For a Baroque Approach to Cities and Architecture*

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Even in Europe, where urban forms, for very ancient historical reasons, are soundly constituted, they are now undergoing fragmentation. Under the pressure of market forces, of the delocalisation and displacement of production divided into "soft" and "hard", of the development of new communication technologies and of the tragic and disconcerting phenomenon of increasing inequality, the traditional city is exploding into separate fragments or even warring ghettos. "Historic" cores turning into museums or prestige business quarters; residential areas that shelter the economic or intellectual aristocracy; the urban wastelands of the immediate periphery with their industrial activities that have become obsolete; satellite or suburban cities invaded by the middle classes; great low-cost housing estates rapidly heading towards a logic of "relegation";[1] the increasing urbanisation of inter-urban agricultural land, to such an extent that the traditional distinction between town and countryside is becoming increasingly uncertain...: all these spontaneous developments are developing urban chaos, the principal traits of which, as suggested by the organisers of this conference are fragmentation, reticulation and polarisation.

In the face of these phenomena which lie beyond his competence, the architect may decide to play Pontius Pilatus and leave it all up to the politicians, economic decision-makers, network developers and other town planning technicians. The temptation is certainly great, the pretext being that, contrary to the utopian hopes of the Modern movement, it is not architects who make the city but the tangle of decisions that largely elude their authors, decisions to repudiate any collective effort towards the organization of public life and social justice by making "urban chaos" an alibi for their own irresponsibility. This can be seen in the following statement by Kazuo Shinohara (1989, 76) in radical opposition to the approach I call baroque, who sees in fragmentation and separation not a set of relationships to be put under tension, but a separation that justifies architectural solipsism:

> "now that I can think in terms of both urban development and the architectural object, the chaos and the machine have become interchangeable for me, that is to say that the machine of the city and the architectural chaos can coexist".

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¹   This concept, which describes an irreversible social-spatial segregation apparent today in certain high-rise housing estates, was proposed by Jean-Marie Delarue, the Director of the Interministerial Delegation for the City, in a report submitted to the Ministre d'Etat, Minister for the City and for Development, under the title of: *Relegation* - Paris 1991.

An intellectually alluring position, but it ignores the fact that an architect's work is never innocent and its quality cannot dispense with a critical examination of the questions raised by the border.

Furthermore, while it is true that the utopian approach of the moderns or the Big Brother approach of the technocrats are no longer in season, the unilateral apology of chaos - of its vigour without norms or prejudice which is supposed in the long run to give breath to a "convulsive" beauty - makes short shrift of an increasingly shocking and dangerous urban inequality. True, it has been demonstrated that architecture is in itself incapable of healing the wounds of society: we know, for example, that several black or chicano ghettos in major American cities are not frightful high-rise estates thrown up in the fifties or sixties, but neighbourhoods made up of "pleasant" town houses abandoned by their (white) owners who left to go and live in the country.[2] But it is nevertheless undeniable, as several studies have demonstrated,[3] that architecture, beyond simple problems of comfort, possesses convivial virtues or, on the contrary, pathogenic potential. So the Italian architect Gian Carlo de Carlo has every right to maintain, in a social-democratic spirit that recalls some of John Rawls' ideas on "justice as equity", that more care should be given to architecture in poor neighbourhoods than in wealthy neighbourhoods, because the basis of democracy - individual liberty - cannot be ensured in a climate where social strife and crime are rife.

And if we reject this paradox in the name of the theses developed by Friedrich Hayek or Robert Nozick to the effect that the complexity of modern democratic societies is such that the free interplay of individuals driven by their personal interest regulates social chaos better and more justly in the long term than well-meaning but counterproductive interventionism, we stumble on another difficulty: the question of public space. Unless one rejoices like the young German architect Hans Kolhoff (supposedly on the authority of Hannah Arendt) in the disappearance of this disturbing influence,[4] the only view of the state to which years of ultra-liberalism have reduced the cities of the United States or the disaster-struck cities of post-industrial Great Britain, is sufficient warning against abandoning the European tradition of paying attention to public space. Whatever the over-zealous epigones of Reaganomics may think, there is no better measure of the quality of the social democratic link than that of the streets, pavements, squares, shopping centres, gardens, lighting and sanitation.

