Marseille Beyond the Headlines

CLAIRE LUBELL
University of Waterloo

Marseille is a city with a tarnished reputation that it simultaneously embraces and denies. Like many post-industrial, second-tier cities, it is reinventing itself through a piecemeal regeneration process to create the image of a competitive global city. Ambitious projects funded largely by private capital, however, exacerbate the polarization of the city, and therefore the stereotypes which define its urban identity. This editorial essay, based on historical research, fieldwork and personal experience, draws a correlation between Marseille's multifaceted self-image and the evolution of its fragmented and contested infrastructural planning to explore the limits of the city's reinvention. As a once thriving port and hinge between a nation and its empire, Marseille's status as a destination has always been entangled with its duplicitous nature as a city at the end of the line - either a dead end or a point of departure.

Figure 1: Bus 27, Lycée Saint-Exupéry, Terminus. [Photo by Author, 2015]

MARSEILLE / *MARSEILLE*

On May 5, 2016, Netflix launched the new French series *Marseille*. Having spent six weeks in Marseille in the summer of 2015, and returned several times thereafter, I relished in the amusing familiarity of the character stereotypes and the often obscure set locations that I happened to recognize from my long and circuitous excursions across the city. Most of my time in Marseille was spent researching the polemics of a planned tram extension into the city's notorious and marginalized "Quartiers Nord." But a good deal of time was also spent indulging in the carefree life of the outsider passing through a Mediterranean city – and one particularly known as a place of passage for outsiders. Fuelled by a dramatic entanglement between politics, industry, sex, mafia and football, *Marseille* reaffirms the overlapping clichés and half-true reputations through which its protagonist, the city, is almost exclusively perceived. Exaggerated and superficial though these clichés may be, through them the series weaves together the city's fictional identity and its, sometimes indistinguishable, factual reality. A critical online editorial of the series published in Le Monde admits: "Or le problème de Marseille est qu'elle donne souvent le sentiment de prendre ses spectateurs pour des imbéciles, qu'elle se complaît dans une réalisation qui s'observe, qu'elle n'exige pas des acteurs qu'ils incarnent leurs personnages ou qu'elle délivre des formules creuses."[1] This commentary is a description of the series, but it could well be a description of the city. Which, then, is more deceptive?

CAPITAL OF THE SOUTH

One of the ongoing plot lines in the Marseille series, is the construction of a casino on the deteriorating port lands, emblematic of the political mandate for the city to "modernize" and become the cultural and financial "capital of the Mediterranean." This is not a new narrative. Like most second-tier cities, Marseille is trying to (re)establish itself within global networks. For the last 20 years, it has struggled to change its

Figure 2: A 4 Star Hotel, Canebière Capucins. [Photo by Author, 2015]

image from one of poverty and crime to one of an attractive metropolitan destination for culture and capital. But relying on the idea of the Mediterranean as a coherent territory (a European concept in and of itself according to Sheila Crane) and as a cultural signifier for urban renaissance is problematic in a post-colonial era.[2]

To return to an idea of Marseille as a nexus of geopolitical relevance means to reconsider the city itself as infrastructural space. At various points in its development there were more people moving through the city than its actual population (900,000 escaping in 1938) such that its infrastructural planning was constantly caught between service to the Empire and service to an independent city. Jacques Greber's urban plan of 1933 sought to "recreate Marseille not as a "transfer station" but as a "city terminus" that would be admired as a destination in its own right.[3] But at the same time coordination of infrastructure at the national level was key to ensuring France's continued imperial expansion towards North Africa, for which Marseille served as the hinge. One of Marseille's prominent architects in the 1930s, Gaston Castel, was the main voice behind promoting the city as the 'Capitale du Sud,' an idea which re-centred the city within its sphere of influence in contrast to its role as the right hand of Paris from which all infrastructure radiated. The next major urban plan for Marseille, approved directly by the state, was carried out in 1942 by appointed architect Eugene Beaudouin and reaffirmed the city as the nation's imperial gateway. Though with a focus on mobility which alluded to Marseille as a geopolitical crossroads, the plan "was structured by a defining tension between the new circuits of connection extending beyond the distant horizon and the singular imposition of centralized authority in the heart of the port city."[4] The city's infrastructural planning in recent decades has once again prioritized high speed connection to Aix-en-Provence, Lyon and Paris for tourists and businesses before addressing the acute lack of networks serving the city's population itself.

