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Getting to the Root of the Crisis of Urbanity

The Debate on Urban Open Spaces in the IFHTP Congresses between the two Wars

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Introduction

Beautiful, comfortable and lively urban open spaces were built in Europe for centuries. Still today, these often characterise the very centre of the cities of the Old Continent, as well as arousing wonder and emotion.

Beauty, hospitality, wonder and emotion are uncertain ideas where subjectivity prevails over objectivity. This confines our assumption to the field of individual taste and personal opinion, beyond rigorously scientific, repetitive and transmittable reasoning.

Nevertheless, as town planning scholars we cannot help considering at least two elements. The first: the squares and streets of European cities were for hundreds of years the preferred place for the social relations that the community identified with and through which the community offered a representation of itself. This did not only happen in the context of those buildings that represented the temporal or spiritual powers of the time (the royal palace, the town hall or the cathedral for example) or those that were the seat of activities that represented the fulcrum of social life (the market, the forum, the theatre). Many urban open spaces in European cities from the Roman age to the nineteenth century were, in being unitary spatial organisms, a key element of public identity, the place par excellence for social relations, expression of the social ability to produce spaces representing established powers (political, economic or religious) and, above all, beauty. Therefore, a form of shared art available to all citizens and able to speak to the society of its own times as well as to societies that followed. Otherwise the charm that many European squares still exude and their impact on people with a cultural background other than that of the Old Continent would be inexplicable.

The same remarks do not apply to the modern city and above all to the urban fabric of the late twentieth century. And this brings us to the second element that we should take into consideration. The urban spaces of these cities – including the European cities that were traditionally the seat of urbanity – do not often encourage lingering, do not favour social relations and more often than not do not arouse any feeling of belonging. They are sometimes hostile too and bring about a sense of insecurity. In most cases they are featureless places, the result of the crowding of buildings more than the fruit of a harmonious urban composition, out of scale compared with man and his skills of perception, more often than not unable to strike the chords of the aesthetical canons typical of the community living there or occasionally visiting.

There are multiple reasons for this and certainly not all of them concern the modern urban design culture. In fact there have been social, economic and political-administrative factors that have influenced modern and contemporary spatiality features. Yet, if we intend to get to the root of the crisis of urbanity concerning open spaces developed in the second post-war period, we also need to explore this specific field – namely the urban and architectural models that inspired generations of architects and city planners – and strive to understand why urban design was often not up to its task precisely at the time when most of the urban fabric of the cities we now live in was built. Degradation and above all misuse, sometimes illegal use, of the public realm of the modern city also stem from its physical form and its functional relations, which are the most typical fields of action in city planning.

This paper focuses on the modern urban open spaces design culture. Its field of investigation is the International Federation for Housing and Town Planning congresses held between the two wars.[2] Without claiming to be exhaustive, either from a theoretical or historical point of view, and starting from statements from some of the protagonists of debate on town planning in those years, it aims to grasp some of the reasons for the crisis of urbanity in the cities we live in, at the same time hypothesising some possible lines of research.

1. The debate on urban open spaces

To start our reflections on the debate concerning the design of urban open spaces at the IFHTP congresses held between the wars, we will take into consideration those events which directly dealt with this theme. These can be divided into two categories: in the first, open spaces are basically intended as green areas for health and recreation; in the second, attention is focused on the relationship between open spaces and traffic.

1.1 Health and leisure time in the design of urban open spaces

A session of the 1924 Amsterdam congress was specifically devoted to *Parks, Park Systems and Recreation* (IFTCPGC, 1924). There were only three papers on this theme: by Henry Vincent Hubbard, Jacques Gréber and Hendrik Cleyndert (Hubbard, 1924; Gréber, 1924; Cleyndert, 1924). Yet this theme was also dealt with in other contributions presented in a different session at the same congress: for example those of Patrick Abercrombie, Fritz Schumacher and Thomas Adams (Abercrombie, 1924; Schumacher, 1924; Adams, 1924).[3] All the papers – more or less in line with the urban planning tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – essentially underlined the healthy character of green areas and the obvious need to increase them in the most crowded urban structures. From the point of view of the development of urban spaces we should underline that the general need was to:

- design the green areas as a continuing relational system connecting city and country and the different parts of cities. This was the case, for instance, for Fritz Schumacher (1869-1947), who suggested a new approach to urban design so as not to consider the open spaces as what remained after the formation of

[2] For this study we took into consideration the reports published on the occasion of the congresses held between 1923 and 1939, although it must be specified that the International Federation for Housing and Town Planning took this specific name at the congress held in Vienna in 1926. The Gothenburg congress of 1923 was not the first meeting of the post-war period – other conferences had been held (when the association founded by Ebenezer Howard in 1913 had another name and other social goals) in 1919 in Brussels, in 1920 and 1922 in London and in the same year in Paris – but in all probability this was the first congress that dealt with the new issue of modern city building in its complexity and with a decidedly international approach.

