

## Chatting about the City

In 2011 and 2012, I was teaching with Dalibor at De Montfort University in Leicester. Invited by David Dernie, we taught an MA in Architectural Design. The students came from Leicester, from Saudi Arabia, Misrata in Libya, Xi'an and Beijing, from Kiev, Nicosia, Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi, from Burkina Faso and the Hague, and various other parts of the world, each with their different and rapidly fluctuating levels of conflict. Dalibor came to Leicester every other week, and chatted to and with the students for three or four hours about the city, about architecture, about history – about life. He would drink coffee with them, smoke outside in the drizzle with the smokers and accept their help back into the room which was our base (with its ceiling tiles and Teflon-coated vertical blinds). My job was to listen, then to continue to chat as the students worked on their design projects and essays, to keep raising the questions Dalibor had raised.

Dalibor told the students, very simply, that the city is something shared. Not shared in the same way that we share a system – simply because we all find ourselves obliged to tap into it (because timetables dictate that a great many of us must catch the 17.52 train). And not always comfortably shared – sharing means dispute. What is shared is what we have in common – experience, understanding, our ‘lived’ history. We share the background conditions that allow us to act. This is what ‘urbanity’ is about.

In the evening, Dalibor and I often travelled to London together, on the ‘intercity’ train. In Leicester, we saw only the university campus, the ring road and the station café (Dalibor’s back was too bad for him to be able to walk through any of the Leicester that has survived the systems imposed by traffic engineers). At the time, I was studying the group of people who, in Paris, were trying to define and to shape what for them was a new ‘discipline’, that of urbanism – this in the 1910s and 1920s. I was trying to find out more about the *urbanisme* that Le Corbusier railed against, for its timidity. For an hour or so, Dalibor would tease me about my interest in Monsieur Bonnier (one of the architects of the new *urbanisme* taught at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Urbaines, founded in Paris in 1919) and Monsieur Poëte (the historian who headed the Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris, which was rebranded to become the school’s home). How is your Monsieur Bonnier today, he would ask? And why do you spend quite so much time in his company – his and Monsieur Poëte’s – when you could be chatting to people who are so much more convivial, more full of wit?

I knew that Dalibor’s provocation was intended to make me think seriously about *why* I was studying these people and their work, and about what kind of mode of involvement with the city they could reveal. He wanted me always to remain aware of why it might be important to care. And I knew that he had a point about my ‘friends’ – someone more sparkling might be more insightful, less dogged, however flawed. But I also knew that sometimes, in the end, Dalibor had a grudging respect for those of us who grimly persist in establishing this or that backstory (it is not deep enough to call it background), and he was trying to make sure that I didn’t get lost in a morass of trivial facts.

Dalibor’s most merciless teasing was reserved for my relationship with Louis Bonnier. Why was I so concerned to find out about an eclectically historicist architect, operating in the early years of the twentieth century, who was just beginning to try to replace the importance of a formalised ‘history’ with that of a somewhat ill-defined yet stylised ‘nature’ combined with ‘technology’, and whose idea of typicality was to distil it into the plan layout and appearance of a building where it could be endlessly repeated with minor

variations? In this, Bonnier was like most other European architects of his time – and that was what I found useful about him.

Dalibor had more time for Marcel Poëte, and would enjoy sparring with him. At first glance, Poëte's concern to see Paris' history as its 'life', Paris itself as a living repository which shapes its citizens, in which all who spend time in the city partake, was not so very different from Dalibor's emphasis on continuity, and on history as something shared and situated. Superficially, Poëte's suggestion, borrowed from Bergson, that change to the 'being' that is Paris is effected both by intellect and by instinct, both wittingly and unwittingly, by those who constitute it might seem related to Dalibor's interest – from Aristotle – in different modes of knowing, such as knowledge that can be explicitly taught, and innate but developable skill. But Poëte's sensitivity to historical 'mood' was focused on mapping its change, on identifying the city's different *mystiques* through time. His determination to imagine the city in a state of constant evolution that could be plotted, then directed, by mastering a mass of ever-changing minutiae of fact meant that he could not pause to dwell in the sheer depth of our present reality. His vision of urban history as the force of instinct guided and controlled by the intellect was ultimately far removed from Dalibor's concern to ask about the relationship between making, knowing and doing in order to emphasise the collaboration between what we learn through practice, through experience, and how we act. Poëte's city was a constantly changing, consciously self-organising organism. Dalibor's was the manifestation of the latent, shared conditions that enable us to act as ethical beings.

In Leicester, Dalibor occasionally showed the students a slide of a miniature by Jean Fouquet, from the 1450s, which he referred to as the *Parlement de Paris*. More usually labelled 'The Descent of the Holy Spirit Upon the Faithful', it shows in the foreground a group of people assembled on the left bank of the Seine. Across the river, the west front of Notre Dame dominates the scene. From the sky, directly centred on the circle of people, emerges the hand of God unleashing the Holy Spirit, creating ripples in the heavens as they open for an almost imperceptible instant. Devils flee to either side.<sup>1</sup>

Had Poëte shown this painting in one of his high-speed dolly-shots, in which the fragments of history pile up before him, it would have been to pinpoint briefly the *mystique* of religion as it gave way to that of the monarchy, before it, too, was eclipsed by the scientific outlook tempered by sentiment, then the evangelism of democracy.<sup>2</sup> For Dalibor, it was a moment to highlight the importance of gathering, under the sky, on a late spring evening, an illuminated moment when dispute might just be opened to understanding, however fleetingly. Dalibor allowed us to see the slide as an image of the primary, cosmic conditions in which we all share, the deeper levels of reality in and by which we co-exist. The city – any city – is a place which takes up and perpetuates those conditions. He allowed us to see that as architects, teachers, students, citizens, the better we can understand this, the better we can uphold the city's 'city-ness'.

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<sup>1</sup> The miniature is from the 'Hours of Etienne Chevalier', 1452-1460, Jean Fouquet. The label 'The Descent of the Holy Spirit Upon the Faithful' dates from the 1970s, when an attempt was made to reconstruct the now dispersed Book of Hours. See John Wyndham Pope-Hennessy, *The Robert Lehman Collection*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> I'm not aware of an image of this miniature in any of Poëte's panoramic works, such as *Une Vie de Cité* (3 vols + album, 1924-31) or *Paris, son évolution créatrice* (1938). In 1904, the Bibliothèque nationale staged an exhibition of Jean Fouquet's work, to rehabilitate him fully as a national hero. But this particular image seems to have been in a private collection, and did not re-appear until it was sold at auction at Sotheby's in 1946. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 30.



Jean Fouquet, La descente du Saint-Esprit, see [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La\\_Descente\\_du\\_Saint-Esprit.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_Descente_du_Saint-Esprit.jpg)

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