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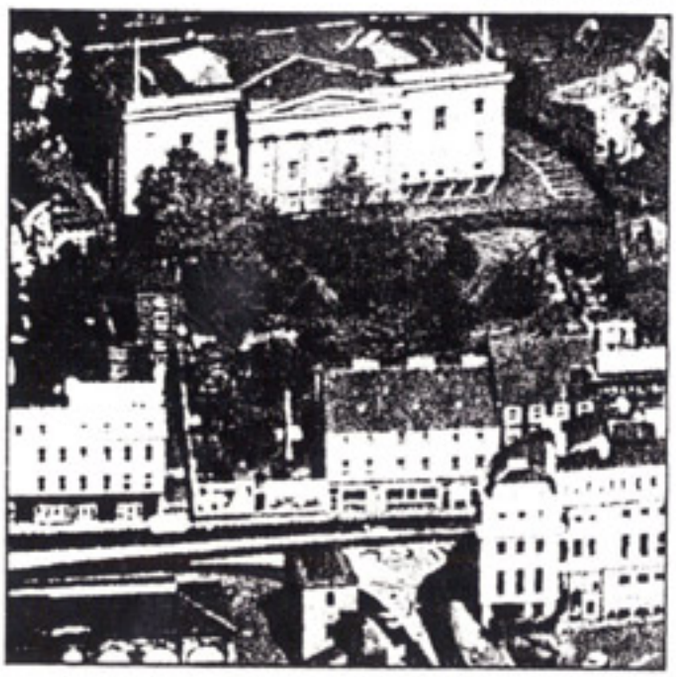

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POST-MORTEM ON THE DEATH OF THE EUROPEAN CITY AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF ITS REBIRTH

Torbjörn Einarsson
Jerker Söderlind

Today's urban planning and design has lost its way. We appear to have a clear-cut choice of action ahead of us: Either a conscious attempt to re-established and further develop the European city. Or a sleepwalker-like descent into the American antithesis of the city – the totally dissolved urban landscape.

Torbjörn Einarsson. *Arch. SAR Partner of Arken Arkitekter in Stockholm.(1981-)previously worked in Ralph Erskines Drottningholm office 1974-1980, a member of the editorial board for the Swedish magazine 'Arkitektur'. At present is project architect for a large project to the S.W. of Stockholm, in Huddinge, called Segeltorp – a project to utilise the mainly forgotten areas between the E3/E4 Motorway and the active centre and face of Huddinge.*
Jerker Söderlind *recently qualified architect who previously trained and worked as a journalist now works for Arken Arkitekter in Stockholm.*

Today's town planning suffers from a cronic conflict between objectives and methods and between theory and practice. On the one hand the consensus as to the objective – the varied and creative urban environment – and on the other hand a numbing ignorance as to the methods: which is clearly expressed in the creation of long distances and water-tight compartmentation between where people live and where they work, and between places of production and places of consumption.

The slogan for the goal of the 80's which has been repeated almost to the point of boredom is "urbanness". This may well be an indication of a genuine striving towards a "European" goal, but

at the same time it acts as something of a smoke-screen for other completely different and contrasting "American" activities which are in practice.

Take for example the way in which new housing areas are planned and designed today, using the physically and visually "tight" European city as a source of inspiration – with the city gate and streets and squares: one borrows the European city's outer forms in order to market them as a content in conventional housing suburbs.

And new office buildings in the suburbs are launched on the market. With their trend-conscious and expensive architecture, as some sort of total environment.

Since the places-of-work areas – each of which only cater for one basic form of activity – lack the dynamic quality of the city, the architect's task has become to reinstate within the complexes the crossroads and meeting-places which mark the life of a living city. The result of this is a new form of "company feudalism" where the individual company's total care of its employees replaces both the freedom of choice and the public quality of the city. It has become the ambition that these office complexes be cities.

This can be seen as examples of the innovation researcher Donald Schön's concept "Dynamic conservatism". In order to defend investments in positions of power, both structures and real capital are transformed and adapted to new ideas in such a way as to suport the existing order of things rather than as part of a new and radical policy of renewal.

Here the dynamic aspect applies to the forms of the individual buildings – and to their volumes, facades and interior design. The established structures which are supported by this dynamic aspect are primarily of an ideological nature – the controlling factor which has steered practically all urban planning and design in the industrialized world since the 1930's, and one which was most clearly summarized at the CIAM meeting in 1933. The so-called Athens Charta city with its category sub-divisions for: Housing, Places of Work, Recreation, Transport Systems and Historic Buildings.