[3] The other papers on the theme *Regional Planning in Relation to Large Cities* were by: M. J. Granpré Molière, R. Unwin, L. Jaussely, F. Sentenac, R. Verwilghen, C. B. Purdom, G. A. van Poelje, F. Shurtleff and E. P. Goodrich, R. Schmidt and P. Bakker Schut.

the architectural masses but as an element that defined the city (Schumacher, 1924);

- attribute a specific functional use to green areas, that is, recreation and sports: a choice that on the one hand apparently limited the use of these areas use in terms of time and space, and on the other, underlined their public role in the modern city. Henry Vincent Hubbard (1875-1947), for example, in his theoretical diagram entitled *Distribution of Recreation Facilities in an American City*, suggested the rational distribution, by means of real 'recreational zoning', of the various types of parks and playgrounds within the urban framework, connecting them and linking them 'physically and functionally to all the rest of the facilities of the city' (Hubbard, 1924: 218) and with other community buildings. To Hubbard, in fact, green areas were above all spaces for all citizens – 'the active and the slow, the young and the old, men and women, the chattering family picnic and the ruminative solitary walker' (Hubbard, 1924: 233) – that were to be conceived of as integration of the traditional community spaces (Hubbard, 1924).

In short, in the mid-twenties the main idea was still that the 'park should, therefore, be designed not primarily for the driver, but rather for the pedestrian who has no other resource' (Hubbard, 1924: 228).

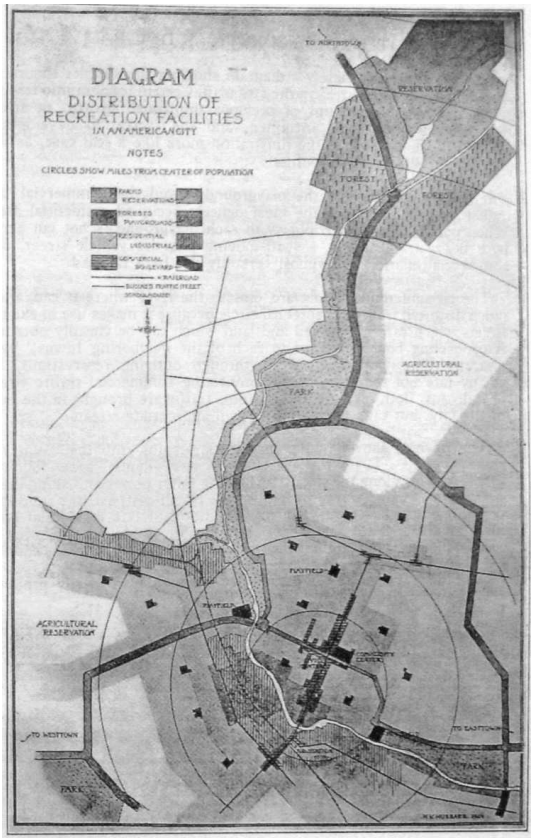

Image 1. H.V. Hubbard, Distribution of Recreation Facilities in an American City, theoretical diagram, 1924

The congress in Mexico City in 1938 (IFHTP, 1938) also dealt with places for recreation as did the Paris CIAM in 1937. In western industrialised cities the disorderly expansion of urban fabric devoid of spaces for social use and the rapid transformation in the use of streets and squares had in fact contributed to highlighting the need for protected areas specifically destined for physical activity or leisure time, especially for children and young people. In 1924 Thomas Adams (1871-1940) in fact underlined that the habit of playing in the street, common among many New-Yorker children – 59% according to a survey carried out in six neighbourhoods – was an important cause of infant mortality. In fact, 'the number of children killed in the streets in 1922 in New York was 482 and there were about 7,000 accidents' (Adams, 1924: 64). However, the contributions presented in the first IFHTP congress in a Latin-American country on the *Planning Recreation* theme only partially dealt with the design of urban open spaces.[4] They represented different ideas of leisure time and, more generally, of modern city planning, sometimes considered as a necessary tool for social policies. If we only consider the relationships that more directly concern the subject of this paper (and not those regarding social centres, libraries or theatres), we can maintain that around the late thirties:

- the urban design of open spaces (for recreation) was predominantly the same as that of green areas (equipped with infrastructure for sports or recreation) as it was in the early twenties. One of the most significant cases presented in Mexico City concerned Amsterdam, where large park facilities, the Amsterdamse Bos, were being developed in the south of the city, over two thousand acres of public green areas placed thirteen feet below sea level that could potentially be used – as was foreseen – by a hundred thousand Sunday users and at least fifty thousand bicycles (Byhouwer, 1938);
- in some contexts recreational space and the development of infrastructure was an opportunity to create civic centres. In Belgium for example, according to Victor Bourgeois (1897-1962), leisure time was considered an opportunity to practice physical activity that might improve health and at the same time act as the lever to improve the quality of life in socially and physically degraded areas; experiments of this kind were carried out for instance in some centres of the Borinage, where an urban centre was planned in areas characterised by sprawling building by bringing together public buildings, sports facilities and commercial activity (Bourgeois, 1938). In Great Britain, the 1937 Physical Training Act gave local governments the task of creating community centres that should be placed as near as possible to the very heart of residential settlements and in connection with public buildings or buildings for public use such as churches, schools, cinemas and shops (Jellicoe and Heckford, 1938). In Italy, the new urban areas planned by the fascist regime included the *case del fascio* along with community facilities such as nursery schools and practices for mothers and children, sports infrastructure (tracks, gyms, swimming-pools) and also cinemas and theatres when the centres were particularly large (Civico, 1938).

[4] The reports on this theme were by: V. Bourgeois, Institution des Questions Sociales-Varsovie, V. Civico, G. A. Jellicoe and E. Heckford, E. Rolfsen, Ústav pro Stavbu Mest (Praha), [?] Byhouwer, K. Straub, H. Drageshjelm, B. Bagg and M. Polonsky and F. Schmidt.

At any rate, in the late thirties the urban design of open spaces for recreation was apparently influenced by new social habits. The British middle-class, for instance, became accustomed to spending their holidays at the seaside or weekends in the country (Jellicoe and Heckford, 1938). In Oslo, to name another example, every Sunday an average of forty thousand people left the city by train or coach to reach the sky slopes near the Norwegian capital, whereas a further thirty thousand people travelled there by their own means (Rolfsen, 1938). In the following years, this was also seen in other European realities and aside from encouraging a re-thinking of modern urban spatiality, it would orient city planners' and administrators' choices towards new and more effective infrastructure development for regional mobility and facilities for mass tourism far from the city.

1.2 Open spaces and vehicle mobility

From the late twenties vehicle traffic progressively became the main protagonist of the urban and regional landscape. In Great Britain, for example, there were approximately sixty-seven thousand private cars in 1906, while there were over two million in 1929 (Pepler, 1931a). In Germany they amounted to sixty-four thousand in 1914, while this became six hundred and sixty thousand in 1930 (Adler, 1931). The Department of Seine recorded approximately three hundred to three hundred and fifty thousand cars in the late thirties, in addition to over thirteen thousand taxis and approximately seventy thousand trucks. From 1921 onwards the number of people using private means of transport had increased by 800% compared with a poor 8% increase in the use of public transport (Dautry, 1939). In the second decade of the twentieth century the American territory recorded one driver in every two hundred people, while in the late twenties the level was one in every six people (Simpson, 1939). New York went from one hundred and sixteen thousand cars in 1916 to approximately seven hundred and forty thousand at the time of the Wall Street Crash (Lewis and Turner, 1931). It was such a remarkable event that it gave rise to a dramatic revolution regarding both the use of urban open spaces and the form of the city. 'Individual motorised transportation', observes Hawley Starr Simpson (1899-1974) for example, 'played an important part in changing the physical aspects of our cities, both large and small' (Simpson, 1939: 1).

The IFHTP congresses devoted specific congress sessions to the relationship between open spaces and vehicle mobility, although it must be underlined that this topic continuously emerged in a number of other events. In the 1925 New York conference there were five papers on *The Traffic Problem* [5] (IFTCPGC, 1925) and the same number again at the 1928 Paris congress on *Mass and Density of Buildings in Relation to Open Spaces and Traffic Facilities*[6] (IFHTP, 1928). In Berlin, in 1931, there were nineteen concerning *The Traffic Problem in Relation to Town and Regional Planning*[7] (IFHTP, 1931), while according to questionnaires drawn up by the Federation,

[5] The papers on this theme were by: A. S. Tuttle, M. Knowles, A. Bruggeman and J. Gréber, G. L. Pepler and J. Brix, R. E. Enright. In addition to these was a report on the same theme by W. J. Wilgus at the session dedicated to *The New York Regional Plan.*

[6] The papers on this theme were by: J. Sulman, M. Urban, H. V. Lanchester, W. Koeppen and E. P. Goodrich.

