Celebrating Complexity:

The Wicked Truth in Urban Design

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When we discuss architecture, we are dealing with a set of phenomena with actors involved, sustaining a series of chain reaction in a certain period of time, within a particular range of space. These all happening phenomena, which in another expression is basically the sum of our everyday life, are taking place in venues where space is bound by physical structures. Each event including all its carrying factors (economic, social, cultural, environmental, etc.) is intertwined with these structures, forming an intricate notion of architecture. In understanding architecture itself, our bodies are naturally endowed with senses that are capable to distinguish each different kind of impulses and thus perceive a whole spatial experience.

Through his dissertation, "The Role of Sound in Making of a Sense of Place in Real, Virtual and Augmented Environments" (2009), Gokce Kinayoglu highlights the unique concept of soundscapes and shows a simple example of how impulses that are available in the surrounding environment, are also differentiable from one another in its role of our perceiving and defining space. Vision, which lets us understand the state of things by its pictorial frame, is different to sound that tells us more about events and activities occurring in time (Kinayoglu, 2009). Dissimilar dynamics and dimensions of impulses and senses (for instance, vision and sound) then qualify a complexion that contributes to shaping the very existence of architecture.

> *"Soundscapes are collectively created by the inhabitants unlike planned architectural and urban spaces, which is often top-down, built and imposed. No amount of planning or design can predetermine the exact way a sound environment will function."*
>
> *Kinayoglu 2009, p. 67*

From here, we can understand that the presence of sound as a single sample among many other elements could establish its own territorial dimension and at the same time contributes to a larger architectural construct. It proves the axiom that validates the magnificent specificity of our every organ to support us as a unit of individuals occupying space, as well as the richness of interrelated matters and components in architecture. More or less, the similar idea of recognizing the diversity and complications of elements was mentioned in Robert Venturi's "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" as an interesting character and potential prospect in design. In his book, Venturi expresses his fondness of contrasting degrees and the

beauty it creates. While criticizing the modernists' typical coping to diminish and neglect a good half of existing design problems, he promotes the spirit to embrace them all. Instead of eliminating variations, he believes in taking advantage and adding values through juxtapositions of things. Although Venturi is not only referring to urban design, when his idea is brought upon the scale of a city, it can apply to suggest that architects should take comfort in the wicked and complex nature of communal inhabitation they can never cease from.

Figure 1 Piazza S. Marco, Venice (left) and Times Square, New York (right) (Venturi 1977, p. 54)

Regarding this matter, Venturi expressed his critic on several architectural objects, including Venice's Piazza S. Marco and New York's Time Square. He pointed out the contradicting features in scale, rhythm, and texture on the first and the similar quality conceived through different language on the latter (see Figure 1). Such comparison showed a distinctive atmosphere from each varying degree of inconsistencies. Even from landscapes that are alike, we could find both evidence of qualities that speak endless inconsistency and, on the other, infinite consistency (see Figure 2). But what is critical according to Venturi was the flaw in the two. The first one showed a scene of a road town that considerably is a no-man's land filled with inconsistencies, creating chaos, and the second, Levittown-like[1] spatial order resulting boredom. Then, from what we could see as a misfit between spatial boundaries, occupancy, and impacts from its rules:

> *"In road town we have a false complexity; in Levittown a false simplicity. One thing is clear-from such false consistency real cities will never grow.* ***Cities, like architecture, are complex and contradictory****."*
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> *Venturi 1977, p. 54*

[1] Refers to Levittown (United States and Puerto Rico), seven suburban housing developments designed by William Levitt, Levitt & Sons, built after World War II.

Figure 2 Highway (left) and Developers' Houses (right) in USA (Venturi 1977, p. 55)

The complexity of city life is embedded with several interrelating dimensions or referred by Matthew Carmona as "everyday subject matter", that simultaneously will always remain a challenge to architects and urban designers. Those dimensions—that have been defined by Carmona into 'morphological', 'perceptual', 'social', 'visual', 'functional' and 'temporal', are the grounds in which the life of urban society revolves. Often many variables shaping and affecting this total life are overlapping then, therefore becoming difficult to identify and control. The complicated attributes constructing a city life in urban context is leading the authorities, the lawmakers, the government, the designers, the planners, to arrange a particular set of standards and ideals on some sort. These standards and ideals are no other than a conditional matrix to adjust all the parts of communal living into a large fitting whole, despite the social and cultural leverage in predetermining its reality in day-to-day basis. But then, there is a problem in setting standards and creating mental images of the ideal without the familiarity of what is real and the readiness to deal with it.

