

MODERNITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

A conversation with architect and urban planner Leon Krier

Leon Krier hardly needs to be introduced to anyone who has a professional or academic interest in the discussions of architecture and urbanism of recent decades. An internationally established architect, architectural theorist and urban planner, he is well-known not only as the author of numerous architectural and urban design projects and master-plans, but also for his defense of what is sometimes called „neo-traditional” architecture and the values that were and continue to be associated with the role and aesthetics of the architecture of past centuries. Although he has been attacked for his non-conformist views and critical attitude towards radical modernism, Leon Krier remains an important figure in discussions of architecture and urbanism, and his interests overlap with present concerns for environment and sustainable future. The talk by the editor of the journal with Leon Krier is an attempt to discuss the flaws of contemporary architectural and urban practice as well as to indicate its roots and draft some prospects for the future.

Almantas Samalavičius (A. S.): *The last century witnessed the triumph of Modernism in architecture, urbanism and the arts. Together with intoxicating technological progress, Modernism has given more promises than it was able to fulfill. Perhaps that is why critiques of the mainstream vanguard dogmas of the last century have proliferated all over the world. Urbanism of the twentieth century bore the signature of Le Corbusier and his ideological accomplices even though he himself was unable to implement his most ambitious urban schemes. What is the future of this ideological and physical legacy? Will it finally give way to a new understanding of urbanism and architecture in the contemporary city?*

Leon Krier (L. K.): Common to Modernism and its various post-modernist derivatives (High-Tech, Deconstruction, Minimalism, Starchitecture, Modernist and Traditionalist Kitsch) is their total dependence on cheap fossil fuel energies. The dominant modernist building typology, (the skyscraper, the landscaper, the suburban home and their massive proliferation in geographically segregated mono-functional zones) can only be sustained and serviced in conditions of cheap fossil energies. Very little legacy of that collective malpractice will survive the inevitable global consequences of Oil-Peak.

A. S.: *It seems as if the aesthetics of Modernism has claimed and eventually largely usurped the rights to “novelty”. However some insightful critics of mainstream urbanism and dominant architectural practices have claimed that “newness” has produced new forms of boredom and exhaustion. As an architectural theorist and practitioner who has been defending the aesthetic legacy and values of western civilization what, do you think, are the prospects for the future? Will this century remain imprisoned in Modernity’s aesthetical cage or will new attitudes gain momentum?*

L. K.: Most of “novelty” is novel only to the ignorant. Architectural modernism is largely imitative of formal sources from outside the field of architecture be they from machine, vehicle, weapon or tool design, mineral or biological sources. I used to believe that once the catastrophic consequences of modernism were fully understood a radical reform of architecture and urbanism would ensue by rational decision. The fact that humans have the capacity to reason does not mean that reason dictates individual or collective decisions. We are literally enslaved to fossil fuels, individually and collectively. James Kunstler says that we are literally drunk on fossil fuels. The core of the addiction problem is not the fossil fuel but our drunkenness with it.

A. S.: *The world is very rich in varying architectural heritages. Nonetheless the logic of modernity has forced many cultures to give up their architectural traditions and aesthetics. Despite deep respect for eastern cultural traditions expressed by such masters of modern architecture as Frank Lloyd Wright and some other revivals of interest in eastern (Oriental) traditions, globalized modernity seems to have won all over the world where local traditions were and are given up. How has this homogenization of built environments affected us culturally? What is your attitude to local architectural traditions and aesthetics?*

L. K.: Modernism has not only usurped the terms of “novelty” but equally that of “modernity.” However it is something, which is both imposed from outside and desired individually. A lot of this desire is no longer motivated by individual physical appetite or need, but by what Rene Girard has called “metaphysical desire”. A collective enthrallment with a particular desire. How else could we explain the phenomenon of the “distressed jeans.” It satisfies no physical need other than that to “do like the others.” The desire to imitate the desired model is so strong that it even defeats, in the case of anorexia, the will of self-preservation. Then there is a lot of confusion regarding the performances of traditional and modernist architectures. Le Corbusier’s “5 points of modern architecture” can all be fulfilled by traditional architecture. They are not technological but merely programmatic points. They are not contrary to objectives of traditional construction nor to the use of natural building materials. What is certain is that with the increasing price of fossil fuels the use of synthetic building materials will dramatically be decreased in favor of local natural building materials. At the same time the modernist typology will loose its dominance accompanied by a massive return to traditional building types, dictated by climate, altitude and soil.

