

The Emotional City

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The urban environment is a precise emotional condition. Being in the city feels a certain way. This is similar to being at home, you know when you feel at home, when you can take your shoes off and relax. This feeling of being at home can be communicated to other people even though they live in different kinds of homes. Similarly, the feeling of being in the city is not easily confused with being in a shopping mall, or being in a theme park, and most people are sensitive to these differences. The architectural vanguard has not recently much discussed the significance, or the defining characteristics of homeyness. At the turn of the century, the propriety of the home was a central theme in the discourses of architects like Semper and Loos, who tried to articulate what was the difference between a house and a public building. The city, on the other hand, has been hotly debated by all manner of architects and urbanists, arguing positions which range from the reconstruction of the European city to a new fluid functionalism which emerges from global market forces. It is strange that so much is said and predicted for the future of the city since all evidence suggests that physical planning plays a barely significant role in the development of cities. The growing pressures to concentrate use, to assemble ever larger sites, to erode the public realm are driven by economic development, and architects are usually left to interpret and facilitate decisions that have been taken at a much earlier stage of the process, decisions that architects and planners are rarely party to. Cities are in fact highly resistant to a priori ideologies and instead follow a continuous and barely perceptible form of structural development. A development that is an embodiment of culture, of people's ambitions and desires. Thought of this way, rather than being an imperfect manifestation of an abstract theory, the city is a perfect and vivid instance of reality. If one accepts that abstract, formal ambitions will almost never play a significant role in the city's development how can architecture continue to operate in good faith?

Many cities do have physical structures that originate from a priori ideas; from a Roman military encampment, from an amazing nineteenth century gridded extension, or from Jefferson's demarcation of the American territory. In the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, networks of squares and parks, the replacement of city walls with Boulevards are also the result of abstract political ideas put into practice. Very quickly, however, an incredibly complex set of conditions are brought to bear onto these ideological origins, and each city develops in subtly different ways. Weather, geology and topography have an effect, as do changing patterns of land ownership. Law in the widest sense, has a powerful effect. As these many, changing forces assert themselves, each city, or each part of large cities, assumes its own morphology. Each city has its own size and configuration of block, has its own version of a city house typology, its own way of making a facade. In Europe the longevity of this process means that cities have become important physical repositories of a place's history, but even more powerfully the city is a manifestation of a particular living culture, of reality.

I am holding up a very traditional idea of the city to be a paradigm. I am not, however, especially interested in the conservation of this paradigm's physical structure. I am concerned that instead of discussing theories of the future city there be a discussion about how the form of the real city has emerged and why, in Europe at least, the city continues to be relevant, robustly adapting to hundreds of years of political and economic change and also resisting being turned into a large open air museum. While one might intuitively be suspicious of the romantic variety and finely grained scale that now make the historic centres of our cities such popular tourist attractions, this consistent heterogeneity eloquently registers the mixed tenure and density of ownership and use so characteristic of and necessary to a liberal and democratic society. Hundreds of separate interests fronting onto a single street, all more or less subscribing to certain rules of engagement and benefiting from a multiplicity of social and economic transactions. Within obvious limits, all the inhabitants of a street are empowered to make choices and to effect change.

Contrast this with land assembly, one of the most direct and destructive manifestations of the current economic regime on the city. The requirement to increase returns on investment year on year means

that even profitable properties need to earn more. This can only be achieved by demolishing single buildings and erecting ever larger, more efficient ones. When efficiency can no longer be improved, buildings are still replaced in favour of newer, fresher packages that can tempt tenants away from buildings that are sometimes themselves only a few years old. This is a vicious circle with devastating environmental implications. While planning authorities may argue about facade materials and the survival of medieval street patterns in the master plan, several city blocks, that once housed thousands of tenants and was in the ownership of hundreds, is now controlled by one owner backed by international financial institutions. Do not be fooled by the medieval street pattern, the well maintained squares, the lunch time activities, these developments constitute a serious erosion of democracy and of the public realm. This process is taking place all over London and in all major cities. Far from attempting to control this serious threat to the health of cities, politicians and planning authorities encourage these developments as regeneration essential if cities are to maintain their status as economic centres.

I am not arguing for a return to some mythical past or for protecting the status quo, but in sustaining the condition of heterogeneity which I believe to be fundamental to the city. The current fashion for discussing the future of cities, and how their structure will emerge from the global market and new information technologies is as futile as the modernist discourses of the twentieth century. These ideologies are about shock and novelty, they define themselves in contrast to what exists. They confront the vivid plurality of the real city with the deadening unity of an ideal city, an ideal which will always be insufficient, incomplete and disappointing in the face of an infinitely complex reality.

Rather than attempting to conceptualise the whole of urbanism, a critical architecture can emerge by ignoring the big and the general and work with the minute and the highly specific. Architecture should be sensitive to those emotional qualities that define the city, melancholy, expectancy, pathos, hope. If one accepts that architecture is about altering and extending what is already there, one can engage the powerful presence of the real so that the aura of urbanity is amplified and extended in the place that one is working. The complexity and interconnectedness of the city is sustained by such instances of profound invention.

London

London, despite its size, its tradition of compromise and an English cultural ambivalence towards urbanity, is a great and moving city. A city so large that there still exist substantial parts that have resisted the ravages of land speculation and have continued to develop and adapt in response to a multiplicity of conditions rather than to unitary special interests. It retains a loose, sometimes toothless texture that is still emphatically urban. London is so decentralised that one can live and work within walking distance in the east end and only visit west London every month or two, for a sort of holiday without leaving the city.

The pathetic failures to plan London somehow proclaim a triumph of human frailty and reality over abstract theories. The imperfections and incompleteness of its many utopian fragments (the Georgian city, garden city, ville radieuse, new vernacular) is a poignant indication of how urbanism follows strong internal forces that are not easily described. The resulting complexity and never-ending potential of the city has little to do with novelty and theoretical abstraction but is held within the deeply moving world of things.