Streetcars Named Desire

A Vision of Transport Networks Between Design and Fictional Urban Planning

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Luc Gwiazdzinski provides an original and critical analysis of the changes affecting today's cities and contemporary urban production by focusing on the trams, streetcars and light-rail systems that increasingly form part of the urban landscape. He shows in particular how these vehicles, as vectors for urban regeneration, are used as tools for the "staging" of the city.

Humanity has always cultivated the art of storytelling – an art that is at the heart of social ties everywhere (Salmon 2007). In recent years, the relationship between urban production and fiction, that is to say histories based on imagined "facts" rather than real facts, has changed in a context of ever greater territorial competition where design – the "part of the process between the problem and the results" (Raynaud and Wolff 2009) – plays an increasingly important role and contributes to an imagined or "fictional urban planning" (Matthey 2011) that even encompasses the production of transport networks such as tramways.[1]

As both the components of transport networks and technical objects (rolling stock), trams have come to represent a major electoral issue capable of toppling municipal majorities, a sought-after vector for urban regeneration in both urban cores and suburban areas, and an essential tool for local mayors and councillors, alongside self-service bike-hire systems and the development of major urban events in metropolitan areas. In recent years, new expectations in terms of sustainable development and urban marketing have made trams an object of desire, a sacralized icon and a symbol of the changes that affect the city and urban production.

Contemporary trams are both the objects of "staging" and key "actors" in the "staging" of metropolitan areas and discourse on the city and public space, embodying watchwords such as sustainability, accessibility, participation, creativity, innovation, nature, multisensoriality, hospitality and aesthetics. This trend is accentuated in the most recent tram projects in France, where other skills – such as those of designers, set designers, sculptors, musicians, writers and artists – have been brought together to develop the editorial and imaginary dimension of the network in a way that goes far beyond the scope of conventional communication and public-relations operations. As objects that hold the promise of regeneration, transport and urbanity, at the intersection of discourse and reality, narrative and practices, and aestheticization and functionality, trams can tell us a lot about society and the city.

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[1] Translator's note: a variety of terminology exists in English ("streetcars", "light rail", "trams", etc.) to describe what the French call *tramways*, depending on the country and the precise nature of the system in question. As this article focuses primarily on European systems – and French systems in particular – which often include both street-running sections and suburban light-rail sections, the terms "tram" (for the vehicle) and "tramway" (for the system) shall be used throughout.

The narrative at the heart of urban production

The art of storytelling is now at the heart of urban production. In 1940, Oscar Niemeyer's asymmetric concrete curves and arches in Pampulha already heralded the "society of spectacle" (Debord 1967) by bringing to the fore a form of discursive architecture that has since become a key feature of contemporary architectural production. The strong, and sometimes sacrosanct, aesthetic of his works was a generous gesture based on the notion of social utility (*L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* 1993). Some authors go further still, leaving behind urbanistic narratives and instead advancing the hypothesis of "fictional urban planning" (Matthey 2011), a form of urban planning that tends to replace the real, tangible production of cities and territories with a narrative production – a kind of storytelling that extends beyond the urbanistic narrative and espouses the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999).

This hypothesis can be explored on the basis of observations of how tram projects in France – and in particular the new tramway in the city of Tours, in west central France, inaugurated in 2013 – have been developed, incorporating a shift from mere technical objects to narrative production and a design that contributes to the process of "aestheticization of the world" foreseen by Walter Benjamin (Palmier 2007; Lipovetsky and Serroy 2013) and a "fictionalization" of the world that affects all aspects of the urban system.

