

Kenneth Frampton\*

## MEGAFORMA JAKO MIEJSKI KRAJOBRAZ

### MEGAFORM AS URBAN LANDSCAPE

Zaczął się już nowy wiek, obfitując w liczne monumentalne realizacje. Warto więc może przypomnieć ten tekst, napisany jeszcze przed końcem ubiegłego stulecia, które pozostawiło po sobie niedostatek odpowiedzialności za kształtowanie miejskiego środowiska. W rozważaniach nad trudnościami, jakie stoją obecnie przed architekturą i urbanistyką, powraca aspekt skali i rola samego aktu oznaczania miejsca. Elementów, które wciąż pozostają w dyspozycji architektury.

*Słowa kluczowe: megaforma, megastruktura, krajobraz, forma terenu, megalopolis, urbanistyka XX w.*

The new century full of monumental projects has begun. It is worth to remind this text written when the past century was drawing to a close, leaving us a lack of responsibility of giving shape to the urban environment. In the discourse on the difficulties we have to overcome today in architecture and urban planning, there is the aspect of scale and role of marking a place that are particularly taken in consideration. Elements that are still available in architecture.

*Keywords: megaform, megastructure, landscape, landform, megalopolis, XX. century urban planning*

*The flight of the plane provides a spectacle with a lesson – a philosophy. No longer a delight of the senses. When the eye is five feet or so above the ground, flowers and trees have dimension: a measure relative to human activity, proportion. In the air, from above. It is a wilderness, indifferent to our thousand year old ideas, a fatality of cosmic elements and events...From the plane there is no pleasure...but a long, concentrated mournful meditation...The non-professional who flies (and so whose mind is empty) becomes meditative; he can take refuge only in himself and in his own world.*

*But once he has come down to earth his aims and determinations have found a new scale.*

Le Corbusier, 1935

Unlike the last half of the nineteenth century we are unable to project urban form today with much confidence, neither as a *tabula rasa* project nor as a piecemeal strategy to be engineered over the long term through the application of zoning codes and by-laws. In the main we can only envisage the urban

\* Frampton Kenneth, prof., Columbia University, Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation.

future today in terms of fragmentary remedial operations as these may be effectively applied to the existing urban cores or (with much less certainty) to specially selected sections of the megalopolis. This is due, in the main, to the fact that, as the century draws to a close, we are increasingly subjected to sporadic waves of development that either escalate out of control or, alternatively, take place in spurts followed by long periods of stagnation.

Needless to say this predicament confronts the urban designer with an all but impossible task, one in which civic intervention has, at times, to be capable not only of engendering an immediate science of civic identity but also of serving as an effective catalyst for the subsequent development of the surrounding area. However, none of this is totally new and at different times over the past century architects have been acutely aware that the contribution they might be able to make to future urban development would of necessity be limited. This is already evident in Camillo Sitte's remedial urban strategy **City Planning According to Artistic Principles** of 1889, where clearly what is envisaged in relation to the "space-endless-ness" of the Viennese Ringstrasse is a form of urban intervention that would be capable of providing a certain definition in terms of bounded domains together with some continuity of built-form.

I have coined the terms **megaform** and **landform** first, in order to stress the generic form-giving potential of the work in hand and second, in order to emphasize the need for the topographic transformation of the landscape terms rather than in terms of the self-contained aestheticization of the single building. Thus while the term **megastructure**, first coined in the 1960's, may appear, at times to be synonymous with the **megaform**, what is at stake, in the latter case is the **overall continuity of the form** as opposed to the articulation of the large building into its articulate structural and mechanical component parts. Thus while a megaform may, in fact, incorporate a **mega-**

**structure**, a **megastructure** is not a **megaform**. In much the same way the term **landform** may appear to be indistinguishable from landscape, save for the fact that the coinage implies that what one has in mind is not merely a matter of surface treatment and plant material. Of course a landform may also be a landscape in the more conventional sense but a conventional landscape is not a **landform**.

