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SETTING, SKYLINE AND SURROUNDINGS.
THE ICONOLOGICAL TURN OF URBAN REALITIES.

Lipp Wilfried / Australia

President ICOMOS Austria

The extent and borderlines of intervention needs daily decision-making by conservationists, preservationists, politicians and citizens. Priorities are to be defined and functions discussed within an aesthetic framework making it possible for both the old and new to exist side by side not in a competitive fashion, but allowing both to stand along side each other, fully equal. In an architectural era where seemingly everything is possible, it must also be possible to make provisions for the historic spaces to exist.

The literacy of urban design lies at the core of the iconological question. In this context a shift from the multilingual historic architecture to the mass confusion of contemporary urban development can be identified. The period of mass confusion may end in uniformity – the uniformity of architecture as exemplified in the so-called *Asian Tiger Cities*. The process leading to this can be described in the following examples.

1. When viewing the vedutes of the Baroque period leading up to the 19th century as for example in the views by Caneletto, Vischer, Mathäus Merian and Rudolph Alt several characteristic points can be observed.
- The clear division between the town and its surrounding landscape, which creates the unmistakeable setting,
- The identifiable skyline which can be associated with the locations,
- Speed reading of the symbols connected with the structures and their economic, political and military importance as well the social structure: trench, wall, fortifications, towers, churches, palaces, etc. and outside of the wall the smaller buildings of the craftsmen and farmers.

Easy understanding with the help of a legend makes the identification and description of the structures possible. The rigid hierarchical design of the historic towns represented the reality of society at the time. In general the historic vedutes show clearly structured towns, with identifiable skylines, typical settings within a countryside creating characteristic surroundings.

2. In comparison to the clear messages the vedutes conveyed, the contemporary view of a historic town as in the example of Vienna, shows how these clear structures have already been altered.
- The symbol of Vienna has always been St. Stephen's Cathedral located in the center of the city with its tower visible from a distance occupying space without competition. The baroque churches and the domes of the emperor's residence occupied the space below the tower of St. Stephen and the houses of the citizen's again one level below. This was so until the 1960's and represented the traditional view of Vienna, characterizing the world famous skyline and the unchangeable setting and its magnificent surrounding which the Vienna Forest (Wienerwald) creates.
- Since the last third of the 20th century the image of Vienna has noticeably changed. St. Stephen's Cathedral and the Baroque skyline are now competing with high rise buildings, chimneys of power stations and large volumes of public buildings. The development of a city above a city in Vienna thanks to the inadequate restrictions of urban planning has also left its marks on the skyline. The space for the historic zones is growing scarce and is becoming narrower resulting in an iconological turn.
- This mixture has led to a hybrid development endangering the historic layers of the town increasingly. The tendency is that the historic structures disappear in the jungle of the "mixed salad" of new urban symbols dominated by economic factors.
- The problem for the setting, skyline and surroundings is the break in the urban development which in former times grew continuously and slowly and is now subject to accelerative modernization based on economic motives, representation and competition. It is the over-layering and the clash of urban ideologies which has led to the undesirable effect now present in the city.

3. A huge leap forward along the scale of urban development leads to New York which is a milestone in the design of modern cities.
- Manhattan was settled primarily in the south leaving a large open space to the north which was planned

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beginning in the late 19th century. The introduction of a system of streets and avenues as a grid did not have to take many old structures into consideration.

- By the early 1930's the landmarks such as the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the Woolworth Building and the Flatiron Building had already been erected still serving as the center of attention of sightseeing tours up to today.
- The verticalization of the city led to a virtual disappearance of the older structures such as City Hall, St. Paul's Cathedral among others. These no longer play a role in the skyline as the high rise buildings have already won the competition.
- Now Manhattan is the paradigm of a city of skyscrapers. The permanent change is not problematic as long as the aforementioned icons of the city remain recognizable.
- An important role for the identification of Manhattan is its surroundings and its setting which cannot be altered at will; they are permanent – the Hudson and East Rivers merging in the Atlantic Ocean.
- Thus Manhattan is without competition between architectonic and urban ideologies in its development and it is always so to say in a win – win position. The transfer of this strategy would however be fatal for old cities with historically developed centers.

4. It is the Asian Tiger cities that have taken on the aura of New York within one generation. The Tiger cities have amplified and extrapolated wherever possible.

- They are the total and frightening expression of the present disregarding the past. Moreover there seems to be no recognizable structure serving as a setting, no surrounding for easy association and a skyline permanently changing.
- Identification is thus almost impossible. Hong Kong is recognizable more by the typical red boat in the foreground of the well-known cliché postcard pictures than by the clusters of giant skyscrapers.
- Differentiation apparently seems to need association with the past. The Tiger cities lack this connection. Where this will lead to remains to be seen.

