

DOI: [10.38027/ICCAUA2022EN0206](https://doi.org/10.38027/ICCAUA2022EN0206)

“Boxes” Versus “Architecture for People”

*Phd Professor **Ana Paula Rainha**
CIAUD, Universidade Técnica de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal
E-mail: arq.paularainha@gmail.com

Abstract

Designing for people must be the main goal of architecture, or, in other words, not designing following fashion or fame, which can bring serious consequences in what really matters, as energy, environment or yet functional problems, in the literal sense of the word. With the proliferation of what I call the “boxes”, clean, minimal, we observe a mischaracterized monotonous architecture, missing often the good sense, what brings the need to rethink the main purpose of architecture: people, environment, cultural, social and historical context, local resources, climate, all factors in prowl of a sustainable and consistent attitude towards architecture.

This paper aims to review what the concept “designing for people” means, beginning a research through a critical reflection of what happens when we follow fashion tendencies “versus” an attitude where architecture should be a human right.

Keywords: “Boxes”; Sustainable Architecture for People.

1. Introduction

“To think, nowadays, is a revolutionary act”. I read this in an interview with Daniel Innerarity¹ in “Expresso”, a portuguese magazine, and I find it so curious, in the sense that it contains a certain behaviour of what happens today, in general, and in what concerns architecture, and, in a larger scale, the city, we can say the same.

This paper pretends an approach to what should be the main objectives of architecture today, reviewing and reflecting on nowadays concepts, like sustainability and the “humanization” of Architecture and Urbanism, remembering and reflecting, with a critical vision, about what happened with the architectural and urban theories that marked the 20th century.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Modernism and Postmodernism

To review the concept of “designing for people” it will be important and necessary to back off to the Modern Movement, genesis of rationalism and purism in architecture, the postulates of the Athens Charter², and the consequents reactions of postmodernism.

Since the Second World War, it took place, in Europe a series of initiatives, which had as objective the reconstruction of the devastate areas, essentially the urban centres. These new projects had, by reference, the urbanistic models advocated by the Modern Movement, through the manifests of the International congresses of Modern Architecture.

In the new cities, the rationalist principles were defined in the postulates of the Athens Charter, which proposed a doctrinal reformulation, not only through the pragmatism of its principles, but also by the theories of “zoning”, which compartmentalized the city in main functions: to work, to sleep, leisure, with strong infrastructures connecting them all. They were cities for the car and for transports. The scream of freedom expressed in the main principles of Modern Architecture was so strong, as they indeed created a statement by its attitudes and tendencies in such a way, that many people, today, when seeing a house by Mies Van der Rohe, Alvar Aalto or Philip Johnson, for instance, will think that they were designed nowadays. And thus, by its rationality, pragmatism and pureness, from the organization of spaces, the transparencies, the kind of material, to the integration in the landscape, but mainly by the contemporaneity of the concept itself. Everything comes together to give the idea that they were conceived and built today.

It was undoubtedly one of the great chapters of the History of Architecture.

Inevitably all this had expected consequences at various levels, and the reactions (postmodernism) came from several authors from different countries in the late sixties and seventies, mainly from the School of Venice, with “La Tendenza” movement, Germany, England, and the United States of America, not only in architecture and

¹ Daniel Innerarity is, according to the magazine “Le Nouvel Observateur”, one of the twenty-five most important philosophers of our time, with a vast literary work about the contemporary era.

² The Athens Charter surged from the IV Congress (1933-1947), dominated by the personality of Le Corbusier. There were nine congresses, the first one in 1928, and the ninth in 1950.

urbanism, but also in other levels of knowledge, through different disciplinary areas, like psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, among others³.

These critics had a voice from a series of people. Names like Kenneth Frampton, Robert Venturi, Charles Jenks, Christopher Alexander, Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, Gordon Cullen, Amos Rapoport, Norberg-Schulz, Carlo Aymonino, Aldo Rossi, Rob Krier, Collin Row, made part of a list, whose theoretical argumentation had an unquestionable value for the practice of architecture and urbanism.

It was mainly in urbanism, and in urban design, that this vast group of authors gave a rich contribute, though several methodologies of thinking, reading and producing urban space, covering several fields of knowledge. These was the great contribute of postmodernism: an integrated and multidisciplinary vision and attitude towards architecture an urbanism.

