



# Vilém Flusser

## writings

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## Designing Cities

Meant here is not the glistening city of Le Corbusier, for which Brazil is the strikingly gray and terrible counterargument. Meant here is the rejection of civilized life in favor of another, an alternative. We were thrown into civilization: we are bourgeois (*citoyens*), civilians, without anyone asking us for our permission. But, as soon as we become conscious of the fact that we are not individuals (not civil subjects), with one stroke we are no longer bourgeois identifiable by a passport. As a result of this situation of being expatriates, we are able to design alternative cities. That is what is meant here.

### **Marketplace and Temple Mount**

First, a genetic question: How did we come to a civilization into which we could be thrown? This is a fundamental question that archaeology should be made to answer. The answer is: civilization originated out of culture, approximately six thousand years ago. If there had not been a culture (had the people not eaten grass), then we would not be civilians today. Why people began eating grass in spite of their digestive apparatus, and why they went for each other's throats in defense of their grasses, is a follow-up question (not addressed here). If one asks about the origin of culture in the narrower sense of "agriculture," then one runs the danger of wanting to hunt and gather. And for this we are much too civilized. The Paleolithic paradise of those who waded through the abundant intestines of the woolly mammoth and sucked up bird's eggs is not an alternative to civilization: we cannot design these sorts of utopias.

If one eats grass, one has to eat a lot of it not to starve, even if one

limits oneself to eating grass seeds only. This circumstance demands that one sow the seeds and sit down and wait until they ripen. It demands a sedentary life. If one sows and then leaves (as in the Mesolithic period), then others can come. This patient sitting and waiting (this guarding) is the cultivated attitude toward life. One still lies in wait (as when hunting), but no longer for something edible (for animals), but for eaters (humans). This is culture in its narrower sense: *homo homini lupus*. In short, the village. The people who write Culture with a big C, these village wolves, represent patience and tolerance. But, these vegetarian wolves do not describe lying in wait. Only those who write culture with a little c describe lupine lurking. They are not hunters, but civilians. They describe culture from the perspective of the city, even if they want to reinstate paradise.

Approximately six thousand years ago, canalization of some riverbanks was begun, to regulate and increase the harvests (for example, in Mesopotamia or along the Nile). This required not only geometry (thus, an intellectual class), but also forced labor (thus, slaves) and supervision (thus, an executive class). The “Big Man” sitting on the hill is in charge of supervision. He also has to raise his hill (“rampart”) to a certain artificial height (“tower”) to have a full view of the area and to make sure his commands are being heard. Thus, civilization is called into life: The individual villages lengthen their streets, so that they converge at the bottom of the hill. Harvests and commands are transported up and down. The city that originated in this manner consists of three spaces: the homes, the marketplace situated at the bottom of the hill, and the hill. The home dwellers farm the grasses according to commands from on high (according to statutes and laws). Geometers (intellectuals) stand in the marketplace, to formulate the commands, and the “Big Man” on the hill evolves from a guard into legislator, king, high priest, and finally God. This is the political structure of civilization into which we were thrown.

A number of circumstances have changed during the last six thousand years, but the structure has essentially remained the same up to the beginning of the modern period. Modern civilization, which came into being as a result of this revolution, is characterized by the suppression of theory by politics, and of the contemplative life by the active life. The result of the marketplace’s dominance over the temple mount is modern science and technology, as well as the industrial revolution and the expansion of Western civilization across the rest of the globe where temples have not yet been overthrown.

### From Masquerade to Relational Field

The city and the village are tools for the production of anthropologies, to achieve social identification among the residents. For example, I become “I” in the village thanks to a medicine bag and in the city thanks to an official identity card. For example, I identify myself in the village as a howling goat and in the city as a taxpayer. Village and city are structures through which people identify with something or identify themselves as something. Put another way, culture and civilization are strategies for the generation of human individuals, and these strategies are constantly improving.

