Learning from Ourselves

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We use to call development the evolution towards a certain state of the urban systems. Urbanity is about complexity and seems to be a character, a flavor including hazard and utopia. It is constructed, reinforced, altered, even lost and eventually regenerated. It is a quiet sunny day after a storm, before the next storm arrives. It is also a kind of imperfection dealing with learning processes involving the stakeholders. Once the option towards living in urban environment became global and massive, the way urbanity is constructed and promoted also became a very important issue. While there is always a certain delay between ideas, theories and practice, the measure of this distance shows the performance of the whole system. We look at a city as a system constantly informing itself, through a self-learning process: decisions, projects, their completion or distortion are continuously contributing to urbanity. In order to progress, we may look back to previous developments, reanalyze their context and compare them to new ones, investigating both their principles and particulars at work. This paper brings together some of the realities of the Romanian planning attitudes of recent times, as well as a few general precepts, pointing to the need for a more attentive look beyond the close reality and for a permanent evaluation of the previous decisions in a critical manner. While connecting the realities of Romanian urbanity to an absent *Baukultur* planning tool, this article intends to sketch an open list of distilled matters that can be extracted from the permanent learning process illustrated by urban development.

But for all that, what does this learning act as a key instrument for understanding and progress undertake? City is evolution. It is about changes and resistance to changes. Evolution and progess mean learning from previous as well as different situations. It means learning from ourselves and learning from others. To learn from others requires selecting models, and to question at every turn their suitability. There is a permanent temptation to indicate substantial differences, particular reasons, thus learning from others is a complex and often rejected process. Even small cases are very difficult to be transposed. Learning from others supposes a capacity to observe, extract, select and adapt the cases to one's situation, while some parameters are obvious and others, less visible. Learning from others basically means applying successful strategies and methods, while at the same time avoiding demonstrated mistakes.

On the other hand, learning from ourselves lowers the horizon, but is closer and easier to understand as a process. It is about trial and error, but also about trial and success. Sometimes, when fundamental changes occur, a lot of projects are failing, a lot of trials are leading to errors and instability in the urban evolution looks either like a lack of action, or like too much action. Dealing with error and failure is quite difficult: there is a huge pressure to reject it or to blame others for it. This is a harsh kind of politics and professional behavior, as we are always part of the same picture. Failure is so usual and so normal, but if we misunderstand this, the risk of never learning from ourselves increases. Standard political and even professional arguments may change in time, but still without sufficient feedback. Labels and slogans are mistaken for arguments such as, for example, the need of infrastructure: sometimes bad infrastructure may be worse than none.

The Need for a *Baukultur*

As mentioned above, dealing with imperfection, temporality and subtle combinations of partial success and obvious failure is one of the most important instruments for urban planning. There is always a certain understanding of urbanity, combining visions, politics and common opinion. There is always a kind of blurred desire mixed with gossips on dissatisfaction, resulting in criticism for certain actions and their reasoning. Urban planning is about existing and imagined realities and supposes a capacity of involvement, appreciation and support from stakeholders. Working with the city combines scientific products with experimental praxis, which we may call in different ways, built environment culture, urbanity, urban behavior, planning culture, development culture, or better, include them in the broader umbrella term of *Baukultur*.

The *Baukultur* terminology derives from the German space, meaning Building Culture in an extended sense. While *Baukunst* (architecture) refers exclusively to the built objects, *Baukultur* goes far beyond a constructed embodiment, as an extended concept of culture that originates in the need to understand and contribute to the complex evolution of life in settlements. The responsibility for the quality of the built environment belongs not only to experts, but also to society as a part of it. Therefore, this concept encapsulates learning from ourselves, which basically means feedback. A definition looks like this:

> *Baukultur* aims at good planning and building. It combines a high design standard with a holistic view of social, economic and environmental aspects and thus has an emotional and aesthetic dimension. *Baukultur* is essential to produce an environment that is perceived as livable. It serves to secure and develop the social and economic values thus created. Producing *Baukultur* is a social process based on a broad understanding of qualitative values and goals and their implementation with high levels of interdisciplinary expertise. *Baukultur* is the positive result of a good process culture.[1]

What is the place of *Baukultur* in a Romanian perspective? How do we evaluate the existing building culture and how does it evolve? We are somewhere in between labeling a building "good" – meaning it pays a tribute to development – or "bad" because of its lack of refinement, poor building qualities, or weak relation to context. The need to talk about building processes in a more evolved manner, much more based on references of previous visible cases is obvious, but does not happen quite often. We therefore stress once again the need for learning from ourselves.

