



Delft University of Technology

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Correia, Luís Miguel; Bandeirinha, José António; Mota, Nelson

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José António Bandeirinha

Luís Miguel Correia

(CEIS20, DARQ, UC)

(TU DELFT) Nelson Mota

The European City as a Place of Coexistence

This issue of *Joelho* aims at bringing together contributions to discuss the European City as a project and as the vital locus for the historical processes that populate our collective memory and our shared cultural heritage.

The European City, as Leonardo Benevolo put it in 1993, defines “the stable background against which the flow of diverse experiences that characterize each generation is given significance”. For more than five centuries, the architecture discipline has been instrumental in defining this background. For example, in the Renaissance, architecture gained momentum as a key player in the radical development of the city as a project. The city became a powerful concept and the progressive rise of the bourgeoisie as the ruling social class granted political agency to the architectural discipline. Five centuries of permanent encounters and intersections between architecture and the city defined our urban identity and shaped the physical context in which we live. Throughout the twentieth century, however, the power of architecture was challenged by new political mantras and economical dogmas that encouraged architecture’s disciplinary retreat. The articles published in the following pages illustrate some key moments in this process.

Up until the First World War, the European city was chiefly defined by one of its genetic characteristics: it was a space of exception, physically determined and independent. As Benevolo argues, in the European tradition “cities were born as closed entities, in which the need for independence dominated those of internal equality and openness to the outside world”. “The result”, Benevolo continues, “was a composite and imperfect setting, formed by a balance of competing forces”. This characteristic would relentlessly change throughout the twentieth century, though.

Ákos Moravánszky’s article, “Blow Up”, discusses a particular moment in our recent urban history when this distinctive feature of the European city was challenged. It is the moment when the relationship between landscape and human life went beyond the physical reality defined by the bourgeois city. In the interwar period, Moravánszky argues, visual narratives based on aerial photography became increasingly used in the United States (e.g. the TVA project) and in the USSR to release architecture from Earth’s gravity. This process triggered the emergence of scalar-planning as a new approach to rethink the relationship between man and nature. It would influence the production of regional plans (e.g. Olivetti’s Aosta Valley) and projects at a geographical

scale in Europe, integrating ecological, engineering, landscaping, architectural, and aesthetic concerns to realize a socio-economical vision.

Through the Age of Extremes, as Eric Hobsbawm called the short twentieth century (1914–1991), most European countries developed housing policies to provide shelter for the working class. This process would challenge the architect's agency in design decision-making and eventually re-configure the European city. The article written by Irina Davidovici, "Tafuri on hous-ing", brings about the intellectual framework in which one of the main architectural historians of the twentieth century, Manfredo Tafuri, addressed housing as an inescapably political phenomenon. In her article, Davidovici discusses the challenges for the architectural historian dedicated to the study of this theme, reviewing Tafuri's account of seminal cases such as Frankfurt's and Berlin's modernist *Siedlungen*, Red Vienna's *Gemeindebauten*, and Rome's post-war neorealist housing. She emphasises how Tafuri pioneered a critical history of housing as the ultimate negotiation of built forms with the societal and economic processes that shape both buildings and cities. Tafuri's discursive approach was instrumental to highlight the relation between the

development of the capitalist mode of production and the processes of urbanization. In housing, this could be seen in the move from the “oases of order” produced under the auspices of reformist political agendas in the interwar period, to the “feigned spontaneity” of neo-realist post-war suburban housing districts that opened the way for the inexorable suburbanization of the European city.

Matthew Teissmann’s “An Ideological City” moves further to discuss the consequences for the European city triggered by the completion of the process of territorial globalization that followed the reconfiguration of spatial territories across the globe in the aftermath of World War II. The universal language of money worked ceaselessly to unite the various peoples of the world creating the Second Ecumene, as Peter Sloterdijk calls it. Doxiadis’s *Ecumenopolis* (1968) offered a persuasive illustration of the end of the city as we knew it – i.e. Benevolo’s European city. He has signalled the emergence of a new phenomenon, the global-city, created to accommodate this new worldwide movement of money, goods, and people. Teissmann discusses Rem Koolhaas’s famous academic thesis *Exodus* (1972) as a seminal example of resistance to the globalized city. The “voluntary prisoners of architecture”, as Koolhaas

put it, live in a walled city (an inverted prison) that creates an alternative urban space to the universal sameness and banality of the global city. Despite its apparent strangeness, the enclosure and containment offered by Exodus recreates a fundamental characteristic printed in the genetic code of the European city, a clearly defined interior.

