



What are architects for?

I would phrase the question thus: what are architects for? By using the verb "to be for" it would seem that we are making an appeal to functionality. "To be for" can mean practical use but also symbolic or aesthetic uses, which are nevertheless necessary in order to get by, even though we are often not aware of them. Architecture has something to do with both these things. No matter how much some people, thinking themselves to be clever, (when in reality they are mere speculators), have wanted to confront them. In the name of functionality—and economy—people have sought to justify aesthetic monstrosities and projects which have destroyed the urban fabric. In the same way, but on a much more reduced scale, formalist aspirations have sometimes been abused, and completely uninhabitable buildings have been constructed. I believe that we cannot go against the essence of things: a house (or, on another scale, a city) must be a space which combines the minimum physical and aesthetic comforts in order to be lived in. And if these requisites are not fulfilled—because contempt for the client (particularly if they are poor) makes anything permissible, as long as money is being made or because the petulance of the creator leads him to confuse a hotchpotch of levels and staircases with a place to live—architecture is no use.

All fields of knowledge generate a spontaneous philosophy, a way of thinking characteristic of the trade which, to an extent which is more or less explicit, more or less aware, is shared and stamps those involved in the profession with their own character. The spontaneous philosophy of the architect is very close to that of the military man, even though it is practised with other means (which are not always necessarily less destructive). Both contemplate the terrain as an available space which can be acted upon with a certain impunity. To the military man it is an area of conquest: the occupation of a territory. To the architect it is an area to be moulded: the construction of a medium within the framework of which men grow and live in a state of wisdom and virtue. The great architectural movements—utopian and not so utopian—are the supreme expression of this philosophy.

Any spontaneous philosophy is tempered and adapted as the rugosities of real life appear, in this case those of the available space and of the people who live in it. Gradually, the architect discovers the difficulties which arise from fashioning a space in accordance with reason. The usual counterweights to the excesses of theoretic rationality appear: the interests and wishes of the people and societies. This multiplicity constitutes what we call a city.

Throughout history there has been a hard-fought battle between political and economic powers and the citizens, in order to give cities their precise forms. Some of the great innovations (the boulevards which pave the way for modern cities, for instance) are not inconsistent with the logic of favouring the possibility and control of movement of people and goods. Architects have been the executorial hand placed in the middle, in a balancing act which has not always come down on the right side. Every urbanistic disaster has at least three signatories: money, the politician and the architect. And the responsibility cannot be shirked, no matter how much the preeminence of the client and the sacred neo-liberal principle of laissez-faire is invoked.



The architect shifts between political and economic power, endeavouring to save his soul—or image—, finding ways of expressing his ideas. The use which the politician has made of the architect expresses the State's willingness to be the arbiter of abuses of economic power and to exploit the symbolic value of stone as a factor which will stimulate consensus amongst the citizens. Barcelona has been a good example of this. The alliance between the prince and the architect has led to an objective improvement of the city and also to a renewed pride for the people of Barcelona through identification with the new public symbols which can be seen around the city. Inevitably, of course, these alliances end up drifting towards "good taste" and leave little room for experimentation. It is logical that the politician should look for average tastes, those of the majority, and these must, out of necessity, pass through the sieve of conventionality. The curve running from creative innovation to the birthday cake can be traced perfectly from the early experiments in parks and squares at the beginning of the eighties (which culminated in the myth of the hard squares) to the jewel in the Olympic crown (Isozaki's pavilion).

Strictly speaking, architects should serve to provide houses and cities with functionality and taste. The architects' dignity is constituted by their skill in weaving improvements in the urban landscape, in the midst of the system of interests and desires which make up a city, that is, without seeking to become a *tabula rasa* (which always end up engendering monsters) and knowing that, fortunately, everything has the permanent after-effect of complexity. Avoiding the destruction of cities should be their moral commitment (and cities are not just destroyed by war; they die a little every time gateways to freedom are put up—invisibility is the city's most prized value—and traces of memory are burnt). These imperatives do not have to block the essential value of a city: change. A change must have one meaning and one direction: to take in the most diverse variety of people in reasonable conditions.

In the present day city, diversity means complexity. Utopian proposals do not fit into this complexity. In fact, Utopia has always been contradictory to the city (even though architects do not want to realise this). A Utopia has no precise location. For a start, the city is a place. And it is on top of this place that we build, in successive layers, the city which is the born of the alluvion of people and things which have been deposited on that territory.

The architect, therefore, knows that his dream of having available a territory and fashioning it is increasingly unlikely, and that there are old and new problems which can be formulated in spatial terms, which are his own, and which require answers. Beginning with the first, essential problem, that of the house: the piece which articulates the entire urban jigsaw. Why has the problem of habitation been neglected for so long? Why is it so long since new ideas have emerged concerning this key question and why have speculative atrocities mounted up? Is it a reaction of powerlessness, a shirking of duty on the part of the architect and public power? The idea of territory and the city itself changes together with this inexhaustible topic. The city is no longer what it was, nor is it clear if it can maintain its essential quality. Territories lose their outlines and come across problems of movement and time. Everything is relativized. New spaces appear. Mutations and flows show us this new relationship between time and space. Containers and *terrain vague* identify for us the new spaces which the city generates, often as waste which needs to be recycled. Architects have a good many factors to consider if they wish to continue convincing us that they are still up to the task we gave them responsibility for: designing an inhabitable framework both in the functional and formal sense.