Book Review

Netzstadt – Designing the Urban Franz Oswald,
and Peter Baccini, 2003, Birkhäuser, Basel, Boston

URBAN DESIGN *International* (2004) 9, 97.
doi:10.1057/palgrave.udi.9000117

An architect and a scientist, Franz Oswald and Peter Baccini from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETHZ) have joined efforts to combine knowledge bases and analytical tools into a new synthetic approach to urban planning.

Netzstadt – literally ‘net-city’ – is both a metaphor and a model: a way to perceive, analyze and interpret and a basic pattern of organization, intervention and planning of urban systems. It is part of a long-term development strategy (range of two generations) for societies of new urbanity, that is, populations of developed countries, which enjoy efficient access to social and technological modern infrastructures. City/country, nature/culture, local/regional and similar dualisms are irrelevant to this new lifestyle that evolves equally on the backdrop of an agricultural field, a nature reserve or a skyscraper. New urbanity is characterized by massive flows of people, goods and information, which concentrate at the nodes of the net. Any such system of paths and nodes, covering tens of thousands of square kilometers and amounting to hundreds of inhabitants per square kilometer, is changing over time and therefore prone to accumulation of new problems and needs at various scales and aspects. This is when the Netzstadt model may be called up for redevelopment and reconstruction.

Netzstadt does not propose archetypal solutions. Guided by the four leading principles of shapability, sustainability, reconstruction and responsibility, it is a process that presents systematic analyses to be considered by people potentially

affected by the development. It is the public that sets the planning objectives, which are eventually restricted and redefined in a feedback cycle between the public and the experts. The participatory process is not part of Netzstadt, but the authors propose Synoikos method, which they had tested in real situations.

The decade-long collaboration between Oswald and Baccini has produced a methodological framework that secures the unique architectural-morphological and scientific-physiological contributions, without subordination of the one to the other. Actually, a much larger transdisciplinary platform is implied, always to be applied in relation to five methodological phases: first – identification of the urban system in the terms of the model; then – three analytic steps that structure the system into selected activities, shape it on the basis of key resources and represent it according to types of territories; the final stage is an evaluation according to quality criteria. What follows next are the participatory cycles, and only then the planning syntheses of projects rather than Modernist comprehensive plans.

All phases and their components are defined, explained, articulated and illustrated to an extent that makes Netzstadt a real textbook on the planning of cities. On the backdrop of voices that tend to renounce any possibility of large-scale overall planning, Netzstadt is a highly invested, courageous and encouraging endeavor to save the urban planning baby while ridding it of the outdated water of rigidity and uniformity. It is to bring back a major role to creativity and – if the form of the book is a source of inspiration – also a lot of beauty.

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