

FRAGMENTS OF THOUGHTS ON CITY AS AN INHERITANCE¹

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Abstract: This paper examines some ideas concerning contemporary understanding of cities. Following observations of recent development in architectural world it is possible to assume that main concern of today's architecture is not architecture itself, but the destiny of our cities. Urban development is today carried mostly by techno optimistic forces, smart technologies, technocratic ideas, or by capitalist economic interests of "The Icon Project" or "Starchitecture." Nothing of this is necessarily wrong, but surely highly problematic and ambivalent. What we need is not yet another technology or more science, unaware of particular people, tradition, context and culture, but clear view of situation and a way out. Regardless of any scientific novelty and progress we do not know what to do with our cities. Taking it as a point of departure this paper contends an argumentation that it is possible to start understanding our cities as an inheritance from the past. The paper propounds benefits of doing so. The arguments are drawn from contemporary philosophy (an ethics of inheritance). Following it the paper explains an ethical notion of an heir and what are the advantages of the notion.

Keywords: cities, inheritance, philosophy, future, personal responsibility

In accordance with recent philosophical ideas on urban situation² it is possible to maintain that the "main battlefield" of today's architecture, since at least 1990s, is not architecture itself (what, how and why is something built), but the destiny of our cities, traditional, European, but cities of the world as well. This has already been a subject of various reflections. Architect Rem Koolhaas has recently shocked architectural world by his new *bon mot* "architecture is death."³ Taken literally, it's obviously not true. This master of slogans however does not make groundless statements; he wanted to express his view that discipline that has always tried to make world a better place, to give people home, to ameliorate situation of people,

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2 O. Mongin, *La condition urbaine. La ville á l'heure de la mondialisation*, Paris, 2005. Czech edition: O. Mongin, *Urbánní situace. Město v čase globalizace*, Praha, 2017.

3 R. Koolhaas and J. Otero-Pailos, *Preservation is overtaking us*, New York, 2014.

to create meaningful and pleasant environment, in a word, to help, has changed to a producer of luxurious “products” (i.e. no longer “buildings” or “houses”).

Urban development is today increasingly carried mostly either by techno optimistic forces, smart technologies, technocratic ideas etc., by large developers or other capitalist economic interest that is increasingly changing cities according to the “Icon Project” as sociologist Leslie Sklair calls it⁴ or according of capitalist logic of “Starchitecture” (described for instance by Davide Ponzini).⁵ Nothing of this is necessarily wrong, but surely – as all relevant and significant matters are – ambivalent and problematic.

There has never even been agreement on cities and urbanism during 20th century discussions. These observations varied considerably from city as economic entity to city that nurtures social and cultural diversity and even to city that dismiss in suburbanisation. The view of cities changed radically since 20th Century up today. In mid-20th Century Lewis Mumford published influential text on city in history⁶ in which he famously claimed that metropolis is doomed and should be for various reasons changed, i.e. rebuilt, to a disperse pattern of settlements and sub centres in what he named regional planning. This position against traditional concentrated point city provoked huge reaction through following decades. A very influential and fruitful reaction to Mumford’s ideas seems to be Peter Hall’s book of 1998 *Cities in Civilization*.⁷ In this plea for cities and their urban golden ages, city is an irreplaceable place of human creativity, creativity in the culture, art, technology and technics as well as in fixing its own urban problems. A fascinating thing about cities, according to Hall, is they can propose and solve problems they themselves generate. Hall was nevertheless little interested in visual or aesthetic side of cities or how particular architecture in a particular city looks like or how beauty of a particular city develops through time. In establishing urban order Peter Hall believed the most important factor is technology and its progress.

Cities are without doubt places of creativity and as such they are necessary and human civilization needs them. They are places in which culture flourish and that feed technical development, but what is usually not stress in argumentations on their creative and economical role is that they are also places where people live, places that must be taken care of. We constantly decide how they will look like in the future – they reveal our responsibility, something that is not always clearly visible in the context of, for instance, post-communist region. Aesthetic quality of urban places, from large wholes up to smallest pieces, must in this regard be highly stressed. And so Hall’s rehabilitation against modernist view concerns cities regarding their function, their role in civilization, as a source of various creativity but not, at least not sufficiently, as our material creation, as a human artefact.

