

DESIGN MODELS FOR A FLEXIBLE CITY

Nicos KOMNINOS
Department of Urban and Regional Planning
Aristotle University
Thessaloniki

International Conference
on Architectural and Urban Design

Hydra - Greece
2-6 September 1990

DESIGN MODELS FOR A FLEXIBLE CITY

abstract

Models for physical space constitute a powerful and frequently dominant method of urban design. Much of what has happened in the world cities, during the post-war years, can be traced back to some space models and key ideas of few visionaries, often ignored or rejected by their contemporaries. I wonder how wrong would be to see the history of the city form as the struggle among a limited number of research programmes and models in architecture and urban design?

Starting from such hypotheses which stress (1) the importance of models and types as design methods, and (2) the contradictory character of the design models proposed each time as "best ways" for space construction, I will proceed to the analysis of urban design models which compete today as genuine ways giving form and geometry to urban space. My intention is to evaluate urban design models and space concepts related to neo-constructivism and the new internationalisation, to historicism and the pre-industrial European city, to populism and the sovereignty of the consumer, to rehabilitation and the community movement. The question I would like to address concerns the contribution and the accesses these models offer to a "flexible city", a physical urban space related to flexible production systems and the associated social structure and compromises.

This paper deals with the contemporary concepts and movements of urban design with respect to the challenges introduced by the transition of western societies towards flexible production and accumulation. In particular, I wish to discuss 3 issues : (1) how the flexibility debate and the related arguments concerning the transition to postfordism have affected our understanding of urban space and design; (2) which is the general framework connecting contemporary urban design and flexible production or accumulation; (3) which is the attitude of the dominant today concepts and urban design movements towards flexibility.

With respect to these questions, I have divided the paper into three consecutive parts / arguments :

(1) That the crisis of fordism and the flexibility debate have contributed to the emergence of a new conceptual framework about the city-making theories; within the new theoretical perspectives, it is possible to by-pass the argument of the artistic nature of urban design (the city as an object of art) and to sustain the concept of urban

design as regulation process, as global project dealing with culture, technology and economic relations.

(3) The second part starts by a question. If urban design is a regulation process, then what is regulated through contemporary urban design? And continues with a comment on David Harvey's book "The Condition of Postmodernity", where he approaches contemporary design movements as part of a regulation mode for the flexible accumulation.

(4) The last part develops more the previous argument and discusses dominant urban design movements and space concepts (de-construction, populism and neo-classicism) in terms of regulation strategies and compromises : as city construction models promoting particular economic, cultural and technological relations. The question I would like to address concerns the contribution these models offer vis-a-vis the challenges that the European cities confront today, as they are involved in the turbulent waves of flexibilisation and internationalisation.

The paper must be seen more as an introductory comment on these issues (urban design during the era of flexibility, which design models are needed for urban spaces characterised by flexible production systems, how pertinent are the models of modernism, which horizons are opened by the debate on postmodernism) than as a set of conclusive theses.

1. THE CRISIS OF A THEORETICAL PARADIGM

The reversal of the "production of space" paradigm

During the 80's, new forms of capital accumulation and formation of the hegemony system have appeared in the western societies. The rupture with the previous systems, which dominated during the post-war years and up to the 70's, may be traced on the levels of production organisation, skills and the division of labour, consumption models, income distribution, revenues and social stratification, regulatory policies and institutions, as well as on the levels of spatial division of labour and the urban and regional systems.

With respect to the French regulation school and the American flexible specialisation literature, this global restructuring process may be conceived as a transition of the western societies towards a distinct historical phase. The old phase as well as the new one are associated with a specific form of production relations, technology, consumption norms and conflict resolution practices. Growth

and relative prosperity occurred when these elements mesh together and form a coherent and stable environment for capital accumulation. Controversy, it falls into crisis when the conditions for harmonious growth are ruptured.

So, the current period of international disorder is understood as a structural break, an organic crisis resulting from the collapse of fordist regime of accumulation and the associated mode of regulation. The new period is based on flexible accumulation strategies and on a new hegemony project of popular capitalism. These were counterpoised to the fordist modernisation strategy of the 60's and to the social democratic, One Nation welfare state, project first established through the post-war settlement (Jessop 1989 : 262-275)

It is very important to underline that the current restructuring of the economy, the enterprises, the regions and the cities do not appeared through a smooth continuity and organic replacement of the old regime by a new one. On the contrary, the changes were forced by strategies and projects which offered creative solutions to the contradictions and the reproduction obstacles of the old regime. Once again, I must note that the concepts of agency, strategy and project are key-concepts for understanding the postfordist transition.

