

RE-PRESENTING SCANDINAVIAN MODERNISM. THE GELLERUP PARK AND THE VISUAL NEGOTIATION OF THE MODERNIST SUBURB.

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INTRODUCTION

The Gellerup Park (Gellerupparken) near Aarhus in Denmark is the largest of a series of planned residential areas built as social housing in the period after the Second World War inspired by Le Corbusier's ideas on city planning. A large portion of these areas have later experienced social problems and have officially been termed 'ghettoes' by the former Danish government. As a result, the Municipality of Aarhus has presented a large scale physical and social reconstruction plan for the area which will be implemented during the period 2011-2030. The purpose is to "transform Gellerupparken and Toveshøj into an attractive, multifunctional neighborhood and an integrated part of the city of Aarhus."¹

The project involves both the construction of new buildings and the demolishing of existing residential blocks. As a way of preparing the actual implementation of the project it has been presented to the public through information material and large scale banners visualizing the future city area, some of which are placed on the existing buildings. It is a common feature of architecture that it has to be visualized through drawings, models and animations before it can be realized. The interesting thing about this case is however that this is not just a matter involving the architect, contractor and residents but is a matter of public communication involving the whole public. This has to do with the politically controversial and contested character of these areas. Today a large portion of the inhabitants are immigrants, and the area has a reputation of high levels of crime and unemployment. It is thus viewed by critics as a symbol of a failed planning and immigration policy based on abstract ideals. The municipality states the purpose of the project as preventing a future 'parallel society' and "changing the image of the area in the consciousness of all citizens in Aarhus."²

While the matter is thus deeply political and the plan includes social projects and regulation as well as physical changes, the scope of this article is a little more limited. I will focus on how the meaning and valuation of Gellerupparken is constructed and negotiated through mediated representations, since what it is at stake is exactly the 'image' of the area in the public consciousness. In recent years the existing buildings has been the subject of several photographic exhibitions, while as mentioned the implementation of the reconstruction plan is supported by widespread public visualizations of the new architecture.

In doing so the new project actually follows a modernist tradition of regarding the aesthetic 'education' of the public as requisite and part of modern architecture. In this article I will trace this tradition through reexamining of some of the writings by Le Corbusier from the 1920's and investigate how the modernist tradition is reinterpreted and represented in the current projects. This goes both for the architectural plans and the way mediation plays an active part in them. One of the starting points

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Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

is, following Adrian Forty, that the meaning of architecture has always been entangled with different forms of representations – writing, drawing, photography.³ In recent years digital modelling and visualization has been added to that list.

In 1970 The Gellerup Park was termed ‘the most beautiful city in Denmark’ by the Danish tabloid newspaper BT. Only a decade later the general public would at least partly ascribe the social failure of the area to the general uniformity and ‘ugliness’ of it. It is interesting and quite thought-provoking that the aesthetic judgment of the public can make such a 180 degrees turn in a short span of time, which points to the notion that aesthetics cannot exclusively refer to the physical properties of the object.

This article in no way claims that the social success or failure of housing projects rely solely on aesthetic judgments, nor does it claim to explain neither the historical failure of the existing area or the probable success of the reconstruction project. It rather uses the Gellerup Park as a case to investigate the present engagement with modernist aesthetics and ideas of the city in the Danish context. The reconstruction of the Gellerup Park is one example of a series of projects in Denmark, where Post War modernist planning projects are being remodeled and developed at present.⁴ It seems that a new image of ‘the good city’ is materializing itself, and by examining the visual representations it can be examined to what extent it continues or breaks with the historical modernist vision and aesthetics.

THE EYES WHICH DO NOT SEE – LE CORBUSIER AND THE AESTHETICS OF THE MODERN CITY:

A key notion in modernism was the idea that architecture was lacking behind the rest of society and that the way industrialism and capitalism was reshaping society called for a complete rethinking of the nature of the dwelling. Le Corbusier was very clear on stating that this called for a new aesthetic as well that prioritized structural beauty over ornament, and which furthermore called for a new way of seeing and a new sense of beauty that was a sign and privilege of the truly modern man. In his writings in his and Ozenfants magazine *l’Esprit Nouveau*, later collected in *Towards a New Architecture (Vers Une Architecture, 1923)*, he developed the metaphor of ‘the eyes which do not see’.

