

## Alexandr Skalický

### *DIVERSITY/ADAPTABILITY SISTEM/ATMOSPHERE*

For all architects, it is important to be able to respond to the question why architecture is designed precisely as the architect imagined it. Only after the answer does architecture truly begin.

It is no success to copy what brought someone else a different success. Success lies in having an original style and an original opinion. And these can be acquired quite easily: suffice it to think in one's own way and over a long time to develop and correct this view. Nothing more is necessary for architecture.

Arbitrary criteria can always be set – to put forward arbitrary, but relevant questions and with one's designs to provide an answer. But how to ask them and how to answer?

Above all, it is necessary to begin somewhere.

For a brief comparison, I would like to provide the following impulse: the book *FAARMAX*<sup>1</sup>. On the flyleaf, the reader is informed that *FARMAX* is the process of increasing the density of area for the human population, vertically and horizontally, such that at the same time people gain more space (Far – Floor Area Ratio). Further on in the book, the question thus presented (the definition of the problem) is provided with an answer in terms of its authors' own design projects. Naturally, the questions of urban density must be posed by the author when it is relevant one. The book's contributors are all active in Netherlands, and derive their perspective from the Dutch situation. The question is not, through, local and only appears to be concrete. Its being posed and reflected in actual architectural work has been the foundation of success for de studio MVRDV.

In a setting where authors usually pose the question of whether they like or dislike their design, it is clearly advantageous to strive for greater generality. Perhaps it is simpler, even if definitely not

1 MVRDV: *FARMAX Excursion on density*, 010 publishers, Rotterdam, 1st edition, 1998, p. 736

more superficial. The level of the general, moreover, provides greater possibilities and does make it easy to cast doubt on the matter.

Reflections can focus on any possible categories.

There is no need to travel far. It may even suffice to look out of the window, to walk along the next street. To observe who walks down the street, or to think about what the author encounters in his or her daily life.

In looking out of the window, it is possible to observe an ever-changing, backdrop: the diversity of sunlight, clouds, fog, rain. Or trees as their leaves change color. The observed variety of moods can never become boring. Similarly, the large-scale, collective rows of buildings in the adjoining street have, in time, changed their appearance under the pressure of the changing demands of their inhabitants. A single basic type is no longer dominant, as expectations and tastes change according to the age. At the outset was the same commission and the same point of departure, which was more important than the changes that life always brings and which can never be predicted in advance. The people who walk along the street do not need any further examination to make their differentiation evident: it is enough to take in the overall whole to make in into an abstract impression. Even the books on the shelf have their own system, and are stacked and arranged in a specific way: each is different and provides different information, as well as the meanings associated with. And each could be in a different bookshelf, or even in a different box.

After a view from the window, after a stroll down the next street, after observing others' or one's own afternoon or evening activities, it is possible to come to a definitive opinion. And the observations need not be as banal as one might at first expect.

It is possible to examine a building's atmosphere, or its ability to accept changes. It is possible to react to the diversity of individual users, or to reflect on the system of design in architecture as a self-standing element respecting the stated demands.

Like the changeable mood behind the windows, even a building can be changed by its lighting, by internal life. The movement or curtain or reflections of light that are deflected back or pass through it. Buildings can be programmed such that they can bear their internal development. They can be assembled variously out of their functional units: their interiors can resemble a park with statues, a garden full of flowers, newspapers and poster-kiosk, trees laden with fruit, or perhaps even the psychology of various colors. The system of a building can be one that transcends the intended design built from within or without – one that gives the outline frame into which the partial functional units can be set.



House Semily, Alexandr Skalicky, 2001-2006

Using the criteria thus stated, it is possible to react to the visible situation. And this is how it can be possible to react the pre-fabricated apartment block, a phenomenon which has affected many in the Czech Republic. A building whose over-reproduction deprived it of any atmosphere, a building that cannot adapt or respond to the varieties of human character, and thus to the various demands of individuals and communities. A building in which there is only the most elementary system, set by the means through which the building was constructed.

But, just as with the concrete-panel building, the generalized method of response can be applied to a world ever more composed of virtual and mediated information. A world of de-materialized media collage, where actual reality is hard to find, under the layers of informational noise nearly lost.

Yet, it as its atmosphere, its changes, its various forms and its system, which form it and bind together.

Everything is possible, but it is necessary to find a method that will continue to investigate and re-evaluate all in the past. For it is said if the architect does not know the answer to his or her introductory question.

### ***The potential of an average town***

The internal construction potential of many present-day towns of historical origin is far greater than often realized. Not all towns, in other words, have undisturbed historic cores, and thus do not demand protection as landmarks. In their centers, many towns now preserve merely their historical structure, a remnant of the original system, and the attendant, often damaged, remnants of the historic architectural fabric. Sections of these towns no longer bear any connection to their compact historical core; moreover, they also contain many relatively new structures and sites available for construction.

Hence, there exist a possibility for re-evaluating the entire urban system, now rendered outdated and functioning poorly. This is what is termed an “average” town.