The cross section through some key discourses on the European city ends up with Alexandre Alves Costa's essay "The City, The Suburb and The Rest. The Earth". In his piece, part of it originally written two decades ago, Alves Costa dissects the urban condition created by a new habitat that emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century in Portugal: the suburb. In sharp opposition to the stasis of the historic centre, Alves Costa delivers an optimistic gaze into the suburbs as a space where new opportunities for inclusion and co-existence could come about. Provokingly, he announces the suburbs as the real monument of the twentieth century, a human creation that should be maintained and preserved as such, in an age where the global virtual city will become the new locus for exchange and intercourse. Fast forward to the present day, Alves Costa stresses the dangers of removing the historic centres from the wider reality of the expanding city, and the other

way around. Alves Costa ends up his essay highlighting the instrumentality of design – informed by politics –, as a key contribution to project the articulation of the diffuse limits of the [European?] city, the suburbs and the rest.

After this cross section through discourses on the European city, the next set of articles featured in this issue of *Joelho* examines tangible evidences of the changing nature of the European city, particularly focusing on the entwined relation between design and politics. The first example, discussed in Chiara Monterumisi's article "Towards the People's Home", is set against the background defined by Sweden's celebrated marriage of capitalism and socialism in the interwar period. Using two social housing complexes built in Stockholm in the 1920s, Monterumisi reveals how municipal architects and planners, tenant societies and housing cooperatives teamed up to develop urban residential districts with a strong collective identity in the fringe of Stockholm. Based on a revised version of a canonical European urban creation, the courtyard urban block, the two case studies discussed by Monterumisi testify to the growing importance of collective spaces – the courtyards – to build up a sense of community and prevent the atomization of individuals. She also emphasizes the

successful attempt to recreate in peripheral neighbourhoods the same delicate balance between diversity and identity seen in the core of the historical city.

While Monterumisi's article sheds some light on the characteristics of a celebrated example of public housing, the Scandinavian model, Harald Bodenschatz's article "Public Housing in Fascist Rome" aims at examining the role of housing in the political agenda of dictatorial regimes in the interwar period, particularly in the agenda of Italian Fascism. Bodenschatz brings about the factors that contributed to make public housing a key component in securing the support of the middle classes to create the social consensus necessary for the preservation of Mussolini's dictatorial regime. The typological mapping of housing complexes proposed by Bodenschatz for Mussolini's Rome illustrates a policy based on the urbanization of the middle classes, and the de-urbanization of the urban poor.

Throughout the twentieth century, the spatial politics of Mussolini's dictatorial regime will be reproduced in many other social and political contexts and challenge the historical characteristics of the European city. One such example is described in Joana Capela de Campos and Vítor Murtinho's article "*University City of Coimbra: tabula*

rasa as a project methodology". In this article, the authors show how an urban fabric based on the co-existence of different social groups and building types was destroyed and replaced by a mono-functional citadel, designed to establish a new social and spatial hierarchy. The *tabula rasa* methodology, borrowed from the toolset of modernist urban discourse, was used in Coimbra in the late 1940s to erase the typical spatial markings of the European city that had been inscribed on the place. However, paradoxically, the *tabula rasa* approach was also instrumental to transform an ordinary urban fabric into a unique, extra-ordinary landscape of power, recently celebrated with UNESCO's recognition as a world heritage site.

