DESIGN AT THE REGIONAL SCALE:

NOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF AN IDEA*

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1. Formerly, artists depicted things that were to be seen on the earth, things people liked to see or would like to have seen. Now the relativity of visible things is made clear, the belief expressed that the visible is only an isolated case taken from the universe and that there are more truths unseen than seen. Things appear enlarged and multiplied and often seem to contradict the rational experience of yesterday. An effort is made to give concrete form to the accidental.

In these lines from one of Klee's most famous writings there is evidence, drawn not so much from his theoretical speculation as from his concrete aesthetic experience, of his assumption that anything visible can at the same time be analyzed, resolved, and related dynamically to its elements, both simple and composite, as well as independent of conventions and hierarchies bound up with relations traditionally constituted between objects taken individually. But if it is possible to comprehend a house, a leaf, a ship, a road, a mountain according to this same method of inquiry then this means that all of them can be revealed and therefore "designed" in such a way that "design" encompasses not only the sensible form of these objects, but also the network of relations constitutive of the interior structure of a form.

Since then critics and artists in the visual fields have been working systematically, although from different points of view, both towards a design summarizing the totality of man's experience, and an enlargement of this experience to what is irrational, elementary and historical. At times design has meant a summation of reality within geometries slightly more complicated than those of the Renaissance, as in Schlemmer, or a reduction...

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to a material knot, as in Fautrier, or even with a more constructive historical attitude, a figuration of new images elaborated with tools furnished by an experience both intellectual and rational of reality, as in Henry Moore. The discussion on design has been noticeably enlarged in recent years so much that it has provoked the precise point of dispute from the orthodox representatives of Pop Art, and to the point of experimenting with the possibility of programmed art, meaning an art where the accepted values of form are connected to the process, instead of the discrete results of an artistic work. Thus, the same way that the hierarchical, or more clearly the perspective, kind of relation of man to nature has been disproven, in a like manner have the boundaries between constructed and discovered things. Different poetics of object trouvé from the sophisticated collages of Schwitters to the crude reproductions of cartoons by Lichtenstein have systematically eliminated all illusions about a possible reconstruction of a system of values based on a dialectic relationship between elements rationalizable historically and elements naturally uncontrollable.

2. It is necessary now to see if the architectural critic has as readily accepted such a tabula rasa of traditional values. It is clear that the acceptance we are looking for is not limited to the principles but should be translated into proposals, both of interpretation and design, in all fields pertaining to the architect. As far as landscaping is concerned, in other words the inclusion of the "regional" dimension into an aesthetic evaluation, we must
admit that the critic has for the most part limited himself to assert or protect environmental situations which are recognized to be of particular historical, geographical, or panoramic interest. It is exactly in this matter that we have allowed ourselves to be preceded by some macroscopic transformations already realizing themselves totally (at most provoking a reaction fundamentally defensive) before a comparably new approach to design has been defined. There has existed for a long time a considerable literature of observation and verification of these phenomena connected to the interests of architects and city planners. But these surveys have been used generally to visualize analyses of a sociological, economic, or technological nature, and are therefore the means, not the subjects of the study. The appearance of the great productive plants, from the Japanese industrial strip to the Ruhr, and to the petro-chemical industries of Ravenna or of Lacq, has at times suggested images or utopias of a new world, but has usually been employed to emphasize not the visual impact, but the economic power which this aspect symbolizes. Thus the common evaluation of the landscape, formed in the regions where the Tennessee Valley Authority has operated, apparently does not have the effect of posing, in general terms, the problem of how to give form to a new landscape, but of only observing that at this time interventions heterogeneous to the existing nature have been able to order themselves within a criterion of minimal alteration of the environment, that is substantial camouflage. On the contrary, industrial settlements are frequently designated
in only negative terms such as the protest of the Coketown of Dickens and Mumford, evidencing only the degrading aspects, such as for the coal regions surrounding Arras. We are able to recognize a more liberal attitude in the literature examining some specific operations like the construction of dams, bridges, and highways. Concern of design mainly centers around the latter two operations although narrowly filtered through the world of the landscape architects which extends from Central Park to the parkways of the years of F. D. Roosevelt. The attention which is given to this by Giedion, as one of the most orthodox representatives of the culture connected with the Modern Movement, signifies the extension of the field of design to an object, the road in the landscape, which is quite unusual in the tradition of the International Style. But the approach is always an analytic one. An artifact is considered more valuable, the more it is self-identifiable, thus simultaneously preserving the identity of the environment in which it occurs. Harmony among the different elements is automatically derived from the juxtaposition of self-defined "types," which is an attitude analogous to the canonical one for the historical monument and areas, from the Ministry of Education of Rio de Janeiro to the Stazione Termini. Mumford does not even here disprove his ancestry from Howard. The regional structure that he proposes as the unique solution to the problems made extreme by the metropolis is automatically transformed into the vision of settlements dispersed in the natural environment:
Instead of encouraging the further building up of metropolitan areas, already overburdened, a rational policy demands a systematic urban re-settlement in Greenbelt Towns with a minimum expenditure on the elaborate mechanical means of congestion, and a sane provision of opportunities for living.  

