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On Nomadic Urbanism

and Other Oxymorons to Learn From

by Annu Wilenius

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The city of Ulaanbaatar, capital of Mongolia, where nomadism and soviet city planning is being complemented with self-organized ger districts and staggering tower blocks, is by no means the most comfortable place to be, but it certainly is immensely interesting. (Outer) Mongolia, which as a state expands over 1.500.000 square kilometres of land, is inhabited by only 2.4 million people (and about 4.6 million goats and a several millions of other cattle). One of the poorest and definitely the most sparsely populated places on earth, Mongolia is a magical mix of differing landscapes as well as of ideologies and their remnants. For someone not overwhelmed by first impressions and appearances it can also provide a visionary understanding of a future.

Here is Not There. Here You Always Bring with You.

I first came to Ulaanbaatar in the autumn of 2005. We were a group of five artists and one philosopher and we travelled to Mongolia in search of interdisciplinary, non-hierarchical, down-to-earth and down-to-ourselves kind of research and art practice and in order to rid ourselves from existing ideas of many things. We wanted to make ourselves face something radically different from the world and life we led at home, but to go as a tourist

to a country recently on the verge of hunger catastrophe was something quite problematic as we most certainly did not mean to go slumming in the 'developing' world looking for a pre-modern, authentic way of life. What we came up with instead was to organise an art exhibition and seek contact with the local artists that way. So we paid 1000 US dollars to exhibit at the Union of Mongolian Artists' gallery. The exhibition we called Here is Not There. Here You Always Bring with You. (There is Where You Are Not. The title is from a Swedish children's program song teaching the difference of here and there.

At the opening of the exhibition we encountered a whole host of Mongolian artists inviting us to visit their studios to see their work. In viewing that work, alongside getting our first experiences of the Mongolian countryside and pastoral nomadism, the topics of urbanism, structural change of the society, Mongolian re-found history and religion, after the seventy odd years of Communism, formed into a medley with our own interests and culminated into exhibition exchange projects that I have been working with for the past five years.

What has formed into the focal point of my own research is reflecting on personal experience of architecture and urban planning with some ambition toward a discussion or sharing of experience around what could be termed a(anti)-modernity or second or liquid modernity. These terms come from sociological thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Ulrich Beck and

Zygmunt Bauman all trying to formulate the idea that modernity, as we have known it as a project of the Enlightenment idea of progress and evolution (of development), is no longer a plausible way of understanding the state of the world and us humans in it.

Latour is possibly the most radical in suggesting that we actually never have been modern, that we were just caught up in an idea of modernity, never actually reaching it. Beck on his turn calls the ideas we no longer have use for the First Modernity and the one in which we are trying to re-formulate the relations of the planet, humans and the rest of existence, as Second Modernity. Bauman in his turn analyses the current situation of impotence in face of a new world as being based on a separation of power and politics. We no longer feel that we have tools to cope with the world and this leaves us in a state of fear, and usage of forms of life already dead.

In order to even begin to repair the 'tools' one needs to realise they are broken, or dysfunctional. In other words it is necessary to realise that the Western way of life as expressed in the (Modernist) Western Standard of Living is neither ethically nor ecologically sustainable. It is not acquirable for anyone for a longer period of time any more and most certainly it is not acquirable for all the people for any remaining time we have on this planet. This realisation must needs be accompanied by the realisation that what we have grown to appreciate as necessities of dignified life etc. have to change; our vision of ourselves, oth-

ers and the planet cannot remain unchanged now that we have finally, virtually, become One.

This realisation of becoming one is at the core of the new modernity; the world has become a limited place without extensions and separations. Michel Serres describes the condition as that of a raft at sea. We already have all there is. This is it and we have to learn to live with the fact. Serres' image talks poignantly of the natural resources condition, where as the human connectedness of the new global world is well described by Benjamin R. Barber in writing: "No American child may feel safe in its bed if in Karachi or Baghdad children don't feel safe in theirs. Europeans won't boast long of their freedoms if people in other parts of the world remain deprived and humiliated". In terms of the children's program one might say that a 'there' (where you are not) has ceased to exist in a planetary scale and we now inhabit a massive 'here' that we inevitably and without alternative share with rest of humanity.

What most strongly hit us coming to Mongolia in the first place – and then again and again over the years – was how very deeply all our thinking and experience was rooted in Western standards even how much we wanted to be open and flexible. At moments of fatigue, we inevitably just want(ed) things to be the way "they should be, the rational, functional, logical way", in other words, as we knew them from before.

Happiness in a Radically Incomplete World

As I am writing this there is a discussion going on in television on the happiest countries of the world and the criteria for happiness. In one listing Finland comes first, in another one the sixth, just after Bhutan¹ that is preceded by Switzerland, Austria etc. Besides the obvious economic standing, factors such as social connections, sense of justice and equality as well as trust in general are mentioned as happiness factors. The more we feel that we can trust people around us and the society we live in, the happier we are. The Finnish are good in trusting. So were the Icelanders, which the happiness calculus some years ago placed on top. Some years back Iceland and Finland also shared the least corrupted country of the world title. Makes one think of the good old saying that what you do not know, won't hurt you.