This is a truism: village and city are factories for the masks with which people identify themselves. In the village, the masks are still material. In the city, they become increasingly immaterial and thus increasingly numerous. But this truism stops being one once it is recognized that nothing is hidden behind the masks, and that they are really the dancers. That culture and civilization are a masquerade, a *danse macabre*. That there is no one who lays on a mask to identify himself, but rather, that these masks secrete those wearing them out of themselves. This is another way of formulating the assertion that culture and civilization generate anthropologies, which claim to serve as their foundation. This sounds ghostly: these abstractions, culture and civilization, secrete concrete, individual humans. This essay is concerned with formulating this situation the other way around and with bringing an end to this ghostly talk. To demonstrate that culture and civilization are concrete, and that the individual is abstract. The concrete is to be seen as a network of relations, and the threads of this network become tangled without connecting anything concrete. The only concrete thing is the relations themselves, whereas everything related or in relation (all objects and subjects of relations) are abstractions. The network of relationships is to be seen as an intersection of different relational fields, one of these being the field of intersubjective relationships. The field of dialogical intrahuman relationships is networked with other fields in a way that is almost too complex to understand (for example, with the electromagnetic, with the psychological or the ecological). Nevertheless, it possesses its own unique structure: it functions negentropically. It is a relational field where information is generated, stored, and distributed. When viewed from this perspective, the terms *culture* and *civilization* can be formulated: they are two forms of connecting to the intersubjective relational field, two strategies for the generation, storage, and distribution of information by means of the threads of intrahuman relations.

Such a perspective is rather simple to reach—we already possess models, for example, electrical connections or the telephone network—but it is difficult to maintain. It is barely possible to experience every day the products of culture and civilization (for example, Stone Age knives, airplanes, or ministries) as abstractions from a negentropic relational network or to recognize ourselves and our neighbors as products of such a network. This is what is meant here by a change into a sincere life. If, however, one maintains this perspective (and even if it is only for brief moments of insight), then horizons will be opened for possible reconstructions of intrahuman relational fields, for alternative civilizations. Then it is possible to design cities.

### **Cities, Not Villages**

First, one asks: Why cities and not villages? Why not, as some alternative thinkers are suggesting, discard civilized life in favor of a cultivated life? Why not focus, for example, on McLuhan's cosmic village? Short and sweet, because the village does not open up theoretical space. Because, despite appearances, the cultivated and cultivating village life does not offer leisure in the civilized sense. Villages cannot have temple mounts. This is not because they turn into cities (*suburbia*) when situated under a temple mount. Put another way, as soon as villagers theorize, village life becomes citified. This is an assumption, and it must be taken into consideration. It does not suffice to give historical proof: as soon as geometry is practiced, villages become cities. The question to ask is why this is so.

The cultivated and cultivating life is a connection plan. Intrahuman relationships are so tangled thanks to this plan that the knots behind the mask of vegetarian wolves can be identified. This blanket description of village life does not only depend on the Roman model with its *colere, cultura*, and its *lupa* (even though it is impossible for the Occident to forget this Roman model). It is also a matter of trying to get a handle on lying in wait for the harvest. In terms of their attitude toward life, cultivated and cultivating people are vegetarian wolves. They are wolves to each other, because the harvests must be distributed. And they are a pack of wolves to others, because the others lie in wait for their harvests. And they are vegetarian, even when they eat an occasional grazing cud chewer, because they sit around and wait for the grain to ripen. Certainly, different masks may be used in the village dance, but they all possess this wolfish mien. All dances are *lupernalia*, even when they honor a different, but equally clever and bloodthirsty totem animal (such as the boar). Lurking anticipation of this kind is an attitude toward life that is opposed to theoretical

leisure (the Greek *scholē*, the Jewish Sabbath). Village “free time” is great, but antiacademic.

It is not as if the city had “ennobled” the vegetarian wolves or bred them into sheep. On the contrary, it has opened a political space where the wolves are able to let off steam. And, it offers an economic space that places herds of sheep at their disposal. The city resounds with the cry of the wolf and the bleating of the sheep (one need only think of car horns and walkie-talkies). In the city, the wolf occasionally wears sheep’s clothing and the sheep mask themselves in wolf’s clothing. But this transformation of vegetarian wolves into cannibalistic wolves and this taming of the city dweller into sheep (something that Christianity aided) allow the city to cut out a space for silence and to raise it above the din. There below, the wolves and sheep eat one another, and precisely for this reason a few academics are able to theorize up high (granted, they have gained entrance owing to their mathematical and musical skills). Even this blanket description of the city, similar to the description of the village, has its own inescapable model, namely, Athens. But, similar to the description of village life, this description arose from the desire to get a handle on the city dweller’s attitude toward life.