Changing Our Minds

For a long time, I have been fascinated with and intrigued by unfinished projects at the urban scale. Unaccomplished master plans, previously designed fragments transposed into built form and then, almost always, a change of mind, an abandon of the initial, of the previous, and another direction is adopted. It appears to me that almost every master plan is condemned to be changed, altered or even denied and contradicted. Reality alters the plans and provides them woth a feedback. A housing area planned for a certain type of living is altered by the interference of other typologies built for a market opportunity. Planning rules are sometimes unstable because of their own weaknesses, but more often because of profit speculation.

Is there such a gap between what we want to plan at a certain point and what we need and realize after a while, during the building processes? What does a plan mean in this case? Is a master plan just a starting point of an evolution, deliberately conceived to be altered? Even in the case of a stable political regime, changes occur by densification, modification of different parameters, budget reduction with building cuts, and so on. Do we learn something from that, or do we still look at master plans as a possible reality at a certain time? Master plans look like dealing with

1 Anne Schmedding, Daniela Michalski, Klaus-Dieter Beißwenger, and Patrick Diekelmann, *Baukultur Report. Built Living Spaces of the Future – Focus City 2014/15* (Potsdam: Federal Foundation of Baukultur, 2015), 1.

probabilities instead of defined and predictable urban forms and activities. There is a gap between the formal approach of design and the real drivers of development, including the inevitable and necessary interference of private and public input.

How much of the change of direction of a master plan is driven by new programs or economic reasons and how much by the will of the power holders or the vision of the designer in charge? Maybe this is a real part of the trial and error way of building: corrections above corrections at one to one scale model. I design, therefore I change. The most used word about urban development in the last two decades in Romania is "chaotic." What kind of chaos is perceived by people? Is this the result of the planning regulations, designed on purpose to create the collage understood like chaotic? Is this the result of ever changing minds and altered regulations? From a distance it may seem like something coming out of a paranoid mind. However, at a closer look, for somebody more interested in the phenomenon it is far more compelling to read the urban development periods and trends by the heterogeneous and even congested built environment, encapsulating series of trials and failures, like music played with an ever growing and shrinking orchestra, while changing instruments and rhythm during the performance.

The normality of the urban development result is often questioned. Nonetheless, the answer depends on the reference: on the one hand, order and uniformity are perceived as the result of a too centralized will, reminding of the communist period. On the other hand, a large diversity of intentions, solutions and quality is seen as a failure, an expression of uncontrolled, weakly planned and inconsistent development. Intuitively, the best answer lies in between, thus learning from ourselves at this level seems to be important; otherwise, the balance between the extremes will not be achieved.

First In, First to Decide

I remember Christian de Portzamparc, the Parisian architect who played in the 1990s an important role in the major projects erected in the Mitterrand period and still comes up with interesting schemes for controversial places like Rue de la Loi in Brussels, in a relatively recent competition. He developed the theory of *l'îlot ouvert* [the open block],[2] a certain set of morphological regulations with open solutions, therefore unpredictable, but still controlled by limited coefficients of land use and other rules. The first ones to build have a wider choice to start the occupation of the plots but still preserve the possibilities for the next comers to decide among many alternatives.

> For a long time now I have been working on a scheme which I call the open block. It enables articulation between modern architecture of objects and thought on emptiness, on interstitial space. It can generate situations rich in the feeling that arises from the confrontation without negation of the qualities proper to modernity: opening, light, views.[3]

So is modernity a dramatic change of language which makes sense only within its own logic? Modern building approach, from planning to architecture, seems to have real difficulty to adapt to previous realities. How would our style combine a cathedral look if we added a Modern section after the Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque, etc.? I think the Modern started at a certain point to learn from itself: it began to re-inform the program and to become more flexible both inside and outside. This could be a kind of sustainability which the Modern ignored for decades. The anti-modern movements which followed one after the other couldn't bring a major counterproposal to the Modern, which is still present, with both a massive built environment by modern rules and a strong retention of its principles. It appears to be a contamination, a criticized approach but without replacement. It looks like democracy, as the best imperfect system, like capitalism as an unsustainable model, but again, without any better opposable one to promote. Coming back to Portzamparc:

2 Armelle Lavalou, "La Ville, Dossier Christian de Portzamparc," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 302 (1995): 74.
3 Ibid.

