

Leonardo Ricci

An Architect Facing the Problems of a City (1952)

Unpublished typescript of a lecture addressed to the University of Southern California Department of Philosophy. In the lecture Ricci firstly reasons on the way towns were designed in the past, on the variables influencing their change in time, drawing a distinction between European and American cities. He secondly suggests possible factors to be analyzed to design contemporary cities. The document belongs to the holdings kept in Casa Studio Ricci.

Ladies and gentlemen. Unfortunately, my knowledge of the English language is such that I must read my lecture instead of speaking directly to you as is my custom. The subject of my lecture is: an architect confronted by the problem of a town. I am not a lecturer but only a friend speaking to other friends. This is my position in life when I talk to my students as well as when I address a larger group.

I do not believe that a man can have such a universal knowledge as to be a dictator of thought. I can only say I am a man; I live; I have made some experiences. These are my opinions. But I say these opinions sincerely, with all my heart, without fear, because we live in a moment when each man has to take his personal position and responsibility. I am an architect, but above all a human being. Like many other men, architects and non-architects, I have been asking myself what the city of the future will be; or better, which will be the city best capable to satisfy the exigencies of a modern man.



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Modern man. What does this mean? What does modern mean? What is hidden behind this word? Does it mean perhaps a man who flies to the stratosphere, bombards the atom, will eventually reach the moon, and so on? Yes, but the modern man also is: a man who lived between the last two world wars, has seen falling down one after the other the great myths of the past, is born at the end of a civilization and the beginning of another. A man who finds himself in a kind of vacuum, ready to look at the facts straightly without mystifying himself nor trying to deceive others; to find out whether both as an individual or part of a collectivity he can justify his life and live, or to the contrary only make the efforts of surviving, as a being fallen by absurdity into a transition time and pushed around by events larger and stronger than himself. Lastly, a modern man is one tired of being alone, trying to break this circle of solitude, to establish new contacts with others, outside all conventions, dogmas and false morals of the old and newer pasts; one who does not feel like being a god, a superhuman, nor a slave, but only one who tries simply to live in peace with others.

Now, what does it mean, a town? I think that any person, looking at a town plan, can understand the life of its inhabitants. Because a town is the exact mirror of the life lived by its people. It is not my intention to give you a historical lecture. For this you have your teachers and your books. I wish to make only some observations.

When carefully observing the plan of an old town, be it Indian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Mediaeval and so on, if we have imagination we see little by little the paper reach the third dimension. Buildings take their weight, men walk in the streets, in the squares, rest in their homes, go to church, to work, and so on. If we take the plans of an old town chronologically, we can also understand the gradual transformation from the early man to the man of today. We can understand that always in history the towns were an organism and not an aggregate of parts; because their life was one of an organism and there was a hierarchy within the parts: we can see in each period the predominance of some power, the religious power or the political power, or the social power, and within each period we can see the dominant power of that period expressing itself in the most important buildings as well as in the smallest details such as a fountain, a little statue or what you prefer. When we reach the twentieth century we can see immediately the destruction of this organism: an amorphous chaos of houses, blocks crossing each other in and out of the old cities, and practically we create from order disorder.

Certainly, certainly, there are many reasons. We know them all: sudden increase in the population of a city, intervention of the machine, the sudden changes of functions, and so on. Personally I think that beyond these reasons another more radical and deeper exists: We, the modern men, have not yet been able to find and express what we desire to be our individual and collective life. Is this a negative observation? I do not think so. It is only a dry and cold observation we must all make if we honestly wish to begin a new civilization and consequently to build the new town.

