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Review: La Ville Stationnaire: Comment Mettre Fin à l'Étalement Urbain? [The Stationary City: How to Put an End to Urban Sprawl?]

By Philippe Bihouix, Sophie Jeantet, Clémence De Selva, and illustrations d'Estelle Klugstertz

Reviewed by Yves Laberge
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Bihouix, P., Jeantet, S., and De Selva, C., *La Ville Stationnaire: Comment Mettre Fin à l'Étalement Urbain?* Arles and Paris: Actes Sud, 2022. 352 pp. ISBN: 9782330168735, €23.00.

La Ville Stationnaire: Comment Mettre Fin à l'Étalement Urbain? written conjointly by three French thinkers, either engineers or architects, is questioning green issues such as urban growth and the usual solutions to address them. Building new constructions in big cities can be energy-consuming; in themselves, these residential projects do mobilize natural resources and create pollution, and they are often built on agricultural zones or on big forests with old trees. According to Bihouix, Jeantet, and De Selva, planners now need to include a more nuanced approach in their conception of sustainable cities. But first: why do we need bigger cities? Why are we still building? Why do societies need to construct new houses and new buildings? Could this rather be a management disfunction, or an inefficient planification in housing? The main problem remains that cities are always getting bigger, and/or even more dense. Moreover, the co-authors argue that the densification of big cities is not really a panacea, and urban sprawl remains an everlasting issue that can be resolved in many ways, depending on cases and contexts. They conceptualize these issues in terms of “Who owns the houses, what do owners do with them?”, since many of the new buildings are only dedicated to secondary residences. Another dimension of this manifold problem is the fact that there seem to be a shortage of houses in big cities, while rural sections encounter the reverse problem with the lack of population and empty houses (p. 12). Therefore, maybe instead of managing and trying to prevent Urban Sprawl, planners should rather find a way to stop growth in cities that are already big enough and think of deconcentrating activities in more regions. In other words: when and how do we get a signal that some big cities are now too big to grow more? And who will ask to stop the

growth of such fragilized cities? A city is not necessarily too big because of its population; rather because it is simply saturated. The cases of Venezia, Barcelona, Vancouver, and Québec City come to mind.

A prolific writer, Philippe Bihouix is well known in France for co-authoring (with Karine Mauvilly) an excellent, critical, ground-breaking book titled *Le Désastre de l'École Numérique: Plaidoyer pour une École Sans Écrans* ([The Disaster of the Digital School: Advocacy for a School Without Screens], Seuil, 2016) about the economic and intellectual failures of digital schooling in primary schools. Unfortunately, none of Bihouix's books have been translated.

Here, in *La Ville Stationnaire: Comment Mettre Fin à l'Étalement Urbain?* (2022), Bihouix, Jeantet, and De Selva propose to conceive smaller cities and consider hybrid models. They transpose and apply the old Bauhaus principle "Small is Beautiful" to 21st Century cities or for new neighborhoods: not to focus on smart cities, but rather on smart buildings (p. 102). While considering many possible avenues, the co-authors are sometimes tempted to praise new technology in the conception of new buildings, but up till a certain point, because too much technology can also create other problems such as useless overconsumption of energy for manufacturing each new technological equipment (p. 103).

The very original book is interesting and innovative for various reasons, because it raises new angles for questions. For example, are all cities made for growth? Or are there cities that should not be growing beyond a certain level because it would denaturalize its originality, its identity, its inner feeling? At some point, could we observe that some cities are saturated, either for geographical reasons, or because they have become too attractive for tourists, or for secondary residences? (p. 67). Even though this book focuses on cities and regions in France, readers from anywhere else could certainly transpose the fundamental questions raised here to other countries or states. In sum, *La ville stationnaire: Comment mettre fin à l'étalement urbain?* (2022) by Bihouix, Jeantet, and De Selva is an engaging, thought-provoking book in urban studies and eco-citizenship. It is a rich, rigorous, rewarding, and dense book. I often had the impression I was reading two books in one, because there are so many dimensions being brought in and discussed in creative ways. Let us hope there will be a translation soon.

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