

THE HYBRID IMAGE OF A HYBRID CITY

HYBRIDNÝ OBRAZ HYBRIDNÉHO MESTA

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Bratislava – a city planned and unplanned? What lies behind this conjunction of contradictory designations forming the title of the book? What dialectics led to the examination of the city through the connection of the planned with the unplanned? And is it a question of dialectics at all? What method did these studies apply in the selection of relevant objects, in defining the characteristic traits of urban organisation, or even in the visualisation as photographs, maps and models?

Even at first glance, the text of the publication informs us that we cannot sufficiently approach the character of the methods of these research approaches simply through mere references to dialectic synthesis of contradictions. Linking the planned to the unplanned becomes more concrete through accepting a methodology that openly acknowledges its hybrid character. In the introductory remarks, the authors themselves state that their approach is the outcome of a hybrid combining of “the methods of architectonic, urbanistic and architectural-historical qualitative research and the visualisation technologies of architecture and planning” (p. 18). Further in the text, we encounter the justification for this hybridity. In expressing the aim of the entire project, there appears – tellingly – another conjunction of contradictory designation: “Quite literally, it implied making invisible history visible, connecting local manifestations across history, revealing their mutual ties and their links to city – wide tendencies to make their correlation evident and understandable. As became clear, the connection of historiography and technical-engineering disciplines like architecture and urban planning, along with their digital visualisation methods, made it possible to reveal otherwise unobservable laws and opened the possibility for new and more complex conceptualisation of the problems in the history of urban planning and construction.” (p. 22). Interweaving methodological approaches serves here to represent what emerges from

the invisible background into the visible reality of built urban ensembles. For history to make itself visible, it was necessary for the historian to become an engineer, yet able to switch back into history right at the point of arranging the projects in chronological succession.

This hybridisation of methods, running across traditional fields and disciplines, recalls the admission made by Bruno Latour in his *We Have Never Been Modern* (1997) in rejecting the alternative that placed the representatives of the human and social sciences, at the end of the 20th century, in front of the choice between the modern and postmodern. In Latour’s words: “Hybrids ourselves, installed lopsidedly within scientific institutions, half engineers and half philosophers, ‘tiers instruits’ without having sought the role, we have chosen to follow the imbroglions wherever they take us. To shuttle back and forth, we rely on the notion of translation, or network. More supple than the notion of system, more historical than the notion of structure, more empirical than the notion of complexity, the idea of network is the Ariadne’s thread of these interwoven stories.” Indeed, even in the investigation of the network that spreads across the territory of Bratislava it was necessary for the investigators to become themselves half historian, half engineer to be able to follow the threads in which the twisting paths of history intersect with the geometric lines of architectonic and urban projects or proposals. Hence there appear in the field of vision alongside built structures the historical events that influenced the contours of the regulatory plans to diverge from the original trajectory, grow obscure, or even vanish entirely. Hence mutations made their way into the history of planning urban ensembles. Hence even in outlining the subject of study, the planning documents integrated themselves into the history of unplanned processes so that, together, they shaped the city, made visible its invisible elements, and made present its absent forms.

Unquestionably, a major contribution to the remarkable results that this authorial team achieved in teasing out the threads of interwoven histories was their use, in approaching the city, of the ideas of the Catalan architect and urban planner Ignasi Solà-Morales. As soon becomes evident, they jointly draw upon his conception of the cultural categories that capture the relationships between architecture and contemporary urban reality. The invocation of five of Solà-Morales's categories (mutation, flows, habitation, container, and *terrain vague*) helped them to identify, conceptually and visually, the urban situations in the territory of Bratislava and organise them into a typology consisting of twelve basic types. In the first type, titled "From Linear Street to Complex Urban Space", they apply the idea of urban mutation to capture the changes in Obchodná ulica (though warning that in contrast to Solà-Morales, their sense of urban mutation has no negative connotations); in the second, through the prism of the "container" and *terrain vague* categories we see the locality of Kamenné námestie transforming from periphery into new city centre... And then with the final type (From Rental Tenement to Mass Housing), the category of "habitation" introduces us to the processes of housing construction.

There is not enough space for a detailed presentation of the results provided through this application of the five categories in individual typologies of urban situations. Of course, we could try to look more closely at selected instances, yet I would prefer to concentrate on a single particularity evident throughout the breadth of these studies and significantly marking their outcomes. What I have in mind is the connection of two approaches to the city that frequently part ways and, in certain interpretations, are even regarded as irreconcilable. The French philosopher, essayist, and trenchant observer of urban processes Olivier Mongin expressed the opposition between these approaches as the opposition of two languages, two discourses: "As for the city, it immediately offers us two contradictory languages. At least from the outset, it appears that on one side is the language of the writer and poet, and on the other the discourse of the urbanist". Paris's streets, squares, and quarters were perceived in one way by literary author Raymond Queneau, in another by architect Le Corbusier. Possibly a similar pairing could be found again in the case of a city like Bratislava. Yet Mongin does not reduce the

opposition to the level of two discourses, the authorial and the architectonic, which for him only make more evident the basic opposition of the two views of the city: while the literary author describes the city from without, the architect or urbanist describes it from within, yet at a distance and from above. In opposition, Mongin strives to defend and develop and approach emerging from the urban experience itself, where that of the exterior is inseparable from the interior. And precisely this synthetic procedure best matches the reality of the city itself: the city, in his view, oscillates between science and phenomenology, between objective knowledge and narrative, between "city-object" and "city-subject". In the conception of Solà-Morales, a similar aim manifests itself strongly through reflecting the phenomenological standpoint of bringing the urban plan to urban reality and using the wider theoretical reflection of the city to capture the attitudes and actions of its users.

