



The Maison de l'Europe de Paris and the City of Paris have organized a preparatory seminar of the conference entitled:

29 January 2007

Urban forms: living in cities

Cities are in a state of constant change, and urban society is in perpetual effervescence. This type of phenomenon needs to be accompanied by certain types of organisation, in terms of policy and expertise; which in turn implies a need for the comprehension of contexts, circumstances and territories. The city of tomorrow must be based on the city of today.

We are currently faced with a certain number of strongly-marked trends, as far as metropolisation is concerned. The dominant schema is that of Malthusian urbanism, with politicians taking fewer and fewer initiatives. The governance of planning projects is undergoing a mutation, and territories that are significant in planning terms have changed over the last few years, with growing disparities between decision-making and implementation. What is lacking is not land, as is often thought, but projects, and a determination to bring them to fruition.

This conference revealed how different the realities of European cities can be. In Hungary and Romania, the socialist past continues to cast a long shadow, with the city as a representation of State policies and priorities, but also, and in particular, the transition to a market economy (with an absence of control over development and planning, the disappearance of public space, etc.). In this type of context, making the city a pleasant place to be is not an important objective.

And yet planning methods and skills are now better developed than ever. Planners are acutely aware of the complexity of the problems they have to deal with, and the need to operate collectively. The scale of the work is becoming ever larger, and at the same time the detail is becoming finer. This is a process whose intermediate stages we are currently traversing. Between the point of departure of a project and its culmination, ten or twenty years later, it is important to ensure that each stage in a programme of urban transformation is practical and desirable. It is often necessary to work with unknowns; and this is a situation in which expertise on transport, habitat, social dimensions, heritage issues, territorial assets and a poetic or painterly eye are among the factors that contribute to constructing the reality of a context, and making it comprehensible.

This kind of comprehension is a precondition to any urban transformation project that is concerned with sociability, to which the first part of the day's proceedings was devoted. Some methodological considerations emerged: the idea of working simultaneously on public space and habitat, taking into account temporality as an essential aspect of any project, and not

ignoring the political dimension of cities, given that the life of the city *is* political life. It is also important to combine simplicity and complexity, major projects and one-off operations. The political will of a mayor can be fundamental, but also the rationality of a programme and the intelligence of a negotiating process, which are crucial, not simply for the sake of the democratic process but also because working on complex issues means working with the multiple groups that make up a city: suppliers, business people, officials, local residents, etc.

Apart from questions of method, some aspects of urban sociability might be mentioned. To begin with, there is the human quality of projects. This has to be painstakingly worked at, and every project is subject to conflicts, contradictions and decision-making along the road to humanisation. Then there is the multifunctionality of the city, and the combination of different urban functions, but also urban density and intensity, and people's privacy needs. The city can be seen as a model of symbiosis, or an ecosystem, rather than an embodiment of struggles between different functions and constructions. Quality of life and innovation, equilibrium and durability, diversity and flexibility need to be at the centre of a model of metropolitan sociability, which should be audacious enough to try out ideas (without always claiming to be capable of predicting all the outcomes), and to invent urban forms that are compatible with the social context. This new metropolitan model needs to be accompanied by new forms of governance, which should be capable of combining different forms of action, and of representing an awareness that planning, urban forms and sociability are inherent in political life and activity.

What are the prerequisites for this type of governance? Firstly there is vertical integration – the coordination of policies and cooperation between central government and local bodies, administrative departments, residents' and tenants' organisations. Then there is horizontal integration between different sectors, in partnership with the relevant interest groups. Finally, there is the question of long-term financial and organisational commitment. The four main protagonists in this new system of governance are the State, local bodies, business and residents; and what is needed is a system within which multilateral (and in some cases bilateral) negotiations can take place.

The second part of the day's proceedings was devoted to the identification of financial and decision-making responsibilities. It was noted that although local people pay for urban transformation, they do not make the decisions. In the new forms of governance, intercommunity cooperation and public-private partnerships, the citizen is even less conspicuous. These systems are opaque, and they circumvent the question of democracy, whatever the level of decision-making.

Yet negotiation has proved its worth. It can give projects more concrete grounding, and more durability. What it requires, in addition, is a realisation that there exist several forms of knowledge and ways of looking at cities, along with an acceptance of confrontation and debate. This in turn presupposes that representations of the city be made explicit, along with the intentions which are at the origin of urban projects, and which underpin them. The authorities need to make professional and consulting services available to civil society, and to put issues of utilisation and participation at the core of training programmes for architects and town planners. It should be recognised that conflict is inherent in the urban way of life, and that urban forms do not exist independently of people.

Frameworks of discussion differ, between cities and countries. In the Netherlands, the idea of risk is much more widespread than in France, and there is a real culture of negotiation. In England, the form of partnership is different again, starting with the fact that the planning system is not regulated, but based on negotiation. In Budapest and Bucharest, the weakness of the public sector and the problem of decentralisation are preeminent.

The different contributions to the proceedings cast light on the extent to which ways of

paying for urban change can influence the content of programmes as such, the morphology of cities, and the fact that the mode of implementation of a project can be as important as its component parts. In situations of public-public or public-private partnerships for the provision of financing, a completely new approach to implementation is required, and one that gives more prominence to negotiation, consensus and contractuality. The way a project is carried through to its conclusion must interact with the way its architectural and planning aspects are conceived. In terms of financing major projects, the European Union now wields considerable influence.

Finally, the seminar raised the question as to what metropolitan models actually *are*, or potentially *could be*. The crisis in the French suburbs reflects a change of era: this type of architecture was designed to address a social problem, and sprang from a strong policy of models. But the capacity to create such models seems to have disappeared. It is now more a question of territories, of rejecting dogmatism and linking up architects' grandiose visions with views of the sky, with habitability – with the ground one walks on every day. What is a metropolitan model? What value does it attribute to the kinds of detail which, though apparently trivial, are those that give a metropolis its inner life and identity? Does a metropolitan model not, above all, represent the way a metropolis dreams of itself?

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