From technical discourse to the creation of narratives

The love affair between cities and trams has not run smoothly. Trams were first introduced as a means of transport in France from 1850 onwards. Initially horse-drawn, these vehicles would soon driven by steam traction, replaced by electric traction in the early years of the 20th century. Accused of taking up too much room in the city streets and being the cause of numerous accidents, trams all but disappeared from French cities[2] (and indeed in other countries, including the UK) after the Second World War in favour of buses and cars. They would finally reappear in France, in an updated form, in the 1980s, most notably in Grenoble, in the south-east of the country, and the western city of Nantes, where the first new system was inaugurated in 1985. When the arrival of a tram system in Strasbourg was announced in 1989, following extensive debate on the subject, it became clear that trams had taken on a new dimension. Today, tram systems are now in place in some 28 French cities: Angers, Aubagne, Besançon, Bordeaux, Brest, Caen, Clermont-Ferrand, Dijon, Grenoble, Le Havre, Le Mans, Lille, Lyon, Marseille, Montpellier, Mulhouse, Nancy, Nantes, Nice, Orléans, Paris, Reims, Rouen, Saint-Étienne, Strasbourg, Toulouse, Tours and Valenciennes. In this return to favour, characterized by the particularly important role played by design and communication, the projects undertaken in Strasbourg, Bordeaux, Montpellier and Tours represent interesting steps in the gradual shift towards an increasing use of design work and storytelling.

In Strasbourg, trams ran between 1878 and 1960 across not only a dense urban network but also interurban lines serving nearby villages. The last of these lines were closed in 1960 in order to make room for motor traffic. In the 1980s, faced with congestion on the city's streets, the option of an underground automatic light-rail/metro system – the VAL[3] – was evoked. In response, the opposition on the city council, which was in favour of a tram system, raised the questions of cost and the desire to rid the city centre of motor vehicles. They triumphed at the city council elections in 1989, propelling the Socialist Party mayoral candidate, Catherine Trautmann, to victory. The city's new tram network was inaugurated in 1994, accompanied by an urban regeneration programme, original artistic contributions, and a mascot. The project included the public

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2   Translator's note: in France, only Saint-Étienne, Lille and Marseille retained parts of their pre-war tram systems.
3   Translator's note: VAL stands for *véhicule automatique léger* ("light automatic vehicle"), a light-rail system initially developed for the Lille metro network and later used for metro systems in other cities (such as Rennes and Toulouse), as well as at Paris Charles de Gaulle and Paris Orly airports.

commissioning of works of art alongside the tracks. Sculptors, a sound installation artist and, from the literary domain, members of the Oulipo group played with words based on the tramway and its stations in the work *Troll de tram* (indeed, the title itself is a pun on the phrase *drôle de tram*, meaning "a funny kind of tram"). In addition to technical features such as its integral low floor, proponents of the Strasbourg tram often highlight the fact that it made it easier for people to access and take ownership of the city, its contribution fo the "urban spectacle", and the futuristic design of its vehicles. Furthermore, if proof were needed of this mode of transport's successful integration into the city, the tram quickly found itself starring on postcards of the city (Dhume and Gwiazdzinski 1997) as a piece of "touristic heritage". Finally, the tram has rarely been targeted on the occasions when episodes of urban violence have broken out, unlike the numerous burnt-out cars that seem to be a local speciality (Gwiazdzinski 1998).

Several years later, the arrival of trams in Bordeaux was portrayed as a major and comprehensive urbanistic undertaking. The project was managed by a professional team of architectural designers and landscape architects. On official websites,[4] the descriptions of the tramway show that the city is firmly on trend: "imbued with modernity, dynamism and openness", it is no longer "merely a means of transport". As an anthropomorphized object of desire, it attracts attention with "gentle, curved forms and large eyes…". Immune from traffic jams, "specially designed" for Bordeaux and its inhabitants, and often the recipient of national awards, it flatters the ego of its users. Priority is given to aesthetics at every level, particularly "in the choices of street furniture and materials". The tram seems to have developed "a sense of belonging and a common identity". It is idealized and made the object of desire thanks to an enticing overall narrative – a form of urbanistic storytelling for the city and for the world, *urbi et orbi*, that parallels the development and promotion of tourism in the Bordeaux area and its tram network.