> An open block can constitute an urban fabric where public space and buildings interweave clearly. The street is never a corridor; buildings never or only rarely stand shoulder to shoulder. The rules set in place, whether they obey a program or organize randomness, ensure the permeability of interiors. With the help of a few constraints of alignment and setback, evolution in time remains open-ended. Coherence between solids and voids can reflect coherence between interior and exterior. But this idea is not a universal remedy, it is only a method.[4]

This way of open-ended design inspires the idea of allowing built systems to learn from themselves. In the construction field there are many ways of studying the building performances of a structure or a mechanical system, finishes or even functioning in use. Different tools for measuring are implemented to detect movements, corrosion, changes in behavior, etc. What if the urban complexity would be measured by default in order to inform the plan for future changes? I strongly support the need of evaluation of every urban development similar to the post-occupancy techniques for buildings.

Considering the Past

The principles for building in the so-called "protected heritage areas" are turning around the idea of preserving by lower interference, low profile of the newly built, continued logics. They appear to me like contemporary undercover developments. The further debating point refers to and questions the newly built, not the preserved one. Is considering the past the only sustainable method, or may we add something else to enrich it, such as the future, for instance? By considering the past as well as the future, I would say, new discussions arise on the authorship of the project. Isn't it so, that the one who sets up the building's regulations for a certain area, becomes a kind of a co-author of the project? To a certain extent it may be so.

Taking a look at what Pier Vittorio Aureli notes, I would thoroughly consider the extended conditions of every project:

> The project is the *conditio sine qua non* of the production of architecture: it gives form and reproduces a shared, and thus collective, knowledge which is irreducible to what is realized in the form of buildings and designed objects. The collective knowledge that any architectural project always implies can be defined as the *common* in architecture.[5]

I believe there is an important resource in reanalyzing the relation of the past with the future, through the urban regulations and principles which nowadays look mostly like an idiot proof type. They seem to prevent big mistakes by imposing anonymity, by dealing with the objective in terms of simplistic geometric basis. The quality of urbanity encompasses certainly the dialectic between past and future. This is a key issue which passes through planning, rules and evaluation processes.

The "Good" and the "Bad"

Jumping back to the city scale, I bring into discussion the conflict of two building types which in Romania are setting two worlds in conflict: the family, or so-called detached house and the collective dwelling or apartment building, the so-called block of flats. After the mutations following the Second World War we are tempted to consider that what happened in Romania is only due to the communist regime. I believe it is time we widened our perspective.

The block of flats and the collective is not at all just a communist type of mass housing meant to enroll people in the limitative controlled society. Collective living can be found in front of the Central Park in Manhattan or in the XVIth *arrondisement* of Paris. Then again, it is still considered in Romania, as a counter reaction to the blocks of flats, that the house is good, it is the

4 Ibid.

5 Pier Vittorio Aureli, "The Common and the Production of Architecture: Early Hypotheses," in *Common Ground: A Critical Reader: Venice Biennale of Architecture 2012*, ed. David Chipperfield et al. (Venice: Marsilio, 2012), 147-156.

proper expression of freedom to own and use, it consolidates without competition the individual aspiration to be detached from a society one does not necessarily accept and appreciate. At the same time, the block of flats is perceived as "bad", a prison of the past that many cannot escape from, an abandoned ship with no captain at its steer and a lost admiral of the fleet.