Allow me to be for the time being a European. Afterwards, I will try to enter the shoes of an American. European towns are wonderful. Italian towns are wonderful. This is not a nationalistic point. When I walk through Rome, Paris, Florence, Venice, and so on, I feel so happy at times, to see, to observe, their cathedrals, buildings, gardens, fountains. This is not only in large cities, but also in small towns: a small artisan shop is enough, a door frame, a panel of engraved marble. Are, however, these towns, good for us? Can we live there relaxed, according to our innermost feeling and desires of men of today? No. These towns are not ours. What we have accomplished is a disfiguration of the old towns. I think that they will never again be ours unless a radical transformation takes place. A transformation that our town plans, even the most idealistic and utopistic¹ ones do not even dream of. Perhaps I am a nocturnal animal who lives during the night and sleeps, when he can, during the day. This when I am in a town. But when I am in the country the opposite takes place. I sleep at night and stay up during the day. Perhaps this is a symptom that our towns are not ours. Thus I often walk during the night. I like it. I like to walk when people are asleep, and on the roads there are only a few night-walkers, taxi drivers and lovers. At night, when the fascination of the city is stronger, when we can enjoy more feelings of plastic and coloristic² beauty of buildings and material, just then I feel like a stranger in these cities because I should change my clothes³, wear some antique ones, travel on a horse carriage by the light of the torches. And thus these marvellous⁴ European cities will end up like many older ones, run over by the flow of life because they are unable to express our life. If we are not aware we shall destroy the thing that we should save, not as the mummies of the past, because mummies are no use, but as a lesson to be learned from a past civilization. A civilization that we must use as a term of comparison, in order to weigh what the men of the past have accomplished and what we are able to accomplish. At the present time I do not know a single European town which is our city or could be our city unless radical measures are taken.

And now allow me to enter your shoes. When I left for the United States I was very anxious to see American towns, not only from pictures and maps as I had done in the past. I was very curious to see New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and other cities which developed during the present or the last century. Cities born in the age of the machine, or at least after the industrial revolution, brothers and sisters of the modern inventions. I was curious to see if they were modern towns, or at least capable of a rapid and easy transformation. Let me render to you the first impression I had arriving in New York:

"I feel at ease. New York was not born from the spring of a metaphysical problem. It was born spontaneously from the life and work of men, and yet it is strangely a religious town. Eschatological, perhaps more than our European

1 Mistype: to be replaced with "utopist".

2 Mistype: to be replaced with "coloristic".

3 Mistype: to be replaced with "clothes".

4 Mistype: to be replaced with "marvellous".

cities. They say that money has created the skyscrapers. It is not true. It is something much deeper. It is something even deeper that which pushed the Italian Princes to build their towers. They are the arms and the hands of men tending towards the sky, even more than the Gothic cathedrals. In this city one works. Work here is a religion. Another observation: all is a question of relation. The European city: the church, the city hall; religious power; political power, then the rest. Here: Wall street, the office buildings. Idols the churches, idols the skyscrapers. But between the two, which is nearer to our life? Wall Street. The office buildings, skyscrapers. One must kill idols. But yours are easier to destroy than ours. They have smaller and younger roots. The wonderful town of the future without idols. Made by men for men.”

You can easily see from the first impression received from New York that I could observe at once a superiority of New York over the European cities as far as modernity of life is concerned. New York is the only town which shows its being completely the child of the bourgeois civilization after the French revolution. In this town I felt very well. Always excited and with a clear mind. But yet it is not a really modern town, and it is difficult that it will be transformed, it is too difficult to destroy the idols of steel and concrete.

Let me tell you the impression I got from Los Angeles. Although I do not know many other American cities, these are the extremes between which the others are included. Particularly because some others, such as Boston, New Orleans, and San Francisco are much more similar to the European cities. My first impression was very negative. Los Angeles is not a town. It is not a village. What is Los Angeles? It is nothing. Really nothing? Something it must be. Here was the prairie, wonderful land to cultivate. Black ground with dry grass. Under the ground, oil. Then men came. The land was divided by roads. And next to the roads tents and barracks. Then men got richer and the tents became small houses. Then they grew wealthier and the small houses got the swimming pool. The grass is cut, and there are flowers. But the houses have remained tents. Are you familiar with a soldier’s camp? They look so sad. Isn’t Los Angeles sad? I wanted to leave immediately. Then the night came. Only stars and a city filtered with light. I was in a desert made of houses. I was empty in the emptiness of the houses. But there were no idols. No churches. No monuments. No skyscrapers. This is the strength of Los Angeles. Tomorrow this town can have a face, a body, a heart. You can notice that, notwithstanding my first negative impression, I could find at last a town which really represents the present position of mankind. Indeed we, sons of problematic times, live a kind of existence, naked, so to speak, without any of the firm religious and moral supports of former ages, and we are waiting for a new, total cosmic justification of our existence.