When it comes to design, one is facing the impediments in predicting the shape of future and the risks of incompatibility between his prediction, which at some point is what he believed to be his *truth*, and the *real truth,* that is the actual occurrence after his design. In regard of this matter, Michel de Certeau pointed out the common weakness of designers to overlook the connection and difference between the two. To have his design correctly serving to the problem, an architect or designer must not lose sense of which units that are actually living and defining the design itself. Many design failures especially in city planning, are rooted deeply in the designers' incompetence to predict his design not only in three-dimensional extent but also in the overlapping flux on users' level of mileu. As much as it is elaborate, it is also the bare minimum to apprehend the complex nature of urban challenge. De Certeau tried to 'formulate' the negotiation process as an attempt to give a clearer view of the wicked urban design problems to designers.

> *"I call a "strategy" the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (...) can be isolated from an*

> *"environment." A strategy **assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper** (propre) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it … "*
>
> *de Certeau 1984, p. xix*

Architects or urban designers are ordinarily commending certain vision to their design. This vision is giving the entire plan a framework of goals to achieve in the long run; a strategy. What is often to neglect is the unconscious assumption of the real condition on-site to be proper and conducive to the plan. With only this blind assumption, architects will fail to grasp the real truth of his problem, for every design is solving one while creating another.

> *"I call a "tactic", on the other hand, a calculus which **cannot count on a "proper"** (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. (...) because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing"."*
>
> *de Certeau 1984, p. xix*

While strategy aims for the big picture of the success of a design, there is a tactic which in its nature is unattached to the plan and arguably can be unexpected. It is narrated by the users whose actions range about the design, define how it functions, and thus give meaning to the place. As the space within any range, any design, is always in change, actors who live in it are always adjusting the way they occupy and inhabit the land. Every fault in the system's condition is able to turn as an opportunity to advance in life, even if it means to be outside the law and violate the rules. This possibility is vital to be reckoned for the design not necessarily to be perfect, but closer to the truth of everyday life.

The challenge to create a solid design order has appealed to many architects and urban designers. One among them was Le Corbusier. In 1924, he was considered ahead of his time for presenting his idea of Radiant City. His modernist vision was manifested in the form of a city arrangement, providing residency facilities in blocks configuration. Le Corbusier's idealization to system order in architecture (as shown in his famous quote: "a house is a machine for living in"), was also reflected in Radiant City. He ambitiously composed such a design that was claimed to accentuate the importance of effective transportation, not only to generate a better lifestyle but also to create a healthier society. His consideration of the equal exposure to the sun and green areas was neatly articulated through the clear grid of the city.

