Library as a meeting space

II Volume

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Introduction

'The cities everyone wants to live in should be clean and safe, possess efficient public services, be supported by a dynamic economy, provide cultural stimulation, and also do their best to heal society's divisions of race, class, and ethnicity. These are not the cities we live in.' Richard Sennett

As Richard Sennett stated in this quote, wrote in the introduction of its theory of the Open City, the way in which we often think of how the city should be has something wrong. We think that the complexity of the city or at least its parts can be reduced in order to find answers to its problems. We try to plan and design it as if it could be reduced to a linear system.

The qualities that make the city a great place to live in are not cleanness, safety and efficiency, quality that we can find more easily in the suburbs, but density and diversity that create a place that is vibrant and unexpected.

In order to stimulate these qualities, make the city a place that is worth living in, that stimulate knowledge and economy, and that is able to accommodate different dwellers with different needs and lifestyles, we cannot think about the city as a linear system, we have to think about it in a non-linear way.

In my essay I will try to investigate this relation between the concept of linear and non-linear system in parallel with the conception and planning of the city.

In order to clarify this relation, firstly, I will summarize the theory of Ecological and Egological systems and specifically the concept of linear and nonlinear systems. Secondly, I will link this theory to the one of the Open City, defining it and trying to understand how this can serve as guideline in the design project.

Many architects planners and theorists refer to the concept of Open City. In my article I will refer principally to the theory of the work of the American sociologist Richard Sennett and I will partially discuss on the interpretation of Open City as conceived by Kees Christiaanse, a Dutch architect that in 2009 curate the 4th International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam with the title Open City: Design Coexistence.
Linear and non-linear systems

The linear system is a method that goes direct to the answer and focus on the solution. The non-linear system instead is a method that focuses on the problems and considers the space of the possibilities. Is a system that gives us the chance of 'thinking that something could be otherwise'.

The Linear system is characterized by closure, determinism, reversibility, equilibrium and reductionism; on the other hand, openness, indeterminacy, irreversibility, instability and irreductionism, characterize the non-linear system.

This way of thinking as suggested by Andrej Radman, can allow us, architects, to 'escape from the cliché', instead of thinking about buildings we should think about affordances, instead of thinking of a chair, we should think of a place to sit. As Quatremère de Quincy writes in the 18th century, instead of thinking about the model, we should think about the idea that stays behind it, in order to find a new interpretation of this idea an not merely copy the model.¹

This interpretation is very interesting, especially because placing the focus on capabilities force us to think more in a relational way in an 'ecologic' way. Ecol-logic conceived as opposite of ego-logic, where the person or the object is always though in relation with its environment and never separate by it.

The city, because of its complexity of structure and relations if interpreted through a reduction and a simplification can only bring to a misleading interpretation and design. Therefore, in my opinion, this way of thinking is even more stimulating if applied to the understanding and the conception of the city than of a building or an object.

The Open City

The idea of the Open City can be seen for many aspects as an interpretation and an application of a non-linear approach to the theorization of what a city should be and how it should be planned. This concept tries to define which are the characteristics of the city that makes it a place of coexistence and a place that is able to mutate and adapt to the changing world and society.

In order to explain what an Open City is I will start explaining what an Open City is not, so what make a city a Closed City.

A Closed City is the result of the application of a positivist way of thinking to the city, a city that is made of rules based on problem-solving, a city that is conceptualized and envisioned in a linear fashion. During the modern age this approach to the city became really common. The plans of Le Corbusier, that influenced so much the urban theory and design in all the parts of the globe, were based on the application of mass-standardization and on the division of the living's functions in zones, abolishing the component of the city that for Sennett and Jane Jacobs create is the ultimate quality of the open and diverse city: its ground plane, and the life in the street.

