

Resource Architecture – Final Plenum: Perspectives and Visions

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Architecture: Conflicts, Will and Wisdom

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The Nature of the Conflict

In the 1999 Beijing Congress Istanbul was selected as the seat of the 2005 UIA Congress. In this selection cultural reasons seem to have been of some relevance. Geographically and historically, Istanbul symbolizes the union of Asia and Europe. It carries pagan memories of Ancient Greeks and Romans, Early Christianity of the Roman world, the Christian Byzantine Empire and the Muslim Ottoman Empire, which, politically and economically, unified the Near East with the Balkans and the Mediterranean. All these superposed historical accumulations make Istanbul a rich treasure house of historical imagery, in an incomparable geographic setting -- the historical core attests, by its still surviving historical relics, to the importance of historically determined geographic locations, where *genius loci* is imbedded, and it continues to be the focal point of attraction, representing the wisdom of the past cultures.

Nevertheless this historical core and background are dwarfed by the immense expansion of the contemporary city with its 11.000.000 inhabitants. The megalopolis Istanbul presents all the ills of modern life, all the conflicts inherent in the present world system, often ugly in their physical expression. Architects resent those distortions and lack of beauty that degrade human life. A city of such dimensions, is indeed a paradigm of conflicts on all its physical and intellectual dimensions by its formal and social contradictions. Istanbul offers a highly visible profile of acute tensions among its components where the village and the skyscraper live together and where the unadulterated medieval mind of the rural Anatolia survives in the hectic atmosphere of modern life. Interestingly, Istanbul survives. Unsolved urban problems, dirt, sufferance, economic difficulties, and ugliness do not destroy human settlements. They create socio-cultural problems, the solutions of which are not at the hands of architects.

The Will of Survival

Istanbul is shaped in all its rapidly changing peripheries by anonymous architecture of rural immigrants. These wide expanses of unplanned areas are the symbol of their will of survival and expectations from

the city. But some of the essential qualities of a civilized urban life, order and aesthetics, are lacking. One cannot expect from the newcomers in search for a shelter and minimal existence, to care for the ills of the city, even if they become conscious of them. They were instinctively lured by the attraction of this chaotic pole of humanity, that great and mythical city. They feel much less than us, the architects, the burden of their environment, because the city offers them some life dimensions that they never had in their villages. After a while they may be disillusioned, but they never go back.

It has been realized for almost half a century ago that the greatest help to have a better environment is the understanding and participation of the common people in our efforts, and our judicious and intelligent exploitation of their will of survival. The natural and unalienable right to have a shelter and the will to obtain it must be manipulated and transformed into a will of better environment. This means to integrate an aesthetic component to their bare struggle for life. The will of survival of people and the will for the creation of an harmonious environment of the architects and intellectuals may, hopefully, be combined for a healthier future for our cities. Programs for shelter for the poor has a long history. But in a city where 60 percent of the building stock is illegal, old politics of housing must be redesigned in local and national contexts.

Uses and Abuses of Technology

It is evident that, in the near future, there will be no economic equality between men and the regions of the globe. Decisions in the choice of technologies have serious impacts on the living standards of the societies and the economy of the countries. The political, economic and cultural domination of rich countries impose the use of inadequate and expensive building technologies and related forms in poorer countries. Since they represent the prestige of the developed world, technology, form and concept are imported wholesale, whether appropriate or not. It is a disguised coercion. One of the architect's responsibilities resides in the selection of proper technologies and materials. But here, unfortunately, the politicians decide. Yet the questions remain open and must be answered: Should technological research be directed towards abstract universal aims, without differentiation? Or, would technology be differentiated according to regional and local demands? Are we going to define a technology for the rich and consumerist societies or are we going to be selective ?

The search for the solution with regard to the use of appropriate technologies, having political and economic implications, is a thorny problem. But it may be the basis of a new human-centered approach to architecture. It may be a new epoch of humanization, after an epoch of dehumanization. Do responsibilities of architects include the forecasting of the future? If so, what could be their role? Will it be diminished or

increased? Or will they contribute to the discussion of the future, through imposing new visions for the future?

Fallacies of Global Discourse and the Nature of Dialogue

All over the world local cultures are already imbued with global (i.e. Western) culture. There remains no place on the globe not influenced by modern techniques and media. Since the Imperialist Age with its corresponding eclecticism, architectural theory, vocabulary, and architectural techniques were exported and imported. After the Second World War architecture has been global -- it is being sold, barrel-and-stock. In all non-Western countries, only historical architecture under protection represents traditional culture; the new is global and international. Today the fight of surviving local culture -- to the extent it remains -- is against the relentless invasion of new techniques and materials. The concepts of alternate and appropriate technologies are the fields of defense. And this is a multi-disciplinary protection where architecture is only one of the contributors.

On the other hand, global urban policy is a fallacy, because it is directly related to the shaping of greatest and most complicated artifact the societies have created in their specific history. The city is the only artifact that cannot be imported wholesale. So any discussion based on global concepts and vocabulary is self-defeating. In the case of Istanbul, we are going to witness a concrete example of the fallacy of general theories and strategies.

Until now architects could not resist the onslaught of uncontrolled urban sprawl which destroys the possibility of a decent urban environment? Can architects play any role in the urbanization of proto-urban crowds of developing metropolises? In this context, the role of architects is getting more and more limited. Their traditional responsibility urges them to find solutions to a situation where complex social, cultural and political ingredients decidedly eliminate proper architectural discourse.

The last word to Architects

Architects do not shape global politics. However, they have been the instruments of civilization through all historical periods and continue to be so, because their contribution is part of that portion of culture which figures heavily in the definition of urbanity and civilization. Turkish architects do fight lawlessness, ugly land manipulation, and lack of planning. But I think we are not able to formulate even the basic problems of such a gigantic agglomeration. We do underestimate the complexity of this new phenomenon, the dimensions of which completely change the nature of architectural intervention. Cities do not remain cities, architects do not remain architects. Interdisciplinary approach to all sorts of environmental design turn architects into container designers. While architects continue their old ways of

designing tiny projects, to discuss the future of architecture is more beneficial than the discussion of the professional situation. In the present chaos of urban environment it seems ethically more valid to discuss the situation of architecture, and less the architecture itself.

These questions are being discussed in many different contexts. But by questioning this situation architects may help clarify contemporary thought towards a future, with less conflict or, at least, with more resilience.

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