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Editorial

URBANISM AND OUR URBAN FUTURE

Professor, Doctor Almantas Samalavicius interview with Witold Rybczynski, architect, urbanist and architectural writer, Emeritus Professor of the University of Pennsylvania

The last century was marked by the proliferation of modernism and many of its varieties have left lasting marks on architecture as well as contemporary cities, however, this legacy and its present forms produce ambiguous affects on architectural practices as well as on city-building. The legacy, or perhaps it is much better to call it legacies – of modernism so far remains rather controversial and sparkles ongoing debates not only among architects, theorists and critics of architecture, but affects wider layers of society, these days preoccupied with architectural and urban issues.

Witold Rybcynski – an architect, urban historian as well as prolific and renowned architectural writer and author of numerous books that have been translated to many languages is professor emeritus of Pennsylvania University and co-founder of Wharton Real Estate Review. He has contributed a lot to the understanding of architectural legacy as well as it contemporary trends. A stimulating and thoughtful writer, he has discussed various aspects of architecture, urbanism and city-life that are important to architects, architectural academy and society at large. This conversation was stimulated by his writings as well as need to reconsider historical issues.

Almantas Samalavicius (A. S.): *In your book Makeshift Metropolis one can find an insightful remark that "Cities don't grow in a vacuum. Urbanism is conditioned by what came before, not only physically but also intellectually". You further go on to explore the legacy of City Beautiful, the ideas of Ebenezer Howard as well as urban concepts of Le Corbusier. It seems, however, that Le Corbusier's influence on the ideas of urban planning and urban design had a more lasting effect than significantly more modest, balanced and nuanced proposal of Howard, especially if one thinks about the urban mentality shared by a vast array of Le Corbusier's followers. Can we today call urban thinking in Corbusian categories a fact of the past? Or perhaps, it still maintains the power to intoxicate new generations of urban designers, especially when human civilization is challenged by unprecedented level of urbanity?*

Witold Rybczynski (W. R.): It is easy to underestimate the vast legacy of Howard and the Garden City movement. Robert A. M. Stern is currently compiling a catalog of built garden city projects around the world, and is finding hundreds of projects, not only in Europe and North America, but as far afield as Israel and South Africa. Indeed, it could be argued that the Garden City movement was far more influential than CIAM. The term *garden city*, which exists in virtually all the European languages, has survived; whereas no one but historians remembers the Ville Radieuse. The Garden City has also outlived the Corbusian model on the ground. Existing garden city communities like Forest Hills Gardens in New York, Hampstead Garden Suburb in London, and Le Logis in Brussels, are cherished, economically successful, thriving places, whereas the surviving examples of CIAM urbanism are generally unsuccessful, disliked (if not vilified), and in the case of American public housing, proved so dysfunctional as to have been demolished. CIAM-influenced Soviet-era housing projects in Eastern Europe have not fared any better.

I agree that the Ville Radieuse ideal continues to influence some younger urban designers today, especially those who are trained as architects. They still believe, as did CIAM, that the city can and should be designed – just like a building, only larger. This is all part of the modernist revival that occurred after the demise of postmodernism in the late 1980s. But whereas a revival in buildings is a matter of fashion and taste, a revival that ignores the deplorable record of 1950s city-building in America, Europe, and the old Eastern Bloc, will be extremely harmful.

Of course, both the Garden City and the Ville Radieuse ideas evolved and were put into practice in ways that their originators did not anticipate or intend, but that is the nature of urbanism. It is easy to pooh-pooh the City Beautiful movement, for example, because some of its most ambitious plans came to naught. Yet almost every major American city has its City Beautiful trace – a public library, a railway station, a boulevard, or a civic center. Indeed, without the great civic buildings of the period 1900–1930, American downtowns would be but a pale shadow of what they are today. Not before, and certainly not after, have enlightened city officials, planners, architects, and landscape architects come together so felicitously.

