

HOW TO DESIGN A TOWN

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Designing a city does not mean coordinating into a single framework the most diverse requests, from the really material ones, such as the traffic design, the noise pollution or the utilities designs, to those made by the citizens on the most disparate of occasions, or those from new housing represented by the developers or the big chains with their shopping centres. Because each of these requests has its own motivation, which are each different from the other, constructing them or putting them down on paper or modifying them changes the assumptions of the framework whose coherence we are seeking, a framework that pretends to be stable in time but which cannot at the same time imprison a mobile reality.

The end of this framework, legitimizing its pretence to coordinate the future behaviour of the citizens even in the face of their actual desires, is that of following their “true” happiness. This consists of a few immutable universal rights – schools, hospitals, transportation, parks and gardens – to be included in the city using criteria of distribution rationality inspired by technical efficiency.

But the European city is the land of liberty and what is the ‘real good’ of its citizens is an open question that is the point of *civitas* who it confront it on a daily basis with its democratic procedures. So that each time we picture what must be the best *a priori* behaviour, we treat men not as though they are ends – thereby increasing their opportunities for choice – but as though they are a means, because we assume there is a criterion for the city’s functioning that considers that behaviour is foreseeable (and therefore can in fact be forced), thereby implicitly reducing freedom. The most rigorous plans are those of totalitarian regimes, which become immediately obsolete as soon as liberty is regained.

“The explicit premise of Le Corbusier is in fact the search for happiness. Le Corbusier said “no pain lasts when one gets up three mornings in a row and looks at the invigorating splendour of the sun rising. Gianfranco Contini, who went to one of his conferences, comments that we utterly forget the right to complain about bad weather, and with a great and more fundamental optimism we should like to ask that *bonheur*, and I mean stable *bonheur*, finds its much more fragile and imponderable origins even in urban darkness.... his *bonheur* is a Muscovite one, free time is obligatory, legislative and collective, and the invitation to State human nature of State is dictatorial. ”

Every plan that pretends it has constructed a coherent framework will subsequently be retracted, because the majority that approves it – often flinging it around to cover up differences of opinion – pretends that it can subtract decision-making from future majorities. However these majorities have every right to revise it right from the day after its approval, interpreting new requests or overturning their previous hierarchy. This happens with town planning standards which for some time have not monitored real social requests and whose traces hang around in cities like dinosaurs or rubbish.

The real field of *magister urbis* is certainly that of revising plans, but not integrating the subjects' multiple viewpoints and techniques into a coherent framework. Rather it resorts to its own knowledge, independent of every other that is not intrinsic to its own techniques – the road widths, land ownership, regulations for expropriation, hydro-geological constraints, etc. -, that have been embedded and defined over the course of the millennium and which has as its end the *designing of a beautiful city*. Just like the other arts, it is therefore an art founded on the basis of a defined *profession* with its own specific knowledge regarding the theoretical structure, the operative instruments, and knowledge of many cities. This can be compared to the sort of knowledge we hope our general practitioner has when we entrust him with our health.

The theoretical framework consists in the awareness that the beauty of a city is expressed in the *sequence of its collective themes* which have been embedded over the course of the millennium. These sequences involve the whole of the existing city and it is onto these that the sequences of new projects should be grafted. Only the exceptional case of faraway satellite centres can be imagined as created *ex novo*.

Collective themes and themed roads and squares, each of which with its own name and its own way of being recognized, constitute a sort of catalogue that can be consulted to design a beautiful city. This is a catalogue common to all European cities and that has been slowly formed and enriched generation after generation. It has its own slow rhythms which we cannot pretend to accelerate with the pretension of modernization.

Having come to our awareness by the very fact that we have learned them by living in the city, collective themes matured in this millennium are for us similar to the words in our language. We learn them by speaking them and we know what they mean without even knowing their etymology. For this reason they all have full citizenship in the contemporary lexicon of the city. They are symbols of *civitas* even without knowing their origins, and their whole gamma is always completely up-to-date and available for the present generations. It is through these that cities continue to confront each other in a timeless universe.

