

Cities and Architects

Lucien Steil

[auf Deutsch](#)

Ideas and opinions from some of our supporters

Volume I Number 2

The traditional city is the sublime, complex and popular materialization of civility and conviviality. It is the perfect synthesis between territory, culture and human communities. It is a stable and stimulating "*Patria*" for individuals and families, for locals and foreigners, for residents and hosts, for industry, business, crafts, art, for communication and interaction, for social, cultural, intellectual and commercial exchange and invention.

Besides it has always remained a compelling artifact for imagination, for thinking and for adoration. How many vedutas, paintings and engravings, photographs, descriptions, poems and popular songs etc. celebrate the beauty, excellence and uniqueness of the popular traditional city? Even smaller cities and towns have impressive collections of visual and written records of their epic memory, their layout, their monuments and piazzas, their streets, their skylines and panoramic views and of the transformations through a history of an organic urban identity...

Both large and small historic cities remain centers of cultural pilgrimage and regeneration for millions of contemporaries, who long for the enlightenment and the sensuous and spiritual pleasures of the good city. Most of the most famous intact historic cities support the most efficiently the activities and requirements of modern life, whereas most of the most contemporary cities cannot even handle the basic components of their initial plug-ins!

Now all traditional cities and towns are built according to the same principles of harmony and proportion, of scale and of measure, of organization and of structure, of typology and morphology etc., relating the mathésis of the urban artifact to that of the universe. If the major ideologists of modernism and deconstructivism abusively use scientific references to their own purposes, their axioms have now been criticized to be erroneous conclusions from superficial scientific understanding! Traditional architecture and city-building have been acknowledged for according far more profoundly with fractals and chaos and new knowledge about man and the universe.

"Mathematical chaos is the study of hidden patterns in systems that are only apparently chaotic. There is no change in the fundamental aim of mathematics - which is to discover patterns - in going from Newtonian to chaotic models. Despite the enormous possibilities of applying fractals to built forms in an innovative manner, deconstructivist buildings have only led to randomness."

Nikos Salingaros (in: "Architecture, Patterns and Mathematics")

This has been scientifically investigated and thoroughly exposed in the writings of *Nikos Salingaros* and *Christopher Alexander*. In fact, rather than rendering obsolete classical theory of imitation of nature based on the universal principles of structure, proportion and

harmony of nature, the new scientific knowledge has consolidated antique intuitions into evidence. The regeneration of antique theory through modern sciences opens up spectacular perspectives on the sophisticated patterns of traditional architecture and city-building, their highly ordered complexity, their appropriateness with the human mind and body, and their consistency with ecological issues.

"There are general laws and nature broods on these laws to create diversity. Harmony provides the pattern and chaos gives the freedom."

Trinh Xuan Thuan

All of these traditional cities and towns are familiar and friendly to us and we experience the pleasure of "recognition" in foreign cities we have never seen before! However there is no greater diversity and inventiveness than the one we might discover in the vast patrimony of traditional cities... The rejection of traditional principles of city-building, the purely arbitrary experimentalism of modernism and the masterplanning of sprawl and suburb on the contrary have generated faceless and monotonous urbanizations, all alike through the world. Pretending to express our time they have only succeeded in expressing a monstrous failure of no-time and no-place!

"Historic cities are alike but all different. Modernist cities are each one different, but they are all the same!"

*Maurice Culot**

But we also know that the beautiful cities of the past have been attacked and destroyed, then rebuilt again and again so many times. Have there been times where humanity was not confronted to war, illness, corruption, wickedness, barbarity and destruction? The "Golden Ages" if there have been some, have always been exceptional and short!

Now why should we expect architecture and city-building to express ugliness and horror, confusion and disorientation, homelessness and alienation? Why should architecture and city-building rather than build a "patria", limit its role to celebrate the conflicts and crisis of our time? Reducing architecture to compulsively mirror the state of society and of contemporary apories is an absurd proposition in itself: There would not have been any memorable, beautiful, inspiring building nor any comfortable and attractive city produced through the dramatic history of mankind! Architecture and city-building would never have developed into highly sophisticated arts!