When one looks back at the history of this century one is immediately struck by the fact that Le Corbusier's mode of beholding the city was radically changed by his aviatorial experience. Once he had seen the urban fabric from the air, he became totally transformed. This is obviously the significance of his Plan Obus of 1931 that was inspired by the volcanic topography of Rio de Janeiro which he had first experienced from the air in 1929. This aerial pano-rama of sweeping volcanic cornice led him to imagine an urban megaform in which one could no longer discern quite where the building ended and the landscape began and so, in this sense, the image was also of landform. A significant corollary to this topographic **a priori** was to render the built fabric as a kind of artificial ground, upon which and within which the occupant would be free to build in whatever way he saw fit. Hence while postulating the continuity of the megaform as a monumental topography, Le Corbusier left the small scale cellular fabric open and accessible to popular taste. At the same time it has to be acknowledged that the Plan Obus was hardly a rational proposition from either a political or a productive standpoint. In its failure to conform to any received model of the city it represented a total rupture with conventional urban typology. Unlike his Ville Contemporaine of 1922 it was neither Haussmannian nor Sittesque. It had nothing to do with Joseph Stubbens's codification of **regularized** urban space as this is set forth in his book **Die Stadtebau** of 1890. Nor did it owe anything to the perimeter block type, widely

applied in European urban extensions of the early 1920's. At the same time it did not conform to the Taylorized **Zeilenbau** row house model; as this was widely adopted in the Weimar Republic and elsewhere. In terms of constructional rationality it totally repudiated his earlier propositions for a normative form of urban housing. Possibly derived, in part, from that naïve projection of an urban extrusion crossing open landscape, as we find in Edgar Chambless' Roadtown of 1910, the Plan Obus surely represented the idea of the megaform taken to extremes. It was already conceived at the scale of an urbanized region, thirty years before the urban geographer Jean Gottmann recognized this **de facto** condition and coined the term megalopolis.

One may define the generic **megaform** as displaying one or more of the following characteristics. A continuous urban mass extending predominantly in a lateral or horizontal direction rather than vertically; a form which, unlike the Megastructure the mass is not broken down into a series of structural subsets. A form capable of inflecting the existing topography and context in a morphological way. In this respect, it is decidedly not a freestanding object but rather a continuation in some manner of the existing landscape or its latent potential. In this sense, one may assume the character of an artificial landscape or alternatively become manifest as a geological metaphor. A complex form capable of being read as a densification of the dispersed or invisible city. In this regard, it may be experienced as the "other"; as a dense urban discontinuous urban nexus with the "space-endless" dispersed urbanization of the megalopolis.

One is reminded in this context of Rockefeller Center, New York (1930–1939) which, despite its height, surely meets many of these criteria. And while we may not think of Rockefeller Center as a polemically modern work, it is surely one of the finest urban set-pieces that the twentieth century has

achieved. In this regard, it is not only a metaphor for Manhattan but also a city in miniature in much the same way as it prototypes the Palais Royale in Paris (1640–1825), even if the Manhattan version lacks any residential accommodation. Above all, Rockefeller Center maintains the plastic continuity of its forms to such an extent as to be virtually readable as a geological metaphor. This metaphor seems to be reinforced in a literal sense by Raymond Hood's proposal to install gardens on the lower roofs of the complex.

If one looks for the origin of the urban mega-form in the Modern Movement one finds it in Northern Europe, rather than in the Mediterranean. One finds it above all in the German cult of big building form (**Grossbauform**) as this appears in the work of many, so-called expressionist architects. I have in mind, in particular, Hans Scharoun, Hugo Haring, Fritz Höger, Emil Fahrenkamp, Hans Poelzig, Karl Schneider, Hugo de Fries, Max Berg, Wilhelm Riphahn, Wassily Luckhardt, and above all, Erich Mendelsohn. One finds in these architects a predisposition for creating large organic urban form, largely removed from the dematerialized spatial dynamics of the twentieth century **avant garde**. I have in mind such pioneering pieces as Scharoun's Breslau Werkbund exhibition building of 1929, Hugo Haring's Gut Garkau farm of 1924, Fritz Höger's Chilehaus, Hamburg of 1925, or Hans Poelzig's House of Friendship projected for Istanbul of 1916. One is particularly struck in this last instance in the way in which the distant silhouette of the building rose diagonally above the general flat contour, punctuated by minarets, so that it appeared like a mountainous escarpment replete with hanging gardens. Mies van der Rohe's original proposal for the Weissenhofsiedlung Exhibition and Stuttgart and Erich Mendelsohn's Alexanderplatz project for Berlin, both of 1927 can be said to assume, each in his own way, a swirling, dynamic topographic character; the one arising out of the existing street form, the other

out of the contours of the site. The work of the Tyrolean architect Lois Welzenbacher was often in this open topographic manner, particularly since much of his architecture was expressly conceived for an Alpine context.