Modernist architecture is an architectural Esperanto dependent on the use of synthetic building-materials and climate control machinery. The problem is not the so much its nature and existence but its pretension to be the only legitimate language of modernity, declaring traditional architecture and techniques to be “historical” and therefore “outdated and anachronistic.”

A. S.: *The last century witnessed the cult of the Universal Architect or Grand Designer (one can recall visions of the architect’s role promoted by such individuals as Frank Lloyd Wright, R. Buckminster Fuller or Le Corbusier). During the later decades, with the rise of mega-cities and expansion of real estate enterprises it has become evident that architects today hardly oc-*

cupy the same semi-autonomous role that was enjoyed by some of their predecessors. The individual architect is more and more just a member of a larger team in the business of building and development. Despite the individual aesthetics of some architectural “stars”, most contemporary architects seem to perform more modest roles providing services to the building industry. How will this shift in the architect’s role influence the future of urbanism and urban aesthetics?

L. K.: The architect hero figures which were modeled by geniuses like Michelangelo, Palladio, Wagner, Picasso, Le Corbusier have become mimetic models for every single member of the architectural profession. This is another demonstration of metaphysical desire displacing individual desire and producing massive frustration when faced with actual individual abilities. Starchitects play the role of entertainers, creating spectacular fireworks, which divert the illiterate from the worldwide squalor of common architectural production.

A. S.: *Some people maintain that the urban future is further growth of mega-cities or megalopolises. Decades ago Constantinos Doxiadis was promoting a vision of Ecumenopolis or a world city, a vision which was strongly criticized and rejected by Lewis Mumford and a number of other humanists. Some critics argue that for reasons of economic and environmental concerns, mega-cities as well as their clusters of skyscrapers have no future and that smaller size cities will eventually take their place. What is your take on this dispute?*

L. K.: The Club of Rome and the text *Limits of Growth* turn out to have been accurate in their predictions. The biggest intellectual concept to grasp today is that technology is the logos of techniques. That technology is neither high nor low and that that differentiation has little to do with intelligence, wisdom, progress, ecology. What superficially looks like high may be extremely low in ecological terms and vice versa. We live now a capital moment because we begin collectively to realize that the idea of permanent economic growth, on which the idea of modernism and progress are built, cannot be sustained. How then to pay for our accumulated debt if there is no foreseeable economic growth beyond Peak-Oil or slave-labour. Those who pretend that human ingeniousness holds a solution ready to kick in when needed, won’t be able to lie much longer. Because however brave science has been in exploring the micro and macro scales, there is virtually no science of ecological civilization. How then are our representatives to take intelligent long-term decisions when lacking reliable resource data?

The questions which science have urgently to address and answer are ... HOW MANY HUMANS CAN LIVE IN GIVEN LOCATIONS, REGIONS, COUNTRIES, CONTINENTS, IN GIVEN GEOCLIMATIC CONDITIONS, FOR HOW LONG, UNDER WHAT POLITICAL ECONOMIES AND WITH WHAT TECHNICAL AND BIOLOGICAL INVENTORIES? And beyond « WHAT CAN BE OUR MORAL, AESTHETIC, TECHNICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL VALUE SYSTEMS IN CONDITIONS OF LIMITED FREE-ENERGY RESOURCES?

Politicians are more and more pressed to make extremely urgent environmental decisions. While we like to believe that such decisions are based on solid information, they generally result from hypotheses with scant scientific or philosophic foundation, more motivated by industrial than ecological interests.

