

# Rethinking Modernism and the Built Environment



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Edited by

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“For several millennia, mankind generated organized complexity to a degree proportional to its level of intellectual development. The twentieth century denied this process, and started to reverse it. By removing urban complexity, the simplistic modernist model has destroyed our cities.”

—Nikos Salingaros, “Principles of Urban Structure”

“One of the problems of modernity – here the most important one – is the loss of the *profound sense of the landscape* that characterizes traditional societies...”

—Augustin Berque, “Thinking Through Landscape”



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## INTRODUCTION

# QUESTIONING ARCHITECTURAL MODERNISM AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT: NOTES ON CULTURAL TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

ALMANTAS SAMALAVIČIUS

Dissatisfaction with a growing number of the essential aspects of contemporary modernist architecture, and especially the mainstream course taken by planned urban design during the last century, seems to be shared in various locations of the globe during recent decades. Architectural modernism was largely an isolated enterprise practiced by small groups of vanguard architects and artists before World War II, and only established itself as a ruling ideology, aesthetics, and *praxis* in the post-war era. Moreover large scale reconstruction in Europe had become an imperative demanding cheap and functional buildings, and that was what architectural Modernism seemed to be able to offer. The building industry was quick to appropriate Modernism for these alleged qualities.

More recently, economic globalization has taken cultural forms and its homogenizing tendencies affected the built environment almost everywhere. Thus diversity has been reduced or erased, superseding local building traditions and fostering unprecedented urban growth, even though the global expansion of urban tissue has become almost uncontrollable since it was triggered by the explosion of urbanism in the era of Industrialism.

Urban milieu these days has become equally plagued, both in the Northern and Southern hemispheres, with remedies that were applied to urban disorders, causing the same serious problems that they were supposed to overcome. A number of architectural visionaries of the Modern era have put forward numerous far-reaching, ambitious, large-scale and almost universal schemes of urban design. Their promise was that their informed visions would finally create a more liveable urban environment, and provide impeccable global solutions for urbanism and

city-making. Undoubtedly, some of these intellectual visionary efforts were guided by a sincere belief in never-ending progress and the almighty powers of technology. Being a direct product of Modernity's project born in the intellectual agenda of the Enlightenment, the ideology of progress was eventually able to capture the imaginations of several generations of modern architectural and urban visionaries. Though modern social utopias suffered a serious blow with the collapse of Nazism, and later on with the demise of Communism, and were finally discarded almost everywhere, various forms of new urban utopias proliferated. Some of them – like the one of Ecumenopolis put forward and disseminated by Greek architect and urban planner C.A. Doxiadis and the network of his *ekistics* after World War II are now abandoned and almost forgotten. Others – like the visions of grand-scale modern urban reconstructions as well as concrete urban proposals of the type of the *Ville radieuse* proposed by Le Corbusier – have had a large following and continue to haunt the imaginations of architects and urban designers, despite the obvious failures experienced while introducing these modern urban nightmares into practice. Places like Brasilia – manufactured under the inspiration and guidance of Corbusian dogmas – have become examples of cities consciously designed as clusters of “non-places,” to use a well-known category of Marc Auge's. No wonder that, since the day it was built, Brasilia has become a generic name for a planned urban nightmare produced in the name of progress and the future.

When re-reading many of the treatises on architecture, and especially on urbanism, written either at the very end of the nineteenth or the beginning of the twentieth century, one often encounters a kind of infatuation with the idea of progress and a firm, almost unshakeable, belief in omnipotent technology. There is also a belief in the power of the architect's vision in solving the most exigent social problems of the age, particularly those of the built environment. Today however our belief in progress as the ultimate salvation of humankind has become more and more ambiguous, or has begun to appear doubtful, even if some cannot imagine a civilized human life without it. As Jose Maria Sbert has put it in his brilliant analysis of the development of the idea of progress in Western history, “Progress highlighted hope – a vision of a future of plenty, freedom and justice – and excluded, along with beliefs in powers superior to man, the traditional notions of man's limitations. Humility turned from a saintly virtue into a rare heresy. Condemnation of greed, innate to the Christian religion and to all traditional systems of wisdom and philosophy, was transformed into leniency bordering on approval toward such a sin, which is now perceived as the veritable psychological engine of material

progress.”<sup>1</sup> But today this hope seems to have dimmed, or at the very least become more modest.



