

Fernando Távora

Architecture and Urbanism

The Lesson of Constants

The text on architectural “constants” – one of the guiding concepts of Távora’s work – is part of a series of writings about the city published in the early years of the 1950s, and therefore at the time when Távora was asked by Carlos Ramos to collaborate as a volunteer assistant in ESBAP’s teaching programme. The texts are: “Arquitectura e Urbanismo. A lição das constantes”, Lusiada, Revista ilustrada de Cultura, no. 1, November 2, 1952; “Para um Urbanismo e uma Arquitectura Portuguesa”, Comércio do Porto, May 25, 1953; March 24, 1953; December 13, 1955; March 8, 1955; “Do Porto e do seu Espaço”, Comércio do Porto, January 26, 1954; “Para a Harmonia do nosso Espaço”, Comércio do Porto, August 10, 1954.



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The phenomenon of architecture and urbanism is universal. Wherever man is, at any time and in any place, there is Architecture and Urbanism. A necessary phenomenon, inherent to man's very nature, an indispensable extension of his life, a manifestation of his existence; from this universality – the variety, the infinity of aspects, the plurality of realisations. Each physical or spiritual climate has its own solution, hence the immense panorama that consideration of the past offers our eyes and that the present itself does not hide, infinite construction methods, countless plastic subtleties, varied programmes, the strangest materials, always and everywhere the unprecedented, the different, the unexpected. No one can deny the persistence of the phenomenon: in Architecture it's the elementary hut of the savage or the refined Parthenon, in Urbanism it's the incipient cluster of buildings or the complex metropolis. Different in volume, shape, and degree of delicacy, but common because they are manifestations of a common need to organise space, realised here by a primary spirit incapable of any possible speculation, there by a specialist who integrates his work into a theoretical current or establishes a doctrine. How many changes of spirit there are between the Arab who is an architect when he pitches his tent and the Renaissance man who writes treatises on architecture! Universality of the phenomenon, permanent and endless variety in realisations. How can we not? How can we conceive of the rudeness of a popular house in Palladio's work? How can we expect an Acropolis of Athens from the hands and spirit of a primitive society?

It is the function of history to know the existence of man's manifestations and to determine the possible constants that this existence presents. It is a necessary and indispensable function that justifies any interest in knowledge of the past because of the contribution it can make to the present.

But you ask, is there anything common in the evolution of the phenomena of Architecture and Urbanism? Undoubtedly. Three aspects, three constants, seem to us to be of paramount importance: its permanent modernity, the collaborative endeavour it has always reflected, its importance as a conditioning element in human life.

The modernity of an event is measured by the relationship it maintains with the conditions in which it takes place. In terms of Architecture and Urbanism, modernity means the perfect integration of all the elements that can influence the realisation of any work, using all the means that best lead to the achievement of a certain end. Modernity manifests itself in the quality and accuracy of the relationship between the work and life. If the conditions are different, the solutions will be different – but the nature of the relationship must be the same. The great works of architecture and urbanism have always been modern insofar as they translated their surroundings exactly, i.e. according to a perfect relationship. There is one great truth common to all these works – their modernity. Their formal aspects are a direct consequence of the variety of environments, of conditions of all kinds, but they themselves, in their diversity, allow for the deduction of that constant called modernity.

St Mark's Square in Venice is a typical example of formal diversity and permanent quality. Between the first and last buildings that make up this extraordinary urban organism there are a few centuries of difference, centuries that signify evolution, diversity, variety. Any one of these buildings was modern and because they all were, the constant of modernity presides over the whole; it doesn't matter in what style each one was realised – it matters, rather, the similar attitude that presided over their conception. Common to all the manifestations of Architecture and Urbanism is the truth that all of them were realised thanks to a collective effort and that all of them therefore represent a synthesis. The architect or the urban planner are not enough to achieve Architecture and Urbanism; they are only the organisers of the magnificent synthesis that the works reflect and in which an endless series of elements collaborate. Without underestimating the value of the individual contribution, there is no doubt that it is these elements, in their totality, in the unity of their efforts, that realise the definitive work. Collaboration here takes on the most varied aspects and reaches the most diverse social strata. Without astonishing physical effort, the stones that define Stonehenge would not have been erected; the Pyramids would not be a reality without the collaboration of geometers, astronomers, and mathematicians; cities like Athens or Venice would not exist without a climate of close collaboration between their most diverse inhabitants. And this collaboration ranges from the actual collaboration that takes place in the conception or construction of works of architecture and town planning to the very enjoyment of these works; in fact, it is not enough to build houses or cities or temples, it is necessary to have the guarantee of their interest for those for whom these works are intended; by living them, they collaborate not only in the creation but in the very existence of these manifestations. Being works of collaboration, the works of Architecture and Urbanism will be syntheses, plastic translations in the organised space of those by whom and for whom they are made, translations of their own, characteristic, diverse, varied, and changeable. Previous and common to all of them is the truth that without a spirit of collaboration, of collective effort, these works could not be realised.

The importance of Architecture and Urbanism as a phenomenon that conditions human life cannot be overstated. If man, in organising space, carries out conditioned work, insofar as he satisfies the realities that surround him, he also carries out work that conditions his own activity; a city or a house are built according to pre-existing conditions but once built, they create conditions of existence for the men who live in them. The good or bad quality of the organisation of space determines, in part, the wellbeing or unease of people; the disharmony of the organisation of space generates human unhappiness. Who is unaware of the influence of the space man inhabits or where he manifests his social relations on his own physical and spiritual health? It has always been true, and here we call it constant, that the environment exerts a capital influence on man. It is largely in the hands of

architecture and urban planning to organise the environment in which men live, the buildings in which they live or work, the cities, regions, or countries in which they are integrated.

Knowledge of the past is of value to the present. It is true that the mentioned constants, by their very nature, have not lost their relevance. Sometimes, however, they are forgotten, and Architecture and Urbanism take on aspects of crisis. The analysis of many contemporary manifestations in this field provide the perfect index of this crisis, of this forgetting of the constants, of something fundamental being replaced by the accessory and the decorative, even though these manifestations almost always invoke traditional aspects or a return to the past. The Great Tradition, the tradition of constants, is confused with small, fleeting traditions. Because the lesson of the constants cannot be forgotten, contemporary Architecture and Urbanism must show their modernity, reflect total collaboration, and not forget their importance as conditioning elements in human life.