It needs to be asked: Why is it desirable to open up a theoretical space, and why should cities be designed instead of villages? The Platonic answer that the city is justifiable because it allows for theory, and that theory leads to the true, the beautiful, and the good, is no longer satisfying. From the relational perspective, which has been proposed, another answer can be offered: because theory is the connecting force of intrahuman relationships, to which we owe the production of information. The political wolves shred this information into pieces, and the economic sheep consume it, but in a theoretical space they will always be dialogically threaded anew. Therefore, if the intrahuman network has the tendency (is thus “engaged”) to produce information in spite of universal entropy, then the theoretical space is its alpha and omega. Thus, one sees how Plato can be stood with his feet on the earth in a sort of Copernican revolution (one more time). In short, the designing of alternative cities must be concentrated on the designing of theoretical spaces, which do not look into the heavens, but drag them down.

Granted that the future projection of cities will be concentrated on theoretical spaces, the following question needs to be asked: Will not the political and economic foundation, on which the ivory tower is built, be neglected? Brutally stated: If the future builders of cities become satisfied with the building of temples and should thus elegantly forget the market-

place and private residences, will one not be justified in accusing them of a pharaonic, elite oligarchy, an aristocratic fascism? The answer is that since the time of the pharaohs (and since Plato) a few things have changed, and this above all: it has become minimally possible to think that the marketplace and private residences could be handed over to simulacra of humans, and that all human citizens could be settled on the temple mount. It has become minimally possible to think that politics could be handed over to artificial intelligence and economics to robots, and that humans would be concentrated on programming these robots.

In this way, the following alternative city for the sincere human life begins to take shape on the horizon: There, where sheep consume and chew their cud in private residences, herds of ever more operative automatons will be working day and night. There, where currently blood-thirsty wolves shred themselves into pieces in the marketplace, and lie in wait for sheep, packs of ever more intelligent computers will be governing the automatons. And there on the temple mount—where currently an elite of programmers and set designers, mostly unnoticed, pull the invisible threads of the marketplace and private residences—the entire citizenry will produce information in a setting of leisurely dialogue without friction, to program the marketplace and private residences to take care of the temple mount.

### **A New City Model**

In order to conceive of this new city model, one must surrender the intellectual categories of geography in favor of topology. This task is not to be underestimated. One should not conceive of the city to be designed as a geographical place (such as a hill near a river), but rather as a fold in the intersubjective relational field. This is what is meant by the assertion that the future civilization must become “immaterial.” This change is not to be underestimated, even if we are getting used to seeing folds in fields in synthetic images of equations on the computer screen. One must only think how difficult it was to see the geographic surface as a body surface rather than as a plane. Strangely, a rethinking in terms of topology rather than geography will not make the city to be designed “utopic.” It is “utopic” (placeless) as long as we continue to think geographically, because it cannot be localized within a geographical place. But, as soon as we are able to think topologically—that is, in terms of networked concrete relationships—the city to be designed allows not only localization, but also localization everywhere in the network. It comes into being forever and everywhere, where intersubjective relationships accumulate according

to a connection plan to be designed. To state this “astronomically”: what a heavenly body is to the gravitational field, the city to be designed is to the intrahuman relational field, which is to say, a fold that “attracts” the relations.

If one sticks to this (somewhat awkward) metaphor, then it becomes more understandable what is meant here by the designing of a theoretical space. It has to be a space where intrahuman relationships are “somehow” soaked up. It must be “attractive.”

What sort of alternative civilization can we design right here and right now? Let us draw up only one. It can be modified without difficulty (with or without a computer) into endless others, and recomputed to the point where the original version would no longer be recognizable. The city to be designed would be a result of the following connection plan for intrahuman relationships: All humans are to be connected in such a way that the currently available information must be subsumed in more and more new fields and entered into the computations. It is assumed that some of the information produced this way can be used for the programming of artificial intelligence. This, in turn, would be able to generate and control automatic machines for the production of necessary foodstuffs for humans, so that the theoretical space can remove the political and the economic from itself and relegate these two spheres to the subhuman. This sort of model for the city can be seen as a reversal of the Platonic utopia: Certainly, as in the Platonic utopia, the theoretical space moves into the highest position, but it is no longer based on politics and economics, but rather, it designs and generates these two spaces. The big difference between this city to be designed and utopia consists in the fact that this city becomes a sort of unavoidable appendix of the theoretical space, whereas the city’s task in the utopia is to open up a theoretical space. The intention of this projected space is neither to create politics and business nor to lead them. Instead, it is to give meaning to the intersubjective network in the face of universal entropy—in the face of death and the fall into ever-increasing probability. In short, to understand theory no longer as the discovery of truth, but rather as the projection of meaning.

