Joseph Rykwert

A BALANCE-SHEET OF THE CITY

Should the city be read as a negative or a positive? Is it a tissue of buildings, separated by streets and squares, or is it a series of public spaces: streets, squares, gardens, parks—between which buildings rise as enclaves of private and semi-private volume?

The city must of course be read as both. Easy dichotomies such as positive and negative or public and private are going out of fashion again, and it is just as well. Nevertheless, the interplay of public and private is essential for any interpretation of the city: not the neat polarization of opposites, but a whole range of graded meanings: semi-private; institutional; commercial; defended (or at any rate defensible); silent and meditative—a list of assorted categories could go on indefinitely. Without such variety the city does not exist. It is the need for variety which brings it into being, the variety held together in the unity of an urban form: as if immediate experience was in the variety and form was in the recollection and the memory. One cannot exist without the other. In writing this I register a double loss. New city buildings are no longer designed to allow of the immediacy which we need so as to experience variety. And the city no longer has a generalized form, a memorable and inclusive topology: the city of our time is generally conceived as being indefinitely expandable.

Well, not quite indefinitely. Any responsible planner/urbanist

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will allow that some limits were essential. Indeed, late in the nineteenth century the notion of satellite towns which would simulate and alloy the features of both country town and metropolis was formulated and has been current ever since. Post-1945 particularly, this has presented a vexing problem: in Great Britain and in France, countries dominated by single metropoles of vast size, this policy has produced a notorious kickback, which goes under the euphemistic name of "revitalizing the dead city centres;" it has even become an election platform, and certainly a policy feature of a number of parties. But city centres did not die because of the urban planners, or at least not only because of them: the wilting of city centres needs to be interpreted in some detail. To look at architecture in this connection may—some will think—not reveal enough about what is a complex social phenomenon. Yet the decrepit nature of city centres is a syndrome, and the architecture in which it may be examined is not just one symptom among several others, since architecture makes, and constantly re-makes the body of the city.

Something unexplained but very important happened to young architects during the 1914-1918 war. It is best described as a shift of attention: from that time onwards most architects saw the house and housing as the focus of their activity, or perhaps it was even more definite than that. The house, single and collective, became the model of the architect's task. Of course, architects were to continue to care about other building types; about factories and offices, town halls and schools, even libraries and churches. But read the pronouncements of Le Corbusier or Frank Lloyd Wright, probably the two major architects of the century, and you will find that they are concerned in the main with houses and housing; even when he was justifying the design of the stateliest of inter-war buildings, the Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva, it was the analogy of the house which Le Corbusier invoked constantly in his apologia for the palace. *The Natural House* is Wright's most important sustained piece of writing; *The Living City*, in which he sets out his ideal of Broadacre is in fact also largely concerned with the house. The public buildings of Wright's Utopian settlements were largely shopping malls and stadia, with a sprinkling of office-skyscrapers: not unlike those of American suburbia in the seventies.

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It may of course be claimed that there is nothing new about the obsession with the house. The city, Leone Battista Alberti wrote in the middle of the fifteenth century, is a big house, the house is a small city; the adage was much loved by other architects—Palladio repeats it literally in his treatise. But of course they did not mean that the house is the most important building in the city; rather that the structure of human settlement, its topology if you like, is so consistent that its two opposites, the most public and greatest, the city, as well as its most private and least impressive, the house, embody the same, or at least analogous relationships. The much more recent shift of attention has to some extent also broken this analogy. When the house became the central concern of anyone involved in building, then the polarity broke. The break was itself related to the thinning out of the institutional texture in Western society, but indirectly. More obvious is the focussing on post-war reconstruction, represented by slogans like "homes for heroes" in Britain. The dreadful housing conditions of the urban proletariat, which they tolerated with growing resentment through the nineteenth century, became intolerable in the twentieth. The alternative of re-housing or revolution became a spectre with which public authorities had to struggle increasingly. Moreover, the shabby shrinkage of institutions implied an inversion of previous relationships: while the poorly-housed could take comfort and pride in the public buildings which were their other "home" in the Albertian sense, the metropolis of bureaucracy could offer no such consolation. The powerful social drive for improved homes and apartments swelled monstrously after the introduction of mass-market electrical-domestic equipment in the late nineteen-twenties and the thirties. As the equipment of the house improved and inflated, the city did not altogether follow suit. Of course there were changes: there was a revolution in the public transport system but it was even more radical in the private one. Mains supplies improved enormously, but they affected the private homes much more than the institutions. In the meanwhile, the city was invaded by another consuming and self-absorbed growth: the office building. There had always been such places of work. The royal palaces of Europe housed large administrative populations; so did any public institution. Workshops and warehouses always had offices attached.

