is increasing the number of initiatives and statements against urban sprawl.

10. My underlining.

11. Amongst the problems emerging from specialist analyses, we can list, non-restrictively, those relating to land and real estate, density, roads and services, transport, mobility, hybrid engines and accessibility to jobs and public or private services; but also those concerning savings and indebtedness of households, types of finance, assisted or otherwise, the place of housing in the family project and the social strategy of families, their lifestyles, modes of consumption and entertainment, social distinctiveness strategies, etc.

12. Such clarification is a task with limited scope, of course! It is a task that is nevertheless necessary, as the history of town planning shows the damage that can be done to the validity of developments by the fact of subjecting truly urban problems to political considerations in respect of which, very often, planning is foreign and powerless.

13. The concept of "technostructure", coined by economic science, defines a cluster of interests and cohesion of views bringing together economic, administrative and political elites, working convergently, saturating the democratic space, i.e. by imposing a dominant thinking delegitimising those who do not adhere to it.

public institutions.

One might think that the attitude towards the town and peri-urban one-family housing was resuming the progressive/conservative divide. There has of course long existed a divide between the modernists and the traditionalists, the former admiring the town, the latter defending the countryside. But nowadays, mainly because the almost widespread urbanisation of the population, ways of life and employment make challenging the town obsolete, the dividing line has moved between those who are favourable towards the compact, dense town, and those who state a preference (or show it simply through their habits) for the house and as a consequence for the peri-urban.

In fact, it appears that the way in which the issue of one-family housing is raised partly uses the left/right divide, mainly concerning the status of real estate. But it is also permeated with a supra-partisan imagination: by means of the one-family housing issue, it is about reaffirming the prevalence of the political or, at least (this is our main hypothesis) trying to combat the loss of social credit of the political.

## Modern society, urban society, individualistic society

Let us first note that there is a special link between the process of urban growth and the process of individualisation. For over a century, French, German and American sociologies[14] in particular have been making a strong link between the two phenomena[15]. However, what kind of urban growth does this involve, dense or dispersed? And what kind of individualism - universalist and participative (*i.e.* republican) or environmental and "subtractive" (*i.e.* democratic) – does it involve? In the French cultural tradition and in the range of ideologies present in it, how do relations between the different types of individualism and the different forms of urban growth become problematic?

The republicans, (almost) orphans of the national matrix and the progressives having (almost) kissed goodbye to the idea of revolution, have recently been to an extent falling back on the town. For them it symbolises social cohesion and legitimate public order. It provides a reference image enabling one to talk about a society unified by and around public institutions which occupy both topographically and imaginarily a central, magnetic position, in accordance with the national narrative. With the result that if there is a change of scale, the structure of political discourse will continue. Likewise, the praise of the metropolis, its cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism that it arouses, its internationalism and universalism. The theme of "right to the town" is then put forward to denounce in spatial terms social injustices: exclusion, discrimination, segregation. Defending the cause of the town and its urbanity means in

particular defending the cause of the new banished oppressed (Delarue, 1989). Here the town represents an ideal of sociality and a model of "togetherness", of "making society", which is no longer counterpointed by the countryside (to which only a few reactionaries still refer), but mainly by the suburban council estates, peri-urban low-rise housing and by the different modes of exclusion, voluntary or forced, interpreted as communitarianist threats. And, in this way, the distinctive features of *citadinité* (belonging to and in a city) have become positive, i.e. individualistic emancipation, anonymity, differentiation for everyone of spheres of existence, plurality of social roles and reflexivity (Delarue, 1989). However, city life was long considered detestable, both by conservatives and progressives, since it was associated with the bourgeois spirit (in both senses of the term: city dweller and owner), and consequently it was supposed to strengthen merchandisation, exploitation, alienation, superficiality and amorality[16].

In short, the town formerly regarded with suspicion by supporters of a Strong State (Ascher, 1998 and Wachter, 2001) has recently become synonymous with progress and allows reaffirmation of an ideal of man's perfectibility. This ideal is expressed thus: man is naturally good but is corrupted by pride and envy. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the city encourages these failings: Paris is for him the capital of luxury, frivolity, greed… In short, of individual egoism. And public virtue has to stand against these private vices. But how do we give consistency to this salutary order without a firm political will? It was the nation, the product of both history and reason, which for a short while embodied this salutary political order. But at a time when the nation remains sullied by the nationalist risings of the first part of the 20th century and decentralisation at the bottom and Europeanisation at the top are eroding the national principle itself, which socio-historical operator is capable of such a task? To put it another way, progressive thinking proceeds from an artificialist, Promethean concept of the world, in so far as the human and social world is understood as a construct that owes nothing to "natural" nature nor "human nature" which leads to the social jungle. But in order to exist, this artificialism needs a model that enables representation of a positive collective order and constituent political will. But, after the eclipse of the nation

---

14.  Let us remember that at the origin of socialist thinking is the concern aroused by the destruction of traditional belongings and solidarities following the political, industrial and urban revolutions of the 19th century.