Quite naturally, of course, a conference document does not possess sufficient strength in itself to lead the course of development onto a particular path – and the Athens Charta could perhaps rather be seen as an expression of architects capitulation in the face of the Special Interests of the community and the technical mechanisms which were furthering the disintegration of the city. It is, however, an open question as to whether the architectural profession, – armed with a sufficiently powerful opposing ideology – could have succeeded in altering the course of development.

We, nevertheless, are wholly convinced that the ideology of town planners is of importance.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

The consumers in connection with both housing and office accommodation prefer the "pre-modern" and integrated European city. The astronomical prices charged for tenant-owners apartments and office premises in city-centres are a clear indication that the supply is lagging far behind the demand.

This being the case, what is it then that prevents an increased supply of the goods that are in such obvious demand – namely, the city.

The system of planning itself, zoning, seems to have become an effective and holy obstacle: every function is to have its given place, and its own colour on the town plan drawing. But zoning should be seen as a mental brake-block and not an insurmountable obstacle!

Today there are cityblocks being built where this is "mentally" permitted. The old city-centres are being filled in. The resulting "scarcity of building land" however brings with it multi-storey buildings and the decking-over of urban motorways and railway-lines. The city-centres are broken apart by the enforced overheating. This can hardly be regarded as "a historic necessity". At the same time, however, firms which are forced to build in land outside of the city have begun to make the best they can of the situation. By way of a sales argument they offer the market a product which "resembles" the one that is in demand, namely "urban-ness".

The discrepancy between what is being supplied and what is in fact in demand, can, in this-perspective, be seen as an economic driving-force behind post-modernism. "Post-modernistic architecture markets the modernistic building of the anti-city using the pre-modernistic city's form language."

What we now have – instead of "the real thing" – in an accelerated stage-set type of building of "islands" for separate functions which are marketed with the help of "good architecture".

THE FIFTH STEP

The mental images which direct the work of today's architect actively contributes to and encourages the different special interest groups in the community into building independently, and with their own requirements only in mind.

The alarming aspect now is the accelerating growth of this functionalistic planning pattern. We are taking the fifth step in the shift in scale towards ever larger units in human building. In terms of size and function the development can be described as follows:

1) The agrarian society's farm. Place-of-work and dwelling completely integrated.

2) The mediaeval town and city building.

Handicraft and commercial activities at street level, dwellings above.

3) The 19th century town and city blocks.

Buildings for different specific individual activities, and housing, and commercial activities, all co-existing on good terms with each other within the physical framework of the same block.

4) Modernism's zones

Buildings with special specific functions grouped together in specialized areas and linked together with vast road systems.

5) Post-modernism's "city-like" stage-sets.

Encapsulated places-of-work-cities with autonomous service and social life. Isolated housing communities for family life. Specialized retail trade and entertainment communities resembling the ones which are being built today in the San Francisco region.

THE THREAT FROM LARGE EXTERNAL SHOPPING-CENTRES

Large externally or peripherally located shopping-centres have clear "draining" effect on the life of the European city.

Legislation forbidding shopping-centres of this type is in fact in the interests of free competition since a large and dominating shopping centre has a tendency to develop into a monopoly company with an unhealthy price policy.

Attempts to counteract monopoly situations by establishing competing firms, or in the vicinity of large shopping centres, has the effect of further strengthening the trend towards the drainage and disintegration of local smallscale commercial life.

DISRUPTIVE MOTORWAYS

The reason that the cities which were built before 1930 are on the verge of being gassed to death by motor cars is the city which was built after 1930. We have not succeeded in handling the increased mobility which the motor car has given (some of) us. Everyone acts logically in terms of his own points of reference – it is three to ten times faster to travel by car in today's cities. The art of politics therefore lies in succeeding in managing to get self-interest to harmonize with the interests of the community in general. When the car-manufacturers in Los Angeles bought up the city's public transport system, ran it down completely, and then forced the city into massive motorway investments, it was a question of a special interest group eliminating competition with the help of a monopoly.

The recipe of roadplanners has been to build new stretches of road in order to unload the pressure on the old stretches – a continuous expansion of the asphalt network. The average politician also lives in the belief that it is possible to build one's way out of the problem. He has obviously not been in Los Angeles. The attempt to "build away" car queues with new roads has become the Tower of Babel of the 20th Century.