At the outset ‘the eyes which do not see’ were the eyes of his contemporary architects, since they were not looking in the right place. Le Corbusier reinterpreted the concept of style so important for the study of historical architecture by stating that the style of the modern age should not be found in art or architecture but in everyday industrial objects: “Our epoch is fixing its own style day by day. It is there under our eyes. Eyes which do not see.”⁵ Accordingly his general examples in the text are those of the steamship, the airplane and the automobile. The task was to look at these industrial objects as art, which could serve as a vehicle for liberating the architect from the enslavement of tradition:

“If we forget for a moment that a steamship is a machine for transport and look at it with a fresh eye, we shall feel that we are facing an important manifestation of temerity, of discipline, of harmony, of a beauty that is calm, vital and strong. A seriously-minded

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University

Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

architect, looking at it as an architect (*i.e.* a creator of organisms), will find in a steamship his freedom from an age-long but contemptible enslavement to the past.”⁶

The modern architect is here characterized by his fresh eyes and a certain way of viewing characteristic to him. So the architect’s task will actually be two-fold: To discover and acknowledge the new form of beauty already manifesting itself in non-architect products and translate this into architecture. This aesthetic is at the same time a new set of forms and a new conception of beauty, which demands cultivation. Hereby the perspective is shifted from the architects as professional group to the broader concept of the cultivated man as opposed to the peasant: “Decoration is the essential overplus, the quantum of the peasant; and proportion is the essential overplus, the quantum of the cultivated man.”⁷ There is thus a certain historical and hierarchal movement, where industry and progress are providing the means, while the architect’s job is to form the elements to a harmonious whole thereby creating a sublime beauty that demands a certain kind of cultivation to be appreciated:

“Standardization is imposed by the law of selection and is an economic and social necessity. Harmony is a state of agreement with the norms of our universe. Beauty governs all; she is of purely human creation; she is the overplus necessary only to men of the highest type.”⁸

This new aesthetic was put into action in his plan for a ‘contemporary city’ of 3 million inhabitants from 1922. The plan comprising 24 skyscrapers laid out geometrically was presented as part of his *Urbanisme* (1924) where the presentation ends with a paragraph on ‘the city and its æsthetic’. Characteristically Le Corbusier is not depicting the city as a static image viewed from a fixed vantage point, but he is placing the viewer inside a moving car:

“Suppose we are entering the city by way of the Great Park. Our fast car takes the special elevated motor track between the majestic sky-scrappers: as we approach nearer there is seen the repetition against the sky of the twenty-four sky-scrappers; [...] The Uniformity of the units that compose the picture throw into relief the firm lines on which the far-flung masses are constructed. Their outlines softened by distance, the skyscrapers raise immense geometrical facades all of glass, and in them is reflected the blue glory of the sky. An overwhelming sensation. Immense but radiant prisms.”⁹

This description contains not only a subject that is dynamically moving in space but also the aspect of time, since the bright midday is turned into twilight, making the description a sort of written movie:

“As twilight falls the glass sky-scrappers seem to flame. This is no dangerous futurism, a sort of literary dynamite flung violently at the spectator. It is a spectacle organized by an Architecture which uses plastic resources for the modulation of forms seen in light.”¹⁰

Three key characteristics can be noted in this description. The first one is the role of geometry, where the beauty lies in grasping the compositional principle of uniform geometrical modules in varying internal relationships, a principle typical of much modern architecture. The second is the role of light. The skyscrapers are not described as sculptures, they are prisms and the real image is the reflection of light in them. Finally it is characteristic that even though the spectator is driving through the city it is always viewed at a distance. The skyscrapers are ‘softened by distance’ and the grand order of the city plan is best comprehended from afar. Nowhere is it described how it is to be inside the buildings or inhabit them. The city is treated as one large piece of art, a dynamic sculpture seen in light.

VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS AND THE VOCABULARY OF MODERNISM:

In his *Words and Buildings. A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* Adrian Forty describes architecture as a three-part system constituted by the building, its image and its accompanying critical discourse.¹¹ It is noteworthy that we up till now only have concerned ourselves with the writings of Le Corbusier. The role of the writings is in this case to ensure that the spectator perceives the drawings and actual buildings the right way; it is a way of guiding the gaze. And it might be argued that Le Corbusier’s status as ‘The Architect of the Twentieth-Century’ as Kenneth Frampton has termed him¹² springs exactly from his ability to at the same time produce drawings, actual paradigmatic buildings and an accompanying discourse.