The form of the metropolis is for him only the degeneration of older relationships based on a clear distinction of structure, both visual and sociological, between town and country. The vision of a Megalopolis overflowing its territory without organization and above all without subdividing into finite and identifiable cells, asserts the impossibility of any form unless an actual overcoming of these tendencies and their underlying values should occur. In this way Mumford joins with so many other American sociologists in the denunciation of the metropolis, which in its most immediately understandable and controllable dimension provokes the decline of community values. In his analysis of the new regional structure Hilberseimer points out three basic elements: human activities, land uses, landscape characteristics. While acknowledging the tendency towards decentralization, in industry as well as in housing (he writes this in 1945), he wishes to isolate location factors accounting for natural conditions first of all:

As an animal he is an organic part of the landscape, like all other creatures. He differs from the animal, however, as a carrier of the non-organic system of his socio-cultural heritage.  

He is interested mainly in the kind of settlement which presents itself as a renewed landscape, the Inca Village or the Medieval City, rather than as an element opposing the natural environment. He goes as far as to delineate various settlement schemes flexible and adaptable to differing conditions of land, winds, and waters.
The spatial models of Hilberseimer which could be defined as a grid derived from the composition of linear elements of settlements, both urban and rural, related with the "Ciudad Lineal" of Soria Y Mata, and with Broadacre City of Frank Lloyd Wright deserve more analysis, which however exceeds the subject of this paper; it is important to note that his Geddesian consideration of nature results in a design capable of assuming as modifying factors the characteristics of the landscape.

3. When "urban sprawl", the diffusion of urbanization into metropolitan areas, is eventually acknowledged as a fact significant of a new urbanization, and not just deprecated as an element destructive of natural order, it would seem natural that design could be applied to a regional dimension. M. Webber, one of the strongest supporters of this kind of metropolitan structure, goes even farther to note that this metropolitan sprawl may even occur together with spatial schemes of a traditional type. In fact we have noticed that the modes of exchange have been greatly transformed, and that the concentration of information formerly expressed by an urban organization of a nuclear or focal type is attainable today through channels of a different nature, spatially much less constraining. From this a new design may be implied when we designate a different functional sociological model of the city, and note the absence of a corresponding form. More precisely there is a correspondence between the metropolitan model characterized by a horizontal stratification of functional processes and "communities of interests," and a spatial organization
distinguished by indifferent locations; but this is just a new availability of space, a raw material which sometimes seems through inertia to conform to older schemes; at this point the object of design can only be a new structural model in which the relationship between the constructed and the natural evolves into a more homogeneous field characterized by a major or minor formal tension in its various points, as well as by a formal tension which differs depending on the way in which this field is understood by individuals or a community. Webber complains that town plans still propose "ideal" solutions of a unitarian nature, where the unit of settlement is defined by strips of territory of very low density in an attempt to preserve the distinction between urban and rural. These physical boundaries must eventually collapse since social exchanges, originating from the attenuation of the distinctions between city and country, already ignore them. To insure communication, supplies and information over long distances means first to make possible a range of locations hitherto unavailable, and a different emphasis on the factors determining a settlement. The California boom following World War II has been explained as a prevailing consideration for its residential characteristics, while in the East it remains the markets and the source of industrial supply. We must now see if this kind of consideration, valid on a national scale, may be also applied within a single metropolitan area. To be sure, the cost and time elements of communications are diminishing rapidly: predicting the development of individual motorization a well-engineered network of expressways becomes the most efficient means
of insuring personal contact in this way eliminating from the piazza, the center, or any other mode of radial organization, the primary justification for their existence. The metropolitan highway, as D. Foley observes, does not necessarily have a focal point, but is the expression of a process, of a flow, and whenever it is built a new flexibility and major integration among different land uses is instigated. A completely homogeneous dispersion will however never occur due to the time and costs involved, even though they be reducible, and thus increasingly less constraining. Therefore the spatial model of the Future City now taking place will be internally highly varied and diversified, both in respect to land uses and densities, into a new urban order for which new visual symbols, different from those connected with a centralized, density populated organization, must be found.