Among the Scandinavian architects, the one who lies closest to the German tradition of **Grossbauform** is Alvar Aalto, as is already evident in his Sunila paper-pulp factory of 1935–1937 where a very striking relationship is established between the brick mass of the factory and the surrounding landscape. An equally powerful affinity between building and pre-existing landscape is created by Aalto in his Baker Dormitory, built on the edge of the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1938–1940, with the building, at one and the same time, flowing with and expanding out into the riverscape. Once one starts to examine Aalto's work in this light one finds that this syndrome is manifest throughout his mature career; from the “tented-mountain” he projected for the Vogelweidplatz sports center in Vienna in 1953 to the Pensions Institute realized in Helsinki in 1956, or say from the House of Culture, built in Helsinki in 1958 to the University of Jyväskylä dating from virtually the same period. In each instance the overall form is readable as a landscape metaphor. A similar stress upon a dynamic megaform that is virtually indistinguishable from the landform of the site is also evident in Aalto's plan of the mid-sixties for a new cultural district to be built in the Tooloo area of Helsinki. Of this ambitious, felicitous project, only the Finlandia concert hall was eventually realized.

Traces of a somewhat comparable approach may be found in the work of Team X; possibly in Alison and Peter Smithson's London Roads Study of 1953 although here it may be argued that the work is ultimately of a megastructural character. A megaform strategy will certainly inform Jacob Bakema's Bochum University scheme of 1962 and above all in his proposal for Tel Aviv of 1963. Here the basic

challenge was how to capitalize on the reality of the **motopian infrastructure** given that under the **Wirtschaft-wunder** rule of post-war capitalism the road system was the one sector in which massive investment would inevitably be made. As a result Bakema and many of the other Team X architects thought of the autoroute as the only permanent structure on which one could depend on when designing future urban form. A similar strategy lies behind the Smithson's Berlin Hauptstadt Competition of 1958 and as it is present in a much more atomized way in Louis Kahn's Philadelphia plans of 1956–1957. A somewhat opportunistic empiricism distinguished these works from the earlier German essays in **Grossbauform**. One may note a division within Team X itself, particularly when one compares the work of the Smithsons to Ralph Erskine's project for Svappavaara in Lapland of 1963 or his much later Byker Wall housing realized in Newcastle, England in 1981. One also has to acknowledge at this juncture the presence of another seminal figure for the north: namely, Jørn Utzon, who while acknowledging the automobile, did not endow it with undue importance. However, Utzon's concern for the Megaform is surely evident in his Sydney Opera House of 1953 as well as in the opera that he projected for Zurich in 1964, and his Bagsvaerd Church, built outside Copenhagen in 1976. But we would have to say that Utzon's work at this scale is, on balance, closer to Bruno Taut's concept of the “city crown” (1919) than it is to the tradition of the **Grossbauform**.

It seems to me that this tradition has enjoyed considerable currency in Spain over recent years. It is surely evident at an urban scale in the work of Rafael Moneo, from his extremely modest Bank Inter building completed in Madrid in 1976 to the continuous form of his L'illa block, designed in collaboration with Manuel de Sola-Morales, completed in 1993 on the Diagonal in Barcelona. While the Bank Inter was a relatively small, fairly vertical form,

on a restricted urban site, in a prestigious neighborhood, it was still able to address itself to the larger urban domain of the Castellana axis. Thus, at one and the same time it both asserted its own identity as a semi-freestanding building and contributed its inflected, dynamic form to the evolving character of the neighborhood.

To varying degrees and in somewhat different ways the urban megaform has been a recurrent theme in Moneo's production throughout his career. It is surely possible to identify this concept in his Roman Museum, realized in Merida in 1986, as well as in his Atocha Station built in Madrid of 1992. In each instance, the morphology of the existing fabric is given a specific inflection, by transforming the topography surrounding each building. In Merida, the structure builds back into the street while anchoring its morphology into the nearby Roman amphitheaters. In Madrid, the hypostyle hall of the new high-speed train shed thrusts its dynamic form into the back of the old railroad in such a way as to re-establish the authority of the terminal. Such an inflection is evident even in his more formalistic work such as the town hall that he built in Logrono although one can hardly think of this work as an urban megaform. It is surely present in his 1992 proposal for the Kursal site in San Sebastian with its unifying podium and the twin concert halls mounted above, inflected as they incline and pivot with respect of each other and the context, above all the swing of the promontory and the passage of the river. There are of course many other architects whose work could be considered under this rubric, but for the moment this cursory didactic view will have to suffice.