Forty argues that the two types of images traditionally connected to architecture, the drawing and the photography, are actually so different that they should be treated as separate parts of the system.¹³ Furthermore he claims that the traditional focus on architect’s drawings rather than their words stem from the fact that there is a constant battle over the verbal description and the ownership of language:

“one of the features of the architecture system – apparently absent from fashion – is the contest between architects and the press for control over the verbal element. Although language is vital to architects [...] it is striking how little discussed language has been compared to architecture’s other principal medium, drawing. Part of the reason for this disparity must surely be that whereas drawing is a code over which architects hold a large measure of control, their command of language will always be disputed by every other language user.”¹⁴

While it might be true that architects have a certain control over their drawings, the same cannot be said about photography. Rather it is disputed much the same way as Forty describes the verbal description. Here I focus on architects representations, but the need for these representations should be understood in the context a wide range of actors battling over visual meaning.

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University

Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

PICTURING THE GELLERUP PARK

Gellerupparken was built 1967-72 by Knud Blach Petersen Architects and was as the architects stated “governed by the ideals of the 1960’s” with “high-rise blocks placed around a park area” and built by sophisticated industrialized methods”.¹⁵ But already in 1974 where the quotes date they acknowledged that the ideals had changed in favor of low/dense housing and ‘modern villages’.¹⁶ As earlier described the area is today characterized as ‘socially exposed’ and further politicized because of the high number of immigrants living there.

In 2008 three young architects, Rasmus Therkelsen, Søren Leth and Jens Bager, arranged the exhibition ‘60’s Concrete With Love and Dreams of the Future’ with photographs by Poul Pedersen and Nicky Bonne focusing on the architecture of Knud Blach Petersen. The intention was to defend the beauty and architectural value of the concrete architecture of the 1960’s and it was among other places shown at the central square in Aarhus. It was thus carried out once more as an attempt to educate the eyes of the public.



Figure 1: Klostersvengen, Aarhus. Photographed as part of the 2008 Exhibition ‘60’s Concrete With Love and Dreams of the Future’

To exemplify the approach we can look at one of the central pictures of the exhibition depicting Klostersvengen at twilight, another Black Petersen building closer to the center of Aarhus. (Figure 1) The central element is the interplay between light and structure in the building. The apartments are lit from inside but also reflects the fading light from the outside creating a varied pattern of more or less luminous spaces. A pattern of light thus emerges in the structure of the seemingly uniform apartments. This way the picture tries to highlight the aesthetic thinking behind the building and one is reminded of Le Corbusier’s description that “As twilight falls the glass-skyscrapers seem to flame.”¹⁷ The building is treated as an abstract work of art and is given a monumental, perhaps even religious character due to the golden light emerging from it.

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University

Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

On the other hand what is also characteristic is the absence of people. The football field which can be distinguished in the foreground is empty and the individual families only manifest themselves as parts of the overall pattern. The picture is taken from the architect's viewpoint at a great distance, the same point of view that Le Corbusier prescribed in his literary drive through the modern city. The central idea of the exhibition was thus to let the general public assume the architects view thereby generating understanding and valuation of the inherent aesthetic qualities of the buildings. The focus was therefore explicitly on the aesthetics ignoring the social aspects. The social is however still present inside the aesthetics through the symbolization of the idea of a harmonious relationship between individuality and totality. The pattern of light can be seen as a symbolization of an idea central to the Scandinavian interpretation of modernism, that the standardization of material living conditions actually was the best prerequisite for exercising authentic individuality in one's daily life: A notion of individualization through material equality.

Moreover one of the purposes of the exhibition was to save the buildings from another form of aestheticization in the form of the installation of new brick facades in order to make them more attractive to the users, which at that time was a widespread practice with similar buildings. This example thus illustrates the notion of 'aestheticization' as a complex term¹⁸ In this case different aesthetics are at play as well as different means of influencing aesthetic judgment, where physical facades and photographic representations are part of a battle over aesthetic valuation.



Figure 2: Visualization of the plan for rebuilding Gellerup, Aarhus Municipality

Turning to the current project we move from photography to digital visualization and thereby also from staging the real to staging the imagined. Whether the presentation of the current project is inspired by the 2008 exhibition is hard to tell, but in any case we once again encounter the twilight as background for the main visualization of the project. This picture is visible many places in the city of Aarhus and the existing Gellerup Park, literally overwriting the current reality with the future utopia.

