

Lecture 4. Distances and Proximity

Introduction

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Introduction

Does physical proximity lead to social proximity?

« According to the context, social proximity can either favour social relations or increase tensions ». Grafmeyer, 2007

I. Insiders and outsiders: social construction of distances

Distance...

Distance with other people is one of the main characteristic of « The urban man »; social distance is not necessarily expressed in terms of spatial distance (G. Simmel, E. Park).

Distinction is also a mean for appropriation and identity affirmation (P. Bourdieu).

“Leaving together” and “leaving apart” are processes developing by time. Their observation should mix individual behaviours and collective expressions.

In order to study the different situations of distance and proximity that go through and shape the urban world, three orders of phenomenon must be visited:

1. objective characteristic that define individual and groups' positions in the social space. Distance in that case is the gap between the different groups according to income, origin, etc.
2. nature and amplitude of relations between individual: kinship and friendship, associative movement, all kind of interaction, conflicts included... This second level is not necessary linked to the first one
3. spatial configuration associated to these positions and relations: residential location, use of the neighbourhoods and the larger environment, urban services and equipments, public spaces...

And proximity...

Co-presence of heterogeneous groups can lead to conflicts as well as integrative situation. Compulsory social mix (Big estates, "Villes Nouvelles", urban renewal operations...) can lead to deep disillusion.

Conversely, opposition to certain groups concentration (mainly poor and ethnic groups) can have negative consequences (Turkish neighbourhoods in Rennes), or create insoluble problems (impossible re-housing of African families in Paris) After Maurice Halbwachs, P.H. Chombart de Lauwe has studied working class families in their professional and domestic life. Through very large surveys in several cities in France, he has put in light different appropriation of space modalities and different sociability according to the social position. Working class people, for instance, have smaller network and stronger local sociability.

Equipments in the city

Ségrégation urbaine. Classes sociales et équipements collectifs en région parisienne, 1986.



Some interesting conclusions:

Services, equipments and facilities spatial distribution is concentric. Central neighbourhoods are better equipped, and the frequency diminishes with the distance to the centre.

However, if one can at first sight conclude saying that bourgeoisie lives in well equipped neighbourhoods and working class people in poorly equipped

neighbourhoods, the reality is more contrasted. Working class is distributed from centre to far outskirts, and “red banlieue” is well equipped. There are subtle differences among employers; intellectual categories have a much better access

Statement of inequality is also not satisfying because it implies that the benefit is equal for all and the symbolic of social equipment is equally positive. An equalitarian ideology lies under such conclusion, and one should pay attention to the differences of quality more than quantity.

Gossip and the fabric of exclusion

Sociological approach such as N. Elias one allows to go deeper. Not only has the distribution of equipments mattered, but moreover their social use.

How a group can expulse another from the use of equipments, bars and event public places?

The story of Winston Parva...

Discussion : N. Elias. Über den Klatsch, in: Etablierte und Außenseiter.

II. The “Grand ensemble”: Construction of « the medium man»

Large social housing estates (more than 1000 flats) built in the 60ties and 70ties are the result of different elements:

- lack of housing
- (late) political willing to encourage public and private housing construction
- strengthen of big builders companies
- strengthen of HLM bodies
- households' income increase
- “Modern Movement” ideology (Le Corbusier), creation of a “*technostructure*”

Rational:

“Big estates are the solution against slums”

“People will learn to live together”

“Proximity will create social links and social cohesion”

But at the same time, critics came from Sociologist: « Proximité spatiale et distance sociale » a strong critical approach of big estates as a model for « the new man » C. Chamboredon et M. Lemaire, 1970 Revue Française de Sociologie

The original idea is that social housing will be affordable for all. Social groups (working class people, and middle class) are supposed to live together

But if GE population is globally similar to urban population as a whole (being younger and more familial), it is defined by very specific modalities of selection – totally different from the « free market ones »

Moreover, households are at different stage of their life cycle. They have different residential backgrounds. For some GE is a stepping stone, for other it is a terminal. They have consequently different mobility projects.

The diverse modalities of attribution process (municipality, prefecture, employers, landlords, Allowance pay desk) produce a huge diversity of itineraries and social positions among the inhabitants

The undiscoverable cohesion but...

