Three stories for the XXth century
II International Ph.D Seminar on Urbanism, Barcelona, 27.06.05

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I wrote a book; it is a small but dense book containing no more than two hundred pages and very few images. I hope it will be in the bookshops in September. The title will most likely be "The 20th Century City ."[1] It is a part of a series directed by Donatella Calabi on the history of the western city from antiquity to the present day. Except for myself, all the authors are historians.

While writing this book, I thought of a range of alternative approaches. The first was to summarize the many and valuable histories of the city, architecture and urbanism, but I was not interested in that kind of approach. The second was to write that "such and such occurred" and to speak only of facts. I would have liked to write such a book but there are so many facts that either I would have had to select them in a very accurate way or abandon this hypothesis. With very few exceptions, in most histories of the city, architecture and urbanism, this choice is guided by something I call a "canonical screening" of what we are accustomed to think of as the most important *exempla*. Canonical screening is responsible for the apologetic *vulgata* of the history of the modern city, the Modern Movement and modern urbanism. Certain research delves deeper into specific aspects, sometimes adding detail, changing others, suggesting a different hierarchical order, and slowly modifying our ideas about the past.

I did something different.

Like many people who have spent most of their lives in the 20th century, I tried to understand the sense and meaning of that century for the European city. I use the word "sense" in reference to the significance and meaning of the direction taken in the 20th century. I was not alone. In different research fields, attempts to reflect upon the meaning and sense of the 20th century are now so numerous that they form a quite large collection.

So what I would ask that you to do now is to stop and reflect with me for a moment upon the meaning and sense of this era. Let us try to avoid simplification and maintain a critical distance from the *vulgata* and, as a result, also avoid their summary. I propose a provisional hypothesis - three different, but coherent, histories of the 20th century European and western city.

1. *Three different histories*

The first history is the story of dual anguish. The entire century is accompanied by anguish. It is the anguish of a city growing out of control; of a metropolis that loses it dimension to become an "un-measured" megalopolis extraneous to individual and collective everyday experience. The city is perceived as meaningless because it is impossible to grasp completely and impossible to master its functional, technical and symbolic aspects. From another, and partially opposing, point of view, this anguish regards not only the dissolution of the city, but even moreso, the very concept of city. It regards the disappearance of a magical place where all technical, social, institutional and political innovations were born. Its dissolution into a territorial dispersion of remarkable dimensions takes upon unrecognizable and incomprehensible forms, whose future roles are even more difficult to understand.

The second history is that of "a great generation." The words of Henry Godard, a French literary historian, refer to a great intellectual generation, part of which, like Celine, Bernanos and Giono, or like Lurçat and Gropius and others, endured the Flanders' trenches during WWI. Celine describes that experience in great detail in *Voyage au bout de la nuit*; Claude Simon portrays it in *La route des Flandres*.
This generation was dominated by the one main idea that the project of the city is part of a broader design for a new society, or, in the words of Gramsci, for "a new man." It was an idea rooted, in general terms, in the various *utopias* which have accompanied western culture since antiquity, but was grounded specifically in the horrible experience of the WWI and in the expectations for radical change in European and western society in its aftermath. The "great generation" does not coincide precisely with the architects and urbanists of the Modern Movement, nor with CIAM; it is broader. It cannot be confused with the story a number of heroes; it is much more than this. We find it in different disciplines such as

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[1] Bernardo Secchi, *La città del ventesimo secolo,* Laterza, Roma, 2005

literature, as Henry Godard demonstrates, in philosophy, just as we find it in the hard sciences, in technological research as well as in design.

The third history is the story of a patient search. This search - for the physical and practical dimensions of individual and collective welfare - first comes about through the "moralization" of the industrial city in the 18th and 19th centuries like the Amsterdam of Berlage or Vienna, and then through an attempt to construct new life space where the most important individual and collective needs and wishes might be represented. It is the story of the slow modification of interior space and its furnishings as well as the slow modification of its relations with outdoor space and its design. It is the story of the transformation of many aspects of the "in-between" public and private spaces which construct reasonable and meaningful sequences between indoor and outdoor space. It is the story of nurseries, schools, hospitals, athletic fields and anything else which, since the 1930's, but especially after WWII, was included in every social welfare program - the change in their quantities, their distribution in urban space and in their very physical make-up. It is a history of continuous research through experience - learning by doing, of multi-disciplinarity, of architects and planners working together with, and often preceding, other scholars and practitioners such as psychologist, teachers, doctors, botanist and athletes, not only economists and sociologists.

2. *The role and meaning of the three histories*

The first history underscores the role and importance of a number of facts. The second emphasizes the role and importance of design. The third is focused on the role and importance of the individual and collective dimensions of freedom.

But if we look more closely at these different histories, we discover that the first is based on some fundamental representations of the facts, beginning with cartographic or statistical representations, which we usually consider to be closest to fact, and ending with those that we usually consider more distant, like the different theories which attempt to interpret fact. The first history recounts how western culture observed, interpreted and portrayed the urban phenomenon. It is a history of much research and many researchers, of their methods, their backgrounds and biographies. It is not only a history of facts but also of books, congresses and symposia which discussed the facts. We understand why the first history was so often used in such an intense ideological way. Its legacy, as is well known, are the many movements throughout the century - the garden city movement, New Urbanism, the Smart City - proclaiming a new and better society.

