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Considering urban design as the „art“ of designing cities

“The return of urban design to its own domain is still pending.”

Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani

Overwhelmed by the rapid expansion of our cities in the recent past, urban design theory has taken off towards several directions; some believe that today’s city cannot be planned any longer while others see the recent development as their chance to define urban design as an experimental field that reflects the fast changing life styles of our times. Although some of the attractive models and renderings of these so-called “experimental” projects are somewhat intriguing, the qualities of these “unplanned” spaces as living environments are hard to assess. It is therefore necessary and meaningful to re-consider urban design as the “art” to design a city’s transformations in order to extend the current discussions in the field of urban design. There are many reasons for this. First of all, urban design is considered the “civic art” of making a city. The two terms “civic” and “art” represent the key ideas of the role and sense in the discipline of urban design. The lack of the “civic” or community life is obvious concerning the present cities; in addition, the meaning of “art”¹ must be rethought in the current context. Second, discourse about a city as a “work of art” has been part of urban design discussions for a long time and peaked between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century². Not only the physically built cities, but also written treatises and articles on urban design are key witnesses for the above-introduced discourse in the past. To achieve new directions in the present urban design theory, which are based on the re-consideration of urban design as the art of designing cities, it seems almost unavoidable to study the cause and effect of these treatises and articles and to analyze how their authors dealt with the terms and meanings of “civic” and “art”.

In this article, which reflects the current status of a research project on the *phenomenology of urban space in new urban areas*³ we are examining the above mentioned theoretical discourses on urban design with the help of four urban treatises, written between 1889 and 1949, which were significant and widely consulted works at their time and beyond.⁴ What their authors had in common was a certain discomfort regarding the fast growth of urban areas and the many negative consequences that came as a result of the growth. They also had the urge to be part of these developments in order to improve the living

1 About the meaning of art: The ancient task of cutting wood for construction and of fashioning wood into a new object gave the name to every activity, technique and field of specialist knowledge. In Greek it was called ‘η τεχνη (from a root that initially meant “to cut”); in Rome it was called *ars* (from a root that initially meant “to adapt, to embed”); see: T. De Mauro, *Tecnica e Tecnologia, stessa radice, strana coppia*, in: *Telema*, n.8, Roma, 1997

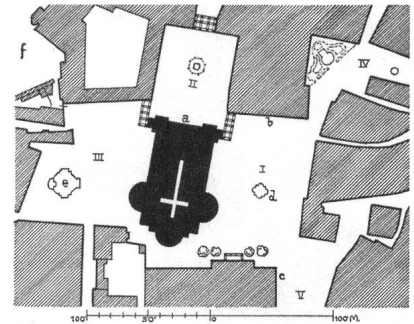
2 For an extensive overview of the discussions about the city as ‘work of art’ especially between the last decade of the 19th and the beginning two decades of the 20th century, see: Wolfgang Sonne, *The entire city shall be planned as Work of Art, Städtebau als Kunst im frühen modernen Urbanismus 1890-1920*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 66.2003, p.207-233

3 The content of this article reflects on the current research project *phenomenology of urban space in new urban areas* of the institute of urban design, emphasis: the systematics of urban design under Prof. Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani. The project is furthermore part of the trans-disciplinary poly-project *Future of urbanized landscapes* of the Network City and Landscape, NSL.

4 The four selected books are significant representatives of a much broader number of treatises and articles written since the end of the 19th century. For a complete list of works between 1890-1920 see: Wolfgang Sonne, op.cit. Anhang, p.234-236

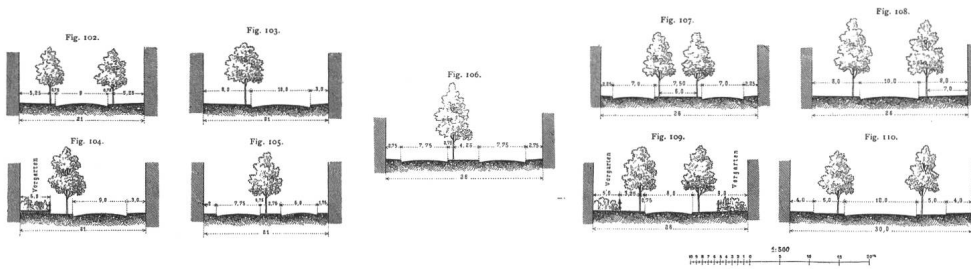
conditions inside and outside of the cities. These authors' works were concerned less with establishing a canon than with collecting, systemizing and imparting knowledge. It is also relevant to emphasize the main issues of these works: the city is understood in its spatial essence and made up of "urban spaces" rather than "zones" and "areas" and "open spaces". Therefore, the relationship is between buildings rather than unbuilt voids between built up sites. In addition, the authors point out the qualities of urban space by considering their origin and sense, rather than their originality or novelty. Open spaces, squares and streets were not elements left over by parceling out building sites, "but [were] designed to have an enclosed character for a definite effect"⁵.