But it does... at least when it catches up with you. And so the Icelanders who were the happiest and most trusting nation of the world are now economically enslaved and mentally at a loss in a new world that just don't function the way it should.² Heidegger speaks of trusting the world as a basic need we have for getting on with our lives smoothly. We trust one day to follow another much in the same way as the one before preceded this one. No great change, no awareness. It is only when some-

thing does not function that we become aware of its existence at all and need to readjust our trust relation anew.

In happiness charts such as these Mongolia does not fare very well. It is one of the poorest and one of the most corrupted countries in the world, so what could we possibly want to learn from it? What should we learn from a people that have been mangled through totalitarian regimes of varying ideologies, practically with little if any power to influence or to understand their own standing in relation to the surrounding world?

Walking the streets of Ulaanbaatar or any of the minor towns of Mongolia it is easy to tag on to a sense of hopelessness. Still spending more time in the country and surpassing this notion, there is an attitude and elegance there, that I think we could well learn from. For one thing we could learn flexibility in varying areas of life: A capacity to tolerate ambiguity, patience to see what happens before rushing to decide in order to better control, an ability to forgive and forget and just get on with things. What we could learn to cherish is the idea of uncontrollability. As Žižek put it in a recent lecture: "The world is fundamentally, radically incomplete! God did not finish it. It's not all there..." The best we can do is to learn to cope with that incompleteness and uncertainty. I am obviously not writing this in awe of totalitarian governments, but in awe of the people who have had the spirit to survive and to do it with such good spirits and style. I think that in Mongolia there has developed

a special aesthetic-existential capability that I would like to term Mongolian Elegance. It is a way to cope with scarcity and chaos with grace.

Back in the TV-programme the discussion has reached the topics of social connectivity. In this the Finnish are not so very good. But we are on top of the list for nations who rely more on their friends than on their family. And we are on top of the list of single person households. In Helsinki over 60% of people live on their own.

In Mongolia an architect friend once went to the ger districts with the question of how would the people like to have a silent room where they could be all on their own. The idea was received with some ambiguity. Silence could be related to a nostalgic idea of living out in the steppe without neighbours - the ger districts being very noisy - but how to organize solitude and to what exact purpose?

Similarly when visiting a Mongolian architect, who was showing us his plans for a new housing development with four families living in a unit forming a swastika shape, we asked with great interest how come he had not divided the living quarters into rooms? His answer was that many Mongolians like to have one living space like in the ger. Here our Western ideas of specialized spaces and privacy as the formulations of true freedom squirmed in anxiety. But could it be that the distinction, separation, estrangement of bodies, spaces and functions have not led to the happiness

intended?

Richard Sennett for one has targeted this separation of private space in modernity as something that leaves us at an eternal adolescent state, coveting our own security and trust in the perfectly controlled world that we limit to the minimum in order to be absolutely secure. In order to grow up, to be genuine, unafraid persons we need the discomfort of other people, unknown people and unknown events. We need public space that is authentically public, meaning that we cannot choose it, cannot control it.

Here comes the tricky part of the modern project: Who wouldn't want to have a house of their own with a vacuum cleaner of their own etc. etc.? Who wouldn't want to have better health-care and better education? But these things are not innocent. They are part of a whole and make us slowly but surely what we are.

What the modern project has done in many aspects of life is that it has left us helpless to take care of ourselves in case the system should suddenly not function. Zygmunt Bauman summarises the idea of modernity as fear in writing: "The kind of society that, retrospectively, has become to be called modern emerged out of the discovery that that human order is vulnerable, contingent and devoid of reliable foundations. That discovery was shocking. The response to the shock was a dream and an effort to make order solid, obligatory and reliably founded."

Urban Nomads and Nomadic Civilization

With the 'glocal turn' talk of nomadism has begun to emerge prefixed with urban. This is interesting as these terms have for long been thought of as being incompatible par excellence. In most societies industrialization and urbanization have been the first cause of sedentary peoples starting to move about, but prior to this modern movement, staying put, being sedentary was seen as the base of what is called culture or civilization.

It has been thought that civilization would categorically be urbane and technological; a new technological invention from fire and the wheel to www having taken humanity to its next step of development. In evolutionary theory, where cultures develop from savagery to barbarism to civilization through domestication of cattle and the emergence of agriculture, the nomad was seen as categorically stuck in a previous stage of development in comparison to settled societies.

In 1884 Friedrich Engels wrote: "In the Eastern Hemisphere the middle stage of barbarism began with the domestication of animals providing milk and meat, but horticulture seems to have remained unknown far into this period. It was, apparently, the domestication and breeding of animals and the formation of herds of considerable size that led to the differentiation of the Aryans and the Semites from the mass of barbarians..."