In this sense, it is easy to distinguish the major projects associated with the contemporary transition towards post-fordism : (1) the production reorganisation and flexibility, (2) the internationalisation and supra-national European regulation, (3) the cooperation and locality, (4) the state of knowledge and postmodernism.

The contemporary growth, planning and design of the European cities are substantial parts of these projects. Traditional cities were affected by industrial decline, the diffusion and restructuring of the productive system across the national space, deconcentration of the urban population, a growing unevenness in income and the social polarisation of housing provision, and finally, the degradation of social equipment and urban infrastructure. Almost paradoxically and along with decline, restructuring has also given birth to new urban landscapes. On the one hand, the so-called "silicon landscapes", such as technopoles, high-tech industrial parks, industrial districts, corridors and routes of development outside the city, which correspond to expanding industrial branches and to new forms of cooperation among industry, universities and the state; on the other hand, the selective built up

and renewal of central city areas associated with the growth of producer and financial services.

These developments permitted us to understand that city restructuring is not only the effect of the new projects (flexibility, locality, internationalisation, post-modernism). They are also fields of experimentation and creativity, where the same projects are co-formed and further elaborated. Let us take some examples : (1) the project and the debate of postmodernism have been largely constructed in the field of architecture and urban design; (2) the advances in productive cooperation and the new space-time economies ought a lot to cities like Prato and the other localities of flexible specialisation which constitute prototypes and social experiments on new projects of co-ordination and integration; (3) the understanding of the growth patterns in cities like Grenoble, Toulouse, Turin, Munich, the western Crescent and central Scotland have seriously contributed to the project of productive reorganisation and flexibilisation; (4) in many places pro-growth coalitions are expressed mainly through city planning schemes (Turin, Toulouse, Montpellier); in many places urban design has become central industrial modernisation strategy.

This involment of city planning and design into the shaping of major projects of the new period we are entering has important repercussions throughout the hole city making theory. It becomes more and more difficult to follow linear concepts of the city as the outcome of a given economy, politics and ideology. This structuralist conception of the interlinkages and determination of separate structures (economy & ideology on space) seems rather irrelevant.

In this sense, it is possible to discuss the reversal of the "production of space" paradigm in favour of a "conformation" approach, where the making of a city is not considered as the simple product of economic relations and ideological values, but as part of the projects for the construction of the dominant, each time, economic relations and mythologies. An aspect of the above "conformation" process I will examine in the following sections : the active involvement of contemporary urban design into the projects of flexibility, internationalisation and locality.

Urban design : art or regulation ?

Within the global restructuring of the cities, a number of well known events (like the revival of constructivist and elementarist aesthetics, of classico-vernacular and pre-industrial European city, of the road-side suburban

civilisation) formalizes the opening pages of a new approach to urban design.

However, according to the mainstream architectural and urban design thought, these events mark the displacement towards the postmodern or post-functionalism ethos and the break with the modernist ideologies of scientism and messianism that sustained post-war architecture and urban design. The following remark of D. Porphyrios (1978 : 70-71) is very indicative.

"The task of post-functionalism thought is twofold : on the one hand, it re-establishes architecture as an art renouncing every alliance with science's epistemological nature, and on the other, it repudiates all messianic promises assigning to architecture the non-heroic yet critical task of ideological commentary.... The bankruptcy of Modernism's scientist and messianic ideologies, together with the recent popularity of semiology, contributed irrevocably towards the formalisation of contemporary post-functionalism thought..... The couple form/function is now replaced by the 19th century forgotten category of the type, according to which design is but the proper referential exercise utilizing as tool syntax, stylistic iconography and the sensuous materials. Thus, since 1966, the concept of the type became the theoretical link accounting for the recognizability of sensuous form".

In my opinion, the argument about the artistic character of architectural and city design, which is also present in many other theorist of the postmodern, is based on a profound misunderstanding of the nature of the architecture of the city and the urban design. At least, it provokes to a reconstruction.

