

THE HEART OF THE CITY
CONTINUITY AND COMPLEXITY OF AN URBAN DESIGN CONCEPT

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The heart, even in the age of its transplantability, is still viewed as the central organ of internalized humanity in the dominant language games of our civilization.

- Sloterdijk P., *Sphären I*. 1998

The Heart of the City. Continuity and Complexity of an Urban Design concept.

The “Heart of the City” theme is proposed by the MARS group as title of the 8th *Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne* (CIAM), held in Hoddesdon, England, from the 7th to the 14th of July 1951. Two opposite urban conditions are considered by Sert, President of CIAM, as main issues which the Heart discourse should face: from the disappearance of city centres because of the destruction of the War to the negation of the urban centrality because of urban sprawl and the infinite constant enlargement of city boundaries. But the Heart itself also represents two different figures of speeches, the symbol and the metaphor: from one side it becomes a humanist symbol “*which springs directly to the senses without explanation*”¹, in opposition to the “*mechanized killing*”², to the “*tyranny of mechanical tools*”³ as stressed by Giedion during CIAM 8, similarly to the almost contemporaneous Congress of Darmstadt where Heidegger makes his famous speech “*Building, Dwelling, Thinking*”⁴; from the other side the Heart still keeps its metaphorical organic meaning translated into a presumed right physical form and dimension of the city. These oppositions - from annulled bombed centers to infinite urban structures, from metaphor to symbol, “*from function to passion*”⁵ – are the main causes of the complexity and of the stratification of several different layers of significances of the Heart of the City, since CIAM 8 until the present. If CIAM8’s theoretical roots are already traceable within previous debates and architectural experiences⁶, then the thesis stresses the continuity and the

1 “*It seems that a new stage of civilisation is in formation in which the human being as such – the bare and naked man – will find a direct means of expression.*” in Giedion S., *Historical Background to the Core*. In Tyrwhitt J., Sert J.L., Rogers E.N., *The Heart of the City – towards the humanisation of urban life*. London 1952, p. 17 and Giedion S., *Architecture You and Me*. Harvard University Press, USA, 1958, p. 127-128

2 Giedion S., *Architecture You and Me*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1958, p. 35

3 Giedion S., *Historical Background to the Core*. in Rogers E.N., Sert J.L., Tyrwhitt J., Editors, *The Heart of the City: Towards the humanization of Urban life*. New York, Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1952, p.17

4 Darmstadt, for the “*Mensch + Raum*” exhibition. An important link is created with Hoddesdon, since “*the formulation of questions and issues are similar: the rediscovery of urban space, respectively the highlighting of the city and its duties against the reconstruction policy in one way of the government, and so the answers.*” Oechslin W. (1992), I darmstadter gesprache. *Rassegna*, n.52/4, p. 80

5 “*The understanding of the core as a human heart emerged from an architectural debate in which function seemed to have yielded to passion.*” De Sola-Morales I. , *Differences. Topographies of Contemporary Architecture*. MIT Press, 1997, p. 49

6 For instance Domhardt has identified the origins of the CIAM 8 theme since the ‘30s, in the American

complexity of the Heart of the City, since 1951 until the 1970s⁷, as well as its influence in the physical and theoretical transformation of the City in the USA and in Europe. The thesis is therefore both a historical and theoretical study of the Heart theme, through the analysis of both projects and theories related to CIAM 8. Moreover attention has been paid by both master architects' proposals and young students' architects' projects. This is very important since the crucial role of the young generations and of education is vehemently stressed during CIAM 8 itself.

As far as the complexity of the Heart theme is concerned, we might consider the different layers of significance, or arteries of the Heart if we want to keep alive the metaphor, as branches of a "*cultural phylogeny tree*"⁸, which can melt together and which come from the same trunk: CIAM 8. Since it is not possible to describe each singular branch of a tree, also of a natural tree, then three main 'actors' have been individualized in order to dissect horizontally the symbolical branches, similarly to the sections of a complex project or territory. These sections intersect the most important ideas and issues regarding the Heart of the City. Furthermore, these actors have been chosen also because they are characterized by both theoretical and project activity.