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University

Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

The first thing that can be noted is that the existing buildings are almost absent in the picture. They can only be distinguished in the background. Even though three blocks are planned to be demolished the old blocks will still count for the most of the building mass in the future area as well. The main feature is instead a new main street and a square. It has the features of a classic boulevard with 4-6 story buildings with shops and café's at the ground floor and trees at the center and sides. When the eye follows the street, it is led to a bridge and an iconic skyscraper as the visual focal point. While the buildings at for instance the Wiener Ringstrasse were individualized by historicist ornamentation, these buildings are individualized by patterns in their material and different kinds of formal variation. It could be argued that in this case the individual buildings are even more being treated as sculptures. In *The Culture of Design* Guy Julier, drawing on writings by Marshall Berman and John Urry, traces the roots of modern 'place branding' by the means of architecture to the Boulevards of Paris, the 'flaneur' and the development of photography shaping a visual consumption of the city-scape.¹⁹

Where the modernist city was characterized by the disintegration of the classic street through the separation of different forms of traffic, the creation of a common visual and architectural identity for the new area thus goes through a reintegration of the street. With the references to the boulevard and the tram, the picture on the one hand refers back to the period around 1900 and a classic European image of urbanity. On the other hand the architecture of the buildings is unmistakably modern, almost futuristic, creating a mix of historical references and the promise of something completely new.

If we consider the picture as picture the most prominent feature is the almost exaggerated use of the coloring of the sunset. Also the different sources of light emanating from buildings, street lamps etc. are strongly marked while many of the persons in the picture are blurred by movement. The picture has a very strong visual appeal as a collected city scape at the expense of individual detail. For Le Corbusier the building as prism served the purpose of heightened clarity and structural beauty while light and color in this case serve the purpose of creating atmosphere and visual overwhelming of the spectator. In this sense it is closer related to the aesthetics of romantic painting or to modern commercial modes of photography.²⁰ The shift from large-scale structural beauty to a more sensual and affective appeal is thus visible both in the proposed architecture and the way it is represented.

This article has focused on modernism as an aesthetic reform and how aesthetics are intimately entangled with meaning and valuation in architecture. We saw in the case of Le Corbusier how he replaced the two-dimensional focus on architecture as façade and ornamentation with a focus on architecture as sculpture, prism and structure. The legacy of modernism is not in architectural form alone however but also in the ambition of educating the public through the means of language and visual representations. The two examples show that this can be done in different ways. While the first example is explicitly solidary with the modernist ideology and tries to defend it with aesthetic means, the second is more ambiguous

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University

Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

both in the architectural content and the aesthetic presentation. What they both show however is that in the case of architecture aesthetics and mediation is part of a cultural and political battlefield that plays an important role in determining the future of the city.

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- ² Ibid. p. 7 (Authors translation)
- ³ Cf. Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings. A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (New York: Thames and Hudson 2000) pp. 11-14. In Tim Benton: "The Twentieth-Century Architectural Interior: representing Modernity" (Jeremy Ainsley/Charlotte Grant (ed.): *Imagined Interiors*, London: V&A Publications 2006 p. 220-239) special attention is put on modernism and the development of photographic representation.
- ⁴ Another example is the reshaping of the City Centre of Odense.
- ⁵ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications 1986 [1931]) p. 95
- ⁶ Ibid. p. 102-103
- ⁷ Ibid. p. 143
- ⁸ Ibid. p. 148
- ⁹ Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow and its Planning* (New York: Dover Publications 1987 [1929]), p. 177-178
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p. 178
- ¹¹ Forty, *Words and Buildings*, p. 13
- ¹² Cf. Kenneth Frampton: *Le Corbusier. Architect of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams 2002)
- ¹³ Forty, *Words and Buildings*, p. 13-14
- ¹⁴ Ibid. p. 14
- ¹⁵ Knud Blach Petersen Architects: "Gellerupplanen, Brabrand", *Arkitektur nr. 8, 1974*, p. 289
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Le Corbusier: *The City of To-Morrow*, p. 178
- ¹⁸ For a thorough discussion of the concept of 'aestheticization' see Wolfgang Welsch: *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: SAGE Publications 1997) p. 1-32
- ¹⁹ Guy Julier: *The Culture of Design* (London: SAGE Publications 2014) p. 141-142. See also Marshall Berman: *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (New York: Penguin Books 1988 [1982]), p. 131-172 and John Urry: *The Tourist Gaze* (London: SAGE Publications 1990)
- ²⁰ The use of color can be related to what Günther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen in *Reading Images* term the 'sensory coding orientation' typically found in advertising, fashion and food photography etc. where color is used as a source of affective meanings. Cf. Günther Kress/Theo van Leeuwen: *Reading Images* (New York: Routledge 2006), p. 164-166

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THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University

Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

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