

Open Letter

Paul Virilio, Director of the Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture

Published in *Urban Toys*, Booth-Clibborn Editions, London, 2006

We can't tell where the game begins - its toys - and where the drama ends - the metropolitical tragedy. Therein lies the paradox of urban art, the paradoxical aesthetic between the panic and the circus games.

Mockery, childishness or neo-terrorism, no work of architecture lends itself to laughter, contrary to sculpture it can frighten, seriously disturb, or sometimes even raise a smile, but joy is never part of the edifice. Just what will become of our cities, these concentrations of real-estate inertia?

Even if "joy girls" still exist in reserved quarters of the metropolis, despite the charm and appeal of some of them, no "city of joy" has ever seen the light of day.

Whether a playful city or a panic city, it has never inspired peals of laughter, but has often induced frustrated anxiety before finally losing itself in the deaf melancholy of the silent crowds.

"Boredom cries" could be read on the walls of the Latin Quarter in Paris in May 1968, before imagination seized power for a brief instant.

Since the third millennium, it is henceforth the state of anticipation in New York, Madrid or London that dominates the superficial agitation of agglomerations in Beirut and in Jerusalem...

Without going into Prague or Kafka, the author of "The Metamorphosis", there is one city today, more than any other, which attracts universal attention. Shanghai and its two thousand towers, each more illusory than the other, are put up on their "podium" while yesterday the old Pudong quarter saw the exodus of a "solitary crowd", swelling the ranks of a floating population of dozens of million wanderers.

A symbol of 2006 - the Year of the Dog in China - isn't it being said that a brand new museum, some hundred meters high, will be built at the foot of the celebrated Pearl Tower and that it will take the form of a canine specimen, more specifically a sitting bull-terrier, one of whose front legs will house a battery of elevators and the other a monumental staircase.

As I was saying at the beginning of this letter, dear Nadim Karam; in the absence of a playful city we are left with the probability of a cynical city, where the tragedy of the post-modern metropolis will be concealed behind the appearance of this "politeness of despair", which we call humor. But I do not think that URBAN TOYS takes part in this catastrophic perspective, which actually consists of making fun of others' misfortunes, but rather, it seems, in the DESIGN of the enigmatic smile of indulgence which the grimaces of "expressionism" have deprived us of for too long.