The City Beautiful

by Suzanne Loen

In our profession we are indeed afraid to speak of beauty in an urban context, whoever dares to speak of it will raise suspicion. The word beauty is contaminated because we tend to associate beauty with cosmetic urbanism. Botox, face-lifts, slick pavement and facades with too much make-up. Superficial beauty, with the same thickness of façades and pavement, covers and eventually smothers the very essence of what a real city is. But then what is a real city, real urbanity? In order to define urban beauty, we would first have to define the meaning of urbanity itself. But by analysing urbanity, defining its formula, we start experimenting with its composition, creating a possibly chemical reaction. Urbanity might just blow up in our face. It's probably safer to start by asking ourselves: What is urbanity, a real city absolutely NOT? A real city is not a planned entity, a real city is not a monumental decor that serves commercial needs. It is not homogeneous, has no fixed boundaries, is not a collection of buildings. I would say a real city is defined by its multitude of contradictions and conflicting interests. A real city is a collage or a quilt of old and contemporary, bit by bit layer by layer. The real city is loud and tranquil, clean and dirty, organized and chaotic, functional and dysfunctional, poor and rich, repetitive and diverse. The very nature of the city and urbanity is found in the combination and confrontation between these contrasts. A real city unites seemingly irreconcilable contradictions. Although this city of contrasts and contradictions is indeed a real city, she is not yet a beautiful city.

Now I arouse suspicion, because what do I need beauty for, I should be quite satisfied by now, having defined urbanity? But why not have beauty too? Everybody loves beauty, wants to be beautiful, wants to have a beautiful lover, beautiful children, clothes. It is in our human nature to long for beauty. Beautiful houses, streets… and cities. The unique thing about urban beauty, and there it differs from the superficial beauty of objects and people, its not a matter of taste, but a matter of experience. Only when citizens (both temporary and permanent) are able to experience urban contradictions, can urban beauty be found. In order to experience the real city we should offer room for free movement through it. When we move through the city on our daily routine or holiday quest, the city confronts us with its contradictions. Moving through the city we experience the multi-layered city in different directions. In the horizontal direction we experience the different urban areas, the businesslike, the commercial, the crowded, the sleepy. In vertical direction we experience the historical layers, the old tracks, scars and a multitude of city reformation projects. In a cyclic direction we experience the

urban life from day into night, season after season. In this experience of 'the real city' we immerse ourselves into the complexity and contradictory of what we call urbanity, and there urban beauty might occur. Therefore the word beauty in 'urban beauty' is not a static condition but a fluid one, it appears and disappears in different shapes and forms.

Where do we find sublime urban beauty? We find it wherever we are confronted with the most obtrusive urban contradiction. There where we find the contradiction between, open and closed, crowded and silent, hard and soft, hot and cool. To me this experience is most intense when moving in and out of city parks, the very essence of urbanity. There are no parks in the country, and none in the suburbs. The rise of the city park is connected with, and a product of, the rise of the 19th century industrial cities. During this process of urbanization it became obvious that this process was irreversible and unstoppable. The form and characteristics of the industrial city began to take shape and it appeared not be to anyone's liking. There was no way of escaping the noise, the dirt and the decay. The call for the exact opposite of the industrial city became louder and louder as the surrounding landscape moved further and further away. But a solution came; the city park, a piece of captured arcadic landscape, the perfect escape. There is no better confirmation of urbanity than the city park, the green inverse of the city. The city park exists only by the grace of its enclosure, its exact opposite; the city itself. The infinite horizon, replaced by a wall of city noise, masses of stone and people only strengthens its concepts. The city park becomes a materialized illusion, an oasis in reverse (1).

The Garden City movement followed, driven by the idea of a pastoral illusion, but based on a false interpretation. The exceptional and exclusivity of the green inverse as a 'place' was transformed into a green infinity of 'space'. Therefore garden cities are neither gardens nor cities. The garden city is no city because she robbed the inhabitants of exactly that which is promised with the word 'city' in garden city; that is urbanity and contradiction. But there are no contradictions there, no loud and soft, no chaos and order, only this green smothering space.

To illustrate the contemporary success of a 19th century concept and explain the role of city parks in the urban experience, Amsterdam is an interesting example. Although the urbanity of Amsterdam is threatened because of the functioning of the historical centre functions as a static décor for touristy and commercial delights, the city parks within the city ring do function as inverses within the city's chain of contradictions. Green holes in a landscape of stone they confirm urban life by offering the illusion of an easy escape. Because everybody is passing through and nobody owns the park permanently, the illusion of an escape into nature is even stronger (although some people consider the park as a more permanent domain harming its sense of freedom). These days the famous Amsterdam Vondelpark has become a regional, national and international attraction, with around ten million visitors a year. In the good season people from outside Amsterdam will 'do a day in Vondelpark'. They don't go shopping, don't stroll along the canals, they

go exactly there where urbanity is confirmed in contradiction; to Vondelpark. The enormous success of the Vondelpark as a place for the ultimate experience of urban life is almost becoming a threat to itself.

Another notable example is Valencia and it's Jardí del Túria in Valencia, Spain. The park is located on the former bed of the river Turia. Due to flooding the river was relocated and no longer runs through the city centre. Irrespective of whether you like the design of the park, dominated by buildings designed by the city's architect Calatrava, the concept of this park is simply sublime. It's sublimity lies in the parks two main conditions. First, the longitudinal shape and direction of the park, a simple fact because it is an old river-bed, enhances the experience of urban contradictions. As it moves through the park it laces up, like a thread, urban contradiction. The second condition is the change of perspective. The riverbed is below the city level. Being in the park not only means a mental escape from urbanity but also a physical one. Creating an even stronger sense of escapism. Peacefully passing below the old bridges, while over your head the urban traffic roars. I have never experienced an urban contradiction more beautiful then this one. From the lower level of the park city life on the quay walls seems funny and like another world. Now imagine the contrast of the citizens moving over the bridges. Seeing people down there in the park there just strolling, sitting around doing nothing actually, while they themselves are busy with everyday life. It reminds me of a game children like to play on country borders; one step and you're in, one step and you're out. Because paradise is only paradise when you're free to leave as you please.

City parks, being the very affirmation of urbanity, play a crucial and indispensable part in the urban physical and mental texture of the city. They fulfill a symbolic role, just like cathedrals were once and sometimes still are the consolidation of religious power of a city, the green cathedral consolidates the cultural power of its city.
Cities grow, crumble, shrink and rise again without any visible planning or cohesion, because that's what real cities do. It is impossible to control or direct this process and to create urban beauty itself without running the risk creating exactly the opposite. It should however be possible to create certain conditions where the experience of urban beauty might occur. These conditions should, like the Jardí del Túria in Valencia, uncover the urban contradiction to create both a longing for the escape from urbanity to its green inverse and back again.

Rotterdam based architect Suzanne Loen (founder of SL_architect, studio for research design and urban ecology) strives for urban beauty in any shape and form as longs as it's green, but fears green guerilla might be the only solution….

(1) In 'The Enclosed Garden. History and Development of the Hortus Concluses and its reintroduction into Present-day Urban Landscape' (Rob Aben and Saskia de Wit, Rotterdam 1998) the writers use the term oases and it's revers the 'lichtung'. The lichting being emptiness, an open space in the forest through it's physical absence.