The first 'actor' is Victor Gruen and the First Urban Design Conference held at Harvard in 1956, whose "*precursor*"⁹ is considered CIAM 8 itself. While Team 10 dissolves "old professors" CIAM, and the Core's concept is beginning to be

neighborhood theory and in a constant transatlantic exchange of ideas between USA and Europe. See Domhardt K.S., *From the "Functional City" to the "Heart of the City". Green Space and Public Space in the CIAM Debates of 1942-1952.* in Brantz D., Dumpelmann S., *Greening the City: Urban Landscapes in the Twentieth Century.* University of Virginia Press, 2011, p. 133-156. Then Jos Bosman and Volker M. Welter consider the Core as "*the most symbolical element of Geddes's theory*". Bosman J. (1985), *My association with CIAM gave me new perspective.* Ekistics, Vol 52, n. 314/315; Welter V.W., *In-between space and society. On Some British roots of Team 10's urban thought in the 1950's.* In in ed. by Risselada M., van den Heuvel D., *TEAM 10 1953-81: in search of a Utopia of the present.* NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, p.258.

7 This is the period during which there are the examples of the Heart's influences. It is interesting what Henry Russel Hitchcock affirms about this historical period and its urban projects, in *Architecture: XIX et XX siècle: "Les deux décennies avant 1970, les années 50 et 60 virent la production d'une grande partie de cadres urbains et suburbains dans lesquelles nous continuerons probablement à vivre pendant le reste de ce siècle [...]"* quoted in Lefebvre V., *Paris-Ville Moderne. Maine Montparnasse et la Défense, 1950-1970.* ed. Norma, p. 19. Most of the architectural and urban projects which are studied with the heart of the City, are still influencing our contemporary life too.

8 The tree of the '*cultural phylogeny*' (Kroeber A.L.), symbolizes the complexity of '*the mechanism of the human creation*'. See Martí Arís C., *Le variazioni dell'identità. Il tipo in Architettura.* Clup, Torino, 1990, p.49. See also Steadman P., *The evolution of design.* Cambridge university Press, 1979; Kroeber A.L., *Anthropology. Race, language, culture, psychology, prehistory.* Hacourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1948

9 "*Sert and the CIAM 'Heart of the City': Precursor to Urban Design, 1947-52*" in Mumford E., *Defining Urban Design – CIAM Architects and the Formation of a Discipline, 1937-69,* University Press, New Haven and London, 2009, p.80

questioned by Team 10 criticizing the basis of CIAM itself, as Eric Mumford reminds us¹⁰, overseas the continuity of the CIAM discussion is assured inside the prestigious American University. The main issues that remain, as Sert explains, are the recentralization of the cities for the preservation of civic values and the three-dimensional design as basis for Urban Design.

Among the participants there is also the “mall maker” Victor Gruen who publishes *“The Heart of Our Cities: The Urban Crisis: Diagnosis and treatment”*¹¹ (1964), a decade after the release of proceedings of the 8th CIAM *“The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanization of Urban Life.”*¹²(1952). Gruen invents a new commercial type whose architectural devices would be adopted for the design of urban proposals such as in Fort Worth and Louvain la Neuve. Some of these devices are similar to those used by CIAM members in order to raise the humanist values, as stressed during CIAM 8, within their urban master plans. However, for Gruen the centralization of the city is no longer aimed only at the survival of civic values, similarly to Sert, but it is also focused on environmental protection. Indeed, in the early `70s, the Athens Charter and the Heart of the City will become for Gruen the starting points for an updated manifesto centered on environmental planning: the Charter of Vienna. Finally, the case study of Montreal is discussed. Its planner Vincent Ponte, in the late `60s, transforms the right of the pedestrian, *‘la royauté du piéton’* (Le Corbusier) as vehemently stressed by CIAM members in Hoddesdon, into the first germ of social segregation inside the *“analogous city”*¹³. If CIAM 8 (and later also the UD Conferences and Gruen too) stresses the necessary separation between pedestrians and vehicles, as a translation of a radical antagonism between the symbols of the Heart and the Machine, then Montreal becomes the first example where this split is adopted on an urban scale, concentrating the main pedestrian flow into a huge underground protected and controlled shopping centre.

