Introduction to the exhibition

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Introduction

The enthusiastic response to exhibit projects within the four themes of the Biennial underlines the broad interest in spatial planning at the local level throughout Europe.

The selection of exhibited projects however, should not be regarded as an average of European local planning activities for at least two reasons. Not only does the theme 'cultures of cities' focus on a specialized subject but the submitting municipalities are not necessarily a representative group, being characterised as cities that are proud of their achievements and eager to show their results to European colleagues.

It should also be clearly recognized that the exhibition is not able to present a complete overview of European urban planning activities. The reason is that the focus here, is on physical town planning activities which can easily be exhibited by plans, maps, photos, etc. Although social and economic aspects of sustainable urban development are the starting points of many of the projects, those aspects are more difficult to visualise than physical developments.

In general, the Biennial demonstrates the great extent of urban planning activities throughout the European countries. Almost everywhere, the spatial development of the town is gaining (public) attention and (political) priority. Many municipalities organize substantial activities towards meeting with the population and other interest groups, in order to prepare ideas, design plans, organise support, negotiate implementation etc. It seems that whatever term is used for spatial development at the local level – "town planning", "urban development", "urban design" or just "planning" – these activities directed at the city's future physical quality attract a lot of public interest from local society.

A second general remark is that there are fundamental similarities in the focus of urban development policies within European cities. At first glance, a great variety can be attributed to revitalising derelict urban areas, improving the quality of public space, brown field development, reducing the barrier effect of infrastructure, enhancing spatial cohesion, providing new functions for historic constructions and improving accessibility. But all of these planning activities concern the transformation of existing situations. This common denominator is

reflected in the spatial policy objectives aimed at revitalising and improving the city itself, at fighting sub urbanisation, urban sprawl and unnecessary land take.

The relation to the theme of the Fourth Biennial of Towns and Town Planners is that culture, in the broad sense of the term, is important in determining the quality of spatial plans and the way in which urban problems are solved.

In this respect the tension between new projects and the existing local context is part of the discussion everywhere.

Two developments illustrate this point. First of all, there are demographic developments taking place in every locality independent and regardless of physical projects. Immigration, for example, is perceived in many localities as an overwhelming threat, posing the question: "what happens to our culture if we become a minority?" Another issue, "what kind of culture will result from the influence of commercial global forces?" is also discernible at the local level.

So, a central question concerns what will become of local cultural identity in the future when confronted with modern developments such as globalisation. If we take the projects of this exhibition under consideration, the impression is that local culture and identity will profit in a positive way.

Local culture

Development is perceived by many as a threat: changes bring uncertainty about what will result. The existing local culture is seen as an identity that is at stake.

The fact is that the existing situation, culturally as well as physically, is the result of developments in the past which have carved their traces on localities according to circumstances of time and place. The result of historic development is often indeed a large variety of local cultural differences, regional distinctions and national characteristics. Sometimes Europe's most striking characteristic has been described as its large variety.

If we acknowledge that local culture itself reflects a historic mix of different backgrounds during many centuries, then its cultural identity, which has sometimes been referred to as something pure, is nothing more than a local mixture or blend of other cultures.

This point of view is illustrated in the exhibition. Luxembourg, for example, describes the cultural quality of its 1000-year-old city as a mix of German and French cultures. Salerno, Italy derives parts of its pride from an Arabic Normandic monument and is presently employing the Catalan town planner Bohigas to help determine its future. It appears that when local culture is not regarded as static but is considered in a more dynamic way, the future may be addressed more positively, not as a threat for local culture.

Local identity

The social aspects of local identity can hardly be distinguished from the above-described cultural aspects. Nevertheless it may be instructive to be more explicit about demographic aspects, especially immigration. Large numbers of immigrants from North Africa, Middle East and other parts of the world are presently living in the neighbourhoods of European cities. As a result, different foreign behaviour, languages, dress codes, religious activities, gastronomy are practised in cities throughout Europe. Some people fear that their identity, values and other cultural aspects will not survive. It is not easy for persons who fear loss of identity, to trust the outcomes of this confrontation. They deal with the current quality of life and are not interested in long term effects. But for planners, dealing also with long-term effects, these demographic developments affecting the identity of citizens should also be regarded as challenging opportunities. As in the past, culture has generally resulted from a variety of foreign influences. Migrating groups delivered those influences. In hindsight, they enriched the local identities. The USA, for example, owes much of its national strength to former immigration. The Netherlands' population today is also the result of historic migrations: westward migrating tribes during the beginning of our history, northward migration of Portuguese and Belgium Jews and later Huguenots from France in the 16th and 17th century, immigrants from Indonesia and the Caribbean and nowadays from Morocco and Turkey. A case in point is that the Dutch Golden Age developed after the 16th-17th century immigration flows.

The German project Soziale Stadt explicitly addresses the social aspects of housing and social inclusion. An important question for urban policy is whether to aim towards the target of a melting pot or that of kaleidoscopic differentiation. Although it is understandable that part of the population fears loss of identity, the influence of newcomers should be regarded as a challenge in a dynamic urban developmental process.

Global forces

Global commercial forces and technological developments are also influencing the cultures of cities. Sometimes globalisation is referred to as Americanisation. This positions the discussion as a rivalry between cultures. The large power of international commercial organisation is noticeable at the local level. The brands of American or Japanese products are loudly advertised. Mega projects such as shopping malls, airport cities, high-speed train stations are expressions of global forces, maybe of a global culture.

In the exhibition, the ambitious plans of the German city of Wolfsburg is a strong example of a city centre of a middle-sized town dominated by leisure and retail

organised around the Volkswagen brand. Careful modern design of the central area is an enormous impulse for the culture and the identity of Wolfsburg.

At the same time but on a smaller scale, the factory-outlet centre of Lelystad in The Netherlands designed as a 17th century construction, may be regarded as kitsch. It is implemented to support almost any kind of commercial enterprise.

A third aspect of the global forces is technological development. In Torino, Apeldoorn and Novara, worn-out infrastructure has been replaced and accessibility is organised in new forms. The railroad track through the centre of Torino and the canal through Apeldoorn were important parts of their local identities for extensive periods. We tend to forget that their construction in the 19th century might then have been regarded as undesirable expressions of global forces, because of their supposed negative effect on the existing local identity at that time.

These considerations may lead to the conclusion that globalisation has always affected local identities. Local interpretations of global forces have always been implemented and have resulted in what now is perceived by some as 'pure identities'. 'Globalisation' is not new at all.

Overview

The exhibitions show us some of the local varieties of European culture. Many of the municipalities place their projects in a historic context. This enhances the awareness of continuous developments in which many of the actual hot items of urban political discussions also appear to be continuous.

Spatial development has always been triggered by demographic developments as well as global and technological forces and presumably will always be so. Nevertheless, local politicians and town planners are carefully looking at what is happening and how developments can be influenced in such a way that the resulting quality is optimal.

Sustainable development is a priority almost everywhere and serious attempts are being undertaken to find a balance between socio-economic aspects, ecological aspects and spatial development. Not every attempt is successful, but as long as local politicians and planners are taking the interests of coming generations into careful consideration, then lasting quality is more probable.

The exhibition illustrates that when spatial development at the local level is regarded as a continual dynamic process, then influences from immigration and globalisation may result in yet unknown, new cultures and new identities.