The Brusselian Agora

Analysis of the ancient Agora model
Towards an new social and cultural centre in Brussels South

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Introduction

Contemporary cities are the result of centuries of evolution and development in architecture and urbanism. The past has always been a source of knowledge as well as inspiration and precedents which all contributed to this architectural evolution. Modern architecture may not have the esthetical expressions of ancient monuments, although the architectural values are based on ancient standards and design methods. The influences on architecture has increased in the last decades through to the fact of the industrial revolution and the more recent digital era. In these modern times professions seems more specialized within a specific framework which on the one hand increases the quality of the product and on the other hand provokes a specific need to new professions.

The role of the architect and its instruments have changed through time, although his tools of design stayed very traditional. Although the building as a loose entity in the city fabric is still a derivative of classical architecture, the public realm has been adapted to the contemporary use of the city. The city as a collage of services and goods all related to the demand of consumption. This evolution of the organisation of the city territory has been influenced by a lot of inventions and innovations through time. The ancient Agora was one of the most prominent urban innovations of its time. The organization and construction of an economic and social heart of the city was a major breakthrough in the history of urbanism. Although the contemporary interpretation of this public central city environment has physically been changed through time, yet its basic urban values stayed the same. What can we learn from this ancient urban model? Which values are integrated in our contemporary cities? And how would the modern Agora look like?

1. The Athenian agora: results of excavations, 1954
American School of Classical Studies Athens, p14-110.
An excellent example of Greek town planning, spatial and social city organization is the city of Olynthus. A city in the north of Greece which was excavated and mapped in between 1928 and 1939. Although the city was not that big, the urban structure was very renewing at the time of settlement around 500 BC – 300 BC. Through the excavations the city was remodelled and analysed. Especially its urban organization seems to be very modern for its time as new urban features where integrated in its design. The city was based on 4 sections. The first was the old city of Olynthus stationed on the South hill (in the South West area of the city). This part seems to be built by the normal standards of city planning, while houses were built adjacent to each other with occasionally a shop or workshop on the ground level and housing on top of it.

The second was the urban design of the North hill, based on a grid pattern which was related to the theories of Aristotle and his ‘modern’ Hippodamian fashion. Straight streets and regular blocks turned the North hill into a modernistic city district, which with 360 households was good for a population between 2000 and 3000 people. In this part of the city you could see new urban design techniques (as the Hippodamian grid structure, and the agora were new urban elements) built in practice for one of the first times in history.

The third section was a large open area in the South-Western portion of the North hill, the Olynthus Agora. Connected with both city avenues (one leading the foreign travellers towards the Agora, and the other connecting the local citizens with this city centre.

Designed with precision, in which scale and proportion were the tools to create a monumental urban landscape. The Agora was more than just an economic centre, as it was the main space for discussion, politics, human interaction, trade and religious activities. The fourth and last part of the city was the latest addition, the eastern Villa section. This might have been a reaction on the Agora settlement. While this new city section was furthest away from the big boulevards and the Agora on the other side of the city. The housing prices in this new area were fairly low as people who used to live near the Agora moved towards this more quiet and peacefully end of the city.


3. Architectural Space in Ancient Greece, 1937, Constantinos A. Doxiadis


The city

In his book 'The architecture of the city' Rossi describes the notion of urban artifacts. He considers urban artifacts of a city as works of art, which manifests social, cultural and religious life. The Agora could be considered to be a manifestation of social and religious life as well as being a work of art on itself. This ancient example of an urban artifact has been a major influence in the know-how of urban planning and urban development. Besides the grid structure (which was a general design approach of urban planning in the same period of the Agora development) this new urban artifact has major influence on the structure and behaviour of the city and its citizens. As Rossi used the exploration of urban history as one of the most valued ways to study the urban structure, this urban history would be considered rather important for my research. The sequence of monuments within the agora design as well as the city’s basic layout and it’s plans gives insight in the ancient social and cultural centre of the city.

