Semiology and Urbanism
Roland Barthes

The subject of this discussion concerns a certain number of the problems of urban semiology.

But I must add that anyone who wants to sketch a semiology of the city must be at once a semiologist (a specialist in signs), a geographer, a historian, an urbanist, an architect, and probably a psychoanalyst. Since it is obvious that this is not my case—
as a matter of fact, I am none of these except, barely, a semologist—the reflections I shall present to you are those of an amateur, in the etymological sense of the word: an amateur of signs, one who loves signs, an amateur of cities, one who loves the city.

For I love both the city and signs. And this double love (which is probably, as a matter of fact, only one love) impels me to believe, perhaps with a certain presumption, in the possibility of a semiology of the city. On what conditions or rather with what precautions and what preliminaries will an urban semiology be possible?

This is the theme of the reflections I shall present. I should like first of all to remind you of a very familiar thing which will serve as a point of departure: space in general (and not only urban space) has always been a signifying space. Scientific geography and especially modern cartography can be considered as a kind of obliteration, a censorship objectivity has imposed upon signification (an objectivity which is a form like any other of the image-repertoire). And, before speaking of the city,

I should like to recall several phenomena of the cultural history of the West, more specifically of Greek antiquity: the human habitat, the "oikoumene," as we can glimpse it through the first maps of the Greek geographers: Anaximander, Hecataeus, or through the mental cartography of a man like Herodotus, constitutes a veritable discourse, with its symmetries, its oppositions of sites, with its syntax and its paradigms.

A map of the world by Herodotus, graphically realized, is constructed like a language, like a sentence, like a poem, on oppositions: hot countries and cold countries, then on the opposition between men on the one hand, and monsters and children on the other, etc.

At this point, the conception of the city was exclusively as an architectonic sign, as a direct utilitarian conception of an urban distribution based on functions and usages, which incontestably prevails in our day. I wanted to point out this historical relativism in the conception of signifying spaces.

Finally, it is in recent past that a structuralist like Levi-Strauss has produced, in Tristes Tropiques, a form of urban semiology, even if on a reduced scale, apropos of a Bororo village whose space he has studied according to an essentially semantic approach.

It is strange that, parallel to these strongly signifying conceptions of inhabited space, the theoretical elaborations of the urbanists have not hitherto granted, if I am not mistaken, anything but a very reduced status to problems of signification. Of course, there are exceptions; several writers have discussed the city in terms of signification.

One of the authors who has best expressed this essentially signifying nature of urban space is, I believe, Victor Hugo. In Notre-Dame de Paris: Hugo has written a very fine chapter, of an extremely subtle intelligence, "This will kill that;" this, which is to say the book, that, which is to say the monument. By expressing himself thus, Hugo gives
evidence of a rather modern way of conceiving the monument and the city, actually as a writing, as an inscription of man in space. This chapter of Hugo's is devoted to the rivalry between two modes of writing, writing in stone and writing on paper. Moreover, this theme can find its current version in the remarks on writing by a philosopher like Jacques Derrida. Among present-day urbanists, signification is virtually unmentioned; one name stands out, therefore, that of the American Kevin Lynch, who seems to be closest to these problems of urban semantics insofar as he is concerned with conceiving the city in the very terms of the perceiving consciousness, i.e., of identifying the image of the city in the readers of that city. But in reality, Lynch's researches, from the semantic point of view, remain quite ambiguous: on the one hand, there is a whole vocabulary of signification in his work (for example, he grants a good deal of attention to the readability of the city, and this is a very important notion for us); and, as a good semioticist, he has the sense of discrete units: he has tried to rediscover in urban space the discontinuous units which, within limits, somewhat resemble phonemes and sememes. He calls these units paths, enclosures, districts, intersections, points of reference. These are categories of units which might readily become semantic categories. But on the other hand, despite this vocabulary, Lynch has a conception of the city which remains more gestaltist than structural.

Aside from those authors who explicitly entertain the notion of a semantics of the city, we note a growing consciousness of the functions of symbols in urban space. In several studies of urbanism based on quantitative estimations and on motivation-research, we see appearing—in spite of everything, even if this is only for memory's sake—the purely qualitative motif of symbolization frequently used even today to explain other phenomena. We find for example in urbanism a relatively common technique: simulation; now, the technique of simulation leads, even if it is used in a rather narrow and empirical spirit, to a more thorough investigation of the concept of model, which is a structural or at the very least a pre-structuralist concept.

