

## NARCI-CITY OR THEATRUM MUNDI? THE URBAN STAGE OF THE FUTURE

WITH 75% OF THE GLOBAL POPULATION LIVING IN CITIES BY 2050, WE SHOULD BE INTENSELY PREOCCUPIED BY THE POSSIBILITIES OF CREATING NEW SPACES FOR MANIFOLD CO-OPERATIONS IN THE PUBLIC REALM. STAGING A VIBRANT URBAN LIFE IN THE FUTURE IS WHAT ARCHITECT ANDREW TODD AND SOCIOLOGIST RICHARD SENNETT ARE DOING WITH THE PROJECT 'THEATRUM MUNDI'. DISCOVER THE POTENTIAL AND THE ALTERNATIVE.

BY ANDREW TODD, ARCHITECT

Architects and urbanists are bent out of shape. We suffer from being trapped in an ever-tightening vice formed by budgetary constraints on the one hand and strident regulations on the other. At the same time, we are expected to provide a spark of originality, to be 'creative' in our pursuits. Many of my professional colleagues can be observed presenting a very hard, exhibitionistic form of this 'creativity' which may in part be an understandable railing against restriction, but also something like the call of an exotic bird performing a mating dance. 'Look at ME,' they holler, 'I am better, brighter, prettier and more colourful than the others!' It doesn't help matters that this disease has an official name, the 'Bilbao effect', and is in fact considered a worthwhile pathology in certain quarters. Surprisingly, even fifteen years after the fact, one still hears talk of the 'Bilbao effect' named after the attention-grabbing, tourist-luring success of Frank Gehry's extraordinary museum in the eponymous Basque city.

Many a minor mayor yearns for a similar splash through the erection of cavorting forms, conjuring the mythical 'wow'-factor, although many pretenders fall short for want of sufficiently appealing plumage. Gehry is a great architect who earned his stripes slowly through a series of modest commissions. He has consistently been interested in how things are crafted and put together and has extended this patient research into the digital era, using and developing cutting edge cad-cam technology both for his own creative process and for the construction of buildings. As often before, genius is a bad example: there are legions of wannabes (including, disturbingly, many of the students I have taught over the last ten years) who wish to short-circuit actual apprenticeship and experience and go straight to having Brad Pitt as an intern (as Gehry did).

I find it worrying that this culture is producing generations of architects who do not think it is necessary (or even interesting or desirable) to listen. They would rather shout as loud as possible, and the civic context such a situation produces is a reflection of this strident narcissism: it is all foreground, whereas city life requires a subtle

range of characters –as in any play– which extends from protagonists to minor players to crowds, the polis. We have to be able to situate ourselves, to find our own level in the human performance: how can we do this if the city is not porous in any way, has no depth or background, but is just a wall of bellowing prima donnas?

### 'HMMM' VERSUS 'WOW!'

The bodacious charms of such prima donna buildings are strangely unsatisfying in the long run. One might say they are not sustainable in every sense of this slippery word: they are made for instantaneous effect rather than affectionate long-term use. For all that they titillate the retina, they are often cold to the touch, cleverly made-up but not profoundly sensual, like a fashion model whose authentic existence is on glossy paper rather than in real life. Fortunately, there are other ways of doing things. A different feminine paradigm is presented in the work of Swiss architect Peter Zumthor: his buildings are not cute, not easy to photograph on the outside, but enveloping, warm and overwhelming in terms of the atmosphere and materiality they present in their interiors. I am thinking in particular of the thermal baths in Vals and the extraordinary Kolumba Museum in Cologne. These buildings reward concentrated occupation, and leave a very long-lasting impression on the whole body. Zumthor shuns publicity, but people will cross the world to experience his spaces. We could say that they replace the 'wow'-factor with a much more engaging 'hmmm'-factor.

Zumthor's architecture – although beautiful and crafted with immense intelligence – is much more background than foreground. It is quiet and leaves room for the user's own experience to bloom. During a recent visit to the Kolumba Museum I failed to realise that four hours had passed and I had missed lunch, so strong was the hypnotic strength of the museum and the artworks it put in context. This was not because of modesty on the part of the architect: there is actually a very intentional mise-en-scene and sequence, but the building somehow – like a loving parent – left room for the unfolding of my own experience and interpretation. Such architecture is revelatory because

it makes the ingredients of architecture (time, light, matter, measure, place, history and human purpose) appear clearly as they are; they are not hijacked or diminished; the building is a catalyst rather than a fetish.