[7] The papers on this theme were by: F. Musil, I. Beneš, E. Mölzer, V. Malling, G. L. Pepler, F. Pick, B. Aminoff, L. Adler, K. Remy, P. Bakker Schut, A. von Kempelen, C. Albertini, E. Fuselli, U. Vallecchi, A. Lamse, J. Opolski, S. Rozánski, H. Lewis, G. McAneny and W. D. Heydecker.

twelve reports were presented in Stockholm in 1939 on *Town Planning and Local Traffic* [8] (IFHTP, 1939). In general, we can state that vehicle traffic was apparently a problem that needed to be rapidly dealt with and resolved. The vast potential of the new means of transport was generally very clear, as was the unsuitability of urban facilities for these new needs. The solutions proposed generally showed two types of approach: one that we might define the 'city planning' approach and the other the 'engineering' approach, but it was quite common to find these coexisting at different levels of reasoning.

1.2.1 City planning approach

To some authors, the increase in vehicle traffic could not be solved by simply designing new road infrastructure or increasing the capacity of those already existing. In their opinion, in order to reduce the need for the movement of people and goods, action was needed both regarding the functional organisation of the city and region and their overall structure (see for instance: Unwin, 1923, 1925; Pepler and Brix 1925; Adams, 1925; Lewis and Turner, 1931; Pepler, 1931a; Pick, 1931; Dautry, 1939; etc.). In fact they examined factors generating urban and regional traffic which were therefore the elements that had to be acted upon:

- the growth of the city body encouraged by the new freedom of settlement guaranteed by buses and cars and an increasingly extended and widespread road network. Frank Pick (1878-1941) emphasised how more and more frequently the principle 'that the workman shall not live near his work' (Pick, 1931: 205) was established. In early twenties London, for example, the City, with a population of almost fourteen thousand residents, recorded four hundred and thirty-seven thousand people in the area during the day (Pick, 1931). The practice that was increasingly popular in low-density western countries of developing wider areas around the cities and decentralising residency especially, brought about a significant growth in demand for home to work/home to facilities transport and also made the creation of public transport with appropriate cost-effectiveness impossible.
- High population density in the central city areas determined, as was the case in the nineteenth century, both by the urbanisation of the population (a rather recent phenomenon in the States)[9] and by schemes and plans that were

[8] The reports on this theme were by: R. Niemeyer, M. Vanecek and J. Vanecek, Town Planning Association of New South Wales, Town Planning Association of Victoria, O. Forchhammer, H. S. Simpson, F. Pick, H. I. Manzoni, R. M. Finch, W. J. Taylor, J. F. Eccles, A. von Kempelen, U. Vallecchi, P. Dreijmanis, S. Lier, K. Nordgård, H. Baumann and R. Dautry.

[9] In the early nineteenth century, recalls Hawley Starr Simpson, when some European capitals had populations of between half a million and a million inhabitants, in the United States only New York exceeded fifty thousand inhabitants, and only three other cities crossed the twenty thousand threshold. In the mid nineteenth century the Big Apple had still not reached seven hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants and only five cities had over 100 thousand inhabitants. Between 1890 and 1930 the great leap happened. In forty years, faced with a national population that had more or less doubled, thirteen cities grew large enough to exceed five hundred thousand inhabitants. An increase that coincided with the relative increase in mechanical transport, although - according to the cofounder in 1931 and then president of the Institution of Transportation Engineers - this did not initially have significant consequences for the design of the urban street network and, in

permissive and ineffective compared to the virulence of property revenue. 'Economic requirements', observes for example the former president of the Town Planning Institute of London, Henry Vaughan Lanchester (1863-1953),'dictate an intensive use of the actual building' (Lanchester, 1928: 365). These are often so overcrowded that some judged 'the relation of the density of building to open spaces is more a question of social and sanitary character than one of engineering' (Urban, 1928: 362). Such concentration had powerful negative effects on the health of houses and entire neighbourhoods, as well as on traffic levels.

- The disorganisation of production, trade and tertiary activity in the territory, which in a number of contexts brought about 'confusion, waste, discomfort and dangers to life' (Pepler, 1931b: 37). The Covent Garden Market in London can be an example of this specific situation. In the early twenties 'in this market there comes every month many thousands of tons of vegetables, fruit and flowers of all kinds, from all parts of the world; and from that market it is again distributed, not only to all parts of London, but over the greater part of the country' (Unwin, 1923: 42-43). All this gave rise to the obstruction of 'the busiest streets of London' (Unwin, 1923: 43) since this community infrastructure was not connected to any kind of goods yard. This kind of situation – typical of the most industrialised cities – added to the effects of an increasingly frequent interaction between different specialist production and the links between the cities and distant territorial infrastructure (for instance, between ports and inland cities).
- The lack of co-ordination in designing and managing mobility services and facilities that were frequently the result of market logics instead of correct planning. This gave rise to impromptu and ineffective systems that, even from the perspective of traffic, had self-defeating effects.