At another stage of these studies in urbanism, the demand for signification appears. We gradually discover that there exists a kind of contradiction between signification and another order of phenomena, and that consequently signification possesses an irreducible specificity. For instance, certain urbanists, or certain of those investigators who are studying urban planning, are obliged to note that, in certain cases, there exists a conflict between the functionalism of a part of the city, let us say of a neighborhood or a district, and what should call its semantic content (its semantic power). Hence they have noted with a certain ingenuity (but perhaps we must begin with ingenuity, not) that Rome presents a permanent conflict between the functional necessities of modern life and the semantic burden transmitted to the city by its history. And this conflict between signification and function constitutes the despair of the urbanists. There also exists a conflict between signification and reason, or at least between signification and that calculating reason which wants all the elements of a city to be uniformly recovered by planning, whereas it is increasingly obvious that a city is a fabric formed not of equal elements whose functions can be inventoried, but of strong elements and nonmarked elements (we know that the opposition between the sign and the absence of sign, between the measurable degree and zero degree, constitutes one of the major processes in the elaboration of signification). From all evidence, each city possesses this kind of rhythm; Kevin Lynch has noted as much; there exists in every city, from the moment it is truly inhabited by man, and made by man, that basic rhythm of signification which is opposition.
psychoneutric lesion is no longer conceivable. All this casts a certain credit on the word "symbol," for this term has always (till today) suggested that the signifyng relation was based on the signified, on the presence of the signified. Personally, I use the word "symbol" as referring to a syntagmatic and/or paradigmatic but no longer semantic signifying organization: we must make a very clear distinction between the semantic bearing of the symbol and the syntagmatic or paradigmatic nature of this same symbol.

Similarly it would be an absurd undertaking to attempt to elaborate a lexicon of the significations of the city by putting sites, neighborhoods, functions on one side, and significations on the other, or rather by putting on one side the sites articulated as signifiers and on the other the functions articulated as significations. The list of the functions that a city's neighborhoods can assume has been known for a long time; there are by and large some thirty functions for a neighborhood (at least for a neighborhood of the center-city: a zone which has been closely studied from the sociological point of view).

This list can of course be completed, enriched, refined, but it will constitute only an extremely elementary level for semiological analysis, a level which will probably have to be revised subsequently: not only because of the weight and pressure exerted by history, but because, precisely, the signifieds are like mythical beings, of an extreme impression, and because at a certain moment they always become the signifiers of something else: the signifieds pass, the signifiers remain. The hunt for the signified can therefore constitute only a provisional undertaking. The role of the signifier, when we manage to isolate it, is only to afford us a sort of testimony as to a specific state of the signifying distribution. Further, we must note that we attribute an ever-growing importance to the empty signified, to the empty site of the signified. In other words, the elements are understood as signifiers more by their own correlative position than by their content. Thus Tokyo, which is one of the most intricate urban complexes imaginable from the semantic point of view, nonetheless possesses a sort of center.

But this center, occupied by the imperial palace which is surrounded by a deep moat and hidden by verdure, is experienced as an empty center. As a more general rule, the studies made of the urban core of different cities have shown that the central point of the center of the city (everybody has a center), which we call the "solid core," does not constitute the culminating point of any particular activity, but a kind of empty "heart" of the community's image of the center. Here too we have a somehow empty place which is necessary to the organization of the rest of the city.

