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URBAN FRINGE**JUST IN *** BREAKING NEWS FROM THE URBAN FRINGE *****

(Followed with an editorial note)

All Urban Problems now Problem Spaces

Dateline July 12, 2009. Paris. 12:45 CET

The International Association of Urban Intellectuals, meeting this week for their 112th global symposium at the Walter Benjamin Conference Center in Paris, announced that forthwith all problems associated with urbanization and metropolitan living would be converted to problem spaces. The change will go into effect on January 1st, leading some to speculate about the challenges faced by cities and their residents in anticipation of the conversion. Discursive shifts of this sort, while not unprecedented, often come with significant epistemological and pecuniary costs, including altering one's outlook on daily urban living and buying lots of new books.

The rapid development of communications technology is expected to aid significantly in the conversion process. Microsoft announced a patch to PowerPoint™ which would enable architects, planners and engineers to rapidly alter old presentations to be rehashed in the new language. It includes an autocorrect function to prevent unwanted slippage into previous terminology. Similarly, Apple announce that at least three iPhone™ apps were under development by its army of independent programmers, including one app which reportedly includes daily maxims from poststructuralist thinkers in order to help stubborn positivists and bitter technocrats to effect the ontological shift needed for true adherence to the associations' decision.

Nevertheless, the conversion is expected to cost upwards of €4.1 billion, a cost deemed negligible by Association spokesperson Robert van Dietrich. "The importance of clean and healthy discourse can not be underestimated in today's rapidly urbanizing world," said van Dietrich in a prepared statement. "After careful consideration by the association's executive comitat, we recognized that the very survival of the human race depended on our ability to speak differently about the urban."

The move is seen by some as the final push to move past the controversial Mike Davis era, when the world-renowned *Planet of Slums* author chaired

the association through what many observers consider its most anti-urban phase since the long tenure of Louis Wirth in the 1930's. Davis' sensationalist account of slum dwelling masses in an amorphous global south sold millions of copies and catapulted hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens into the ranks of amateur urbanism, but similarly helped prop up a movement towards the aestheticization of poverty, a tool often used by the global urban growth machine to redevelop poor communities and displace the poor from valuable land in the urban center.

Given both the fractious nature and significant power of this unelected body of professional scholars and itinerant organic intellectuals, internal and external criticism of the move has been swift. Prominent environmentalists dismissed the move as irrelevant, noting that the problem was urbanization itself, and that we should all read more Aldo Leopold. The Society of People Who Love Transportation released a terse statement indicating that the solution was not discourse, but bikes and BRT. In the most radical move yet, a dissident group of planning theorists interrupted the final deliberations at the Benjamin center by chaining themselves to the coffee makers in the lobby and chanting lines from Habermas. One of the dissident theorists, who was later arrested, had tattooed the groups' rallying cry, "This is not our BATNA!" on his chest.

Despite these more radical protests, most debate about the edict, while passionate, was civilized and conducted with full knowledge of power relations and ample glasses of *pastis*. The problem space subcommittee, which will be in charge of licensing problem spaces in a post conversion era, remained deadlocked on the issue of whether the power of *starchitects* constituted a single problems space of its own or whether each individual architect constituted a separate space, determined by ego size and their ability to captivate developers and politicians with pornographic renderings of unbuildable and unnecessary megaprojects. On a similar note, the committee reserved the right to grandfather in some concerns as problems due to their seemingly intractable nature, including New Urbanism, academic conferences, and traffic.

In related urban news, members of the Lefebvrian liberation front declared the urban revolution to be complete, and Lefebvre to be the dominant paradigm. In a press release spray-painted on the Centre Pompidou, they urged us all to understand the urban as the newly dominant means of production while continuing to adhere to the classically Marxist emphasis on use value over exchange value. They also derided German efforts to scientifically produce a new generation of urban theorists in response to recent French hegemony. The French dominated the last World Urbanism Games held in Delhi, claiming medals in all events except land use modeling.

Alex Schafran contributed reporting on this story from Istanbul and Constantinople.

Editorial Note

In past issues, the Urban Fringe column has been dedicated to selections *pour penser en dehors de la boîte*. This year, it offers an attempt at satire with Alex Schafran's elliptically entitled piece "All Urban Problems now Problem Spaces". Ultimately, I believe my dear colleague Alex, is posing a rather simple question: can urban theory be funny? Is that a problem?

Hector Fernando Burga