1.2.2 The engineering approach

In the various contributions devoted to vehicle traffic a number of authors apparently urged the old continent to get rid of a century-old tradition of urban design where the connection between architecture and city planning in the design of urban open spaces was very strong (see for instance: Goodrich, 1925; Gréber and Bruggeman, 1925; Pepler and Brix, 1925; Adler, 1931; Pepler, 1931a; Simpson, 1939; etc.). In fact, from North America to Europe a design technique rapidly took root that considered the streets as mere support for vehicle traffic. The variety of open spaces in historic cities – traditionally the backdrop to sociality – was not considered a treasure, but an obstacle to the movement of people and goods. Therefore all social, cultural and aesthetic aspects of streets and squares were ignored, thus inhibiting any potential in encouraging the complex experience of civil living. Road widening, the demolition of historic centres, belt highways, underpasses, overpasses and traffic circle signs were the elements of a new kind of urban design that – along with road traffic regulations – would characterise the design and use of open spaces in the modern city. This no doubt had a positive impact on traffic flows, although it contributed to undermining both the vitality of the streets and the city in its entirety. It was an engineering approach that spread

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general, the definition of the urban model. In fact the population initially increased near existing urban fabrics, merely inflating the main body of the city (Simpson, 1939).

rapidly – in the late thirties approximately forty American cities with over a hundred thousand people were equipped with specific traffic offices run by engineers (Simpson, 1939) – and opened up to specialist design plans that were frequently unable to grasp the urban phenomena in their complexity, so much so that they impacted on the quality of urban relations and more in general on the life of the people. This was a shift in the focus of urban design that apparently worried some authors. One of them was Raymond Unwin (1863-1940), who felt that 'the essence of design [is] the art of planning to bring all parts into proper relation and due proportion. Town and country, industry and commerce, dwellings, recreation, and culture, all have their right relations one to the other. The science of planning must study and define these; the art of design must combine them into a coherent whole' (Unwin, 1931: 23).

2. Other factors of crisis in the urban design culture

Only taking into account those congress sessions where the issue of the design of urban open spaces was strictly dealt with is insufficient to get to the root of the weaknesses of the urban design culture on this specific theme. In fact, the IFHTP congresses regarded city planning themes, issues and practices that, despite concerning other elements of urban and regional design, had a significant impact on the form and use of community space. Let us examine some of these.

2.1 The house issue

Modern city building was highly influenced by the need for a solution to a particularly serious issue, that of social housing. As in other cultural networks, one of the very centres of the debate on this theme regarded building types within the IFHTP too. This was dealt with, for instance, at the 1926 Vienna Congress – where a session was devoted to *The Rational Distribution of Cottage and Tenements*[10] (IFHTP, 1926) –, in Paris in 1928 – in particular at the sessions devoted to *Housing for Very Poor and House Building Costs*[11] (IFHTP, 1928) –, in Rome in 1929 – *Planning Apartment Housing Schemes in Large Towns*[12] (IFHTP, 1929) –, again in Paris in 1937 – *Horizontal or Vertical Building*[13] (IVW-IFHTP, 1937) –, in Mexico City in 1938 – *Housing in Tropical and Sub-Tropical Countries*[14] (IFHTP, 1938) – and finally in

[10] The papers on this theme were by: F. Musil, A. Kubicek, F. M. Elgood, A. Bjerre, B. Brunila, H. Sellier, G. Benoit-Lévy, A. Muesmann, H. van der Kaa, C. Albertini, F. López Valencia, H. Wright, R. Verwilghen, A. Keppler and G. Montagu Harris.

[11] The papers on this theme were by: A. Weber, F. Gosseries and A. Van Billoen, M. E. Mitchell, G. Risler, F. Paulsen, A. Keppler, G. Gorla, F. López Valencia, E. Klöti and L. Purdy.

[12] The papers on this theme were by: F. Musil, F. C. Boldsen, G. Forrest Topham, A. Eriksson, G. Risler, P. Wolf, M. J. I. de Jonge van Ellemeet, O. Wildner, D. Barbieri, J. Zaleski, T. A. Râdulescu, F. López Valencia, H. Oetiker and L. Veiller.

[13] The papers on this theme were by: Nederlandsch Instituut voor Volkshuisvesting en Stedebouw, A. Mayer, R. A. McInnis, G. E. Pearse, G. F. Sébille; Société Nationale des Habitations et Logements à Bon Marché, Akademisk Arkitektforening, G. Gorla, Polskie Towarzystwo Mieszkaniowe, G. Harbers, A. Klein and J. Dower.

[14] The reports on this theme were by: R. P. Davis, G. Fletcher, R. Dann, U. Tha Tun, L. Langdon Williams, E. J. Hamlin, A. Klein, Government Service of Public Hygiene (Batavia), M. Fumio Hayakawa, C. Crossland., R. Schoentjes and C. Valle.