The second ‘actor’ is the CIAM Summer School held in Venice, from 1952 until 1957. This case study, inside Venice as *“City of the new modernity”*¹⁴, considers

10 See Mumford E., *The emergence of Urban Design in the Breakup of CIAM in Harvard Design Magazine* (2006), *The origins and evolution of “urban design”, 1956-2006*, p. 15 This is not totally true since, as we will see Bakema will continue to think about the heart of the city also later, for instance in *‘human core of St. Louis’*.

11 Gruen V., *The Heart of our cities: the urban crisis : diagnosis and cure*. Thames and Huston, 1964

12 Rogers E.N., Sert J.L., Tyrwhitt J., Editors, *The Heart of the City: Towards the humanization of Urban life*. New York, Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1952; tr. It. *Il cuore della città*. Hoepli, Milano, 1954

13 Boddy T., *Underground and overhead: building the analogous city*. in AA. VV., *Variations on a theme park. The new American city and the end of public space* Hill and Wang, New York, 1992, 123-15

14 Gregotti V., *Venezia Citta` della Nuova Modernita`*, Consorzio Venezia Nuova., 1998. The title derives

the Core as the arising interest on the relationship between the new project and its surrounding urban context. This theme has been well described since 1950s by Ernesto Nathan Rogers in Casabella-Continuità, and it is related to CIAM 8 too, as asserted by Vittorio Gregotti in 1992: “Moreover at the CIAM in Hoddesdon, also through the ‘Heart of the City’ theme, the question that starts to emerge - and one which will prove central for the next forty years - is that of listening to the context and of the project seen as a dialogue with the context as a deposited form of the history of a specific place.”¹⁵

In parallel, the link between the spirit of the city – Norberg Schultz` *genius loci* and the Heart of the City, as already stressed by Volker Welter¹⁶, is analyzed. The main project, which has been discussed, is the *Oslo suburb* proposal, presented at Hoddesdon by the PAGON Group with Christian Norberg Schultz as a student of Giedion.

The third and last actor is Jaap Bakema who, unlike other CIAM members, considers the ‘*relationship*’ as the main characteristic of the Heart: “There are moments in life when the separation between man and things disappears; at that moment we discover the miracle of the relationship between man and things. And this is the moment of the Heart.”¹⁷

Instead of proposing a central square or a civic center as a main example of the Heart, Bakema exposes the Asplund cemetery in Stockholm: the Dutch architect conceptually shifts the Heart theme from a conception of life to the overlap of life on death, from the inside to the outside, from the urban centrality to the landscape. The main case study is his project for the “*human core*”¹⁸ of St. Louis in 1960. Almost ten years after CIAM 8, Bakema reconsiders the Heart theme stressing the importance of its historical background¹⁹, its three-dimension and the relationship between the social and physical urban structure of the City. Finally, if we can consider the first actor as mainly characterized by an overlap between the organic metaphor and the humanist symbol of the Heart, then Bakema`s projects reject any organic functionalist metaphor of the city. The projects are intriguing proposals where the Heart attempts to be the symbolic of harmonious

from a lecture exposed by Tafuri in 1993 and called: “*The forms of the time: Venice and the modernity*”

15 Gregotti V., *Editoriale – Gli Ultimi CIAM* in *Rassegna* (1992), n. 52/4, p. 5

16 Also *locus and fatti urbani* of Aldo Rossi, *Architettura della Città*. See Volker M. Welter, *From locus genii to heart of the city: embracing the spirit of the city* in I. Boyd Whyte (ed.), *Modernism and the Spirit of the City*. Routledge, London and New York, 2003

