Motopia

What Tony Garnier tried, admirable as it is, never has been put into praxis. Even if it had been, the question remains if it would have worked; because one can either rely on progress via continuous production and on growth, or on a closed cosmos – which his world was, at least in its social terms. But perhaps this does not have to remain a contradiction. Perhaps we succeed in combining these contradictory forces of a closed cosmos vs. growth and progress, even more so since we have realized some devastating results of the latter – the point in history where Motopia enters the scene, at the beginning of the 1960s, according to its creator a point where humans have alienated from nature and now live in two worlds, a biological and a mechanical one after having succeeded to lift themselves, with the help of mathematical sciences, above their former animal state. At the same time, humans still remain to be animals, bound to their physical existence, as Jellicoe, the creator of Motopia, states.

This generates conflicts and frictions, and it raises an old topic anew: what could be an ideal surrounding under these circumstances, in our terms, an ideal space suited to this new human condition? Motopia tries to answer this, as does the world to follow afterwards, Babel IID. We need some solutions because we have been overwhelmed by the forces of a technical civilization, as Jellicoe says. According to him, this holds particularly valid for the car, by its essence, a technical instrument that allows the human being to perform something very unnatural: namely to propel it at will to distances and at speeds that certainly have never been nature's intention. All the historically grown cities had one thing in common: They were planned for pedestrians and horse-drawn vehicles, and even the railways were confined within certain limits. The human being had time to adapt itself to that new instrument, the car, but not its surroundings.

Contexts of Construction

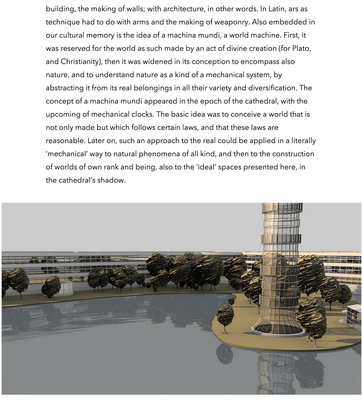
What applies to the car applies to modern human surroundings in general. Man, says Jellicoe, today finds himself bewildered by circumstances which he alone has created, and by his own free will. For a pedestrian in its wider sense, a naturally moving human being, for the most time in human history, humans remained subsidiary to their natural environment. Feeling, rather than intellect, has created a deep faith in a world beyond the visual world, he says, expressed inter alias in the cathedrals. At the same time, the outlook towards nature was that of a conqueror. A symbol of this was the ordering and regimenting of nature into classical and geometric shape, as expressed, for instance, in the formal layouts of the Renaissance or in Baroque constructions.

As regards these ideas, there seems to exist a dichotomy deeply embedded in a Western culture: in its Greek terms, between physis and nomos, the naturally given and grown (also historically) and the human-made law, the geometries of order imposed. In his attempt to draw a human history of nature (as he calls it), Moscovici summarizes that type of world building as follows: the human creations come equivalent to the creation of a new nature, that of the constructed; at least in its occidental mode. Expressed in Christian terms of world understanding, it is about a myth of a second creation – performed by humans, not by God.

'Culture' stems from cultura, from colere, to actively take care and to meliorate something naturally given: to remove original nature, and to tame the remainder. Colere relates to colonia, colony, to first occupy and then settle on a territory. Compared to other cultures, so a recent summary, in the Occident, nature has been constructed as a peculiar ontological dispositive which serves as a base for the cosmogenesis of modernity. It is not about a distinct objectivity of 'nature', but about a "naturalistic and exotic cosmology", even more so as not only outer nature has to be tamed, but also the inner nature of the human being as it appears in its 'natural' uncivilized form.

The first major step that has been taken by Western civilization with regard to a modelling of human environments, and of city and country alike, says Jellicoe, was a separation of geometry and biology. Geometry, he says, was at the beginning of all: "In the beginning, and out of chaos, geometry preceded biology as a phenomenon of the universe." According to him it was the relation between geometry and technique that liberated humans, also from natural bonds. This is the new condition, the new conditio humana applying to us, and referring to the old connection between art and technique, ars and techne; it is a context of the mechanical arts.

From our very basic occidental understanding, technique itself is an activity adverse to nature, long before the advent of cars. According to Aristotle, technique is exactly what nature is not able to deliver. Mechanics originally meant mechane, a term used for all kinds of machines, first of warfare, then for means to tame natural forces (irrigation channels and the like) and, with building, the making of walls; with architecture, in other words. In Latin, ars as technique had to do with arms and the making of weaponry. Also embedded in our cultural memory is the idea of a machina mundi, a world machine. First, it was reserved for the world as such made by an act of divine creation (for Plato, and Christianity), then it was widened in its conception to encompass also nature, and to understand nature as a kind of a mechanical system, by abstracting it from its real belongings in all their variety and diversification. The concept of a machina mundi appeared in the epoch of the cathedral, with the upcoming of mechanical clocks. The basic idea was to conceive a world that is not only made but which follows certain laws, and that these laws are reasonable. Later on, such an approach to the real could be applied in a literally 'mechanical' way to natural phenomena of all kind, and then to the construction of worlds of own rank and being, also to the 'ideal' spaces presented here, in the cathedral's shadow.

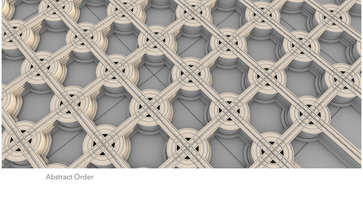


Utopian Ventures

If nature and culture are opposites, then there must be a solution; because we neither can get back, having irreversibly lost our original 'natural' state, nor can we keep on with our alienation. In line with the myths of progress and a second paradise, but first of all driven by our technical-scientific praxis and its progresses, there is only one direction left: the future. That we will succeed, with the help of technique, to create a new environment adapted to the new naturalness of the human being: to be not only a cultural, but a technical animal. The hope is that human nature shall unfold inside these newly built spaces of culture, and that it might be possible to create spaces which reconcile nature and culture, even if this might sound utopian.

Both in its anthropological and architectural dimension, the utopian ideal space is an absolute space. There must exist the possibility of an absolute architecture, says Pier Vittorio Aureli, reviving the issue. In this respect, the term absolute is meant not in its conventional sense of 'purity', he says, but in its original Latin meaning as something that is "resolutely itself after being 'separated' from its other." This is the point of an ideal space as a utopian construction. Having started with the cathedral in our exhibition, it is a characteristic feature common to those spaces: an Interior, the ideal space in question, is separated from an Exterior, a proverbial rest of the world. It is the topic of the cosmic closure that reappears, belonging to the utopian construction of 'ideal' spaces.

The most consequent way to do so is to construct such spaces in a consequently rational and simple way, more geometrico, according to the laws of geometry. This means they are clearly structured, follow always the same logic applied, are thus are easily understandable and of an absolute clearness. To summarize, for our occidental culture, there were two ideal conceptions: the idea of an organization as a kind of mechanism, a machine; and the Christian idea of a city of supreme reason. The Christian tradition with its guiding idea of "a single, all-powerful but disembodied God who had a safe distance from human desires", says Madanipour, had paved the way for the idea of a city of supreme reason, which was essentially a disembodied city, the heritage of a Heavenly Jerusalem. It was an 'abstract' space and, out of this alone, one which is utopian in a literal sense, place-less; since disembodied, a construction abstracted from the individual, inner-worldly real circumstances.



Abstract Order