When designing the theoretical space, the city builders will take current science (and its technology) as a starting point, but not as their base. They will spin out a network of material and immaterial reversible cables (which they have already begun to do). They will allow information to run through this cable, so that it is simultaneously and completely accessible in each place in the network (which they have already begun to do). They will build raster screens and memory into the network (which they

have already begun to do). And they will encode this information with an ever-increasing operability of codes (and even here the first steps have already been taken). From a geographical perspective, the city will encompass the entire globe, but, from a topological perspective, it will initially be a barely perceptible fold in the all-encompassing intrahuman relational field: most of the intrahuman relationships will lie outside of this network (in existing civilizations). The fundamental problem facing the designing of the city will be the question concerning the broadening and deepening of the theoretical fold. One solution that will be proposed is “open Confucianism.” “Schools” will be everywhere built into the intrahuman network where competencies for the processing of information will be developed. In addition, these schools will create a series of grade levels moving in the direction of theoretical space. The more numerous the “mandarins” become (the more intrahuman relationships become competent in theory), the more the theoretical space will expand and the more attractive it will become. During the transitional period from the current to the future civilization, intrahuman relationships will fall into two networks: one will already be connected theoretically; the other will still be connected economically and politically. But, in time, the second network will be subsumed by the first (this process is already under way). This “open Confucianism”—everyone can become a mandarin as long as he acquires competencies—has one passing and one permanent consequence. Temporarily, the division into mandarin and layperson will be understood as mandarin totalitarianism by the laypeople (this is the opinion of the cultural pessimists). Over an extended period of time, the theoretical space will be proven to be a “fuzzy set” of interconnected and reciprocally beneficial competencies (thus, the intention of the city designers).

This also shows why science will be a starting point, but not a base. Taken as a whole and as individual disciplines, science will be only one of many competencies that mesh together in theoretical space and overlap one another. Other competencies (art and other critical disciplines, for example, will also be a starting point, but not a base) will enter into the realm of science and change it from the inside, thus losing their original character. In the long term, this gray zone of overlapping competencies will find a synthesis in a universal competency that is difficult to imagine today. This universal competency may spread itself out into many other branches. The current categories, “knowledge,” “judgment,” and “experience,” will no longer be operative and will be replaced by others. The first signs of this decadence—of this “death” of science, art, and ethics, as the pessimists say—are already visible.

The theoretical space to be designed in this manner is a school (a place of leisure), because all work (all transformation of relational fields) is mechanized and relegated to the subhuman. But it is not a classical school of contemplation. It is much more a laboratory for formal experiments, for *sperimentazione mentale*; for it is a space for the processing of intrahuman relationships, for the concretization of possibilities inherent in these relationships. The new civilization should no longer identify humans as individuals with masks or in masks. Instead, using creative accumulation, it should project the specifically human out of these intrahuman relationships. Thus, we can talk about the “death” of science, politics, and the human subject, but only in the way we talk about the butterfly in terms of the death of larvae. A city designed in this manner is that place where the sincere human breaks out of the subject.

### **Contradictory Tendencies**

If one considers the proposed, hastily thrown out, and not very thorough (rough) sketch of a city to be designed, one is impressed with two contradictory aspects. On the one hand, the sketch appears to be a completely unrealizable fantastic dream of someone who hovers outside the social fabric. On the other hand, it appears to be a projection of tendencies that can already be observed in this fabric. This contradiction is characteristic of the current situation. If we extend these contemporary tendencies into the immediate future, then very different scenarios play themselves out and all of them are fantastic. But, whoever does not dream, and instead wants to keep both feet planted firmly on the ground (whoever has no desire to project himself) is doomed to minimizing or misreading the majority of these apparent tendencies. Closing one’s eyes is not the recommended attitude for realists. On the other hand, whoever is prepared to accept these apparent tendencies will be led into a world of fantasy. The proposed sketch for a city to be designed is a fantastic dream. It was born from a desire to be engaged in creativity and for others. And thus, it is more realistic than the scenarios provided by pessimists—among other things, for the curious reason that reality is now becoming recognizable as fantasy.

(1988)