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Learning from Modern Utopias

With the crisis of modernism, modernist utopias came to be seen as the cause of the fragmentation, suburbanization and dehumanization of the city and as a tool in the hands of real estate speculation. However, modernist utopias were critical visions committed to social, humanist and technical research for the improvement of living conditions in the industrialized city. On the one hand, one cannot deny the modernist attempts to reconcile the urban predicaments raised anew by the industrialization process and the creation of a new, post-industrial social condition. On the other hand, it can be argued that the problems the contemporary city has to deal with have much in common with those that gave rise to the modernist utopias: bigness and high density, circulation and traffic congestion, public health and social changes, cultural identity and technological development, capitalist profit and corporate power. It is therefore to be expected that links should be found between those utopias and contemporary strategies of urban design. The challenge launched by *Joelho* for this issue aims at exploring these links.

Contributions reflect the contemporary belief in the improvement of the existing urban systems rather than in the creation of a completely new order, as was the case of the urban utopias of the 1920s and 1930s. They broadly

follow two trends of the postmodern critique of the Modern Movement. One trend deals with the return to the values of the traditional city, promoting the regeneration of the urban tissue as a continuous urban fabric; the other with the impossibility of this return, seeing the process of fragmentation rooted in nineteenth-century industrialization as an inevitability. Contradiction is only apparent, however. Both trends find their pertinence in the diversity of contexts of the contemporary city. In fact, if there is one word that characterizes the contemporary situation of urban design and the theoretical debate around it, it is diversity. Diversity of social, cultural, economic and physical contexts requires different ways of looking at and diverse answers to the contemporary city.

The issue opens with an essay by Tim Verlaan on Amsterdam's Leidseplein. Verlaan reminds us that urban utopias are not a conceptual argument for architects' self-indulgence, but rather consist of attempts to create a better world; attempts that not only take people into account, but which can engage and be triggered by people. He also reminds us that, although by definition utopias are not realizable, they generate a new reality that changes the course of history, differing as it may from the ideal

envisioned. The civic strategies of action that demanded the preservation of Leidseplein as a public space of collective expression, aiming at upholding the diversity, inclusiveness and multifunctional character of urban life and space, are presented by Verlaan as an example of the contemporary urge to develop new collective utopian visions and social consciousness.

Underlying the civic movement's attempts to safeguard Leidseplein is a concern with the traditional values of the city and of urban life, expressed in the significance attributed to public space. The growing importance of public space in the contemporary context of European cities and architectural discourse, as demonstrated in the paradigmatic cases of Barcelona and Berlin, is the focus of Hans Ibelings's contribution. What surfaces from Ibelings's essay is that, radically different though their principles may be, the modernist visions of public space are triggered by the same essential credence that we find in the contemporary discourse: that improving public space is vital for improving the quality of urban life and society. The gap is narrower when one looks at the practical application of modernist principles throughout Europe, in which, as Ibelings notes, the infinite utopian public space turns into

finite, well-defined and carefully designed urban spaces. In this sense, modernist utopias can be seen as part of a process that, having started as a reaction to the industrial city, is committed to improving urban life by improving public spaces.

Despite this common aim, the concept of public space has gradually recovered its links with the traditional city since the late 1940s, when the crisis of the Modern Movement began to take shape. A milestone in this process was the CIAM 8 meeting, chaired by Josep Lluís Sert and organized by the MARS Group, which took place in Hoddesdon in 1951 under the theme of "The Heart of the City." Because utopias leave their imprint on reality, however, this post-war return to the city is not without modernist influences. This is illustrated by Sert's designs for Harvard University, which, as Caroline Constant's contribution shows us, reveal not only the adaptation of Sert's utopian proclivities to the American context, but also the conflation of modernist and traditional urban patterns and values. High density and greenery, pedestrian lanes and metropolitan transportation networks, patios and aerial bridges, plazas and covered passages, continuity of the urban tissue, mixed-use and open-ended planning — all

these apparently contradictory concepts were equated in light of a new urban vision aiming at reconciling, on the one hand, the qualities of traditional small towns and their public spaces and communal life, and, on the other, a metropolitan 'constellation' composed of self-sufficient units.

Just as the crisis of modernism led to a return to the traditional values of the city, so too did it question this return and the traditional planning instruments. Alexander Eisenschmidt's essay on Reyner Banham's fascination with Los Angeles and on his passionate acceptance of the city's unplanned complexity is a paradigmatic example. Conurbation and 'autopia', resulting from 'spontaneous' urbanization processes, are not only inevitable but they also provide the context for new, frenzied urban experiences. The traditional cityscape and the spatial perception associated with it are replaced by a metropolis of split landscapes, a car-based metropolitan culture and a fragmented spatial cognition. Orientation depends on a 'Baede-car'— Banham's tribute to Karl Baedeker's travel guides through which, unknowingly, Banham foresaw today's GPS navigation systems. As Eisenschmidt notes, in extolling the urban experience of the mixed-use, unplanned metropolis and the dynamics of the motorized city, Banham

was constructing a new urban utopia based on the changes introduced by technology in the existing city, simultaneously reworking imageries and arguments of modernist utopias.