*Fig. X-1. Glass towers of the Europe's square in Vilnius. Photo by Almantas Samalavicius*

A small book by the German philosopher and poet Paul Sheerbart, published in the year World War I broke out, is a remarkably instructive example of this kind of popular enchantment with progress when imagining the urban future. Infatuated by the possibilities of glass architecture as well as the unprecedented speed of technological development (which in his opinion among many other things was soon to bring about floating cities made out of concrete), this vanguard German thinker hailed the brave new urban world that would be shaped by architecture, the ultimate quality of which could only be transformed by the potential of transparent building

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<sup>1</sup> Jose Maria Sbert, “Progress”, 195.

material. According to Sheerbart, even though “many ideas sound to us like a fairy-tale, they are not really fantastic or utopian at all. Eighty years ago the steam railway came, and undeniably transformed the face of the earth. From what has been said so far, the earth’s surface will once again be transformed, this time by glass architecture. If it comes, a metamorphosis will occur, but other factors must naturally be taken into consideration . . .”<sup>2</sup> He had not a single doubt that due to the glorious development of natural science and technology people rightfully had “extraordinary marvels to expect.” Shifts in technology would eventually enable glass to perform more functions in the human environment than could have ever been imagined. He praised the wondrous technological shift, and had no doubts about its breath taking potential, and concluded that “the new glass environment will completely transform mankind.”<sup>3</sup>

From the perspective of the present the rhetoric of Sheerbart’s statements might be viewed as somewhat naive and simplistic, exposing somewhat stale aesthetic attitudes; however, the same kind of enthusiasm permeates many far more influential books produced during the last century. For example, some of the writings of F. L. Wright – a towering figure in the development of Modern architecture and undoubtedly far more influential than the obscure German philosopher and poet – strikingly represent the same fascination with the possibilities provided by glass in buildings before World War II.

More than a century after Sheerbart shared his almost childish naive and undisguised infatuation with glass and concrete as means of ultimately changing the character of modern built environments, one can conclude that many promises of technological development, and especially their application to buildings, have failed spectacularly. Before 1990, many of the inhabitants of Eastern Europe were forced to live in a depressing urban environment dominated by ugly, monotonous concrete boxes that looked identical. At the same time the population was thrilled by Western, especially American, downtowns filled with breathtakingly tall glass towers sparkling at night time. During those oppressive decades, to individuals caged within the perimeter of the Iron Curtain, they looked like the promise of freedom. Today they are no longer taken as visions of freedom. The townscapes of eastern European cities have acquired the sameness peculiar to the urban milieu all over the globe, previously

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<sup>2</sup> McElheny and Burgin, eds. *Glass! Love!! Perpetual Motion!!! A Paul Scheerbart Reader*, 84.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

associated with the liberal West. These “glassy and glossy”<sup>4</sup> towers are no longer speaking of freedom or liberty; instead they have become oppressive and depressive images of globalized “senile capitalism” in most parts of the world that experienced an untimely modernisation that deprived them of their former character. Thus an urban researcher discussing changes in one of the Eastern European city laments that “between 1989 and 2007 Sofia (capital of Bulgaria – A.S.) staged itself as a private, neo-capitalist city dismissive of ‘rules.’ The old, centralized socialist city was replaced by a fluid and ambiguous “site” of unregulated, private lives that did not form a communal, civic life.”<sup>5</sup> These comments can be easily and justly applied to many urban locations of a former “Second World” that have become both play-grounds and laboratories of global urban trends. They do not, however, tell us how to cope with the growing visual and physical confusion.

In Eastern Europe, (and in other locations as well) architectural modernism and urbanism were for decades (and still are) ill at ease with regard to the legacy of the past. The end of Stalinism marked a departure from the Soviet Communist regime’s short-lasting infatuation with Classicism and a course toward Modern architecture and city-building was chosen instead in order to compete with the West in all possible and impossible areas. This course lasted until the dissolution of the Soviet empire in 1990. Soviet authorities seemed to have realized well enough that triggering architects’ interest in Modern aesthetics and allowing them to appropriate Modernist ways of architectural and urban design could mean having strong allies in demolishing the legacy of the past. Old buildings of the “bourgeois” era, or even earlier, were demolished during various urban reconstructions to clear sites for more and more Modern buildings to take their place.