From these methodologies, the most important analysis concepts are: Urban Morphology (Aldo Rossi, Robert Krier), Visual Analysis (Gordon Cullen, Roberto Venturi, Charles Jencks), Urban Perception (Kevin Lynch, Norberg Schultz), and Environment Behavior (Hall, Lang, Sommer).

Modernism and postmodernism were completely different in ideology; nonetheless they had something in common: both were structured, and supported by their own philosophy, an ideological basis, inserted in a social and political context, genuine and inspiring, whether we agree or not.

In every period in the History of Architecture, the new tendencies had always been launched by the intellectual elites, in consequence of social, political, economic and artistic factors, and stopped to be fashion, when other tendencies occurred, while the previous ones spread out.

2.2 And now?

Meanwhile, in the last decades, let us say the last twenty years, “new” concepts and concerns emerged, like sustainability, which contains itself a series of inherent sub concepts.

Said this, where are we now?

Observing the exponential growth of the cities around the world, specifically those in Asia, Africa and South America, the truth is that both in architecture, and mainly in urbanism, it seems that we did not leave the modern movement, we still are there.

Cities grew up disorderly and, worse, grew without any kind of philosophy, just with the need of growing, growing, growing, becoming more and more into large suburbs, monofunctional, mischaracterized, asphyxiated, without any planning policy, or at least none apparently visible.

In what concerns Architecture, with its big equal concrete blocks, like giant boxes, that multiply infinitely, and where millions of people live, independent of climate and cultural habits, the problem is not different, is just another side of the same scenario. If we think that part of this was done and thought by architects, the problem gets even bigger.

This reminds us of another difficulty, that is what is being taught in the architecture programs, not only in the contents of the several disciplines, but also in the programs themselves, mainly in the way they are structured.

The Architecture and Urbanism programs, which should be, by definition, the time for experimentation, in the real sense of the laboratory, became, many of them, spaces where students and teachers follow the fashion of the moment, with references of architects elected by the elites of the moment. The studios lost their real meaning. Of course, it is important and even fundamental to be aware of what is being done and by whom, with updated references, but, not less important, is to be aware of the needs of our time. For that it is crucial, besides to teach by doing, or learning by doing, to teach and to learn by thinking. To learn how to think, not in a fragmented way, but with an integrated and integrator attitude, connecting in the right way all forms of knowledge. And to think in Architecture implies to think in its the real purposes, in the ethical responsibility, as well as to rethink architecture as a human right, what implies to go beyond the “boxes”, to face sustainability as crucial, necessary, as a conscientious need, and not just one more “nowadays” concept.

It is urgent to think that architecture for people obliges to use the integrate knowledge of several disciplines and interconnect them as fundamental tools to draw with ethic, quality and aesthetic, concerned with social and cultural factors, with a proper philosophy and with a true, consistent conviction, in the sense that is not occasional or according to some momentary, ephemeral fashion.

It is here that begins the real distance from the Modern Movement and Postmodern Movement.

It may seem a contradiction to say that to draw for common people does not have to be different from drawing to the elites, in the sense that drawing in architecture must always deal with the conscience of climate, comfort, beauty, important factors to rich and poor, to which we must add the concerns of sustainability, the respect for the culture and the needs of everyone.

³ The objective is not an intensive description of authors, but to mention those considered more significant to the subject.

The problem with the exponential proliferation of the “boxes” is essentially the mischaracterization, the decontextualization and the non-respect, or worse, the disinterest in the real needs of the people, something that remind us of the problematic of the Modern Movement. It is important to question “for whom and where are we doing this (?)”.

It is in this context that is required to review, and to re-evaluate the main purposes of architecture, which has been lost, what failed in the practice of the modern and postmodern principles, what obliges us to think and to reflect, since very early in universities, and later in the professional life, with conscience, in architecture and urbanism as a fundamental instrument to give answer to a human right: the right to a house, the right to the difference, in terms of culture, the right to the urban space, the right to comfort, to quality, independent of the social status. Quality, aesthetics, and comfort cannot be a symbol of status, but a right for all.

If in the last century the Modern Movement failed, becoming a reproduction of speculative logics, and the postmodernism was not able to change it, it is our obligation to contribute, through architecture and urbanism to ways of life more adjusted to contemporary needs, to integrate instead of breaking, being more heterotopic instead of entropic.