The study (Chamboredon and Lemaire, 1970) shows clearly that the co-presence doesn't produce natural regulation and the expected « mediumization ». At the contrary, the initial differences tend to reinforce.

The study shows that the main sources of conflicts are:

Noise

Education of the children

Use of public (common) spaces

20 or 30 years after their construction, GE population has dramatically changed. A selective residential mobility (ownership encouragement) has produce a concentration of immigrants (and their children) and low income households. Nevertheless, the inhabitants' reactions to the demolition show an attachment to their flat and to their environment.

III. The village in the city

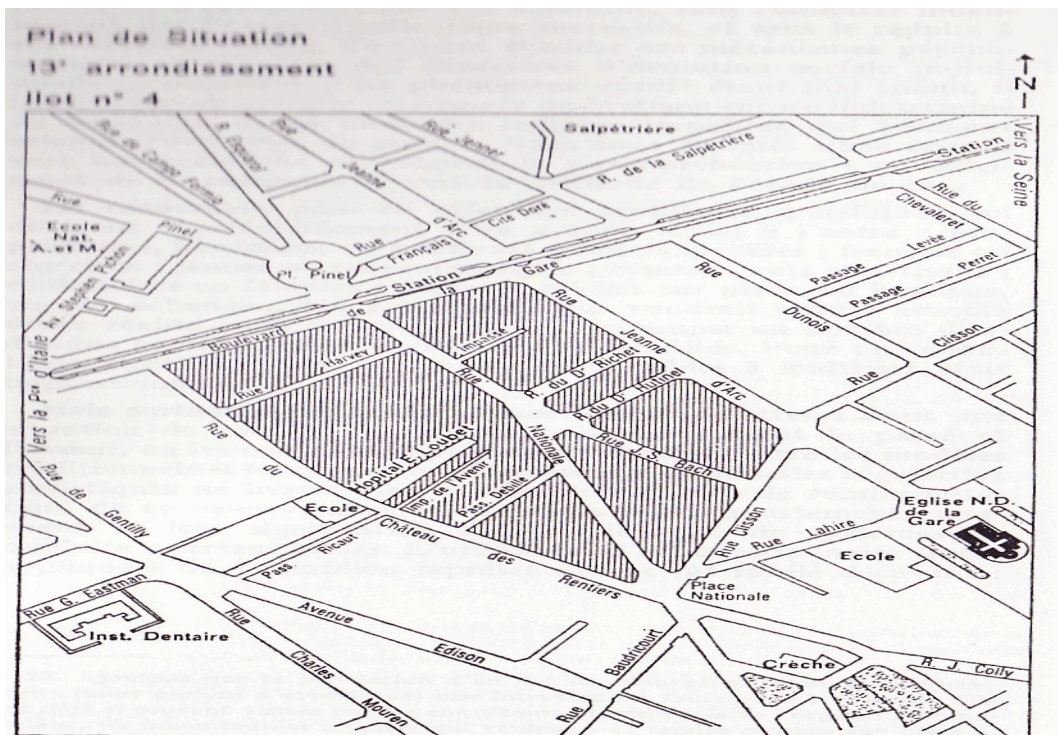
Qualities of the social space

There are numerous examples of case studies on ancient neighbourhoods where way of life seems to be much closed to the « primary group » social functioning.