17 Rogers E.N., Sert J.L., Tyrwhitt J., Editors, *The Heart of the City: Towards the humanization of Urban life*. New York, Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1952; tr. It. *Il cuore della città*. Hoepli, Milano, 1954, p.67

18 Bakema J., *The Humane Core, A Civic Center for St. Louis, MO*. Washington University Press., 1960

19 Similarly to Giedion at CIAM 8

relationships between “*You and Me*”²⁰, between “*a centripetal diastolic movement, but, at the same time, a systolic centrifugal one*”²¹ (Paci, 1954).

All three actors represent a particular and precise facet of the heart theme. Indeed the Urban Design Conference and Victor Gruen, represent the invention and the renewal of the city in America through the concept of the Heart; the CIAM Summer school in Venice represents the increasing importance of the tradition, of the Ernesto Nathan Rogers` continuity, of the recognized role of history and context within the modern project; finally Bakema represents the physical interpretation of the philosophical current of the Relationalism (see Enzo Paci), putting the relationships between the urban factors as the main issue for the sociological and physical structure of the city.

However, the three actors might be all compared through their grades of relationships. We note indeed that the first is addressed to the centrality of the city (I grade), the second to relationship between one building and its surrounding (II grade), while the third as a total relationship between different scales of urban structures (n° grades).

Moreover in all three actors, especially in the first and in the last one, there is a similar intention to consider the design of the city with a vertical integration of functions, into a three-dimensional space: in this sense the heart of the city becomes a counterforce of the zoning method of planning, of the four functions` divisions (*dwelling*, work, recreation, and transport), rather than its mere fifth element as criticized for instance by Team 10²².

In the contemporary urban discourse and practice, the Heart of the City still remains a reference for contemporary urban projects, such as “*The Simple Heart*” by Dogma or the proposal for the *Grand Paris* by Richard Rogers in 2009. However this latter interprets the heart theme mainly as an organic functionalist metaphor, omitting the deep humanist values stressed at CIAM 8. Indeed the heart and the body become merely images for the restoration of connections to external urban severed limbs, in order to reconstruct the governance of the *Ile-de-France* with balanced districts.

20 “If we look at the city as a place in which private life and community life find a meeting place, then the mark of a true city is the balance between YOU and ME.[...] The endeavor to reestablish an equipoise between the individual and the collective sphere is proceeding today throughout the world. This may have been underlying reason for the selection of the ‘Core of the City’ as the theme for CIAM 8.” Giedion S., *Architecture You and Me*. Harvard University Press, USA, 1958, p. 124,126-127

21 Paci, E. (1954) *Il cuore della città*. *Casabella Continuità*, n.202, p. vii The attention is therefore focused on the relationship between the two movements, with many resonances to Bakema`s theory.

22 See Welter V.W., *In-between space and society. On Some British roots of Team 10`s urban thought in the 1950`s*. In ed. by Risselada M., van den Heuvel D., *TEAM 10 1953-81: in search of a Utopia of the present*. NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, p.259

Another interesting project is the new centre for Almere in The Netherlands, designed by OMA in the early 1990s, whose aim remains “*donner un coeur à ses cinq centres et se rendre attractive.*”²³ However, this project is in contradiction with the *Generic City* described by Rem Koolhaas almost in the same period, where all Heart identities seem to be totally abhorred. The heart of the city becomes in this case a dichotomy between theory and project attitude, before which one of the most radical Manifestos of the last Century finds its limits and incongruity.

