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The architecture of the European city

Interview with Bogdan Bogdanovic

How will the great European cities – London, Paris and Vienna develop in the future, both in a political and in an architectural sense? The Serbian architect Bogdanovic argues that Europe must preserve the civilization of its cities, whilst preventing them from turning into megapolitan cities.

Miroslav Marcelli: We are meeting in Vienna – in the city where you live and to which you paid homage in one of your articles. According to you it represents a special spiritual environment. How would you describe more closely this spiritual environment, which is now also your spiritual environment?

Bogdan Bogdanovic: As cosmopolitan. I will give a little anecdote to illustrate this cosmopolitan or international character of Vienna. Immediately on the first evening, when we came to Vienna, we were thoroughly confused and we went to friends, we were looking for a street, which was not, God knows, simple. We were confused because we came from the very difficult life and political situation in Belgrade and I suddenly unintentionally collided with somebody in the street and said without thinking "Izvini burazer" ("Excuse me Sir"¹), that is a phrase from Belgrade slang, and he replied: "Ma nema veze!" ("No problem!"²). Maybe this is Vienna. You know, this means a lot. We all lived in small isolated national spaces and now they are even smaller. Then, you suddenly find yourself in this environment with no frontiers. It is very pleasant to be in the sort of cosmopolitan environment, in which you are not troubled by the political situation or other things, but you belong to yourself, your friends and ideas. These are the advantages of the big world.

M. M: Can you talk about specific features of Central European cities such as Vienna, Budapest, Prague and perhaps also Bratislava, which you have visited?

B. B: Obviously they are Danubian cities. It is as if they are all on the same street. I always repeat: we have stayed on the same street – the River Danube – we have only changed the number of our house a little. We have moved a little way further up the hill and up the river. The role of the Danube is not only symbolic, but real, and it is very important for me. The Danube is a symbol. In the first years of our life here, when I was depressed, and there were reasons for this, since I had left my country, I went to the Danube and felt at home. And it applies in reverse. When Viennese friends, Professor Achleitner and Vienna television visited me last year in Belgrade, I took them to the Danube, although in Belgrade it is quite complicated, access to the Sava is easier. And it seemed to me as if they felt they were in Vienna. Only, perhaps this sounds like local patriotism, they were enchanted, because the Danube in Belgrade is

much bigger than the Danube at Vienna. It is huge, almost like a sea. So the Danube is something symbolic. However, there is a small linguistic problem. The Danube is feminine in gender in German, she is a lady, but in Serbian the river is masculine in gender, he is a young man, a hero, but the River Sava is feminine.

M. M: The Danube is also masculine in Slovak.

B. B: In Belgrade, it is interesting that the female River Sava is nicer, gentler and smaller, so we can see it as a feminine being in comparison with the masculine River Danube. The union of the Sava with the Danube recalls an almost sexual act, a rebirth of the world. The whole world is born from two rivers. Perhaps a beautiful mythology of Belgrade can be created from this. However, this can be considered much better from Vienna than from Belgrade, because we are too rational down there, so rational that we have done irrational things throughout history.

M. M: When we came to Vienna, we saw the buildings of hypermarkets and warehouses of multi-national companies – the big boxes and hangers, which now line the roads into all large cities – Vienna, Paris or London. So far they are placed on the periphery of these cities. How do you think they influence the character of the city and its life? If therefore...

B. B: We do not shop in these large shops on the periphery, because it is necessary to have a car to do that. In addition, those who go to these shops, to the supermarkets, do not go there every day, they go once a week, buy what they need and buy other things here. What should I say? If we look at the matter in general, I am an old-fashioned person, I like a city to look the way I have seen it all my life: a city, which can be measured or experienced on a walk, by the pace. I measure cities by paces. I have liked to walk all my life, I passionately loved walking: a real Johnnie Walker. I also walk now in Vienna. At eighty, walking for an hour and a half every evening is not what it used to be, but I feel I need it. I like cities I can measure by paces. Fortunately, Vienna is still such a city, and I doubt that some other European capitals are similar. Vienna has preserved its centre and new construction has been pushed to the periphery, beyond the Danube. This is a very favourable situation. Paris was already strange to me twenty years ago. I have known Paris for a long time, from my youth, but twenty years ago I was already alienated by the bigger road on the Champs Élysées and its upper continuation – and it seems that the same fate has afflicted London. It is the fate of large cities. But our considerations are only lyrical, because we cannot do much here. Both people from the profession and professional planners have to take things as they develop. But with good architecture – and Vienna has good, interesting architecture – many things can be supported or improved so that you gain an *environment*. It seems to me that they are experimenting with this enough in Vienna. It is psychologically important for architecture to overcome the trends from the sixties and seventies. Vienna also has a tradition in that it lacks great avenues like those of Berlin, but it has very beautiful courtyards. Look at our little courtyard, it is a great experience for me, so I often sit there and look at it. The courtyard is an independent whole, an independent *environment*. So much happens here: you hear quarrels in various languages, sometimes in Serbian, sometimes in Turkish and sometimes, it seems to me, in German. And there are two cats, one black and one white, and I have flirted with them for a year. I go onto the terrace, the white cat comes (a cat never looks at you, but always sees you), then it goes away and says something to the black cat, then the black cat comes as well, they look – I arrange something, they do not react. Then

