Milica Topalovic
Urbanism after Urbanism

The discussion is exciting and I am happy to be here. Or maybe I feel stuck between a rock and a hard place. It is difficult at the moment, but let's see what happens.

I will not show any work to start with. I just want to make a few notes about urbanism and about teaching urbanism.

Quite recently, I watched this film *Architects' Congress,* which was commissioned by Siegfried Gideon and realized by László Moholy-Nagy in 1933. It documents a group of one hundred architects travelling from Marseille to Athens on board a ship with the name Patris II, which has become one of the key moments in architecture and urbanism in the twentieth century, namely the fourth CIAM [Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne – Ed.] meeting, where the charter of the functionalist city was drafted. The film is half an hour long and highly entertaining. I was immediately struck by a few observations that perhaps seem rather optimistic yet in contradiction to our current situation in the architectural profession.

First, in relation to emancipation and this debate, or more precisely to gender emancipation, it is clear that architecture used to be a male profession. There are very few women on board. I was also struck by the atmosphere of the camaraderie and good cheer, and also by the physical proximity of people. The engagement in the work was really physical. The boat was not big, and communication was completely analog. There is no digital technology, no beamers, no microphones. Images and drawings are physical objects. The sense of communication and of collaboration is very different to today's.

The third moment that struck me was the work itself, the large-scale urban plans. Thirty-four new cities and extensions of cities were discussed, such as the Amsterdam Expansion Plan, shown by Cornelis van Eesteren, who was the secretary of CIAM at the time. After this period, architects have not dealt with tasks of comparable scale; neither have they performed urbanism in a comparable manner. There has been an increasing lack of such work, not only because Europe has, in the meantime, been completely urbanized, and cities stopped growing at high rates, at least on this continent. This brings me to a topic that we mentioned repeatedly over the last couple of days:

the crisis of urbanism. A colleague, who is professor at the ETH Zurich, told me recently, «urbanism is dead.» And Bart Lootsma reminded us of the Koolhaas statement in «What ever happened to urbanism.» Paola Viganò, who is here today, also told me recently that urbanism was always in crisis, which resonated with me very much.

Paola Viganò

… was always perceived in crisis.

Milica Topalovic

Yes. So how did we get to this point? I would like to briefly look back in history. There are many historical narratives of urbanism in the nineteenth and twentieth century, but rather than telling the history of formal innovation, or the development of urban form, there is a narrative of urban history of urbanism in relation to *processes* of urbanization. With urbanization, I mean a process that evolves together with the development of capitalism. The theory says that this process has caused sustained migration from the countryside to the city, thus spreading new urban fabrics. This type of development has affected Europe for roughly 200 years. Since the nineteenth century, there has been a history of architects' engagement with urbanization. Major figures in modern architecture began to take the extra-urban developments associated with industrialization and rural exodus as the basis of their projects. This history has so far not been properly written, but all the elements are there.

There is an interesting Swiss historian, André Corboz, who wrote a short text, *La Suisse comme hyperville,* in which he proposed such a historical periodization of urban design in relation to urbanization. For Corboz, the first designs, which he calls «the city outside the existing city,» began in the mid-nineteenth century with Ildefons Cerdà. Cerdà initiated a new approach to city and urbanization by projecting the walls of the historical city outwards, in order to incorporate the neighbouring villages. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this mentality was adopted into several projects, all of which were engaged with organizing new settlements that sought to combine the advantages of the rural with the urban.

Still from László Moholy-Nagy's film *Architects' Congress,* 1933. The CIAM 4 conference took place on board the S.S. Patris, journeying from Marseilles to Athens.

The second period Corboz proposes is marked by the Athens charter. He calls this period «urban design theory against the city.» He is referring here to the replacement of unplanned development with socially, technically, and hygienically controlled structures. In the same year, 1933, Walter Christaller proposed another influential theory: the Central Place Theory *(Theorie der zentralen Orte)*. What those theories have in common was the hierarchical vision of socio-spatial organization, anchored at the scale of national territories, corresponding to the Fordist organization of economy. However, following the theories that argued for complete control of urbanization processes under the patronage of state, the processes of the mid-twentieth century were very different. As we know, practice in general was different. The major responsibility of public institutions was, de facto, handed down to individuals. A ubiquitous texture of private dwellings became the assumed fabric of the modern metropolis.

In the third period of a backlash, and we are now in the mid-sixties, Corboz considers Aldo Rossi's book, *The Architecture of the City,* as the key text or the genetic code of this period, representing the return to the idea of the city as a historical continuity. Corboz gives it the title «urban design within the city.» But this critical development also enabled a new view of territory – a view that accepts «the facts» of urbanization, as demonstrated in the works of Oswald Mathias Ungers in Berlin, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in Los Angeles, or Cedric Price in Potteries Thinkbelt. All of these projects have, in fact, arrived in the same period.