Taken in its broadest sense, that of a concept of political philosophy, the notion of public space refers to the more symbolic than material domain where citizens, i.e individuals who possess rights regardless of their of their private condition, meet and confront one another. Now it worried Hannah Arendt (1961, 1983) (she did not rejoice in the fact!) that this space should be undergoing a crisis in our modern democracies, because of the triumph in the *polis* of the *animal laborans* over the *animal socialis*. And this crisis has only grown worse since the "Condition de l'homme moderne" was written: both as a reflection of some of the dead ends into which Western rationale has run, to the extent that it is no longer entirely able today to offer a stable and commonly accepted basis for the public debate; and even more so perhaps, as an effect of

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[2]   For example, the neighbourhood chosen by Spike Lee as the setting for his film: *Do The Right Thing.*

[3]   I am thinking in particular of the work of the "City and Health" team organised under the auspices of the Interministerial Delegation for the City (DIV) by Banlieue 89.

[4]   Interview with Marie-Hélène Contal in the April-May 1989 issue of *Architecture intérieure-Créé.*

this unmaking of the world as a result of communication technologies which tend to reduce the public domain to the level of the television screen "animating" the private space. That this crisis of the political public space endangers the urban and architectural public space is evident, as demonstrated, alas, by its decay in the neighbourhoods worst hit by the economic crisis and therefore the most threatened by a rejection of democratic public life. It is therefore all the more important that architects aware of their responsibilities as men of art and citizens should resist the prevailing cynicism and *laissez-faire* attitudes. For no spontaneous miracle, no regulating "invisible hand", no chaotically deterministic "strange attractor" will come to the rescue. Just as the "ignorance of the future result" between "people pursuing different aims" to quote Hayek, is capable of producing highly exciting architecture within an efficient modern urban space (in terms of communication and the supply of competitive goods and services), so the same hypothesis applied to the public domain as perceived by a certain European universalist tradition does not work. Unless you resort to unrealistic measures such as those practised in certain parts of London, where the upkeep, and hence the keys, of public squares are left in the hands of local residents (but then how - and indeed why - should we "privatise" squares, thoroughfares, etc.?), unless we postulate that the only "urban public spaces" of the future are the shopping precincts, or unless we rewrite history and attribute the miracle of Central Park to something other than the determination of local officials to save a vast area in the heart of Manhattan from the laws of the market, we are obliged to face the fact that public space is a question of political determination, means, intelligent urban scenarios and an architectural effort to link, to pull down barriers, to offer places - in a word, to "embellish" as Baron Haussman would say, even if the term is obsolete.

To recognize this need does not mean returning to the past, except as a source of *reflection and inspiration. Indeed the development of modern cities - that is those in the industrialized West*[5] is incompatible with the historicist corset into which certain architects like Léon Krier and certain men of state like Prince Charles dream of squeezing it in defence of some "European City" as mythical as it is undefinable. Similarly, whatever certain guardians of the Modern temple may say, the urban approach of the C.I.A.M can no longer serve as a model, as proved by the fact that its utopianism, in the face of the complexity of real life, has engendered an unprecedented urban catastrophe. To prevent the symmetrical disaster which the advocates of chaos are preparing, therefore, we must invent new modes of urban and architectural intervention free of the illusions of "rationalist" urban development and open to the disturbing trends of the modern-day world and to the new forms of urban poetry revealed by Godard, Jarmush or Wim Wenders.

An impossible task? No doubt. At least if we measure the success of a human enterprise in terms of an inaccessible perfection. I do feel, however, that a touch of modern urban baroque can point us in the right direction.