This tendency, despite its local ideological motifs and social peculiarities, was hardly unique. As Norwegian architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz (who was in fact educated in a modernist architectural milieu but eventually became more and more critical of modern urbanism’s attitude to the architectural and urban legacy of earlier periods) has observed “The modern-day environment shows increasingly evident signs of the fracture with the past.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Samalavicius, “Facing Globalization: Lithuanian Urbanism between Postcommunism and Postmodernity”, 110-111.

<sup>5</sup> Kiossev, “The Screen and the City: Sofia’s Transitional Urbanscapes, 1989-2007”, 94.

<sup>6</sup> Norberg-Schulz, *Architecture, Presence, Language*, 309.



*Fig. X-2. Awkward neighborhood. Neo-gothic headquarters of the Lithuanian Association of Architects designed by Julian Januszewicz and a modernist glass-box structure behind. Photo by Almantas Samalavicius*

Many architects and urban designers, however, chose to ignore these kinds of diagnoses and continued to produce cheap cement and glass boxes and their clusters. While reconsidering the course of architectural history, well-known architectural thinker Vincent Scully was no less critical of the architectural Modernist's view of the old city. According to Scully "The German Modernists had advanced equally catastrophic ideas based upon their concept of the "zeitgeist," the spirit of the age that did not allow anything which had been done before to be done again, or even to be preserved. So Hilbersheimer proposed his endless miles of high-rise slabs, his landscapes of hell, out of which the mass housing of the 1950's took shape, much of it to be dynamited as wholly unliveable hardly more than 20 years later."<sup>7</sup> While commenting on the development of Western urbanism, another equally brilliant and sensitive architectural historian, Spiro Kostof, insisted that "Modernism is only at home on clear sites, and is unable to make common cause with the remnants of previous urban

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<sup>7</sup> Scully, "Foreword", 223.

orders. Its organizing schemes are sweeping abstractions that set a crushing urban scale unworkable except for very large cities. None of this was helpful for the historic towns of Europe which needed a gentler and more intimate touch. So a pragmatic formula developed without much theorizing.”<sup>8</sup>

Architectural Modernism’s legacy is now subjected to criticism more often than ever before. More and more authors dealing with various issue of contemporary urbanism are inclined to challenge and revise the ambiguous legacy of Modernism in architecture, urbanism and city-making, sharing the critical attitude to what continues every day all over the globe. For example among many other informed critics Eamonn Canniffe insists that “The contemporary situation in urban design is in many ways still in thrall with the wholesale acceptance of Corbusian urban dogma in the period immediately succeeding the Second World War. Replacing the ground-hugging forms of the traditional city with the tower block and urban motorway was a design strategy which was enthusiastically implemented across the world and beyond.”<sup>9</sup> There is an abundance of evidence suggesting that, despite growing attempts to critically reconsider this intellectual and physical burden inflicted upon urbanism by dogmatic Modernism, the general tendency, unfortunately, continues. In his timely meditations about the interaction of urban design and ethics, John Whittlegg accurately remarks that even today “Our planning and development systems are delivering large, land-greedy, energy-wasting leisure, recreational and retail facilities; at the same time urban communities wither and die because of lack of facilities and lack of attractiveness.”<sup>10</sup>

Can one object to these insightful remarks based both on visual evidence and on common-sense? Can one doubt the validity of such critical statements? Let me label these questions purely rhetorical. On the other hand there is no doubt that this global urban mass constructed during the twentieth century owes a lot to the Modernist standards set by Le Corbusier in his master-plans which he persistently tried to present as global solutions to urban problems. While presenting a large panorama of urban planning and urban design over the last century in his impressive historical study, Sir Peter Hall has noted that “The evil that Le Corbusier did lives after him; the good is perhaps interred with his books, which are seldom read for the simple reason that most of them are almost

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<sup>8</sup> Kostoff, *The City Assembled*, 264.

<sup>9</sup> Canniffe, *Urban Ethic: Design in Contemporary City*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Whittlegg, “*Building Ethics into Built Environment*”, 32.

unreadable.”<sup>11</sup> While a serious and fundamental re-examination of Le Corbusier’s influential legacy is badly needed, in most cases the attempts that are on offer seldom go beyond regular ritualistic homage, or barely disguised praise. A published author with several well-known books who has lately come up with a critical re-examination of le Corbusier’s legacy in a monograph form has informed me that his book proposal was so far rejected by more than twenty architectural publishers. It sometimes looks as though challenges to Modernist dogmas are treated like heresies that threaten the status of some powerful religious cult.