The conflict of the two types is explicit and goes on for decades, and the following paragraphs will illustrate a few current types of discord. First, how can one associate collective and individual homes, within a basic encounter that derives from morphology, use of land and social behavior? We did not care a lot about it and have tolerated the mixing up of the two with insufficient basic urban rules. This mutation brought better and worse results, but generally, there is a real rage against building blocks of flats in areas with individual houses on private lots. The conflict escalated in different cities like Cluj-Napoca, for example, and led to political decisions against this type of "crime." But if one looks closer to this phenomenon, one can notice it started long time ago, when owners of large plots, with gardens, devised them in order to get profit by creating subdivisions. We started to get the houses beyond the houses, the second and third line of buildings, creating a kind of better use of the urban position, a densification by mutation. The driving force is clear, the logic is there, and the result is debatable.

Then, in Cluj-Napoca there were several attempts to balance the situation by downgrading the rules, like imposing the so-called "small collective buildings" limited to maximum six apartments on maximum three floors, then limitations to maximum three apartments on maximum three floors and recently, with the new city master plan limited to two apartments in a building having a similar volume to a single family home. Is this the good way to deal with densification, in the context of the natural economic behavior of land owners to exploit their properties by dividing and selling them to developers? I would say not quite, mainly because of the relativity of the limitation by imposing a maximal number of living units in a building. More recent experiments in different parts of Europe are introducing solutions for small communities sharing certain spaces and even parts of buildings in an active way. Here is not the place to give solutions, but to highlight that many urban conflicts could be reduced by getting a good philosophy on this matter.

Another important conflict results from developing new collective buildings inside existing residential ensembles. Recuperated lands by restitution laws are putting new developers in the position to over-densify the existing collective housing areas from the communist time. Regarding the density issue of these ensembles, I have not seen in any urban set of rules any reference to densities measured in the number of inhabitants per area. It appears that planners do not stress this issue at all, they do not care about it and they do not handle it and thus provide no limitations or recommendations to that. This clearly leaves a gap to be filled and marks out a great need to supply density indicators in urban master plans. Urbanity represents density in a complex physical and metaphorical sense, and the optimal density, related to intimacy and quality of life certainly depends also on inhabitants, not only on buildings. There is a lot to be learned on this subject as well.

The Voices

To this point we questioned the quality of the development processes: we have identified the problem of establishing the rules, the one of judging the proposals according to these regulations and the decision making. While rules are not flexible and open ended, the exceptions from them are in this case too many and escape the general overview. Decision making is a process led by politicians with an optional input from professionals.

Apparently the disaster is inevitable under these conditions, which makes me state that good practices owe a lot to hazard. The public is supposedly called to take notice of the planning intentions in public consultation processes, but this is just another inconsistent type of a determining phase of the development leading to failure. The voice of the public is not articulated, but based on the NIMBY attitude,[6] individual interest is confused by the difficult

6 Not In My Back Yard, meaning to support something only if it does not apply to yourself.

language of presentation of the proposals and by the natural opposition to everything new, resulting in a construction phase which may take years of disturbance with unforeseen results in terms of quality.

The frequent failure of new developments comes from the impression that everything new is worse in terms of quality, it is mutating and disturbing the existing, it is not to be trusted because of high speculative principles and impossible to be negotiated with community and public interests. The former and the latter are not the same: if public interest is easier to be appreciated according to major strategies and principles, the community interest does not exist in a place where the community is absent, inconsistent or vague. Even if public consultation still happens, which is a good thing, it lacks the culture of consultation. Coming back to the *Baukultur*, let us notice again the German example of using Design Advisory Councils:

> Design advisory councils consist of a group of independent specialists - thus usually not local – who examine in an interdisciplinary way the project in terms of its defining effect on the cityscape and issue recommendations. Their sessions can take place in public and their results are published. Design advisory councils see themselves as intermediaries between the interests of the developers and the general public. They not only take a building into account but also it's embedding in the urban body and in the local design tradition. With their professional competence, they provide support for a higher project quality in the sense of *Baukultur*.[7]

The number of design advisory councils grew in Germany from 13 in 1983, 20 in 1993, and 46 in 2003 to 98 today. Planning competitions are also a strong instrument in search for urban quality. Between 250 and 350 planning competitions per year are tendered in Germany since 2004, the majority coming from the public sector. This brings professional voices to be compared. The Romanian avoidance of planning competitions is well tethered because of the lack of culture in this regard. However, this culture may consolidate the trust, the knowledge of their organization and the use of results. How far are we from that? How can we learn this? I believe we can pick it up only by doing and quickly recalibrating, with improvements of procedure for consultation and evaluation. This method may be called fast learning.