City is also a place where we are, both individually and collectively, rooted. In cities people can live uprooted lives, but interestingly rooted lives as well. I believe the rootedness is based on the building themselves, on the brick and mortar or the flesh of the city. Hence the importance of particular walls, stones, pavements, corners, arches etc. Cities provide us for the existential foothold. And so there seems to be two different group of approaches toward theme of the city, one centred on its function, its working, attitudes mostly technical, utilitarian, and other, attitudes based either on phenomenology or other philosophical inspiration and it is important to bring these two groups to potentially fruitful discussions. What is particularly interesting from perspective at the turn of second a third decade of 21st Century on Christian Norberg-Schulz, one of leading proponent of phenomenology in architecture and authority

4 L. Sklair, *The Icon Project*, New York, 2017.

5 M. Nastasi and D. Ponzini, *Starchitecture*, New York, 2016.

6 L. Mumford, *City in history*, New York, 1961.

7 P. Hall, *Cities in Civilization*, London, 1998.

who claimed for architecture to be our existential support is that as long as in 1970s and 1980s he was not much interested in historical preservation, in preservation of historical monuments or non-historical but significant building of a city. Norberg-Schulz was not a preservationist and his interest in historical architecture was not nostalgic. With his stress in existential support Norber-Schulz represents also a kind of rehabilitation of traditional city. Nevertheless, it is without a focus on taking care and preserving of particular important building, places of memory.

It goes without saying that the future of cities is and will be heavily influenced by science, and yet I believe that what we need is not yet another technology or more science, unaware of particular people, tradition, context and culture, but clear view of situation and a new thinking. Any holistic answer is from the beginning almost impossible since our societies both at national and regional as well as general level are at the moment deeply divided. And the same applies not only for Europe but globally. Architect Christopher Alexander, known for his community oriented design approach, published some time ago a text *The Overriding Rule*⁸, which reflects on what could help "... the city gradually become integral" and defines a single and main rule, every step in construction must be done so that healing the city. Or in another formulation: every new step in construction has a single basic duty: it must create a continuous structure of integrity around itself. There is no doubt that this is an ideal that we should accept without hesitation. But it is not clear why a city should be a whole, if its society, its culture, its world to which the city belongs, is not? How could city form a whole when society that builds it is fragmented? His rule thus seems right to me, but it is absolutely not clear how to convince all people of the rule – in situation when any attempts at general convincing of even elementary and obvious clear facts have failed in the long term. Moreover, if he wants to heal or save the world (by the integrity of the cities) and not start with it with people, then – although Alexander would probably disagree – he continues the now much criticized modernist tradition, Le Corbusier's and other modernists' attitude, of changing the world through architecture: better flats, houses, cities etc. give the emergence of a new person, family, society... History of 20th Century architecture and urbanism is a testimony that this topsy-turvy approach failed.

Regardless of any scientific novelty and progress we are not sure what to do with our cities. As we are not sure with our culture, society, civilisation. On cities could be said the same what philosopher Karsten Harries claims for architecture: "For some time now architecture has been uncertain of its way."⁹ Any answer could be only individual, personal.

In the pre-modern, pre-industrial cultures people understood their lives and culture, and in reality *everything*, as an inheritance, especially life itself was understood as an inherited gift. In his recent book *Ethics, Life and Institution. An Attempt at practical Philosophy*¹⁰ Czech philosopher Jan Sokol tries to build on it a systematic Ethics of Heritage that leads our understanding and actions, both personal and collective. In the end of the book in *the Ethics of Heritage* section he tries to show what he wants: a proposal to resurrect the concept that man is an heir; that he owes life, care, language, culture, everything he has, knows, is aware of, but also the planet, the nature, landscapes, society, institutions, cities... A distinction is made between heir and steward (a caretaker or an administrator). The heir is a person in his personal life and everything he inherited in "private" life, as an individual. The steward is how he (a person) behaves

8 Alexander, "The Overriding Rule", in: Christopher Alexander, Hajo Neis, Artemis Anninou, Ingrid King, *A New Theory of Urban Design*, Oxford, 1988.