With great delight, we find that the present work on the shifts and diversions in planning Bratislava aligns itself with the ideas of the Catalan urbanist through assuming his categorical system in the spirit of the urbanism that connects the objectivising description of the city-space with the traits of its anthropological and phenomenological qualities, in short, what the city has brought (and still brings) to its residents. In this way, for instance, the category of *terrain vague* (used alongside the category of "container" for Kamenné námestie) is defined not only by its emptiness, unproductivity or uncertain future but equally as an opportunity for the confrontation on this site of the past and the present, as well as one of the last urban "fortresses" where it is possible to realise the freedom of the individual or a small group" (p. 209).

This theoretical context casts new light on the documents from the history of the planning of the city. We become aware, from this perspective, of the full extent of the relativisation of the contradiction through which the proponents of modern urban forms strove to express their rejection of earlier plans, regulations, and projects. And we find that it loosens the boundaries intended to mark the lines of tectonic breakpoints, gaps, radical discontinuities, and the shifts toward a new paradigm.

In the declarations where the representatives of a rising architectural and urbanist modernity formulated their demands to relieve Bratislava, now in independent Czechoslovakia,

of its character of a provincial town, the promotion of new planning methods was verbally interlinked with a vehement refusal of the traditional ones, especially those derived from the city plan prepared by Antal Palóczy under Austro-Hungarian rule. Despite this, the ideas of this Budapest-based architect and planner, the creator of the ambitious guidelines for the regulation and development of the city (never officially approved in entirety), emerge again and again, not only in the regulatory studies from the inter-war years but much later, indeed still today. As we are reminded again and again in reading this monograph, it is no exaggeration to say that we find them in all significant urban plans before and after World War II. Reading that every one of Bratislava's bridges stands at a point where Palóczy proposed them in his plan, that we can find within the same plan the future outline of the urban ring-roads, routing of rail lines and positioning of rail stations, that he indicated the future placement of university complexes and managed (after decades of argument) to implement his proposal for the preservation of Bratislava Castle, we arrive at the conclusion: "In the plan of Antal Palóczy, we can clearly identify the prefiguration of several actions that, in the course of the 20th century, would significantly influence the urban design of Bratislava. As such, the Palóczy regulatory plan could be regarded [...] not only as initiatory but even idea-shaping in its introduction of modern city planning. What is unusual in this is, though, that the later preparers of regulatory or land-use plans generally made no reference to the original blueprint documentation or even the written texts of Palóczy himself" (p. 90). Indeed, this finding is striking. And no less striking, for me at least, is how in the following sections of the monograph the references to the Palóczy plan keep reappearing, yet not reduced to mere mentions of an unjustly forgotten precursor – instead, entering into the analysis where, in the open field of the engagement on various sides from social, demographic and economic actors with their often-imperious demands for shaping the urban space, they reveal the continuities, constants and invariants of planning.

The unintentional continuity displayed by the presence of Palóczy's ideas in later plans is characterised in the text as an indication of the "natural vitality and resilience of the urban structure, which by itself guides the planners to the solutions that are for it the most natural" (p. 89). We should understand

this reference to the natural in its connection to the vitality and resilience of a specific urban structure – absolutely not as an attempt at the naturalising of the urban. Drawing attention to the terrain morphology and natural qualities can be found in the studies of individual urban situations, but always as a supplement to the reflection on their historical development. If in this context, the persistence of certain ideas and tendencies assumes the form of naturally recurring solutions to problems in urban planning, it is more because they have become an inseparable part of the perception of urban reality. In what the perception of buildings, houses, or entire neighbourhoods of the city offers, in how its spaces are used in the daily practice of the inhabitants, in this immediate reality – there is an ever-present reference to the past. Together with the present, we perceive in the city its past, yet not the monumental past of great deeds, events, or figures, but more the recollection of the never-realised projects and unfulfilled attempts at rebuilding.

The present monograph about Bratislava reflects this reality, documenting it and giving theoretical explanation. In the examples of all investigated urban situations (with one exception), it confirms the thesis that Bratislava is a city of incomplete plans, a city where the process of planning "took place with interruptions and discontinuities" (p. 33). Continuity in discontinuity – yet another pair of oppositions coming together in the findings of these studies. Perhaps it would not be too far removed from the intentions of the authorial team if I were to add to these contradictions one further instance: this being the addition to the uncovered inability to complete the project a resolution to continue and try once again in new conditions to realise the plans that so often remained among immaterial ideas.

Bratislava has long needed such a book. It is my belief that the city will accept its contention from which we learn that about all that remains incomplete in this city in its buildings and planning. And I believe that it will also recognise the exceptionally well-prepared visual component, serving neither for the transmission of historic legacies or the propagation of shining visions of modern architecture. And no less, I express the hope that the published monograph is not the culmination of the investigation itself: so many other urban situations and so many other theoretical challenges remain to be addressed.