Traditional architecture and city-building have always been ideals of harmony and beauty in a destabilized and disrupted world! Through centuries of glorious and tragical history, the traditional city has always remained a desirable model of urbanity, of civilization, of good life and of a possible utopia...

Destroyed by natural calamities (earthquakes, floods, hurricanes etc.) or human ones (wars, fires, urban transformations etc.) the traditional cities have most of the time been rebuilt on the same place, and, according to the same principles. Through the aspirations of permanence, continuity, identity, the new cities were built on the ruins, footprints and memories of the old ones. Rather than being archeologically the same, these rebuilt cities

were improved, embellished and perfected to adjust memory and modernity within the shared pattern of a collective urban culture.

The spectacular reconstructions of Lisbon after the terrible earthquake in the 18th century, of Catania after the destructive eruption of Vesuvius, of London after the Great Fire, of Warsaw after the 2nd World War, and of so many other cities all over the world, document the genius of self-regeneration and emulation of traditional city-building, as well as its essential capacity of critical adjustments and necessary transformations.

Despite of our century's quick, dramatic and unprecedented changes and innovations, the traditional city has remained a good and desirable place to live. It has proven to be perfectly compatible with modern life. It is both an tangible reality and a realistic project of contemporary civilization.

Remember the paradigmatic Bologna, a prosperous and vital modern city where the best of the traditional European and Mediterranean urban culture can still be fully experienced today. This is so not because of backward-looking nostalgia and lazy urban policies, but because of deliberate cultural and political choices in favour of the traditional city. In the late 1960s the renowned Japanese architect Kenzo Tange proposed a modern megapolis for millions of people, a masterplan which Bologna rejected after thorough considerations.

The city decided to develop a future vision from the reasonable potential and the inherent properties of the historically grown traditional city. Under the direction of architect Pierluigi Cervellati a strategy of sensitive restoration, rehabilitation and reconstruction based on tangible principles of typology, morphology, of functional mix and social diversity etc. was set up and realized successfully.

Today Bologna is one of the most popular Italian cities, a booming place of commerce and industry, a renowned university city and art centre, a great place for leisure and entertainment, for good food and good wine, for "calme et volupté", as much as for the excitement and enlightenment of the most sophisticated amenities of modern life!

Some years ago projects for the demolition of the train station and the building of a pair of quite ridiculous skyscrapers (by *Ricardo Bofill*) were successfully defeated by the citizens of Bologna and the vigorous public crusade of *Gabriele Tagliaventi**, supported by numerous professional people from Bologna, Italy and from many places of the world.

How many contemporary examples do we know of successful city-building which do not in some way or another make their reference to tradition and historical precedents? Not many, really, and hardly any successful ones! New classical and traditional urbanism on the other hand have the best records of successful achievements and projects. The "New Traditional Neighbourhoods " built by the growing number of "New Urbanist" adherents and practitioners are not only popular and publicly acclaimed, but they have developed into an indispensable part of the Renaissance of American urban culture. "New Urbanism" has set up a considerable authority and has a growing influence in national and regional development policies.

Strangely enough the Universities prefer to ignore the new realities of the American Urban Vision in favour of uninhabitable speculations on Cyber-suburbia and other outdated avantguard fantasies. The Universities obstinately continue to educate architects and urbanists as an unpopular elite, proud of their alien visions of place and time, and unprepared to serve the legitimate expectations of the citizens for beautiful, comfortable and well-built homes, neighbourhoods, towns and cities!

In Europe, though not constituted in a strong organization like the "Congress for the New Urbanism", in many countries there are notable projects and realizations of traditional city building. Sympathetically enough these projects and buildings are often related to a quite inspiring vision of public housing, of economical and ecological land-use, of regional and local identity and cultural traditions. The "Fondation Philippe Rotthier" in Brussels, "A Vision of Europe" in Bologna, "INTBAU" in London, "Byens Fornyelse" in Norway and other institutions and organizations are actively supporting the reality of New Classical and Traditional Architecture and Urbanism.