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But the independent office building developed in the nineteenth century when the flatted warehouse, common enough even in antiquity, grew into the flatted office building. The parallel development of vertical electric transport and "fireproof" steel construction led to the rapid increase of city-centre land-values. The brutal force of this transformation had a much sharper impact on the cities of the New World than the Old: in the nineteen-thirties the silhouette of Chicago from the lake, or New York from one of its two rivers was an accurate graph of land-values. But it was the only form of value which the city then represented accurately.

In the forties and fifties attitude to land-values and to building in city centres became much more sophisticated in the New World, while Europe took over the American brashness. Some cities escaped. Paris was saved by a mercifully atavistic respect for its centre area, Amsterdam by its treacherous soil conditions. But whatever the detailed differences, there followed, in the post-1945 period, an inordinate growth of the office building as a "thing seen." Formally the office building is quite inert. Apart from the requirements of structure, it is only articulated by the towers of services: banks of elevators, commonly arranged with escape stairwells in parallel, and service ducts carrying mains supply and waste, are usually cores at the centre or on the edge of the building. Internal divisions were dictated almost exclusively by renting requirements. The city, public space, constrained these buildings negatively, in determining height-zoning and light-angles. The office building need make no more than the most token positive gesture to public space.

An alien element intruded into this development: the concern of the semi-public corporation for its image. While earlier some public institutions (the City of New York about 1910) showed themselves to the city as skyscrapers—in the same way as Moscow University did forty years later—the change in the capitalist world was promoted by that aspect of advertising which shades off into public relations, and the corporate image of the multi-nationals became a more positive formalizing agent of the office block than the old zoning regulations had provided. It became increasingly common for the large office buildings not to occupy all the volume the planners had delimited for them,

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and even to make timid gestures of public concern: restaurants with open-air cafes on the ground floor for instance. Interestingly enough, in socialist countries, an equivalent move was made by building city-centre hotels with some public spaces at the street levels. However, anyone who has walked down Wall Street on a Sunday morning (and there are a number of such streets in world capitals) will know that these moves must remain token gestures. Even if the silhouette of Chicago from the lake no longer accurately reflects land-values, the growth of the super-building, such as the John Hancock (for a short while the world's tallest building, in which you can do everything from being born to being embalmed without actually going outside), has marked both a new level of privatizing services and an apprehension about stepping onto the uncontrollable and menacing public space, the street or square.

The claim of this kind of building on the city was overwhelming. Mains services had to be supplied in unprecedented quantity and at unprecedented pressure in a few points; it also meant that what public space there was in the neighbourhood of the structure had to provide increasing areas of both circulation and parking for the motor traffic connected with it. In some cities this affected only fragments of the main centre. In others, such a process has completely destroyed the texture of the settlement: Glasgow and Liverpool in Great Britain are perhaps the most conspicuous examples of the process, though some of the rebuilt Ruhr cities are close rivals. The process has also meant that the area of the roadway (as against the pavement) has had to be considerably widened, so that the built-up city-block becomes an increasingly isolated element in the street-pattern: negative and positive are distinguished sharply, so that the city is more and more seen as a series of pavilions in uninflected public space.

The large hotel has become a very interesting reflector of this situation. The *belle-époque* hotel did of course cater to many of the guests' needs: not only restaurants and cafés, but hairdressers, sometimes even boutiques were found in them. But on the whole shopping was excluded, because the older traveller wanted to see and smell the city. The majority of latter twentieth-century travellers require of the hotel insulation against the alien and

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perhaps hostile terrain and population which they are visiting: the visitor is not therefore given access to the maximum "home" comforts, but provided with a vicarious life-style for his own, which he can adopt without disturbing his habits, even his *petites-manies*. Anyone familiar with tour-operators' brochures will know what I mean. The hotel is, of course, no standard for a city's institutional structure (and as I write this I realize that *institutional* as applied to buildings has an almost entirely negative association) to model itself on. Nor is this what I am proposing. But the modern hotel does tie up a number of popular prejudices about the city into a nexus, which is a surrogate city on a smaller scale than the American mammoth building—smaller because transitory. In the modern hotel the equipment of the individual room is lavish. Consider the tour brochures again: colour television in every room, private sun-terrace and so on. Where the hotel does not have any valuable commercial use, the connection with the outside world (telephone, postal services) are played down. But played down, too, is the squalor of the public rooms. The correlative of colour-television in private is often the help-yourself café in the public space, supplying the barely-defrosted dishes in the tourists' familiar home brand. This contrast has to some extent been transmuted in the New World by a series of highly successful (commercially) hotels which—while supplying the familiar private comforts—have offered the visitor a quasi-public space of unprecedented generosity. Even the very names used for such spaces: *atrium* most commonly, but also *forum*, suggest that the hotel is taking on, assuming a civic quality. They are still limited to North America: The Bonaventure in Montreal, The Renaissance Centre in Detroit are well-advertised examples of the genre; but all over the USA a number of the Hyatt Regency hotels have done it with varying success.

