

Built Environment Protection – From Curative Actions to Preventive Actions

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Summary

The built environment is nowadays central point of some critical problems as well as of a huge resource potential. The challenge consists in its improving. We may notice two trends in our concerns to give out curing solutions for the cities, for the built environment. The first trend is concerned mainly on pollution aspects, environment impact, and increased volume of traffic, urban texture demolition, natural landscape and built landscape depreciation. The second trend is concerned by the increasing acknowledgement of urban environment potential, social, cultural and economical significances, the way we arrange out living space. The preventing urbanistic surveys are trying, for the moment, to set up general future directions, acknowledging the present possibility limit of urbanistic forecasting, steadily recommending a main principle attitude: man as the center of all concerns, aiming to place the individual, with his personality and aspirations, in a built environment whose scale not to "smash" him, transforming him in a simple mathematic or informational element of a high tech gearing and whose control the society may lose.

Keywords: critical urban problems, curative urban actions, preventing urban surveys, built environment protection.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the built environment is the central point of some critical problems as well as of a huge resource potential. The challenge consists in its improving.

If we were asking various persons what they mean by built environment, we may find out that they refer to the city buildings, therefore to the built framework. Indeed, this component of the built environment is the palpable one, visible for everybody. The urban space is less obvious for city inhabitants, being a more subtle notion. Therefore, it is mistaken with the city constructions. The urban spaces, the urban environment, are those that deliver the most important benchmarks of orientation for the inhabitants of a city and their influence on the human psychic, personality and behavior is overwhelming. The visual perception of the city, of the urban space, is related to the significances the physical and social



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ambience have for each individual differs from one individual to another, from one culture to another. Each of us needs a certain urban ambience that finally is perceived and is appreciated depending on his psycho-affective personality and in compliance with the motivations given by his activities in this ambience. This complex and obvious process of inter-relation between all these factors, subtle at first sight, has triggered some decades ago important alarming signals. It drew the attention on some important disorders of the physical and psychic health of the city inhabitants, emerged due to some damage of the urban space and ambience, of the built environment. It is about facilitating some severe dysfunctions by not observing some important urban morphological balances for city survival. The imbalance between old and new, the imbalance of urban functions, the land speculation, the scandal of empty dwellings and homeless people, the chaotic congestion of traffic, social service insufficiency, green spaces insufficiency, lack of some space generating human contacts so necessary in order to weld a collectivity, the cultural mediocrity encouraged by mass-media, here they are only some of the cause in a long list of problems. The inter-disciplinary surveys trying to give curative solutions to some of these damages remarked the fact that the urban environment problems cannot be scientifically sort out without previous solving of delicate social and economical problems: poverty, social injustice, corruption, society members chance inequality, racisms etc.

2. FOREGROUNDS

The urban environment problems came into sight especially due to the lack of some clear attitudes in regard of the city both from civilian politicians and specialists.

The talks about the city are taking place permanently between specialists and politicians in order to work out a coherent public policy. As some important and large investments were made, these talks transform into disputes. In approaching the built environment as a whole, of the city in general, a considerable confusion and incoherence persist, as a result of a distorted understanding of democracy. That means the decisions that are made for the city are influenced by the economical problems, by personal interests, in fact by the intention conflicts between politicians, promoters, designers, builders and users.

What is really a CITY? Among all definitions formulated trying to catch the complexity, the most suggestive ones are the symbolic ones. THE CITY is “a big house whose internal beauty is conferred by the external beauty of its buildings” – as the architecture historian Camillo Sitte said. For the French architect Christian de Portzamparc, the CITY “is by itself the human civilization body that, in a perpetual play with time, connects the future to the past, talking to its predecessors and successors”. Dictionaries define the CITY as a economical-geographical complex



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system, with physiognomy, texture and unmistakable features in territory or as a complex becoming of all morphological-functional, economical, political, military, social and cultural structures characterizing its existence. Carlo Argan, a contemporary art and architecture historian, considered the CITY as “a nucleus of cultural accumulation and irradiation conferring it the important capacity to organize the surrounding territory”. In spite of various definitions, there is a unanimous opinion of the historians and specialists studying the urban phenomenon: the city should pass through reforming processes, processes of whose success is conditioned just by correct understanding and determination of the city.

We may find out two trends in the concern to give curing solutions of the cities, of the built environment. The first trend is dealing mainly by pollution aspects, environment impact, and increased volume of traffic, demolition of urban texture, natural landscape and built landscape depreciation. The second trend is dealing with the increased acknowledgement given to urban environment potential, social, cultural and economical significances, to the way how we arrange the space we are living in.