Moreover, in a contemporary emergence of public space design, of “*absent urbanism*”²⁴, of unclear distinction between individual and collective sphere, the Heart (as humanist symbol rather than mere organic metaphor) still seems an important, valid, contemporary abstract idea²⁵ of the City. It is indeed an eternally present idea, as interpreted already by Giedion²⁶, aimed at an ideal overlap between the social and the physical urban structure. It can be interpreted also as a better future condition or idea of the society, towards which we should tend and which should be interpreted in a present tangible form of public space. “*This is our task today.*”²⁷, Giedion affirms at CIAM 8 in 1951, and sixty years later this purpose seems still effective. A similar task has been stressed for instance by Christopher Alexander who, in 2006, publishes the essay “*The Heart of the City. The Necessary Binding Force That Creates The Core Of Every City.*”²⁸ Alexander stresses the failure of the First Urban Design Conference

23 “*to give an heart to his five centers and to become attractive*”, Arjen Oosterman.(2002) *Réinventer Almere*. L'architecture d'Aujourd'hui, n.339, p 68-75

24 Marshall R., *Emerging Urbanity: Global Urban Projects in the Asia Pacific Rim*. London: Spon Press, 2003

25 As described by the Opbouw Group in Hoddesdon, “*the abstract core is not one point, or one space, or an expression of only one activity, but an idea, expressed now, by one, then by another activity, fluctuating from one place to another, reaching his extreme expression perhaps within a certain, but not distinctly bordered, region*” Opbouw group, CIAM 8 describing the core of Pendrecht, responsible rapporteur: W. Wissing. Bakema Archive, NAI, Rotterdam, g. 18

26 **The interpretation in Giedion of the core as an eternal element is underlined by Francis Strauven.** He affirms that Giedion’s discourse about the Heart “*ties in closely with the research into “the eternal present” he was engaged in at the time, a search for the original archetypes of art and architecture, for the primal, prehistoric forms that he saw simultaneously re-emerging in the art of the contemporary avant-garde. He regards the core as an urban archetype, as the place where the individual can participate in public life.*” in Strauven F., Aldo van Eyck, *The Shape of Relativity*. Architecture and Natura, Amsterdam, 1998, p.238
See Giedion S., *The Eternal Present: I. The Beginnings of Art (1962); 2 The beginnings of Architecture (1964)*. Bollingen Foundation, Pantheon Books, New York.

27 Giedion makes the example of Michelangelo’s Capitol which is an expression of democracy even when there was no democracy at all in Rome. Similarly the Agora is an expression of freedom even when the Greeks have lost it. See Giedion S., *Historical Background to the Core*. In Tyrwhitt J., Sert J.L., Rogers E.N., *The Heart of the City – towards the humanisation of urban life*. London 1952, p. 25

28 “*This essay invites a journey of non-traditional thought about architecture and urban design, and proposes a science of context-sensitive, harmony-seeking, shape-forming process focused on generating and shaping positive space in all public places, so that the overall urban process will be able, in the hands of thousands of professionals and users – to generate inspiring, useful space throughout the city and throughout the region.*”

in 1956 (first actor), because of its unawareness or incapacity to focus the attention on the public space as the generator of the city. This remains instead “*what we 21th - Century architects, now must deliver.*”²⁹ - Alexander claims, underlying the importance of contemporary discourse about the Heart of the City, as generator of “*positive space*”³⁰. In this context, the study of the three actors, between 1950s and 1960s, aims to reveal the complexity of the Heart theme and its influence on urban design until nowadays, “*as a reference point for the new forms of public space*”.³¹ This influence has been already partly unearthed by several authors, historians or designers especially in the last ten years, but without a complete overview³². The projects and the theoretical discourses of the three actors represent the attempt to translate the abstract idea of the Heart into a physical urban project. Their failures and successes have become outstanding lessons for present-day Urban Design too. Indeed they allow to specify the context of the Heart theme, delineating some of the theoretical issues and project devices which still concern our contemporary urban planning³³.