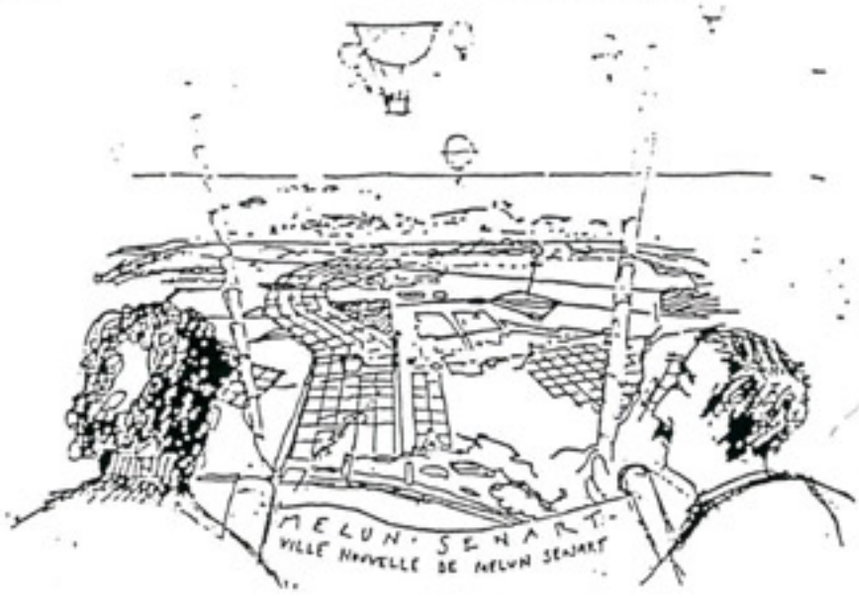
WHAT'S TO BE DONE THEN?

The building of what the market wants, that is to say that which both is and looks like a historical European city, calls for what could be described as de-programming of the concept of town planners. And after that a changeover to the type of urban planning and design which was practised here and there in 18th and 19th century cities – cities which were equally in the hands of private speculators and special interest groups as the city of today is.

One of the things which we can learn from history is that private interests can harmonize very well with an overall form of authority, in this case the city's.

Here of course there is a natural enough objection which can be made – namely that we have market economies where both housing companies and industry and commerce build the structures which they want. This objection is built on a misunderstanding of the nature of the free market.

The explosive development of free-trade in the industrialized world is the work of national politicians and not of industry and commerce. The American anti-trust legislation, for example, is a method employed by politicians to forstall the self-destructive tendancies of the free market which can lead to the annihilation of all but the strongest. Without an effective framework which guarantees a free market there can be no free market.



THE TRELLIS AND THE CLIMBING ROSE

As alternative fifth step in urban planning and design should therefore build on the awareness and knowledge of both the threat to - and the possibilities for - the survival of the European city. The unequalled advantages of the city lie primarily in the block system with function mixed buildings, and the major threats to this organism are partly "draining" activities such as large peripheral shopping centres and skyscrapers, and partly factors which have a splintering effect such as functional zoning and the mass use of cars. The possibilities for its survival lie in the fact that more of the "city" is very clearly in demand on the market. The methods for its survival are to check the transport system and to take advantage of modern technology's increasingly clean and less disturbing industrial and manufacturing processes.

Now that at least 75% of all places-of-work can be located together with housing, one of the previously strongest arguments for functional zoning no longer carries any real weight. In order to protect the quality of the total and unified environment perhaps the time has now come for both politicians and planners to reassert more strongly than before their responsibility for the framework of the urban environment, the trellis, and to defend its spatial and contentual qualities - and at the same time let the roses grow freely.

AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY

Some basic concepts and approaches for an alternative urban planning and design strategy can be:

1) Four taboos

   Analogous with the anti-trust legislation in the USA, the survival of the European city demands that a number of activities are effectively and uncompromisingly forbidden:

   - A stop for the building of office towns and cities.
   - A stop for the building of large shopping-centres both within and outside of cities.
   - A stop in all cities for the building of urban motorways.
   - A stop for the building of housing suburbs.