The second history seeks to demonstrate that, during the 20th century, European cities and territories changed due to changes in individual and collective imagery, as well as in building technologies and practices, and that the role of urban design and architecture, as a part of a broader social project, was as essential for this change as it was for the transformation of the urban landscape. It is the history of an extreme effort by the imagination, if not of a *Utopia*. This effort was defined in many ways in different regional and political contexts, such as in Europe in the first post-war period, in the Soviet Union up until the beginning of the 1930's and in the USA during the New Deal. It is a history of design projects representing the physical dimension of a policy, a history of people, of their relationships and their conflicting proposals; like the history of Semenov, educated, like Abercrombie, in England, and of the 1935 Moscow green belt plan as well as that of 1944 Greater London Plan. It is the history of Rasmussen and Abercrombie in London or of the conflict within CIAM where the "Fourierist" left wing with Mart Stam and others, clashed with the "Saint-Simonist" wing - Le Corbusier, Giedion and others - over the role of mechanization. But it is also the history of a general agreement regarding the necessity for a new way of life and a completely new image and physical make-up of life space. Its legacy, often denigrated a-critically, is evident in every European and western city. Perhaps a visitor to 22nd century European cities will not perceive the impact of the first history on the western culture, but he or she will certainly see the physical legacy of the second.

The third history accentuates the role and importance of the individual emerging, in Europe, from a long period beginning with the Italian and North-European Renaissance or as shown, for instance, in Flemish painting. Moreover, it is the history of the growing importance of everyday life, of domesticity like in 17th century Dutch painting. This story pays even more attention to everyday life, to the human body and its comfort, its permanence and movement in urban space, to the "material" quality of our spatial context. "From the spoon to the city" represented the idea that everything in our material context contributes to our comfort or discomfort and that, as a consequence, everything must be investigated through a design project. It is a history of some radical changes, but also of many incremental and widespread improvements, where experiments in the wealthiest villas and in social housing could merge and transfer results from one field to the other. It is a story told through many parallel micro-stories linked together - the history of sports and educational theories; the history of medicine and of hygienic practices; the history of the industrial, and other types, of workplace; the history of the lighting, heating and conditioning of indoor and outdoor space and of the design of indoor and outdoor furniture. The third

story, finally, takes into account the needs and wishes of different social groups, their variety and changes as an outcome of social structure and its transformation. Perhaps the legacy of this history in the western world is more pervasive and stable, marking a clear direction that cannot, and will not, be reversed in the future.

What, perhaps is even more important is that these three histories are mainly histories of ideas which have defined, over the course of a century, three different semantic orders which dominate and design both the future of the city - by fear, imagination and everyday life - as well as the past - by *nostalgia*, radical criticism and by the will to overcome it.

3. *"Continuity vs. discontinuity*

At the beginning of the 1930's, Bardamu, the main character in *Voyage au bout de la nuit,* arrives in New York to see an extremely dense and vertical city - *un ville debout, absolument droite*. Today we see urban sprawl everywhere - a horizontal city, and we get the feeling, sustained by much research, that the 1960's represented a breaking-point in European urban history, marking a passage from one urban form to another, from the compact city dominated by continuity to sprawl dominated by the fragment.

In fact, much research has shown that the two phenomena, concentration and sprawl, compactness and fragmentation, parallel each other throughout the entire century and even over a much longer period. Urbanization and concentration, as is well known, continue at an even more accelerated rate in other parts of the planet even if, strangely enough, few people today demonstrate great concern over this and others consider it an opportunity for modernization. The anguish of the first part of the century seems to have disappeared. On the other hand, much research in Italy, in Flanders and in some other very few European regions, showed that sprawl is not a new phenomenon, but one that began in Europe during the 16th century with the colonization of the territory by Roman or Venetian *villas*, or by the castles-villas in Flanders. From that time on, the process of densification through sprawl was, in many European regions, a continuous process sustained, during the 20th century, by a strong political impulse for the progressive democratization of society on the one hand, but also by a society frightened by the growing "proletarian-ization" of the large city. Many of these policies failed, such as the Italian policy which was hostile to urbanization and in favor of "ruralization" during the fascist period, or agrarian reform seeking to settle the population in the countryside during the post-war period. But the density of mobility infrastructure, "the peasant tramways" in Flanders or in England, the Loucheur law in France, "ruralization" policies in the Soviet Union or during the New Deal in USA, all lay at the roots of the American dream and its European versions.