Alexander C., Alexander M.M.(ed., *The Heart of the City. The Necessary Binding Force That Creates The Core Of Every City*. Center for Environmental Structure, 2006 See www.livingneighborhoods.org/library/the-heart-of-the-city-v18.pdf

29 Ibid. p. 25

30 Ibid. p. 25

31 For instance: **Ciam 8** “*was perhaps the first expression of what would become major preoccupations with architect-designed public gathering places in the work of Victor Gruen, Kevin Lynch and many others in the following decades. CIAM 8 can be seen as a reference point for the new forms of public space, including Shopping malls [...]*” in Mumford E., *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*, The MIT Press, 2000, p.215

32 See for instance edited by **Avermaete T.**, Havik K., Teerds H., *Architectural Positions. Architecture, Modernity and the Public Sphere*. SUN Publisher, 2009, Amsterdam; **Mumford E.**, *Sert and the CIAM `Heart of the City` Precursor to Urban Design, 1947-52* in Mumford E., *Defining Urban Design – CIAM Architects and the Formation of a Discipline, 1937-69*, University Press, New Haven and London, 2009; ed. by **Mumford E.**, **Sarkis H.**, **Josep Lluís Sert: the architect of urban design, 1953/1969**, Yale Press, 2008, New Heaven; **Domhardt K.**, ETH PhD Thesis *The CIAM Discourse on the Heart of the City and the American Neighborhood Unit Theory*; Alexander C., Alexander M.M.(editor), *The Heart of the City. The Necessary Binding Force That Creates The Core Of Every City*. Center for Environmental Structure, 2006; **Avermaete T.**, *Another Modern*. NAI, Rotterdam; **Wall A.**, *Victor Gruen – From Urban Shop to New City*. Actar, Barcellona, 2005; E.Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*. MIT Press, 2000; **Curtis B.**, *The Heart of the City* in Hughes J., Sadler S. ed by, *Non-Plan: Essays on Freedom, Participation and Change in Modern Architecture and Urbanism*. Architectural Press, 2000; **de Solà-Morales I.**, *Architecture and Existentialism*, chapter three in de Solà-Morales I., *Differences. Topographies of Contemporary architecture*. MIT Press, 1997; **Gregotti V.** (1992), *Rassegna*, n.52/4; **Bosman J.** (1985), My association with CIAM gave me new perspective. *Ekistics*, Vol 52, no 314/315

33 As Paola Coppola D’Anna Pignatelli highlights: “*The design of a Heart is also nowadays one of the most complex problems of urban planning, because of the lack of a definition specifying its contents.*” Paola Coppola D’Anna Pignatelli in a cura di Portoghesi P., *Dictionary of Architecture and Urban planning*, I edition 1968, II edition 2006

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10 PROPOSITIONS

01 The 'Heart of the City' refers to a historical discourse and to different theoretical issues concerning the contemporary city too.

02 The Heart of the City deals with the balance between the private and the public spheres and with the ideal overlapping between the social and physical structure of the city, which are still important contemporary issues of "absent urbanism" (Marshall).

03 A general frame of interpretation of the Heart theme is still lacking.

04 There is still a narrow use of the theme of the 'Heart of the City' in some of the contemporary urban theories and projects.

05 The research about the Heart of the City is mostly focused in the 1950s and the 1960s, between Europe and USA.

06 The complexity and the difficulty of interpreting the Heart of the City are mostly caused by its janus-faced semantic load: metaphorical and symbolic.

07 Within the research the three actors (Victor Gruen, CIAM Summer School in Venice and Jaap Bakema) are used in order to dissect the complexity of the Heart of the City theme, similarly to the sections of a complex project or territory. These sections reveal three different relationships: the Heart as a relationship with both the center and centrality, the Heart as a relationship with both the urban and historical context, the Heart as total Relationship.

08 The failures, successes and contradictions of the theories and projects of the three actors are important key studies for contemporary design of the City.

09 The Heart of the City is both a pro-urban Idea and a proto-urban Idea.

10 It's important the study of the constituent elements at the basement of the contemporary urban structure. The 'Heart of the City' is one of them.