Ideal cities - ideal citizens? Participatory urbanism and activity patterns in a post-utopian European context

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We accept contemporary conditions as something given, as reality - just no utopia, that would be too easy.
Lucien Kroll, 1982

Post-Utopianism?

To call our contemporary European context a post-utopian one can be understood as a provocation. What has happened to utopian thinking? What kind of city visions predominate at the beginning of the 21st century? And what are ideals and models that we aim for?

In these first decades of the 21st century, everything seems to be technically possible and it is rather technology itself that confronts us with the limits that the technical progress has produced. Within an uncertain state between technological achievements and the limits of growth, some of the predominant discourses seem to recall form, order and the importance of history as guidelines to urban development.

The mock up of the facade of Potsdam's seventeenth century city palace as the first step into its literal reconstruction presents us the reconstruction of a vanished past and, as a consequence, the transformation of a palimpsest of styles and traumatic political influences of the 20th century into a cityscape that wipes out such traces in favour of a historicist new perfectionism, a new ideal. Is it the one we should follow today?

Only forty years earlier, in the late sixties, the architects and artists collective Haus-Rucker-Co (Bogner, 1992) made the "Balloon for Two" pop out of a 19th-century building in a traditional Viennese neighbourhood - a clear gesture to show that new ways of living are desired, that tradition has to give way to new forms of both more individual and more uncaged forms of living.

Figure 1. Mock up of the facade for the reconstruction of Potsdam's 17th century city palace. Photo: Kathrin Golda-Pongratz, 2011
We also know to what extent individualism and our missing respect for territorial conditions has changed our urban landscapes and our idea of the urban during the last decades. Rather than as liberation from collective traditional living, it acts as a motor for urban sprawl and a worldwide-extended suburbanism and a loss of the notion of the civitas, the essence of urban cohabiting and sharing of common responsibilities and rights.

On the other hand, the idealized demarcation of one's own territory is inherited in the human existence, also of the enlightened human being. Private property is also a motor of development and of (not only destructive) speculation in the cities, in complex urban environments. It is when man also searches for establishing or maintaining roots in the territory and a social context and starts to take on responsibilities.

**Individualism and civitas**

Let us discuss the relation between individualism and civitas and figure out if maybe there are, apart from increasing expressions of a ragged individualism in our Western urban societies, also forms of positive forces of appropriation, of resistance and of new expressions of romanticism other than the one Bruno Taut envisioned in the early 20th century. Can we make out positive potentials of individualism in urban context, maybe even state that the individualized citizen is even better prepared for imagining the future? Is the future maybe much more determined by the enlightened citizen's successful integration into urban processes than by urban form?

Bruno Taut's drawing entitled “Die grosse Blume” (The large flower) incorporates an early 20th century vision of a self-sustainable, nature-oriented city, a sacred place that absorbs solar energy and is, at the same time a joyful temple, a place were the notion of property does not exist anymore and were technology combines with sensuality and helps the inhabitants to develop their living and working without constraints, as Bruno Taut notes down on his drawing. An ideal
city, as it seems, and still we wonder how its citizens would live in it. Taut, voluntarily or not, questions the concept of civitas and romanticizes the monumental character of the city and its potential as a complete form.

With industrialization, massive migration and modernization, cities have grown, have lost shape and even those with monumental heritage and rich layers of history have reached stages of collapsation. Therefore, throughout the 20th century urban agglomerations have been claiming for development strategies that would respond to the needs of an increasing mobility, provide housing solutions and still maintain and further develop their integrity and role as cultural, economic and political centres.

Figure 3. “Die Grosse Blume”. Drawing by Bruno Taut, 1919

Figure 4. Publication “Can our cities survive?” by José Luis Sert and CIAM. Cover by Herbert Bayer, 1942
The 1960s and 1970s were decades when visions were developed and some of them, willingly or not, became physical realities and had to prove their potential in the urban reality. Paul Rudolph's "Lower Manhattan Expressway" project (1970) influenced an interesting, but also very conflictive and discussable built mega structure that provides housing on top of a major motorway in Berlin: the "Autobahnüberbauung Schlangenbader Strasse" (1976-82) by architect Georg Heinrichs, that unites both the existence of motorized mobility and the creation of massive housing (Van der Ley and Richter, 2008).

Superstudio's provocative collage “The continuous monument. An architectural model for total urbanization” (1969) has become a both stunning and shocking reality in urban agglomerations like Benidorm on the Spanish coast, were the desire of growth and of the domination of a privileged landscape meets the need for mass solutions and the rationalization of such desires, also the rationalization of contemporary individualism. This is when we have to accept that massification and standardization seem to resolve the contemporary urban needs and it is when the question, what kind of citizen we want to be, becomes each time harder to respond to. And this is also when we probably start questioning which is the urban world we want to be living in.