A. S.: *When one thinks of the most essential urban critique of the last century, at least two names come to an educated mind that can not be omitted – first and foremost those of Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs, who had different and occasionally clashing opinions about urban prospects, but who made a significant contribution to the understanding of urban life and urban culture. Though the legacy of both authors is well-known to academics and professionals, it seems like general public both in US and other countries including Europe has a very vague idea about their important intellectual heritage despite of the fact that in this century we have wider access to any kind of media. Is something that was previously referred to as "common knowledge" vanishing in present-day culture?*

W. R.: Mumford is not much read today. Although his architectural criticism is as penetrating as ever, books like *The City in History* are hard going. In my experience Jane Jacobs remains influential, due in large part to her clear and simple language. Her books are continued to be read, and not just by professionals.
In the past, the "general public" did not have a profound understanding of, or even an interest in, urban planning. Things like new sewer systems, slum clearance, and street widening, were left to experts. On the other hand, today it is impossible to build an urban project (except possibly in China) without public review. One could argue that after the 1960s, following the often inhuman postwar reconstruction in Europe and urban renewal in the US, the public insisted on becoming a part of the planning process, exercising its influence through historic preservation boards, community groups, and neighborhood associations. Most cities have instituted a formal process of community consultation for any new construction. While the public may not be familiar with the planning literature, and with current theories of urban design, it knows what it likes – and what it doesn't like.
Having that said, I admit that I am skeptical of the impact of citizen review boards on design quality. Public reviews can stop bad things from happening, but are less effective in making good things happen, instead they often leads to consensus and watered-down compromise.

A. S.: *As an author who practices open discourse in architectural and urban criticism reaching different audiences, including professionals, academics and, hopefully, general readership what do you think of the role of the critic in these fields nowadays? Is the educational role of a critic important in our times having in mind the scope of the urgent problems of present urbanism as well as fast growth of cities, mega-cities and their dwellers? What are the possibilities or architectural criticism in capturing wider audiences when despite proliferation of media fewer and fewer people are inclined to practice meaningful "intellectual life" – whatever this might mean?*

W. R.: Although I have written my share of book reviews and critiques of buildings, I have always considered myself a writer, rather than a critic. In daily newspapers, buildings are reviewed as if they were theatrical performances or movies – I think that's a mistake. A building may be "news" on opening day (actually, the press is invited to tour the building *before* opening day), but buildings last a long time, they adapt to their users, and their users adapt to them. I have always found it more useful to write about buildings years after they are built, when the rough edges have worn off and one can assess the durability – aesthetically as well as functionally – of the architect's ideas. On the other hand, I think it is useful for critics to weigh in on controversies that surround proposed buildings – like the Eisenhower memorial in Washington, DC, or the proposed changes to the New York Public Library.

I have never been interested in "educating" the public, or in promoting so-called "good design".

When I write about buildings and urbanism, my aim is, first of all, to explain how and why things work the way they do. This is particularly true in urban development, where there are many actors – developers, architects, lenders, municipal government, neighborhood groups, and so on. The interests of these actors are rarely aligned, and I see my job as explaining what these interests are. In writing about buildings, I like to put them in a broader context, both culturally and historically. I prefer to write about architects who see

their work in the same way, as part of something larger. I don't see my role as championing any particular style. Much of my writing has been about ordinary environments – shopping malls, production housing, and strip development – which are the setting for our everyday lives. Often I find these places more interesting than formally conceived buildings that are frequently more concerned with fashion than substance.

I do think that the broad public is more interested in design than it used to be (look at the success of Apple and IKEA), and there is certainly more awareness of new architecture. However, this is offset by the popular media treating buildings as consumer products, whose novelty is required to entertain. This has a distorting effect on architecture, priviliging the startling and the novel over the tried and true.

A. S.: *One of the chapters in your Makeshift Metropolis focuses on the kind of cities people seem to want. During recent years at least some of the urban researchers have been giving more attention to the relations between city culture and consumption, to the role of financial capital and economic growth in globalization of urban culture. These days, however, more and more economists and other individuals seem to have serious doubts about the prospects 'growth economy', moreover so that dealing with problems of climate change, pollution and other urgent global problems, further growth of economy and imperatives of sustainability are absolutely incompatible. Do you think there are chances of replacing the present philosophy of "wants" with the philosophy of urban "needs".*

W. R.: I agree with Evelyn Waugh who once wrote that "all we can know for certain is the past", so I am uncomfortable making predictions about the future. Will we solve our climate-warming problems, or is it already too late and we will simply have to adapt to them? I don't know. I do know that I get nervous when I hear people speaking of *need*, as opposed to *demand*. In our market economy, demand represents the aggregate decisions of many individuals; need, on the other hand, has to be defined, and it has historically been defined by well-meaning – or not so benevolent – elites. Most people don't like to be told what they need. It may well be that we will have to abandon the market model one day, certainly that is what happens in wartime, with conscription, rationing, and all sorts of need-based measures. So I suppose that in an extreme global warming scenario – rapidly rising water levels, flooded cities, impenetrable, killing smog – one can imagine a shift from a demand-based to a need-based economy. But that would be a last resort, and hardly a cause for celebration.