As Christian Salewsky underlines: the critiques of modernist urban planning often focused precisely on the resulting enclaves of the modernist city that led to locally and programmatically specific designs of districts environments for social groups and activities but did not meet the demands and requirements of real life. (...) The illegitimate reduction of society's complexity to the level of simple organizational schemes failed to deliver livable environments because the solved problems did not reflect the real problems.

The problem was exactly that the over-simplification of people life and needs brought to a simplified conception of our living environment. An environment, the city, that gives answers only to some defined needs characteristic of the society in that moment in time without raising the problem of adaptability to other conditions and needs or to future mutate scenarios.

Planners started to become conscious that a comprehensive understanding of all the dynamics of the city was impossible, and the discipline started to enter in a big crisis.

The belief that planning was not possible anymore, that was not possible to handle the complexity of this system, brought to a retreat of the discipline. Architecture and planning were not anymore seen as a political instrument capable to deal with social problems, the large scale was abolished and the discipline started focusing more on aesthetic discussions and marketing strategies.

The way of thinking about the city changes drastically in few decades. Cor Wagenaar writes that Granpré Molière - in the 1930s - "picture of what the changes would look like from the prospective of ordinary citizens." and than adds: "Now this concern is lacking almost completely. The living conditions of the average person no longer seem to matter. (...) Hygiene and psychologically sound conditions are no longer among the concerns of the city planner. They have been replaced by entertainment values, which, unlike health conditions, are hardly ever related to basic human needs and, therefore, are not presented from the prospective of the general population. Instead of (future) inhabitants, prospective investors are targeted. What is it that makes a city appealing in their eyes? That appears to be the main question these plans try to answer. They do so not by planning but by marketing."

In this change of way of thinking about what the city should be and what is the role of architecture and planning, the goal of the discipline change completely. If entertainment becomes one of the key factor for the conception of the postmodern city, and it creates divisions in the city of areas targeting different...


types of dwellers with different needs, an other mayor issue, responsible for the great fragmentation and segregation of the city’s parts is the great focus given to security; a security conceived as both of physical security of the citizens and especially the inhabitants, and security of the investment as real estate value. Security is not addressed in an orwellian way through transparency but with the creation of a 'city of bunkers'. A city that as Tim Rieniets underlines "neither needs an authoritarian regime nor social consensus to be implemented. This concepts perfectly suits the financing, building and marketing of today’s real estate industry. It can be implemented project by project and sold to all those who desire and can afford this kind of security."

These "bunkers" are not camouflages made of bare concrete, rather the opposite: many large-scale developments are designed as highly visible and glamorous projects: shopping malls, congress centers, business parks, tourists resorts, theme parks, research compounds, and so on. Yet these projects, as inviting as they might appear, are not primarily designed for the larger public, but for attracting solvent user groups. With exclusivity as the core of their business and design concept, these projects are safeguarded against people and activities perceived to violate their guidelines.

Since the modern age the idea of 'form-follow-function' started becoming popular and dictate a new 'efficient' way of building the city. The buildings designed following this principle have a very tight-fit that make them difficult to adapt to other uses. This 'over-determination' of the shape of the building, the emphasis on equilibrium and integration make a city a Closed City, what is an Open City, and which qualities characterizes it?

As defined by Kees Christiaanse "The Open City is neither a utopia nor a clear-cut reality, but a situation, a balance between openness and closeness, between integration and disintegration, between control and laissez-faire."

Two of the main quality of the open city are the two point which Jane Jacobs so strongly insisted in its world famous book ‘The Death and Life of Great American Cities’: density and diversity. These two conditions are so important because favor vitality and exchange of knowledge, creating innovation and allowing the city to flourish.

From these two qualities Richard Sennett, in its theory of the Open City defines three other features that characterize the Open City and that can guide its design: ambiguous edges, incomplete form and unresolved narratives.

