



ARCHITECTURE AND THE CITY by Mr. Enric Massip- Bosch

1. WHAT MAKES A CITY - A CITY

Architecture and the city are two of the oldest and most important cultural constructions in human history. They give shelter, provide interchange and convey emotions. Nowadays they are rapidly becoming the habitat for the majority of people, and are responsible for the majority of energy consumption in the planet. They are, simply put, key elements of our lives.

But even though we use them every day they are little known or understood, especially by the general public. They have been for centuries the realm of specialized professionals, with their precise and obscure language, and many untrained citizens feel insecure or, even worse, detached, when dealing with this cultural constructs, that they feel unreachable.

I would like to use the kind invitation to collaborate in this new magazine to propose a series of articles dealing with the subject that I feel most passionate about and with which I develop my professional ambitions: architecture and the city. My aim is to bring these concepts, and the whole array of issues that they raise, close to the general public, in the assumption that the more familiar with them the more of us are, the better our cities and the architecture in them will be. And to make both of them better should be one of our first and more urgent priorities.

Two tendencies in the 21st century

The city is the most wonderful and the most complex invention of humankind, and it is increasingly becoming the background of the life's of most of us: by 2050, 80% of the world's population will be living in

cities, thus more or less completing a shift started at the beginning of the XIXth century, when 80% of the population lived in the countryside.

This accelerating trend contrasts sharply with another one that is occurring simultaneously: the growth of the world population is reaching a plateau and it is also estimated that after 2050 it will not rise significantly.

This means not only that the new urban population will be supplied exclusively by the rural population, but that the political, economic, etc. balance between countryside and city should be drastically revised. We'll discuss this in a next occasion.

What is a city, anyway?

There are several sorts of cities: ancient cities that have been building upon themselves layer by layer over several millennia, like Rome; and pop-up cities like the new capital of Brazil, Brasilia, which is merely 60 years old. Cities that resonate with the cosmopolitan buzz of the world, like New York, and cities that serve as local aggregators, like so many we know all over the world.

Cities that are tied to a single industry, like Venice with tourism nowadays or Venice with commerce centuries ago; and cities that provide many jobs opportunities, like Milan has done since its founding. Cities that look chaotic at first glance but are surely less so, like Tokyo; and cities that seem very ordered and are probably less so, like Barcelona. And then, of course, there are the cities that everybody knows about but don't exist anymore, like Troy or Angkor; and those that perhaps never existed but are cultural icons, like Atlantis or Gotham.

But all of them have at least one thing in common: they constitute a recognizable congregation of human beings that live together sharing many elements in the same space, interchanging information and goods, and benefiting from this interrelation in spite of all conflicts that social contact inevitably brings about.

A city, then, is made of people, buildings and streets. Among other things, sure, but for now we can limit this discussion to those three elements. But the opposite is not true: a mere congregation of streets, buildings and people does not necessarily make a

city. Put in another way: a string of buildings where people live and work along roads is not a city 'per se'. Think for instance of those single-family houses neighborhoods proliferating around the world, where there might be in the best of cases some sort of social life, albeit limited, but where there is not urban life because there isn't simply the complexity of functions, people or typologies to make it happen.

Or think about those business districts umbilically connected to the world and where, yet again, monofunctionality is the norm. Considering the city as a system perhaps we might tolerate such limited 'functional bags' provided they are few and apart, but it is hard not to see them as selfish piggybacking, taking advantage from the rest, but not giving anything in return.

What is it then makes a city a city?

Let me forward an answer: public space. And in the sense I want to convey here, public space is turbocharged with qualities: it is openly accessible, it serves the common good, it facilitates different uses, it allows for coexistence of functions and of people and, above all, is the space of interchange of ideas and goods. In short, then, public space is what ensures relationships of all sorts in a city, and where we behave differently from private space, because public space is a social realm.

I want to stress the word 'relationships', because this is what differentiates a city as a system of interconnected public spaces from mere human settlements along roads. Even though there are different issues such as population density, property structure, urban form, cultural patterns, etc., related with the existence, the experience and the definition of public space, it is actually quite amazing to realize how consistent around the world it is the function and the usage of public space as the realm of relationships, as if it were a constant of humankind, regardless of races or history.

Cities all over

That universality of public spaces explains why we can decode and enjoy cities far from our everyday experience when we travel abroad, being Bangkok for Europeans or Paris for Far-Easterners. And, conversely, why we don't feel very interested as visitors in those places where there isn't, to put it simply, any street life worth speaking of. And it explains of course the enormous international impact and prestige that the urban transformation of Barcelona has had, and still has, since the mid-1980s, all over the world.

There are many cities, including London, Copenhagen, New York, Curitiba or Medellín, that have looked at the example of Barcelona and have applied its urban design lessons. Which in fact are deceivably simple and require a strong political will to carry them on, but are easy to comprehend: understand public space as the main asset for the urban common good; give it full recognition by quality of design and comfort of use; and keep it simple and neutral enough to allow for unexpected things to happen. ■

Enric Massip-Bosch



Architect and Professor. Worked at Shinohara Atelier, Japan. Currently Director of the Master Program in Urban Design Building The City Now, Saint Petersburg. He has been Member of the Advisory Board of Urban Habitat, City Council of Barcelona. In 1990 founded EMBA with which he has won many international awards and competitions. Member of the Advisory Board at Barcelona International Business Club