Incorporating aesthetics and design into urban regeneration

In the space of a few years, trams have seen their status evolve from technical objects used in transport networks to objects used by all-powerful urban planners as tools for urban regeneration and, furthermore, icons. Their impact goes beyond the simple question of mobility and accessibility and plays a key role in urban beautification.

Within the context of this aesthetic strategy, the choice of vehicle colour is central. In the coastal city of Brest, in western Brittany, a lime green colour was chosen to symbolize the meeting of land and sea. In Reims, in the Champagne region, trams are any one of nine colours. Further south, meanwhile, Montpellier took things a step further: while trams have become mobile billboards in many European cities, Montpellier instead chose to call upon a big name from the fashion world to "dress" its trams. In 2011, couture designer Christian Lacroix, famous for combining narratives with timeless symbolism, created a sun-inspired livery for Line 4, following liveries on the themes of air (Line 1), earth (Line 2) and water (Line 3; also designed by Lacroix).

Another sign of this attention to the aesthetic sides of things is the fact that all projects place emphasis on the front end of their trams, as a marketing tool and a form of reassurance – both in France and elsewhere. For example, in Paris, the tram boasts a unique nose section "imbued with fluidity and elegance (…) which incorporates its design into a regenerated urban landscape by expressing fluidity, smoothness and elegance". In Bordeaux, the tram's nose section, which resembles a smile, is the "key element of its personality", "smiling and welcoming, positive, like a family pet".[5] In Dubai, the tramway inaugurated in November 2014 has vehicles with cabins shaped like diamonds. Everywhere, the specific design of the trams is complemented by a choice of materials, adopted both for conventional street furniture (traffic lights, lighting columns, benches,

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etc.) and specific elements associated with the tramway. In this way, it extends the amount of urban public space devoted to it.

Iconic architecture in motion

This progressive shift from the technical object that is the rolling stock towards an exceptional and emblematic "iconic architecture" (Gravari-Barbas 2010) in motion and a "fictional urban planning" of networks seems to reach its zenith in Tours. The tramway was inaugurated on 31 August 2013 but its history already seems to have been written and integrated into the territory, the calendar and the imagination. It existed even before the tram began to operate.

With this project, there is a gradual move towards a comprehensive design of the rolling stock and the line as a whole, incorporating all upstream phases up to and including after-sales service. A multidisciplinary collective composed of sculptors, set designers, musicians and other designers, constructed around a type of association called an AMO,[6] was able to take ownership of this new urban object in order to work on the whole line and, according to the association, construct a coherent "concept" that combines a transport project and an urban project. Promoted as a "tool for urban regeneration", the Tours tram was the object of lavish attention, carefully "staged" in order to show it off to best advantage, and incorporated into a narrative, rather like a film star. All communications were carefully planned upstream of the project. For example, in 2011, TV Tours (the local cable TV station) broadcast episodes of a documentary series on the new tramway every Thursday evening, while France Bleu Touraine (the local public radio station) devoted a daily chronicle to the project. Before the tramway had even opened, the network was well established within the Greater Tours area: from 2010, flags, road markings and signs on bus stops were put in place. Various "goodies" were given out to future tram users and a life-size model of the tram was on show in 2011 at the annual Foire de Tours trade fair. The project's "spin doctors" had spun an enchanting yarn, made available on the official website, that told the story of an ideal tramway that not only brought with it regeneration but also would provide a regular, accessible, ecologically sound service that respects its surroundings and is inclusive. The tram as an object – or rather a character – seemed to embody every possible virtue. The communication campaign was further adapted for local residents and traders, with the creation of a "Maison du Tramway" (housing an exhibition/information centre dedicated to the tram) and a tram information point, and the introduction of numerous personnel on the ground in distinctive orange uniforms in order to inform, assist and reassure them. Tens of meetings with residents were organized. In addition to directional signage, an online map enables visitors to the website to plan their journeys.[7] Since 2013, rather like a celebrity star, the tram has had its own websites, blog and even Facebook and Wikipedia pages.

