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What generates our cities

From laws to strategies

Abstract

In Ioana Akpako's view, the last decades of the 20th century saw a gradual shift away from modernism to a new form of urban design which prioritises strategy over law. She believes these two approaches are fundamentally different: law-based thinking conceives the city as a whole, incorporating what is different; while the strategic approach addresses specific places and disregards the rest. Weighing up the pros and cons of these two approaches, she concludes that urban planning and governance should reintegrate and reinterpret the notion of planning laws, arguing for an all-embracing approach to this inherently complex task.

> The shift

Today's cities are going through a transition from being centralising points of national power to nodes in a global network. Whether accepted or not, this trend also affects European cities, deeply changing their meaning, demography, ways of financing, administration, and ultimately their material form.

Urban planning and architecture have an ambiguous role to play in the making of the city, at times constrained by its fast-evolving context and other times foreseeing or even influencing urban life.

Analysis and imagination are both part of these professions, as cities are built in order to meet the present needs of their population, like housing and transport, and are at the same time shaped according to imagined futures, for the exercise of power, for communicating with the rest of the world, and for asserting new identities. Between contingencies of the present and projects for the future, two entities that are not necessary compatible, building can be an act of creation just as easy as one of dissent. The current transition from national to global adds yet another dimension to the challenge of city making, since the very way we imagine our future is shifting from a deterministic to an open-ended ideal. While modernism envisioned the ideal city as a finished product, a beautiful mechanism where everything had its place and followed a predefined logic, the uncertainties of the

present have led to the emergence of a new model: a resilient, creative and adaptivecity, which constantly evolves according to its population's needs and desires. Urban planers and architects are aware of both these views, and are struggling to resolve their contradictions.

Modernism, dominant in Europe for the most part of the 20th century, imposed its vision of an urban development based on laws. By using scientific methods, the main aim of architecture and urban planning was to make the city predictable, functioning and manageable. However, since the 1970s in the capitalist part of Europe, and since the 1990s in the postcommunist part, modernism has gradually been giving way to a new form of design, which prioritises strategy over law.

According to this new way of thinking, architecture has the capacity to steer social and economic processes; embellishment can (re)activate a place; and branding can reposition a city in the international network. Small-scale and or temporary interventions are supposed to trigger societal transformations of the biggest magnitude. Exception has gained priority over the rule.

The processes of deindustrialisation and globalisation coincide with this change. Production, now increasingly mobile, is largely taking place outside Europe. The continent's cities are less reliant on manufacturing and more on services and the information economy, while becoming dependent on global exchanges for their basic needs. Disconnected from their hinterland, but connected to each other and because their population, firms and capital are free to move in search of better conditions, european cities have to compete with each other and "plug into" the international flows of capital, information, people and goods in order to survive. Opportunistic development strategies, aimed at attracting capital, investors, tourists, workforce and new inhabitants, have thus become keys to urban planning.

The two ways of planning described above - through laws or through strategies - are fundamentally different. If the former conceives the city as a whole, incorporating what is different, the latter addresses specific places only and disregards the rest. While the creation and implementation of building codes are publicly financed, development strategies may be financed privately or through public-private partnerships. Laws target the whole population, now and in the future, as beneficiaries. Strategies promising economic growth try to attract external investors and consumers to a specific site. Although the contemporary propensity for the 'strategy approach' to planning has overcome some of the shortcomings of the modernist law-based thinking, like over-determinism, it has also created new problems.

> Dangers

In order to test the legitimacy and the efficiency of the 'strategy approach', it is essential to determine who has the privilege of designing the city of the future and for whom.

In today's Europe, cities suffer from a loss of meaning. Just like King Midas, whose legendary touch turned everything into gold, Europe might end up starving as it commodifies everything it owns. Marketing creates readymade realities, which push the social into informality and marginality.

Referring to places, such as airports, supermarkets, train stations and refugeecamps, French anthropologist Marc Augé (1992) developed the notion of "non-places". They are defined as places that condition behaviour and use through codified instructions, prescriptions and prohibitions, favouring individualisation and standardisation over socialisation. "Supermodernity [...] makes the old (history) into a specific spectacle" (Augé, 1992, p. 110), while "it seems that the social game is being played elsewhere than in the forward posts of contemporaneity." (Augé, 1992, p. 111)

Extending the notion to branded architecture, large areas within contemporary European cities can be identified as "non-places". As buildings are constructed less by

owners for their future use and more en masse by large investors who want to attract buyers, preferably international, "the city" is reduced to a standardised consumer product. "Global flows", the preferred client, are an abstract and elusive reality, without cultural roots or any clear requirements. Planning is done in advance for a generic user, a conglomerate of individuals who might never form a community. The result is monotonous private spaces on the one hand, and spectacular public spaces, which play the role of advertising for private property around them, on the other.