In 1946 Arnold Toynbee, in his A Study of History (in 12 volumes), describes nomads as "arrested civilizations", in other words, societies that had got stuck for millennia in the same stage of development, like bees or ants. To contradict these essentialising views on the nomad, David Sneath presents in his study The Headless State, that even though this view might have been plausible to hold for someone like Engels, 20th century anthropology clearly shows that pastoral nomadism is not a pre-agrarian phenomenon, but a way of life developed long after early agrarian societies in the area practicing semi-nomadic herding and semi-sedentary societies before getting on the move more permanently.

Gilles Deleuze writes on nomadism: "The archeologists have made us think of nomadism not just as a primary state, but as an adventure, an invitation from the outside, as mobility, that surprises the sedentary peoples." This nomad Deleuze constructs from the ideas of the Mongol "war machine" (of the time of the European invasion) against the "bureaucratic machine" of the sedentary village. To be a conceptual nomad is to stay outside of the code, to stay wild, in resistance, partly belonging, partly autonomous. Deleuze continues to point out that this kind of nomadism does not mean necessarily mobility in space, but mobility in intensity— and that even historically the nomadic peoples have never been on the move in the same sense as immigrants. The nomads are the ones who become nomadic in order to stay where they are.

In studying the ger districts and nomads in the countryside such researches as David Sneath and Ole Bruun have come to the conclusion that somehow nomadism sticks, no matter what the people seem to go through. There are aspects of social and environmental attitudes that remain even how sedentary and urbane Mongolians were trying to become. Besides attitudes and appreciations in the city, there has also appeared a counter-mobilisation of people moving from the cities back to the steppe and pastoral nomadism. They go back with their mobile phones, solar panels and satellite antennas and combine what is best in these two cultures. This recent phenomenon has been partly reversed again during the past year with the heavy winter that has forced thousands of nomads into the ger districts of Ulaanbaatar after losing their cattle. In the growing slums it will be of extreme importance to 'get innovative' both of the material as well as social resources available.

Garden Cities of Tomorrow

One of the most striking combinations Mongolia has to offer is that of glass surfaced tower-blocks neighbouring people living in felt covered tents, called gers. I remember seeing it for the first time from a taxi window and something shifted inside me. Later we looked at a map of the city with a few streets and a lot of little tents depicted all around. In one way of looking these areas are slums forming from vast amounts of people from the countryside moving into the city that cannot

in any way answer the need of housing and infrastructure: Answer the need of people who would require living in the city to mean a flat with running water and electricity etc. But the people moving into the ger districts come from living in gers in the countryside and their solutions are according.

The new situation of having gers placed tightly together form many kinds of new problems such as lacking privacy that people try to create by building fences and air pollution as the gers are mainly heated by burning coal. There are also many new positive affects of this semi-settled existence. One of these is the relation to the land in many varying aspects. One of these is gardening and vegetable growing, radical as such in Mongolia, another is that as there is no actual building tradition in the country, the exiting stone architecture is either by the Chinese or the Russians, the tower-blocks being built for the incoming population is not always deemed quite safe to live in. People prefer to have their feet in a nearer proximity to the ground for safety, but also for family privacy, fresh air and sensual connectedness to the environment.

In some ways the ger districts, the slums, have begun to be seen as a possibility to a new type of inhabitation, a semi-nomadic, semi-settled ger city with its green areas protecting its population from a myriad of urban ills, whereas the tower blocks/skyscrapers have become the harbingers of disaster. In the neighbouring capital of Kazakhstan, Astana, the inhabitants have named the latest

two housing projects as Titanic and Kursk. The Mongolians call their so far tallest building quite fondly The Pregnant Lady – for its heavily swelling side – but at the same time the old Russian built quarters are the most wanted, again, on the real estate market alongside with projects for re-developing the ger districts.

The current city planning includes many plans for new parks and for better maintenance of the existing ones, but water has become very scarce and expensive, and privately owned land is difficult to keep for recreational purposes. Many of the courtyards that used to be parks in the centre of the city have been built out with new high-rise buildings. From the 1990s the government has been actively encouraging people in the ger areas to grow their own vegetables. This has even been referred to as the Green Revolution in Ulaanbaatar. Possibly as the inner-city parks will be built up, the ger areas will emerge as the new green areas of the city.

Annu Wilenius

The writer is visual artist, lecturer in visual culture and doctoral student at Aalto University, Finland.

The Mongolia projects are part of her doctoral dissertation *Semi-detached Ger with a Garden: Experiencing Self, Community and Environment through Urbanizing Mongolia*

Footnotes

1
Bhutan is run on policies based on Gross National Happiness instead of Gross Domestic Product. See <http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/>

2
Besides the obvious hardships of the economical situation also positive phenomena has emerged. For example as MacDonalds and Burger King have left the country, due to too high production costs, local food businesses are turning up with recycled porcelain, 'home' roasted coffee and, one might suppose, an attitude.

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