Amidst the structures now standing, present alongside open spaces for new construction are, additionally, many structures that could, in the long run, be revived. A decrepit factory near the center of the town may have the same areas as the historic core itself. Many lots in the center or its vicinity are unoccupied, many regarded as having little value. The average town of today does not exploit its spatial possibilities: the original potential at present lies dormant.

Investors in the town center tend to remain confined by its given rules, and merely fill in the empty lots without much imagination.

Architects of average talent, in turn, reinforce a now irrelevant

urban structure with meaningless mass. As a result, we are faced with a situation preventing these authors of such average work from shaping the new town, if new buildings cannot measure up in confrontation with their sites, the work of the architect is in vain. Squandering these architectural opportunities drains the energy and self-confidence of the inhabitants, required to live in an uninhabitable city. The original industrial zone, close to the center, decays, because the existing intellectual potential cannot reveal its future significance. And the present average town stagnates, loses opportunities. It fails at being an inhabitable space. Though indeed the working day is charged with the dynamism of human movements, it contains nothing that could provide living comfort.

Nor is the extant mistake fixed by the addition of areas where there is no traffic, nor by filling in empty lots if the new mass is nothing of value. Arrogance and vulgarity in meeting economic targets is no solution: it provides non connection with a feeling for the essential.

Not always is the assumed economic return met, and it may serve only to underscore individual errors and stupidity.

Culturally, the town rots from within; physically, it comes apart moving outwards to its edges. The hierarchy of urban spaces is lost; new systems of transportation have altered the organizational structuring. Its present fabric can be observed from various angles, via various trajectories on foot or by car, and particularly apparent in the latter is its structural dilapidation, laid bare through new view from behind it or outside of it, never previously assumed. Zones of meaning in this fabric are illegible.

The town demands a legible and clear structure. Its greatest need is to thicken and reinforce it meaningfully in those areas where its space is fragmented and without content. The town demands the creation of visible zones determined by layering of meaning. It is necessary to supplement the damaged blocks of building and space with new qualities and nature – yet building at all costs is not necessary. Equally good use can be made of existing empty structures.

“Thickening” the town is possible both with built structures or with natural matter. The final goal should be to form a public space, and to fill with a system of meanings such that comfortable habitation is possible. Temporary absence of content should form a call to solutions. Nature offers a setting of comfort entirely lacking, even though highly possible, in the town, and the economic facts of building reveal that filling in all space inside the urban fabric can never completely succeed. Greenery can intervene into separate urban zones; it can fill empty sites, bind together the dissociated structure, form transitions and make reference to the unspoiled



Náchod Centrum, Alexandr Skalicky / ASMM, 2001. The design re-evaluates the present state of the centre of town. Construction is founded on the use of a system of two-story, variable elements for assembly, which may be layered above or placed beside one another. The height of existing construction matches the height of three such levels. The proposed construction is based on the optimal height of built structures in relation to their surroundings; simultaneously, it considers the optimal usability of the site. The urban structure is not uselessly overtaxed. A new system from within the outmoded structures forms an effective environment for urban life. The existing potential of the town is used with restraint, and enough free spaces are preserved. Nature becomes a component of the town. Locational qualities are strengthened, decrepit structural fabric reinforced. The town acquires new, legible orientational relations.

landscape. It softens the original, historically exhausted structures of the town.

Nature has its own level of thickness; trees and bushes have a definitive mass, and thus give form to a city. A supplement and replacement, it is a lightening of the original built structures. Greenery forms a calming insertion, and a visual transition between empty space and building. It firmly supports the function of livable comfort.

Formation of a contemporary space, however, cannot be performed atop the remnants of the earlier system. The town contains a complex organization of a large quantity of building which demand a suitable place in the system. The vision of returning to a basic historical model no longer suitable or effective – i.e. , the urban scheme of streets and squares as based on past experience – is hard to maintain in the present dispersed state of the city, once many urban functions are in fact disposable and, if not immediately used, without real purpose.

The present system of life is not the same as in the past. Life is now a matter of free time, and the plan of the average historical town offers it nothing for inspiration: it does not respond to the present situation.

No town can be rescued by constructing streets that will remain grey, empty, dusty, and defaced with graffiti. Streets where buildings are placed even when they have no function are planned badly.

The most frequent buildings of the present are, unfortunately, largely static. They dissolve into their positions, create stereotypical filler for the lines of the streets, yet stimulate no development in their recoiling upper floors, and create no new dynamic relations. They form no sequences from a film in real time; they do not offer the exclusivity of the ordinary. All they are is a delicacy for local snob, who believe in the well-worn narratives of building only because they know no others. The average town demands a visible organization of values. A simple and legible system of meanings; a mobile image of new combinations and confrontations. An excessive level of aggression and confrontation is a natural component of development. Confrontation between values and banality is sorely needed. Here, buildings are confronted with foot-paths; rail corridors or regulation of river-beds with built-up areas. Statues can be viewed in a single glance with newsstands. Both churches and prefabricated sport halls have their significance.

The town is assembled from functional units. A light montage of reality is our present condition; the temporary, allowing for variability, is a central program. Light urbanism, with space for change and developing living comfort is indeed a possible goal.