15.  So, for example, Louis Wirth defined the city as a "dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals" and he explained that "the larger, the more densely populated, and the more heterogeneous a community, the more accentuated the characteristics associated with urbanism" (Grafmeyer, Joseph 1984, p. 260).

16.  From Marx to Zola, we can find many traces of progressive abhorrence of the city, symbol of bourgeois order.

AKG-images

Edward Hopper, Cape Code, *Evening*

and industry, in the market of stereotypical ideas and images there were few available substitutes. With the result that during the 1980s-90s we heard talk of the city, artificial object if ever there was one, as "melting pot of civility", of "citizenship", of "public spirit", of "civilisation". The large city, real, dense and cohesive, one that is neither ghetto suburb, dispersed urban growth, nor secure estates, was then elevated to the status of big new (geo)political player on the stage of history: there were myriad discourses, for example, on the fact that at the time of globalisation, the "metropolises", *Global Cities*, would be the engines of culture and economy in the contemporary world! In short, for its supporters today, the idea of man's perfectibility is only rarely associated with the city[17].

Town planners have eagerly seized upon the new political status attributed to the city. This was in line with their professional culture, which, in France, often leads them to define themselves as technicians of public interest[18]. In this respect, they say that they are opposed to low-rise housing, as the latter seems to contradict the former. Such a concept is rooted in the republican imagination of public institutions in general, which accuses individual and local interests of always being limited, partial and biased, i.e. contrary to the common good[19]. For state technicians, this is about asserting a blueprint for society that is valid for the community as a whole,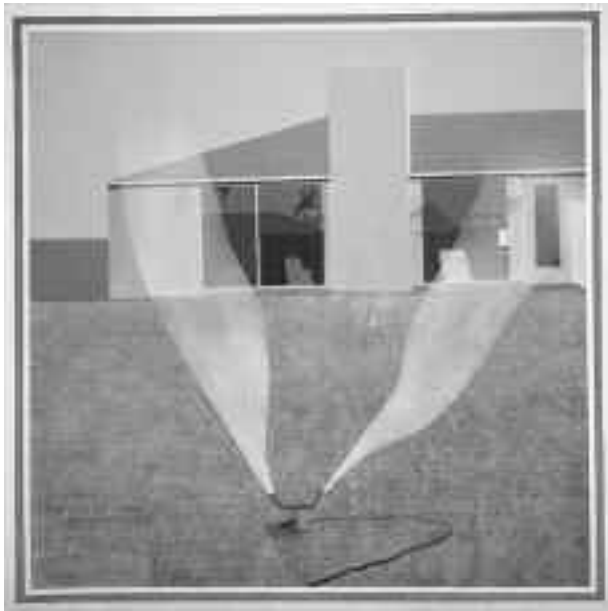 without anyone "being excluded or being left by the wayside" (recurring argument of town policy), and without others, by avoiding utilities charges like one might avoid responsibilities, seeking to group together and protect themselves in a singular and private way (argument for condemning *gated communities*).

But in order to make the dense city a figure embodying the public interest, it was necessary to de-index it from the bourgeois individualism it previously represented. To this end, town planners and urbanophile intellectuals re-activated implicitly an old distinction between two individualisms: one positive, civic, open, urban and city-focused, connected with the abstract universalist individualism of citizenship. Here, the city, the intersubjective framework par excellence, becomes the instrument of the blossoming of the "I", being of reason and will. The other, negative and isolationist, is associated with the peri-urban which would

17. Although during the 1990s it may have been referred to as a utopia of electronic communication that was supposed to abolish frontiers and project individuals in a ubiquitous and egalitarian way into the great planetary network.

18. *Cf.* P. Rosanvallon (2004) on "utopian generality".

19. Conversely, in the political tradition that is now prevalent in the European Union, the notion of "common good", in so far as it is different from the notion of "public interest", is seen not as transcending multiple interests, but as connecting them.

least to a concrete milieu governed by collective values (those of the *Polis*). The city, as a new supra-individual entity, must therefore produce political identity; i.e. the only "identity" (where the portion of the identical between the subjects is favoured over the portion of singularity of each individual) that is legitimate according to republican doctrine[24]. According to this viewpoint, the return of the private, of concrete individualism, as would be expressed in and through low-rise housing, can only harm this doctrine.