The whole gamma of the collective themes is in fact still available in its entirety, and even if some seem to be forgotten for the moment they will perhaps be taken up again. As we have seen recently new city gates or new fountains reappear. Perhaps we will even see new castles or new city walls as in the playful shapes of outlets.

When a city wants to enhance its own beauty it still resorts to building a new town hall (going on for seven centuries), a new library (going on for six centuries), a new theatre (going on for five centuries), a new monumental cemetery (going on in Pisa for six centuries but elsewhere only for two centuries), a new public park (going on for two centuries), a new stadium or at least a sports ground, which has been around only for a century.

The collective themes are then linked in sequence from the *themed squares and roads*, which themselves were produced in the same way. They belong to the same catalogue, and are constituted following rules that were laid down as well over the centuries to make them aesthetically more efficacious.

Themed roads and squares, which were created to correspond to a defined social theme, immediately became the terms on which a beautiful city was constructed. Their use does not depend on other purposes which do not belong to the truly aesthetic sphere. If in fact in the tree-lined avenues designed today no-one meets in the evening in carriages as they used to in the original ones in the sixteenth century, yet these still have the same effect of enlivening the city's aesthetic aspect. It is true that the nobler promenades, such as the Champs Elysées or the Castellana, are devastated by cars today but it would not make sense to design a new promenade to dedicate it to pedestrians just as new squares cannot be designed today in order to encourage strangers to meet. Once the square was a place for rigging elections, for strolling players, ball games, horse races, bullfights, terrifying executions, barrows. In the same way as they are still set up as a place for socializing they will be a meeting place. The lady next to me at the market gives me ambitious recipes, and the young still court in the evening shuffles in southern Italy. But it is rather a determined behaviour that can choose its own privileged site, wandering from one site to another without our knowing why.

However if each of themes has practical purposes of secondary importance and above all they can be modified with time, the beauty of a city of which they are essential, in turn incorporates the primary social end, firmly rooted in its centuries' old time schedule, to make *urbs* an appropriate habitat for *civitas* – unique in the world – open, mobile, democratic and egalitarian. Because of their intrinsic expression of the whole *civitas*, the collective themes constitute in fact the immediately perceptible symbolic recognition of a house's belonging to *urbs* – and therefore that the family living there belongs to *civitas* – a recognition consistent in a visible manner in their evident proximity. This is very marked in the silhouettes of certain mediaeval cities, which are dominated and protected by the gargoyles on their cathedrals.

Whoever designed the cities did everything possible so that even the farthest away quarters were linked up to the civic sequences, thus stressing the underlying principle of equality. This very same objective must still today be the end of our project for a new extension of the city or for the renewal of an existing zone, (where old industrial buildings have been de-commissioned or where quarters hurriedly built 50 years previously are worth demolishing), ensuring that they will be satisfactorily themed and for all their inhabitants public and immediate recognition of their dignity as citizens and avoiding that symbolic alienation from the context of *urbs* – almost as though they belonged to another city – and sometimes, above in all larger cities, even social alienation.

The main reason why the aesthetic principles of the city have persisted over time depends on the fact that *urbs* must be implemented following a language that is common to all citizens. This is because it is they who take decisions about it and appreciate it. Since they

have lived their from childhood, the citizens have learnt not only the gamma of collective terms but also the force of their sequences. Without resorting to this consolidated language they can neither imagine nor judge a city's beauty.

It is in the collective themes, just as we perceive the beauty of *urbs*, that read the will of *civitas* to represent the agreed will of all citizens. They recognize the expression of their own identity, as is demonstrated by the enraged reactions when we attempt to change them.

To design a city I should like to evoke a new personage with a different mental outlook from the contemporary town planner. He would no longer be imagined as an expert with a truth to impose but rather one who gently *suggests* – the *magister urbis* – that he does not believe he should or even want to *teach* or *force*, but who is fond of the city and its citizens. He believes that he has the essentially joyful task of encouraging everyone to dream up his own *urbs*. The citizens must find in him the person who gives suggestions, making it obvious to them what they have at the bottom of their hearts. With his ideas he will leave everyone with a trace of affectionate regret rather than bitterness for regulatory excesses or the remoteness of strictly disciplinary points of view.