*Fig. X-3. Gyeongju Arts Center, Gyeongsangbuk-do, South Korea by Sao Architects and Engineers. Photo by Almantas Samalavicius*

On the other hand, there are an increasing number of intellectual attempts to deal with this burdensome legacy and reconsider the ambiguities of vanguard architectural aesthetics, false functionalism and other ills of Modernist theory and practice. While radically re-examining the requirements, aspirations and promises of architectural modernism presented in what he calls “edicts,” Malcolm Millais observes that “At

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<sup>11</sup> Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*, 219.

face value, some of these requirements seem quite reasonable, such as the need for architecture to be functional and to incorporate modern technology: others seem quite arbitrary, such as the blanket dismissal of decoration and previous design styles. But perhaps there was compelling reason for the less obvious edicts, and when these are understood they all make sense. Perhaps these assumptions would lead to a new, modern, architecture, which would be functional and rational based on science and modern technology – perhaps exactly what the modern world wanted and needed. If the “new” architecture were needed (and in fact there was no special reason to think so) what architecture would these assumptions produce? Would it be efficient and economical and work much better than what went before? In which case, aesthetics aside, there would be obvious advantages following such edicts, and the basic myth (as proposed by the architectural ghetto) is that that is the case. But this is not the case, as Modern Movement buildings were neither efficient, nor economical, nor do they work better than those that went before.”<sup>12</sup>

Although architectural and urban Modernism was a product of a certain *zeitgeist* that put forward technological imperatives, demanded solutions on a global scale, put an emphasis on efficiency and economic considerations and was both technologically visionary and a victim of its own confused and confusing assumptions, it is obvious that its legacy needs a thorough and continuous analysis. I can only agree with Michael W. Mehaffy and Nikos A. Salingaros who have lately insisted that “Many things did improve in this technological regime, of course, and today we can cure diseases, reduce backbreaking toil, eat exotic foods, travel fast in comfortable motoring and flying craft, and do many other things that would astonish our ancestors. But along with that new regime has come a calamitous ecological depletion on which all economics and indeed life depends. So today, in the age of converging crises, it is well worth our asking hard questions about the assumptions of that industrial regime – and the complicity of architectural Modernism as a kind of alluring “product packaging” with it.”<sup>13</sup>

Luckily, more and more architectural and urban researchers have moved beyond praising the modernist legacy and instead are offering new visions of how architecture and urbanism should respond to the most pressing problems of our time, while abandoning dogmas that have never worked.

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<sup>12</sup> Malcolm Millais, *Exploding the Myths of Modern Architecture*, 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Mehaffy and Salingaros, *Design for a Living Planet: Settlement, Science and the Human Future*, 38.

These conversations about the legacy of Modernism in architecture and urbanism as well as the possibilities of transcending it, conducted over several years during the period of 2012-2015, are my own attempt to clarify some of the issues that I find complicated and troubling, issues that much supposedly serious-minded literature chooses to pass by. As a matter of fact, the idea of conducting a series of lengthy talks on various issues having to do with the ambiguities in the developments of vanguard Modernism in architecture and urbanism matured after I came back from one of my numerous trips to Asia. Having received an invitation to attend an international event held in the year 2011 at the geographical center of India, I was stunned to learn that it was going to be held in Wardha, in the vicinity of Sewagram – the place where the leader of India’s national liberation movement, Mahatma Gandhi, had chosen to spend the last fourteen years of his life. I must admit that my decision to attend the conference was triggered by the fact that the event was going to be at a location near the place where Bapu’s hut was located. The essay of Ivan Illich – one of the most radical, thoughtful and often misunderstood critics of modernity – written after he returned from Sewagram and titled “A Message of Bapu’s Hut” urged me to follow the steps of the great social thinker and reach this remote spot where Gandhi once dwelled. A stay in a dwelling place devoid of electricity as well as other facilities that are the landmarks of so called “civilized” modern life provided ample food for thought about our “success” in urbanising the globe.