2) Town plan - Game plan

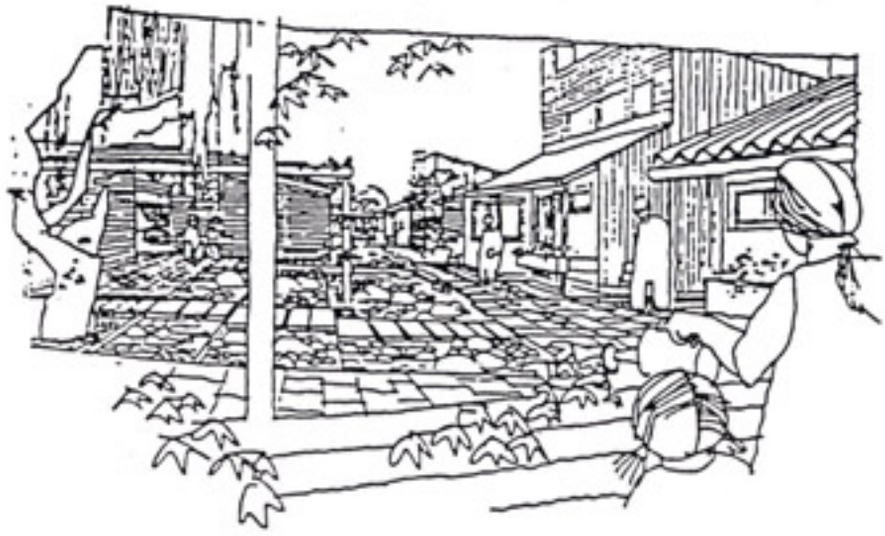
   A town plan can be compared to a legislative statute. It stipulates the value, but can be used for different purposes. Legislation can permit both "socialization" and "privatization". The town plan must make up its mind regarding the overriding product questions and the framework. We must rid ourselves of the illusion of the "perfect plan" which solves everything. As long as block can be added to block and function can be added to function, then the city will grow in a controlled yet free fashion.

3) Both one thing and another

The city-centre of the 19th century was superior to today's in terms of its generality. Because of the normally rather high ceiling heights, a 19th century building can equally well be used for dwellings or offices, or as a restaurant or a shop. Instead of building for just one very specific and limited function we should instead build buildings. Instead of area-for-area zoning, blocks should be structured vertically – multifunctionally – with activities of various kinds at the bottom, and dwellings above.

4) Either – Or

The tourist industry is in fact rather a good indicator of "the goals of our desires". During our holidays we get out into nature, the countryside, the alps, or the coast – or we make our way to the intensive urban life of Cannes, Sienna or New York. And since we prefer the "either or" solution during our holiday period then why should we be forced to spend eleven months of the year in the dreary landscape of "neither-nor".



The physically "tight" city gives at one and the same time both a more intensive street-life, and, because of its more effective use of land, a saving in land resources in the form of fields and unspoilt nature. This applies equally well to the small village as to the big city.

5) Multiplicator effects

One of the tasks of a town plan is to create multiplicator effects. Two housing areas each with 5,000 inhabitants have a population base which is enough for both of the areas to have, for example, a food shop and a school. If instead, the two housing areas lay adjacent to each other, then they would also be able to have, shared between them, a secondary school and a shoemaker's shop. And 5,000 places-of-work integrated into the two areas would provide a population basis for a post-office, a chemist's shop, a restaurant and more shops.

6) Grid-pattern city - linear city

Life giving zones come into existence at crossing points or overpasses: the walking route over a pass, its crossing a railway-line, the railway's crossing a river, the river's meeting with the coast, and the coast itself. Human settlements follow this pattern. The goal of planning can either be to avoid or support the growth of development in these types of transition zones. The expansion and extension of transport systems is the most powerful single steering element that the planner has at his disposal.

7) Parks and nature

City blocks deliberately unbuilt on become large island-like parks, instead of as it is today: islands of buildings surrounded by motorways and desolate expanses of grass. Nature as a unifying element instead of as a broken up impediment. By being kept within its linear form the city can have an outer side which faces onto open nature instead of onto unusable areas (SLOAP = space, left over after planning).

A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH

It is possible to make decisions about the future. The reforms in the land-parcelling laws of the 19th century dissolved and destroyed many small villages together with the social patterns of the country districts. The city-like stage sets of the 1990s will – if they are built – have a devastating effect on the life of the European city. It is high time for a shift in the pattern of urban planning and design – where the methods will support the goal, not work against it.

Box 2205,
10315 Stockholm.