In 1889, Camillo Sitte wrote *The Art of Building Cities*⁶, a manifest which had the well-known disruptive power of a bomb in the city planning practices of German speaking Europe. It attacked the poor and monotone urban designs and the lack of aesthetic in the cities designed by the modern "technicians and engineers" and it restored fundamental, but forgotten principles in civic design. Sitte's manifest led several generations of architects in German speaking and Northern European countries to believe that urban design was a result of the art of building and not simply a product of the "building-trade". According to Sitte, "art" required artistic talent alongside of scientific knowledge. He discussed this issue through an analytical approach and used a deductive method to demonstrate the lack of aesthetic and functional "modern" city planning systems. There is, for example, a meaningful passage in his book where he scientifically demonstrates how a rectangular plan for traffic movement is neither aesthetically pleasing nor technically functional. His aesthetic attack against geometrical modalities and sterile technical sciences to design cities carried out by technicians and engineers who are "armed with T-squares and compasses"⁷, reminds us of present issues in the contemporary crisis of urban design. We nowadays observe the same mistake, namely the fact that many of us have an understanding of urban design as a merely technical task. This combined with blind trust in technical tools and digital instruments, which are supposed to be capable of offering aesthetic and qualitative solutions for urban design, lead us back to Sitte's problem of making urban design a sterile, technical science.



Camillo Sitte, *Several Plazas surrounding the Dome of Salzburg*, 1890

5 Camillo Sitte, *The art of building cities. City building according to its artistic fundamentals*, translation of the literal: *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, 1889, by C. Stewart, New York, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1945, author's preface
6 Camillo Sitte, op.cit., English title translation
7 Camillo Sitte, op.cit., p.13



Hermann Joseph Stübben, *Street Sections*, 1890

It was only one year later, in 1890, when his contemporary Hermann Josef Stübben presented his strategies for urban design in the form of a systematically and thoroughly structured manual, *Der Städtebau*⁸. While in Sitte's book the criticism of urban design took up far more space than specific suggestions for their solution, Stübben focused on strategies for functional requirements which had to be met before even getting into the design phase for an urban plan. His initial understanding of the function of urban design as civic art becomes obvious in his examination of the relationship between "usefulness" and "beauty": „Die Anforderungen der Schönheit stehen eigentlich nicht für sich selbständig da. Wie die wirkliche Schönheit sich an die Zweckmäßigkeit unmittelbar anlehnt, so ist auch beim Entwurf des Stadtplanes die Grundforderung des Schönen durch aufmerksame Befolgung der Verkehrs, Bebauungs- und Gesundheitsbedürfnisse erfüllt.“⁹

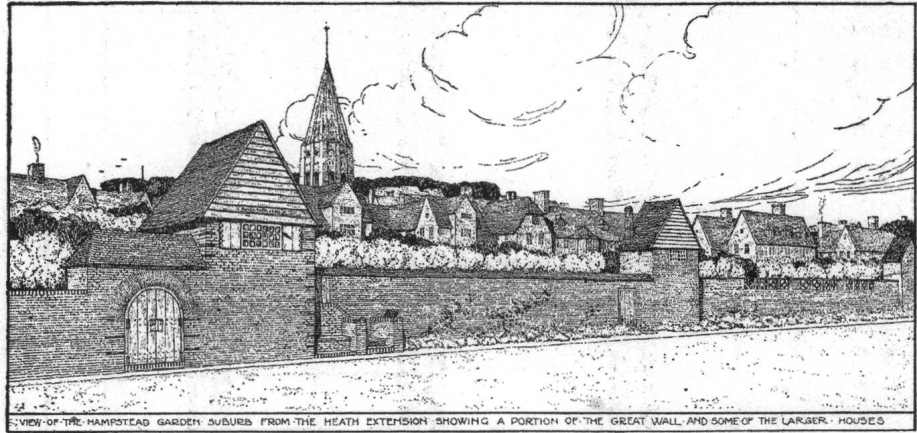
Translated this reads, "Beauty doesn't stand for itself. Just like real beauty is tied to usefulness, the design of the urban plan achieves the demands for beauty if it complies with the necessities implied by traffic, construction and sanitation." Looking at the problems cities faced at that time, it is rather understandable that priorities were set this way in the first place. At this point in his book, however, where Stübben discusses the element of a plaza as a result of the mutual relationship between these basic elements, the balance of "art" and "civic art" shifts. The creation of a public plaza, to him, asks no longer for purely functional fulfillment, but beyond that, for artistic talent. This shift also influences his reflection of the antique, the medieval age and the renaissance within urban design, since he succeeds in accepting all their practical and aesthetic values. Stübben concludes his book by admitting that more than just the entity of dwellings, traffic and public infrastructure, urban design is important for both the physical and mental well being of the population, which eventually stands for the beauty of a city. Stübben's work is a great example of how - through the elaborations and research within a certain discipline - long-standing theories get confirmed and new results are discovered.