We would like to say however that making the dense, centripetal city a barrage against the "market society" is to say the least paradoxical in so far as urban centres are largely places of deployment of the hedonistic consumerism of "Bobos" (Brooks, 2000), who themselves are the vanguard of the cultural relativism challenging republican rigourism. With the result that making the compact city a condensation of the greatest diversity with the greatest density is dangerous, in so far as this city, often museumified and

David Hockney

supposedly wrap people up in their "me", being of passion and egocentrism[20]. This distinction in fact revisits both classical concepts of individual liberty. Benjamin Constant separated liberty as defined by the Ancients, i.e. freedom to participate in the collective order (public and civic liberties from the classical and revolutionary tradition which, during the 20th century, were associated with social rights), from the liberty of the Moderns, i.e. freedom of autonomy, "subtraction" (Revault-d'Allonnes, 2002), "defiance" (Rosanvallon, 2006), and non-modification of the private sphere by public policy[21]. From this standpoint, the recurrent hostility of town-planning doctrines towards low-rise and per-urban housing, supposed to spread and strengthen security concerns and withdrawal, seems to proceed in fact from a political and moral objection to the liberty of the Moderns – i.e. to liberalism, utilitarianism and the market economy[22]. Conversely, coexistence in the dense city should foster civility and enable, through interaction, intersubjectivity and mutual comprehension, the acculturation of city-dwellers/citizens in the freedoms of the Ancients. The co-presence of diversities is supposed to guarantee miscegenation and concord, encourage "social cohesion", and even "civilisation" (Castro, 1994) – i.e. protect us against "a market society"[23]. With the result that this city would be the instrument by which everyone would become involved in the City's affairs. To put it another way, the city today embodies (perhaps for want of anything better) Everything that is thought to be superior to the sum of the parts. It represents this general order which tears individuals from enclosing proximity and inherited links, and uproots religious, ethnic, customary and family particularisms. It is supposed no longer to transfer subjects to the half-emotional, half-rational abstraction of the nation, but at

20. In fact things are more complicated as, although the republican doctrine, which promotes the individual as political subject obliged to be in an immediate and unmediated relationship with the State, and in this respect is philosophically liberal and democratic, it is also "illiberal and holistic" (Rosanvallon).
Indeed, it is suspicious of individual uniqueness and egoism and wants to see the community prevail over the individual, the political over the social, the State over Civil Society, the universal over the particular.
Thus, Rousseau counterpointed "pride", closing in on oneself, and "self-love", on the basis of which we open ourselves to others and to the community. The problem of such a distinction is that it only has theoretical consistency and socio-historical credit from a rationalist standpoint. This doctrine – which is heir both to the Catholic concept of salvation guaranteed by the obedience of each and every one of us to the saving Institution (the State representing the laicised figure of the Church) and to the humanist concept of ipseity (each human being is unique and irreplaceable) - was tenable from the standpoint of general progress towards the light.
But, in an age where rationalist, progressive mythology is distorted, idealisation of subjectivity, potentially oriented towards the common good, becomes improbable. Subjectivity then becomes an "alien" self again (alterglobalism, the radical left resuming this type of Marxist analysis), or an "inner-directed" self (Riesman, 1992), "egological" self (Gauchet, 2005), "self-reflexive" self (Giddens, 1994)… Such that it would be advisable to distinguish between theories of subject, person and individual and the place that each one gives to the relations of singular man (*homme singulier*) with his environment.

21. *Habeas Corpus* as much as natural law sustains the theme of human rights, which strongly challenges the republican idea of sovereignty according to which the law supersedes rights. Such that the triumph of this theme for a generation has contributed in France to a weakening of the political since the latter traditionally proceeded from an eminently sovereign concept.

22. The case is particularly striking in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, as his analyses of "economics of the home" (ARSS) and of alienation by the resulting individual ownership, ushered in the denunciation of capitalism which would characterise his later works.

23. If we use the famous distinction suggested by Lionel Jospin between the "market economy", to which he rallied, and the "market society", to which he objected.

"gentrified", becomes almost mono-functional and social instinct is subject to commerce and commercial leisure.

## The city: factor of socialisation or individuation?

In fact, there is great tension between, on the one hand, a significant cultural tendency in the western world which equates democratisation with individuation, i.e. which combines hope of emancipation, challenge of autonomy and individual liberty and, on the other hand, a model of solidarity and social justice which, in the republican tradition, remains indexed to a vision of public policy, in theory universalist and egalitarian, in practice homogeneous and normative. The latter vision sees individualism – both as value and practice – as a ferment of social desegregation and an attack on the blueprint for equality.

But does not the evolution of our society and its economic organisation towards more individual autonomy (Boltanski, Chapiello 1999) and organisational and productive flexibility (Cohen, 1998), i.e. the growth of subcontracting, relocations, deregulations, vertical disintegration of firms, job insecurity and the "erosion of salary status" (Castel, 1999), fundamentally renew the problems?