The time spent meditating in “Bapu’s Hut” brought me back to the memorable writings of Ivan Illich and his merciless, yet remarkable, thoughts expressed in his writings as well as in his lecture at RIBA on the ambiguities of civilized comfortable living: “Humans dwell. They have inhabited the Earth in a thousand different ways and copied from each other the forms of their dwelling. What had determined for millenia the changing character of the dwelling space was not instinct and genes but culture, experienced and thought. Both territory and dwelling space are, admittedly, three-dimensional in character, but as to their meaning, they are not spaces of the same kind – no more than dwelling space and garages. None of the sciences that we now have can properly grasp this variety of topologies – neither sociology, nor anthropology, nor can history as now mostly undertaken abandon the central perspective in which the differences that count disappear.”<sup>14</sup>

Illich’s fragmented but nevertheless insightful critique of modern urban conditions seems to resonate well with recent concerns about the

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<sup>14</sup> Illich, *In the Mirror of the Past: Lectures and Addresses*, 1978-1992, 63.

limits of natural resources, energy and a way of life that has turned out to be unsustainable and a threat to the future of humankind. Fortunately in recent decades there have been numerous attempts to rethink and reconsider the habits of thinking and action that came to dominate since the dawn of the Industrial era. Though our hopes about the future are not yet supported by a fundamental shift in human consciousness and ways of acting, some trends have become promising. As urban philosopher Arnold Berleant remarks in his *Sensibility and Sense*, there have been some hopeful developments with respect to communal dwelling: “Urbanism has now moved beyond these rather simplistic modes to a more sophisticated stage as an ecosystem. This leaves behind the mechanical ideal of uniform, replaceable parts and adopts an organic vision. In sharp contrast to the mechanical, the biological ecosystem model recognizes the urban region as a complex unity of many different, but interdependent components, each preoccupied with its own purposes but at the same time contributing to and depending on the context that embraces them all.”<sup>15</sup>

I must admit that despite such bright and encouraging insights, I have limited hope about the future development of urbanism, bearing in mind that Corbusian dogmas remain deeply entrenched, and our abilities to face the challenges of the future are still affected by the ideas shaped by the ideology of Modernism and its numerous avatars. The blind pursuit of profits, and greed and corruption, seem to dim our visions of the future. Thus as Lewis Mumford has famously remarked, “Like a drunken locomotive engineer on a streamline train, plunging through the darkness at a hundred miles an hour, we have been going past the danger signals without realizing that our speed, which springs from our mechanical facility, only increases our danger and will make more fatal the crash. If we are to find a different destination, every part of our life must be re-examined and overhauled, every activity must undergo criticism and reevaluation, every institution must seek its own renovation and renewal.”<sup>16</sup>

This has been my goal while having these conversations with prolific social thinkers and authors, all of them leading practitioners and experts in the field of architecture and the built environment whose work and writings I respect and admire. It is my hope that our exchange will contribute to the growing awareness about the need to change the current course of global development.

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<sup>15</sup> Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World*, 123.

<sup>16</sup> Mumford, *Art and Technics*, 11-12.

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*Fig. X-4. Babu's Hut, Sewagram, Wardha, India. Photo by Almantas Samalavicius*

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**PART I.**

**ON THE LEGACY OF MODERN URBANISM  
AND ITS FUTURE PROSPECTS**

# CHAPTER ONE

## URBANISM AND OUR URBAN FUTURE

### A CONVERSATION WITH WITOLD RYBCZYNSKI

In your book *Makeshift Metropolis* one can find this insightful remark : “Cities don’t grow in a vacuum. Urbanism is conditioned by what came before, not only physically but also intellectually.” You further go on to explore the legacy of *City Beautiful*, the ideas of Ebenezer Howard as well as the urban concepts of Le Corbusier. It seems, however, that Le Corbusier’s influence on ideas of urban planning and urban design had a more lasting effect than the significantly more modest, balanced and nuanced proposal of Howard, especially if one thinks about the urban mentality shared by the vast array of Le Corbusier’s followers. Can we today call urban thinking in Corbusian categories a fact of the past? Or does it still maintain power to intoxicate new generations of urban designers, especially when human civilization is challenged by unprecedented level of urbanity?

**Witold Rybczynski:** It is easy to underestimate the vast legacy of Howard and the Garden City movement. Robert A. M. Stern is currently compiling a catalog of built garden city projects around the world, and is finding hundreds of projects, not only in Europe and North America, but as far afield as Israel and South Africa. Indeed, it could be argued that the Garden City movement was far more influential than CIAM. The term *garden city*, which exists in virtually all the European languages, has survived; whereas no one but historians remembers the *Ville Radieuse*. The Garden City has also outlived the Corbusian model on the ground. Existing garden city communities like Forest Hills Gardens in New York, Hampstead Garden Suburb in London, and Le Logis in Brussels, are cherished, economically successful, thriving places, whereas the surviving examples of CIAM urbanism are generally unsuccessful, disliked (if not vilified), and in the case of American public housing, proved so

dysfunctional as to have been demolished. CIAM-influenced Soviet-era housing projects in Eastern Europe have not fared any better.