In fact these hotels cater increasingly to large conventions and congresses, when the whole visiting population is a single group whose organization has to be fragmented to provide an impression of the good fellowship which existed in the old town. But the simulation remains a substitute. Even the largest of such hotels can only be entered from the city with some difficulty. They occupy one or more city blocks, and are framed in a trap of

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access roads impassable to a pedestrian. The discouragement of the pedestrian has become an important part of our culture. We do of course still pay lip-service to the ideal—to the older cities where people still use the streets as if they were living rooms. Venice is the most obvious example. And it is all too easy to praise Venice while denigrating Liverpool or Detroit. There is precious little, however, that any planner or architect can do to Venice: but Detroit and Liverpool summon him urgently. These cities are seen as so problematic now because they have been monopolized by vehicular traffic. Yet only twenty years ago a German architect wrote a book about the car-directed city as if he were writing about the principal problem of Town Planning and had his book sponsored by the German Ministry of Reconstruction. About the same time a distinguished English landscape architect proposed what he called Motopia—a form of suburban settlement in which a continuous grid of slab-blocks was the structure, the building, with the spaces between the blocks laid out as parks, and all the traffic was carried on the roofs; the only accommodation was below the highways: the traffic roundabouts at the grid intersections were circular bridges between the slab-blocks.

But since then we have had the much greater sophistications of the Buchanan era, and our cities were confided to traffic engineers. It is they who have directed the latest developments which I have described. But through no fault of their own. At the moment there is simply no socially accepted framework within which a town planner can "direct" a traffic engineer. The relationship between them reproduces in some degree the old relationship between town planners and sanitary engineers half a century ago; the municipal sanitation department would often be the first to direct the layout of mains drains in any new development—since they were the most important piece of urban equipment. As the road service would be laid directly over the main, the plan of the settlement would in effect be the by-product of the drainage layout. And yet the quintessentially urban man is the pedestrian. Motorized man must have his way too, but the city where the *flâneur* has no room for his manoeuvres is not worth living in. In spite of that, the whole tendency of "urbanism" as town planning is called in many languages, has been to

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evolve strategies against the *flâneur*. The city of 3.000.000 inhabitants, which Le Corbusier designed in 1922, was neatly separated between housing (and its attendant public buildings, exchange places) on the perimeter and office accommodation in isolated high towers at the centre. The perimeter and the centre were separated by parkland. Now it is well known that the *flâneur* does not care for nature. He will tolerate trees in a boulevard, or even the planting of a square: but the miles of open parkland in a city of 3.000.000 inhabitants would have instantly driven him elsewhere. It is 60 years since that city was designed, yet it has been a paradigm, particularly for much of the development and building after 1945. In that sense Le Corbusier has been an accurate prophet, but something of a Jeremiah. Five years after the Corbusieran City, Benda published his *Trahison des Clercs*, in which a section is devoted to what he called "*la religion du succès*", the third of his major treasons, perhaps the greatest, and one of which Corbusier was often guilty. He believed in success, and his prophecy is made in its name. Fortunately he was not only a man of the contingent. His deeper preoccupations allowed him at other times to be true to his calling, to reflect on perennial values—and these reflections made him the great architect of his generation: but in his work the dialectic between his passionate attachment to the contingent, to the architect's service of indefinitely growing production, and the equally passionate attachment to a formal teaching which he believed to contain permanent value—this dialectic was never quite resolved, and was the source of his restless energy. His disciples could not sustain it. And in those who followed him, whether confessedly or not, the belief in success—success in a transcendent and impersonal sense—and certitude predominated. Underlying Benda's condemnation which I am here echoing in a rather different key, was his unease with the intellectual as the seeker for and the purveyor of projective certitude: or (if you like) as one who, knowing the direction of history, can measure his actions by their closeness to the future he has scientifically forecast. It is unimportant for the purpose of my analogy whether the forecast is scried on the course of the class war or on the developments of technology, or whatever. The important distinction to maintain

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is between what is right and what is likely, as against those who maintain that what must certainly come about is therefore inevitably right.