A. S.: *The last chapter of Makeshift Metropolis is on cities people really need. Despite some notable exceptions, many concepts of city-making seem to have failed: Howard's garden-city was eventually compromised in UK, recent concepts of 'creative class' or 'creative city' weren't too much successful in creating cities and their culture… During recent years there had been attempts to promote eco-cities, albeit with a limited degree of success. What is your vision of prospective urban transformations? Or will the urban future be generated by experimentation solely?*

W. R.: Cities have always been the sites of social and technical experiments and innovation (think of centralized water supply, streetcars, gas and later electric lighting, social integration, public education, and public health regulations. These experiments did not always succeed (early plagues tended to break out in cities due to overcrowding, disastrous fires were also an early problem) Today, social unrest remains an urban not a rural phenomenon.

I agree with Jane Jacobs that cities are extremely complex systems that are generally resistant to simple analysis. City planners over the years have often ignored this (that is why Jacobs was basically opposed planning). The market, on the other hand, has approached the city more conservatively, trying small changes, pursuing them when they work (airport hotels), and abandoning them when they don't (urban shopping malls). Trial and error, rather than grand theories. A very different approach from most theories of city planning.

I would say that the most significant urban development of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is the appearance of global cities. While still part of larger polities, these cities have the same sort of economic autonomy as city states did in medieval Europe. City administrations making changes have a better chance to get things right (many of the mistakes of urban design in the 1950s and 60s were imposed on cities from above). My guess is that the most innovative initiatives to deal with the effects of climate change, for example, will occur in global cities such as New York, London, and Tokyo, which have the resources – both human and economic – to act independently.

A. S.: *As you emphasized in City Life, the vision of Broadacre designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in response to Le Corbusier, despite of the lack of serious consideration during his life-time, today looks pretty familiar, because automobile altered American (and not only American) way of life. Yet the dominance of private automobiles in urban transportation is hardly sustainable.*

What is your vision of the future of urban transportation? Do you think private automobile will remain the essential form of urban communication in this century?

W. R.: There are many options available to owners of private automobiles other than switching to mass transit, which is the usual alternative promoted by critics. When gas prices spiked in the US a few years ago, individual car use dropped precipitously, because people drove less, carpooled, and combined trips. I can imagine many scenarios where personalized transportation persists despite high gas prices: electric and hybrid cars, communally-owned cars, smaller and lighter cars, jitneys, cars that are glorified motor scooters, and so on. The modern American lifestyle depends on individual mobility, just as nineteenth-century urban life depended on coal, and eighteenth-century urban life depended on horses. My guess is that only when we have exhausted every alternative will we abandon the car.

A. S.: *During the last decades, there seemed to be a kind of revival of 'traditionalism' in urbanism. New urbanism as well as some other attitudes to urban planning and design is perhaps a response to the 'totalitarian' visions that largely influenced and shaped planning throughout the second half of the last century. Is there some hope that such (less totalitarian) attitudes favoring more balanced views of urban development (including a stronger role of local communities in urban planning) will become stronger in future?*

W. R.: The New Urbanism movement is a reaction to the discredited urban design theories promoted by CIAM, and it is "traditional" only in the sense that it looks to the long urban design history of cities that are based on a combination of streets, public spaces, and buildings, and dispenses with radical innovations such as super-blocks, traffic separation, and megastructures. At the same time, in practice it also resists high-rise buildings, which is a problem since most large downtowns include this building type both for commercial and residential use. New Urbanism has gained a toe-hold in the marketplace, but it accounts for a very small portion of total new urban and suburban development, and in Asia, where most city building is going on, its influence has so far been small.

I believe that the future of urbanism today lies in China, just as it lay in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when American cities pioneered skyscraper construction, mass electrification, and streetcar and trolley technology (in the 1920s, LA had the largest trolley system in the world). China – not Europe or the US – is where I would expect the next important innovations in urban design to take place. They will probably have to do with making cities that are very tall and very dense. Earlier American urbanism was greatly affected by inventions such as elevators and telephones, without which tall buildings would have been impractical. How cheap personal communication and digital technology will affect these new Chinese cities, remains to be seen.