Nonetheless, a modern city needs a modern face and Marseille, though a city established in antiquity, is not known for nostalgia. The architectural stars of its current reinvention (Zaha Hadid, Norman Foster, Rudy Ricciotti, Kengo Kuma and Stefano Boeri) have thus been commissioned to endow the historic centre with the necessary contemporary icons and emerging skyline befitting a global city. The facelift was bolstered with European Capital of Culture financing in 2013 but is primarily driven by the ambitious, privately operated and state supported *Euromeditérrannée* redevelopment plan which aims to convert 300 hectare of rail yards and port lands into residences, businesses and a park for 30,000 people. The project is unquestionably progressive and yet the name alone is distinctly nostalgic, perpetuating the struggle to legitimize Marseille as an autonomous and metropolitan centre within the geopolitical constructs of the "Euro" and the "Mediterranean." By underscoring an idea of latent cosmopolitanism, the venture is also an effort to overcome the entrenched cultural and social provinciality of the city, persistent despite the historical worldliness associated with the port city. City administration and financiers are relying on the construction of a physical manifestation of an image of metropolitanism to then bring this metropolitanism into reality. So as the rest of the vast city is left to its own devices, constantly shifting as new references and influences collide and relate, Marseille's imagined identity continues to be constructed through fixed and preconceived representations.

INFRASTRUCTURAL IDENTITY

Through media – take films such as Cédric Jimenez's *La French* and Robert Guédiguian's *La Ville est Tranquille*, or advertising for famous

products such as Le Petit Marseillaise, La Cagole beer, and Ricard's Pastis – Marseille's identity is built upon layered stereotypes which, in relation to each other, become a more or less accurate expression of an unruly city which is, in fact, mostly quite ordinary. It is portrayed as a city of slow indulgence: of sunshine, beaches, women, and alcohol. A city of daily sweat: of industry, immigration, trade, and poverty. A city of fast deals: of drugs, prostitution, gangs, and corruption. Within each of these narratives is an implicit struggle – equality versus polarity; singularity versus plurality; periphery versus centrality – which together are key to Marseille's demography, urban form and geopolitical identity. The overlapping tensions between each begin to reveal the city which has never fit into dominant and clear cut narratives and remains under a constant but futile process of stabilization. As William Firebrace says in his book *Marseille Mix*, "in Marseille, the absolute founders, is mocked and split into parts."[5] Its opposing reputations are constant reminders of the limits of individual autonomy in a city where individual politics are otherwise said to exert particular force and where collective mandates are only adopted by force – despite their inevitable interdependence. In my experience, the vast and often nondescript city is constructed by the coexistence, rather than cohabitation, of autonomous realities.

This observation is based on trying to navigate a city whose morphology, and therefore infrastructure, appears to lack any reason or rigidity. In fact, one could draw a parallel between the construction of Marseille's multifaceted identity and the geography and politics of its infrastructure. Unlike Paris, Marseille did not grow outwards in concentric rings anchored by monuments, but rather formed from the eventual connection of small villages scattered around the old city. Different periods of city building now coexist in uneasy relation, a semi-functional sum of parts with no one part dominating the others.[6] Expansion was not steady but rather happened in bursts of development and demolition, eventually forming a massive urbanized area characterized more by chance and opportunism than by strategic progress towards a designed future. Much of the city is now an incoherent collection and sometimes spectacular collision of villages, mass housing, and industry, constantly interrupted by highways, railways, topographical jumps and stretches of nothing. It is an urban morphology that feeds on diversity instead of unity.

Figure 3: Bus 36 Cap Pinède Lyon, Marché des Puces. [Photo by Author, 2015]

Marseille presents alternate facades depending on from what vantage one approaches it and how one moves through it. From the sea, the city appears a static single mass of stone embedded in the hills. The only attention seekers punctuating this horizontality are Notre Dame de la Garde and Hadid's CMA tower – Marseille's first piece of "world class" architecture – while the housing estates gather in clusters within the nondescript landscape. From the highways that wind their way through the city and drift along the port, cutting across the face of buildings or hovering above those left to crumble, Marseille appears serene and majestic but slowly decaying. The ocean is an omnipresent backdrop for the promise of a better future. From the bus, stopping and starting through vacant areas, old industrial sites, neighbourhoods that haven't been touched since the 1940s, one feels the endlessness of the city. As one watches men smoking on cafe terraces, kids hanging out on the street, merchants selling random imported goods on the sidewalk, the constantly changing mosaic eventually becomes mundane.