4. The position taken several years ago by the group gathering around London, The Architectural Review, and persisting still along with their special section, is radically opposed to the one now supported by Webber. Observing this same phenomenon of dilution of specific characteristics traditional to different kinds of settlements, The Architectural Review feels forced to reaffirm the necessity of a distinction between different typologies, thus maintaining precise boundaries between them. It is true that their "counter attack" having as one of its main objectives the "New Towns", organized within the tradition of the "Garden Cities", meant also to reexamine the values associated
with high urban concentrations. The effectiveness of that attitude is today verified in the "urban" emphasis of the best British architecture. The denunciation of the squalor of those areas where a proper use of the most correct elements of "townscape", different pavements, street lights, pedestrian ways, and front lawns, had the effect only of making more rigid an environment already desolated because of the impossibility of a spontaneous associated living typically connected with higher population densities, had the merit of constituting the first step toward an ideological revision of the new towns. From this derive some of the most interesting initiatives of the London County Council (Roehampton and the project for Hook New Town are the best known, although there are many others, however smaller in dimension), the new developments of Sheffield, and the latest New Towns, whose divergence from the original model is even greater than it may appear superficially. But the attack of *The Architectural Review* was also against the degradation of the urban and rural landscape from the disorderly juxtaposition of industries, farms, and housing, that is from a loss of identity of the former landscape. They crudely indicated, in confrontation with "what it could have been," what, conforming to major models, characterizes the English conurbation, and similarly all other old centers under new development. It is here that our critique is directed, because this kind of "defense planning" which seems to be concerned mainly with protection, distinction, and characterization and whose dictates seem so self-explanatory actually results in mere observation
of the most crude and unacceptable visual aspects of structural and morphological transformations which are in reality more deep and, to be sure, unassailable if aiming only at their more conditioned elements. It is not understood that these most unpleasant aspects can be the symptom (if not necessarily the material) of the formation of a different landscape, previously unknown by us, and that our duty is perhaps to uncover in this apparent chaos the relations connecting different parts, and eventually, on the visual level, new substructures. Here the contrast between the two streams of thought, the "urban" way of the most advanced British culture (which was echoed immediately in the debate begun in the 60's in Italy on the form of the city and the elements constituting urban design, through essays, meetings, and some competitions particularly relevant to this) and the American one, which derives from the experience of its cities support for theses of regionalism and decentralization, can be significantly lessened if we realize, through confrontation with problems in design, the reality of a formal level, as yet not defined. If, on one hand, the position of The Architectural Review appears anachronistic in its assumption of conservation of a morphology already largely in crisis, its contribution towards a more advanced formal qualification of the urban structure, even if it derives from that same desire for conservation and distinctions, is to a large extent positive in that it opens debate on the formal dimensions perceptible and meaningful in today's social and cultural situation. Here we see that the sharp contrast which seemed to exist between the two
positions becomes noticeably attenuated. If there is a division it remains a horizontal one between that literature, which extends from Howard and Patrick Geddes to Gutkind and Mumford, and which is limited to schemes of social organization which it pretends to superimpose on the reality of the regional transformation (the most clamorous example being the London plan of Abercrombie); and the most recent one, which is motivated by the observation of these realities to reconsider the very foundations of the possible theoretical and operative approaches to design at the different morphological levels.