The *magister urbis* reads the style of the city to identify existing sequences onto which to connect the new ones. He then traces his own design resorting to the consolidated catalogue. However, with very few exceptions, he cannot know what new collective themes will be decided subsequently by the *civitas*, because their wishes will emerge in an unforeseeable manner as part of city politics. He will have to depend above on all the themed roads and squares, and by arranging these he can trace out privileged sites for their placement as they arise.

He will have to piece the themed roads and squares together as though it were a jigsaw puzzle, trying and re-trying – and even resorting to similar cases – to identify which design is the most efficacious to theme the new city, which is the most audacious one and the one that is more agreeable for visual succession, and at the same time connects up better to the network of sequences and the existing quarters. And this design, an invention that others would perhaps been able to imagine as different but which possesses the intimate coherence of a work of art, will be his own design.

The design of a city must respect even material needs such as for example those of traffic, just as we expect that a house does not collapse and that it has suitable bathrooms, but keeping in mind that these requests correspond to a technical area characterized by progress (contrary to science) founded on instrumental rationality, such as that which connects a shopping centre up to a quarter or to a road or a railway line. One day these will become obsolete as a result of changes in the way commerce is carried out, or different preferences

for the type of transport, as well as where people want to live. Because the criteria for technical suitability imply that citizens' behaviour be founded on a rule of objective rationality with which perhaps we can neither now nor in the future agree in a *civitas* based on liberty.

The form of *urbs* has to last for centuries and must therefore respond to principles that, to have been shown to be valid in past centuries, offer the guarantee that they will last as many more centuries into the future. Since we do not have to make them depend on momentary functional requirements, which we will certainly consider provided that they do not plainly condition (as in projects for linear cities) their coherence.

It is possible that today the lack of a satisfactory symbolic universe, the mistrust that modernity is capable of constructing cities as beautiful as those in the past, leads on one hand to people becoming morbidly fond not only with historic city centres but also to any modest ruins of old farm houses or de-commissioned factory sheds. On the other hand it leads to the request that the city as a whole have above all the merely mechanical efficiency of a device designed to satisfy material demands, vindicating roads, kindergartens, schools, hospitals, bicycle paths, underground railways or whatever. These are all things that in any case, (such as gas tanks or water supply systems or other structures that technology puts on our pathway and that often stand out on a city's skyline), belong to the area of necessity and are without any symbolic significance whatsoever.

But in reality it is technology itself that creates these material needs, suggesting the perspective that in the extreme it can satisfy them all. As this cannot be possible, because on one hand these limits constitute in fact an unattainable frontier – like the vague horizon of immortality – and since technology cannot maintain all the promises that we attribute to it, and on the other hand the needs thus matured in the citizens' expectations are in conflict with each other, the cities become a ground for extenuating and contradictory frustrations..

On the contrary we need above all – as does every living being – our proper habitat. And the habitat proper for the European *civitas* is not so much that of our bodies – which is our animal body – but that of our specific culture, which differentiates us from animals, its *urbs*, the symbolic universe where we are people whose identity is socially recognized, the fruit and manifestation of the aesthetic will of its citizens as identified in the facades of our houses and as *civitas* in its collective themes and their sequences, the finished and embedded expression of its mobility and democracy over the course of a millennium. And we know that this *urbs* will last for many generations to come, even though it will not always succeed in absorbing to the best all the material needs that will gradually arise. But it is a question of modest inconveniences. That traffic and that noise have been assailing it for a thousand years after all represent its modest cost and which perhaps is also part of its contradictory fascination. Because otherwise why doesn't the person who contests it retire to the silent solitude of the country, which is after all just around the corner.