The very interesting book of Peter Hall (1988) "An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century" describes the process of translating ideals and plans of pioneers and key-individuals into reality. Starting from the Victorian city and the garden-city vision, Hall deals with an important number of urban-design concepts : the City-beautiful movement, Albert Speer plans for the reconstruction of Berlin, the Lutyens-Baker plans for the New Delhi, the Corbusian Radiant City and its quasi reconstructions (Brasilia, Pruitt-Igoe), the community architecture and urban renovation, Frank Lloyd Wright's decentralized Broadacre City and the soviet deurbanist anti-bureaucratic visions, the suburbia and the nonplace urban realm, the urban schemes of "Image-engineering" in Boston and Baltimore, the Docklands plans.

These city plans and design schemes rely on a number of conflicting principles and ideas : the high-rise

densification and the least space per habitat, the creation of small self-governed communities, the city dispersal and decentralisation, the monumentality of the form, the arts and craft form concept, the standardisation and object-type notion, the instrumental logic of the form, and so on so forth. Some ideas and design principles were realised; others were not. The lesson from the history is that the visions and ideas which were turned into reality were connected with wider successful strategies. Those which remained plans and ideas were associated to social projects which were also rejected.

The wide spread of the ideas of Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, CIAM, De Stijl and neo-plasticism, the Deutsche Werkbund, ought a lot to the successes of the fordist, keynesian and Rooseveltian strategies over their corporatist and statist rivals. On the other hand, we must search the deviations from the garden-city vision to the demise of the anarchist social project. Also, beside the apologies of Leon Krier, it is difficult not to associate the failure of the National socialist version New Tradition with the failure of the third Reich project. Or to not associate the failure of the soviet deurbanists visions with the rejected strategies concerning popular consumption in USSR.

However, the involvement of urban design into wider social strategies and projects is not an historical peculiarity of the 20th century city. The object itself of urban design gives it a wider than the referential and iconographic role.

I think that it is possible to agree that urban design has to resolve three main problems: (1) that of the urban tissue, thus the arrangement among streets, buildings and open spaces, (2) that of the geometry of the building coefficient, thus the volumetric relations between the urban tissue and the buildings, and (3) that of the macro-characteristics of the building materials and forms. As these problems may be defined by geometrical descriptors (shape, volume, arrangement, rhythm, proportion), immediate problem of urban design becomes that of the geometrical organisation (Kominos 1986 : 70-101).

But geometrical organisation is also an ideological problem because of the connotations carried by the various spatial arrangements; it is also a technological problem because of the different materials and technologies that the various geometries are associated with; and an economic problem because of the impacts of the urban tissue on the land use and value. These relations between space geometry, ideology, technology and economy promote an objective

interference, wanted or not, of urban design into social projects; and transform urban design to strategy dealing with culture, technology and economy; to a regulation agency.

The regulatory capability of urban design is built in its methodology. In my opinion, the dominant design methodology that architects and urban designer follow is that of imitation, fragmentation and recomposition of established space models. The significance of the models in urban design thought is so important that its consciousness and history are also based on the notions of styles, models, key-personalities and movements, thus on categories working as prototypes and asking the individual designer to imitate, to deform, to transform and to adapt.

Such a methodology on the one hand may guarantee the wide spread and generalisation of the established models, thus assuming the main regulatory condition to have a rule; and, on the other hand, transfers all design creativity, innovation and ingeniously to avant-garde which elaborate and debate on the space models.

2. URBAN DESIGN : WHAT CONTEMPORARY REGULATION ?

A logical question following these arguments concerns today's social projects and regulations to which contemporary urban design is associated with. To that question, David Harvey's book "The Condition of Post-modernity" gives a genuine reply.

The main arguments of the book is that

"There has been a sea-change in cultural as well as in political-economic practices since around 1972. This sea-change is bound up with the emergence of new dominant ways in which we experience space and time. While simultaneity in the shifting dimensions of time and space is no proof of necessary or causal connection, strong a priori grounds can be adduced for the proposition that there is some kind of necessary relation between the rise of postmodernist cultural forms, the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation, and a new round of "time-space compression" in the organization of capitalism."

In chapter 4, (p. 67) D. Harvey approaches postmodernism as the dominant contemporary culture of city-design which "cultivates a conception of the urban fabric as necessarily fragmented, a palimpsest of past forms superimposed upon each other, and a collage of current uses, many of which may be ephemeral. Since the metropolis is impossible to command except in bits and pieces, urban design simply aims to be sensitive to vernacular traditions,

local histories, particular wants, needs, and fancies, thus generating specialized, even highly customized architectural forms that may range from intimate, personalized spaces, through traditional monumentality, to the gaiety of spectacle. All of this can flourish by appeal to a remarkable eclecticism of architectural styles."