⁸ Josef Stübben, *Der Städtebau*, Reprint of the first ed., 1890, Braunschweig und Wiesbaden, Vieweg & Sohn Verlag, 1980.

⁹ Josef Stübben, op.cit, p.50

¹⁰ Raymond Unwin, *Town planning in practice - an introduction to the art of designing cities and suburbs*, London, 1909

Another book which enriched urban design theory at the beginning of the 20th century was Raymond Unwin's *Town Planning in Practice*¹⁰ (1909). It can be classified as a manual, but besides technical requirements for town planning,



Raymond Unwin, *Hampstead Garden Suburb Boundary Wall*, 1909

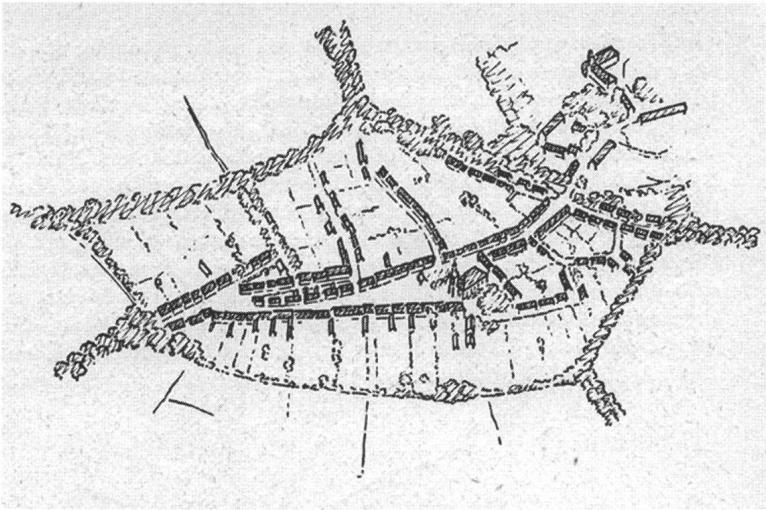
it contains a significant section on urban design. As mentioned above, the role and function of urban design was understood as “civic art”, which concerns the expression of civic life and which is beyond the fulfillment of standard building laws. Facing the lack of aesthetic values in his day’s urban development, Unwin expressed the necessity to put “art” within its modalities, as “*the well-doing of what needs doing*”¹¹. In this way he opened a new consciousness towards the practice of town building. There are at least two aspects of his work which merit attention. The first is that he stressed the usefulness of historical studies of old towns and their buildings, not in order to reproduce them, but in order to extract principles for new planning tasks.

He explains, “Though the study of old towns and their buildings is most useful, nay, is almost essential to any due appreciation of the subject, we must not forget that we cannot, even if we would, reproduce the conditions under which they were created; the fine and all-pervading tradition is gone, and it will take generations for any new tradition comparable to the old one to grow up. While, therefore, we study and admire, it does not follow that we can copy; for we must consider what is likely to lead to the best results under modern conditions, what is and what is not attainable with the means at our disposal.”¹²