The awareness that the beauty of *urbs* is the area in which the citizens of different classes become integrated in a unitary image, induces us above all to avoid that in future there be

the inconveniences of the last 50 years, of outlying suburbs whose citizens are without their symbolic universe, dragged from their proper habitat just like the wild animals shut up in zoo cages. And if such disorientation does not always constitute the theme of their specific vindication, it is because, as it is not clear how to avoid it, they have renounced being conscious of it, as perhaps the imprisoned lion is no longer homesick for the savannah. But we do not see why we have to be so attentive to the solitude of wild animals and not worry about our own proper habitat.

The themed picture of *urbs* traced by the *magister urbs* will be the benchmark for future quarters – no longer adrift as in the last 50 years - with their own symbolic dignity, and ensured with local collective themes, whose arrangement will usually follow the general principle on one side of being linked to the principal sequences and on the other of being exalted inside the sequences making them visible from everywhere.

But, having declared this principle, the *magister urbis* will not have to pretend to draw up designs for the residential zones. He only has to restrict himself to the field of his own specific competence, which is where he has exclusive knowledge, avoiding having to cross over into fields where others have the same or even more ability, above all because they represent the express request of the citizens in their houses and not the wish of the *civitas* as a whole.

Urbs is the expression of the aesthetic will of the citizens as individuals in the facades of their houses and of *civitas* in its collective themes. Thus the *magister urbis* well knows that his task consists only of putting them into order in appropriate sequences, which is in fact an area that belongs strictly to *civitas*. Not only does he not wish to cross over into the area of the citizens' individual expression in the facades of their houses, but considers them as the ends of his work and not as means to implement a really ideal city, he tries to increase their degree of liberty, enriching their opportunities for choice. Democracy consists above all in being able to express one's own thoughts freely, and as far as we are concerned, their own aesthetic likings connected with the dignity of being a citizen in one's own house, whereas the rituals of voting and elections constitute the procedure inherent in the whole of *civitas*.

For this reason the *magister urbis* will leave the design of the land division up to others, because it will always be possible that a group of future inhabitants, or a developer in their name will prefer the free arrangements inherited from modernity, where the houses are separated from the roads.

If our opposition to this point of view does not induce us to extend the competence of *civitas* even up to an area that after all concerns the condition of the citizens whose symbolic membership is in any case ensured by the sequence of collective themes, we should not on the other hand stop supporting and preaching what is more fitting to our

European *urbs*: the arranging of houses along the streets, which has matured over the course of the millennium and conforms with the specific characteristics of the European *civitas*.

It would be correct that houses were aligned along the streets, on one hand because the streets – where the houses are lined up one next to the other they are the metaphor of solid citizens in the social body of the *civitas* – constitute a public stage on which everyone's status can be seen from the appearance of his house's façade (but also with the araucarias and magnolias in the garden), and on the other hand because the continuity of the streets and the continuity of their facades, which accompany us from the outer city toward the centre, materially represent in the physical contiguity of the *urbs* the moral compactness of *civitas*, which renders its democracy necessary.

This tolerant point of view should even more hold for the facades of the houses. Having established a few regulations – the height of the house compared with the width of the street, the type of house to be adopted, the housing density, the amount of land to be built on – the citizens should have maximum liberty regarding the facades (and in the internal arrangement) of their houses.

Variety in individual houses, where the citizens' differences and aspirations are manifest, constitutes an essential reason of *urbs*, because the fragmentary and differential landscape of the streets mirrors the pluralism of our *civitas*, whose holistic and egalitarian soul is not expressed by joining the houses up – as many totalitarian utopians from Thomas More to Le Corbusier would often like – but in mirroring the proud consciousness of self in the collective themes and their sequences.

Architectural regulations regarding the facades of houses are legitimate only when it is necessary to give body to collective themes whose symbolic consistency involves their aesthetic coordination. As in the monumental streets and squares, which are thus because they are faced with buildings of a conspicuous architectural quality or even uniform architecture, and recently in the historic centres whose character is ensured – even when it is an invention – simply by the fact that it consists of houses whose architecture precedes the modern one.