

Hans

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Ibelings

**MARC AUGÉ'S
NOWHERE IN PARTICULAR**



Unknown,
Unknown airport, 2018

In recent decades the architectural discourse has benefitted greatly from insights from outside the field. Several of the most influential perspectives on architecture originate elsewhere, whether it is in arts or anthropology, economy or ecology, psychology or philosophy, sociology or science. Whereas it is hard to imagine that, say, economists would consider a book on architecture highly illuminating for their discipline, it is easy to give examples of architects, architectural critics and historians who readily borrow from economists, with Thomas Piketty's *Capital* as one recent example. This is true for many other disciplines as well.

Most of the books from other disciplines which have been influential for the field of architecture are not about architecture at all - think of the work of Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Ulrich Beck - yet every now and then there is a publication which comes from outside the discipline but touches upon the built environment. Marc Augé's *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995), originally published in French in 1992 as *Non-Lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* is a case in point. For Augé architecture is certainly not the central subject of his book but it forms a constant presence in the background, as an illustration of his thesis that in contemporary societies people have developed a new understanding, and usage, of an increasingly larger part of the public domain, which he has called the non-place. (To put *Non-places* in perspective: Rem Koolhaas published his 'Generic City', the *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* and 'Junkspace' respectively three, eight, nine years later.)

Augé is a prolific and thought-provoking anthropologist who, as one of the founders of the "Centre d'anthropologie des mondes contemporains », has proven to be a keen observer of what is beyond the purview of conventional anthropology. Simply put, conventional anthropology has the 'other' as its subject, and this 'other' is often elsewhere,

outside the world and experience of the observer. Augé's interest is what happens 'here and now', and with 'us'. In other words, he is trying to understand our own otherness.

Non-Places is an investigation into our uneasy relationship with place today, now that many sites have lost their conventional anthropological significance as settings where people meet, and feel a deep connection with. Traditionally the village or town square, and the street corner have been places people are attached to and where, over time, all the events that happened here have formed thick layers of meaning, of collective memory. As a Christian Norberg-Schulz has written in the preface of his *Meaning in Western Architecture*, in this conventional anthropological understanding architecture is place making, enabling humans to make their 'existence meaningful'. Elsewhere, Norberg-Schulz has elaborated on the common expression to say that when something happens 'it takes place', This led him to the conclusion that place and life are deeply interrelated.

Augé begs to differ and shows that life goes on even without existentially meaningful places.

Non-Places invites us to look from a different angle at those apparently meaningless environments where we spend an increasing amount of our time, and to appreciate what is going on in shopping malls, in chain hotels, holiday resorts, theme parks, parking garages, airport terminals, and all those other non-places which are in many ways the built version of white noise. We use them, but they are rarely a destination for us; rather they are places in between destinations, places of transit and passage. In this respect, the highway is a key example of a non-place for Augé, where - at least in France - motorists are notified by brown and white road sign of the existence of historical monuments and touristic attractions. For Augé it underlines the distance between the non-place of the highway and the signifiers of 'real' places to the left

and right of it.

Nearly nobody pays attention to non-places, and not many of us are particularly fond of all those transient, interchangeable settings where we are passers-by, accidental visitors. Even if non-places often feel comfortably familiar, they rarely invoke a sense of being at home. (In an article in *Qua-derns*, reflecting on his own book a decade after its publication, Augé acknowledged that for the people who work in a non-place like an airport, or a shopping mall and spend time there on a daily basis, they can actually be meaningful, but this amendment does not weaken the fundamental argument about our understanding and usage of places that do not deserve the name). In non-places, human interaction is typically limited to what the famous sociologist Erving Goffman in the 1960s has called 'civil inattention': a telling label to describe the polite indifference that is the core of human behaviour of people in public space. Acknowledging the presence of others while minding one's own business. More and more human interactions in shops, fast food restaurants, at the airport counter, and the reception desk of a hotel have become scripted exchanges, a point made clear by George Ritzer in a number of books which address what he calls the "McDonaldization" of the world. And a growing number of these transactions do not even need human interaction anymore. With the proliferation of scanners, card readers, credit cards, apps on smart phones, and all the options for self-checkin and self-checkout, it is actually possible to avoid human contact almost completely in many instances. Augé hinted already at the credit card as one tool to reduce interpersonal contact; if his book would have been published a bit later, he would most likely have included the smart phone as well.

Augé published his book in an era when an awareness of processes and effects of globalization started to increase. Augé

did not use the word globalization, although it is obvious that the sameness and interchangeability he refers to in relation to non-places, are part and parcel of it. The general awareness of globalization in the 1990s was partially triggered by the feeling that the world was becoming more and more homogeneous, with an ever growing number of McDonald's and Starbucks outlets everywhere, and the realization that one could find the same products in every store everywhere, while hearing the same background music in every part of the world. The collapse of Communist regimes, enhanced the perception of One World. With the ubiquitousness of internet connections and the instantaneous dissemination of every event, this awareness of global unification has only increased, to such extent that we can pretend that we are now truly living the global village life which Marshall McLuhan had predicted in 1968.

Augé's book was written too early to include a discussion of the worldwide web, but in retrospect it can be seen in many ways the extension, and intensification of the notion of the non-place, creating a sense of simultaneously being everywhere and nowhere in particular, being in the same detached state as the motorist passing a touristic sign on the *autoroute*.

Instead of globalization, Augé used the word *supermodernity* to describe the present, and even if there was no direct correspondence with anything architectural, this idea triggered (at least for me) a link with the prevailing contemporary architecture, which after a postmodern period, tended towards a return to modern principles, but this time in a superlative version. This then-new architecture often was a built equivalent of Goffman's idea of civil inattention: abstract, neutral almost building, which did not convey much of their use, program, or purpose and often displayed a remarkable indifference to the specificity of the site. In other words, many of the key projects of the 1990s were detached,

taciturn, and not ostentatious connected to their context.

The supermodernity in Augé's subtitle could be interpreted as the periodization of a condition after postmodernity. In architecture, the postmodern has had a double impact, questioning the validity of modern ideas, and bringing forth a new set of ideas, related to symbols, significance, meaning, and a sense of place. The supermodern condition which succeeded, and in several ways superseded, the postmodern, was in a certain sense its opposite. It distanced itself from postmodernism not by proposing an anti-postmodernism but rather making an architecture that was deliberately non-postmodern: an architecture that intentionally was non-symbolic, non-significant, non-meaningful without being unsymbolic, insignificant, or meaningless.

Just as the postmodernism couldn't deny its dependence on modernism, supermodernism could not exist without the postmodernism that preceded it. And by being the opposite of postmodernism, which in itself was a reversal of modernism, supermodernism in many respects picked up the thread of modernism where postmodernism had left it. If modernism can be summarized by Ezra Pound's 'make it new', the supermodern creed could be 'make it anew'.

In retrospect postmodernity was too fast in declaring modernity in their last throes; twenty-five years after Augé proposed the idea of a supermodernity, it is no longer certain that this sealed the fate of postmodernity either. In a very postmodern way, it seems that we are now in a phase in which it is hard to deny that multiple perspective can coexist (perhaps the most fundamental legacy of postmodernism), meaning that the current condition in architecture is comparable to quantum mechanic's waves and particles duality, that neither postmodern nor supermodern can completely describe what we can observe.