Reading the Site: Architectural Design in the Periphery of Urban Areas

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ABSTRACT

The design of buildings located in areas that surround the central core of cities is becoming, as we approach the end of the twentieth century, one of the most critical problems for architecture and its related disciplines.

The design studio is an appropriate environment for developing strategies and tools focused on the architectural and urbanistic implications of working in peripheral areas. This has been the dominant thematic of recent design exercises developed in design studios at the University of Illinois' Study Abroad Program in Versailles. This paper presents the theoretical frame of reference and some recent examples produced in these design studios.

INTRODUCTION

The design of buildings in peripheral urban areas is, today, a relevant topic because the social and spatial problems present in urban peripheries are becoming increasingly important for architecture and urbanism.

The importance of working in peripheral areas has been also signaled by journals, which, in the last few years, have dedicated numerous essays and monographic issues to its consideration, probably because some of the most relevant architectural and urban projects and realizations of the last (lets say) ten years, have been developed in peripheral or semi-peripheral areas.[1]

The "problem" of the periphery is obviously not new; it has existed since the origin and formation of the first urban agglomerations. To concentrate design studies in those areas is not an "original idea" either. However, nowadays, it is important that we recognize the specific and particular characteristics of the periphery in the early stages of architectural education, particularly at the level of the design studio.

THE PERIPHERY

Before beginning with a discussion of pedagogical strategies, it is important to state some definitions (or tentative explanations) of *what is* the periphery. Dietmar Steiner has defined it as:

... the locations of everyday life which are not subject to urban attention and embellishment, a state in-between, between old centres and new islands, a region of non-location that remains in motion, free, contradictory, wild, and plain beautiful."[2]

In a statement somewhat related to Steiner's definition, Rem Koolhaas has explained that the periphery had little to do with the location of a building or project but more to do with a certain state of mind, a sort of conscious self-marginalization from what have been the predominant paradigms of urban-planning and "urban-minded" architecture.[3]

In general terms the peripheral areas of major cities share several characteristics. Among them we may include an increasing erosion of the traditional urban fabric, social, economic and ethnic marginalization, a lack of urban identity, and an unconsolidated spatialization. This is basically true for most cities despite their differences of size, importance, history, cultural background and origins, and geographical location. In many ways, as Eckhart Ribbeck has noted, the peripheries have a negative image, despite their function as areas of expansion and experimentation for urban planning without which no city can survive.[4]

In the course of the twentieth century the periphery emerged also as an area where the socio-urban idealizations of modern urban-planning could be realized without finding the resistance of more conservative cities. However, and especially after World War Two, the space of the periphery moved into the city, and later, or sometimes simultaneously and in a reverse movement, urban planners, architects and sociologists, critical of such urban experiments, found it appropriate —in order to resolve the problems of the periphery and the *peripheral virus* that had affected the city— that it was necessary to transmit or to transplant the genetic codes of the city to the periphery. The result was the emergence and formation of a hybrid spatial continuum that, often times, lacks both the dispersal of buildings of the former (the periphery) and the spatial cohesiveness of traditional/historical cities.

It must be noted, then, that "the periphery" is not necessarily a geographical definition for the areas that surround cities,

for in the cities themselves we find the same characteristics that affect their surroundings. This may be best exemplified by the increasing importance of re-developing industrial areas within city limits and by the emergence and popularity of loft districts, especially in the United States but also in most cities that have large underutilized industrial zones.

Expectedly, whether within the city limits or outside them, this spatial continuum is the area in which today most architectural interventions take place, an area where it is often rare to find strong or dominant spatial characteristics that may determine (or have an impact in advance) in the resolution of an architectural project. Therefore, as the cities continue to grow and the spatial characteristics of urban peripheries emerge even in small urban agglomerations, it is important that we increase the awareness of the characteristics, properties and spatial conditions of these areas at all levels of architectural education, but more significantly in teaching architectural design at the early stages of the architectural curriculum.

This has been the main concern of a number of design studios that I taught in the last few years, whether in the United States, where I invariably selected sites in marginal areas of small, yet significant towns mostly in central Illinois, or (currently) in Europe, in the context of the University of Illinois' Study Abroad Program in Versailles.

READING THE SITE

The most significant common characteristic of these studios was the importance assigned to the selection of the site, and then, the determination of implementing a close reading of the site's physical characteristics. (By site I understand of course not the actual plot and its adjacent buildings, but the area at large where the project will be developed) .

One of the objectives of this "site-reading" exercises has been to develop alternative strategies of site analysis that could provide elements to insert the project within the existing urban fabric without falling into conventional and superficial contextualism. Moreover, the exercise encourages students to develop and understand the *construction* of a contemporary critical architectural discourse. One of the exercises developed to this end consisted in a study that we called Read the Site, which, in broad terms, aims to develop a critical understanding of the physical characteristics of the environment.

