

Notes taken in a discussion with BERNARD REICHEN
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Privatization and new way to design urban space

Urbanism is the science of the future, because the issue of a massive urban civilization is socially and politically very important in XXI century.

But there is a danger that it be an urbanism of risk prevention and insurance. More than in the urban project, we will find ourselves in the urban action and urban will become a formatted, sectorized world according specific areas, with rules that prescribe the framework of urban life and mark it out more than they open perspectives of the possibles.

The formatting is the essence of urban civilization "zero risk", its role is to quantify, to give measurements without human intention. The rule, the measurement become their own finality. And the urban project of impact is substituted by urban actions of which we want to measure the effects to prevent the risks, and this work is in the hands of specialized offices, that work outside the field of the project. The stake will be more and more to define the regulatory prescriptions and the certifications more than think about the future of a territory through the urban project.

So the project is gradually disappearing in favor of the procedure. And the idea of zero growth, is associated with the lack of visions, of dynamic perspectives for future, preferring to plan products and frozen images. Besides the lack of vision of the future is associated with a disproportionate weight of the image on one side and an enhancement of the urban movement and events on the other.

The debate becomes the project.

Just compare for example the urban project IBA Ruhr Gebiet more than 20 years ago designed around major lines of forces, defining visions and themes, which has enabled the development over time of a variety of projects, and the last IBA Basel, which in contrast does not offer visions of the future ... but images that refer to products certainly still themed but without a vision integrating time of urban transformations.

One major problem is the public domain which was able to take risks in managing the urban project, which, today, protects itself by regulations and transfers its economic, social, technical risks on private sector, to specialized developers.

How to act in this new context?

The project, in most of the contexts is now reduced to the design of macro-lots of 20 to 50 000 m² which correspond to units specifically managed entirely by a private developer who takes the responsibility and risk on this scale, which is more than an object and less than an urban project.

But more and more they relate to urban units linked to land availabilities managed directly by the private sector.

In general, the private developer of a macro-lot entrusts to an architect planner the coordination of the overall and then divides the implementation between several architects.

This is often the location effect that gives a plot of 1 to several hectares valuable real estate and private developers seek these situations with this scale of about 50 000m² to implement.

Mobility promoting accessibility are of course an engine for development of these sites. In general the most innovative clients, and if the macro-lot has a value of attractiveness of its location can incorporate into their program from 10 to 15% of architectural "innovation". If it's housing it may include a small part of "lofts" even if the concept is far from being totally innovative...

The architect in charge of coordination will define the overall morphology, also will manage the ground floor or the base and assembly of pieces that will be given to other architects. Architects of the fragments will have to fit into this logic and often they realize more products (as in the design of objects) rather than projects.

Beyond this level, the macro-lots may in some cases be integrated in larger urban projects, such as in the project of the Docks de Saint-Ouen North of Paris. We can therefore find more rare contexts which allow to work on a larger scale, introducing a dimension of urban project, but which is conceived in any other way than in the past. The urban project was a prerequisite and its overall coherence determined the fragments defining in a land division which was then shared between public space and lots to be built by private and public developers, but in a strong interdependence between these buildings and public spaces.

Today logic of macro-lots of and the privatization of this scale requires to change its attitude at the urban scale. The urban project is the design of an autonomous dimension of shared spaces, in a own spatial logic, so autonomous of the design of the macro-lots, even if it will play the role of link between them. This can be a platform, a park or a linear public space that fits between the existing and new fragments and integrates soft mobility. This gives the macro-lots both relative autonomy claimed by developers who shared buildable sites, but obviously shared space will determine certain location values around it. But we see emerging a totally new relationship where the public domain can not conceive a priori the overall project, but think the links and exchanges of public space between the spaces privatized.

In this logic of urban assembly, urban-architectural level is paramount. And it is perhaps for European a field of investigation. But it seems difficult to attract private developers directly in the competition, and the public domain (cities, agglomerations, SEM) at different scales is probably the most obvious partner for European even if we can have in this new public-private deal to involve private partners whose projects will be "affected" by the urban-architectural project that competition could produce.