I agree that the Ville Radieuse ideal continues to influence some younger urban designers today, especially those who are trained as architects. They still believe, as did CIAM, that the city can and should be designed—just like a building, only larger. This is all part of the modernist revival that occurred after the demise of postmodernism in the late 1980s. But whereas a revival in buildings is a matter of fashion and taste, a revival that ignores the deplorable record of 1950s city-building in America, Europe, and the old Eastern Bloc, will be extremely harmful.

Of course, both the Garden City and the Ville Radieuse ideas evolved and were put into practice in ways that their originators did not anticipate or intend, but that is the nature of urbanism. It is easy to pooh-pooh the City Beautiful movement, for example, because some of its most ambitious plans came to naught. Yet almost every major American city has its City Beautiful trace—a public library, a railway station, a boulevard, or a civic center. Indeed, without the great civic buildings of the period 1900-1930, American downtowns would be but a pale shadow of what they are today. Not before, and certainly not after, have enlightened city officials, planners, architects, and landscape architects come together so felicitously.

When one thinks of the most essential urban critique of the last century, at least two names come to an educated mind that cannot be omitted – first and foremost those of Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs, who had different and occasionally clashing opinions about urban prospects, but who made a significant contribution to our understanding of urban life and urban culture. Though the legacy of both authors is well-known to academics and professionals, it seems that the general public both in the US and other countries including Europe has only a very vague idea about this important intellectual heritage, despite the fact that in this century we have wider access to any kind of media. Is something that was previously referred to as “common knowledge” vanishing in present-day culture?

**WR:** Mumford is not much read today. Although his architectural criticism is as penetrating as ever, books like *The City in History* are hard going. In my experience Jane Jacobs remains influential, due in large part to her clear and simple language. Her books continue to be read, and not just by professionals.

In the past, the “general public” did not have a profound understanding of, or even an interest in, urban planning. Things like new sewer systems, slum clearance, and street widening, were left to experts. On the other hand, today it is impossible to build an urban project (except possibly in

China) without public review. One could argue that after the 1960s, following the often inhuman post-war reconstruction in Europe and urban renewal in the US, the public insisted on becoming a part of the planning process, exercising its influence through historic preservation boards, community groups, and neighborhood associations. Most cities have instituted a formal process of community consultation for any new construction. While the public may not be familiar with the planning literature, and with current theories of urban design, it knows what it likes—and what it doesn't like.

Having said that, I admit that I am skeptical about the impact of citizen review boards on design quality. Public reviews can stop bad things from happening, but are less effective in making good things happen; instead they often leads to consensus and watered-down compromise.

As an author who practices open discourse in architectural and urban criticism reaching different audiences, including professionals, academics and, hopefully, a general readership, what do you think of the role of the critic in these fields nowadays? Is the educational role of a critic as important as ever in our times, especially keeping in mind the scope of the urgent problems of present urbanism and the fast growth of cities, megacities and their dwellers? What are the possibilities of architectural criticism in capturing wider audiences when, despite the proliferation of media, fewer and fewer people are inclined to practice meaningful “intellectual life” – whatever that might mean?

**WR:** Although I have written my share of book reviews and critiques of buildings, I have always considered myself a writer, rather than a critic. In daily newspapers, buildings are reviewed as if they were theatrical performances or movies—I think that's a mistake. A building may be “news” on opening day (actually, the press is invited to tour the building *before* opening day), but buildings last a long time, they adapt to their users, and their users adapt to them. I have always found it more useful to write about buildings years after they are built, when the rough edges have worn off and one can assess the durability—aesthetically as well as functionally—of the architect's ideas. On the other hand, I think it is useful for critics to weigh in on controversies that surround proposed buildings—like the Eisenhower memorial in Washington, D.C., or the proposed changes to the New York Public Library.

I have never been interested in “educating” the public, or in promoting so-called “good design.”

When I write about buildings and urbanism, my aim is, first of all, to explain how and why things work the way they do. This is particularly true in urban development, where there are many actors—developers,