Likewise, the facilities offered by "overindividualising" new technologies (Internet, à la carte TV programmes, mobile phone and computer, individually-portioned ready meals, microwaves, etc.) lead to the diffraction of spatial habits and allow individualistic aspirations to be fulfilled.

More generally, we are seeing everywhere a widening and deepening of the feeling of self, already underway in the 19th century, but limited to the cultural elite, and held in check for a short while by grand ideologies and nationalism (Gauchet, 2005) and, correlatively, a weakening of collective belonging, both national and familial, religious and statutory (Singly, 2005a, 2005b, 2007; Kaufmann, 2007a, 2007b; Lahire, 2006a, 2006b). This extension of individualistic values makes each person's belonging to a group or idea partial, ephemeral and detailed. Likewise, the notion of allegiance of the subject to an encompassing and identifying collective has lost its meaning[25]. This phenomenon is making its impact felt from top to bottom of the social spectrum. In the affluent categories, of course, who defend and illustrate liberal-libertarian values, and for whom the central urban framework is an asset, and also in the disadvantaged, vulnerable or excluded categories, whose non-belonging to what was previously the working class strengthens the sense of dispossession (Guibert, Mergier 2006).

It seems that current trends throughout the developed world are set to continue. They are part of a rationale of individual autonomisation, desynchronisation and destandardisation regarding ways of life. It follows from these trends that the meaning and status of the physical space, in particular architectural and urban, are changing.

In this way, the material causes just as much as the intellectual reasons on which hostility to low-rise housing urbanisation was based are losing some of their relevance. So, does not the concept of urban space as operator of sociopolitical integration, on which this hostility was established, now find itself partly invalidated by cultural and socioeconomic changes?

One way of standing back from the political presuppositions that impose themselves on the town-planning debate may be found with Professor Jean Remy (generally considered as the French-speaking world's most eminent urban sociologist). In 2005, in a collective work, he insisted on the necessary articulation between the "culture of the residence" and the "experience of the city", mainly because the first corresponds, according to this author, to the fundamental needs of autonomy, calm, safety and appropriation, demanded by individuals and households, which "are often expressed by a preference for a one-family house. According to this viewpoint, it would be better to consider the question not in terms of opposition but of complementarity.

Far from this set of issues, the arguments about hostility towards low-rise urbanisation (Crouzel, 2005) mix together the political-moral point of view and the technical-environmental-budgetary point of view (economic alienation, excessive debt amongst households, lack of cultural open-mindedness, social pessimism, communitarianism, misanthropy, xenophobia, knee-jerk reactions on security issues and voting for the far right, as well as waste of farmlands, sub-optimal use of public amenities, overexpenditure by infrastructures and networks, attack on the ecosystem, car dependence, production of greenhouse gases, excessive consumption of non-renewable energy resources, etc.). In fact, all these arguments seek to have social order and institutional organisation prevail by devaluing households' capacity for rational arbitration and condemning their free will in terms of the type and location of their home (a free will always without limitations, of course). There is nothing new in this as the legal doctrine on which town planning is based follows in a direct line from the republican imagination. Such that technicians of social

---

24. We have shown elsewhere (Genestier, Ouardi, Rennes, 2007) how the rhetoric of city politics founds and confounds the lexicon of the city with that of the republic: mobilising etymology, it uses simultaneously the terms "city", "civility", "urbanity", "public space" *inter alia* in the proper sense and in the figurative sense, as if a line of mutual begetting existed necessarily between the urban order and the political order.

25. Let us note however that the "construction of the collective identity in an identifier and mobilising territory" is a recurring objective of current political action, thus showing that political personnel do not manage to apprehend current cultural logics and that they maintain the concept of society as a politically unified "body" and continue to see people as an entity made homogeneous by the simple fact of residing in the same space.

AKG-images

David Hockney

management often present themselves as being at the service of the "community of citizens" (Schnapper, 1994) and draft reference systems of their action not according to the diversity of observable needs or aspirations but according to their concept of a future that is desirable for the whole community. In the territorial domain, this approach has led to architectural and town-planning experimentalism, to the desire on the part of the authorities to break with ordinary modes of living and forms of socialisation in order to promote a corrected and corrective social and physical space (so when one discusses with public planning and construction technicians, they often end with the idea that it would be better to teach people how to move round, to inhabit the city or their dwelling).

Actually, the issue of housing and urban agglomerations is often involved in debates focusing on "social integration and solidarity", "civic equality", "human dignity", etc. In this way, this issue serves to reaffirm ideals in a more operative and less ethereal way than in discourses of principle. In other words, it is precisely at a time when the conditions of social and cultural acceptability of republican doctrine (in the Jacobin and royal sense) diminish (studies on the individuation of values and beliefs bear this out), that urban issues are used by the authorities to invigorate this doctrine *via* the concreteness offered by the issues of the city and housing.