Then we arrive in the fourth period of this trajectory, which is ongoing, and whose paradigm is still being negotiated. This is the belief of Corboz and I roughly agree. The defining condition is the merging of urban and territorial scales: Corboz calls this the «co-existence of city and territory.» During the past thirty years, many concepts have described this condition, including *Città diffusa* in Italy or *Zwischenstadt* in Germany. In Switzerland, they called it the «decentralized concentration.» Andrea Branzi used the term «weak urbanization.» An example close to me is Studio Basel, which produced a study called, *Switzerland, an Urban Portrait* [*Die Schweiz. Ein städtebauliches Porträt,*

2006], which put forward – in line with the thinking of Corboz – a thesis of Switzerland as a completely urbanized country. This is a highly provocative thesis for Switzerland's self-perception. It states that the Alps and the Matterhorn and the villages of the Swiss Mittelland are as urban as the cities. In other words, there is no nature; there are no longer any rural areas. And, in a sense, the very basis of Swiss democracy is destabilized through these new relations.

What can we conclude from this historical trajectory of urbanism and urbanization? In shifting from the period of Fordist economy, which emphasized the national scale, to the period of neo-liberal globalization, the national territory has been abandoned as a relevant scale of planning, with some variations from country to country. The national planning approach was replaced by a more flexible or provisional idea of strategic planning with a focus on selecting new strategic territories. Broadly speaking, urban areas or agglomerations today receive different amounts of attention in terms of investment and disinvestment. There is no specific relevant territorial scale; the frame or the scale, is always contextual and depends upon the capital, the protagonists, and so forth. There are no overarching concepts in urbanism; correspondingly, there is no relevant unifying theory.

The next point, linked to the corresponding transformations, can be traced in the changing position of architects among other practitioners who deal with territory and the urban. The new constellations, which are predominant nowadays, foreground the role of engineers and engineering approaches, as well as law and economy as key approaches to shaping territory, rather than the role of design in the way it is familiar to architects and urbanists. At the same time, there is a shifting of the typical task of the architect into smaller spatial scales, from the territory and the city back to the building.

Looking at these examples that I have just mentioned, it is apparent that in different historical and political circumstances, the challenge of urbanization has been a constant. This was not a minor problem that has only recently got out of hand. There was the assumption, following the developments in architecture in the last

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twenty years, that the late-twentieth century city has become ungovernable, unplannable, and driven by laissez-faire politics. This has given many architects an alibi for retreating into a kind of strict professional mandate, but actually, this is no truer today than it was before. In fact, if we look back long enough, architects have persistently continued to reinvent urbanism and urban territory as a playing field of their practice. It follows that such an engagement is still relevant and necessary.

Where does this bring us today? How can the architect-urbanist operate, and what should be our program? I want to propose three notions that we have developed over time as a conceptual base of our work at ETH Zurich.

The first notion is «critical interdisciplinarity.» We tend to forget that urban and spatial planning have always been interdisciplinary – think, for example, of urban planning that was understood as a scientific discipline in the 1950s. We do not have enough experience within our sphere to tackle the complex problems of urbanization. We just do not have it. But as I mentioned, we have, to a certain extent, also lost ground to other disciplines in the planning process.

I believe that there is a dire lack of serious criticism from architecture and design perspectives on the urban and spatial planning processes that are taking place. For example, a criticism concerning mainstream approaches such as ecosystem services that emphasize financial tools putting a price on nature, resources, and so on, which are paradoxically understood as a remedy against capitalist exploitation of the environment. It is absolutely mainstream. Or, for example, criticism against the smart city movement that assumes technology as another type of all-important remedy.

These are both examples where technology and other sophisticated digital tools are instrumental in promoting neo-liberal programs, though they are seen as supposedly non-ideological. This is not the case at all, and there is not enough critical discussion within architecture about these developments. Let us enter a critical discussion with those practices. Once again, I propose that we look critically at how territorial and urban transformation processes are currently organized in terms of knowledge

and expertise. I believe there is a necessity to broaden the understanding of the territory and practice of planning from the purely technical and administrative domains into which they have collapsed, and to insist on the social and cultural dimensions of territory.

In our work at the ETH Zurich, the link between architecture and geography has been crucial. Other important ways of engagement with landscape and territory have come from visual arts and ethnography, for example Lucius Burckhardt and the practice of walking. With my students I insist on this dimension, telling them that they have to know their territory; they have to be present in the real world, with a sort of zero-degree observation.