In architecture the forecasts had already been the staple of many nineteenth-century "ideal" plans. Fourier's *Phalanstère* was to be the perfect dwelling for the period of Guarantism, the sixth period of his social movement—he considered his own to be civilization, the fifth period in a succession of 32 such divisions, which were to last 80.000 years altogether; after which the world would see the end of the animal and vegetable creation. The systematic phantasmagoria on which human desires are as rigorously categorized as the progress or rather the passage of time is not just another by-way in the history of ideas; it led to the construction of the new dwelling-forms which were to precede the *phalanstères*: the *familistère*. Its influence on twentieth-century housing policy is well known. The principle which guided Fourier and his followers was stated in more acceptable terms by Auguste Comte, his near-contemporary. *Voir pour prévoir*: Comte wanted the laws of social change formulated in the same way as those of physics or biology. The business of sociology was to scry the inexorable future and help men to understand it, to promote it. Harmony had to come through sympathy with the inevitable.

The prophets of the automobile city belong to this order of thinking, and they are guided by another principle which is also dependent on it. Since for many urban theorists, in the future city, energy (and energy meant money and materials, therefore traffic) must flow quite freely, the city may be considered as an appendix of the great universal roadway system: the phrase is Idelfonso Cerdà's: Cerdà, who also coined the word *urbanization,* regarded himself as a precise scientist, and indeed he is largely responsible for the extension plan of Barcelona—although his forecasts have turned out to be sadly flawed. His contemporary Spanish theorist, Arturo Soria y Mata, foresaw the city buildings turning into the mere lining of the street. The street was to carry all forms of transport, while shortish lanes opening off it were to accommodate layers of workplace and housing. Soria saw his linear cities first as appendages, then as links of older "point-cities." In fact he built a short section of the *Ciudad*

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Lineal outside Madrid, but in the end he dreamed of a continuous city linking Madrid with Moscow. The early plans for Stalingrad, Leonidov's *Magnitogorsk*, Miljutin's scheme round 1930 are all refinements on Soria y Mata's conception.

Strangely these projects in which the street entirely consumed and eroded all other public space were formulated at the same time as others prophesied the death or at least the atrophy of the street. In Le Corbusier's city of 3.000.000 inhabitants the street had disappeared. He first loved then hated the street. Contemporary German planners shared the hate. It is astonishing in retrospect to consider the success of Ludwig Hilberseimer, whose prosy, grim and squallid drawings promised a streetless city—worse, if anything, than what actually happened. This success is a sociological phenomenon of the odder kind. He had moved from the Bauhaus to Chicago to continue his weird advocacy of the disassembly of the city into a system of motorways connecting high slab blocks. But this advocacy is not of archaeological interest only. The Motopia I spoke of is an echo of its influence and it has continued well into our own time. Again the motivation seems to be that "religion of success" of which Benda had spoken. But the emphasis has shifted from a solution of urban problems by production to a social engineering which involves following the stream rather than directing it. To isolate two instances: *The Levittowners*, a bulky piece of sociology, by Herbert Gans, intended to drive home the lesson that "people are entitled to be what they are"—or put in other terms, that suburbia is the choice of many Americans, and there cannot therefore be much wrong with it. *The Levittowners* appeared some fifteen years ago and its lesson has been taken up by a number of populist architects. The most articulate and elegant advocate among them, Robert Venturi, claims that "Main Street is almost all right." Like Gans he maintains that the architect or planner or contractor (or what you will) who makes the decisions about the programme and shape of the city is providing the acceptable packaging for a life-style which—in a democracy—is a life-style that a people devise for themselves, and to which they are entitled.

It is of course not the entitlement which is questionable, but the choice. No people ever collectively "choose" a life-style

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in some way analogously to the way they choose a representative to a legislature. Votes are not taken. Questions may be asked by social enquirers, but the answers, as is well known, are all too conditioned by the framing of the question. Nor can such questions ever have (they certainly never did have in the past) the status of political decisions, which might alter the policies of governments. Government must always be either by consent and complicity, or oppression. When the consent breaks, or oppression loses the complicity of a people, revolutions ensue. They may or may not change the rebellious people's life-style, but life-style by deliberate choice in the sense in which Herbert Gans talks about their entitlement is unknown.