Stockholm in 1939 – *Housing for Special Groups*[15] (IFHTP, 1939) –. From the viewpoint of urban design and, in particular, the construction of a spatiality still able to produce that urbanity that had characterised the fabric of all European cities until the nineteenth century, the choice of 'Low-, Mid-, or High-rise Building' – to mention a recurring expression in city planning debates of those years – was irrelevant in a sense. In fact, apart from some specific cases, the need to avoid the development of unhealthy settlements, experiments in the rationalisation of spaces and the prefabrication of social housing, a growing focus on the need to redress the balance between buildings and open spaces and, finally, the significance of the first experiences of the garden-cities, were all key factors in the consolidation of the idea that houses should be developed in green areas. Whether they were cottages – also settled around community spaces – or multi-storey residential buildings – vertical or horizontal development - the architectural, urban design and political-administrative culture of the period between the two wars mainly aimed to develop isolated buildings that had a completely different relation with the public space compared to the traditional relationship. 'Oxygen, sun, green areas', stated Gréber, interpreting a common position within the IFHTP, '[were the] three essential elements of our ideal future city' (Gréber, 1935: 214).

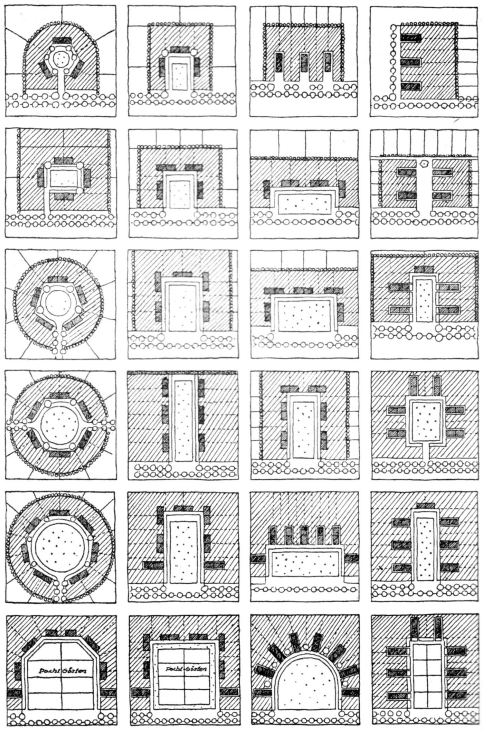

Image 2. G. Langen, Diagrammatical plans for groups of from 3-8 houses with gardens and potatoes field, 1923

[15] The reports on this theme were by: A. Pfeil, F. Gosseries, F. C. Boldsen, J. O. Walker and C. Lansing, D. B. Tweedy, H. Sellier, P. R. Rathbone with C. Solomon and O. Matthews, G. F. E. Kiers, G. Gorla, P. Dreijmanis, A. Skaug, S. Vasilescu, A. Dahlberg and W. Amann.

Thus, especially since the First World War, buildings tended to no longer define streets and squares, nor did they link together to form the walls of open air rooms. According to building regulations aimed at solving traffic and hygiene issues and influential modernist theories and experiments, houses were increasingly separated from each other at prefixed distances, kept back from the curb, isolated in the centre of plots and repeated en masse. All this created better living conditions, thus increasing the green areas available to people living in those areas and facilitating the development of road infrastructure suitable for traffic needs, but in general renounced the variety and formal quality of the open spaces of the pre-modern historic city.

2.2 Functional zoning

The rational planning of the use of urban and regional land and buildings was one of the typical features of modern city planning, although with varying local methods, extent and objectives. In the States, for instance, after the first zoning ordinance in 1916, the number of cities that used this instrument for regional planning and governance had reached three hundred units in ten years (Bassett, 1925) and even in Europe it was the most popular practice. Yet functional zoning gave rise, in different contexts, to a number of problems, especially when applied simplistically. In general, it was noticed that organising the city into mono-functional zones obliged continuous movement from home to work and home to facilities, thus multiplying traffic. Furthermore, concentrating a single function in a single urban area caused an unbalanced use of urban space thus impoverishing the vitality of the built-up fabric. In the IFHTP congresses which dealt with this theme – in particular that of New York in 1925 where a session was devoted to *Zoning in practice*[16] (IFTCPGC, 1925) – the anticipation of these possible negative effects was however rather limited. The authors, although adopting different nuances, rather strove to consider this practice as a panacea for some of the problems facing the cities in that period, including that of urban traffic, without considering any possible impact on the form and use of community spaces (see, for instance: Bassett, 1925; Goodrich, 1925, etc.).