Cases

I have decided to analyze some of the most interesting cases of the approximately last fifteen years in Cluj-Napoca. I tried to evaluate what we did learn and how we do apply the received knowledge further on.

The first case illustrates a major failure in the very center of the city: the initially called "extension of the Telephone Company building," which originated in 1997. The project is a speculation invented by the company which pretended to need space in order to host technical equipment close to their existing facility, but in reality they produced an ordinary office building as a business. The proposal was invented by some clever architects who distroyed a public green area and covered a water course to accommodate the building on public space. Despite the protest of many architects who tried to boycott the design pitch, the project was contracted by the same people who had invented the whole mechanism, to the smallest detail. There was even a master thesis elaborated to demonstrate the need and opportunity for this project. A pretended pedestrian passage was designed above the water, but it is now used for parking. The telephone company sold the building to a bank, the proof that it was not needed from technical reasons and the bank was conditioned to provide parking spaces by buying a certain provision in an underground garage which was never built. As a result, the connection with the previous buildings is completely lost and unarticulated.

What is the lesson of this case? Complicity between state institutions can be justified by architects wishing to get contracts, therefore the technical arguments have to be double-checked.

7 Anne Schmedding, *Baukultur Report,* 105.

The second case refers to a business center called Maestro, on a main boulevard in Cluj-Napoca. The building is integrated in a continuous front of one to maximum three-stories high buildings. However, the building in question rises to three times the height of its existing context, thus producing a mutation. The argument was that the whole area is going to be developed at completely different parameters in time. In a contradictory manner, the new master plan of the city preserves the neighboring ground floor buildings as having a contextual value, denying the mutation. What did we get? A huge disproportion created by the new building, two enormous blind partition walls and a picture which displays a momentary lapse of reason instead of planning according to urban regulations.

The third case is an office tower situated on a corner in a predominantly low-rise area, very close to the city center, proclaimed by the investors as a new financial district to be developed. Despite opposition from architects and planners, the mayor decided to endorse the project and finally, after eight years of trials, crisis and delays it is almost built. It is a cheap building with two huge almost blind walls, only perforated by restroom windows. The strange consequence of this project is that the immediate neighbor asked to be granted the same zoning conditions to build aside, and got this through political pressure and even threatening to sue. In this case a mutation is consolidated irrationally. I hope the critics will react soon after the handover of the tower and that somebody will learn something from this case.

None of the above exemples offered any feedback to the authorities, one that would translate in a better judgemt of future projects. On the contrary, the precedent is used by other developers to justify their proposals even if the result is clearly speaking about failure. There is a lack of learning from ourselves.



Fig.1: Telephone Company building, 1997
Fig.2: Maestro Business Center
Fig.3: IMO Tower2

Temporary Yours

During the last few years, in Cluj-Napoca, the number of events in public space increased considerably. It brought some experience in the temporary use of public space and temporary constructions. Actually, there is an obvious trend towards provisional solutions, coming from the increased use of public space during the last decades.

What can we observe, and thus learn from the wonderful collection of top European architecture if one is to look only at the last 25 years of "Mies van der Rohe" Prize for Contemporary Architecture? The shift from architectural objects to public spaces and from private functions to public facilities is glaring. Even some of the last major architectural objects, such as the Harpa Concert Hall[8] in Reykjavik is an indoor public space, opened all day long as an extension of the existing open public space of the Iceland capital, which suffers extreme weather conditions. Three out of four finalists were in the same year projects for public spaces, including the Red Bull Music Academy[9], a prize for an emerging architect, beside the Market Hall[10] in Ghent, Superkilen[11] in Copenhagen and Metropol Parasol[12] in Seville.