Our society was basically changed. There are no more simple solutions or absolutely correct solutions for the existing challenges. The attempts to offer historical models, contemporary models or aesthetical answers as urban solutions proved to be unsatisfactory. It becomes compulsory a total modification of some attitudes that, concretely manifested, generated state of affairs of breaking up of built environment, of urban ambience: either non-interventionist attitudes like “let the city develop itself alone and spontaneous” or aggressive attitudes that, by the proposed implants, destroyed the balance of many urban areas.

The restrictive and incoherent measures, with a prevailing curative character, should be replaced by a all-inclusive action system, of a forecasting nature, *a strategy with a predominant preventive character*. Both processes should run in a programmed succession of inter-conditional operations, and should be included the operations of diagnosis and prognosis, of planning and decision, of edifying and control. These should be correlated with provision of due funds and giving priority to the community interests towards the departmental, local and personal interests.

In this respect, by taking over the Agenda 21 type action plans, the current urban policy tries to develop some sustainable development strategies, to rehabilitate the urban environment. The coherence of these actions can not be obtained only by using regulations by the way of which the authority tries to control and to adjust the intention conflicts between promoters on one side and users and society on the other side. The attempts to get quality in architecture and urbanism by control, plans, schedules and constrains had not effective outcome.

There is the hypothesis of some successful preventive solutions: to act at the root of the matter, to awaken the individual and collective consciousness of responsibility



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towards the city, by a sensitizing process and dense motivation, of community information and training, both for citizens and for public servants. From the past history, we have concrete urban examples of coherence between idea and goal, between responsibilities and competences. At the time, the promoter, the designer, the user and the builder mutually understood and respected their intentions and the citizens and town counselors encouraged the main targeted goal: a harmonious urban framework.

Of course nowadays the conditions for marking up a coherent and balanced urban framework are more difficult because of the above mentioned intention conflicts, because of the high costs, because of the corruption and so on. The desire to develop the economy comes into conflict with the aspiration to preserve the historical centers. The responsibility of the architect to consider the users' needs as well as the society needs, while it is paid by an ignorant promoter, here it is a situation that became chronic in time by the impossibility of establishing a set of totally reconcilable interests.

The urbanist historians are mutually issuing the opinion that the ignorance and corruption are main causes that lead to conflicting situations resulting severe damages of the urban environment.

The ignorance is mainly generated by the false identification of the built environment and even of the architecture with its built forms. Portzamparc finds out in a survey on the city that: "In the post-war city, the modern architectural object represents a culture and a value. The object engaged us, dominates us and this represents a paradigm of our way of production. We are in a stage of evolution in which mass economy influences our way of perceiving the surrounding realities". Not any building is a work of architecture. *To build does not mean precisely to do architecture.* The meaning of architecture surpasses the construction itself. The architecture can be "an idea" modeled in a built form; it is a conception work that cannot be reduced to a way of optimal assembling of some construction components. The architecture may mean also environment quality: protection against heat and cold, the offer of light and shade, the adequate use of building materials and structures, the human scale of buildings. Architecture can offer social suitability: common or individual dwelling and work spaces, spaces sustaining and conferring a meaning to human activities and tasks. Architecture means functional and ecological suitability: flexibility in usage, durable and viable materials, reduced energy consumption. Architecture implies economic suitability: a right value-price ratio in this era extremely obsessed by the cost issue. Architecture means aesthetical suitability: building silhouette and urban silhouette, volume proportion, shape proportion, fullness and emptiness plays or detail proportion. Architecture means coherence: culture, environment, composition, aesthetics, function, technique coherence, the coherence in a built environment fragmented by time and people. The architecture gives substance and structure to



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the city and gives significance to the city by its symbolism of shapes. The architecture has the capacity to symbolize or materialize some of the essential life truths, to respect “the essential joys”, as Corbusier said, to respect the air, the sun, the water and the ground with its green robe, to respect the urban or landscape context, to express respect towards the past, offering an image for the future.

The cultural suitability of architecture seems to be the main element conferring it penetration force in citizen consciousness. This aspect may be useful in awakening the urban consciousness, in individual and community informing and training in order to trigger a successful urban changing and rehabilitation process. Relations between architecture and culture are deep: “architecture does not have function and does not function but within the cultural system” as C. G. Argan said. Within the urban cultural system, the architecture plays a similar role to that of language in human collectivity. The modern city dysfunctions, of the urban environment, are clearly expressed by architectural language. Many test polls reveals the fact that the modern city is often confused with a system of information and communication because one of the current imperative needs of the urban environment is the need for information and communication. A subtle form of pollution of the urban environment emerged as a consequence of satisfying this need: today city is integrating in an alarming way to a mass culture structurally transformed in a mainly informative culture, a culture reduced to a simple system of mediocre information. The current urban ignorance, cause of many problems of the built environment, has its roots obviously here. Argan asks with concern: “Can we imagine a passing from the ionic system to the information system being neither traumatizing nor destructive?” Do we really want to preserve the historical city, as a model of social aggregation around a cultural nucleus? But how can we match the historical constitutive nature of the city with the contemporary informational culture? Mass economy opposes to preservation and protection of historical urban centers, but builds amazing headquarters mainly within these areas because it needs their cultural and political prestige. The city itself sails in trouble waters full of obstacles: non-interventionist attitudes, destructive attitudes, attitudes out of reality, opportunist attitudes, and greedy attitudes without scruples.