And yet the Main Street of Robert Venturi's dictum is the product of a series of individual decisions, and the current social consensus is framed to allow the decisions to be taken in such a way as to result in the Main Street of the aphorism. It is one of the current quandaries of architectural discourse that we have no way of saying why any particular Main Street is not all right without invoking questions of taste of which *disputandum non est*. That is the popular wisdom, enshrined in a Latin tag for respectability. It is nevertheless one of the binding problems of any discussion of art in a pluralist society. Since it is generally held that the faculty of taste is innate and irrational, which of course the Latin tag presupposes, any standard of taste implies the existence or the recognition of an elite group in such matters, whose taste is in some way "trained." This training once upon a time depended on familiarity with the best examples of the arts, and this was acquired by travel. Travel is now generally available. The rows of charabancs any day outside the Louvre, or the Campo dei Miracoli in Pisa, or the Pantheon, or any other monument you care to mention, testifies to the popularity of the kind of travel which involves inspecting the generally recognized monuments of great art. This has however not led to Main Street being an emulation of those great monuments I mentioned. There is no generally acceptable visual culture, either East or West, in which the relative merits of the monuments and their lessons can be rationally spoken of, not even among those specially trained in the history of architecture. Without disagreement any subject becomes inert and routine; but there should

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nevertheless be some agreement among its practitioners about its relative importance in human affairs. It is one of the awkward problems of current discussion that the appearance of buildings is regarded as entirely secondary to their "success," to the ease with which they were built, the advances they required in constructional methods, or the ratio of usable space to their total cost. Yet these considerations of success, these rational considerations are often defied in practice, for reasons of prestige, prejudice and even taste; the rationalizing of this defiance seems taboo. The whole of Soviet building and planning policy since the thirties is a fascinating exemplification of the violent but concealed power of the irrational. German policy of the thirties, whose results often looked like the Soviet ones, was openly guided by irrational considerations: which however appear monstrous when translated into public discourse.

What may and may not be discussed rationally or quasi-rationally in the public forum varies considerably from decade to decade. It would be hopeful if a return to the public discussion of taste was foreseeable in the near future, but I think that it is beyond the immediate horizon. Those of us who care for the way in which the city is inhabited must find modes of explaining to those in authority why the philistine policy pursued by most governments, both central and local, has led to urban impoverishment; and to convince them that all the new talk about revitalizing the urban centres can only come to something if it is predicated on a concern about the city as a form.

The form cannot be something imposed on the city, external to it. City form is inevitably immanent: it can only be otherwise in a society which is closed round consent to some *a priori.* And in so far as our city form is immanent, Main Street—if not altogether all right—must be obligatory reading for the planner and the architect. If the time-honoured analogy between architecture and language has any force, Main Street must be the source for a public language in our society and there can be no other.

It may well be that the very notion of the architect as the master and governor of the house, his obsessive concern with housing policy, has led to a sharp but false focussing of the image of the architect as an over-powerful demiurge with arbitrary control over the lives of common folk. It was this power which the

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architect seems to have assumed after 1918, without quite realizing what sort of figure he would cut in the public realm. The promotion of the house, but a collective rather than a single-family house, to the status of a totally dominant building type has a series of interesting precedents. Many historians of modern architecture have "explained" the changes of twentieth-century architecture as being the result of the introduction of new materials. What is often neglected is the havoc the individuation of the new building types wrought on architecture at the end of the eighteenth century: factory, railway station, office building, department store and so on. The only way out seemed the invention or devising of a visual character for these types; and, at a time when history had become perplexing and overwhelming, this could only be done in terms of historical precedent. The reaction was inevitably couched in anti-historical terms. If each kind of building within the city seemed at one time to require a distinguishing livery, which also gave its historical justification to the building type (so that railway stations could be seen in terms of Roman baths or medieval castles) so at the end of the century the livery and its dictionary of precedent no longer seemed to fit. A new way of dressing buildings, a relaxed dress to fit the new age, which would put all the types into the same variable kind of livery, flexible enough to dispense with historical precedent altogether lasted for some twenty or thirty years. It was called *Art Nouveau.* But very quickly even that seemed awkward and ill-fitting.

The next step seemed all too obvious at the time. Livery could be dispensed with altogether. Under the livery, the costume, there was an essential building which could be revealed, and would then be seen in its essential beauty. That this revelation was launched in the twenties of this century at a time when the institutional life of the Western world had become threadbare to the point of inanition is our misfortune—even tragedy.

The well-documented case of the United Nations Palace, of which I wrote at the beginning of this essay, exemplifies the situation perfectly. Any attempt to persuade the reader that the whole current problem of architecture is in some way soluble by a new appeal to the past, or by adding ornament to the sort of structures we already have, cannot therefore be taken entirely

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seriously. The true need is a new public art. To that public art all the work of the past fifty years must be its primitive period. If it is not, then maybe there is no future for the visual arts at all—or at least not for some time. But that is not a hypothesis I find interesting to entertain.

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