But at the same time, the crisis of credibility of institutional authority (Dubet, 2002 and Renaut, 2004) shows through in the rise of environmental protection associations and residents' resistance movements to planning operations. This is the NIMBY (*Not In My Back Yard*) syndrome which is often radicalised into a *Nothing, Nowhere for Nobody* promoted by *No Growth Coalitions*, i.e. local inter-

est coalitions mobilised occasionally but intensely, in the United States and France, to block any planning operation likely to cause densification and increase in fiscal pressure. The French Law of 13 July 2006 limiting legal actions against planning operations, and the legal insecurity26 that follows, show the severity of the issue. One might condemn the tendency towards the development of individualism, in particular when it determines contemporary urban growth, as did the issues "Quand la ville se défait [When the city comes undone]" and "La ville à trois vitesses [The 3-speed city]" of the *Esprit* journal. But, as these issues themselves show, the inner city has some part to play in the matter: what is "gentrification" of historic neighbourhoods and districts, if not the fact that they are won through economic and cultural values making the autonomous individual the main character in the play currently being performed!? Such that the dense city devoted to culture, anomic commerce, the "creative class" (Florida, 2002, 2005), i.e. the "metropolis of individuals" as it is called by Alain Bourdin (2006), is no less individualogenous than the peri-urban.

There is one difference however: the gentrified individualism of economically and culturally affluent social levels is politically legitimate, in particular when it is accompanied by a discourse on creolisation and diversity (but in neighbourhoods in transition diversity is only provisional and on borrowed time), whereas the peri-urban individu-

---

26.  It is also interesting that this notion of "legal insecurity", used originally to defend private individuals and to protest against attacks on the right of ownership by town planning (Bachoud, Chazoule 1999 and *Que choisir*, 2002) has been turned round by the authorities so that it applies to the situation of planners and investors.

alism developed to a large extent in France by more modest social groups that have sometimes failed to climb the social ladder, appears highly suspect[27] or even totally reprehensible as it is not conducive to social diversity. The pioneering work of Éric Charmes (2005) on the issue shows clearly the diversity of situations and lived experiences of this type of housing, and above all the complex system of constraints and arbitration that has led households to reside in the peri-urban space.

In addition, the public and moral condemnation of individualism, and of one-family housing which is supposedly both the breeding ground and the product of it, is of limited practical interest as, at the risk of making the physical space one of the major causes of social phenomena, individualism is the simple cognitive consequence of real technical and economic changes and of the deployment of a corpus of representations and values which are massively widespread[28]. Perhaps then it would be more appropriate to attempt to identify the global trends that are developing and, depending on them, try to consider the possible means of leverage that are emerging.

The rejection of planning operations by *No Growth Coalitions* can be explained both in terms of demographic and economic change. Thus, the ageing population forces concerns about security and environmental quality, whereas the productive sphere is marked by globalised competition, growth in immaterial production and the prevalence of demand over supply. In such an economic context, public investment in infrastructures barely counts[29]. In cultural terms, one must also remember the considerable increase in the population's level of education, desire for autonomy of individuals and groups (particularist, regionalist and participatory demands), affirmation of civil society and its own counter-evaluation capabilities (Rui, 2004)… All these factors make the model of the community merged by and around a guardian public authority (whether the latter be expressed at national or urban level) questionable.

## Local space: need for flexibility and search for less uncertainty

Although in history ownership of real estate has always meant insurance against uncertain futures, when national insurance arrived (providing collectivised guarantees against sickness, accidents, loss of work and old age) it seemed less important to own one's own property. Thus, during the glorious Thirties a new meaning was attributed to space, with the result that rented housing and public appropriation of land garnered little resistance. But the three decades that followed – which N. Baverez (1998) has called the "Pitiful Thirties" – were marked by flexibility. This is echoed in the urban domain *via* the individualisation of work times, workplace and pay, leading people outside and inside house-

holds to a pluralisation of rhythms of life and to a polymorphism of space practices, i.e. a break with the social cohorts of yesteryear. Thus, households choose (when they have the means, but for those who do not the aspirations are no different) their neighbours selectively in order to live surrounded by similar people in sufficient proportion to produce a protected residential framework[30]. In addition, the flexible mode of production forces "elective pairings" (Cohen, 1996), relationships sorted in order to optimise opportunities in a context of unforeseen events. The development of teleworking, involvement of *freelance* services as and when required or internal reorganisation of firms according to management "by project" combined with "hot-desking" technologies, constitute a mode of professional sociability and of practising professions which has nothing more to do with the world of status (Iribarne, 2006) or of enterprise structuring space-time around itself. When diversity reflected the social spectrum of employees in the same firm, class identification and social control mechanisms were sufficiently strong for it not to be seen as overcrowding. But when the factory disappeared and the employee way of life became destructured, the everyday environment became uncertain and therefore worrying. Which explains the mass disaffection with large council estates of those who can leave, and also, conversely, part of the attraction for the peri-urban, which is more controllable than central neighbourhoods.