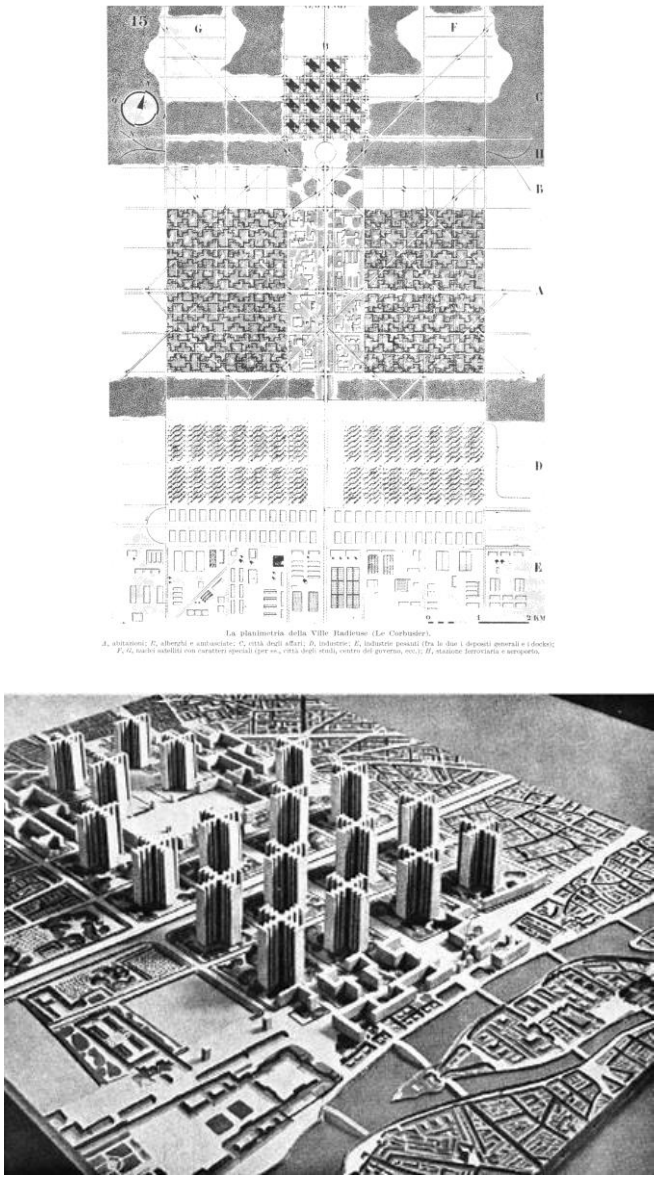

Figure 3 Grid in Radiant City indicated by program function,
in a plan diagram (upper) and model (bottom) (AD Classic 2013, via land8.com)

Le Corbusier's plan strictly divided the land into blocks of different functions; commercial, entertainment, business, and residential. At the center was business district filled with 200 meters high skyscrapers surrounded by pre-fabricated apartment buildings. The two functions were connected by a vast underground trains system. Each business building was projected to accommodate five to eight hundred thousand people. Whereas, each housing apartment (called *Unité*) was able to be the home for 2,700 inhabitants. The apartment would also be equipped with catering and laundry facilities on the ground floor, as well as kindergarten and pool on the rooftop (Merin, 2013). Between the apartments would be some park to provide natural sunlight and maintain a public territory separate from the homes to the citizens.

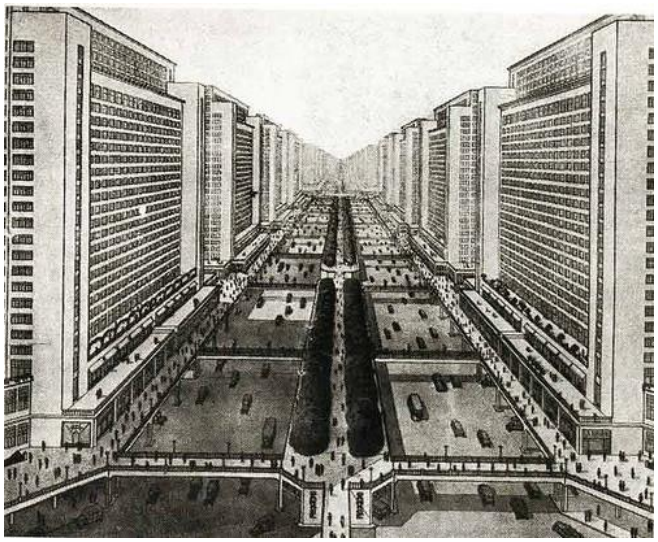

Figure 4 An illustration showing a strip of housing apartments with parks in between (AD Classic 2013, via iamyouasheisme.wordpress.com)

Le Corbusier's idea of Radiant City was never realized, yet the architect developed a few drafts for some existing lands in European cities, such as Paris, Antwerp, Moscow, Algiers, and Morocco (Merin, 2013). Then he was given the commission to build the capitol complex of Indian capital of Punjab, the city Chandigarh, in 1949. He finally took the chance to apply his zoning idea into reality. The other implementation of Le Corbusier's Radiant City can be seen in Brasilia, Brazil.

Figure 5 The Legislative Assembly and the Secretariat in Chandigarh (AD Classic 2013, courtesy of Nicholas Iyadurai)

Although the grid and zoning system was clean by plan and reasonable in theory, Radiant City raised another issue. Apparently, the separation of housing and business district aroused an insufficient contrast around daytime that lead to security problems. Especially in Brasilia, the plan was much criticized for not taking into account the customs of its citizens and the inadequate provision of public spaces. Due to the unavoidable repercussions of Modernism, the housing apartments in Brasilia that was located just outskirts of today's major cities had encountered a contest against poverty and crime, and at the end, most of them had been ceased to demolition.

Radiant City was just one of a few attempts in establishing the ideal weave to the fast-changing urban fabric. The computation was assuring, its aesthetic might as well be tempting, yet its approach was defective to fit the actual inhabitants. The pursuit of order had undermined the spirit of the city as a dwelling apparatus. In spite of the fact that Le Corbusier still has to be appreciated for his advanced thinking and its imperative remark to modern architecture, perhaps Radiant City can be evaluated as an oversimplification, a transgression against the complex reality of urban living. With such kind of neglect, architects and urban planners are just legends working for fantasy land. No total measure of generalization will compensate the intricacy and the beauty in dynamics of details. Instead of capturing a city as a stagnant matter, anyone with the power to involve in its design shall accept the truth of urban landscape and encourage its condition as a potential instrument to improve urban life.

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