My attempt to discriminate between megastructure and megaform finds a certain parallel in the distinction I have tried to draw between landform and landscape. It is surely self-evident that Le Notre's concept of the **parterre** is less three dimensional and organic in character than, say, Luis Pena Ganchegui's setting

for Eduardo Chillida's sculpture, "The Comb of the Wind," as this was installed in the harbor of San Sebastian in 1986. While such a comparison is invidious, we may nonetheless identify a number of landforms that have more or less of the same three dimensional character as Ganchegui's set piece. One thinks of the "staging ground" built on the Philopapu Hill, Athens in 1958, to the designs of Dimitrius Pikionis or much more recently of a restructuring of the immediate environs of the Alhambra by the Austrian architects Peter Nigst, Erich Hubmann, and Andreas Vass. Clearly one needs to acknowledge in this genre of work the contribution of Enric Miralles who has always striven to give his architecture a topographic energy that either animates the site or fuses with its preexisting potential depending on the context. This last is particularly manifest in the Igualada Cemetery (1990–1992) built in a disused quarry or in the archery field house, constructed on undulating ground for the 1992 Olympics staged in Barcelona. It is interesting to note in this regard that in Spain there is no separate profession of landscape architecture.

As I have suggested, one has also to take into consideration the deployment of landscape **in se** in a more radical sense, that is to say, as an attempt to give shape to an otherwise totally formless terrain. One thinks in this regard of the work of Luis Barragan in Pedragal, near Mexico City (1945–1950) or of the gardens by Robert Burle Marx in his Parco del Este, built in Caracas, Venezuela (1962). In such instances, one cannot stress too highly the importance of landscape as a catalyst, so to speak, with which to mediate and transform what is otherwise only too often the unending chaos of the urbanized region.

It may be objected that all of the foregoing is unduly formalist that the future of the urbanized region as an efficient infrastructure is not being sufficiently considered or conversely, but to a similar end that the physical constitution of the city is of little

consequence today in our telemetric age. Alternatively, it may be felt by some that the European City can only be reconstructed typologically, along the lines of the erstwhile Italian **Tendenza**, or one may argue, along with the latter-day neo-avant-garde, that the context of the historical fabric is of no lasting significance. All of these extreme, even retardataire viewpoints seem to me to be evasive to the extent that they do not face up to the responsibility of giving shape to urban environment in the late modern world. In the meantime the automobile, left largely to its devices save for the instrumental mediations of the road engineer, continues to spread its ruthless, anti-civic character across the surface of the earth.

Aside from the most mindless forms of mechanized, speculative development as these are totally transforming East and South East Asia we know finally that cities can never be designed as coherent wholes in the **tabula rasa** sense and that they are equally intractable to being developed in a significant way where the increments are too small and unsynthesized. Perhaps this was always the case, but what has changed dramatically in the last fifty years is the rate of technological change and the rapacity of modern development, all of which tend to outstrip any thing that urbanized society had experienced in the past. Both city and country are affected almost to an equal degree by the relentless dynamism of **motopia**.

Above all there is the fact that in many parts of the world the ground is no longer being significantly cultivated by the act of **work**, that is to say by production in either an agricultural or industrial sense. Instead it is being consumed and phenomenologically “flattened out” by the abstract processes of distribution, tourism, and exchange. At the same time liberal “individualistic” democracy remains reluctant to commit itself to dense forms of residential land settlement that would be consistent with the production of a coherent civic pattern. We may say that architecture and urbanism as a critical culture barely exists. In the meantime urban development is indirectly controlled by zoning codes and mortgage companies, by banks and land speculators. Certainly this is the case in the United States, and it is, I believe, becoming increasingly the case in Europe and elsewhere.

It seems to me that architects can only intervene effectively under present circumstances in a piecemeal, remedial way and that the most effective instrument for this is larger segments of the general building fabric consciously rendered as some kind of megaform or landform by virtue of which the urbanized region comes to be “marked.” As Vittorio Gregotti once put it, architecture does not begin with the primitive hut but with the marking of ground.