For this reason I can sincerely say, and not paradoxically that Los Angeles is perhaps the only large town which is the present perfect mirror of our present life; a great potential force of mankind which has not yet found his general directives to solve his present problems. I am not a demagogue, “being well conscious of the disastrous consequences of demagogy in Europe, and therefore I

do not emphasize an evident superiority of Los Angeles as a standard of living. It is evident that common workers own better automobiles than wealthy people in Europe, and they have in their homes the modern comforts that only luxury homes do have in Europe. They enjoy public swimming pools, golf courses, tennis fields, at little cost. In other words, that have a standard of living superior to any of the richest and smallest European nations such as Switzerland. This fact may seem at a first glance a net progress in the solution of social problems in a democratic state. I however, as an Italian accustomed to consider not comfort by happiness the highest social purpose, do not consider this accomplishment an authentic social progress. Do we know if the poor urbanite of Naples, who after a day of hard work sings and goes fishing is happier than the North Italian of the great industrial cities, who, after having worked hard and earned considerably, does not know how to spend his money? After all I notice that in Los Angeles men are lonelier than elsewhere, and that children though stronger and better-looking than those in other parts of the world, are perhaps less spontaneous and natural. I notice that young people have cars to take to take out their girls in, but they do not know the beauty of the long walks of a European courtship; that the adults after a day of work and two hours of commuting go home to see television, without the possibilities nor the will of more profitable and deeper human contacts, that every house has the same face, that stores, factories churches all look alike, both from the viewpoint of architecture and city zoning. Perhaps, notwithstanding all your technical and mechanical advantages, this points toward a mankind more easily subject to moral and spiritual solitude, deprived of that comfort and human solidarity that can only make man if not happy, at least in peace with himself and the others.

At this point someone may ask me: Good, you have given us a picture of the general situation of towns in Europe and in America. You have told us that there is not in Europe a single town which deserves the name of modern, and that in America perhaps only Los Angeles is the town which may become more easily a modern city, even if now it is only an agglomeration of buildings. What would you then do if you had a magic wand to transform this city in accordance with your conceptions?

Unfortunately: first there is no magic wand, second, if there were one I would not be able to use it in order not to exercise a dictatorship of thought over other beings. Third, I should make a very accurate analysis of all elements which constitute life of mankind, a thing which is impossible within the limits of one lecture. Nonetheless I will try to answer in the most synthetic, honest and sincere manner possible. My experience of life has brought me to very simple conclusions. I have had the good or bad fortune of personally knowing and talking to some of the most important living men in all fields of human activities. I grant you that the first contacts were very hard for me. I considered them so important and superior to me that I behaved with great respect and timidity. I felt that they had in their hands important secrets for mankind that I could not understand. But knowing them better I soon found out that behind the mask of

power and superiority they had the same fears I had, were upset by the same problems, and in last analysis they, like me under the starlight, were only men with a heart oppressed and full of anxiety. I had then another bad or good fortune to be in a war just when I had begun to understand something. I was only twenty-two when the war started in Europe. I could witness the monstrosities and the horrors which mankind can reach in a war. I was able to read, practically in a book made of blood and death, what I had before examined only theoretically. From these two experiences I have reached very simple conclusions in which I can finally believe, on which I can found my life, build something sure also if what I may be doing is as simple as my conclusions were. But I am sure that these simple conclusions may finally create that minimum common denominator which can put the basis of a new future civilization and consequently of a new future city.

What do I believe is man?