The second remark is that symbolism must be defined essentially as the world of signifiers, of correlations, and above all of correlations which can never be imprisoned in a full signification, in a final signification. Henceforth, from the point of view of descriptive technique, the distribution of elements, i.e., of signifiers, "exhausts" semantic discovery. This is true for the Chomskian semantics of Katz and Fodor and even for the analyses of Lévi-Strauss which are based on the clarification of a relation which is no longer analogical but homological (this is a demonstration made in his book on totemism, one rarely cited). Hence we discover that, if we want to produce the semiology of the city, we must intensify, more meticulously, the signifying division. For this, I appeal to my experience as an amanuensis of cities. We know that, in certain cities, there exist certain spaces which present a very extended specialization of functions; this is true, for example, of the Oriental soul where one street is reserved for the tailors and another exclusively for the silversmiths; in Tokyo, certain parts of the same neighborhood are quite homogeneous from the functional point of view: we find there only bars or snack bars or places of entertainment. Yet we must go beyond this first aspect and not limit the semantic description of the city to this unit; we must try to dissociate microstructures in the same way we can isolate tiny sentence fragments within a long period; hence we must get into the habit of making a very extended analysis which will lead to these microstructures, and conversely we must accustom ourselves to a broader analysis, which will lead to macrostructures. We all know that Tokyo is a polycentric city: it possesses several centers around five or six centers; we must learn to differentiate semantically these centers, which moreover are indicated by railroad stations. In other terms, even in this domain, the best model for the semantic study of the city will be furnished, I believe, at least at the start, by the sentence of discourse. And here we rediscover Victor Hugo's old intuition: the city is a writing; the man who moves about in the city, i.e., the city's user (which is what we all are, users of the city), is a sort of reader who, according to his obligations and his movements, samples fragments of the utterance in order to actualize them in secret. When we move about in a city, we are all in the situation of the reader of Queneau's 100,000 Million Poems, where we can find a different poem by changing a single verse; unknown to us, we are something like that avant garde reader when we are in a city.

Lastly, the third observation is that nowadays semiotics never posits the existence of a definitive signified. Which means that the signifieds are always signifiers for others, and reciprocally. In reality, in any cultural or even psychological complex, we find ourselves confronted with infinite chains of metaphors whose signified is always excessive or itself becoming a signifier. This structure is beginning to be explored, as you know, in Lacan's psychoanalysis, and also in the study of writing, where it is postulated if it is not actually explored. If we apply these notions to the city, we shall doubtless be led bempamphazise a dimension which I must say I have never seen cited, at least never clearly, in the studies and investigations of urbanism. This dimension I should call the erotic dimension: the eroticism of the city is the teaching method in which we can derive it from the infinitely metaphorical nature of urban discourse.
1967

The implications for architecture theory and practice of the writings of French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault were profound. It is somewhat mistaken to think of him in any way as a historical figure, as his work is still relevant. His ideas have had a significant impact on the way we think about the relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault's work has been influential in the fields of architecture and urban studies, where it has been used to challenge traditional notions of power and control.

Notes
shorter than many realize. Only thirty life spans separate us from the Acropolis. And the breathing span of the Middle Ages was too short for it to complete its cathedrals.

[addition to the original manuscript: We have all reason to be wide awake and not sleep away our time.]

[card 16]

Furthermore, the technological age is not as young as it may appear. Whitehead transferred the hour of its birth into the seventeenth century. That may be. The ultimate reasons for what occurs today may be found in the discussion of lonely monks behind quiet Romanesque monastery walls.

[card 17]

With infinite slowness arises the great form of birth which is the meaning of the epoch. [crossed out: But a reconciliatory forgiving kindness of history permits great things to die in their greatness and spares them from old age.] Not everything that happens takes place in full view. The decisive battles of the spirit are waged on invisible battlefields.

[card 18]

The visible is only the final step of a historical form, its fulfilment. Its true fulfilment. Then it breaks off. And a new world arises.

[card 19]

What I have said is the ground on which I stand, that which I believe and the justification of my deeds. Convictions are necessary, but in the realm of one's work they have only limited significance. In the final analysis it is the performance that matters. [crossed out: addition in original manuscript: That is what Goethe meant when he said: Create, artist, do not talk.]
Formulary for a New Urbanism
Gilles Ivain [Ivan Chichagov]

Sire, I am from another country.

We are bored in the city, there is no longer any temple of the sun. Between the legs of the women walking by, the decadists imagined a monkey wrench and the surrealists a crystal cup. That's lost. We know how to read every promise in faces—the latest stage of morphology. The poetry of the billboards lasted twenty years. We are bored in the city, we really have to strain still to discover mysteries on the sidewalk billboards, the latest state of humor and poetry:

Shower-Bath of the Patriarchs
Meat Cutting Machines
Notre-Dame Zoo
Sports Pharmacy
Martyrs Provisions
Translucent Concrete
Golden Touch Sawmill
Center for Functional Recuperation
Saint Anne Ambulance
Cafe Fifth Avenue
Prolonged Volunteers Street
Family Boarding House in the Garden
Hotel of Strangers
Wild Street

And the swimming pool on the Street of Little Girls. And the police station on Rendevous Street. The medical-surgical clinic and the free placement center on the Quai des Orfévres. The artificial flowers on Sun Street. The Castle Ceilings Hotel, the Ocean Bar, and the Coning and Going Cafe. The Hotel of the Epoch.

