Memory and critical science:
reestablishing the discipline of urban design
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Common to most of the urban design theories that are in vogue today all over the world is a conviction that the meteoric speed with which our cities are expanding, and the diffuse, frayed way in which they are spreading, are completely unstoppable. If it can't be averted, it has to be accepted, and then you might as well also give it a positive interpretation while you're at it. Of course, those who promote this kind of supposed reevaluation are unlikely to find themselves in the embarrassing position of having to live in the inhospitable and dreary settlements that they even regard – from a distance – as having a quality of abstract beauty. They can afford to live happily in old city centers that they smugly describe as obsolete, or in as much of the countryside as is still left – and which they willingly consign with a shrug to building development, provided they are not going to be directly affected by it themselves.

Is the breakneck speed of the urbanization of the countryside really acceptable? Is it necessary and decreed by fate? Politically, sociologically, and economically, it might appear to be so at first glance; ecologically, it certainly is not. The resources of the Earth we live on have to be used sparingly, and the countryside is one of our most important and precious resources. We are not entitled to go on assigning more and more land to new development on the outskirts of the cities – with loosely scattered detached homes being used in an effort to chase after a natural landscape that is irrevocably destroyed by that very process, and at the same time creating peripheral areas that are neither urban nor rural. Instead, what we need to do is to move closer together. We need to preserve the cities we have, consolidating them and condensing them – and if we condense them in an intelligent way, it can only make them more urbane.

This is not a new strategy. Throughout the world, new cities have mainly been erected on the foundations of older ones, with alterations and modernizations being carried out within carefully defined boundaries and only extending into the rural surroundings when the original urban area became completely inadequate. In the 19th century, the European population quadrupled, and the majority of the people moved from the country to the city. However, even the gigantic urban growth that was needed to absorb the incoming masses – and to help real-estate speculators get rich quickly and easily – was comparatively sparing in its use of land. Virtually unrestrained consumption of the countryside only started with the inexcusably careless attitudes of the 20th century, with its profligate city planning and irresponsible throwaway ideology – attitudes that are also threatening to infect the start of the new millennium as well.

When one examines the issues more closely, the arguments against unbridled urbanization are not only ecological ones. In economic terms, urban design is a spectacularly bad investment both globally and with regard to longer-term considerations, since the resulting costs are virtually incalculable. Among these, post-urbanization costs, including infrastructure expenses, are only the tip of the iceberg. In sociological terms, urban design contributes to the breakdown of a sense of community, by depriving society of the public spaces in which this can be expressed – spaces that provide the indispensable basis for a society that is caring, tolerant,

capable of integration, and full of zest for life. Urban design is no less counterproductive in political terms as well, and for similar reasons: because it undermines, erodes, and ultimately negates the existence of the compact, articulate city as the home of the *res publica.*

The decisive argument against urbanization and in favour of the compact articulate city, which has stubbornly and repeatedly been declared dead but has continued to be stubbornly loved and preferred, has now become a demographic one. Population growth in Europe, North America, and Japan is already stagnating, if not declining. The city planning issue in these regions is therefore not one of expansion, but rather of innovative ways of managing the existing fabric. According to the latest scientific research findings, however, the population explosion that led to a quadrupling of the Earth's inhabitants during the 20th century will not be continuing much longer in the rest of the world either. Demographic growth is now already slowing, and it is expected that the world's population will stop expanding by around the middle of the century and will stabilize; by the third quarter of the century it will probably start to decline. What this means is that the cities, which are currently expanding so fast that they seem to be bursting, will also stabilize and perhaps even shrink.

In other words, the main reason for the expansion of cities into the countryside already ceased to exist decades ago in Europe and will soon vanish in the rest of the world as well. The justification for the supposedly progressive urban design theories that deal with rapid urbanization processes and entire urban regions – the megalopolises given their name by the French geographer Jean Gottmann in his influential book of 1961 – has vanished. The change in the demographic paradigm has to be followed by a change in the urban design paradigm – in fact, urban design work will even need to accompany the demographic changes with foresight and will have to anticipate requirements with planning measures.

To achieve this, the discipline of urban design will need to develop new forms of expertise, while at the same time reviving older ones that have been irresponsibly discarded. To begin with, however, it will have to recall its original purpose: to shape the environment in a humane, functional, sustainable, and aesthetically and culturally demanding way. The discipline needs to remember that this purpose will never be achieved unless planning and design are reunited (again) – so that on the one hand, environmentally relevant data are collected in an objective way, linked together, and transferred into strategies for action; while on the other, the subjective implementation of these strategies is given a clearly defined physical form through cultural and aesthetic programs.

