THE CITY AS A PLACE OF RECONCILIATION BETWEEN MAN AND THE COSMOS: REVISITING JOSEPH RYKWERT’S THE IDEA OF A TOWN

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Originally published in the Dutch architectural journal Forum, edited by Aldo van Eyck, The Idea of a Town gained fame in its revised British edition of 1976. This is not a book about cities of Antiquity, but like every great book on the history of cities and architecture, it is underpinned by contemporary issues, issues which still face professionals concerned with cities.

It is common for us to be led to think that if the actual state of our cities is a product of market pressures, we, architects and urban planners, should be absolved of all responsibility. Rykwert, however, does not agree to adhere to this sophist pact. This book is a critique addressed to those urban planners who consider the city “exclusively through the perspective of the economy, hygiene, traffic problems or services”, as Van Eyck has sharply observed in the introduction to the original publication. The book is a critique of those professionals who have reduced the city to abstractions by adopting strictly functional criteria and have observed it only through the prism of housing.

Rykwert believes that the urban fabric which structures city life needs to last longer than the specific society which generated it. Examples of urban fabric must be clearly recognizable in order to allow citizens of any generation to read their city, to understand its successive layers, and most importantly, to find their place in relation to their ancestors and fellow citizens. Rykwert’s aim is not to show what the planning of cities in Antiquity was like, but rather how the planners of that age conceptualized their craft and how they made use of rituals and myths to shape their urban environment. Far from a utopian view, Rykwert is fully aware of the problems and blemishes of the ancient city and does not advocate any sort of return to a supposed order of Antiquity.

Rykwert dedicates his study primarily to the Etruscan and Roman city as an emblematic work that makes sense to its citizens, corresponding to their symbolic yearnings. The shape of the city, its outer walls and gates, and its public spaces and buildings were built taking into consideration a series of rituals and ceremonies. These rituals situated the Romans within a universe which they themselves recognized.

Opposing those historians who identify in defense strategies, in the control of trading routes and in public health and economic purposes the reasons for the foundation of a city, Rykwert shows that such rational imperatives were not always decisive in the foundation of cities. According to him, the design of many cities in Antiquity, and in other civilizations, was based on a cosmological vision. Drawing on many authors of Antiquity, Rykwert details with precision the entire ritualistic content for founding cities. He begins

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with the choice of the site, through examining the auguries, which included observing the flight of birds, the behavior of animals, the study of the viscera of animals, claps of thunder and other signs from Nature, which were interpreted as divine messages confirming or not the choice of mortals.

When the ceremonies ended, the city had been blessed by the gods who had demonstrated their benevolence towards the community, but the rites continued with the gesture of ploughing the land and marking out the borders of the urban world. After the site had been purified and clearly marked out, the community took possession of the city.

In demonstrating that rituals followed every step in the growth of the city, Rykwert analyses the sacred character attributed to the walls protecting the city as well as to the gates guarding entrance to it and set up to signal the way in. The defensive elements (moats, walls) transcended their material dimension and acquired a symbolic character, as they safeguarded, under the aegis of the gods and goddesses, the social and religious unity of the community.

In one of the later chapters, Rykwert transcends the Roman and Etruscan examples and seeks parallels in other societies, particularly in the so-called ‘primitive’ societies, since human beings have always tried to reconcile themselves with their cosmos and their space. He succeeds in finding in these examples the poetics of building dwellings and public spaces which might connect the community to its cosmos. Rykwert demonstrates how the layout of the villages of so-called primitive people reflected their way of interpreting the world and of structuring themselves in social terms, like the Dogon people of Western Africa, who fascinated Aldo Van Eyck, and the Bororó tribes of Western Brazil, studied by Claude Lévi-Strauss, among other peoples. In the Brazilian case, Rykwert uses Lévi-Strauss’s observations in *Tristes Tropiques* to show that the spatial reorganization proposed by the missionaries, by allocating the Bororós in villages in parallel rows, totally destroyed the tribe’s social organization which had been based on a circular disposition, itself in harmony with their vision of the world. In addition to Lévi-Strauss, Rykwert comprehensively used classic texts of the social sciences, such as those by Fustel de Coulanges, in his studies on how the structure of the Ancient city was understood and transformed by its citizens, and those by Mircea Eliade, in his studies about religious myths and the sacred dimension.

The rituals for founding cities, hence, were closely related to the religious ones. Every foundation of a Roman city, for example, reiterated the foundation of Rome itself, which represented the very creation of the world. In fact, the construction of a city, or even of a dwelling, in many cultures was made in the image of a divine institution which symbolizes the center of the world. The foundation rituals had a crucial importance for the life of a community, since they attested to the urban structure being in harmony with the forces governing the cosmos. Those rituals were constantly borne in mind remembered in their monuments and temples. Rykwert shows that many rituals survived, although transformed and attenuated, until the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Era.

What concerns Rykwert is the loss of a sacred attitude regarding our built environment due to the advent of the Age of Reason and Enlightenment and scientific progress from the 18th century onwards. The suppression of cosmologies and traditional religions seems to have made men unable to find a worthy place for themselves in the universe, and has disaggregating effects in the way we behave in society and feel in our cities. What Rykwert suggests is people only feel part of a community if there is a correspondence between their cosmos and the built environment which surrounds them.
The Idea of a Town belongs to a group of publications dating from the late 1950s and 1960s which criticized the environment produced by post war reconstruction and the effects of modernism in our cities. While adopting varied viewpoints, authors such as Jane Jacobs, Herbert Gans, Kevin Lynch, Gordon Cullen, Henri Lefebvre and Aldo Rossi contributed to transforming the way of thinking about and planning cities. Although belonging to this group, The Idea of a Town was able, more than them, to transcend the context in which it arose.

The publication of this book takes place at a very opportune moment in Brazil and Latin America, particularly as, currently, our architectural and planning schools are dominated by a pragmatism that refuses to see the city itself, unless such observation is shaped by apparent scientific methodologies. When we think about our cities today--engulfed in violent social conflict, bullied by organized crime, compromised by the lack of infrastructure and sacrificed in the name of parking lots, high walls, security porters’ lodges and billboards – the issues discussed in this book seem to be very far from our problems. However, it is our task to try to give new meaning to our cities, a meaning which might transcend the prosaic aim of fulfilling our everyday duties. A recurring issue on those rituals analyzed by Rykwert is the theme of reconciliation: reconciliation between the cosmos and the earth, the sacred and the mundane, the city and Nature, citizens and their institutions, and among the citizens themselves. This theme seems to emerge as the key to reestablishing our cities as the great locus of civilized human experience, as an inalienable part of our culture.