The preliminary assessment for this approach is that the concern for difference, for the difficulties of communication, for the complexity and nuances of interests, cultures, places, and the like, exercises a positive influence. Postmodernist thought gives a radical edge, since it has been particularly important in acknowledging the differences in subjectivity, gender and sexuality, race and class, temporal and spatial geographic locations and dislocations (p.113). But, while it opens a radical prospect by acknowledging the authenticity of other voice, postmodernist thinking shuts off immediately those other voices from access to more universal sources of power by ghettoizing them within a language game. This political silence avoids to confront the realities of political economy and the circumstances of global power and comes close to complicity with the aestheticizing of politics upon which it is based (p.117).

Such a controversial cultural and political attitude, coupled with the revival of entrepreneurialism and neo-conservatism might challenge the title of the new mode of regulation suitable for the flexible accumulation (p. 124). "Flexible postmodernism" as a mix of fiction, fantasy, fictitious capital, images, ephemerality, chance, flexibility in production techniques, labour markets and consumption niches, and the stable institutions favoured by neo-conservatism, is opposed to "fordist modernity". The opposition indicates how two different regimes of accumulation and their associated modes of regulation might hang together, each as a distinctive and relatively coherent kind of social formation (338-339).

3. FLEXIBILITY AND URBAN DESIGN STRATEGIES

The association D. Harvey attempts among urban design, the cultural project of postmodernism and the flexibility project is fundamental for the understanding what the objectives of urban design are. The general relation between accumulation regimes and regulation modes is that the former is not given, but it is achieved through compromises and regulations. Within the theory of regulation there is no place for necessity, but only the open game of institutional forms and compromises which may or may not create a new accumulation equilibrium (Lipietz

1984). Transferring this assessment to postfordist accumulation means that flexible production and accumulation depend heavily upon the regulation culture and institutions.

In this sense, urban design is not supposed to serve a given flexibility but it has to contribute to construct it along with its urbanity and compromises. What it is asked to urban designers today is not to represent a given order of ideas or values, but to invent urbanities for the flexible economies and technologies. Or, to put it in terms of regulation, to invent the models for the spaces of flexible economies and technologies. It is evident that this is an open question and it may take many different answers. But the debate has already begun and some answers are already given.

The author of the models

R. Venturi has argued that we learn architecture and urban design from the Las Vegas strip simply because people like such environments. There is nothing wrong with giving the people what they want; the Levittown-type aesthetics are shared by most members of the middle-middle class, and "Disney World is nearer to what people want than what architects have ever given them" (quoted by Harvey 1989).

But this populist culture is widely questioned. Rowe and Koetter claim for the democracy and freedom of the architectural proponents of the populism, but the question is whether the models of the middle-class suburbanites may express the desires of the fragmented and polarised consumers of the sunbelt localities. On the other hand, even though postmodern thought seems unwilling to impose solutions, USA and Britain's avant-garde rapidly dismissed this laissez-faire solution. Instead of an open and multiple-choices market regulation of the flexible urbanity, the avant-garde seems to have imposed a limited number of institutionalised choices. A decade after its teaching, the lesson from Las Vegas is forgotten.

the new models

The table which follows shows a very simple set of geometrical descriptors which permit the analysis of the character of urban projects or models. On the ground of these variables and categories is possible to define the differences between the radiant city model and the garden city model, or between De Stijl and constructivist space concepts. At the same time it becomes possible to take through the designer's ideology and to examine how fundamental space variables are treated.

Variables and some categories of urban space & design

- | | | |
|--|-------|--|
| 1. BASIC ELEMENTS | ----- | - shapes and volumes
of regular or free
geometry |
| 2. ARRANGEMENTS | ----- | - linear
- centripetal
- repetitive
- free, casual |
| 3. SPACE STRUCTURE | ----- | - open
- closed, bounded
- continuous
- discrete, discontinuous
- homogeneous
- heterogeneous, hierarchical |
| 4. RHYTHM
(succession of
basic elements) | ----- | - repetitive succession
- differential succession |
| 5. PROPORTION
and SCALE | ----- | - various systems |
| 6. INTERIOR / EXTERIOR
RELATIONS | ----- | - correspondence
- differentiation |
| 7. FUNCTION'S
TYPOLOGY | ----- | - street, square, building
- free space, building
- corridor, monument, house |
| 8. REFERENCES | ----- | - connotations and symbols
arising from the basic
elements & their relations |

If we look closely to major urban design projects (Villette, Richmond riverside development, piazza d'Italia, Atlantis, the Melun Senart competition, the Atlanpole consultation) we observe a profound polarisation of urban design strategies around the concept of control over space.