Furthermore, between the "manipulators of symbols" (Reich, 1997), large consumers of city centre amenities, and excluded and vulnerable social groups, there is a social category aspiring no less than the most affluent category to enjoy a spatial environment that is favourable to the deployment of the different activities of the members making up

27. The analyses of the Front National vote developed by the demographer Hervé Le Bras and the geographer Jacques Lévy the day after each election in the *Libération* newspaper are a good illustration of this position. These analyses move quickly from correlation to causality, making peri-urban residence the main factor in explaining the vote for J-M. Le Pen and his party.

28. We also know the downward spiral engendered in the west in the 20th century by protests against "bourgeois individualism" (F. Furet) and the part played by the same attitude amongst contemporary religious fundamentalists.

29. The history of civilisations (Toynbee, Wittfogel) has shown the importance of hydraulic works (diking and irrigation) in the constitution of strong powers and in the affirmation of their legitimacy, in Asia, first of all, but perhaps also in Holland, land of tolerance. To a lesser extent, F. Braudel insisted on territorial unification as a source and means of affirmation of the central French state. But, conversely, one may wonder whether the loss of the functional and structural importance of spatial planning is not a corollary of the weakening of public authority.

30. Such a process of agglomeration of preferences and resemblances intimately connects property market and school supply, to the point of making application of the school-zone map a powerful factor in the social selection of pupils and residents of neighbourhoods.

the household, but not having the financial resources to locate themselves in the city centre. For this category the solution is then either to reside in the outskirts, or to convert available space nearer the centre: before becoming fashionable, lofts were a choice in favour of quantity of space, thereby attesting to the fact that, in terms of housing, the traditional apartment (in a Haussmann building or council block, both graded according to employee life style, which mainly separates the professional sphere from the domestic sphere) is no longer suited to current lifestyles. What the one-family house in the outskirts or the townhouse and the loft of the city districts have in common is that they meet the demand for surface area of households that do not have the means to access very large bourgeois apartments in the historic centres. So one should not confuse an attitude of simple adaptation to the market with a pro- or anti-social attitude. There is in fact quite a lot of ethnocentrism in the denigration by many intellectuals and town planners of lower middle class low-rise housing.

Although the volontarism of the 1960s, which sought to build for as many people as possible a standardised form of urbanisation, strictly suited to the mode of production and consumption then in force, managed to appear as an initiative in favour of social "levelling", and therefore in favour of the entry of large part of the social structure into the age of progress, could this still be the case today? Can we think nowadays that establishing an urban space (as dense and homogenous as it might be) will attract the majority of people to a widened socio-economic and cultural modernity in an unequivocal, egalitarian way? In the era of the post-industrial society (Cohen, 2006), and of sociological complexity (Luhmann, 1999), space may no longer be seen as an operator of social integration or construction of social ordering, in so far as what makes integration today[31] is no longer a matter of fixed and shared identity, part of a territory of belonging structured by public facilities and industries (if ever they did so). Nor does it come out of a conformity of space with standards of facilities, like with the list of amenities for a housing estate known as the *grille Dupont* (1958), or the standards of the wage society[32], like during the Glorious Thirties, but on the contrary it comes out of process, adaptation and connexion.

Space then acquires a new meaning and a new function. In a system marked by job insecurity, it rediscovers its initial function as reducer of uncertainties. It resumes its former purpose, which made it a physical resource (Navez-Bouchanine, 1998) enabling individuals to use empirical tactics of by-passing, withdrawing, or even "fleeing" (Remy, Voyé, 1983, p. 153), i.e. of controlling their immediate environment or standing back from social and economic injunctions which became just as much threats as promises. To varying degrees of course, everyone frequents city centre cultural offerings and shopping services (J. Remy's "high legitimacy space") or out-of-town shopping centres (Chalas, Dubois-Taine 1997), and also spaces "with high opacity

and high permissiveness" constituted by their home, garden, workshop or basement where they devote themselves to their private occupations. Thus, every one of us aspires to having a surplus of space for culturally illegitimate practices: storage, recycling, DIY (to the point that DIY is one of France's prime economic sectors). The success of car boot sales, for example, shows the importance of popular culture, made up of displacements and bypassings, counterpointing habitual cultural codes and norms of social distinctiveness[33]. In the current context then, residential space counts less for its quality and conformity to socio-institutional criteria than for its quantity, i.e. for the surface area available to adapt to changes in the lives of households: accommodation for young adults, homeworking, business start-up and development, etc. Paradoxically, although for town planners one-family housing is antinomic with the concept of sustainable development, for many households that are vulnerable or fearing vulnerability, this type of housing represents a cushion, i.e. a factor of sustainability34 (a modest factor, admittedly, but physical space cannot help much here).