The exercise consists in the study of the physical properties of the site at large in order to find, uncover, establish or generate the (often) invisible structure(s) that organize (or hold together) the site's area. This exercise is supported, however partially, by a discussion of an old text written by Roland Barthes entitled "The Structural Activity."[5]

Some fragments of Barthes' essay are particularly interesting and relevant to the study:

(The objective of a structural activity) is to reconstruct an 'object' in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning of this object. Structure is there-

fore actually a *simulacrum* of the object, but a directed, interested simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible, or if one prefers, unintelligible in the natural object.[6]

The structural activity involves two typical operations: *dissection* and *articulation*. To dissect the first object (...) is to find in it certain mobile fragments whose differential situation engenders a certain meaning. (...) Once the units are posited, structural man [sic] must discover in them or establish for them certain rules of association: this is the activity of articulation.[7]

The essay, particularly the fragments quoted above, provides a framework to read the site, dissecting it as a textual object. The process of articulation is later implemented in the design of the architectural project; however (it must be noted) this process does not necessarily follow strictly Barthesian or Structuralist *techniques* of analysis and articulation. I have used the "Read the Site" exercise in several and quite different occasions with, admittedly, varied results. However, when working in areas where a hybrid or conflicting urban structure predominates, the exercise represents a very good point of departure for considering the possible insertion of the project in the site, or in other words, to let it emerge from the site in order to potentialize (not to mimic) the site's intrinsic spatial properties.

In the last two years (1993-1995) we have concentrated the work in Paris, mostly because our students live in nearby Versailles and thus have a relatively good knowledge of the city's spatial characteristics. Moreover, Paris is a wonderful city to conduct studies focused on the periphery. On one hand, the city itself is the result of historically successive concentric rings around the city's historical central core (thus a historical sequence of peripheries); on the other hand, Paris has an expansive *banlieu* that presents all the aforementioned typical characteristics of urban peripheries. Furthermore, within the city limits there is an area (between the old city walls and tax-gates and today's *Boulevard Periferique*) where the strong spatial characteristics that make of Paris a unique city still remain, but co-exist with other (mostly

Fig. 1 The project's site along the Canal de Saint-Denis.

newer) structures, generating hybrid spaces, still rather Parisian, which, nevertheless present some characteristics typical of the periphery. Beyond the *Boulevard Periferique*, and particularly beyond the northern and southern borders, the periphery of Paris is as typical as that of any other city.

A PROJECT:
A PEDESTRIAN BRIDGE IN SAINT-DENIS

In the 1994-95 academic year we have worked in both the inner periphery of Paris, more precisely in the 13th. and 20th. *arrondisement*, where we developed projects for housing and public institutions, and in the northern city-suburb of Saint-Denis.[8]

St. Denis is in fact a perfect "peripheral" context: a historically significant town, absorbed by the unceasing expansion of Paris, traversed by highways, railroads and water canals, occupied by industries, and filled with often unconvincing social housing complexes from various periods of the last few decades. It is precisely in St.-Denis that we developed the most recent project, a junior studio five-week design exercise. The project was entitled *The Stitch, The field, The Edge*, and consisted of the design of one or more pedestrian bridge(s) across the *Canal de St.-Denis* and a related small Information Center. The site for the project comprised a large hybrid and unconsolidated area of St.-Denis.

Site and program were selected considering the construction (beginning these days) of France's Grand Stade for the 1998 Soccer World Cup, which designed by Zublena & Macary (winners of a two-stage design competition) was (still is) the subject of a major controversy in French architectural and political circles. In fact, as a result of this controversy, at the moment of beginning the project's design phase, we did not know for sure which project was going to be built, if any.

Students were asked to visit and study the site and to determine the area (or areas) of intervention. As mentioned earlier, the design process started with the development (in one or two days) of the Read the Site exercise, where students were asked to study the site's physical characteristics and to
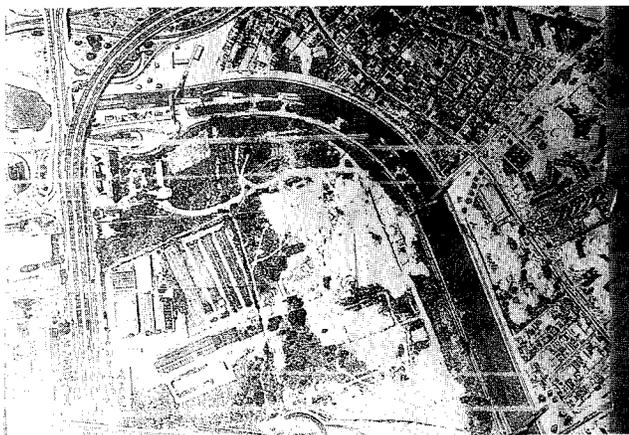

Fig. 2 Aerial view of the area of the Canal de Saint-Denis with project by John Gresko (three pedestrian bridges + re-development of pedestrian promenade along the Canal).

find, uncover or establish the invisible network that holds it together. The objective of the exercise was to provide a framework from which the students' projects would emerge as a result of their respective findings (or the structure that they had created), rather than as an arbitrary imposition to the site.

It is not my objective here to describe an example in particular, nor to make a presentation of the students' projects. However, I would like to mention that this initial study aimed to identify or determine an area of intervention, as well as to generate a strategy for inserting the project into the urban fabric, which might as well provide elements to establish principles or conceptual schematic ideas in the initial phase of the design process.