2.3 Re-planning of the historic city

Another typical feature of modern city planning concerned the transformation of the historic centre. To put it simply, in many cases, a solution to the slum problem was apparently urgent on the one hand – a theme to which the IFHTP devoted a special congress session in Berlin in 1931 where thirteen papers were presented[17] (IFHTP, 1931) –, and on the other hand the need for re-planning of historic cities according to the needs of modernity had become increasingly pressing – a theme that was specifically dealt with in the 1929 Rome congress by nine papers[18] (IFHTP, 1929) –. Generally speaking – without going into issues connected to

[16] The papers on this theme were by: E. M. Bassett, E. P. Goodrich, L. V. Sheridan and J. Clyde Hoffman, G. Phillips and T. B. Argur.

[17] The papers on the theme *The Abolition of Slums* were by: H. Maetz, F. L. Procházka and J. Venečěk, K. Bjerregaard, J. F. van Hoytema, F. Hunt, G. Risler, J. Brandt, A. Keppler, E. von Wildner, V. Testa, H. Hals, C. Sfintescu and L. Veiller.

[18] The papers on the theme *Replanning Old and Historic Town to Meet Modern Conditions* were by: H. P. Cart de Lafontaine, J. Siedler, T. K. van Lohuizen, L. Warga, H. Vaughan Lanchester, L. Piccinato, H. Hals, C. Sfintescu, A. Lilienberg and K. Nordgard.

social, economic and administrative aspects related to city planning transformation – we can say that these two requirements contributed to the production of plans and works that were often disruptive for historic centres. Demolitions of buildings, blocks or neighbourhoods no doubt solved hygiene or traffic problems in many realities but, in Europe especially, frequently wiped out quality urban fabrics. This occurred in London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Stockholm, Rome, Milan and many other large European cities. Few scholars were opposed to this approach. In fact, the culture of architectural and urban conservation had not yet fully developed. However, in some contributions we can see both the awareness of the urban character of the community spaces of the European historic city and the need for the conservation and reinterpretation of its spirit. Among them, those of Gustavo Giovannoni (1873-1947) and Marcel Poëte (1866-1950) at the 1929 congress stood out. Giovannoni, in his *lectio magistralis*, maintained that 'reconciling the past with the future' was possible through works that 'religiously respect monuments, memories and the environment and develop together the main structure of the future city' (Giovannoni, 1929: 18). Poëte stated that 'a historic centre cannot be, totally or partially, destroyed to make way for a modern urban centre' (Poëte, 1929: 425). This was perhaps a method to counter the positions of those who did not pay any attention to the conversion of historic urban centres during those years. Le Corbusier (1887-1965) for example, who in his 1925 Plan Voisin planned the total demolition of the centre of Paris and its reconstruction with vertical buildings in order to cope with the problems of hygiene and traffic that tormented the heart of the French capital.

3. Urban place and landscape design: a forgotten art?

Despite what we have maintained thus far, place and landscape design was not apparently a forgotten art in the IFHTP congresses between the two wars. In fact some voices seemed to stand out from the chorus in a sort of countermelody against those who embraced a more realistic and technical approach to city planning. In reality it cannot be said that they represented a real counter movement against the trend of confining the design of urban open spaces to insignificance, but it may be interesting to examine some of them.

Werner Hegemann (1881-1936) – in his presentation of the United States section at the 1923 Gothenburg exhibition – noted that the uncritical and undifferentiated application of the orthogonal grid in many city planning schemes of American cities since the late eighteenth century – such as that of Washington by Pierre Charles L'Enfant (1754-1825) – had given rise to urban places devoid of architectural expressiveness. A phenomenon emphasised by the use of low density building that should have been countered by paying particular attention to the design of urban open spaces (Hegemann, 1923).

Jacques Gréber (1882-1962) – at the 1924 Amsterdam conference – maintained that in addition to being an essential element for collective health, green areas were also a factor in enhancing the property revenue of urban areas and were a necessary instrument to return harmony to those areas typical of the urban fabric of the modern city where the buildings did not observe any rules of composition (Gréber, 1924). The development of the monumental Fairmount Parkway in Philadelphia, designed by Gréber himself, represented tangible evidence of this statement.

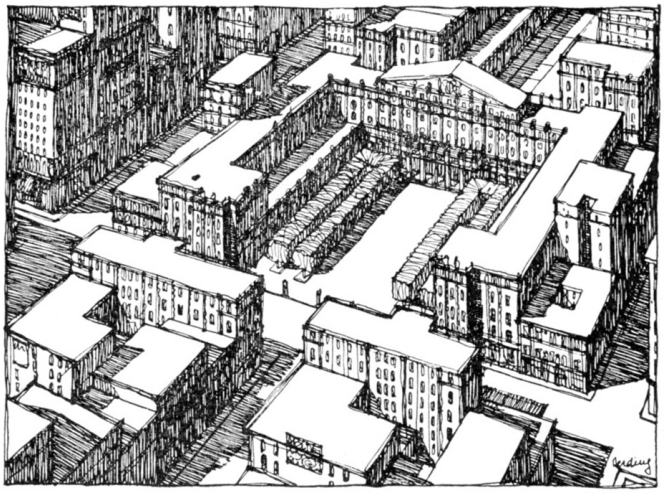

Image 3. W. Hegemann and W. Peets, Civic center design for gridiron plans and restriction of heights (zoning), study, 1923