The role of (public) housing

Surprisingly enough, official housing solutions seem not to have changed since Shadrach Woods described the alienation that people suffer in isolated, incomplete and characterless residential zones like in the Parisian outskirts by quoting Gertude Stein's "There is no there, there" (Woods, 1975, p. 164). Contemporary public housing solutions, even when declared progressive, future-oriented and socially sustainable, opt for the standardized block.

In the Barcelonese neighbourhood Bon Pastor the city council goes as far as to replace a characteristic working class neighbourhood from the 1920s, with an incomparably attractive street life and a historically grown identity, by more rentable standardized housing blocks and no spatial quality at all.

The Programmes of Urbanistic Action (PAU's) in Madrid suggest a programmatic approach to the improvement and growth of some peripheral neighbourhoods in Spain's capital city, nevertheless there is hardly any approach of including the (present and future) population into the creation of urban identity. Housing proposals are colourful and innovative in terms of materials, but conventional and sadly standardized in terms of urban morphology and suggestions of contemporary forms of living. And they drastically lack an interrelation between the private and the public and therefore one of the most important and valuable features of the European urban history.
Also the idea of choice and of participation has a large urban tradition in Europe, one should think. If we look at the traditional city house module, for instance in the city of Florence since the Middle Ages (Feldtkeller, 1995), we can see how a grid of properties and cells with relation to the public space finally ends up defining the streets and the morphology of the city. If, on the other side, we look at Richard Dietrich’s “Metastadt” project for Munich (1970), where a modular “socio-technical” system proposes a participative and non-hierarchical alternative to the massive housing projects of its period, we can see how new technical possibilities and the understanding of the traditional role of the citizen and the importance of his emancipation and autonomy should come to define new forms of urban housing.

The British architect John Turner published “Housing by people” in 1976 (Turner, 1976) and claimed for a complete change of housing policies, towards total participation and the inclusion of the dweller in decision-making and even the construction and understands, most importantly, housing not as a product, but as a process and a community-building activity.

**Forms of participatory urbanism**

Turner's convictions arose during a long working period in Peru, where he could observe the well-organized self-building process as a major path of making city. Did Turner's ideas hit the ground in Europe? Is such participatory urbanism possible? And, can we detect maybe even other forms, that deal with existing structures and make its dwellers part of the process?

The PREVI project (Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda), carried out by an international team of architects in Lima/Peru between 1968 and 1973, is a key non-European example within this discussion, as it combines the architectural and urbanistic definition of space through the designs of internationally renowned architects with the processes of adaptation and self-building that are inherent in the Peruvian capital's urban development. The outcomes of the transformations produced by self-building, amplification and adaptation to personal needs is surprising and very consistent, even though the language of the architects is no longer readable.

The Belgium architect Lucien Kroll has a different answer to participation: as an architect, he understands himself as a dwellers' consultant, a person who organizes spontaneity and somebody who orquestrates a long process of growth and transformation. His architecture does not have an architect's handwriting, although there is a recognizable style in his projects that represents the collaborative experience of participatory building and the responding to individual needs and desires.

Programmatic urbanism is a contemporary definition of a tendency to understand the post-industrial city within its conditions of change and the needs of reactions towards these changes, while also responding to its inhabitants needs. Some contemporary projects prove that planners and city authorities have understood the importance of making people participate at decision-making within such a programmatic approach as probably the only socially sustainable way of redefining the urban. The La Mina neighbourhood in Barcelona, an originally isolated mass housing complex in the Eastern periphery of the city created in the 1970s, has become of recent metropolitan interest through some large scale projects being developed in its immediate surroundings. The Master plan for urban transformation and inner reform integrates the residing -predominantly Gypsy- population into the planning process and makes them part of the planning
decisions. At the same time, these citizens redefine their own identity, their identification with the city and with their own traditions and expectations.

Figure 6. La Mina housing in Barcelona before its transformation. Photo: Kathrin Golda-Pongratz, 2003

Figure 7. Neighbours discussing the new urban Master plan for La Mina. Photo: © Jornet Llop Pastor JLP arquitectos Barcelona

If we have a look at the biologist, urban theorist and interdisciplinary thinker Patrick Geddes' "Notation of Life" diagram, we come to understand how thoughts, dreams, acts, deeds and facts constitute human activity patterns. We also come to understand how important it is to study and comprehend such patterns, in order to strengthen and make successful citizens' movements and activities and potential for urban negotiations.
When citizens negotiate urban decisions by reclaiming urban identity

The feeling of loss or deprivation is often a stronger motor for people’s activation and organization than a state of well-being and contentment. During the Franco dictatorship and within context of a severe lack of public space, the citizens of Barcelona developed a strong neighbourhood organization network and tradition of the second half of the 20th century.

