Moving toward meaningful transit

Mobility has become too complex and critical to be examined only at the hand of performance parameters such as speed. Georges Amar, a design professor at Mines Paris Tech and the author of *Homo mobilis*, explains how to grasp the good potential of mobile life

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Bryant Park in Manhattan is equipped with with free Wi-Fi, power outlets, public toilets and food stands, making it a popular tourist hang-out and an after-work meeting point for many New Yorkers. Although the park is municipal, it is managed by a private not-for-profit company and considered an excellent example of well-administered public space

by STEFANIA GARASSINI

You expect him to talk about technology, particularly the possible evolutions of the use of smartphones and tablets, but as soon as he begins to speak, it's clear that his interests are much broader than that. Georges Amar is a design professor at the École nationale supérieure des mines de Paris (a.k.a. Mines Paris Tech), a long-standing engineering school. Amar is also the author of the book *Homo mobilis – Une civilisation du mouvement* (Fyp Éditions, Roubaix 2016). In March 2019, he held a conference on this title at the "Meet the media guru" event organised in Milan by the digital culture centre Meet (a branch of the Fondazione Cariplo) and by the Fondazione Giannino Bassetti. The event was the first instalment of the "Around Mobility" cycle by the two foundations. Amar, who has a long past as the head of innovation at the Parisian public transport authority RATP, proposes a thorough rethinking of the concept of mobility, and to do so he wants to start with the words we use to describe its new phenomena. It is not enough to use labels such as smart city or augmented reality to account for highly complex circumstances that involve so many aspects of human life. We must go further in depth, starting with the language we use. According to the French professor, it is the only way to truly understand the good potential contained in this new frontier of "mobile life", as he defines it.

"In order to succeed in thinking in a new way, we need to find new words," says Amar. "Traditionally, mobility was an exception. Life took place in specific places between which we moved, preferably as quickly as possible, because movement was considered a waste of time. Today, we are in a transition phase. The equivalence between mobility and transport no longer makes sense. In the paradigm "mobile", I work everywhere, I study everywhere. This is a radical change, and we have not yet the right words to describe it. My work right now is to create oxymorons, such as "mobile place", which is a contradiction, because a place is fixed per definition. But there are a few examples, such as food truck, disco buses, and trains equipped for working. Another oxymoron is "individual public transport", which I use to describe services such as BlaBlaCar, where rides are shared in private vehicles. This is where we start: trying to give a name to something that we are still unable to grasp very well. If you can't name something, then you can't think about it."

We often hear talk about "intelligent mobility", and you refer to the term, too. What do you mean by it?
To tell the truth, I prefer "meaningful mobility", where the meaning is human and immeasurable by types of performance such as speed. It is not sufficient to evaluate mobility only by quantities, such as kilometres per hour. The phenomenon is much more complex, and a cultural fact. Only if we render it in its entirety will we succeed in managing it in the best way. Walking, for example, is an aesthetic and cultural experience that involves all the senses. If we see mobility as an anthropological fact, then the past is interesting, too. The real key to understanding today's challenges is re-evaluating the entire evolutionary path that brought us here.

What impact might this new idea of mobility have on the structure of a city?
I consider the city to be an ecosystem of movements. If we want to think of a new policy for urban space, we must quit considering places and transport as if they were opposites. We must look at hybrid situations where the two elements are combined. That's were the best potential lies.

Another ubiquitous term is "smart city". Much research and investment is being made in this field of study. What is your opinion?
Normally, we use the expression smart city to mean that digital technology is adding intelligence to the city. I propose to turn the perspective around. Data are stupid. The city makes them intelligent. The city is the most ancient form of a network. It is human intelligence embodied in the ground. While Internet is the art of meeting, it is the *polis* that created the thinking behind it. The problem is that in the modern age, we seem to have forgotten all of that, simplifying the role and function of a city in the name of criteria of rationalism and efficiency, which have created true urban monsters. The city has a very ancient intelligence. Digital technology, on the other hand, is comparable to barbarism. It breaks everything, but brings new things. It must be tamed, otherwise it has a destructive impact. Only a virtuous encounter with the dynamics of urban life can bring interesting results.

Could you give an example?
I'll mention a personal experience. I was in New York for a work appointment with a researcher I had never met. We were to meet at Bryant Park, a green area in the heart of Manhattan, at the foot of a monument whose picture I had received. I needed Internet, a smartphone and the digital photo of my interlocutor. All this made a real encounter possible, for work, in a place that to me represents an emblem of mobile life. Outdoors, with perfectly functioning Wi-Fi, electric outlets in every table, bar and toilet. This is my idea of hybridisation, Internet helping us to live better in the concrete spaces where we happen to be. Internet is often identified with the idea of globalisation, but it is not only that. I believe in its great potential to give new vitality to localities, to the places where we meet, the ones that are crucial to the life of every city.