This seems a natural enough requirement, but it has not been viewed in this way for decades. By the 1980s at the latest, the crisis into which urban and also rural planning had manoeuvred themselves, by abandoning their connection with three-dimensional environmental design in favour of increasing abstraction, led to their isolation and even occasional marginalization. It was architecture that filled the vacuum left behind by urban planning. Admittedly, the success of the architectural profession is incapable of concealing its palliative quality – its limitations are all too clear, particularly in retrospect. Although the individual architectural works that were intended to serve as catalysts for urban design taught us new ways of reading the city and the countryside, they did not transform their surroundings on the larger scale. The architects' monuments, which were recommended as models worthy of imitation, failed in

exactly the same way as the planners' diagrams; and they allowed the very same mediocrity to spread out around them that they were intended to overcome.

The new urban developers will have to present themselves as designers and creators – but initially they will have to be researchers and scientists. Urban design is less a matter of strokes of genius than one of patiently building on foundations that are partly already there and partly have to be created. It is no accident that this is a discipline in which the writing of manuals has always flourished – from the tractates of antiquity to those of the Renaissance, from the great treatises of the Baroque and Neoclassical periods to the handbooks of the 19th and early 20th centuries. All of these were concerned less with establishing a canon than with gathering and systematizing the information they provided. Although it is always necessarily creative as well, the discipline of urban design is primarily a science, although it is a science without axioms, and it requires methodical work alongside the creative act.

For work of this type, the discipline of urban design will need to recall its own tradition. Reflection on its past does not stand in contradiction to the process of innovation that changed conditions require – on the contrary, radical but at the same time knowledgeable innovation can only emerge from extensive memory.

The obligation to history must initially be a direct one. A form of planning that aims to put order into the city and countryside cannot behave as the accomplice of a type of modernizing vandalism which, in the name of a one-sided view of progress, destroys precisely the elements needed to provide the foundation for progress. Our cities, our villages, and our countryside are not only locations for production and socialization; they are also, and above all, cultural assets that need to be preserved. One can preserve them by changing them. But the change has to take place with the scrupulousness and gentleness that cultural assets of this type deserve.

The obligation to history also needs to have a methodological effect, however. Particularly when the discipline of urban design is attempting to adapt itself theoretically and practically to the epoch-making upheavals that are engulfing both city and countryside – through the ecological revolution, the demographic revolution, and not least the telematics revolution – the discipline needs to search its past for theories that have previously accounted for similar upheavals systematically; for the urban architectural models that the past has produced on the basis of such theories and which have proved their value in use; and for planning tools that have effectively implemented these models. The history of urban architecture is to this extent a memory-bank of strategies that can be searched for current requirements.

Admittedly, the focus here is on the concrete, constructed, lived city, or – to be more precise – the historical city. Having arisen in a period in which the *urbs* was still the image of its *civitas* and thus not just a more or less structured conglomeration of functions, but rather a true entity with personality, it also fostered (and still continues to foster) an individual, personal relationship with precisely the same entity. This relationship is a physical, intellectual, and at the same time emotional encounter that allows learning and memory and thus produces common identifications that go beyond any inequalities. This makes it into a productive ideological arrangement that promotes the construction and refinement of a community.

Its finely ramified structure of public spaces has a central role here. This complex network creates not only largely direct links between the various points in the city, but also countless occasions between them for intentional and unintentional, accidental encounters and thus for interpersonal exchanges. This is what makes the historical city into an arrangement for communication (and in an extremely modern fashion, by the way).

However, the history of urban architecture is more than this. Cultivated with critical reason, it is itself an instrument for productive criticism. By penetrating beyond urban images to the urban theories these images are based on, it provides the key to their connectedness. In this way, it also provides the key for evaluating contemporary urban projects in a well-grounded way – including one's own. In other words, it allows design decisions to be made that go beyond purely subjective tastes and inclinations and exclusively aesthetic preferences.

In this way, existing (actually implemented, but also conceived and drafted) urban architecture is potentially both things – architectural material, as well an introduction to a critical way of dealing with that architectural material. Studying the world's cities opens up a kind of thesaurus of elements, streets, squares, parks, river quays and esplanades, which seem to be merely waiting in countless (and often marvellous) variants to be measured, studied, and reinvented. At the same time, the way in which these elements are set in relationship to the preconditions from which they emerged and to the consequences to which they gave rise provides parameters for evaluating reinventions based on them. To put it in a different way: for designing drafts in a more thoughtful way.

It is therefore a matter of consulting historical experience for the urban planning project. This is quite a different matter from copying; on the contrary, it is rather a way of avoiding plagiarism – even unintentional plagiarism.

The problems raised by contemporary life are hardly the same as those of the past; nor are the technical means of solving the problems. Accordingly, the results will be necessarily modern if they are derived from the corresponding programs; without backward-looking nostalgia, but also without futuristic obsession. Above all, however: they will once again connect urban design with the human life which it has been called upon from time immemorial, and is still called upon today, to house and to enrich.

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