3. Results

All these are factors to be considered in the act of designing (scales, typologies, character, activities, spatial configuration, circulation, free spaces, urban furniture, relations with existing architecture, morphological relationships, etc.). Although they may not have an immediate effect on the practice of Urbanism, they have the merit of constructing theoretical material for reflection, which requires time to mature before it can be applied to interventions in cities.

The attempt to build a theoretical body, thought to qualify the projects, the uncharacterized peripheries, using new traditional patterns, applied within the new contexts of urban production (administrative, economic, social and cultural) is something that seems unquestionable, as well is unquestionable to transfer these concerns to the education fields in universities, at all disciplinary and scientific areas.

4. Discussions (for further discussions)

We can consider that the question of the invention of cities, in their design, in their infrastructural, social, economic and cultural complexities, is not a stabilized territory, in terms of concepts and theories. It accompanies the permanent interrogations of man, in his image of time.

The rules, the laws, the attitudes, are always referenced in space and time, always leaving open something that may come from nothing (POPPER), or from the future, as is commonly said.

These reflections only intended to draw attention to exalting “moments”, with real consequences in the transformation of cities.

The conclusions of the Habitat I in Vancouver, Canada (June 1976), promoted by the United Nations, could be considered, at that time, as a conclusive synthesis of this theme, whose continuity were expressed, twenty years later, in the conclusions of Habitat II in Istanbul, Turkey (June 1996), in the Special Sessions of the General Assembly on Habitat: Istanbul +5, in New York, USA (June 2001), in Habitat III, in Quito, Ecuador (October 2016) and in the sustainable development goals in the Strategy for Agenda 2030 (New York 2016), in the consequence of conferences like Rio+20, Cairo+20 or Pequim+20.

Due to its opportunity of virtues and conflicts, it constitutes today, in the second decade of the 21th century, a non-exhausted subject, whose debates should be included in the contents of the Architecture and Urbanism programs. Hence, the choice of this theme topic (Rainha, 2007).

5. Conclusions

The human heritage is something that has no name but is in its whole dimension bigger than the parts.

When in the early eighties (1982), the picture “Blade Runner” from Ridley Scott appears, we were far from imagine that some decades later it will be a reality, when confronted with the decadence of the urban scenario, where unfortunately live a large part of humanity, all over the world.

Sometimes it is necessary to build and to rebuild fast and at low costs, but we learned from the last century models and experiences that was not the better solution. We can create now the chance and the opportunity of doing things in the right way. These were some reflections which oblige us to review, in a critical approach a period of the History of Architecture, where the social and political context obliged to create new attitudes and concepts, like the Modern Movement, that pretended to give answers and to find solutions to rebuild a destroyed Europe, but, in the end, did not manage people needs and ways of living.

Even with a luxury cast of authors and theories, the postmodernism did not have strength enough to change the fails of modernism.

When Francis Kéré won the last “Pritzker” Prize, it was as if a new page surged in the path of doing architecture and urbanism for the people.

As I began this text, referring Daniel Innerarity saying that thinking is a revolutionary act, I ended it saying that revolutionary or not, thinking is the only way capable of breaking the “praxis” and make the change.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Choay, Françoise (1992). *O Urbanismo*. [Urbanism] São Paulo, Brasil: Perspectiva. ISBN: 9788527301633.
- Frampton, Kenneth (1993). *História Crítica da Arquitectura Moderna*. [Critical History of Modern Architecture] Barcelona, Spain: Gustavo Gili, SA. ISBN: 9788425222740.
- Jencks, Charles (1985). *Towards a Symbolic Architecture: The Thematic House*. New York, U.S.A.: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc. ISBN 10: 0847806596, ISBN 13: 9780847806591.
- Lamas, José (1993). *Morfologia Urbana e Desenho da Cidade*. [Urban Morphology and City Design] Lisbon, Portugal: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, JNICT. ISBN: 978-972-31-0903-4.
- Rainha, Ana Paula (2007). *O discurso crítico da cidade moderna: os anos 60 e 70. Uma análise histórica e documental*. Tese de Doutoramento. [The critical discourse of the modern city: the 60s and 70s. A historical and documentary analysis. PhD thesis] Porto, Portugal: Universidade Portucalense Infante Dom Henrique. <http://hdl.handle.net/11328/589>