Modernist visionary imageries are indeed recognizable in many places today, be it in highly dense cities or in fragmented urban landscapes. Carola Hein's contribution explores these imageries in the bustling city of Tokyo, a multi-storied metropolis integrating infrastructures and buildings: the city at the ground level, the raised city of skyscrapers and elevated pedestrian bridges, the underground, multi-level city of shopping malls connecting subway stations, trains stations and neighboring urban areas, and the crisscrossing transportation systems of trains, subways and highways with bridge and tunnel sections. Celina Kress, in contrast, focuses on the dynamics and creative potential to be found in the relationship between the rural and urban. Kress proposes the concept of *Urban-Rural Connectivity*, or *Urban-Rural Space*, as a new way of approaching the fragmented city and suburbia and overcoming the inadequacy of traditional planning. *Urban-Rural Connectivity* aims at exploring a cooperative interaction between the complementary aspects of rural and urban contexts, involving notions such as the "network

city", "open spatial arrangement", or "participatory planning." This implies revisiting the historical processes of the urban-rural divide. Modernist anti-urban biases, Kress notes, largely result from a misinterpretation of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City model. Rather than a formal or spatial proposition, Howard's model concerns the integration of economic, functional and social aspects of urban and rural, providing valuable suggestions for the contemporary city.

The anti-urban bias is equally questioned in Alessandro Porotto's debate on the urban dimension of the social housing experiments of Vienna and Frankfurt in the 1920s. Although they differ, both *Höfe* and *Siedlungen* establish relationships of continuity with the city, often related to the concept of urban limit. Rupture with the continuum of the historic city does not result from concepts such as "city-satellite", partially derived from Howard's diagrams, but from a new conception of the city and of its morphology. The idea of unity is no longer thought of in terms of a continuous bounded urban fabric, but as an organism of interconnected urban entities. In the *Höfe* and *Siedlungen*, collective spaces, with their planned green areas linking the public spaces of the city to the private space of the dwellings, partake of this new conception in both functional and symbolic

terms. For Porotto, the spatial and social visions of these experiments, their connections with economic and technical premises, and the conception of the city underlying them provide referents for contemporary urban dynamics and for emerging concepts such as those of “organic urban farming”, “sustainability” or “recycling”.

Visionary images illustrated by Hein and notions such as “open-ended planning” discussed by Kress are brought together in César Losada Romero’s debate on Situationist reinterpretations of modernist utopian megastructures. The author discusses Constant Nieuwenhys’ New Babylon city, a “city within the city”, mainly differing from the modernist propositions in its openness to unpredictability, be that with regard to form, function or ways of life. Although Losada Romero points out the naivety of Constant’s uncritical confidence in technology, he recognizes many of Constant’s intuitions in the contemporary city. He sees in Constant’s work a predecessor of the contemporary debate on bottom-up urban processes and participatory urbanism that can provide possible answers to the contemporary complexity of social contexts. Cecilia Bischeri and Silvia Micheli take this debate one step further in their approach to the work of Moshe Safdie and his attempt to reconcile high and low

density through hybrid three-dimensional megastructures. From the late 1960s, Safdie had been investigating the internalization not only of public spaces but of the city itself in megastructures ultimately extendable to a regional scale. With his recent work in Singapore, the authors argue, Safdie eventually succeeded in turning utopia into reality through the notion of "vertical town." Yet, as happens in Japan, realized utopian visions are expressions of capitalist dynamics deprived of the social dimension envisioned by the modernist project.

While Asian emerging economies provide privileged contexts for new urban experiments, they also show how the politics of urban modernization associated with the renewal of the city's image, in the context of global competitiveness, tends to collide with the specificities of local culture. This is made evident in the case presented in the last essay. Focusing on the city of Hanoi, Manfredo Manfredini and Anh-Dung Ta discuss how Vietnamese policies for the modernization of the city's central district and improvement of living conditions are coercively transforming the idiosyncratic use of urban space and the culturally rich and complex interactions between public and private space. For the authors, the inhabitants' resistance

highlights the urge to create a bottom-up strategy capable of improving living conditions while preserving the richness of Vietnamese culture.

Beyond exposing the diversity and complexity of the contemporary situation, this set of essays share a concern for public space, be it as a place for collective expression or as a vital element in connecting urban fragments together. They also have in common the search for innovative planning processes capable of dealing with the dynamics of the contemporary city. Strategies triggered by and responding directly to people's needs, either as a reaction to the dominance of real estate speculation or to bureaucratic policies, are associated with concepts such as bottom-up processes, participatory urbanism, open-ended planning, or collective utopian visions. The way in which these concepts can replace traditional planning instruments in the construction of comprehensive and consistent urban realities remains, to a large extent, unclear. Yet they can be important tools for intervention in the urban fabric within the diversity of contemporary realities, where a single strategy will hardly be sufficient.