Traffic and Human Space

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The Situationist International attacked the whole of contemporary capitalist society:

> While contemporary impotence rambles on about the belated project of 'getting into the 20th century,' we think it is time to put an end to the dead time which has dominated this century, and to finish the Christian era with the same stroke. Here, as elsewhere, it's a matter of breaking the bounds of measurement. Ours is the best effort so far to get out of the 20th century.
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> – Now the S.I., 1964

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The main mistake made by town-planners is to see the private car (plus its sub-products like the motorbike) as being essentially a means of transport. On the contrary, the car is first and foremost the principal manifestation of what happiness is supposed to be, and which is broadcast as such throughout the world by advanced capitalism. In terms of the same global propaganda, the car is both the sovereign good of an alienated life and an essential product of the capitalist market. American economic prosperity this year is said to depend on the success of the slogan: 'Two cars per family.'

The time spent in travel to and from work, as Le Corbusier quite correctly pointed out, is neither more nor less than unpaid labour–labour which still further reduces the amount of 'free' time one has at one's disposal.

We must replace travel as an extension of the working day by travel for pleasure alone:

Cities cannot possibly be rebuilt to suit the needs of the massive parasitical existence of private cars today. Architecture can only be redesigned in accordance with the development of society as a whole; it must refuse to kow-tow to any values based on forms of social relationships One can see to be condemned (in the first place, the family).

Even if we are forced to accept, for a transitional period, a rigid division between the area where one works and the area where one lives, we must never forget a third area: that of life itself (the area of leisure and freedom–the truth of life). Unitary urbanism acknowledges no frontiers. It asserts that man's environment can be totally unified and that all forms of separation–between work and leisure, between public and private–can finally be dissolved. But even before this, the minimum programme of unitary urbanism is to extend our present field of play to every kind of building we can wish for. The complexity of the field we had in mind would be rough, equivalent to that of an ancient city.

The car isn't any kind of evil per se. It is its massive pile-up in towns that has destroyed its role. A balanced town-planning would neither suppress the car nor allow it to become a central theme. It would gamble on its gradual disappearance. Even now one can foresee certain new areas being closed to traffic, as in a number of ancient cities.

Those who cannot see beyond the car have never thought, even from a strictly technical point of view, about other forms of transport in the future. For example, certain types of private helicopter being tried out at the moment by the U.S. Army will probably have spread to the public within twenty years.

The breakdown of the dialectic of the human environment to the advantage of cars (there are projected Parisian motorways which will entail the demolition of thousands of houses, while at the same time the housing crisis is getting worse and worse) veils its irrationality under pseudo-practical explanations. It is only practical and necessary in terms of a very specific social set-up. Anyone who believes that the facts of the problem as given are permanent must also accept the permanence of contemporary society.

Revolutionary town-planners won't just be concerned with the circulation of things; and of human beings trapped in a world of things. They will try to tear these topological chains asunder, paving the way with their experiments for the journey of men through authentic life.

– Guy Debord; *I.S.* No. 3, 1959