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Author
Schafran, Alex

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JUST IN *** BREAKING NEWS FROM THE URBAN FRINGE ***

(Followed with an editorial note)

All Urban Problems now Problem Spaces


The International Association of Urban Intellectuals, meeting this week for their 112th global symposium at the Walter Benjamin Conference Center in Paris, announced that forthwith all problems associated with urbanization and metropolitan living would be converted to problem spaces. The change will go into effect on January 1st, leading some to speculate about the challenges faced by cities and their residents in anticipation of the conversion. Discursive shifts of this sort, while not unprecedented, often come with significant epistemological and pecuniary costs, including altering one’s outlook on daily urban living and buying lots of new books.

The rapid development of communications technology is expected to aid significantly in the conversion process. Microsoft announced a patch to PowerPoint™ which would enable architects, planners and engineers to rapidly alter old presentations to be rehashed in the new language. It includes an autocorrect function to prevent unwanted slippage into previous terminology. Similarly, Apple announce that at least three iPhone™ apps were under development by its army of independent programmers, including one app which reportedly includes daily maxims from poststructuralist thinkers in order to help stubborn positivists and bitter technocrats to effect the ontological shift needed for true adherence to the associations’ decision.

Nevertheless, the conversion is expected to cost upwards of €4.1 billion, a cost deemed negligible by Association spokesperson Robert van Dietrich. “The importance of clean and healthy discourse can not be underestimated in today’s rapidly urbanizing world,” said van Dietrich in a prepared statement. “After careful consideration by the association’s executive comitit, we recognized that the very survival of the human race depended on our ability to speak differently about the urban.”

The move is seen by some as the final push to move past the controversial Mike Davis era, when the world-renowned Planet of Slums author chaired
the association through what many observers consider its most anti-
urban phase since the long tenure of Louis Wirth in the 1930's. Davis' 
sensationalist account of slum dwelling masses in an amorphous global 
south sold millions of copies and catapulted hundreds of thousands of 
ordinary citizens into the ranks of amateur urbanism, but similarly 
helped prop up a movement towards the aesthetization of poverty, a 
tool often used by the global urban growth machine to redevelop poor 
communities and displace the poor from valuable land in the urban 
center.

Given both the fractious nature and significant power of this unelected 
body of professional scholars and itinerant organic intellectuals, 
internal and external criticism of the move has been swift. Prominent 
environmentalists dismissed the move as irrelevant, noting that the 
problem was urbanization itself, and that we should all read more Aldo 
Leopold. The Society of People Who Love Transportation released a terse 
statement indicating that the solution was not discourse, but bikes and 
BRT. In the most radical move yet, a dissident group of planning theorists 
interrupted the final deliberations at the Benjamin center by chaining 
themselves to the coffee makers in the lobby and chanting lines from 
Habermas. One of the dissident theorists, who was later arrested, had 
tattooed the groups' rallying cry, "This is not our BATNA!" on his chest.

Despite these more radical protests, most debate about the edict, while 
passionate, was civilized and conducted with full knowledge of power 
relations and ample glasses of pastis. The problem space subcommittee, 
which will be in charge of licensing problem spaces in a post conversion 
era, remained deadlocked on the issue of whether the power of starchitects 
constituted a single problems space of its own or whether each individual 
architect constituted a separate space, determined by ego size and 
their ability to captivate developers and politicians with pornographic 
renderings of unbuildable and unnecessary megaprojects. On a similar 
note, the committee reserved the right to grandfather in some concerns 
as problems due to their seemingly intractable nature, including New 
Urbanism, academic conferences, and traffic.

In related urban news, members of the Lefebvrian liberation front declared 
the urban revolution to be complete, and Lefebvre to be the dominant 
paradigm. In a press release spray-painted on the Centre Pompidou, 
they urged us all to understand the urban as the newly dominant means 
of production while continuing to adhere to the classically Marxist 
emphasis on use value over exchange value. They also derided German 
efforts to scientifically produce a new generation of urban theorists in 
response to recent French hegemony. The French dominated the last 
World Urbanism Games held in Delhi, claiming medals in all events 
except land use modeling.
Alex Schafran contributed reporting on this story from Istanbul and Constantinople.

Editorial Note

In past issues, the Urban Fringe column has been dedicated to selections pour penser en dehors de la boîte. This year, it offers an attempt at satire with Alex Schafran’s elliptically entitled piece “All Urban Problems now Problem Spaces”. Ultimately, I believe my dear colleague Alex, is proposing a rather simple question: can urban theory be funny? Is that a problem?

Hector Fernando Burga