I would call the second point «design as soft power.» We try to practice design that is understood as a voice that negotiates in a political process. Being part of the university, we are able to maintain an independent position, and make design without a client, so to speak. In terms of a teaching method, I do not make a separation between research and teaching, or research and design. These activities are seen as a continuum. They are interdependent. I also do not draw a line between interpreting, or seeing territory, and more traditional materialized design proposals. They are, in a sense, also equal.

For instance, we did a lot of research regarding the construction of new land in Singapore, a state-led territorial planning practice that raises the question of utilization of resources: Singapore has been the largest global importer of sand for many decades. We also did a lot of work that enables discussion about the position of the migrant worker in the city: there are a quarter of a million that live in Singapore. We investigated the idea of cultural heritage and possible approaches to it, in the situation of rapid urbanization, which is also destructive and tends to erase history in the region of Singapore. We were rethinking the border zone in the three-country situation between Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. These are examples of critical urban research applied in many concrete situations that I believe can serve, and perhaps have already served, to shift perceptions and change the terms of debate around urban transformation in the region of Singapore.

Anchorage zones across the Singapore Strait

Can architecture really go beyond the limits of the city, the agglomeration, the built-up area, and consider the world in its radical totality?

We have tried to position our work in such a way that it can play into the hands of protagonists who have possibly been marginalized within the development process, or simply to contribute to situations where we felt debate or ideas were lacking.

Finally, the third and crucial point touches upon the issue of scale that we have discussed previously, where we argue for «architecture and urbanism beyond the limits of the city.» I believe that there is a necessity to redefine the geographical field in which urbanism is conceived as a practice – to move beyond the limits of the city, in its traditional understanding, in order to include urbanizing territories in a broader sense. This is not new; I mentioned already a couple of names, André Corboz, ETH Studio Basel, and many others; the theory goes back to Henri Lefebvre. Recently there has been a kind of revival in this direction of research. But if you really think about it, it is rather challenging. Can architecture really go beyond the limits of the city, the agglomeration, the built-up area, and consider the world in its radical totality? Herein there is also an issue with the so-called city-centrism as a type of ideological bias. For example, Rem Koolhaas, when discussing his project on the countryside, pointed out that there is a vast amount of research produced about cities, and by comparison, there is just a tiny fraction about the countryside. Why is that so? Because, ideologically, cities are understood as a superior form of human settlements, which draws research, funding, technology, and so on. It is rather challenging to overcome this understanding. We do not have a history of practice and research of those extended urban territories. For our discipline to capture the questions of technological change, resources, and uneven development, «the city» is no longer enough. Even the questions of a history of the property of the land and of the commons mentioned earlier are allusive if understood only as questions of the center. The crucial urban questions are today played out elsewhere, beyond the limits of the city.

Laurent Stalder

I was struck by your historical overview of the implicit opposition you draw between urban theory and the reality of the city – between, let's say, Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin, a theoretical statement in the tradition of the ideal city, and the reality of Paris and its development at that time.

Milica Topalovic

Yes, the history of urban design is not the same as the history of the actual urbanization processes. These would make separate histories. In the post-war situation, theory pronounced a state control over the urbanization process, but in reality there was in fact a process of outsourcing urban development to the private sphere and the individual. This happened everywhere. I can give you examples from Belgrade where I come from – by the end of the socialist period, only five per cent of the dwellings were publicly produced, and the rest were private, often informally built, houses on the city periphery. Within political debate at the time, this fact gave base to a vocal critique, using the claim that housing Yugoslav socialist society is a public good and the state is responsible for the housing production. In fact, the reality was that the public housing effort produced its own form of elitism, which was of course contrary to the original intentions.

Stephan Trüby

So, you are interested in the continuity between the city and the territory. Isn't that countered by recent developments of sanctuary cities? Some of the inhabitants of these cities are even looking for independence from the surrounding countryside.

Milica Topalovic

What I am saying is that we need to reconceptualize the field of our practice in order to capture the methodology. We need concepts to put these phenomena into a continuum rather than to see them separately. This is a bit what Yoshiharu has shown with the fishermen's village and its relation to the forest and other phenomena. I would not say that the fishermen's village is still an autarkic rural place. It is probably different than what it was a hundred years ago. Technologies have changed, some economies have changed as well. We cannot draw those lines so clearly. And we shouldn't. That is my statement.

Adrian Lahoud

I am just curious about the narration of the boat as a way of opening up this talk. Because you could have started the talk in a number of different ways, but instead we have this really intimate introduction and discussion about comradery and gender politics. I wonder how this narration could come back into it towards the end?

Milica Topalovic

I think that the format and the intentions of such events are important – how things are done. Those people were confined in this heterotopic situation for two weeks. And they met repeatedly because there was an agenda on the table. This is not without intelligence. We also have to commit ourselves.

Nikos Katsikis

I would like to move on to the next proposition and give the word to Paola Viganò.