

Questions of XXI Magazine of Architecture and Design

α Today, it seems impossible to talk about urban planning without talking about politics. Will that ever be possible? Can politics ever give up putting its hands on cities?

In the broadest sense, urban planning is inseparable from politics. Because planning is fundamentally concerned with the distribution of resources and is informed by some notion of the public good, its political character is essential. Of course, in a more limited sense, the imposition of a “political” agenda on planning processes can frustrate the realization of the greater good, thwart local initiatives, and kill creativity. There is always a danger when planning is hijacked by narrow interests.

α Now we have entered into a new era, in which most of the world population has started living in cities. Was that a predictable situation? Moreover if it was, was there any preparation for that? Are cities equipped well for their immigrants?

The exponential growth of cities is one of the greatest crises the planet confronts. There are now over three billion people living in cities and half of these live in slums. We are not prepared for this and one of the results is the urbanism of sprawl and the rise of mega-cities. Such a condition is fundamentally unsustainable and largely out of control. Radical steps are needed to assure the equitable distribution of resources, the defense of the environment, the creation of spaces for democracy, and the sustenance of lively and humane places for life.

α There are some cities in China, built from scratch. What are your opinions about such developments by means of urban memory?

The urban population is growing at the rate of about one million people a week. This suggests to me that there is an urgent need for the construction of numerous new cities, built from scratch and sited with intelligence. This is not simply the only sensible way to deal with urban growth, it is necessary to conserve the genius of existing urban environments. The dynamism of China is exciting but many mistakes are being made, particularly in a failure to adequately conserve historic patterns of form and life. Few who visit Beijing can fail to be struck by the wonderful scale and character of the existing Hutongs, a marvelous precedent for urbanism. Unfortunately, the transformation of Chinese cities from a low-scale, bicycle and pedestrian, character to an urban morphology based on the car is proceeding at a breakneck pace. There is some good news, though. There does seem to be a growing sensitivity to the environment in China and this is critical to the prospect for getting control of growth. The Chinese have a great opportunity to skip a stage of urban development and pioneer truly sustainable cities. I hope they will rise to the challenge.

⌘ You are one of the few people who still work on utopia projects. Why do you think less people are interested in designing utopias? What has changed?

Utopia has a bad name politically because its history has come to be too closely associated with totalitarianism. In this critique the end point of utopian thinking is inevitably the concentration camp or Stalinism: Utopia has become synonymous with dystopia. To me this is sad because it precludes an important form of urban thought, the creation of prospective visions of the good city, imagined all-at-once. In my own work I prefer to use the word “eutopia,” meaning a *better* place. Given the press of rapid growth, the homogenizations of globalization, and the extreme risk to the environment, we are in urgent need of many new solutions to matters of urban morphology and technology. Eutopia is a crucial mode of research and consciousness raising that I believe we abandon at our peril.

⌘ Real estate companies are dominating the built environment. According to your opinion what are the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of specialization?

The global economy is likely to remain mixed for the foreseeable future and real estate companies will certainly retain and expand their role. Important issues center on the nature of the partnership between public and private interests, the willingness of real estate companies to raise the bar on sustainable environmental practices, and their capacity to look beyond “market-driven” products that simply reproduce the mistakes of the past. We have, for example, learned that the model of low-density suburbanization is extremely problematic. Yet it remains central to the imagination of too many real estate companies. The city is our pre-eminent shared space: commercial spatial products must be judged on their capacity to leverage this kind of collaboration.

⌘ You have worked on several waterfront master plans, one of which is your plan for Riva, Istanbul. Can you give us some information about the Riva Ring project and its goals?

The Riva project grew from an effort to find a pattern that would reconcile the interests of the companies that predominate in the ownership of the site with a larger vision of collective form. Our proposal tried to find a platform for this common identity, to suggest ways in which Riva could develop as a series of towns rather than a sprawling suburb, to introduce a very high level of internal environmental management and autonomy (in matters of water, waste, energy, movement, air quality, etc.), and to create the circumstances for a “complete” internal economy. The idea was to make Riva *urban*, a place where all the necessities of daily life – culture, commerce, employment, education, recreation, etc. – were close at hand. We wanted the place to have a very high level of local autonomy, to avoid making it into a dormitory for Istanbul, and to give it a beautiful and singular character and identity.

Questions of INSAAT YATIRIM : <http://www.insaatyatirim.com/>

* What do you think about the architectural structuring in Turkey?

Turkey faces tremendous challenges for the future of its architecture and cities. These include retaining the best of its unique and remarkable architectural and urban culture, solving the crisis of rapid urban growth, providing decent housing and environments for all citizens, and protecting everyone from seismic catastrophe. Given the increased integration of Turkey into European and world economies and into global culture, the country must also strive to retain its singularity, even as it seeks new solutions to shared problems of the environment, technology, social life, and the urban pattern.

* When did you come to Turkey first? In your opinion, what has changed since then?

My first visit to Turkey was in 1974 and many things have changed dramatically, not the least of them Bodrum! The growth of Istanbul has been stunning as has the rapid introduction of so much of the infrastructure of multinational culture. Like many places, Turkey faces the challenge of finding authentic solutions to contemporary problems that are both creative and respectful.