they begin to rub each other's heads and they go away – they despise me. I wanted to say by this, that a city with no everyday theatre is very poor. And Vienna has it. Krleza pointed this out to me a very long time ago, when I was young, by explaining to me that the most important thing in a city is that there is space for theatre. If there is not, there is nothing. A person is also a being on the stage and wants to have his own scenography. So I like the scenography of a city: Vienna has it, Bratislava has it – and that is very important. I don't know exactly: perhaps young people say that their new, aggressive scenography satisfies them, that it is relative, but we decide on the basis of New Belgrade it is not. I don't know if you know New Belgrade...

M. M: No.

B. B: If it is called "New", it should be clear how it looks (*laughter*). That unfortunately is not it. Last year or the year before, I went to Belgrade for the first time in eight years and was prepared for it. We arrived in the early evening and the New Belgrade I remembered from before our departure that is new and all white... Modern architecture is nice only when it is new, when it ages it is no longer nice, while old architecture gets more beautiful with the passage of time. That is the great difference. Now, New Belgrade was black, moreover it was dusk, it resembled a shot from an expressionist film, let us say from the film *Doctor Caligari*, everything was black or dark. The fate of modern architecture is notorious.

M. M: We are coming to a motif, which regularly emerges in your consideration of the city – you always speak of the threats to the city. This motif and threat is a process, which looks at first sight like the growth of prosperity. The city grows, extends its boundaries and its population greatly increases. You recall rather nostalgically Aristotle's idea that a city should not be so large that a human voice cannot reach from one end of it to the other. That is the past of cities, today we are heading towards the origin of the megapolis. It is difficult not to see that this process worries you. You outline the progression polis – metropolis – megapolis – necropolis. How do you think the city can escape this destiny and preserve its identity?

B. B: Aristotle – I have understood this as a metaphor for a very long time: Where my voice is heard, where I exist, where I am a personality is where my voice reaches. Unfortunately, it is now very different in megapoles. But whatever we say about this theme of the explosion of the city, it is a theme without a theoretical solution, at least in my understanding. I don't know what it is like to live in cities with ten, twelve or even fifteen million inhabitants... I don't know how they will live tomorrow in cities with twenty million inhabitants – especially in the poorest parts of the world. The European megapoles such as London have stopped growing. London is getting smaller, while Paris is growing at a rate of one per cent. The explosion of European cities has ended – and it was only a matter of two or three cities, which is not much. Happily, Europe is still a Europe of cities, and it will be best and wisest to keep it that way as long as possible. One day, they may also explode. It is the great wealth of Europe and the first great political task of all Europeans should be to preserve their cities and be a civilization of cities. Because America is not a civilization of cities. In this lies the problem.

M. M: The fifth question continues the previous one. Do you think the megapolis or the growth of cities represents a competitor with the state? Will the life of the person in the near future, be determined more by belonging to a city than by belonging to a state?

B. B: It is difficult to say how it will look in megapoles and megapolitan areas, especially in the poorer parts of the world. But let us take Europe and imagine two or three cities with twelve million inhabitants – they would "swallow" several small states. You know it is not possible. Fortunately! Sometimes it is confirmed that the division of Europe by small symbolic frontiers can be an advantage. Maybe I see it like this: my ideal Europe is the Europe of the 18th century. Europe contained many small states with symbolic frontiers. When we read Giacomo Casanova we find that he travelled without a passport, probably sometimes only illegally. Each of these state formations had one city, a small metropolis, which was a large, strong cultural centre. – When I think about Europe, I like to think not of the Europe of states, but the Europe of cities. At the same time, the city always acquires the characteristics of a state centre and national centre – in a very complex, but very good system. In urbanism, the more complex a system is the better.

M. M: I am a philosopher and as a philosopher, I like the frequency of reflection of a philosophical nature in your considerations of the city. I also get the impression that this approach is not only the result of your culture, education, past and individual inclinations, but that the actual character of the processes occurring in the city require it. How would you define urbanology and the urbanologist, about which you write in your texts?