## Climate shift: a sledgehammer argument?

To summarise, although hostility towards low-rise urban growth, traditional in town-planning thinking, was able to find political and moral foundations, as well as temporary socio-economic credence, at a time of Fordist and Keynesian modernisation, the contemporary change to a "post-modern" socio-economic order removes some of these bases. If the social players have good reason to do so, how can they limit the development of this type of urban growth? On what bases can one arbitrate, better than the social players themselves, between the many constraints in choosing their mode of residence?

There is now, of course, the argument about sustainable development, fight against pollution, climate change and energy conservation. However, at the risk of taking a cataclysmic standpoint and imposing a kind of planetary

---

31. J. Habermas (2001) talks about the "systemic integration" of the present day, which he compares with the "social integration" of yesterday.

32. Should not the failure of the large council estates and of twenty-five years of redevelopment be interpreted as proof of the structural unsuitability of a residential space strictly graded on the norms of the industrial wage society and incapable of evolving?

33. The notion of a car-boot sale is interesting in itself if one places it in the Bachelardian perspective of the poetics of space: the attic that some empty by selling their old things is filled in others' houses with the old things they buy. In all cases it is about confronting space, which is lacking or which is badly planned, whilst circumventing the immediate and costly solutions offered by the market.

environmental techno-fascism, it involves to a large extent imperatives that do not clearly or directly translate into planning, precisely because widespread mobility and the demand for rapid adaptation of activities at metropolis-level are forced upon both businesses and individuals. The latter are caught up in multiple relations, which produce the same quantity of journeys whatever the type of urban growth[35]. Likewise, recent studies show that the energy consumption of intra-urban housing is higher than peri-urban housing and that energy balance over the year of city centre residents is higher than that of suburban residents. Of course, to explain these results, which are contrary to expectations, there are factors related to the decrepitude of the building, to the purchasing power of households, to their lifestyle, to the place of work or leisure activities in their timetable, etc. And these factors themselves change according to the energy costs and regulations. But in a society that is no longer organic and that is no longer governed by the principle of self-sufficiency, the raison d'être of the city is to connect together as many and varied sources of supply as possible. And in addition, with each of these activities and functions having good reasons (accessibility, extensive development, adaptation of one's own space to functional requirements, synergy, safety, etc., i.e. everything that motivates "the emerging city") to group together without being densely packed, wanting to limit movement would be to deny the very raison d'être of the urban fact. From this point of view, one can say that the model of the compact

city, opposite to low-rise urbanisation, is more a nostalgic vision determined by ideological issues than a technical proposition suited to contemporary society. Such that the official discourse against this type of urban growth seems to respond mainly to a concern for symbolic resistance by the republican vision faced with the deployment of democratic logic (Debray, 1998). But, in democracy, political and moral concerns do not move their cause forward when, in a particular domain of social life, they contradict directly the social and cultural trends determining this domain, as they condemn themselves to remaining simple incantations. On the other hand, does a practical solution to urban problems have anything to gain from an out-and-out political or moral formulation? Does not such a formulation help to set unattainable objectives for town planning, or even cause it to try to impose socially unsuitable measures?

---

34. Of course, access to ownership creates excessive debt amongst some households who had poorly assessed the risks of borrowing, but it is borrowing we must blame here more than the type of housing, except when the latter forces households to have two cars. But distance from centres is often more due to the basic Malthusianism of communes than to the will of households.

35. Already in 1960 we noted that the initial employment/residence balance in the new towns of Greater London had not reduced the number of journeys due to career changes, separation of couples or diversity of activities of the residents of these towns.

### References

Amiot M., (1986), *Contre l'État les sociologues*, Paris, éd. EHESS.

Ascher F., (2005), « Le futur au quotidien », *in* Aubert N., *L'individu hypermoderne*, Ramonville, éd. Erès.

Ascher F., (1998), *La république contre la ville*, La tour d'Aigues, éd. de l'Aube.

Bachoud L., Chazoule O., (1999), *Guide des droits du citadin. Contre les abus de l'urbanisme : alignement, expropriation, préemption, que faire ?*, Paris, Seuil.

Bauer G., Roux. J.-M., (1976), *La rurbanisation,* Paris, Seuil.

Baverez N., (1998), *Les trente piteuses*, Paris, Flammarion.

Boltanski L., Chapiello E., (1999), *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris, Gallimard.

Bourdieu P, 1990, « L'économie de la maison », *Actes de la recherche en Sciences Sociales,* n°81-82.

Bourdin A., (2005), *La Métropole des individus*, La Tour d'Aigues, éd. de l'Aube.