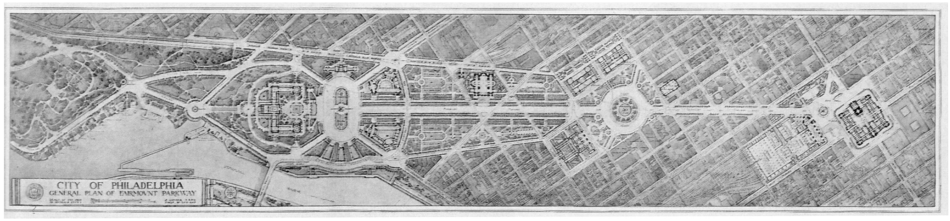

Image 4. J. Gréber, City of Philadelphia. General plan of Fairmount Parkway, 1917

Thomas Adams (1871-1940) – on the same occasion – underlined that the goal of creating beautiful cities could also be pursued by zoning. As he wrote: 'Regulations cannot make a beautiful city, although they are needed to clear away disorderly elements that make for ugliness, and to provide the spaciousness and environment – primarily necessary for social needs – for the exercise of creative art in building up and displaying those things that make for beauty in the city' (Adams, 1924: 70).
Sverre Pedersen (1882-1971)– at the 1925 New York Conference – focused on the need to consider, within the sphere of urban design, colours, materials, forms, atmospheres, climate and geo-topographic conditions, namely everything that tells us about the nature of a place from the point of view of their perception. Pedersen had a vision of the dialectics between nature and the urban place that seemed to evoke the classical spirit, both in that he referred to the mutual enhancement of artefact and natural context, and for his conviction that landscape transformation should be tackled with modesty (Pedersen, 1925).
Henry Wright (1878-1936) – at the 1926 Vienna Congress – criticised the American laws that, in order to fight the effects of bad settlement practices – in particular the slums –, prevented any good results in terms of urban design, such as those he (with Clarence Stein) produced a few years later in the Radburn plan (New Jersey). Though designed on the basis of the automobile, like other plans by the same author, it aimed to enhance the role of the community through a careful configuration of urban open spaces (Wright, 1926).

John Sulman (1849-1934) – at the 1928 Paris Congress –, reflecting on the relationship between building density and traffic maintained that 'there is another reason for the limitation of [the height of buildings] and a further one is that, in my opinion, a far more satisfactory architectural effect is produced by buildings of a uniform height, as in the principal cities of Europe, than by the irregular height of the skyscrapers of New York, or the crude aspect of Sydney at the present time' (Sulman, 1928: 355).
Finally, Luigi Piccinato (1899-1983) – at the 1929 Rome Congress – stated that in order to work in historic centres the nature of the contexts was the key element: this meant no rules or abstract schemes but the willingness to identify 'different solutions according to the typical [of a place] planimetric scheme, according to the type of monuments that are set [within that framework] and according to the historical, architectural and planning characteristics of the existing road structure' (Piccinato, 1929: 348).
These are just a few of the examples that could be cited as evidence of the fact that the torch lit by Camillo Sitte in his *Der Städte-Bau* in 1899 continued to burn even in this context and that the longing for beauty and harmony in the construction of urban places was by no means sated.

Image 5. C. S. Stein, H. Wright, Radburn N. J., Plan of Northwest & Southwest residential districts, 1929

Conclusions

Control of the form, dimensions and uses of the urban spaces was a crucial element in modern city design, and for new reasons compared to the centuries preceding the twentieth century. 'The future welfare of cities throughout the world', writes Ernest Payson Goodrich (1874-1955) for example, taking a widely shared stance, 'is largely dependent upon the establishment of adequate open spaces in and around them' (Goodrich, 1928: 398). The debate at the IFHTP Congresses between the wars pointed out that the rules governing the composition and organisation of urban open spaces were mainly dictated by factors that did not concern the architecture of places and urban aesthetics. The trend emerged from urban design to be transformed into a planning technique – a practice that gave up the interpretation of context – and overspecialisation – apparently more appropriate for facing limited problems (that of traffic in particular) but often unsuitable for convincing solutions to wider issues –. It seems that within the IFHTP there was not an equal and contrary movement as extensive as this, although some authors did not fail to underline the need to return a significant role to urban place and landscape design. And the majority of century-old European culture in terms of the design of urban open spaces was sucked into this black hole: an irreparable tear in the canvas of the intricate relations between community spaces and society that finally spoilt the very nature of the cities and their historic ability to be one of the utmost expressions of western civilisation.

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