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By the way, what urbanism really is?

By the way, what urbanism really is? *Clovis Ultramari*

By discussing urbanism and urban planning, it outlines similarities and differences between these concepts and the fact that they are most of the times indistinctly used. The article is organized according to two main hypotheses. Firstly, a conceptual distinction between them according to the distance urbanism takes from art and architecture (the closer they are the further urbanism is from urban planning). Secondly, an understanding of city problems and so urban planning and urbanism's priorities according to time. This article started with the certainty that urbanism would be strongly linked to physical intervention, altering or building cities with proposals and works of sanitation, transportation, public and private spaces. In some moments of the discussion, this author was led to accept that there were other meanings for urbanism, going in directions that seem to be closer to the concept of urban planning. Urbanism still carries an antagonism between a pretentious belief that societal changes may be generated by the design of the urban settlement and a belief that these changes result from dialectics in the very same society. Along this article, author tends to accept the idea that the set of characteristics that constitute the concept of urbanism is fond of keeping the first utopian approach; urban planning would keep the second one. Urban planning is most of the time presented as the act of planning (master plans and land use laws, for example) and urbanism as the act of intervening physically, building, enlarging an area to be occupied, recycling or revitalizing. In the case of

urban planning, the required professional has many abilities; in the case of the urbanism, the professional valued is the architect, supported by engineering professionals. Criticism to this approach is discussed in the article, too. Urbanism was created out of a problem: of a space with facts and transformations felt as negative, unknown and happening at an equally unknown speed. It explains the pessimistic inheritance urbanism carries sometimes expressed by the search of solutions outside the city itself. But such pessimism does not really persist for ever; quite the contrary, it is frequently substituted by optimism, presumption and renewed pessimism. The misogyny that characterizes urbanism originates in the way its object, the city, sees itself. If seen this way, the object of urbanism sometimes believes itself capable of solution, sometimes sees itself as the very main problem of the world, sometimes as the most adequate space for the development of history. It is, though, evident that urbanism currently presents itself as a science concerned with a phenomenon complex in its essence and understanding, and whose consequences are not restricted to, and thus cannot be solved, solely in its concrete characteristics. Urbanism, or the science of the city, advances from a scientific marginal position and even from a limited understanding of its object to an aggregator of different fields of knowledge. In this enlargement of responsibilities, the concept until then used by urbanism in its stricto sensu proved not sufficient any more. The concept was forced to enlarge itself, not to be limited to actions with immediate results but to be conscious of the more complex domain. In this transformation towards

totality it may need to be renamed. Urban planning would be a more appropriate concept for these new demands. Urbanism appeared as a science capable of writing critiques on and proposing solutions to urban spaces, but also making clear a concern with the city in terms of built space to be created, corrected, or redone. Classifying, naming and conceptualizing things are risky tasks. Either it is necessary to reinforce the need to differentiate urban planning from urbanism or simply indicate the existence of two kinds of urbanism. In both cases the leitmotif of the differentiation is the priority given to physical intervention versus the priority given to a previous and more comprehensive approach to the urban object by means of plans. In both cases, connectivity with architecture and art is at stake. From this persistence of original characteristics two concerns arise in terms of urbanism's pretensions. The first is a belief in societal changes triggered by the architect's drawing board. The second concern is about the risk of urbanism, by enlarging the bases of its knowledge and by considering social and economical factors in its proposals, to believe itself capable to alter society. Such concerns may suggest the persistence of a prophetic mission in urbanism. By adopting the first axiom, we can understand the characterization of urbanism by Choay (1965) as 'heavy with ambiguity'. A science defined by the belief of being able to solve urban problems through its technique and by a pretension to propose an ideal city. While urbanism remains less multidisciplinary and historically concerned with the design that the city may assume, urban planning is

concerned with the conflicts that this use and occupation mandatorily generate. While the former survives in its objectives and responsibilities in a more mono-disciplinary way, the latter shelters innumerable other sciences and interests. The difference between one and the other does not mean that the urbanism may exist without a planning, without counting on a prior moment in which one plans and a moment in which one executes what has been planned. Actually, it does not seem plausible to imagine an urban work, an intervention project, without planning it. But it also seems plausible that one does not plan something that one does not believe can really happen. So far, one can detect three ways of differentiating urbanism from urban planning. The first is to consider the latter as an enlarged concept, dealing with research, sectorial plans, land use control, and the provision of basic services and infrastructures (education, health, public safety, water, sewer, paving, transportation). The second is to consider urban planning as a science responsible for tasks that take place before those concerned to urbanism (research, establishment of prognosis, understanding communities desires, consideration of societal discrepancies and, finally, definition of the city one wants). The third, and opposite to the two first ones, is to take urbanism as the enlarged science, as the one that takes under its responsibilities all process, from planning to intervention. As an incongruent science, urbanism allows itself either to adopt or to refuse its original premises. Maybe it deserves to be renamed for urban planning. Despite the fact that urbanism confirmed itself as a science scared of the new

society over which it operates, suffers from incongruence when limiting its tools to simply alter the concrete, the city but not the urban. The failure of innumerable urbanistic attempts justifies a criticism that forced a more comprehensive approach, transforming urbanism into urban planning. But, we know, urbanism repeats itself in metamorphosis. Current adoption of mega architectural projects to alter cities may justify Koolhaas'assertion (1995): 'Now we are left with a world without urbanism, only architecture, ever more architecture'. If, throughout history, the so called urbanism or urban planning have different ways of implementing their ideas, the correct conceptualization of the terms discussed here would only be possible if conceived from a historical perspective. 'Currently, the practical activity of the urbanist has some characteristics it did not have in the past ... the responsibilities of the urbanist were unexpectedly enlarged' (Secchi 2005). Article's conclusion is that either the concept is ample and pretentious or the practice is reductionist.