

Urban designers: the priests of our time?

Why the metaphor of the priest?

Ariella Masboungi wondered whether we should consider the urban designers as the masters of the game... She noticed that they are hardly known by the general population. The urban designer remains quite anonymous. (S)He discusses more than (s)he draws, and his/her drawings are thrown away after being shown (“dessins-poubelle”, “dustbin-drawings”), unlike architectural drawings.

The designer would then be a *priest* because of his/her enormous influence on the urban lifestyles.

For Joan Busquets, in no way is one supposed to be a *priest*; one should work for the collective. The architect must be faced with the budget-constraints and with the population. There is anyway no single profile, and different roles have to be developed.

Still, Ariella Masboungi remarked, you have the capacity to give vision. Vision is like a tale: you are proposing stories, a dream, something that doesn't exist. It allows the other people to discuss. We need a tale to start discussing. The tale must be debated of course, but Ariella Masboungi wondered whether the creation itself can be collective.

From the audience, Venkateswar Ramaswamy interpreted the meaning of *priesthood*: It involves both a sacred responsibility and the privilege of belonging to a power elite, manipulating and exploiting people. He asked: how much of each is involved?

Caroline Bos, in response to that comment, claimed that urban designers have to learn how to engage more people. Joan Busquets felt “the training process should be more integrated”. The urban designer should learn to think more about private contributions to the public, and the architect must not see the project as *his* thing. A city is something that is collective: there must be an ethic commitment to this statement.

The mission of the urban designer today

Ariella Masboungi opened an inquiry about the contribution of urban designers to the creative city. What kind of innovation is to be pursued? Why? For whom? Innovation can be dangerous, creating place in which it is difficult to live. What do we look for: economic growth? Better life in the city? Conditions for creativity for the people? How can architects and designers contribute to help the people love the city?

Caroline Bos does not believe in a master plan, but in “crossing-points”: points of intensity creating events and networks. This means a lot of communication.

We have the responsibility of the space of the city, insisted Joan Busquets, nobody else will take this role, and this is the most creative part of our work. The past is not giving the answer for the future, but we must *know* the city before designing. The creative moment is a synthesis, but then its outcome should be shared and explained with simple words to the public, with a sense of accountability.

Ariella Masboungi also asked the speakers to face the issue of suburbia. The generic city with its suburbs poses a challenge to the designer: Should we avoid it and reinforce the traditional city? How to turn the suburb into a creative city? And, first of all, why are we producing those generic cities in the middle of nowhere?

According to Joan Busquets, generic cities are produced without architects and urban designers. (They are pure market-products, is his implicit assumption.) Yet we have to understand the difficulties of the past, when many such suburbs were developed, Busquets

argues. He warns us against cynism. He also notices that it is very easy to say “we’ll demolish these suburbs”, while what we must do is help those people living there. Busquets calls his fellow designers to take a closer look at the public budgets and find wrongly spent money, as he claims he did in Barcelona. Then, improvement of the cities should include the outskirts.

For Ariella Masbounji, much more attention should have been given to the suburbs, including in this conference on *creativity and the city*. The *priests of our time* have to explain and convince the public and private sector that we can improve suburbs, which are now the offspring of the private system.

Carolien Bos evoked the case of *nieuwe Rhijn*: a new town, with only a shopping-center and the family-houses... supposed to be “what the people want”. But it is completely devoid of urban life, and now urban designers are asked to solve that problem. The streets of the suburbs are empty shells. We have to return a sense of belonging to the people.

Joan Busquets concluded by saying that creativity must offer a way to allow projects for a long-lasting city. Indeed, the issue at stake here is that of Urban Sustainability (I would advise the reader to look further in ed. Louise Nyström, *City and Culture, cultural processes and urban sustainability*, The Swedish Urban Environment Council, Boverket, Karlskrona, 1999).

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