5. This is confirmed by the homogeneous attitude observed among people of different cultural traditions, yet united by similar design interests, like Kepes, Cullen, or Lynch. Gordon Cullen is one of the main critics of the concept of the "New Towns" (it is his cartoon that depicts an inhabitant of a New Town nostalgically drawing on the immense sidewalk an image of his previous neighborhood, a jumble of buildings and signs), and his interests are concerned with the perceptions of urban form. The city may be interpreted as a series of points of view distinguishing and relating in every moment the "existing view" with the "emerging view", the city as a plastic experience of fullness and void, of open and secluded, of restricted and dilated, as a sequence of clearly defined spaces (here, there) the city as an object (or a set of objects) characterized by color, texture, scale, style, character, personality, and uniqueness. He supports these general points through a continuous collecting of examples, and
proposals for intervention. He confines his research to town-
scape but his methodological framework differs only slightly from
that of Kepes or Lynch, intended as it is to define the visual and
emotional impact of a series of possible relations among different
parts constituting an environment. Lynch's field of research is
more extensive, not only in physical terms. He asks a number of
inhabitants to describe using words or images their own city;
comparing these descriptions with accurate surveys of the areas
involved, he deduces the impact of single elements on the memory
of those interviewed.\textsuperscript{11} His research into the motivation behind
these impacts leads him to recognize basic aspects of townscape,
not to be qualified only as visual data, but also from their
recollection of other images and other relationships. To some
critics this analysis of a psychological character seems excessive,
since it seems to imply that an aesthetic value may be verified
by the judgment of the hypothetical average citizen--but a citizen
from which city? And from which social, cultural group? And
was the range of those questioned sufficiently representative?--
that is, a doubt arises as to the validity of his points in general,
and therefore in terms of design. Lynch professes to study the
visual quality of the American city through its citizens' mental
representations, and in this way the emphasis is mainly on the
clarity or "imageability" of the urban landscape. But if his
theoretical premise seems rather weak to European critics more
accustomed to discussions of visual structures (the suspicion
arises that with his method of direct investigation Lynch wished
to account for some prior intuitions of his, which by themselves were enlightening) the fact remains that he began to establish the foundations for a methodology of design, first defining a set of significant signs. Therefore we will take this kind of psycho-sociological support as a simple hypothesis from which to begin; the real operational value of this research still remains to be verified, even if we have checked its internal coherence and consistence with its stated goals. This research systematically preceeds from general enunciations about the factors of legibility of a form, to an analysis becoming ever more detailed of the different levels of perceptibility, finally suggesting the possibility of a formal cartography with its own nomenclature. In his last volume, Lynch works towards a more sophisticated definition of that which constitutes a formal experience associated with the design of a highway; a subject which itself reveals some of the most valuable results of his research, that is those concerning movement and visual sequences. The next step, already being worked on for several years by Lynch, can only be the amplification of "projectional surveys" to the dimension of the region. In some notes on this subject found in The Image of the City, he suggests the assumption of a temporal scale of sequences as a foundation for an attempt towards formal structuring. The consideration that some traveling is of the commuter-type suggests the possibility of more or less complex symmetries. The fact that functional locations develop everywhere in the metropolitan region suggests also the possibility of a network of sequences. But these methods
are incapable of defining the area as a unit, and perhaps, as Lynch says, this can not actually be realized as a continuous pattern, thus mentally comprehended as a whole; leaving only the possibility of a hierarchical or cellular organization. Kepes attacks the theme of the urban landscape less systematically, but nonetheless in a very stimulating way, directing his attention towards a great variety of elements. The deteriorated relationship between architecture and town design is openly confessed.