The exercise provided a *basic move* at the beginning of the process, from which the projects took their own path; however, even if sometimes they deviated from the initial study, the projects remained sensitive to the general issues that had emerged in the development of the Read the Site assignment. From then on, the projects continued the (somewhat) traditional process of design, aiming to the production of an architectural project as much developed as possible. Expectedly, regardless of the direction that the project followed and the architectural grammar that the student developed in its resolution, the projects were (in my opinion) firmly, yet critically, rooted in the site. The projects aimed to potentialize the site's (or the punctual area of intervention) specific qualities and/or characteristics, without mimicking them. For instance, they participated in reinforcing a predominant linearity, consolidating a latent spatial public promenade, an urban park, or exploiting conflicting geometries, generating always public, semi-public or transitional spaces in an area, a peripheral situation, where site-specific and public architecture has been systematically neglected.

Obviously, the projects do not resolve any of the social and cultural problems of the periphery. This was not the objective of the exercise. However, through a design strategy that at least tries to understand (rather than impose) the socio-spatial characteristics of the site, a social and cultural transformation may emerge.

My intention here is neither to reach to any *definite conclusion*, nor to claim any originality to the process. Rather, my objective is to present what I think is an imperative necessity in architectural design studios (the consideration of the periphery as probably the most crucial area of intervention that architects —our students— face today and will continue to face in the forthcoming decades), and to present what I think may be an appropriate, however not exclusive, strategy for working in those areas, such as a careful and critical close-reading of the site as a tool for developing a socially and culturally involved critical architecture.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, the German journal *Daidalos*, issue # 50, December 1993. Among the most important contributions of the architecture and urbanism of the periphery we may include Rem Koolhaas' *Euralille* complex, his own architectural contri-
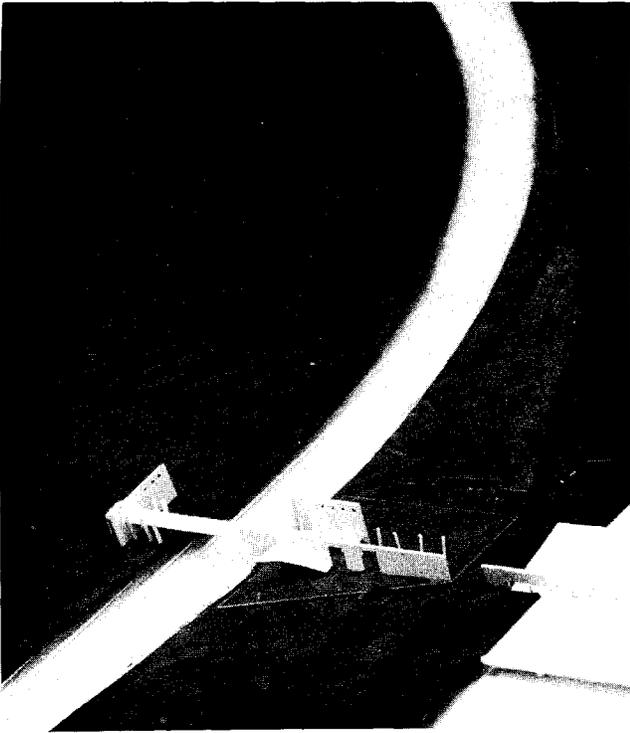
Fig. 4 Parking/Market transformable structure, Information Center and Pedestrian Bridge. Project by Kyo-Jin.

bution to the complex, the Lille *Congrexpo*, Miralles-Pinós' Civic Center in Hostalets, near Barcelona, and the work of Dominique Perrault in Paris, most notably his *Hotel Industriel* and *La Grande Bibliothèque*.

2 Dietmar Steiner, "Perhaps a Biography of the Periphery," in *Daidalos* # 50, December 1993, pages 82-87.

3 "Une Rationalisme Paradoxal: Entretien avec Rem Koolhaas," François Chaslin interviews Rem Koolhaas, in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'Hui* # 280, April 1992, pages 162-169.

4 Eckhart Ribbeck, "The Peripheries as Laboratory," in *Daidalos* # 50 December 1993, December 1993, pages 106-115.

5 Roland Barthes, "The Structuralist Activity," in *Essais Critiques*, Editions de Seuil, Paris, 1964 (English translation published in *Partisan Review*, Winter, 1967, vol. XXXIV, #1, pages 82-88). It should be noted, however, that is not my purpose to orient (or impose) a Structuralist approach to site analysis in particular, and even less to architecture in general. However, Barthes' text is useful to provide some initial orientation to the students.

6 Roland Barthes, op. cit.

7 Roland Barthes, op. cit.

8 From a historical point of view, Saint-Denis is not a suburb but a city in its own right. Its well-known Basilica is a relevant example of Gothic architecture, and it was the place where France's kings where crowned in the middle-age as well as where they are buried. However, from an urbanistic/technical point of view, Saint-Denis has been absorbed by the expansion of Paris' suburban web; trapped between Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport and the city, it houses numerous industrial structures and social housing developments that, in the course of the twentieth century, emerged around Paris' city limits.