The same intellectual misery applies to decisions about urban growth, building technology, and transport. Anything useful, pleasing and desirable has a limited size, form, and weight. Maturity is the end goal of all processes of healthy growth. By multiplication, as opposed to overexpansion, cities cannot grow otherwise without becoming parasites – natural and human disasters. We know too little about the long-term carrying capacity of the planet nor even of given geographic areas. In terms of urbanism and architecture, the love affair with sky-scraping and land-scraping gigantism must be disabused now as stale infatuations of a bygone pre-ecological era. Fossil fuel-fed industrial colossi are their exclusive enablers and masters.

To me it is incomprehensible how intelligent individuals can be enthused by skyscraper city and its corollary, suburbia. The skyscraper (vertical impasse) and the suburb (horizontal impasse) can be charming as isolated occurrences, when they become the prime models for settling the planet they become environmental nightmares from every point of view, be it ecological, political, economic, social, cultural.

A. S.: *What do you think of the possibility that new movements (New Urbanism, etc.) might overcome the ideological and aesthetic legacy of the last century, having in mind that several generations of architects were indoctrinated by vanguard Modernists and this kind of thinking has flourished worldwide? Can one suggest that urban design on a smaller scale as well as social experimentation with present cities will show ways out of the urban crisis produced by the physical and economic growth of the last two centuries?*

L. K.: The concept of “sustainable city” is a metaphysical ideal, a utopian fabulation. In reality, there exist no generalizable, pragmatic models for such a

city. There exist only partial visions. The traditional models in terms of building and planning that inform the Charter of New Urbanism are, however, more than vision. Set on re-establishing a firm relationship between urban and landscape form, construction and architectural form, they represent not mere history but un-renounceable, reified experience. Beyond their objective geometric and physical characteristics, these models also represent the most commonly attractive forms human communities have been able to realize so far. By now, it is apparent that this is the key to the current challenge of building with sustainability and livability in mind.

Despite the critical environmental situation, National Governments, Academies of Science and other official research bodies are to this day speechless and disarmed when it comes to proposing global development models for the long-term future. The Congress for New Urbanism Charter is still the only coherent formulation of a global ecological development project, appositely initiated and formulated by independent professionals, motivated by constitutional objectives.

The validity of New Urbanist theory should be assessed separately from its practical applications. The latter are largely dependant on commissions from the private sector. Locations, briefs, densities and realizations are mostly predetermined by clients’ business plans and existing zoning ordinances, and compromised by unprepared and hostile professional, legislative and bureaucratic environments. The core value of the New Urbanism movement lies, then, not in its many fragmentary realizations, but in its broad environmental vision and ambitions.

New Urbanism is not a set and sealed doctrine. Like scientific theory, it evolves through trial and error, experiments being ranked and hierarchized on their long-term validity. New Urbanism’s body of knowledge is definitely not a theology nor a transcendental theory, but the technology for settling the planet in ecological, aesthetic and ethical ways.

A. S.: *Lewis Mumford once popularized a promising concept of the “usable past”. What aesthetic and cultural legacies are still important despite the ideological frenzy that has raged in the sphere of art, architecture and urbanism for many decades?*

L. K.: Traditional architectures are part and parcel of building technology. To condemn them as historical and dead languages amounts to an ideological brainwash, to a technological dis-education, to the loss of millennial technical experience and knowledge. While the knowledge of handling synthetic building materials has progressed in the past century

the know-how and capacity to handle natural local building materials has catastrophically regressed. Experience is by definition a matter of the past. The “fear of backwardness” holds control of a vast and worldwide fraternity, believing in the sancticity and exclusive legitimacy of Modernism, a theory that has been brain-dead for half a century but keeps dominating positions in academia and its dependent culture industry. This theory, at first fired by fossil fuel energies combined to an atavistic belief in infinite progress, is now held alive by fear of regression. The fear of backwardness is what blinds its victims to the technological treasure house of traditional architecture and urbanism. The ensuing technological and artistic amnesia is responsible for the cataclysmic worldwide degradation of the built environment. The return to traditional architecture and settlement patterns will – contrary to what I have previously argued – not come about by democratic choice, but by fate and by overwhelming necessity. Geography, climate and ecology will eventually define again their forms and materials, their number, location, size and scale.