Some important authors have noticed and commented on the phenomenon of temporary construction arising in the public realm. Ilka and Andreas Ruby have edited the book *Urban TransFormation* (2008)[13] in which different researchers are grouping their contributions to the study of future construction directions into 6 distinct topics. One of these is called "Between Permanent and Transitory" and it is clearly indicating the potential of the public space to be flexible by use of temporary constructions. Peter Bishop and Lesley Williams have concentrated a wide study on the phenomenon in their publication *Temporary City* (2012).[14] Our local activator of 2015 in Cluj-Napoca is called *Someş Delivery*[15] and consists of a collection of temporary constructions and related activities with the purpose to attract people and generate awareness about the potential public access of a river crossing the city. The temporary projects developed for a few days on the river banks and increased the citizens' awareness about the potential of the space for public use. This led to a recent confrontation between citizens and authorities; the latter started to implement a project for street enhancement by transforming the banks. As a result, consultations were followed by negotiations, which initially failed, but after protests and professional talks the works were postponed awaiting the results of a design competition that would investigate solutions for the public space.

Conclusions

At the end of this article that brings together different narratives on urbanity as a state of complexity in permanent evolution, as well as several specific issues related to failure and its lack of acceptance, one can more clearly see our perspective on urban development as a continuous learning process. What are the particular issues drawn from reality, which support our "learning from ourselves"?

One of the first conclusions refers to the fact that every project that innovates or mutates from existing conditions should be simulated in a dynamic and complex way. Its risks as well as benefits and most probable scenarios should be evaluated all the more cautiously if the project attempts to stand out of its context.

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8 It is a project by Henning Larsen Architects, Studio Olafur Eliasson with Batterio Architects, finalized in 2013.

9 Project by Langarita-Navarro Arquitectos.

10 Project by Robbrecht en Daam Architecten.

11 Project by BIG, Bjarke Ingels Group.

12 Project by Jürgen Mayer H.

13 Ilka Ruby and Andreas Ruby (eds.), *Urban Transformation* (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2008).

14 Peter Bishop and Lesley Williams, *The Temporary City* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

15 This is a project by Fundaţia Cărtureşti and Ordinul Arhitecţilor din România, first edition 13-14 June 2015. See http://somesdelivery.ro/ (accessed 15 July 2015).

Comparison of different solutions to the same scope or in different hypotheses is the best method to be used. This is the definition of an architectural competition. Although it should be compulsory for public projects, it is avoided by the authorities for a few main reasons: organizing a competition supposes supplementary time and cost resources; there is a strong impression that somebody else than the elected power – the competition jury – choses the winning solution and there is the chance to lose cost-control by selecting a good, but expensive project. Of course, I have excluded the corruption scenarios. All these queries can be avoided by a perfect preparation of competitions. This needs experts and resources, obtainable by a good negotiation based on arguments and precedents. Projects with special impact should receive special treatment, both public and private. The best method is to separate the problem from the solution and to evaluate the project's opportunity and conditions aside from the solutions. There are not many authorities able to understand the importance of doing that. Most of the problems appear because of the lack of preparation of projects, not because of the projects themselves.

The public consultation should be conducted step by step, with partial conclusions and sequential decisions to avoid belated inputs or even cancelation of projects. Some may not get seduced by plans, artist impressions or investment activity without strong enough arguments. There should be both theoretic principles and case studies for a good evaluation of special impact projects. There is enough similar experience available and easy to access.

When acting within a heritage framework, the future should be considered in the same manner as the past. There should be no important project without a critical feed-back capitalized for the same authority and for others.

The evaluation of projects should consider failure and partial failure without blaming the promoter, the designer or the supporters, otherwise we may not learn from previous experiences. It is again about the risk evaluation which, as due diligence analysis, has to be as realistic as possible. There is no safe project, or perfect project. When there is not enough local expertise or experience, it should be brought from outside without any restraint. When several projects are failing, their procedures should be questioned and different processes and instruments should be tried instead. As an alternative, temporary constructions and use of space are a form of sustainability and a valuable tool for testing the potential of public spaces.

At the very end, we come back to the notion of *Baukultur*, for its lessons are participatory mechanisms and professional debates at the right moment, before serious engagement of resources and contracted works. Guidelines for decision makers based on learning from ourselves should be provided, as should a much wider culture of collaboration in order to be successful and avoid failure. We should build our own instruments for an advanced construction culture, our own *Baukultur* bearing in mind that development is a continuous learning process.

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