

# *Planning, design and the post-modernity of cities*

*Ion Bestelium and Kees Doevendans*, Technical University Eindhoven, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, Department of Urban Design, Den Dolech 2, PO Box 513, Faculteit Bouwkunde/Stedebouw, 5600 MB Eindhoven, The Netherlands

*This essay draws on the concept of 'weak thought' from the writings of the philosopher Gianni Vattimo, and connects it to a weakening of the certitudes of modern urban design and planning. According to Vattimo, modernity does not abruptly end; rather its grounding tenets such as universalised 'reason', 'progress' or 'overcoming', lose their strength, and the construction of the world based on absolute values is replaced by a grounding without absolute ground. A weakened ontology is taken up for its relevance to changing ways of thinking in post-modern design and planning. In other words can this perspective lead to conceptual change? © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.*

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The city is the greatest spiritual creation of humanity; a collective work which develops the expression of culture, society and the individual in time and space. Its structure is intrinsically mysterious, developing more like a dream than a piece of equipment.

Given this, alternatives are required to traditional urban planning ideas, which imply continuity based on projection. My own project in search of the contemporary city represents one possible alternative, an approach which understands and celebrates the city as an evolving, poetic and unpredictable event.<sup>1</sup>

Post-modernity is often denied existence, or declared to have already passed. When admitted to, post-modernity is often used as a name for a new epoch of thought and creation. Otherwise the term is used to describe a mood of thought permeating the end of modernity. When understood as a mood of thought, post-modernity refers to an effort to come to grips with the dramas of the age of reason. It can be interpreted as a passage from modernity, where pain and promise, nostalgia and anticipation, mingle.

<sup>1</sup> Libeskind, D 'Traces of the unborn' in N Leach (ed.) *Architecture and revolution: contemporary perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge, London (1999) p 129



This passage from modernity can be traced in many ways. One is to look at the link between thought and the city, or more precisely the relation between ontology, as the philosophy of Being and the post-modern city, as artefact. The argument is that the ontology of modernity and its corresponding design and planning processes, have become too constraining for today's making of the city. An adaptation is called for, in order to make a place for new categories: the aesthetic and the rhetorical. These categories are prominent in the philosophy of Gianni Vattimo. In his work, a 'weakening' of the metaphysical base of Being is traced in post-modernity and it paves the way for an optimistic and constructive reading of post-modern existence. Such a reading is in turn linked to a conception of truth based on aesthetic experience or a 'model of rhetoric', instead of a 'positivistic model'.

Turning to the city, one could begin from a few lines of Ernst Bloch: 'We also take the form of our surroundings, not only does man make his world but the world makes the man. *Homo faber*, and also *homo fabricatus*—both are equally true'<sup>2</sup>. Thus we may start by stating that the city as a collective creation is a source of a certain consciousness of being in the world, as well as a product of this consciousness. Putting this in post-modern focus would mean looking at two relationships. How the post-modern city is changing the consciousness of being. How this change to a post-modern ontology is in turn influencing the making of the city: the way its future is imagined and the role of its designers—in short it's project.

### *I The contradictions of dwelling*

Tracing a line from the metropolis to modern sensibility is by no means new. In a famous and in many ways still relevant essay 'The metropolis and mental life'<sup>3</sup>, Georg Simmel describes the problems of modern life as specifically metropolitan in origin. The metropolitan individuality is, according to Simmel, a form of consciousness that is the result of psychological adaptation to the richness of 'external and internal stimuli' of the metropolis. The direction of this psychological adaptation is in favouring rational and intellectualised, instead of emotional reactions to the world, thus creating a 'mental predominance'. A calculating attitude, mirroring the outward setting of mental life, would be the result.

The calculating exactness of practical life which has resulted from a money economy corresponds to the ideal of natural science, namely that of transforming the world into an arithmetical problem and of fixing every one of its parts in a mathematical formula.

The consequences on the personality are not trivial, and Simmel summarises

**2 Bloch, E** 'Formative education, engineering form, ornament' (trans. **J Newman and J Smith**) *Oppositions* No. 17 (Summer 1979) 45–50. Reprinted in **N Leach** (ed) *Rethinking architecture: a reader in cultural theory*, Routledge, London (1997) 43–50

**3 Simmel, G** 'The metropolis and mental life' (trans. **E Shils**) *Social sciences III Selections and selected readings* Vol. 2 (14th edn) University of Chicago Press (1948). Reprinted in **N Leach** (ed) *Rethinking architecture: a reader in cultural theory*, Routledge, London (1997) 69–79

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