The Traditional City, as the accumulated sum of experience, of know-how, of theory and practice, of models and types, as a repertory of tangible patterns and finally as one of the most genial inventions of mankind through history, has proved to be the best possible paradigm of contemporary city-building! Now some pretend that it can't be so and that our time has the duty to redesign from scratch. They prefer to fail rather than humbly to learn from the wisdom of whole preceding generations, a wisdom to which we as contemporaries are challenged to contribute! Little can be said about this self-defeating attitude which in the end will never come up with anything of value to the building of a vital contemporary culture.

Now within the context of traditional city-building there is no way of making traditional architecture an optional device. In order to achieve the highest level of integration, of quality, of diversity etc., traditional architecture has to be the necessary condition of traditional urbanism!

There cannot be a satisfying compromise on the issue of good architecture. As Léon Krier once stated, there is either architecture or there is the absence of architecture! Architecture in itself encompasses an unalienable condition of comfort, solidity and beauty, of scale and proportions, of constructive and tectonic logics etc. There is no defendable argument for mediocrity in the definition of traditional architecture!

Now the modernist alternative, the "absence of architecture" option or the "punishment by architecture" option, all continue to pretend to be relevant within the realm of architecture but do systematically reject any concept of durable meaning and value! Modernism as a self-referential system of "radical relativism" has long since lost any utopian connotation and the critical and poetical vigour of an avantguard. It is not a rebellious and youthful upspring of cultural regeneration, but rather a philistine establishment, paralyzed in its reductive, arbitrary and quite sad paraphernalia of theory and practice.

City-building and architecture are different scales of a same discipline. They can't live happily in deliberate conflict, in constitutional crisis, in ambiguous partnership, in fanciful

contradiction. This is a question of genetic integrity where forceful manipulations create monstrosities!

An alienating architecture is always offensive to its inhabitants, whatever the quality of the urban design! New traditional urbanism cannot blindly trust any architectural mutants and cannot develop its potential through the hidden agendas of art-genetic experiments!

Traditional architecture is quite flexible and rich in its capacities of adjustment and regeneration, but only within the boundaries of durable principles of quality, comfort, beauty and solidity, only within the respect of tectonics, of scale, measure and detail. Traditional architecture is not interested in mere novelty and originality, but in an "eternal newness developing from the extended elements of the past" (J.W.von Goethe).

The new and contemporary traditional architects and urbanists are not looking for striking statements and for competitive innovation. Their works are exciting and unique by their harmonious and elegant integration into existing social, environmental and urban contexts. This is done without servility to the past and without blindness to the future. It acknowledges the contemporary with positive lucidity and proposes new standards of modernity for a better world in a context of humanist and ecological criteria!

They are not missionaries or prophets of some hypothetical modernity, nor tragic or misunderstood heroes of anachronistic avantguards, but craftsmen and artists who design and build places and buildings of durable qualities of beauty, utility, construction, to allow the people of our time to live in comfort, security, harmony, enlightenment and pleasure. If man " dwells as a poet " (Martin Heidegger), then the new traditional architects and urbanists can be said to design and build a world where poetry still makes sense.

* "A Vision of Europe", dedicated to the revitalization and promotion of contemporary architecture and city-building based on the intelligence of tradition and the efficiency of historical experience, has deliberately set up its headquarters in Bologna, the most significant, symbolic and emblematic example of a contemporary Urban Renaissance. Gabriele Tagliaventi, its director, does not only benefit from the support of HRH the Prince of Wales, but has been successfully rallying international support around the popular objectives of "A Vision of Europe".

Lucien Steil

© July 2002

Views expressed on this page are those of the writer and are not necessarily shared by those involved in INTBAU.