All of these forms of movement point to infrastructure development as an important factor in defining, or destabilizing, the city's identity as a place of passage. They are also indicative of the opposition between autonomy and dependence in the city. In the book *Marseille en Autobus*, photographer Bernard Plossu explores the city through the window pane. Everything is caught in passing through an off balance, slightly blurred and accidental glimpse. In doing so, Plossu captures the fragmentation that characterizes Marseille both culturally and spatially. But most importantly, the bus is portrayed as a carrier of individual dreams and aspirations that have different origins and destinations and are united only insofar as they belong to passengers on the same bus.[7] The common path is the only collective aspects of collective transportation.

Philippe Doro's postcards of Marseille always convey an image of disorganization and chaos, with infrastructure and architecture and people in constant collision. The city is represented as a haphazard collection of various urban developments, neither in particular coordination with the next. Somehow this lack of rational allows for a charming and humourous depiction of the frustrations of navigating such a city. But for both Plossu and Doro, the city remains the central figure, the protagonist. A stark contrast from shipping and travel advertisements in the first half of the 20th century in which Marseille was just a name or scenic backdrop within a colonial network far more important than the city itself. As a once thriving port and hinge between a nation and its empire, Marseille's status as a destination has always been entangled with its duplicitous nature as a city at the end of the line – either a dead end or a point of departure.

THE METROPOLIS OF INCIVILITY

In an interview with a director at *Euromeditérrannée* about the integration between the redevelopment and the proposed tram line, I was told that "raisonnée la mobilité en Méditerrannée necessite d'avoir une

Figure 4: The Patient Man, Saint-Charles Metro Station. [Photo by Author, 2015]

approche totallement alternative à l'approche classique du deployment raisonnée, cohérent, à la grange échelle, maîtrisée....C'est pas que c'est pas bien, mais ce n'est pas forcément adaptée à la manière dont les sociétées Méditerrannéen fonctionne avec une part de désorganization, une difficultée de metre en cohérence, une incivilitée, une individualisme qui est quand meme particulier."[8] Defining an infrastructural path through Marseille is a process of revealing, construction and perpetuating tensions in the spatial and cultural formation of the city as a whole. Marseille forces one to understand that something as holistic as infrastructure is as likely to further fragment the city, as it is to reconnect. It requires a cooperation that is dismissed as futile in a city where individual ambitions carry greater power than metropolitan ones.

For the metropolis is, as political scientist Achille Mbembe says, "marked by polyphonic dissonance."[9] Polyphonic compositions use simultaneous independent lines of harmony and dissonance is an unpleasant harmony which creates tension because the sound seeks resolution (consonance). Marseille thrives on and multiplies polyphonic dissonances, never flattening them. While one could say the same of most cities, Mbembe is describing Johannesburg after all, the exaggeration of dissonance is seen as a particular characteristic of Marseille, "le capitale de moi je...de moi d'abbord, les autres après."[10] It is precisely this tendency that makes it impossible to encapsulated the city within dominant narratives. In this respect, despite the fact that Marseille the series does little to go beyond the headlines of drugs, sex and corruption that have long described Marseille the city, perhaps its exaggeration of these stereotypes and their slightly improbable collision in time and space is in fact a sincere representation of the coexistence of autonomous realities in an apparently uncivil metropolis.

