

non-city

Text by Henrik Valeur. Images by Henrik Valeur and Mette Vangsgaard, 1999. Answers to the competition "the Future of the City".



urban - rural

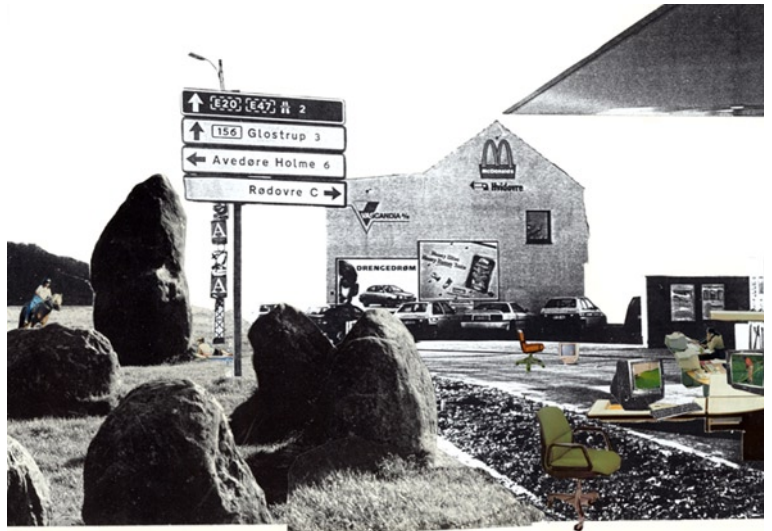
What characterized the urbanization process of the 20th century was not that the population moved into the cities, but that the cities moved out to the population !

Despite continuing efforts to revive the city center, the process of urban dispersion has now reached a point at which the entire globe is - at least potentially - urbanized. But even though every spot of the world has been mapped and every region is covered by lines of communication, we seem to have less and less control of it. The various social, economic and cultural relations, by which the world is tied up, are full of incompatibility, of conflicts and contradictions.

The city is steadily loosening its grip of society; biker communities, companies, fanclubs, grassroot movements, hospitals, lodges, military alliances, prisons, refugee camps, religious sects, sportclubs, squatter communities, stock exchanges, streetgangs, terror organisations, tourist resorts and tv stations ... are all societies, or subsocieties, increasingly detached from their physical context; each

day drifting further apart from one another. Nevertheless, the apparent fragmentation hides new and invisible forms of interdependency.

The unstable co-existence of societies with different size, direction and speed - and the fact that the ways in which the world either decompose or assemble itself rarely correspond to one another - creates a permanent state of flux.



As such, the world remains open for new things to happen. Let's try to keep it that way !

worn-out areas of industry, traffic and harbour

It seems logical to replace what has become obsolete or outdated. And since building is the existential basis of our profession it is a logic by which we are easily seduced in areas where the original activities have vanished.

We then decide to either redevelop or to restore. In any case we will attempt to reintegrate the those areas in what we consider to be meaningful and productive circuits of society. But sometimes the hardest thing to do is not to do anything.



Even though it is obvious that the sweeping changes related to the transition from one type of society to another should also find their expressions in new urban forms of organisation, it doesn't necessarily mean that we have to start all over again. The fact that these areas become worn-out and written-off makes it at the same time feasible to base proposals for their future on other criterias than the markets demand for profit.

What we call urban renewal could also consist in the invention and development of new ways of living.

There is no reason why we should not respect mutual differences.

Then why not allow urbanity to develop at different speeds ?

Our ambition is to expand the world in which we live. Consequently it is also to make room for the underdeveloped, the absence and the idle running.

new industrial sites

If the new industrial sites are "uneventful and spineless" it is -in our opinion- due to a defect in our sense organs. It is not the new industrial sites that need our ornamentation but we who need to rediscover the poetry of cheapness, plainness, anonymity, emptiness and monotony.

It is not through distanced contemplation, but through the daily use of these areas, that we shall be able to grasp the new urban poetry. Because this poetry has not so much to do with what is, as it has to do with what occurs. Therefore the intentions of our interventions will be to provide a breeding ground for a broad range of everyday actions.



We envision new urban environments in which we will be able to sample the trivialities of everyday life in much the same way as the amateur can compose his or her own music at the synthesizer board on the pc.

During the regime of the settled the spatial planning had been subdued to the logic that 1 space equals 1 function: one room for cooking and another one for bathing, one zone for production and another one for recreation.

Today it will often not only be possible, but also sensible, to fill out spaces with activities that used to be separated. This is why the "urban expansion" does not have to be reduced to a mere territorial matter, but can also be temporal -as when the kids play streetbasket on the empty parking lots or as when production halls are used to train dogs on sundays.

traffic

We live in a time in which everything that can not circulate must sink.

We have created a culture that has made us mobile to an extent that makes us curse mobility, regardless of the fact that it is exactly this mobility which gives us access to all the benefits and adventures offered by contemporary urbanity.