Brooks D., (2000), *Les bobos. Les bourgeois bohêmes*, Paris, Florent Massot, coll. Le livre de poche.

Castel R., (1999), *Métamorphose de la question sociale*, Paris, Gallimard.

Castro R., (1994), *Civilisation urbaine ou barbarie*, Paris, Plon.

Charmes E., (2005), *Le périurbain au risque des gated communities*, Paris, L'Harmattan.

Clerc P., (1969), « Les conditions de vie dans les grands ensembles », *Revue Française de Sociologie*.

Cohen D., (1996), *Richesses du monde, pauvreté des nations,* Paris, Flammarion.

Cohen D., (2006), *Trois leçons sur la société post-industrielle*, Paris, Seuil.

Crouzel P., (2005), *Le discours sur l'étalement urbain*, Vaulx-en-Velin, TFE ENTPE.

Debray R., (1998), *La République expliquée à ma fille*, Paris, Seuil.

Delarue J.-M., (1989), *La relégation*, Paris, Syros.

Devisme L., (2005), *La ville décentrée*, Paris, l'Harmattan.

Dubet F., Martuccelli D, (1998), *Dans quelle société vivons-nous ?* Paris, Seuil.

Dubet F., (2002), *Le déclin de l'institution*. Paris, Seuil.

Elias N., (1991), *La société des individus*, Paris, Fayard.

Florida R., (2002), *The Rise of the Creative Class. And How it's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, Basic Books, New York.

Florida R., (2005), *Cities and Creative Class*, Routledge.

Gauchet M, (2002), *La démocratie contre elle-même*, Paris, Gallimard.

Gauchet  M., (2005), *La condition historique,* Paris, Gallimard.

Genestier P., Ouardi S., Rennes J., (2007), « Le local au secours de l'action publique démocratique », *Mots*, n° 83.

Giddens A., (1994), *Les conséquences de la modernité*, Paris, l'Harmattan.

Grafmeyer Y., Joseph I., (1984), *L'école de Chicago*, Paris, Aubier.

Guibert P., Mergier A., (2006), *Le descenseur social. Enquête sur les milieux populaires*, Paris, Plon.

Habermas J., (2001), *Théorie de l'agir communicationnel*, Paris, Fayard.

Haumont N., (1966), *Les pavillonnaires*, Paris, CRU.

Iribarne P. d', (2006), *L'étrangeté française*, Paris, Seuil.

Kaufmann J.-C., (2007), *Ego. Pour une sociologie de l'individu*, Paris, Hachette.

Kaufmann J.-C., (2007), *L'invention de soi*, Paris, Hachette.

Lahire B., (2006), *L'homme pluriel*, Paris, Hachette.

Lahire B., (2006), *La culture des individus*, Paris, La Découverte.

Luhmann N., (1999), Politique et complexité, Paris, Cerf.

Muller P., (2000), *Les politiques publiques*, Paris, PUF.

Navez-Bouchanine F., (1998), « L'espace fragmenté comme ressource », *in* Voyé L., *Ville et transaction sociale*, Paris, l'Harmattan.

*Que choisir*, (2002), « Vous, face au maire et à l'État : propriété privée, urbanisme, environnement », n° 51.

Reich R., (1997), *L'économie mondialisée,* Paris, Dunod.

Remy J., Voyé L., (1983), *La ville, ordre et violence*, Paris, PUF.

Renaut A., (2004), *La fin de l'autorité*, Paris, Flammarion.

Revault-d'Allonnes M., (2002), *Le dépérissement de la politique*, Paris, Flammarion.

Riesman D., (1992), *La foule solitaire. Anatomie de la société*, Arthaud.

Rosanvallon P., (2004), *Le modèle politique français*, Paris, Seuil.

Rosanvallon P., (2006), *La contre-démocratie,* Paris, Seuil.

Rui S., (2004), *La démocratie en débat. Les citoyens face à l'action publique*, Paris, Armand Colin.

Schnapper D.,( 1994), *La communauté des citoyens*, Paris, Gallimard.

Singly F. de, (2005), *Les uns avec les autres. Quand l'individualisme crée le lien*, Paris, Hachette.

Singly F. de, (2005), *Libres ensemble*, Paris, Armand Colin.

Singly F. de, (2007), *L'individualisme est un humanisme*, La Tour d'Aigues, éd. de l'Aube.

Sueur J.-P., (1999), *Changer la ville. Pour une nouvelle urbanité*, Paris, O. Jacob.

Wachter S., (2001), *La ville contre l'État ?*, Paris, Belin.

### About the author

PHILIPPE GENESTIER, Architect and Chief Town Planner for the French State, carries out research in sociology and epistemology of planning at the Laboratoire RIVES, ENTPE/CNRS (UMR 5600).

genestier@entpe.fr