As the Agora developed its social and cultural value became a very influential factor in the city life’s behaviour. The Agoraphobia as a gathering place in the city with its commercial and political functions (a market, shops, theatre, stoas, court, temples, city council). Although the Agora had this twin function, it presence had a huge economical influence in the city. Besides the content of the Agora’s functions the shops which were located on the edge of the Agora were not only a limitation of the Agora district, they were also entrances as the shops had both side access to the public. These walk-through shop shortcuts made the Agora highly accessible for the surrounding neighbourhoods, something which did not stay unnoticed in the further development of the city, as the value of housing properties around the Agora increased rapidly during the flourishing of this central public realm.

New centroid of the city

The Agora was, besides being a highly accessible space, a place of orientation in the city. Considering this, any non-residents such as traders, politicians or travellers would efficiently be able to locate and access this area as the main connection towards the centre of the city was mostly a clear boulevard or avenue. The Agora was often connected with a travel route on the end of one avenue and the harbour or political centre/city council on the other connection. Besides the main connections the Agora had multiple smaller straight connection with the surrounding housing areas.

The ancient agora seems to work as a centroid within the city fabric. It may not be a literal centroid of the city (geometrical-wise), although it is the centroid in physical and functional sense. A good example of a contemporary interpretation of the Agora will be Federation Square in Melbourne. A place which could be called the centroid of the city of Melbourne, by its functional and aesthetical presence, as well as its central location within the city centre. People of this city, and especially the surrounding areas, are inextricably connected with this city area, and their daily life is affected by the presence of this centroid. Anciendly speaking the main Agora was the centroid in the city. The modern day metropolitan cities have several of this central city areas within its build up, fare enough there is always one main location within the city which captures this social, physical and functional entity.
The Brusselian Agora

A contemporary translation of the Agora as an urban landscape in the city could be seen as a necessary feature of the city fabric. Although the city of Brussels has a few city area’s (Grand place, Parc du Bruxelles, European Union district) which has the potential to become such a landscape, there is no single place which really captures the idea of the ancient Agora. As the location of the Brussels South station (which will be tunnelled in the future) was chosen to become a new social and cultural district in the city the concept of the Agora was used to give shape to the idea. Like the Agora this open space in the city will not just be the remains of the surrounding structure, it will be carefully constructed as one of the most important areas of the city. This city square will be one of European measurements as it will be used by Brussels citizens as well as travellers and politicians. A centroid in the city which on the one hand will work as an economic boost for the surrounding areas and on the other hand balancing the city by opposing this social and cultural domain across to the Eastern political domain (European Quarter). This new part of the city which will be an element on its own, jet becomes a catalyst for the surrounding districts to blend in this social urban realm. From out of the perspective of human and their perception, scale and impact, this space is perceived by the visualisation of its limits and becomes a kinaesthetic experience. It is very important that the coherence between the architectural structures and their approach is carefully defined. Their volumes and Scale as well as the positioning are the architectural tools to control the Agora as being a space in the city. These structures exerts pressure and resistance as it stimulate and direct you through the Agora.

As the Brusselian Agora get it shape, numerous of public functions will get assigned their locations on the big Brusselian square. These functions are all orientated towards to square, while most of them will have entrances on both sides of the building. Besides this functions and several monuments small parks will surround or blend in the Agora, while an International train station (with local tram and metro connections) is buried underneath. This station is the Agora’s main connection as foreign travellers, tourists or visitors with business or political reasons will exit the station and walk on the Agora square. The second main connection is the continuation of the Anspach Boulevard on to the Agora, while several smaller alleys or gates connecting the surrounding neighbourhoods. The main issue of the contemporary design has nothing to do with its organization as the ancient model could be applied easily. The matter of scale is the biggest challenge in this urban design, as it will function for almost a half million people every day. Besides these challenges the Brusselian square will become a new social and cultural heart in the city connecting, not only the local inhabitants of Brussels but also, people from out whole Europe as being a new European monument.

10. Architectural Space in Ancient Greece, 1937, Constantinos A. Doxiadis