We look at traffic with the utmost suspicion, we refer to it as an endless series of “problems”, we spare no pains to hide it, we show off all of its disasters and we try with all available means to detach it from the rest of our existence. But try to imagine a world without traffic !



Why separate the motorway from the childrens playground, the airport from the gardens, parking lots from dwellings ... why separate architecture from traffic ?

It is only to a limited extent that our traditional building materials form the urbanity; radio waves, roads, air corridors, optical fibres ... are much more potent tools to form the mobile culture, which we are part of and which is part of us.

While the car dispersed the content of the city, the new electronic means of communication are realizing a global urbanization.

E-mail addresses does not reveal the specific geografical location of the recipient / sender, just as cellular phone numbers have no area codes.

Urbanity is not a place; it is a condition !

recreational territories

In the industrial society leisure was an unproductive sphere compensating for the hard physical labour. The rigid division of the day, as it is was reflected in the workers demand for “8 hours work, 8 hours sleep and 8 hours leisure” was complied with in a correspondingly sanitary division of the territory into separate, monofunctionally determined zones: polluted industrial, pure living and green

recreational areas ... plus distribution systems, service facilities etc.

In the information society there is no basis for such a vulgar organization of life.

As one of this new society's most lucrative potentials of investment leisure is a field which can not simply be assigned a certain amount of m2. Recreational territories are not only "green" and we will not simply create leisure space by reserving "green areas, breathing holes and open spaces".



On the contrary it seems strategically more sensible to let leisure invade various aspects of life. Even though it is not possible to estimate the exact utility value of leisure there is every probability that by inoculating the everyday life with apparent uselessness we shall be able to enrich the total production of society.

As a consequence the introduction of a contemporary urbanity will imply an attack on the physical separation between work and recreation ... and, for that matter, living.

Like the beach makes up a potential place of work you can imagine offices used for a broad variety of recreational activities.

We see it as our joyful task to experiment with new ways of behaviour.



ecological issues

Ecology is not a new style. It makes no sense to express our good intentions through an architecture of a particular diction. Ecology is not about appearance but about concrete impact and effect.

It is now clear that ecology is not only a matter for fanatics. The ecological consciousness is leaking out all over, threatening to drown us in a sea of new dilemmas.

Sustainable solutions can only be ambiguous and provisional. The complicated interactions between

the innumerable factors of an ecosystem, makes it quite impossible to establish permanent stability.

While the settled aimed at an environment in balance, because he wanted to know the result of his efforts before carrying them out, the nomade, with an instinctive understanding of the ecosystems dynamic nature, developed skills to perform under turbulent conditions.

Even though mobility is considered a source of pollution, the ecological consciousness nevertheless urge us to increase mobility, in order to promote nomadic lifestyles.

We have no intentions of stopping progress. Since we have no where else to go, but into the future, we might aswell believe that progress will solve our CO2 problems. And to some people, flagstaffs can be just as contaminating as car exhausts.

robustness

How can a profession called "cityplanning" expect to be taken serious in a world where the city, at least as a physically defined entity, no longer exists and where planning, as a determinative exercise of power, no longer is possible ?

There are several reasons why a new job description would be advantageous for those engaged with the invention of the new urbanity.

We will call them urbanists.

For the urbanist there will be only one certainty, and that is -whether we like it or not- that the global process of urbanization will continue non-stop. In this process the urbanist will take on an active role, though perhaps also a naive one.

As an ever increasing range of interests influence each project, as investments are becoming ever more sensible to events outside our reach, and as decisions are taken on the ground of ever more limited calculations -it becomes accordingly difficult to uphold the illusion that the processes of urbanization will keep with our instructions.

We must acknowledge the fact that we are no longer in a position to decide the real working out of the urbanity.

Devoid of the armory of predictions and decision making, the aim of the urbanist will instead be to activate the imagination of those who actually do make decisions. Therefore the urbanist will not direct his or her efforts at reducing deteriorations, but at facilitating inventions. The work of the urbanist will be about testing, experimenting and exploring ... and the motto will be that it is more important to initiate than to determine !

The consequence of admitting that we no longer can foresee the implications of our actions is not apathy. The kind of flexibility the new urbanity requires is not simply spared space for the unknown needs, but rather visions to provoke these new needs.

The urbanist will reject the masterplan as a meaningful tool, but this does not necessarily lead to "a total lack of architectural attitude", it may just aswell lead to a contemporary and new architecture. And in this case there will be no conflict between "pragmatic flexibility" and "architectural quality".

(the urbanist will, in any case, be a gambler)

If we wish to have success in our new job we must first ask ourselves what we can do, that no one else can do better ?

Our answer could be our imagination. Armed with that we could promote a new and suggestive practice.

In the end, what really drives our civilization forward is not what we achieve, but what we are able to imagine.