And the strange statue of Dr. Philippe Pinel, benefactor of the insane, in the last evenings of summer. To explore Paris.

And you, forgotten, your memories ravaged by the constellations of two hemispheres, stranded in the Red Ceilars of Pak-Kae, without music and without geography, no longer setting out for the hacienda where the roots think of the child and where the wine is finished off with fables from an old almanac. Now that’s finished. You’ll never see the hacienda. It doesn’t exist.

The hacienda must be built.

All cities are geological; you cannot take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We move within a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past. Certain shifting angles, certain receding perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought in the magical locales of fairy tales, and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, little forgotten bars, mammoth caverns, casomirrors.

These dated images retain a small catalyzing power, but it is almost impossible to use them in a symbolic urbanism without rejuvenating them by giving them a new meaning. Our imaginations, haunted by old archetypes, have remained far behind the sophistication of the machines. The various attempts to integrate modern science into new myths remain inadequate. Meanwhile abstraction has invaded all the arts, contemporary architecture in particular. Pure plasticity, inanimate, storyless, soothes the eye. Elsewhere other fragmentary beauties can be found—while the promised land of syntheses continually recedes into the distance. Everyone wavers between the emotionally still-alive past and the already dead future. We will not work to prolong the mechanical civilizations and frigid architecture that ultimately lead to boring leisure.

We propose to invent new, changeable decors ( . . . )

Darkness and obscurity are banished by artificial lighting, and the seasons by air conditioning; night and summer are losing their charm and dawn is disappearing. The man of the cities thinks he has escaped from cosmic reality, but there is no corresponding expansion of his dream life. The reason is clear: dreams spring from reality and are realized in it.

The latest technological developments would make possible the individual’s unbroken contact with cosmic reality while eliminating its disagreeable aspects. Stars and rain can be seen through glass ceilings. The mobile house turns with the sun. Its sliding walls enable vegetation to invade life. Mounted on tracks, it can go down to the sea in the morning and return to the forest in the evening.

Architecture is the simplest means of articulating time and space, of modulating reality, of engendering dreams. It is a matter not only of plastic articulation and modulation expressing an ephemeral beauty, but of a modulation producing influences in accordance with the eternal spectrum of human desires and the progress in realizing them.

The architecture of tomorrow will be a means of modifying present conceptions of time and space. It will be a means of knowledge and a means of action.

The architectural complex will be modifiable. Its aspect will change totally or partially in accordance with the will of its inhabitants ( . . . )

Past collectives offered the masses an absolute truth and incontrovertible mythical exemplars. The appearance of the notion of relativity in the modern mind allows one to surmise the experimental aspect of the new civilization (although I am not satisfied with that word; say, more supple, more "fun"). On the bases of this mobile civilization, architecture will, at least initially, be a means of experimenting with a thousand ways of modifying life, with a view to a mythic synthesis.

A mental disease has swept the planet: banalization. Everyone is hypnotized by production and conveniences—sewage system, elevator, bathroom, washing machine. This state of affairs, arising out of a struggle against poverty, has overshoot its ultimate goal—the liberation of man from material cares—and become an obsessive image hanging over the present. Presented with the alternative of love or a garbage disposal unit, young people of all countries have chosen the garbage disposal unit. It has become essential to bring about a complete spiritual transformation by bringing to light forgotten desires and by creating entirely new ones. And by carrying out an intensive propaganda in favor of these desires.