The exploded space of the metropolis in which effective distance depends upon the mode of travel and in which vast areas and populations become linked in a single urban fabric makes the unit building or unit area a less important symbol than in the past.13

His approach to the problems of urban form is of a global character, and he identifies the elements without caring whether they are or are not architectural; traffic, light (natural and artificial) connections, textures are the sectors of major tension, on which the formal structure of the city is today most often based.

6. Here, a few points may be clarified. At the bottom of all these elaborations is the recognition of a semantic crisis in architecture, and of the necessary identification of a new level of design and communication. The weaker impact of architecture coincides with the enlargement of a daily experience of greater spaces in shorter times. The transformation of modes of perception can not be related to the merely quantitative modifications occurring in the architectural scene, but to the qualitative ones introducing as a permanent parameter the time of use: in all the proposals previously considered here succession, iteration, and
connection refer more to time than to space. If this culturally echoes the fourth spatial-temporal dimension of the Cubists' literature, we must therefore observe that the leap consists in considering elements of this kind as substitutable for, and not as added to, the traditional morphological ones. This furthers the crisis of the image of the architect as working in forms: the material he is accustomed to work with has lost its meaningfulness, and formal structures, previously articulating the architectural object, are now reduced to the support of images necessarily eclectic. Hence, the attempt to find in other levels that possibility of a semantic designation, which in its original levels has been lost. It must be very clear now that attention is directed to all the elements (Kepes) potentially significant to the urban and regional scene, and not, as in Camillo Sitte or even in Frederick Gibberd, only on the composition of buildings. The reduction of these to a basically secondary and accidental role derives from their limited impact on the emotional reactions of the inhabitants of the metropolis; for example, the experience of a commuting trip assumes a value, waiting only to be acknowledged and structured. Another element generally considered fundamental is memory (Lynch). By this is meant the capacity to refer one object to another, as a tool to construct spatial-temporal sequences between different formal components. One of the most important facts is the interesting of the observer so actively that, outside of himself, in his capacity as the user, no value judgement is possible; meanwhile, the temporal and thus spatial
extension in which to structure an image is enlarged. The observer is always a moving observer (Lynch, Cullen); all possible formal construction considered refer to such a structure. This is primarily because of a desire to formally invest a larger section of our daily experience, as it becomes more and more dynamic, due also to a reduction in cost of transportation; moreover movement is a parameter seldom exploited in the architectural critique, and which in our first approximation may seem specific to the new scale of design. The danger of insisting uniquely on this factor lies in admitting the validity of a fictitious equation (at least not demonstrated) of the kind:

\[ \text{static condition} = \text{architecture} = \text{dynamic condition} = \text{large-scale design} \]

On a completely different level the modifications which occurred in regional structure, first of all the development of urbanization within metropolitan areas, served to pose in new terms the problem of how to operate on the urban (or precisely metropolitan) form, clearly evidencing the reduction of the possible effective intervention by the traditional planner-architect. The dynamics of regional transformations follow laws of development foreign to all formal considerations, and, more importantly, the spatial morphology which is derived may only be predicted in its more general lines. Moreover there is no reason to believe this transformation must cease, and that the urban region, or the metropolitan area, should be fixed in a final spatial model along with the hopes of Gutkind and Mumford. This means that the hope of re-introducing form as an element conditioning regional and urban development is linked with the capacity of the designer to intervene
growth, of different or interchangeable uses, of an indefinite extension of the pathways, almost admitting some kind of biology of form able to realize itself autonomously (also as a value) once the laws of its development have been defined. There is, evident from these projects, an attempt to assume some kind of naturalistic value analogous to the one generally acknowledged in natural landscape, neither ordered toward a final design nor graded as to its different parts. The second group of projects evidencing an intention of landscape is the one where the New City as in the proposals of Maymont, or of the Metabolism group, is configured as a system of large containers, variously linked. The size of the buildings and their apparently informal disposition cause them to be related visually to their natural environment; in the project of Mirabaud and Parent for an "architecture spatiale à forte concentration", for example, the channels of communication are designed to be underground in order to preserve for the landscape its full capacity of resonance before the constructed object.14 Broadacre city is a special case, the importance of which we are only now beginning to realize. Wright proposes more than a city, a way of urbanization; "The city nowhere unless everywhere."