The case of the "Forat de la Vergonya" (Hole of Shame) is a most interesting case of a process that combines several aspects of urban negotiation and a process of continuous participation: firstly, a group of activists filled this place with life and converted it in a self-governed territory, while the city negotiated the cleared spaces' destiny. People started to claim for the space as a green and open space with community gardens, a stage and sports facilities. After a struggle over more than six years, in 2007 the city council adopted the citizens' ideas- without dialoguing- and laid out a park in the middle of the dense urban fabric of the old city - in a procedure which they called participative urbanism, but in fact was much more of a non-dialectic struggle. Nevertheless, the original spirit of the space has come back and integrates all kind of neighbours of this densely populated area. Exchange markets take place regularly and the self-managed urban garden is an alternative space of more sustainable urban living that attracts residents and visitors.

The prize-winning project “Passage 56” in Paris (2007-2009) by the collective Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée is another example of a community-based project dealing with a passageway that was closed of as unusable space since the 1980s in the heart of the French capital. In an open consultation process people were asked to make suggestions and the idea came up to create a collectively-managed space that could host meetings, workshops, games and commercial interchanges and activities related to horticulture. A wooden construction was set up with recycled materials collected by the residents themselves, which bridges the gap between the two flanking buildings and between the street and a newly created public garden. The "Passage 56" project reinforces the idea that public space is not a product, but rather continuously developed as a social, cultural and political production and on a micro scale.

Sometimes also macro scale urban transformations can be re-negotiated by the citizens. The large Fòrum area in Barcelona is an emblematic example of how recent transformations blended out the site's history and identity in order to produce an urbanistic motor for new, supposedly sustainable large scale developments. The traces of former "Camp de la Bota", where between 1939 and 1953 a total of 1700 anarchists and opponents of the Franco regime had been executed, were eliminated and overbuilt by solar panels, asphalt and eye-caching architecture.

The Catalan artist Francesc Abad, victims' relatives and other critical citizens had started to claim for a memorial to recall the tragic identity of this place. Until today, under the pressure and initiative of the Memorial Democràtic, only in the part of the site belonging to the neighbouring district Sant Adrià this has been made possible by the authorities: in Spring 2010, a commemoration sign and explanations to understand the site's history was erected in the middle of the ongoing large scale urban development projects. An open process, where it makes sense to acknowledge the traces of history and the citizens' awareness.

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1 Institution installed by the Catalan government to reclaim and amend the pre-democratic crimes against humanity under the Franco regime.
The redefinition of public space in contexts of transformation

Changing conditions and civil awareness are capable to transform urban space. Planners should react to such changes, break the ground for social inclusion and propose rather processes than finished objects and projects. Immigration brings new needs and spatial requirements to urban agglomerations.

The same happens when emigration takes place, when territories lose population, as it is the case in the German Ruhrgebiet. As a consequence, a large-scale transformation of the formerly largest mining area in Western Europe has been started two decades ago. It is a positive and at least partly successful example of a programmatic planning of such an enormous structural change that has to be understood in the context of global energy and production policies. The respect to the area's identity as a formerly industrial place is crucial. A large-scale structural vision and the setting up of a development strategy are the basis for participative inclusion on several levels.

Small scale interventions like the "Eichbaumoper" project in Mülheim an der Ruhr (raumlaborberlin, 2008-2009), where a conflictive and depressing underground train stop, with the involvement of the local theatre, was temporarily converted
into a space of music, is one such example. The run-down state and insecurity of the Eichbaum station are a consequence of the low-density and shrinking condition of the area. The project gave another awareness to such conditions and proved to work as a low-cost, highly integrative idea. "Opera means the interrelation between space, composition, the scenic interpretation of a history and the biography of the place", the organizers explained. Peoples' wishes and ideas were equally part of the project as the fostering of other uses, such as a gallery, a cinema and a space for public lectures.

On a large scale, old mining complexes of the Ruhr district have been converted into a post-industrial and cultural landscape, where ephemeral as well as programmatic uses find place, where hybrid responses are possible and where a certain utopian thinking proposes a culturally active, sustainable, integrative and liveable future.

In such a sense and with all its conflicts and contradictions, this kind of urban landscape incorporates maybe more the idea of an ideal city, an ideal urban environment, as the seemingly perfect cities, Barcelona, Rome, Paris, or Venice. Those will have to rethink their future under the perspective of mass tourism, will have to be more careful in sensing their citizens' activity potential both as enlightened individuals and as urban collectives and encounter strategies to stop what is widely described as a loss of authenticity.

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