Book Review

Sennett, Richard (2018). *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*. Milton Keynes: Allen Lane.

The title of the book says it all: the design of the built environment (building) has a strong impact on how people live in the city (dwelling), and how they relate to each other (ethics for the city). The book is the last in a trilogy exploring the place of '*Homo Faber*' in society. The first volume, *The Craftsman* (Allen Lane, 2008) studied craftsmanship and the relationship between head and hand it involves. The second, *Together* (Yale, 2012) explored the art of cooperation that craftsmen need. The third one, *Building and Dwelling* puts *Homo Faber* in the city: urbanists who have developed the craft of city building. The book has previously been reviewed in academic journals for urban sociologists and urban planners, but its message goes beyond that academic space as his challenging reflections on information technology, and smart cities, are also relevant for the readership of Information Polity.

Sennett identifies two aspects of cities: the city as a 'built environment' and the city as 'how people dwell in it.' A distinction that he explains by referring to the two words for city in French: *ville*, how the city is built, and *cité*, how the city is lived. Distinctions between form and function, or place and space, are other ways to illustrate this contrast. The core argument of the book is that *ville* and *cité* should interact. Problems arise, when building and dwelling are separated. Builders need to look after the quality of dwelling, dwellers cannot do without responsible builders.

The book opens with an exposé about the sanitary engineers in the 19th century who addressed the problems of rapid growing cities. By developing a system of public toilets, and a network of sewers, they dealt with public health issues more proactively than the medical profession. To illustrate the complex interaction between building and dwelling, Sennett continues by stating that their work had a bigger impact than just on sanitary hygiene in the streets – it changed the values and norms of urban living as well. Due to the presence of public toilets, it gradually became shameful to relieve yourself in public. This, in turn, made the outdoor spaces more usable as social spaces, leading to the emergence of boulevard cafés, according to Sennett "a sanitary engineers' gift to urban civilization". At the time, the urban planners also changed more than just the built environment. While their urban plans were an answer to the problems of urban dwelling, they unintentionally changed the nature of urban living as well. With his plan to straighten out the complex set of irregular streets in Paris by a network of wide boulevards, Baron Haussman sought to confront the traffic problems of the time, but also some political problems (as narrow lanes were easy to barricade by revolutionary mobs). In the long run, this change of the city map had unforeseen consequences for urban life. Because city dwellers could travel greater distances, department stores and boulevard cafés could flourish, and city parks became accessible.

Contrary to this adaptive style of the early urbanists is the more directive approach of many modern master planners. They focus on the quality of urban design, or worse on the margin profit of the property industry. Sennett takes a firm stand against this approach because it ignores what he considers the essence of urban life: complexity, variety and openness. A vital outdoor street life is an important element of this. When the built city begins to dominate, the lived city is in danger of being suffocated. These are his *ethics of the city*, which should serve as a guideline in finding the right balance between *ville* and *cité*. Strangely enough, he does not make this very explicit, but his point is clear enough. He ends his book with five design principles that can help urban planners to bring building and dwelling together.

Building and Dwelling gives you the feeling of being lost in a medieval Italian city or an Arabic souk, where narrow alleys and squares are encumbering your orientation. Sennett's inclination to share his enormous knowledge and insights sometimes distracts the attention from his arguments. For example, he cannot resist to introduce the reader to the art of concrete making since ancient Rome, or to elaborate further on the advantages of Styrofoam for urban planners when making scale models. His arguments are illustrated and supported by examples and stories from Paris, London, Berlin, Barcelona, Shanghai, Medellin, Delhi, Cairo and many other cities. Fortunately, readers have many guides at their disposal who can lead them through the book. Sennett presents the reader with a large number of characters, from Max Weber, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Jane Jacobs to Mister Sudhir (a dealer of stolen smartphones in New Delhi) and Madame Q (a civil engineer from Shanghai). And, of course, Sennett himself. As a young urban planner who advised the United Nations on urban programs, or as an old man who stumbled unsteadily through the streets of Berlin after a stroke. Both times, he learned something else about cities and city life. All this makes reading Sennett's book a special experience.

In his search for a reconciliation of building and dwelling, place and space, form and function, Sennett is paying lip service to Giddens' structuration theory, without referring to it. By doing so, the book provokes many thoughts, not only about city planning, but about other form-function dilemmas as well. For instance about the management of information systems, or digital infrastructures. Sennett puts the reader easily on the trail of these topics with all kinds of treatises on disadvantages of user-friendly information technology ('it stupefies'), or on the neurological impacts of computer games. His report on his experiences at MIT, and a visit to the Googleplex office also contribute to this sentiment. Sennett juxtaposes these two hotspots of information technology development to make his point about the ethics for the city. MIT's Media Lab, founded in 1985 by Nicholas Negroponte, stands to him for the open city: diverse, experimenting and innovative. By contrast, the Googleplex building is in his view a new kind of ghetto that represents the closed city. In his reflection on the political economy of high tech, Sennett comes to the ironic observation that Googleplex is built to stimulate the creation free ideas inside, while the firm erodes the free markets outside the office.

This argument is further explained in the chapter "Tocqueville in Technopolis". Here, Sennett describes two kinds of smart cities. According to the author, the closed smart city will dumb people down, whereas the open smart city will make citizens smarter. The closed smart city is an enlarged Googleplex where individualism and user friendliness set the tone, and where technologies serve prescriptive purposes. These smart cities analyze behavior via big data analytics and use this feedback to manage city life and to fine-tune service delivery. Songdo in South Korea is an example of this closed smart city. The city is being steered from a cockpit where air quality, electricity usage, traffic flows and other aspects of human activity are being monitored and scrutinized by interpretative algorithms. As a closed smart city it gives priority to solving problems over finding problems.

Conversely, the open smart city is characterized by using technology to coordinate rather than to control activities. Here, technology is much cheaper and takes a point of departure in the citizens' actual behavior. The main difference with the closed smart cities is that the open smart city provides citizens, and citizen groups, with control over the feedback. Closed smart cities monitor the behavior of citizens (with or without their consent), while in open smart cities data is made available to the public. One example of an open smart city is Porto Allegre in Brazil with its renowned participatory budgeting process, and where information technology is supporting the collective decision-making process. Another example is the ForCity project in Lyons, France, in which SimCity-like 3D computer models supported an open debate between citizens and planners about urban choices.

What is remarkable is that Sennett's discussion on smart cities is limited to the use of information technology by governments. Although Sennett pays attention to the power and influence of high tech

companies, their role in urban development remains completely undiscussed. And yet, Amazon, Alibaba, Airbnb and Uber have an enormous influence on the *ville* and the *cité*, just as Google and Facebook. They are also creating the smart city.

It remains unclear how the smart city, whether open or not, relates to the building and dwelling distinction that is central to the book. Is smart city-technology an extension of the built environment that structures the behavior of city dwellers? Or, is it a new aspect of urban life that creates new demands on the built environment? In this respect, Sennett's book is certainly thought-provoking, but some more elaborate thoughts on this subject would have strengthened its message.

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