Decentralization and urbanization finds its means of realization from the technological process, but they constitute themselves as basic elements of an organic reassessment of the American social and civic structure. He does not propose an ideal city destined to take the place of the existing one; he realizes the transformations (before World War II) taking place in urban
agglomerations, and emphasizes the trend towards dispersion. Moreover, far from proposing neighborhood-oriented regional structure, he makes his proposal of urbanization a means of individual salvation, thus associating himself with that which typically motivates the American tradition. This last justifies with its constant anti-urban attitude Wright's intuition of a structure characterized by the indefinite possibility of spatial expansion, and a very low density of population, which structure coincides largely with the one observed in large metropolitan areas by today's American planners. Wright accepts the modularity and repetition of the new urban structure. In the "city which is nowhere unless everywhere" and distinction between city and country disappears; the inhabitants will be organically related to the landscape, to the transportation and distribution of products, to the centers of education and with all cultural facilities. On the visual level this means a renunciation of a general final design, indicating instead some elements capable of qualifying a substantially homogeneous texture. There are in the first place the superhighways, the arterial roads, and the bridges. The insertion of a road into the landscape should consist in designing it according to the lay of the land, carefully considering the fences and plants, which should be realized with indigenous material; rows of trees should be planted wherever the interest of the landscape allows them.

The modern architect's trained reuse of the harmonious "altogether" in these several matters of road construction, planting, bridge-building, would, and from beginning to end, be indispensable to the integrity of the conception of the whole universal city.
Also the buildings usually different from each other should be strictly related to the topography of the place, thus becoming components of the landscape:

Indigenous character? Inevitable. Endless variety and indigenous character would be the effect of terrain and individuality coming naturally together, wherever they might arise. All would find natural expression, naturally. 17

Although these sentences echo some typical motives in Wright's poetic, we must nevertheless recognize that this constitutes the first, although anachronistic answer to the problem of the figuration of a region; which answer is still extremely cautious when we note that form intervenes only with the more strictly architectural aspects, and is not considered as a variable conditioning the urban design. Moreover the elements Wright considers are the same which later on will be the subject of the researches of Lynch, which are based, it seems to us, on an hypothesis of urban transformation also not very different from that of Wright.

Le Corbusier attacks the problem of landscape in toto: he accepts natural data but does not pretend to conform to it. Rather he tends to balance it against the artificial elements:

Par l'urbanisme et par l'architecture, les sites et le paysage peuvent entrer dans la ville, ou de la ville, constituer un élément plastique et sensible décisif. Un site ou un paysage n'existe que par le truchement des yeux. Il s'agit donc de le rendre présent dans le meilleur de son ensemble ou de ses parties. 16

Much more than the Ville Radieuse, the plans for Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo, and San Paolo, and above all Algiers, violently take hold of some suggestions of the landscape, and propose the intervention of volumes, also dimensionally in scale with the elements
of the landscape. Here it is no more a matter of camouflage, nor is there proposed a relation between background and figure; if the single parts conserve their own individual integrity, the object is to acquire a contextual significance, and in this manner to arrive at a single autonomous expressive result. The approach of Le Corbusier is certainly much more architectural than that of Wright, and it is not by accident that, during recent years, the majority of utopian town designs seem to refer to the precedents set by the former. The proposal of the "regional-scale" in the architecture of a city clearly means an attempt to rediscover a formal tension ever at the first level of physical organization of settlements; that is, a way not to confine the work of a designer within the framework of systems defined through models of nonspecifically spatial planning. This is perhaps the most advanced point towards which a formal attitude, which wants to condition a process of development, and not to propose itself (this would be really hopeless) as a final solution, might tend.
FOOTNOTES


9a. See for a summary of these events, La Città Territorio, Bari (1964); Also, Acts of the 10th Convegno dell'Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica, (Trieste 1965). Most university studio courses are now dealing with large scale projects and from some of them records or acts are obtainable.


14. The English magazine Architectural Design is the best source for the first group of projects, while the French L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui is probably closer to the second one.

16. Ibid., p. 133.
17. Ibid., p. 112.