The large-scale version of this phenomenon - the branding of historical city-centres - acts as advertising for the city as a "product". This should attract tourists, businesses and well-off residents, but has the disadvantage of ignoring the increasingly complex social and spatial patterns of today's urban areas. Branding filters reality, distracting attention not only from the unsolved issues of the city, but also from its everyday life. Historical European city centres, restored or reconstructed, are too often reduced to tourist destinations. Their identity is being patched together from prewar remains and dreams of the future. Instead of representing an opportunity of learning from the past and consolidating a community by reflecting collective values and memories, they have become places of staged history, connected at a global level, but disconnected from their context.

Meanwhile, housing has become unaffordable for most city dwellers, as real estate is more profitably dedicated to speculation games instead. The recent economic crisis and the subsequent social movements have brought these issues into focus, but solutions have not yet been implemented. Theoretically, the high demand for housing in major European cities should help ease the economic crisis. However, this has not been the case, as the main criticism of the "spaces of capital" (Harvey, 2001) still stands: they are unable to include local processes and the uses of the majority of the city dwellers, or, in Lefebvrian terms, their "exchange value" and "use value" are disconnected.

At a spatial level, most European cities, including those in the former Communist bloc, have seen their urban centres lose population density, while urban sprawl is becoming increasingly common. Optimists argue that this is the result of people's preference for more light and space, and of the more affordable land markets on the periphery (Angel, 2011). On the other hand, critical theory suggests that prices are artificially kept high in city-centres voided of their everyday uses and common users. The population does not choose but is constrained to cope with the commuting time and lack of amenities of the periphery.

Hence, while urban planning concentrates its efforts and resources on creating branded realities, refusing to recognise the urban majority, the city evolves in a chaotic, inefficient and unsustainable manner. The myth of a typically compact European city, rooted in the romanticised image of the walled medieval town or the nationalism flavoured bourgeois 19th century regional capital, blurs the image of the fragmented realities of today's sprawling metropolises and their populations gathered from all over the world and which are only beginning to construct collective identities.

These considerations bring us closer to identifying the actors involved in "the production of space" (Lefebvre, 2009) in Europe, answering our initial question: who designs the city of the future and for whom? The active process of imagining and building the European city is currently happening outside the shrinking space of the established laws, done by two actors at the extremes: the elites and the marginal, while the middle classes are reduced to being passive consumers. The financial elites have the means and influence to implement development strategies, which, in spite of their narrow views, have acquired the power of legitimising exceptions to the law. The beneficiaries of these designs vary from the elites themselves to the average consumers, the generic users or even no one, as space can also become strictly an instrument of speculation. Marginal space production, on the other hand, is not acknowledged by the law and does not have the benefit of

legitimising itself through strategic speculative designs. Instead, it possesses the strength of reconnecting exchange and use value, design and use, by responding to the immediate needs of the population, unmet by the established laws.

> Hope

In order to ensure a sustainable future for themselves, resistant to unpredictable economic blows, speculation bubbles, and environmental hazards, Europe's cities need to replace the utopia of selling the city with one of producing it. This idea appeared as early as in 1968, with Lefebvre's notion of "city as oeuvre", which defines urban spaces as a collective creation, constantly evolving according to the people's needs and desires. He also noted that the logic of the market has reduced these urban qualities to exchange and suppressed them. Deriving from this notion, the idea of "the right to the city" claims not only access to city space, but also public participation in the decisions which affect it (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2012).

The theory has been there for a long time already, and recently new tools that can enhance changes in city planning and governance have emerged. Technology enables improved communication and the processing of large amounts of data. The centralisation of the residents' ideas and requests in dynamic maps and the local exchange of goods and information are not only possible, but already a reality.

However, technology alone cannot reconcile the conflict between branded, central urban realities and non-branded, marginal ones, and their conflictual lose-lose situation. Urban planning and governance should also reintegrate and reinterpret the notion of planning laws. City making for local uses should not be reduced to dissidence, but turned into legitimate citizen participation, including especially the middle classes, who are still mostly passive. Only through the integration of different initiatives into a more general picture and through becoming generative and openended instead of deterministic could planning laws make use of the new technologies and transform our cities into better places.

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