What can be concluded?

Up to the beginning of the 20th century and in some cases even after World War II cities showed their development in a lateral scheme with perceivable sections that were added in the course of time. The over-layering, the verticalization, the covering up of older structures is a phenomena resulting from the break on continuity and characterizes the situation of historically developed cities up to now. The clash between the old and the new stills continues and careful planning enabling both to exist without suffocation and without mixing needs attention, more than ever before.

Thus as a consequence the old and new must be equally given space; space for co-existence without mixing the ideologies of urban development. Covering and over-layeri -ng are to be avoided, insuring identity and historic iconology. Continuity is exemplified well in the example of New York which did not experience the iconological turn. Bur nevertheless Manhattan cannot be used as a model for historic and ancient cities.

The Tiger cities are the last consequence of the Manhattan way of urban development excluding radically history and ending in indifference.

The message in short is: The setting and surroundings as essential parts of cities both old and new must remain in their original space, supplying the authentic background for both historic and modern skylines. A basic requirement for success should be: consideration of continuity in the appropriate context.

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Abstract

Monuments and sites are not isolated, they are – at least in our imagination – embedded in a specific setting, characterized by a typical skyline and intertwined in their respective surroundings. But reality proves that our imagination has often fooled us. In spite of the (theoretical) acknowledgement that the environment plays an important role for monuments and sites, in practice observations show two tendencies: they are increasingly becoming isolated on the one hand thus we can speak of singular "icons", of "islands" of historic quarters of "relics" of the past in changing times. On the other they are becoming integrated through alteration and "modernization" in the processes of urban development.

Undoubtedly our view on monuments and sites has turned from the wide perspectives of townscapes (vedute) in the 18th and 19th century which embraced the entire city or area with all the specifics of their setting, skyline and surroundings to a narrow and limited view of a pre-determined section to the so-called motif which is captured in postcards and clichés.

These specific views of monuments and sites must be searched for as one would through the lens of a camera, consciously excluding the environment. Often hidden in the jungle of cities the architectonic highlights of the past are targets of sightseeing excursions, conserved and used as tourist attractions, only receiving a fast glimpse by the passers-by.

This partial perception has given these objects a new meaning. Thus we are contemporaries of a radical *iconological turn* confronted with:
- Fragments and puzzles of reality
- Selection and dis-embedding of historic objects
- Overlapping and disfiguring with recent structural layers
- Loss of adequate space and distance through urban compression and sprawl
- And so on…

Therefore new views are being continually created, views of aesthetic and symbolic contrast, rivalry and of randomness. The flood of new pictures means a continuing process of destruction of traditional and familiar pictures.

How long will this go on? Where are the limits?These are the key questions that need daily decision making by conservationists, preservationists, politicians and citizens. In works of art, in paintings, sculptures, literature and music we understand the concept of a finished or completed piece. This also exists in architecture, in monuments and sites which includes their setting, skylines and surroundings. To define the borderlines of intervention on the one hand and the possibilities of development on the other are the core issues of my contribution.

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Fig.1 Clear literacy of urban structure–vedute of Ursella, Merian engraving
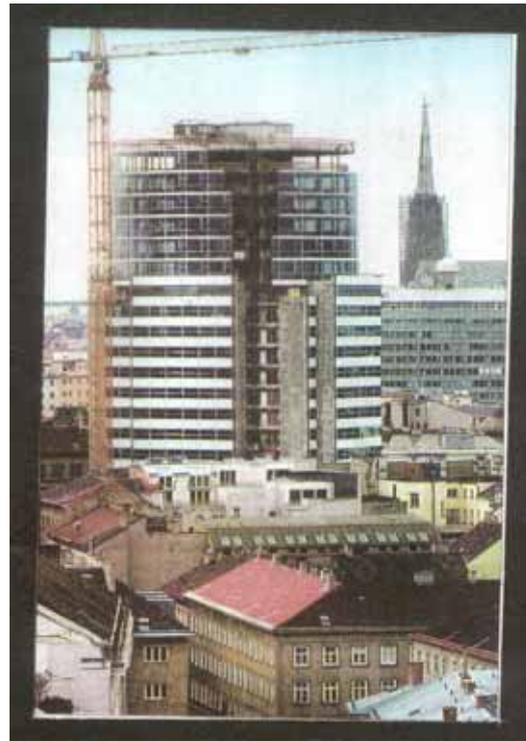

Fig.2 Vienna – competition between old and new

Fig.3 New York – monuments disappearing in the urban jungle

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Fig.4 No more competition – New York remains New York

Fig.5 Hongkong – better recognizable by the red sails ....

Fig.6 than by the skyline