Sprawl today appears to be a much more complex and "above-determined" phenomenon than urbanization and concentration and perhaps this is the reason why it generates the fear, if not the anguish, regarding the city's dissolution. But if we look at some European regions where concentration and dispersion parallel each other over a long period, such as Flanders or some northern areas in Italy, we understand that their outcome, at the end of the century, is a new form of metropolis, a form that is different both from the "impressionistic" metropolis of 19th century London or Paris as well as from early 20th century icons like New York or Chicago. It is a metropolis which encompasses ancient cities and villages, their modern peripheries, fragments of the legacy of the "great generation", agricultural, as well as other, areas where people and activities spread out in the pursuit of comfort and welfare.

I maintain that the contemporary form of the city is a physical, social and conceptual area where the three histories, and their legacies, merge, mix and collide.

4. *Examples*

These histories make up the three main chapters of my book. Each is followed by an example of a city that I know well enough, having tried in the past, by means of a process of obtaining knowledge through project design, to understand and design their future or the future of an important part of it.

For instance, the first history, on growth and dissolution of the European city, is followed by a text describing Siena, something that might appear strange; the second, the "great generation," is exemplified by some pages dedicated to a *grand ensemble, les Hauts de Rouen*; the third, the search for individual and collective welfare, is illustrated through a text dedicated to Milton Keynes. The last chapter concludes with some pages devoted to the North-West-Metropolitan-Area - the region between Brussels, Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Köln - an area that I suggest to be an icon of the new form of the metropolis. Naturally, these examples afford me the possibility to address some more general issues.

Why these examples? Because the 20th century, the century of the anguish I described previously, was pervaded by an ambiguous feeling of *nostalgia* for the ancient city, perceived and idealized as the physical representation of "community." This leads me, on the one hand, to discuss an issue that was important during that century, and which gave rise to the conflict marking European

culture between modernists and ant-modernists and on the other, to show how frequently banal was its interpretation in terms of conservation.

Siena, like many other historic European cities, offers us, as it offered the "great generation," some important conceptual lessons regarding the *status* and role of public space, the many devices that link and separate public and private space, the grammar and syntax of the sequences between public and private spaces, the grammar and syntax of built space and its symbolic value.

In this same way, *Les Hauts de Rouen* gave me the opportunity to face three main issues. First, the dimensions of the parts of the cities which we typically call *grands ensembles* in France, *Großsiedlungen* in Germany and other words in other countries, are so vast that it is impossible to think of demolishing them. It would be better to attempt work with them, as we did in Rouen, by "adding and subtracting" as Vasari instructed and as every generation worked with its historic legacy in a process of a cumulative selection which lies at the origin of the richness of the ancient city. Secondly the *platenbauen* which are the chief urban building-block of these urban areas, give us the opportunity to reflect upon technical progress and the construction of the city. Beginning in the 18th century and throughout the 19[th,], the construction of the city gave impetus to a great amount of technical progress. During the following century, the opposite occurred; the city tried to utilize what was produced in other fields - typically in the mechanical sector - and was not able to resolve its own problems. Third, *Les Hauts de Rouen* is a typical late-1950's project ; it is well designed and well enough built, an example of the characteristic "banalisation" of the "great generation's" grand *exempla.* A certain distance separated the quality of the first seminal *exempla* and the following mass productions in the post-war period. How is a process of banalization structured? What is the role of bureaucracy, of codes, of distraction or of the lack of research?

Milton Keynes elicits a reflection upon the New Town experience - and not only the English one. During the 20th century, more than four thousand new towns were built in an immense effort to provide a different direction for urban history. Built for a society with high levels of welfare, Milton Keynes also represents a movement towards aesthetics even while aspiring to represent an ecologically correct design process. From here, I can discuss the role of aesthetics in the search for consensus along with recent trends in "populist" design forms.

The Northwestern Metropolitan Area is, finally, in my opinion, the icon, as I said before, of a new form of metropolis, perhaps of the future metropolis. An icon is not a model; its influence on other cities and territories passes through imagination and re-elaboration, and not through imitation.

5. *freedom*

The three histories do not divide the century in similar ways, nor along the same lines; the sub-periods they highlight, and the breaks between them, do not always coincide with the great events that marked Europe's political, institutional, economic and social history. The "great generation," for instance, occupies the central part of the century; growth and dissolution of the city both start in the preceding century and will certainly continue in the following one as does, even if in a different way, the search for the concrete dimensions of individual and collective welfare.

The city does not immediately change as a consequence of great events such as wars, revolutions or changes in political systems. These events slither around it creating different degrees of friction and drag. The city changes as a consequence of deeper-rooted transformations in the social and power structure, in imagery, in technical and political culture; the transformations are obviously linked to the events I'm referring to, but not in simple ways. This leads me to reflect upon continuity and discontinuity in European urban history, or rather, upon one of the main categories of history which is inertia. Without this concept, it is truly very difficult to reflect upon history.

This is why it seems to me that, at the core of the three histories of the construction of the principle discourse regarding urbanism over the entire 20th century and its slow modifications, like at mid- century, there is a fundamental problem and a slow search for its solution. It is the problem of individual and collective freedom. There are the ideas and ideologies regarding the relationships between the individual and society and, in terms of the city and the discourse on urbanism, there are different ways to express these ideas (and ideologies) through the construction of life space.