9 K. Harries, *The Ethical function of architecture*, New York, 1997.

10 J. Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institution. An Attempt at practical Philosophy*, Praha, 2016. The English edition is in reality a translation from the Czech original: J. Sokol, *Etika, život a instituce. Pokus o praktickou filosofii*, Praha, 2014.

at work, there he also takes over from the former generations and times, from the past, cares for, hands over, develops and translates to changing circumstances. At the same time, he does not only act for himself; he is fulfilling the goals given by an organization, with the help of its means. These two modes, the private heir and the contracted steward – represent the modes of life and “contain” in itself guidelines how to life. In Sokol’s own summation:

“The ancient concept of ‘inheritance’ as the responsible handling of one’s life and the world can be found in virtually all human cultures. Much as it has been misused in various ways over the course of history, and as it has been programmatically suppressed in modern times, it can complement this polyphony with elements which are nowadays markedly absent from it. ... However, the concept of inheritance stresses the irreplaceable role of man and human culture in contrast to biological reductionism, and to the non-human nature and the world. Unlike the one-sided focus on morality and law, which regards morality merely as a restriction, it offers to each human life a sense of orientation and purpose.”¹¹

Offering of a sense of having a purpose in one’s life, together with hope, seems to be one of the greatest advantages of the Sokol’s idea.

What I would like to try to propose here now, it may be a way how to understand and treat our cities – regarding their development and future in general, but mostly when thinking of them. It must be emphasized that the notion of heir concerns always an individual person. It is always me or you, a particular person, who internalize the notion. And so the awareness of inheritance changes our attitude. It does not begin with changing the world out around us as modernists did. If I am an heir, I am at the moment responsible for my city. It makes me change my mind and orient my acting. It is different way of acting that prevalent in our contemporary society based mainly on hedonistic quest of living only tranquil private life of an Epicurus garden or even on selfish searching of individual economic profit. Unlike propositions of Christopher Alexander that start with changing our world, the ethics of inheritance starts within an individual. Alexander’s rule could in reality work also only if a change of peoples’ attitude occurs. It is very important difference that architectural world has to understand.

There is nevertheless a notion that works with an idea of inherited values, historical, architectural as well as artistic, and that’s preservationism, a care of a cultural heritage of historical monuments, a notion of preservation historical treasures of the world. The concept of preservation of monuments is also a heritage. The origin and development of preservationism is well known. It has changed from protecting the oldest individual preserved pieces of architecture to protecting large collections and entire cities and areas. Preservation has developed into a strong institutionalised form that scan whole human environment, with a main purpose of protecting important and/or historical monuments. On the other hand, main focus of ethic of heir is not protection in the first instance but the understanding of one’s life and thus the attitude to the outside world in general. What is primarily concerned is not the protection of individual buildings - although this is obviously important – but a change in how to approach one’s built environment as a whole. Life as inheritance – and ethics of heritage – concerns mainly of my street, my house, my neighbourhood etc., secondary of my town or city as a whole. Although it also can be very urgent in present situation of many post-war pieces of architecture. It is also not institutional as the preservation today is but highly individual, personal understanding. If widely or at last relatively accepted by people, the notion of heritage could offer valuable inner barrier against accelerating commercialisation of the world and of cities today.

¹¹ J. Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institution. An Attempt at practical Philosophy*, Praha, 2016, p. 236.

Nevertheless, there appear initiatives, grown out of civil society, whose activities may seem similar to a notion of heir. It could be seen in many civil associations all around the world now concerning recent causes of demolishing existing structures and of constructing or on the other hand not-constructing proposed future structures. Citizens of cities are increasingly aware of what they have in their home cities and fight for it. World famous were the cases of tearing down the London Robin Hood Gardens, renowned examples of architectural brutalist style, demolished since December 2017 or New York City the American Folk Art Museum by architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien that existed only about ten years from 2001 to 2011 when it was demolished to provide additional place for extending New York MoMa. And there are countless of examples from all around the world. Civil society, or people, has learned expressing its standpoint and in case of need protesting, for instance, against a demolition of a building they consider valuable or important from their perspective for the life of their environment. Learn Public initiatives also very frequently protest against constructing some building or other structures that would radically change their neighbourhoods. Typically it is in form of refusing some skyscraper or similar megastructure insensitive in the urban context. Very interesting case appeared recently in Prague where public outcry changed a destiny of a bridge in Prague, called Libeňský most (i. e. Libeňský bridge), by famous Czech architect Pavel Janák, that after serving about a century was about to be demolished and replaced with a new one. Citizens of both neighbourhoods that are connected by the bridge stand by the bridge, as they considered it valuable in their view, and changed in the end its destiny and it seems to be saved at the moment. All this seems to be very typical phenomenon of today civilised world. In a word people are increasingly aware of the state of their city and do not let every change pass without notion. And that's precisely what is close to ethics of heritage, be aware of what we inherited from the past generations or simply from history – and it could be historically or architecturally insignificant buildings but their value and meaning is in the context they provide for people around. In the Czech Republic there are several more or less permanent initiatives operating now in lasting fights for or against innumerable future prospects of various cities and towns. Regardless of the fact that these initiatives seem to be rather cautious and wary, they all too often display something as a king of anxiety of future and as such I hesitate to include them as an example of ethics of inheritance.