B. B: Urbanology or urban studies is not generally accepted as a term in our field. Only urbanism is used. It was the same at the faculty in Belgrade, and when I became a senior lecturer I began to consider what I should lecture about and would lecture about, I was in the Department of Urbanism. I would rather draw on practical urbanism, which was a treaty zone between politicians, large companies and capital. (In a way, capital does not exist in socialism, but it existed in practice.) Then I thought of something that may exist only in France – urbanology. Urbanology did not exist in the past. I defined it, if this can be said as a sort of philosophy of the city. I don't know whether I dare to say this, because what I wrote is more a literature than a philosophy of the city. That is, urbanology as a broad platform, on which the city can be considered freely, without pressure from the market, without the pressure practical urbanism brings with it. Practical urbanism, especially after the sort of changes, which happened in our little countries, has become the inviolable domain of the mafia. People get killed in former Yugoslavia for urbanist reasons. Maybe this was also my motive. When I got urbanology into the faculty, it met with a positive response. The scientific council also accepted it, although with some surprise, but in the end it passed. Since I wrote enough about this at the time, they said: "Allow it!" Then the idea emerged of naming it the "philosophy of the city", with the idea of attracting the support of some Marxist philosophers. But I protested in the sense that: "No, no! That is not a philosophy of the city!" and it really is not a philosophy of the city. And this idea was fortunately forgotten after a time. They also gave me some freedom to say what I wanted to say, because my situation in former Yugoslavia was specific. I designed monuments to the Second World War, which soon gained recognition and attracted international interest. My monuments looked entirely different to others. And my party comrades, who held high positions took the view: Let him, better for him to do this, rather than something else! (*Laughter*) such as concerning myself with practical politics. So urbanology started. But I now think that it is necessary to separate the theory of the city and the philosophy of the city from practical urbanism.

M. M: How do you now see the idea, held not only by philosophers, but also by many architects and urbanists, of founding a new city – simply leaving the

old city aside and founding a new city on a green field site? For example, Le Corbusier, Niemayer and others held the view that the old city is uncorrectable. But this is an idea we also found, let us say in Descartes.

B. B: It is a utopian idea. Utopias recognize nothing apart from themselves. Therefore, it is best for them to be absolutely distanced. All utopian cities are on islands. They flee from reality and become kingdoms of dreams. They are interesting as literature and philosophy, but they are not practical. There are all those cities or satellite towns, planned as independent cities, and after the Second World War, they were accepted as the dominant scheme in urbanism. They built a new London, a new Belgrade, a new this, a new that, everywhere something new... We created small new cities with all the appropriate facilities. But what happened? Life made its own demands. Let us say that in a new city, a daughter has her own special profession, her brother another and a grandchild something different. None of them can pursue them in their own town, so they have to go elsewhere, and people must travel 20–30 kilometres to work each day. And something else: all those post-war satellite towns, some of which were really nice, have now all grown together. It seems to me that this was never thought of.

M. M: Were you ever attracted to this idea? In any stage of your development?

B. B: I never liked it. I was always, to put it a little expressively, a city rat. I liked the smell of the old city. But today I would not condemn this idea. I would not condemn the city as a satellite, as a town apart from the city. Today, I would rather see a general dispersion – with people living outside the city, but still living in an urban way. If we look at it etymologically, starting from the word *civitas civitatis*, the city is and always was civilization. The city is inseparable from the concept of civilization. Today civilization is no longer bound to the concept of the city, because a person can live outside a city and still be part of the swirl of urban ideas, urban needs, urban interests and the urban way of thinking. Such a way of life may please some, but not me, because I need the environment, the city as an environment.

S. A: For many, the heritage of communism evokes catastrophe, where the city and urbanism are concerned. A Czech scenographer says that the architects set their shame in concrete.

B. B: The story of architecture in the socialist countries cannot be divided from the Soviet philosophy and the socialist city. The socialist city is a sort of absurdity. These socialist cities seem monstrous today. Fortunately, Yugoslavia was able to avoid this. For various reasons modern architecture was oriented more towards the West. I think that this does not result from socio-political reasons, but more from psychological factors. Since Comrade Tito was a snob, who liked to be friendly with emperors, kings and queens, he gave architects a free hand to do everything they could. We did not have socialist realism in architecture. We were spared that, but instead we had other types of vileness, whatever you like. But the field of architecture was free. It was a different story everywhere socialist realism existed, from the Asian republics to Europe.

S. A: I was at a discussion on the revitalization of the district below Bratislava Castle, which was almost completely destroyed under socialism. Among other things, somebody said that the architecture or urbanism of cities is too important to be left to architects.

B. B: Most certainly! Absolutely! Urbanism is a universal human matter. We mentioned Aristotle, we could also mention Plato, he also had urbanist ideas. They were a little high-flown, supra-realistic, but in the end very interesting. He had three cities: first the city from the Republic, which was purely mythical, with three social groups and so on, later he had an invented Athens, old Athens, which never existed, and finally in the last dialogue, the Laws, he had something rather confused. But his most beautiful urbanist project is Atlantis, which contains so much fantasy that modern architects could also learn from it. Atlantis is an example of how it is possible to dream of a city, which nobody could ever build. It is an eternal human theme. After love, the city is the most fascinating theme in philosophy, literature and everything, because the city is the most complicated of all. The city is a very, very complex theme.

¹ Translator's note

² Translator's note

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