It would be unreasonable to expect every architect to work in the painstaking, ascetic manner of Zumthor. Part of his identity depends on remoteness – of himself and also of his buildings. One could scarcely imagine him designing a shopping centre in Basildon, though Basildonites have as much right to beautiful architecture as the haughty mountain cows of Vals. So how can we bring his principles down to earth, as it were, and create a new way of crafting the everyday spaces of our cities?

### MIRROR OR MUTUAL GAZE?

I would like to return to the question of narcissism as one key to staging the urban life of the future. Social philosophers such as Christopher Lasch and Richard Sennett have identified this psychological disorder as one of the most debilitating ills of our age. Lasch describes in his book 'The Culture of Narcissism' how 'advanced' societies (particularly America) suffer from a disregard for the other which is rooted in disorders of self-perception. Narcissism does not mean merely egotism; rather, it refers to a hardened, hollowed-out sense of self which gives rise to the grandiose preening and posturing we see – as a direct correlative – in the architecture of cities such as Dubai. It also implies the failure to listen: the other is of interest only inasmuch as they provide supply to fill the narcissist's empty self, as long as they are looking, approving, applauding.

Sennett relates narcissism to the city in his book 'The Fall of Public Man', which describes the disappearance of a shared code of civility – of knowing how to engage with strangers – in the face of emerging individualism. He describes how the apparent distance given by the 'mask' of formal public behaviours in 18th Century Paris actually favoured exchange, creating a middle ground whose occupation could be negotiated without anxiety about social status or individual psychology and emotional 'needs.' In his book 'The Uses of Disorder' he also employs psychological terms to advocate the city as a place where one becomes whole through open encounter with difference. In his latest book 'Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation,' he describes the difficulties we face in creating a shared world, and offers some positive structures for doing so.

I am currently engaged with Sennett (and others) in trying to do just this through an ambitious project which he directs and has named 'Theatrum Mundi'. Its aim is, in his words 'no more – but no less – than an effort to translate 'lively', 'arousing' and 'engaging' into pavement,

glass and steel'. The name Theatrum Mundi dates from the Renaissance, when architects such as Sebastiano Serlio drew a parallel between the stage and the street, between everyday encounter and performance artifice. We will attempt to use the energies of urban culture – ranging from social behaviours and beliefs to developed artistic practices – as a way of making the physical existence of the city more fulfilling. Part of this attempt will involve inviting architects to change the way they do business, to stop behaving defensively and narcissistically, and to engage directly with the people – from ordinary citizens to choreographers, scenographers, theatre directors, lighting designers, sound and visual artists, musicians and fashion designers – who create the heartbeat of cultural buildings and the street itself, which we in turn define, contain (and sometimes constrain) in 'glass and steel'.

The aim is to make the dialogue between the container and its contents more rich, dynamic, relevant, real and sustainable as a worthy by-product, and perhaps also to change the way the 'container' is commissioned, conceived and used. Theatrum Mundi will operate through a network of leading academic and cultural institutions in Frankfurt, London and New York, and will sponsor workshops, publications and commission projects over a multi-year period, launching in June of this year. We are initiating partnerships with the Venice Biennale and the Edinburgh Festival, and intend to look further afield to Asia and Latin America in coming years.

Theatrum Mundi will not have a fixed institutional identity, it will act as a network of like-minded people rather than a hierarchical commissioning body; it will be light-footed enough to sponsor immediate experiments, and will not be dedicated to the creation of polished outcome – of 'cultural product'. It will embrace failure and incompleteness as essential and undervalued aspects of artistic and urban life, asking the future-facing question 'what if?' rather than stating the 'here's how.'

The theatre director Peter Brook ended his seminal 1968 text 'The Empty Space' with these words: 'In everyday life, 'if' is a fiction, in the theatre 'if' is an experiment. In everyday life, 'if' is an evasion, in the theatre 'if' is the truth. When we are persuaded to believe in this truth, then the theatre and life are one.'

*Andrew Todd is an architect, writer and musician and senior fellow and member of the Executive Committee of Theatrum Mundi. Founder of his own firm in 2003, he was named one of Europe's leading architects under 40. He is Chevalier des Arts et Lettres of the French government. Theatrum Mundi will launch a web presence in May 2012. [www.studioandrewtodd.com](http://www.studioandrewtodd.com)*