The soul of the spot

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People who read the newspapers and the architectural journals, must have noticed that building new houses in the old city appears prominently on the city-planning agenda. All the time, municipalities have their departments carrying out studies on ‘the quality of the townscape’, on new ‘opportunities’ or on alternative ‘purposes’. Qua bureaucracy, this merry-go-round of research has been a favourite pastime. The interference of external consultants, project managers, boosters and brainstormers, however, is a relatively new phenomenon. In the Netherlands a lot of knowledge is bought. Not just knowledge concerning content, but also knowledge of the processes that are necessary for the realization of ideas.

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As if the situation is not complicated enough, a tendency has arisen to involve in the planning process urban and architectural designers - a group formerly responsible for the realization of plans. Their designing ability was used to increase the cogency of the planners’ arguments. This diversification creates frustrations as well as opportunities. Frustrations, because a great deal of creativity is lost in an official process; opportunities, because the mandate for the design now extends from idea to realization. Designing will be a part of the job and not just the realization of it.

Recently the book ‘Re-Urb’ came out, written under the authority of the *Stimuleringsfonds voor Architectuur* (Fund for the Promotion of Architecture). It concerns a survey of famous present-day interventions in historical tissue. This book

clarifies how much the renewed attention for building new houses in the old city depends on the reassessment of the existing building stock. While the discussion about national architecture seems to be reduced to two subjects, the exceptional projects and the Vinex, in city planning, there is more and more attention for the urban context, this damned yet essential concept. This attention is supported by two very different motives: cost control and historical understanding. An interesting situation arises when these motivations converge.

The moment that the context reappears as a basic and guiding principle for the design, the number of 'variables' which have to be taken into account, increases strongly. One of these variables is the increased public interference. Whether it is the meddlesomeness of the people living in the near vicinity of the building spot, or a municipality's need to create social support by means of 'participation', it makes quite a difference having to listen to the unexpected during the process of planning and design. That is, if one really intends to take this into consideration.

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When building in an existing city this aspect applies even more strongly. It is the rule rather than the exception that inhabitants, townspeople, shopkeepers' associations, action groups and finally future users, rise in this urban debate, whether or not through the statistics that the property developer supplied. In addition, municipalities and architectural centres want to extend this public participation to digital networks. While there used to be just a few seasoned activists participating in a public neighbourhood meeting, a real front can be formed through discussion groups on the Internet. Although this form of telecracy is still in its infancy, it is best to take into account its development.

And now the spot itself. After having considered a complete package of preconditions, the real work begins for the town architect: designing. How does one

analyse the location, what is the character one has in mind for the spot, how willing is one to profoundly understand a spot?

Although popular as a method, the *tabula rasa* variant as regards content, is least interesting to accomplish the foregoing. In this respect, it even seems to be an impossible variant, the urban context will make sure of that. I am not so much talking about a real demolition, but about the developer's and designer's attitude to see the spot firstly and especially as a lot, a horizontal space to build something in, where the context is only respected on the level of lip service.

In an increasing degree, other attitudes literally show profundity. In the first place, there is the approach assuming the conclusion that the spot that will be built on, is an element of the city as a whole. To determine which element, city research is necessary. What is and what was the valuation of the neighbourhood and the spot, what are the icons, which functions are most obvious, how does the spot fit in with existing traffic patterns, programmed zones, zoning plans, et cetera.

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All this is usually mere child's play and inevitable for most designs. A historical vision can be added, though. In the Netherlands this attention has developed far less than in France and England, where a rich history of city research exists. Nevertheless, morphologic studies regularly take place here, too. Once people accept that a spot has a historical patina they can try to find out what exactly this patina consists of. Several aspects play a part in this. The development of the existing tissue or the tissue that is to be spared, soil conditions, proportions of ownership and the mutations in it, and so forth. It produces a kind of atlas of an area.

There is, however, a map, which does not fit in any atlas. This is the mental map of an area. The mental map is drawn by the one who tries to grasp the soul of the spot, the *genius loci*, so to speak. The site's psychological motives, historical tales and phenomenological affinities are analysed from an archaeological point of view. Compared to the preceding procedures, that represent all scientific value, in this

case it concerns a subjective experience that is composed of all kinds of nearly unconscious impulses.

There is a danger that the mental map gets stuck in pure nostalgia. In that case the newly built houses are usually just seen as an attempt on established values. But there are also examples where this profundity, no matter how firmly rooted in personal sentiments, becomes communicable, transferable. In that case the town architect reveals himself as a good historian whose story comes to life.

In the current, complicated city planning process there are several figures who can play that role of archaeologist and historian. This could well be the one who is sent out to taste and map the cultural potential of the spot. A lot will be gained if his contribution can be incorporated in the debate and the decision about the final purpose of the redevelopment of an urban area.

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