It is generally agreed that the starting point of baroque architecture lies in the reconstruction of pontifical Rome subsequent to the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Driven by an exceptional sense of the future of the city, Pope Sixtus V (1520-1590) had the scale of the city dilated and regulated by a network of tensions around seven poles, seven ancient churches scattered over a space that looked outwards towards the

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[5]   Those of the "South" raise problems of a different nature altogether - although the "North" is far from perfect, and vice versa.

countryside: this project, the plans of which are conserved within the Vatican library, where the tensions between poles are clearly marked by vectors, introduces a method of governing space based on the existence of strong points - monuments, squares, etc. - acting at a distance both on the future development of the city and on the rearrangement- requalification of what already exists. The crux of the baroque urban strategy is therefore its polycentrism, and how buildings are aligned and interlinked is merely a historically relative effect. And this strategy regulated by dialogue at a distance, rivalry, the opposition between monumental spaces, and - the less brilliant but just as fertile other side of the coin - by simplicity, the spontaneity, the modesty, the very banality of domestic spaces, consequently offers an alternative to traditional urban planning methods based on zoning, i.e on the dual aim to homogenize space by clearly distinguished expanses devoted to one function or another, and to assign a "rational order" in every part of the territory. In such a way that, by analogy with current theories on gas-liquid-solid transitions, i.e the passage from disorder to order in matter, a modern baroque style of development could be described as a complex process of crystallization (with lacunae, dislocations and intertwined networks of polycrystals) occurring not in whole lumps but growing from seeds that gradually induce solidification; or better still, as the establishment of an order at a short distance gener- ating not an order at a long distance as in the crystalline state, but an overall effect of regulation of chaos, characteristic of certain intermediate states between order and disorder (as in most polymers, for example) (See Guinier, 1980 or Dorlot *et al.*, 1986).

Methods relevant to these problems were developed in Berlin under the leadership of the head of the I.B.A, the architect Joseph-Paul Kleihues, or in Barcelona over the past ten years under the impetus of the Bohigas-Martorell-MacKay team. To my knowledge, however - perhaps because they were never given the means to carry it out - the Banlieues 89 team is the only one to have developed to an explicitly baroque theory its project designed to integrate the suburbs of "Greater Paris".[6]   At the outset a traditional approach is used: a grid of 1 x 1 km squares is laid over the territory. But its purpose is not to homogenize space, quite the contrary. The idea is in fact to show that each square kilometre of the territory concerned has its own qualities - to highlight topographical particularities. Then, having identified the "magic places" and "project places", Roland Castro's team proposes to extend their qualities in such a way that the whole of the square in which they lie is transformed: a sort of "urban acupuncture" based on the postulate that the city is a tissue woven and folded to infinity, where any isolated action, if pertinent, radiates far beyond the area directly affected. Zoning is abolished, as is the structurally unified concept of the city dear to Haussman, Rossi or Léon Krier: order is brought to the chaos by an urban architectural rule, a non-regulatory "baroque-style" rule.

Contrary to what is generally believed, there is nothing twisted, crazy or de- mented about the baroque approach, nor indeed related to any other form of nombrilis- tic trendiness. Its "excesses" are never gratuitous; and its use of artifice is not designed to conceal the truth but to reveal it in cruder, more tragic terms. Finally, and above all, the baroque is not a style but an "approach", an "attitude to architecture and space" as Hans Hollein so rightly puts it. The expression of an era that has lost all hope of a "radiant future" where artists, thinkers, scientists and politicians are faced with the dis-

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[6]   See the supplement in issue 14 of *Murs, Murs* (April 1986) entitled "Le Grand Paris", and in the same series the brochure *Le Paris des cinq Paris,* June 1990.

order of a disenchanted world, unlike the trendy hedonism that supposedly represents "age of emptiness", the baroque attempts to invent a new illusion-free spatial togetherness - something like André Glucksmann's humanism conscious of being habited by the inhuman. More than an aesthetic trend, therefore, the baroque is an ethic based on recognition of otherness.

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