We have already pointed out the need of constructing situations as being one of the fundamental desires on which the next civilization will be founded. This need for absolute creation has always been intimately associated with the need to play with architecture, time, and space ( . . . )
Chirico remains one of the most remarkable architectural precursors. He was grappling with the problems of absences and presences in time and space. We know that an object that is not consciously noticed at the time of a first visit can, by its absence during subsequent visits, provoke an indefinable impression: as a result of this sighted backward in time, the absence of the object becomes a presence one can feel. More precisely, although the quality of the impression generally remains indefinite, it nevertheless varies with the nature of the removed object and importance accorded it by the visitor, ranging from serene joy to terror. (It is of nc particular significance that in this specific case memory is the vehicle of these feelings. I only selected this example for its convenience.)

In Chirico's paintings (during his Arcade period) an empty space creates a full-filled time. It is easy to imagine the fantastic future possibilities of such architecture and its influence on the masses. Today we can have nothing but contempt for a century that relegated such blueprints to its so-called museums.

This new vision of time and space, which will be the theoretical basis of future constructions, is still imprecise and will remain so until experimentation with patterns of behavior has taken place in cities specifically established for this purpose, cities assembling—in addition to the facilities necessary for a minimum of comfort and security—buildings charged with evocative power, symbolic edifices representing desires, forces, events past, present, and to come. A rational extension of the old religious systems, of old tales, and above all of psychoanalysis, into architectural expression becomes more and more urgent as all the reasons for becoming impassioned disappear.

Everyone will live in his own personal "cathedral," so to speak. There will be rooms more conducive to dreams than any drug, and houses where one cannot help but love. Others will be irresistibly alluring to travelers . . .

This project could be compared with the Chinese and Japanese gardens in Tokyo (law)—with the difference that those gardens are not designed to be lived in at all times—or with the ridiculous labyrinth in the Jardin des Plantes, at the entry to which is written (height of absurdly, Ariadne unemployed): Games are forbidden in the labyrinth.

This city could be envisaged in the form of an arbitrary assemblage of castles, grottoes, lakes, etc. It would be the baroque stage of urbanism considered as a means of knowledge. But the theoretical phase is already outdated. We know that a modern building could be constructed which would have no resemblance to a medieval castle but which would preserve and enhance the Castle poetic power (considered by the conservation of a strict minimum of lines, the disposition of certain others, the positioning of openings, the topographical location, etc.).

The districts of this city could correspond to the whole spectrum of diverse feelings that one encounters by chance in everyday life.

Bizarre Quarter—Happy Quarter (specially reserved for habitation)—Noite and Tragic Quarter (for good children)—Historical Quarter (museums, schools)—Useful Quarter (hospital, bookshops)—Sinister Quarter, etc. And an Astrolabe which would group plant species in accordance with the relations they manifest with the stellar rhythm, a planetary garden comparable to that which the astronomer Thomas wants to establish at Lauer Berg in Vienna, indispensable for giving the inhabitants a consciousness of the cosmic. Perhaps also a Death Quarter, not for dying in but so as to have somewhere to live in peace, and I think here of Mexico and of a principle of cruelty in innocence that appeals more to me every day.

The Sinister Quarter, for example, would be a good replacement for those hell holes that many people once possessed in their capitals: they symbolized all the evil forces of life. The Sinister Quarter would have no need to harbor real dangers, such as traps, dungeons, or mines. It would be difficult to get into, with a hideous decor (piercing whistles, alarm bells, sirens wailing intermittently, grotesque sculptures, power-driven mobiles, called Auto-Mobiles), and as poorly lit at night as it is blindingly lit during the day by an intensive use of reflection. At the center, the "Square of the Appalling Mobile." Saturation of the market with a product causes the product's market value to fall: thus, as they explored the Sinister Quarter, the child and the adult would learn not to fear the anguishing occasions of life, but to be amused by them.

The principal activity of the inhabitants will be the Continuous Dérivé. The changing of landscapes from one hour to the next will result in complete disorientation. . . .

Later, as the gestures inevitably grow stale, this dérive will partially leave the realm of direct experience for that of representation. ( . . .

The economic obstacles are only apparent. We know that the more a place is set apart for free play, the more it influences people's behavior and the greater is its force of attraction. This is demonstrated by the immense prestige of Monaco and Las Vegas—and Reno, that caricature of free love—although they are mere gambling places. Our first experimental city would live largely off tolerated and controlled tourism. Future avant-garde activities and productions would naturally tend to gravitate there. In a few years it would become the intellectual capital of the world and would be universally recognized as such.