Consequently, the dealing with historical evidence was not understood as copying, but as an attempt to find and verify valid principles. Secondly, among the elements which compose and define urban spaces Unwin extended the field of the typical urban elements like plazas and streets by emphasizing the meaning of “boundaries and approaches” and “centers and enclosed places”. With reference to urban elements as “boundaries and approaches”, Unwin stressed the necessity to define the physical limits of cities and its parts by designing specific elements. Furthermore, regarding the necessity to confer a character to the public places within a community, he noticed that there was no English word exactly equivalent to the French expression *place*. In focusing on this aspect, he extended the definition of this term from a physical feature to a place beyond a mere square, which is a clear indication of his attempt to shape the city into a *res publica*. Thus, although his work was directed at the specific topic of garden cities, Unwin overcame the typical manualistic attitude to define elements related to their mere technical features. Together with Ebenezer Howard, Raymond Unwin was responsible for a movement and its

11 *Lethaby*, in: Raymond Unwin, op.cit, p.4

12 Raymond Unwin, op.cit, p.13



Gerhard Jobst, *Tress line the city's edge as well as along the streets and ditches within the city to create a linear entity*, Lübbenau, 1949

theories which have largely dominated urban design in the twentieth century. Besides the garden cities movement, it was especially in the period after World War II, when large parts of Europe had to be rebuilt and the expansion away from the urban settings dominated over the inner densification of the cities, that their theories were again highly acknowledged.

More as a supporting instrument for practical problems of the urban designers than as a theoretical manual, Gerhard Jobst wrote the book *Leitsätze für städtebauliche Gestaltung*¹³, literally translated as “Guidelines for Urban Design”, which was published in 1949 by the *Deutsche Akademie für Städtebau und Landesplanung*. Through these guidelines on urban design in the countryside and within the city, Jobst created a manual, which demonstrated a new naturalness regarding the relationship of urban and rural areas. Rather than presenting rural settlements as an option for living far away from hostile cities, as Raymond Unwin did, the author focused on providing a successful transition from one place to the other. Both the title and the main emphasis within the book clearly indicate that urban designers like Gerhard Jobst had a rather pragmatic and precautionary approach to their profession. Urban design was definitely no longer understood as a synthesis of the arts, but as a field which took many aspects into consideration. For example, urban design required trans-disciplinary thinking and working and it needed the will to follow principles like the ones outlined in Jobst’ book. All of these were expected by Jobst before an urban designer could involve creative talent. Although the aspect of “art” was still considered meaningful at the time, Jobst did not claim originality, but based his statements about “art” on historic treatises, without giving specific credits within his book.

13 Gerhard Jobst, *Leitsätze für städtebauliche Gestaltung*, Tübingen, Wasmuth Verlag, 1949

14 The theory of *Urban Artifact*, understood as the city’s stratification and provoked by both slow sedimentation and violent transformation, represents the focus of Aldo Rossi’s research within a neo-illuminist attempt to create an analytical knowledge of the city. The field for discussions about the capability of a technical and cultural knowledge of the city as a discipline to check and control the rhythms and ways of the production of urban spaces was, however, kept open.

In: Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, English translation of the literal *L’architettura della città*, 1966, translated by Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman, Boston, MIT Press, 1984

Since the second half of the twentieth century, the discussion of whether urban design is considered as a “civic” task or an “art” has faded. The physical relationship between city and human being is the center of the discussions and “beauty” is defined under these rather than as aesthetic criteria. The issue of the physical consistency and complexity of urban beauty was investigated by Aldo Rossi in his famous study on the *Urban Artifact*¹⁴. In this study he looks

at urban design as a work of art and protests against the functionalist attitude of modern planning. Aldo Rossi's theories left many questions open, but served nevertheless as the basis for the works of theorists like Rob Krier and Léon Krier as well as the representatives of the New Urbanism Movement.

The field to verify and renew these lessons from the past in order to direct them in a responsive way towards the meaning of urban design today is still open. What is obvious so far is - in our understanding - the necessity to consider urban design as a discipline which, although subordinated to creative talent, demands a renewed consideration in the direction of a primarily methodical task. For this reason, it is advantageous if urban design refers to its own traditions and re-acquires the competence of urban science; this must be defined and based on the knowledge that the final output of this kind of process is a material fact. This understanding must constitute a starting objective in the process of elaborating on the strategies and pertain in specific ways to the role of the urban designer. Therefore, his ultimate task is to make a successful connection between different fields of knowledge which concur to define strategies for building the transformation of our cities – taking political, social, economic, ecological, transportation and infrastructural issues into consideration. If these qualities, combined with innovation and consciousness that history must be *translated* in a meaningful way into contemporary conditions, exist in this profession, it should be possible to achieve results that will nevertheless be modern, beyond the regressive nostalgia of the historicist experience.

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