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PRESENT & FUTURES, ARCHITECTURE IN CITIES AN INTRODUCTION TO BARCELONA '96

PREAMBLE

The XIX Congress of the International Union of Architects is proposed to be held in October '96. The debate has now centred on the Congress theme: the role that architecture can play in the changing conditions of the contemporary city.

This write-up *Present and Futures. Architecture in Cities* introduces this theme and articulates it around five areas of reflection: transformations in our urban environments (*mutations*); new housing models (*habitations*); the effects on architecture and on contemporary cities of the media, information and transport (*flows*); new architectures for the new rites in the public and private lives of the inhabitants of big cities (*containers*); and the changes produced in urban areas which are traditionally either residual or have fallen into disuse (*terrain vague*).

Irena Fialoya, a member of the Scientific Committee wrote the following introduction to the Barcelona '96 theme.

... The tenacity with which typography was presented to the public eye in the 1920s, the thought that went into it and the importance placed on it, reminds us of the entrance of the visual media into our lives today ...

J. Rous, *Graphic Design between Manipulation and Reality*

Not long ago I asked an American student, one of the many students and foreigners living in Prague now, to check the English of this quotation and he did not comprehend its meaning. For Prague, the new life of this old city started during the *Velvet revolution* of November 1989. Seeing it now, it is difficult to imagine that just five years ago there were no billboards, advertisements, private shops, private restaurants, no evidently rich people, no one who was poor or different from the average crowd. The city, evolving very slowly throughout the post-World War II period, without any individual initiative, with five-year plans taking care of all larger investment, turned into a city of constant change overnight.

The euphoria of the moments of the victory of democracy is unforgettable. For several weeks, the city turned into a stage. Every wall was covered with leaflets – the uncensored media for spreading information, every public space was crowded with people talking about the latest news. The city was perfectly able to withstand gatherings and flows of more than 500,000 peaceful-minded citizens; the city, for that short time, was in fact a city of people, owned by its people.

During the following months, very many further changes occurred. I will not speak of the political, legal and historical moments, but of the rhythm and ambience that could be felt in Prague, and of the urban and architectural perspective.

Most of the old structures in society collapsed. Not many new ones existed,

and for the first time everyone could find out how he could manage and what he was worth in the incipient free market economy. The potential in terms of energy and desire was immense. Everybody dreamed of owning his or her own business. The amateur political graffiti and posters on walls were replaced by people selling anything from butter to antiques on the streets. The first private shops and bars with new interiors were opened, old buildings were restituted to the original owners and reconstructed.

Values changed. The amount of information multiplied. The hunger for cars was quickly fed by imported second-hand vehicles. Prague got its first and never-ceasing traffic jams. We had to get used to foreign people, companies, goods and money which had come into the country. Things were very often not quite understandable and ceased to be black and white.

This massive change led to city planning authorities being overwhelmed by requests for urban and building permits. From a city with a strictly centralistic planning system, where nearly all property was state owned, Prague turned practically overnight into a city where individual people became the owners of buildings and land. These people feel they have the right to decide about the future of their possessions, the planning authorities at the same time feel they hold responsibility for the future of the city. Where is the rational but human solution to city planning?

The communist era entirely neglected the maintenance of existing buildings.

It was statistically simple and conclusive to present the number of newly built flats per year. As a result of this ideology, new prefabricated housing – “Slab settlements” for hundreds of thousands of people was built on the outskirts, and the centre, with its thousand years of history and layers, was left nearly untouched. A house in the Old Town cannot only have nineteenth century or older windows, parquet floors and stucco, but often Renaissance ceilings and gothic cellars. The atmosphere is unique. But the house might not always be perfectly efficient, clean, dry, neat and heated. Where is the rational but human decision as to what standard of living we really need?