* Which district of Istanbul did you like the most?

I love Istanbul and am particularly taken by the brilliant relationship of the city to the water. Protecting and extending this relationship is a great challenge for the city and the care and imagination with which it is undertaken will fix the character of its future. I especially like the fantastic towns along the Bosphorous, the way they're compressed between water and hillside, the airy and elaborate wooden architecture, the incredible conviviality of the cafes and restaurants along the shoreline.

* What do you feel when you look at Istanbul with an architecture's eye? What do you think about its architecture and what are the missing elements?

The issue for Istanbul is not exactly one of missing elements but of the imposition of forms that are alien to its genius. The major portion of Istanbul now consists of modernist buildings and areas that lack vital infrastructures of sociability and that are predicated on single-use zoning that only adds to the city's problems of movement and community. A great challenge for the city will be to modify and retrofit these places to create real, mixed-use, neighborhoods that are both hospitable and sustainable.

* Istanbul has been one of the focal points of the global capital flow in the last 20 years. In your opinion, would the global capital flow make any contribution in the

urban life and the prosperity
level of the citizens?

Of course, nobody would argue against prosperity! The question is whether or not these flows of capital tend to increase inequality and the income gap (this is very much the situation in New York) and whether this influx is accompanied of forms of expression and organization that threaten the idea of the local. Among the risks faced by Istanbul and other booming cities is simply that they will converge in a single pattern, that their singularity – and comparative architectural and urban advantage – will be lost in the global system of homogeneous regulation and behavior.

* What kind of solutions would you suggest for the solution of urban problems of Istanbul?

The core problem of Istanbul – its rapid growth and distorted relationship to the country as a whole – cannot be solved in Istanbul. I believe that Turkey should pursue a vigorous program of urbanization – including the creation of new cities around the country - to reduce the over-dominance of Istanbul and to stem the flow of migrants to a city that has simply become too large.

* Which buildings impressed you the most in Turkey?

As always, the work of the incomparable Sinan!

*In which direction will the cities change in the 21st century.

One of the ways in which they must change is in overcoming the hegemony of the automobile. Cars are the enemy of sustainable cities, conducting sprawl, destroying neighborhoods, polluting the air, and killing millions. In light of the truly enormous threat that planetary growth poses to the “natural” environment, cities must dramatically rework their habits and morphologies. On the positive side, I would argue that cities are at the core of sensible solutions to the environmental crisis. They are uniquely efficient and the crucibles of culture and cooperation. We need beautiful, humane, and sensible cities in order to survive. Indeed, in an era of powerful transnationals and weakened states, cities will become the very bulwark of the possibility of democracy.

* What would you like to say about the structuring in the coastal areas?

* How should be the coastal structuring according to you?

* Foreign investors are interested in coastal districts after Istanbul. What do you think about this?

I think we must proceed with great care in the development of coastal districts. We are everywhere – from Phuket to New Orleans – increasingly aware of the threats to communities in coastal areas and we face the challenge of the

repeated devastation of these areas by storms, tidal waves, and other disastrous environmental events. I believe, as well, that these storms are becoming more energetic due to global warming which also threatens to accelerate the rise of sea levels all over the planet. A very conservative attitude to the development of coastal zones is necessary as is the reconstruction and relocation of communities at risk. Of course, the problem arises because coastal areas are very attractive economically and physically. But future developments should be undertaken with great care, both because of obvious dangers and because the coasts themselves are part of our shared planetary patrimony. Nobody wants to see the natural meeting of land and sea dominated by construction.

Questions of KONUT DERGİSİ: www.konutdergisi.com
<<http://www.konutdergisi.com/>>

* How would you evaluate Turkey from the point of real estate investments, especially housing?

Obviously, the market is bubbling. The problem for government is to help direct investment to critical sectors, not simply to benefit those at the top. And, it remains to be seen what the effects of the collapse of the sub-prime market will be as they ripple across the globe, passing through the Turkish economy.

* What do you think about the consistency of the constructions along the coasts of Turkey?

(See the answer above.) Turkey needs to take strong steps to conserve the beauty of its coastlines from over-development. There must be very strong conservation laws as well as close attention to the perils of coastal construction.

* What are your opinions about the rapid structuring and urban transformation in Istanbul and the other big cities? How successful has Turkey been in urbanization?

(See the answers above.)

* When you consider last constructed buildings, where is Turkish architecture now and where is it going?

Turkish architecture is at an interesting crossroads. The country has excellent architecture schools and a very strong cadre of practitioners. A key question for Turkish architecture is the character of its relationship to the architectures of globalization, with its homogeneous identities, star system, and indifference to environmental and social questions. How, in the future, will Turkish architecture maintain its Turkish identity *in dialogue* with inescapable planetary forces? Answers to this question will depend on close attention to Turkey's bioclimatic

particulars, to patterns of culture and affinity, to seismic dangers, to its incredibly rich and diverse architectural heritage, to the endangered environment, and to new patterns of production and lifestyle. I am confident that many brilliant syntheses are possible and that Turkey's architects are equipped to make them.