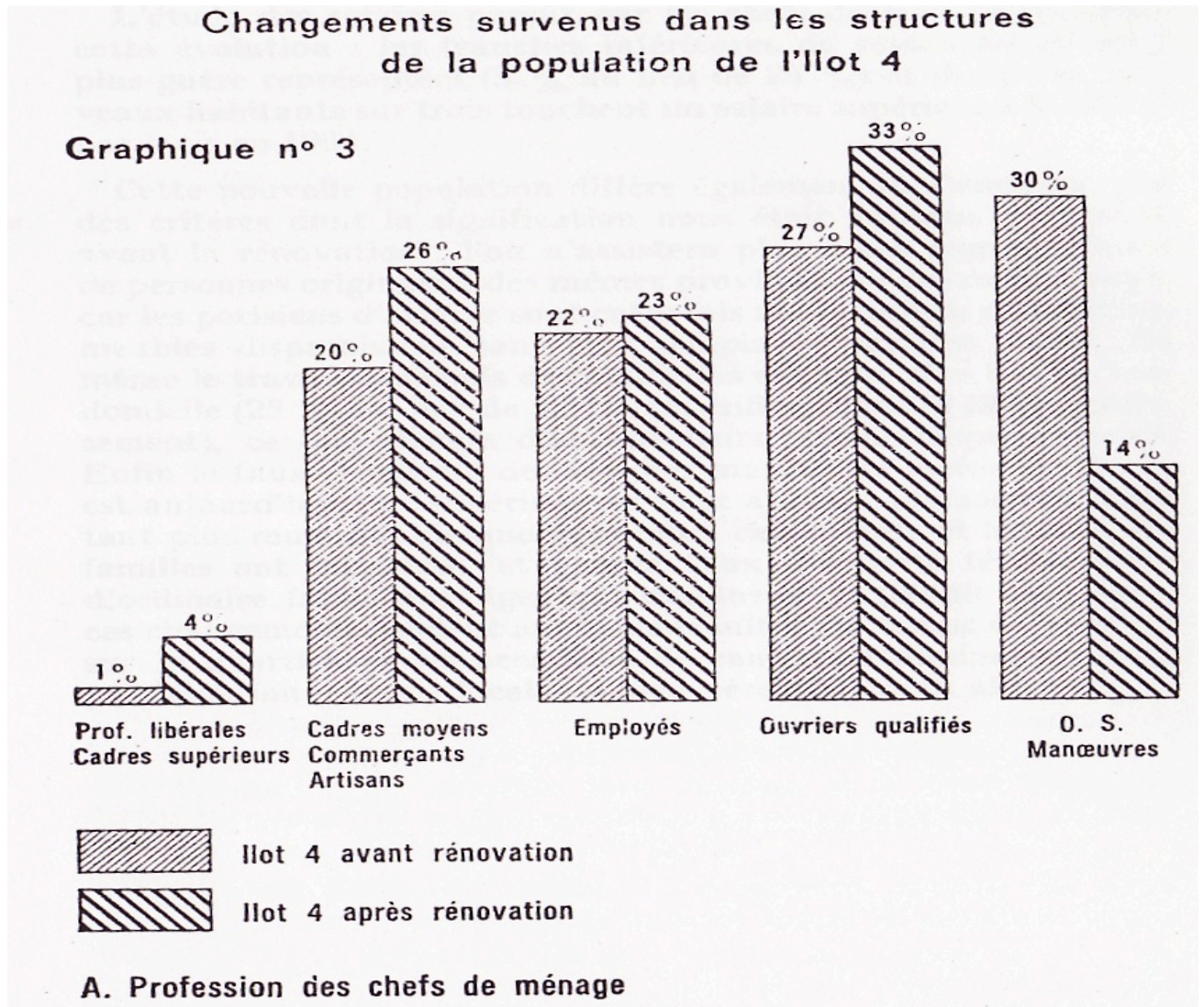
They have mainly been described in order to study social change created by urban changes: construction of a new neighbourhood in the case of East London (P. Willmott and M. Young, 1962), urban renovation and demolition in the case of Paris 13ème (H. Coing, 1966)

The “urban village” of nowadays is at the same time a product of the past and something rather new (gentrification process)

Urban renewal and social change (before and after), H. Coing, Paris 13ème, 1966



Before...



- « rue Nationale, on trouve de tout »
- More than 50% of the dwellings have a single room
- A large part of the population is composed by Algerian
- « Dans le quartier, tout le monde se connaît »

After

All inhabitants have been asked to choose between two options: to change for an equivalent dwelling in a next neighbourhood, to change for a new dwelling that could be located farer.

The choice between the two options was not independent from income level, structure of the household, age of the head: younger, families with children and higher incomes have more often chosen for a new dwelling. For some of them, the consequence has been disappointing (much higher costs and loss of the neighbourhood's resources). For others, it has been satisfying.

- Quasi disappearance of single and low income households
- More employees, executives, families and medium level income
- Change of social life: daily rhythms / relations between newcomers and « native »/ use of the neighbourhood/ sociability
- Change in material aspect of the neighbourhoods; comfort and space in the new dwellings.

Discussion: *What can be the other factors bringing quick changes in a neighbourhood?*