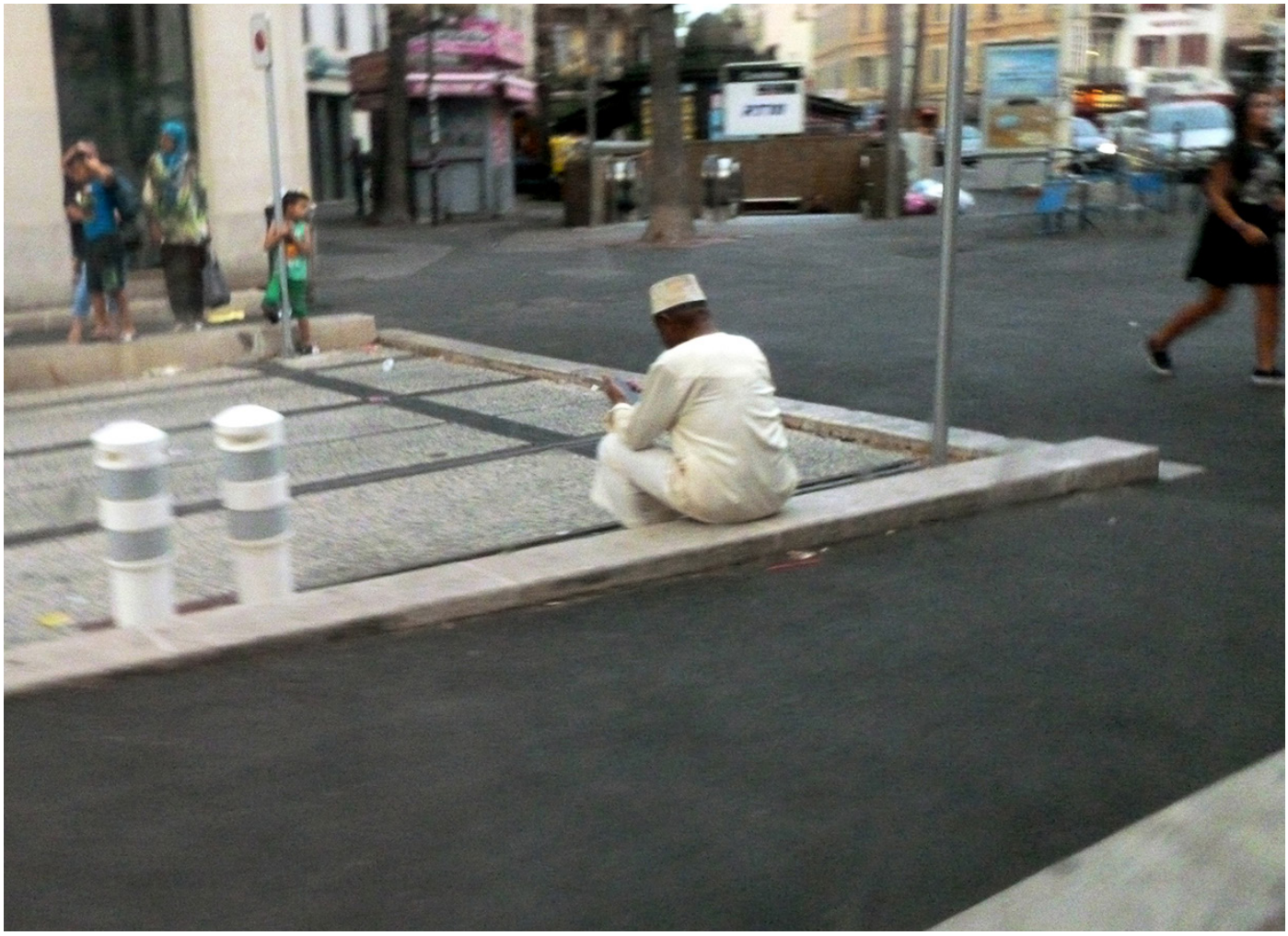

Figure 5: The End of the Line, Castellane. [Photo by Author, 2015]

ENDNOTES

1. Pierre Sérisier, "Marseille – et soudain c'est le drame." *Le Monde des séries*, Le Monde, April 28, 2016, http://seriestv.blog.lemonde.fr/2016/04/28/marseille-et-soudain-cest-le-drame/.

   Translation by author: "Now the problem with Marseille is that it often gives the impression of taking its audience for fools; it revels in a production which can be observed; it does not require its actors to embody their characters; or it delivers empty formulas."

2. Sheila Crane, *Mediterranean Crossroads: Marseille and Modern Architecture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011): 83.

3. Ibid., 70-72, 97.

4. Ibid., 104.

5. William Firebrace. *Marseille Mix* (London: Architectural Association, 2010): 241.

6. Ibid.

7. Bernard Plossu, Gil Jouanard, *Marseille en Autobus* (Mayenne: Anatolia Editions, 1996): 9.

8. Fabien Germain, interviewed by Claire Lubell, personal interview, Marseille, July 31, 2015.

   Translation by author: "Rationalizing mobility in the Mediterranean requires a completely alternative approach to the classical one of deployment that is rational, coherent, at a large scale, controlled….It's not that this isn't good, but it's not necessarily adapted to the way Mediterranean societies function with a certain disorganization, a difficulty to make things coherent, an incivility, and an individualism which is quite particular."

9. Achille Mbembe. "Aesthetics of Superfluity." *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (Durham Duke University Press, 2008): 60.

10. Renaud Baudin, interviewed by Claire Lubell, personal interview, Marseille, August 18, 2015.

    Translation by author: "The capital of me…me first, everyone else after."