When he used to plead for preserving the historical city, Camillo Sitte was not thinking that the urban relation between old and new would be the toughest touchstone for all the specialists involved in the urban rehabilitation and reforming process. Christian de Portzamparc outlines nowadays the existence in many cities of three urban eras whose interference generated tension and contradictions. The classic city, of the first era, had a concept of harmony based on conventions, homogeneity and imitation. From here derived a slow evolution, with long lasting styles, with a laborious construction technique. The modern city, of the second urban era, addresses also a homogenous, unitary ideal, but based on a serial rapidity and repetition. The transformations suggested by this era address the



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replacement of previous century “barbarisms” with modern “order”. Therefore, the conflict emerges. The third urban era is fighting not to make the previous mistakes but repair them; but it also needs originality. That is the reason it breaks the rules, the conventions even the notion of architectural “style”. However, the idea of harmony through homogeneity and unity is sustained even today by some urbanists and architects but is “undermined” by the architectural individualism outbreaks. Naturally, other contradictions emerge and, along Portzamparc and Argan, many other people are wondering: if the unity is not possible, a culture of contrasts would be invented?

The revitalization of historical urban centers without transforming them in museums and without aggressing them is one of the main cultural problems of modern architecture. The aggressive solutions have demolished large urban historical areas; it was started erection of new constructions, gigantic in mass and height. Basically, in this way, the morphology, functions and silhouette of historical areas were changing. The main historical monuments were becoming unhappily integrated within some assemblies that were not tailored for their size but on the contrary. The urban spaces were becoming diffuse, uncontrolled, undifferentiated, neither depending on the placement, nor depending on usage. But these historical centers are crushed also by the adjacent urban area and suburbs weight, which carries their improvement as necessary. In Argan’s opinion, the notion of “historical center” is semantically confused and that is the reason why generates errors in urban rehabilitation solutions. The notion is basically vitiated by the fact that we presume that different areas of the city have different historical values. But all urban areas have their old and new history; therefore they are “historical”.

“A new special dialectics between old and new should be invented, between architectural objects and the place they have, between the object and the external aspect, between object and the surrounding environment” – as Portzamparc suggests, unsatisfied by the curative actions applied to the historical centers. He suggestively describes the metabolic processes of the city which are in fact a part of its life: “generations are succeeding, continuously transforming and reusing old buildings and free spaces, always integrating them in the vivid and active present, as well as, any time, new constructions and spaces are immediately caught and fixed in the existing urban landscape mass becoming already historical”. Like Argan, he outlines the dynamic process of loading with history of each new urban particle.

Argan, in analyzing the difficult relation between old and new in the rehabilitation process of the urban environment, notices that the compromising solutions gave life to some unsatisfactory “revivals”, solutions with aggressive implants generated incompatibilities and rejections, and where the historical centers were preserved in a precarious and approximate way, around them a construction “magma” was



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solidified that gave no place neither to public services nor to green spaces. In that place a suffocating urban environment was born, an enormous "patrimony" favored by demographical growth, of corrupt public administrations and keen profiteers. Argan considers a viable solution the separation of the historical area from the rest of the city, so that this area to remain alive. It is frequently repeated the mistake of restoring old areas without reintegrating them in urban life by providing them with adequate and not artificial urban functions. "Rigorous restorations providing the maintaining of the population traditionally living in historical centers had given good results in some of the cases. But they are difficult to copy them in cities that did not preserve an artisanal tradition and where the people have the tendency to abandon the old centers in order to move to horrible peripheral neighborhoods they consider more modern and comfortable".

The historical prestige of the cities can be saved by the permanent need to urban belonging and identity of all those who have political and economical power. Therefore, Argan suggests politicizing the urbanistic therapy methodology so that, with a high degree of urban, moral, professional and political consciousness, the political errors generated by the built environment pollution would be also corrected also.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The preventive urbanistic surveys for the moment are trying to set general direction for the future, acknowledging the present possibility limits of urbanistic prognosis, but strongly recommending an important principle attitude: the man as the focus of all concerns, aiming at placing the individual with his personality and aspirations, in a built environment whose scale not to "smash" him, transforming him in a simple mathematic or informational element of a high tech gearing and whose control the society may lose.

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