

## Public Interest - Private Interests

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In his book *The City in European History*, Leonardo Benevolo describes the cities of the Old World as the co-existence of private interest spaces (available for economic activities and development) and public interest spaces belonging to the community (available for all the citizens). For him, Venice is emblematic of a kind of urbanism which allows capitalism to create economic transactions while at the same time receiving, in its public buildings and public spaces, a collective life in the service of the community.

This model of the European city, with the interlocking of public and private, took shape during the Renaissance and could be regarded as a hybrid between the Classical Greek city (in whose public space political and democratic debate developed), the Roman city (a functional city meeting urban needs) and the capitalist city (where goods are stored and channelled and where commercial transactions take place). This trilogy - the political city, the

functional city, the economic city, each with its corresponding spaces - is still to be seen today in all the European cities, whose identities are determined by the range and significance of each of the three co-ordinates.

When we take a first glance at the everyday dynamism of the contemporary Greek city - I am referring here to the large cities such as Athens and Thessaloniki, where metropolitan development has taken place post-War- it would seem to have been altered by private interests and commerce. As the town plan has expanded continuously at the cost of the natural environment, the Greek city has been created thanks to the initiatives of hundreds of thousands of private individuals, from small-scale freelance tradesmen to large companies. The structure and the laws of urban development were fixed so as to facilitate the socio-economic development of a city in which small businesses, usually of a family nature, primarily flourish and prosper. These are the businesses which build the city simply by juxtaposing small units - ranging in size from small houses to office blocks- as if they were pawns on the huge board of urban development.

Although morphological heterogeneity is now the fashion -after the period of Modernism, which produced architecture of very high quality, rampant post-Modernism still dominates today, as a mixture of forms and materials which endows urban kitsch with a sense of splendor- the typological principles are, strangely enough, still constant and restricted: the Dom-ino residence type of post-and-beam construction is in general use, with variations of a number of kinds. In houses, the mass of the building is surrounded by elongated balconies which extend the privacy of the residence towards the city, while in office blocks the building is covered with an ornamented curtain wall designed to signify the economic success and prosperity of the proprietor's company.

The incredible vitality of private building activity is matched by the intensive social life which predominates in the built environment and,

by extension, in the street, where there is such an intermingling of a spirit of solidarity, a desire to transact, a desire to be ostentatious and a commercial spirit that one is amazed to encounter such sociability even on the periphery, far from the center.

These predominant characteristics of the contemporary Greek city have attempted -in ever-uglier ways- to cover up the complete absence of the other two urban co-ordinates, that is, services and public space. As the Greek city develops and expands, it has consumed the space (ground) it occupies, creating traffic and ecology problems which seem to be insuperable for as long as the urban fabric, differing in this from the urban fabric of European cities, fails to integrate public spaces (unlike the fabric of American cities) and does not adjust its networks of transportation.

The public administration has confined its powers over planning strategy to mere management of the urban fabric (streets are often narrower than they should be) and to publishing laws, thus favoring private enterprise and minimizing the implementation of public urban facilities projects. During the last forty years, the large metropolises have failed -in the name of the general interest- to defend a policy of conserving and creating natural environmental spaces in and around the city (with the exception of the archaeological sites on the hills of Athens), a policy of developing public transport, or a policy of accentuating and utilising the public space around centres where the public receives services.

Commercial vitality, the mobility of the city-dwellers and the intensity of social life -during the day as much as at night- can find no outlets, forcing them to manifest themselves in an anarchic manner and giving the city an air of frenzy, as if it had lost its balance and was on the verge of rupture.

The Greek city, created in the image of its citizens, is a city on the boil (that is, in conflict), a city with vitality (that is, passion), a city of dynamism (that is, irrationality); in order to achieve the objective of modernization, it has confined its metropolitan development to local and superficial intervention which saves it from general chaos. In the European cities, people have to try to produce the ephemeral next to the permanent; the Greek cities, by way of contrast, seem to be taking part in a continuous urban happening in everyday life, in which 'events' take the place of structural factors.

In a country which is once and for all a member of the European Union -a source of economic support for its development- one could predict that urban modernization will also develop gradually, as we can see happening with the construction of the Athens Metro. In a country in which the motor-car is a symbol of individuality, it would be desirable if this development was not based on the model used by the cities of Western Europe in the 70s, where the networks ignored the city completely and were organised around the rationale of technical efficiency, making no attempt to co-exist with the rationale of urban planning.

However, in view of the delays in their modernization, the Greek cities are in a position to design their new networks in accordance with a contemporary urban approach, one which accentuates and utilizes what exists without destroying it, which, using the potential for functional change, turns the large public spaces of the city over to the people and creates cultural venues adapted to a society of urban recreation.

All photographic material is from the book *New Collective Spaces in the Contemporary City - The West Arc for Thessaloniki* (Athens: Untimely Books, 2000). The European architectural competition was organized in 1997 by the Organization for the Cultural Capital of Europe Thessaloniki 1997 and EUROPAN.

Translated from the Greek by John Solman

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