On the one hand, what is called classicism uses space variables in a very codified and determined manner. It is an approach where (1) the basic elements of composition are construction entities (not lines, surfaces, triangle and square shapes, but windows, pediments, columns and cornices), (2) each of the basic composition elements

belongs to a specific order or category (types of columns, windows, arcs, squares, streets, buildings), (3) defined rules of proportion, arrangement, and space structure connect the elements of the composition. It is an architecture of rules and erudition, a style of repeated elements (Aslet 1988 : 5) and closed spaces.

On the other hand, what is called deconstruction is a game of abstract elements and relations of multivalence or "betweenness", which seeks to create states of attraction, and open frameworks to accept the forces of the urban. It is not a system, not a method or a style, but rather a contextual singularity which breaks the rules and questions the established models (Derrida 1989 : 9; Eisenman 1988 : 57).

The first strategy is totally inconsistent with the flexibility process. There is no way to regulate the spatiality of flexible systems through its design concepts. Not only the concepts of stable rules, repetitions and rigidities is quite strange to flexible forms of organisation in production, consumption and institutions, thus to the logic of flexible organisation. But, the closed and hierarchical spaces of the classicism constitute physical obstacles to the rapidly changing activities, hierarchies and flows of the flexible systems. A recent research programme we have conducted on the "par excellence" flexible spaces, the technopoles and science parks, shows very few expressions of such design, especially after the mid eighties.

On the contrary, the de-construction approach has significant convergences with the flexible organisation strategies. An interesting example on management of the complexity is Rem Koolhaas proposal for the 600 Ha centre of the Melun Senart new town (Sompairac 1988 : 72). Since global planning is impossible today, he argued, there is no reason to programme the entire city-center. It seems more appropriate to control the peripheral urbanisation and to create situations of attraction, and magnetic fields for the future actors. In terms of space form, this reasoning justifies an open space composed by a number of cross-road zones, each one contains some strong points which may organize future constructions.

However, I think that flexible organizations are not characterised by the absence of rules and hierarchies but by their continuous change and repetitive transformation. Instead of deconstructivist rhetorical terms on arrangement and space structure (between images, catachresis) we need space concepts for changing

organisation and time related ruling. To make the problem more complex, we must take into account the ties of flexibility and locality and the demands for regionalisation of the design and for local identity. To this question the rehabilitation and vernacular approach could provide some answers.

References

- Aslet C. (1988) "Classicism for the year 2000", Architectural Design, Vol 58, No 1/2, pp 5-10.
- Derrida J. (1989) "Jacques Derrida in discussion with Christopher Norris", Architectural Design, Vol 59, No 1/2, pp 7-11.
- Eisenman P. (1988) " An architectural design interview by Charles Jencks", Architectural Design, Vol 58, No 3/4, pp 49-62.
- Hall P. (1988) Cities of Tomorrow : an intellectual history of urban planning and design in the twentieth century, London, Basil Blackwell.
- Harvey D. (1989) The Condition of Postmodernity, London, Basil Blackwell.
- Jessop B. (1989) "Conservative regimes and the transition to post-fordism : the cases of Great Britain and West Germany" in Capitalist Development and Crisis Theory. Accumulation, regulation and spatial restructuring, M. Gottdiener, N. Komninos (eds), London, Macmillan.
- Komninos N. (1986) Theory of Urbanity, vol. III, Thessaloniki, Synchrona Themata.
- Lipietz A. (1984) "Accumulation, crises et sorties de crise: quelques reflexions methodologiques autour de la notion de regulation", CEPREMAP, orange cover, no 8409.
- Porhyrios D. (1978) "Sketch of a post-functional architecture", Architecture in Greece, pp 68-85.
- Sompairac A. (1988) "Une logique des forces ?" in La Ville entre Image et Projet, Cahiers du C.C.I., No 5.