In an Open City not everything should be connected,
and the boundaries between the different neighborhoods are very important parts of the city. Sennett makes a parallel between the city’s edges and the cell’s edges explaining that the city should have boundaries that are not like the cell walls, but more like cell membrane. He suggest that the different part of the city shouldn’t be completely connected, but not even completely disconnected like the cell walls that only retain and don’t communicate with the surroundings. The city’s borders should be more like cell membranes that are both “porous and resistant at the same time”\(^{10}\)

Incomplete form, refer to the issue of decay that I have underlined before as a problem that characterizes the buildings in which the form is too strictly determinate by the function. In order to guarantee more flexibility, adaptability and change of use, Sennett suggested that the connection between form and function should be very lose, if not completely disconnected.

The third point that Sennett defines as important for the design of an Open City refers to the planning process and its final goal. The American author stresses the fact that planning cannot follow a linear path but should embrace a non-linear form. He states that in order to do that, he works with a rolling planning process that is made of different evaluations in the important phases of the process; phases in which is possible to make modification, re-thinking and re-adjust the design.

Conclusion

The theory of the open city is important because try to interpret the contemporary society neither forcing a over-determined positivist vision based on a reduction and simplification of it, nor rejecting of every possibility to handle its complexity.

This concept of the Open City tries to understand the city in an ‘embracing way’; envision a space of opportunity and of coexistence; it unveil the false myth of openness though open market “reestablishing the role of planning without falling victim of total control”.\(^{11}\)

In this way it reaffirm the political and social importance of planning, not anymore as a creation of fixed rules that guarantee standards and efficiency, but through strategies that allow and stimulate diversity and flexibility in order to respond to changing conditions of a reality that is ever changing and always on a faster pace.

Bibliography

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Sennett, Richard. “The open city” (The understanding society lecture series, Centre for research in the arts, social sciences and humanities, University of Cambridge, Cambridge UK, February 21, 2013), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uyHey4QuUE.

Wagenaar, Cor. Town Planning in the Netherlands since 1800 (Rotterdam: 010 Publisher, 2011)
Strategies

- Fight depression in South Side Chicago through creating a center with increased opportunities.

- Ensuring a prosperous urban area with a strong identity by emphasizing the existing qualities of the site.

- Attacking the monotonous structure in South Chicago through multi-functionality, diversity and prosperity.
Maps

definition of points of interest and points of tensions
Amenities South Side

- Metra station
- School
- Church

Community services:
- Art center
- Community center
- Library
- Medical center
Qualities on site
Extending streets
Relational scheme I
Introducing new qualities
Connecting qualities
Relational scheme II
Shifting the border
Two parts

modification of the grid & phenomenological approach
Streets

studies on 83rd
87th & 89th
streets:

density, entrances, prospectives
and waterfront.
Density
83rd _ 87th _ 89th
Entrances
83rd  87th  89th
Prospectives
83rd _ 87th _ 89th
Waterfront
83rd _ 87th _ 89th
the Park

not autonomous
part but element of
connection
Green spaces

Existing Park

Park outside the area

Park inside the area
Parks connections
specific points, points of tensions in the plan that become points of attention that need a more specific definition eable to inform and frame the surrounding development

On this theme Maria Shéhérazade Giudici, referring to the concepts of Specific Spaces and architecture d’accompagnement in the France of Henry IV wrote:

‘If Architecture now is looking for strategies to take back the city from the rule of urbanization, it should neither refuse uniformity nor invent special places, but accept the challenge and pick up where accompagnement and Specific Spaces left off, by turning its attention, once again not to the objects but to the void not to functionality but rather to life itself.’
Plan

- The plan is the graphic representation of our strategies.

- The strategies are defined on a large scale but also on a small scale.

- The plan is neither a masterplan nor a collage of different places, is something in between, is the result of large-scale strategies and of the design of small fragments. The final result is the negotiation between these two methods.

- This is a project of interdependent places. Places with individual qualities and characteristics that serve various, yet specific needs and qualities. Thus, by carefully considering precise specific fragments and moments, we believe that the negotiation between these elements will render an urban environment that break with the mono-centric city.