Innovations in terms of the tram's shape and its integration into the city, such as the vehicle's curvature, its nose and the mirror-effect film used to decorate the exterior, are highlighted in order to transform a purely technical object with rough edges into an exclusive product that is the embodiment of fluid movement. The livery design around the tram doors is continued on to the station platforms in order to create visual reference points and a unified appearance. An image of perfection and luxury is sought right down to the push-buttons to open the doors. The choice of an "ultra-gloss red" colour and the use of wood for certain elements also convey an image of luxury and glamour typical of cosmetics advertisements and the red carpet at Cannes. The "ultra-gloss" effect is even accentuated by the visual contrast between the lacquered finish on one side and the satinwood finish on the other. What the tram appears to be saying is: "Because we're worth it." And, according to the carefully targeted marketing discourse, the tram also offers personalized ergonomics that enable each passenger to travel in comfort, validating the hypothesis that the vehicle should enable its users to "inhabit time and mobility" (Gwiazdzinski 2007).

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[6] AMO stands for "Architecture et Maîtres d'Ouvrage", an association that brings together professions and skills from the fields of architecture and project management.

[7] Source: *La Nouvelle République* newspaper, 24 December 2011.

The Tours tramway takes account of urban temporalities, day and night, and the seasons via specific lighting: cold blue in the summer, warm yellow in the winter, and shades in between for spring and autumn. Large, wide windows capture natural light and provide a panoramic view of the city. As part of a multisensory approach, a sound designer has also created special voice announcements. As night falls, these "desirable transport" elements are couched in enchanting narratives, carrying the passenger along on an aesthetic trajectory and an urban adventure redolent of fairground rides and urban amusement parks.

The network also claims to resolve many issues affecting the contemporary metropolis: it enhances the city's identity, offers artists an opportunity to express themselves, ensures users' pleasure and comfort, and symbolically enables local residents to take ownership of their city. The narrative pushes these concepts to saturation point, evoking a network that is likened to "architecture in motion", a "conveyor" and a "cursor", serving the line and passing through urban landscapes with "simplicity and elegance".

The project even claims to have a participatory dimension, in the form of an online consultation on the shape of the tram's nose section. This supposedly elicited an expression of identity built on the concept of the "fourth landscape" and on the line's "alphabet", formed of four elements that guided its overall design and scope of influence: "the route, the wave, the reflection, and the urban artwork". The mirrored surface of the tram's exterior was chosen with the aim of achieving an effect of total integration. It creates a strange *mise en abyme* of the city and its network *in vivo*. In a "spectacular" escalation using a variety of media, the designers tell us a story of a personalized, elegant and refined tram system that is one with the city and enters into its heart. It is simultaneously an alliance of object and artist and a playful, multisensory space.

The project achieved this new dimension – a mixture of fiction and design – through the choice of the members of the design team led by the agency RCP Design Global, in collaboration with artists such as Daniel Buren, Louis Dandrel (a musician and sound designer), Patrick Rimoux (a plastic artist and light sculptor), Roger Tallon (the designer of the TGV high-speed train), as well as Jacques Lévy and Serge Thibault, both researchers in geography and urban planning. "And Daniel Buren created the urban artwork": this is how part of the project was described on the official documents that transformed the tram into an iconic transport network. The artist no longer "decorates" the tram, but rather creates a unique work of urban art. In June 2013, the project's exposure to fame further contributed to its "imageability" (Lynch 1969) and its integration into a narrative. The awards it has received from outside the region, in particular the Light Rail Awards in London, have contributed to "territorial pride" in Tours and helped promote its tram. The inauguration of the network – or "urban artwork", as we should call it – was an opportunity for further events, which included the presence of two ministers and large crowds. The iconic network then had to face up to the realities of day-to-day operations that every transport system "comes up against" (Lacan 1967): difficult-to-achieve journey times, power failures, ticketing problems, and the tram's first clash with a car on 4 September. The forced shutdown of the network after 2,000 protesters invaded the tracks as part of a demonstration against pension reform highlighted the tramway's new symbolic dimension as a public space, and ensured its place in local social history. Since then, the tram has gradually become integrated into the life of the city, along with its disruptions, pollution peaks, Christmas lights and tragic accidents.