In Coimbra the co-existence of ordinary practices of everyday life with the university campus was swiftly replaced by a programmatic monoculture using the wrecking ball. In Athens, the physical transformation of the city followed a different path. The urban landscape was transformed by urban management, a less tangible, yet more pervasive, method than in Coimbra's case. Platon Issaias's article "From the flat to the city" offers a compelling account of how the function of the family, real estate market, ownership and property laws influenced the development of

Athens' urban and social landscape from the post-war years until the present day. Issaias shows how the "informality" championed by the *polykatoikia* system is in fact a political construct to make Greece a nation of asset managers, a country where working and middle-class families were converted to real estate speculators. His article goes further, showing the repercussions of this system on the current social and political turmoil in Greece. While Athens is a very particular case, it nevertheless reproduces a kind of urbanity determined by spatial, economic and social factors that are common to other European cities, especially in the south. Athens's tense relation between individual interests and collective welfare is indeed part of the DNA of the European city.

This trip across projects from Stockholm, to Rome, to Coimbra, and finally arriving in Athens gives us a parallel cross section to the set of articles presented in the first part of this issue. The managerial layers that support the creation of the European city surfaced noticeably. The architectural solutions – more or less initiated by architects – that came along with them were discussed as part and parcel of a large political and cultural construct. The third section of this issue comprises two review articles that address the elusive

relation between architectural discourse and the politics of urban management in the construction of the European city.

In his article “The Politics of the Plinth”, Kasper Lægring reviews Pier Vittorio Aureli’s influential book *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, published in 2011. Lægring critically discusses Aureli’s drive to reunify the domains of urban planning and architecture under the umbrella of form. This reunification, Lægring argues, is an attempt to come to terms with the progressive loss of relevance of the architectural discipline in shaping the historical transformation of the city, in general, and the European city, in particular. The post-industrial city is shaped by professional managerial urbanists, whose influence gained momentum since Ildefonso Cerdà’s *General Theory of Urbanization*, published one and a half century ago, in 1867. The urban model that developed since then, as Lægring asserts, is predominantly based on visual mastery (the panoptic gaze) and spectatorship, rather than on haptic communication. While Aureli is critical of the managerial approach and its inherent interest in promoting visual culture, Lægring argues that in *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* Aureli’s discussion on Mies van der Rohe’s recurrent use of the plinth as a substantiation of the forces of urbanization is largely ocularcentric.

In the last article of this issue, Nuno Grande and Roberto Cremascoli discuss the concept of neighbourhood, a key component of the European city that is threatened by the materialist approach sponsored by managerial urbanism. Grande and Cremascoli expose the sharp deterioration of neighbourhoods in European cities, where once they were cherished as intangible devices to promote values of proximity, tolerance and multiculturalism. Using as background their curatorial approach for the exhibition “Neighbourhood: where Alvaro meets Aldo”, showed at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, Grande and Cremascoli claim that the current European identity crisis is strongly related with an urban management that is more focused on those who use the city, rather than those who *live in* the city.

The collection of articles in this issue contributes to stress the fact that cities are a palimpsest where multiple historical phenomena are overlaid on the same physical support. The European city, in particular, is a stable place against which the flow of time and the accumulation of experiences can take place. As such, these articles allow us to travel in time, navigating through different aspects that have contributed to make the European city a cherished repository of collective memory and a shared cultural heritage.

As Leonardo Benevolo pointed out, the European urban institutions have always negotiated a balance between collective control and individual initiative. However, over the last seven decades this balance has been challenged. In the post-World War II, the utopia of the functional city was hijacked to serve the welfare policies of the states sponsored by the Marshall Plan. Both in urban extension as in urban renewal, technocratic planning approaches were encouraged to back up a political program of de-urbanization inspired by the nemesis of the European city, the American suburbia. Eventually, in the 1980s, the paradigm of the state as provider shifted to the paradigm of the state as enabler. The European city became nothing but a commodity where the state performs as facilitator for the consolidation of the hegemony of the markets. Nowadays millions of tourists flock to London, Rome or even Coimbra looking for “experiences” of the European city, as the travel agencies advertise it.

In the European city there has always been a competition between public intervention and private interests, which constantly requires an equilibrium between different agents in the decision-making process. The articles published in this issue of *Joelho* offer critical contributions

to understand the production and reproduction of approaches to the (re-) definition of the identity of the European city. Furthermore, they contribute to expand the debate on one of the fundamental achievements of Western civilization: the European city as a place of coexistence.