I would like to be so objective, free of prejudice and of the influence of my cultural past, so able to exactly choose my words, to give the most precise and free definition. A definition that everyone could accept, on which everyone could build, so that in the town which could reflect and be the manifestation of the man so defined, all people could feel at ease and not strangers, not masters nor slaves but really citizens. I am not a philosopher, no my desire to give the definition of man seem gratuitous and not of my competency. But what could I do when through the exercise of my profession of architect, when making town plans, as in Italy I had the occasion to do, just then having to create streets, residential sections, industrial sections, business and cultural centers, hospital, schools, and so on. After having exhausted the logical technical problems, and the more difficult esthetical problems, I found myself faced by this last problem: what is man? How must he live? How must his city be? Thus I was forced to answer my problem for myself, because I could no longer with good conscience plan a city, which means to make men live one way or another, if certain fundamental points were not made clear to myself. Man is a terrestrial animal, living on earth without a certain knowledge of why he is born or what will he be after his death, living therefore in the mystery. He is an animal with definite biological requirements. Within himself he is driven toward a search for meaning in which he has expressed in many ways, without however reaching a precise conclusion, valid for all times. His position in the universe in dynamic and as a consequence his position on earth dynamic and temporary. He is an animal which is part of a cosmic rhythm. He is an animal destined to live not alone with associated with others. The possibility of living in harmony with others comes from the nature of such an association of men.

Man's quality of living in a mystery, whatever we may call this mystery, God, the devil, energy, the last end, evolution and so on, makes him consequently a religious being. Religiosity is understood by myself as the aptitude to keep our faculties open to a secret life outside the apparent real life, open to a reality of which what we see is only temporary demonstration and witness. This being a

religiosity in act, man has no right to express it in fixed terms, bind it in dogmas, limit and codify it.

As a practical consequence of this religiosity man has no right to oppress, nor dominate another being not knowing exactly which consequences he may bring to this other being in his terrestrial life and possibly non terrestrial life. This position must be well visible in the organism of a city. As a practical consequence of his biological requirements, the problems must limit itself to the means which can best satisfy these requirements. If men were not so proud to believe one thing and force others to believe it, creating in them a complex of inferiority and fear, if they were not ins such bad faith as to bring out disastrous consequences as in these last wars, only to defend with their swords their dogmas and principles, which they themselves do not observe. If they were only men of good will and good sense, it would not be so difficult to establish some fixed points on which all could meet. Indeed all of us know more or less what we want, and our desired and needs are not so complex as they may at first appear, because the step from the most intelligent man to the least developed is not so long. If we had reached this degree of intellectual maturity, this degree of reciprocal tolerance and understanding, if we had the courage and the constancy to apply in our lives this theoretical reality, it would not be so difficult to find an equilibrium, because in the long run man needs only: to find peace; to be able to enjoy the sky and the nature; to have a body so sounds possible, and not mined by physical or psychical sicknesses, admitting that the two can be separated; to live with a woman that he loved, to have children to continue the human species; to have something to eat and to shelter, and not much more. With a little honesty it would not therefore be so difficult to draw the basis for new towns, where to live well. This explanation of social and human nature was for me necessary because I only believe in live and no longer in all the abstractions by which, as a European and Italian, I was enslaved perhaps even more than you are. Thus I do not believe in things born from such abstractions.

Therefore, coming back to town planning, when I notice the ideal cities projected by some modern architectural genius, if you wish, who gratuitously would like to see mankind living in skyscrapers like in a beehive, or in small individual houses on highway ribbons, or in the thousand and one ways that imagination could suggest, when I notice that such plans, although made by intelligent men, conscious of certain modern problems, are so different from each other as to seem the result of completely different civilizations. I say: let us try to be more humble and simple, more human and true , because only thus can a true city be born. After all, notwithstanding the scientific progress and the greater number of comforts, we see that the house built by the most free and modern architect is not so far from the one built by Chinese and Japanese architects thousands of years ago, from the Pompeian house built three thousand years ago, and so on. This means that, although many things change in man, there exist some elements of immutable order as part of man, which can never be extirpated so long as man be man.