From fiction to reality

Observation of the roll-out of tram projects and the related discourses reveals a shift in the way tramways are considered, from a technical object to a design and a narrative production that both contribute to the process of "aestheticization of the world" (Lipovestsky and Serroy 2013). Although, to date, the companies that manage transport networks are not yet urban travel agencies, and its users not yet the new tourists of everyday life, this first approach to moving from a mere

tram network to a form of "fictional urban planning" with regard to mobility must be accompanied by a critical eye.

The story-making machine that replaces rational reasoning is often "more effective than all the Orwellian imagery of the totalitarian society" (Salmon 2007). One might wonder whether it will stand the test of time and use. In all the cities where it has been employed, this kind of fiction rewrites a much more complex reality.

The cabinet of curiosities that is now on offer is simultaneously a kaleidoscope endlessly reflecting the zeitgeist, a disparate collection of artefacts from the contemporary world, and a component of a "karaoke culture" (Dubravka 2012) that contributes to the commodification and derealization of the world. The addition of this alternative geography of representations to the territorial palimpsest is an opportunity to call into question the complexity of living and building together. We are in what Guy Debord (1967) called a "spectacle", that is to say an inverted image of reality that implies that what is true is in fact a moment of falseness. The world no longer exists as a world but only as a simulacrum. In this sense, the measures and strategies studied in connection with transport networks contribute to criticisms of the "absolute fake industry", illusory strategies, and importance of appearance (Eco 1985) of a society that sometimes "prefers the image to the object, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, and the appearance to the being" (Feuerbach 1864).

One might also wonder about the fictional mechanisms that designate spaces, situations and images, and seem to leave little room for boredom, drifting and improvisation even though "the value of cities is measured by the number of places within it that are open to improvisation" (Kracauer 2013), a dimension that now interests developers and urban planners (Soubeyran 2015).

In the background, one might wonder whether the incursion of actors such as communications and design professionals into the great machinery of urban production is not in fact a highly contemporary form of what used to be called propaganda. This creation of narratives, these "fictionalizations" of networks and territories centred on an all-powerful technical object, transformed into the "Swiss army knife" of urban regeneration, no doubt make it possible to shift lines and push back boundaries. However, there is a difference between telling stories and making stories happen: the creation of obstacles. By definition, "reality is that which is not expected" (Maldiney 1994). There are possible differences between the idealized image of a city and network and the reality that could completely blow this apart.

Like the magic mirror in *Snow White*, creating desire and a history around trams flatters municipal egos and raises questions about the aestheticization of the world, territorial competition, community life and urban planning. For now, these trends towards an iconic form of architecture in motion do not seem to be at the expense of convenience, sustainability and cost. However, the shift from network design to fictional urban planning that seems to involve replacing real production with the production of narratives about networks territories is not without its risks. Concerns may legitimately be raised about the symbolic emptiness of these measures, the loss of individuation resulting from "the loss of participation in the production of symbols, the fruits of intellective life and sensient life" (Stiegler 2004). The professional production of images and narratives does not replace politics. Editorializing a given geographical area also – and indeed above all – means "putting it into perspective according to multidimensional criteria, so that it comes across as a learning, contributing territory" (Beraud and Cormerais 2012). The attention given to "spectacular" means of staging and showing off the network, the design of work sites and their spatial and temporal integration, and the re-enchantment of everyday urban life and multisensory saturation could restrict the development of a democratic debate and limit the participation of citizens won over by a flattering story and seduced by the trappings of the vehicular equivalent of a party streamer with a playful, "happy" fairground aesthetic (Montgomery 2013). Once the initial novelty has worn off, those citizens excluded from the urban production and narrative-creation process because of its excessively technical nature will no doubt put these various discourses to the test in their real, day-to-day use of the tram. After all, every flatterer lives at the expense of his listeners…

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