The centralization and unification of all activities was extensive. The same prefabricated blocks of flats were built in Prague and in the small villages, the same TV set, refrigerator or Skoda car were the dream and reality of the typical household. Socialist production produced large quantities but few modifications, and any other modification had to be home made. The result was quite a diversity of home inventions – hand-made clothes, jewellery, furniture, lawn mowers, even tractors, etc. The quality and elegance of these home-made pieces cannot compete with Western standards of factory-produced ones, but the process of inventing and producing is very different from the process of just buying: to make things at home is to analyze one's own needs; to buy is to consume. Can we learn from our recent experience and consume intelligently, or are we too hungry for all the wonders of the billboards and TV advertisements?

Ircna Flloya

Member of the Scientific Committee

A BAD MUTATION The recreational containers in the Port of Barcelona

The UIA Barcelona 96 congress is especially interested in mixed-use constructions which might be termed container-buildings, spaces which embrace and superimpose a variety of activities, apparently unconnected, and which represent a reification of new

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functions of the big city. The common denominator of these constructions is the creation of environments for free time and collective leisure often linked to spectacular mass consumption.

The Illa Diagonal building, a structure over 300 metres long designed in 1986 and completed in 1993, accommodates and articulates spaces for offices, a hotel, shopping galleries, a supermarket and car park in an architectural hybrid which has simultaneous recourse to a variety of scales and origins as part of a clearly contextualist vocation: the building in a closed block, the high-rise, the small and the large container.

Unlike the big container-buildings characteristic of present-day processes of urban growth, which are normally located on the periphery of the city and tend to reproduce a scenographically isolated urban microcosm, the Illa Diagonal building in Barcelona, from its site on one of the city's most emblematic and commercially active thoroughfares, is designed to contribute through its architecture to the formation of the urban surroundings. Emphasis on the definition of the limits, on the flat façade surface, on pedestrian walkways which penetrate the block, on the link with the subterranean street, on the scale of architectural elements and on references to the model of housing blocks in the centre of Barcelona are determining factors in the materialisation of the city-creating will that generated this project.

Architecture, even good architecture, cannot by any means guarantee improvement to cities. Barcelona provides an example. I want to talk about a set of recreational buildings which are currently under construction in the very heart of the Old Port: a complex of restaurants and shops, an omnimax and an aquarium (great containers, city generators?).

Early in the eighties, thanks to an intelligent programme which reclaimed spaces for public use in the form of a project by Manuel de Solà-Morales, the inner harbour of the Port Vell (Old Port), running from the bottom of the Rambla along the city's seafront, was converted into a water plaza. The perimeter wharfs had been cleared of their sheds and transformed into two magnificent, wide-open urban spaces: the Moll de la Fusta (Timber Wharf) and the Passeig de la Barceloneta. In between, an enormous void was left: relaxing, tranquil, like a breath of fresh air in contact with the sea. At that time the City Council was firmly in charge and knew what they wanted for the good of the city.

Roles have changed, however, and now it seems that commercial interests prevail over the will of the City Hall. Those in charge of the Old Port see the harbour as a vast *terrain vague* and have come to the conclusion that if they fill it with recreational buildings they will also fill their coffers. They might be right. But by doing this they have treated the people of Barcelona like children thirsting for Disneyland and spoil the spatial richness the calm waters of the harbour would have retained had they been left alone. Despite the fact that the architectural quality of the components of the complex might be high, the result will go against Barcelonans, having robbed them of a wide-open space for relaxation and replaced it with a collection of games boxes which could just as well have been located in other parts of the city's *terrains vagues* and even improved their urban quality, instead of destroying one which already had this in its own right.

Architecture must be conceived in itself and in terms of the city. It is society's democratically elected representatives who should make decisions of collective interest. And surely it is the role of architects – thinking now of architecture and the city – to attempt to influence politicians so that it is they, and not profits, who set collective urban priorities in the citizens' interest.

In 1996 when we meet in Barcelona, we will see and talk about all this.

Rafael Moneo

Manuel De Solà-Morales

Quoted from Barcelona '96