Nevertheless, all this expresses surely positive increasing awareness of civil society of our rootedness in built environment and how cities are important to us and that is also connected with the notion of a heir. We didn't inherit only immaterial culture, pieces of art etc., but real, material places, places that literally informed us regardless of the fact that are or are not historically, culturally or architecturally important. Ethics of inheritance allows us to appreciate all this kind of places (that previously had appreciated only by phenomenology of architecture).

This study is just the beginning of a research of inheritance and could not offer more than rather elemental ideas about what one can do to change his point of view toward our understanding of cities. As I said at the beginning I see the future destiny of our cities as a "main battlefield" of today architecture because cities are radically changing for better and worse toward a state that is not pleasing for many of us. And since we do not seem to know what to do with them – and it seems to me clear that we really do not know – the proposed conception of cities (and in reality everything including our lives) as an inheritance offers a chance to change the course of things. This notion doesn't come with any explicit, defined rules it only offers solid orientation in life situations. Knowing that one is heir means this person is fully aware of what we got, what we received and what we should do to administrate the matters the best possible ways, best at the actual moment we live now, to past the inheritance (i.e. cities in this case) to next generations. This position stands in clear contrast to what could be called techno optimistic forces.

Yes, it couldn't probably change the world but it could, by changing oneself, transform small place within the world, i. e. my own place. And so it offers great deal of hope and thus great amount of positive energy toward the future – something that is so missing in our today situation; since today in Europe so many people live lacking optimism and sense of meaning that is nevertheless crucial to our lives. In Jan Sokol own words: "In contrast to the myopic concentration on various problems and pseudo-problems of the day, it bears in mind the view to the future, which is beyond our individual lives, without suffering from the shortcomings of naive fetishes of 'progress'."¹² If I internally accept I am an heir of my own life and of city I live in I am able to see what real problem is and what not and could look to the future.

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Јиржи Турек

ФРАГМЕНТИ МИСЛИ О ГРАДУ КАО НАСЛЕЂУ

Резиме: Текст „Фрагменти мисли о граду као наслеђу“ покушај је обраде теме наслеђа. Као што сам рекао на почетку, будућу судбину наших градова видим као „главно бојно поље“ данашње архитектуре, јер се градови радикално мењају набоље и нагоре ка стању које многим од нас није угодно. А будући да не изгледа да знамо шта да радимо с њима - што је имплицитно постављена идеја текста – предложена концепција градова (а у стварности свега, укључујући и наше животе) као наследства, нуди шансу да промени ток ствари. Колико је то различит став у поређењу са данашњим преовлађујућим схватањем ствари. То вероватно није могло да промени свет, али је промена себе могла да трансформише једно мало место у свету, тј. Моје сопствено место. Такав став нуди велику наду и самим тим велику количину позитивне енергије према будућности – нешто што толико недостаје у нашој данашњој ситуацији; будући да данас у Европи толико људи живи без оптимизма и смисла за смисао који је ипак пресудан за наш живот. Парафразирајући речи Јана Сокола, за разлику од кратковидне концентрације на разне проблеме и дневне псеудо-проблеме, он има на уму поглед у будућност, која је изван наших индивидуалних живота, без патње због недостатка наивних фетиша „напредка“.

Кључне речи: градови, наследство, филозофија, будућност, лична одговорност

12 J. Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institution. An Attempt at practical Philosophy*, Praha, 2016, p. 236.