As a conclusion of this very hurried analysis we could examine all the old problems of the city in the past, canvass them through our recent technical and spiritual elements, and finally create an organism. It would not be difficult to canvass all the elements forming a city, old or new as they may be, churches, squares, theatres, public buildings, museums, railroad stations, airports, schools, and so on, observe them under thin new visual angle, to find out what their new manifestation might be, and with the marvellous⁵ modern techniques create organisms as good as the old ones. It would not be difficult for example to ask ourselves: must we really have a church? or should we not rather have a place where men, instead of making rites and thus separations between themselves and other men, may feel united to the other in this adventure on earth? and if such a thing as a church or its modern substitute must exist, in which position must it be in respect to the city zones? Must the theatre exist or not, and if it must exist, must it acquire a new form? something which is not the bourgeois parlor, and what place shall it take in our new city? What must be a hospital? and what is the patient? Must a hospital be something like a prison, a hotel, an apartment house? Is the patient a being who must be temporarily isolated from society or, just because in a state of temporary inferiority, treated with greater care because he needs more humanity near him? Must there still exist the old squares, like in the European towns, where children play and the old ones sit to breathe the fresh air, and the citizens and the foreigners sit at the tables of the open cafes, or must something else be born instead? And, coming to more recent constructions, how must we build railroad stations, airports, etc., and how should we be ready to give place to possible new organisms, which modern techniques may demand at any time? Which and how should be the k house of man? And how should they be related to the problems of the family, particularly when divorce is permitted? In conclusion, it would not be difficult after examining all these elements, to evaluate them, to classify them and order them organically within the new town.

This, theoretically.

Practically you may ask me: what to do? Unfortunately I will know, perhaps better than .you because Italy and Europe are countries poorer than yours and with fewer material possibilities, I will know all the obstacles that men of bad faith and short sightedness put to the execution of these projects. Difficulties that it is unnecessary to enumerate because every town planner in every country has met them in the exercise of his profession. But as I know them well I do not believe in these difficulties. Because, as in a good industrial administration, a certain program is needed to regulate a city. It means to create order in a city, and consequently economy, under any point of view. I wish you would ask me: If you were in a town, and were allowed to, how would you go about it? The question is not embarrassing.

I would do it this way: I would promote a meeting with the mayor, the local authorities, the best representatives of any field of human activity, politicians, industrialists, union chiefs, and so on, and would express myself in this way:

5 Mistype: to be replaced with "marvellous".

"I have called you not to form one of the usual bureaucratic committies⁶ where one loses time and money but only to make come concrete proposals for a plan of operation. We live in a town developed in these last times, so that the heaviness of false tradition does not oppress us. We have on the contrary many oppportunities in our favor. We have the possibility of studying together the fundamental requirements of modern man, and making our city a really modern city? Shall we get rid of our egoism end egocentrism, and get busy?"

I know the answer of the various individuals. The artists and the architects would be jumping for happiness, medical and professional people probably would be happy of this experiment, others, at the beginning, indifferent. Those to put the first objections would possibly be political men, economists and burocrats⁷. The main objections could be resumed into two. One, economical impose sibility⁸ to act in order not to increase the budget and consequently taxes. Two, impossibility to limit the individual initiatives and freedom of action. To the first objection one could answer with easy factual data. It would not be difficult to demonstrate that poor zoning calls for commuting two hours to work, with consequent tiredness and inferior output. That the expense of instalment and maintenance of streets, sewers, power lines etc. owing to the great dispersion in area, weigh heavily on the city's public budget. From a merely economical point of view, since America is a country of over-production, the use of capital for public works would allow the same rhythm of currency circulation and market absorption that other less noble economical expedients allow. In this case we would also create a public patrimony of which everyone would benefit. As far as freedom of initiative is concerned, I wish to be purposely paradoxical, because often on this word many equivoques are created. Is it freedom to walk on the street and slap somebody on the face without reason whatsoever? Is it not the same as slapping somebody on the face if I, the egoist, decide to put a chimney under the neighbour's eyes, or build a monster of ugliness that my neighbors have to see day and night? Is not freedom a symbol of order, and not of anarchy? These and other similar objections being surpassed all that is left is to start work. With the means that Los Angeles has, as it changed face completely in area and comfort during the last years, it could in an equally short time change face as far as civilization is concerned in a clear demonstration⁹ to the world of a modern and alive city.

Thank you.

6 Mistype: to be replaced with "committee".

7 Mistype: to be replaced with "bureaucrats".

8 In English this noun does not exist, but it is expected that the author would have liked to employ "impossibility".

9 Mistype: to be replaced with "demonstration".