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Nature in the city or the city in nature?

1 Introduction

The question of "urban green spaces" is a variant of the archetypical question about nature and the city. It is very difficult to consistently address this question at the conceptual level, as it involves an antagonist pair, two terms which both elude accurate, unambiguous definition. At the common sense level, the terms nature and city seem simple and generally understandable, but to a more demanding participant in the discussion it becomes soon clear that they are dynamic conceptual constructs engaged in complex relationships. The discussion is therefore necessarily reductionist, because to address the whole would amount to solve key civilisation questions.

It thus makes sense to limit the range and level of the discussion on nature in the city from the beginning. This self-limitation is further indicated by the concept of "green spaces" which highlights only one dimension – the spatial one – of urban green spaces. In this case, too, the common sense answer seems simple. Green spaces are the city's "lungs", an essential, vital element that allows the city to function normally. The scope of a city's green spaces determines its vitality. A healthy city is one with lots of greenery, and how it is designed (landscaped) is of secondary importance. This largely quantitative criterion is in fact so simple that it can be measured and used to check the "health condition" of a given urban space. But even this simplest of indicators turns complex if, for instance, we also consider the city's size. In small countryside towns a relatively modest share of green spaces is no problem at all. In small town, for instance, vast green spaces are accessible within an isochrone of five minutes or less. How relative the quantitative criterion really is, is perfectly illustrated by the example of Mediterranean, densely built-up cities which nevertheless have a very intensive contact with nature's blue and green spaces, and enjoy a high quality environment. Taking into account the size of a city and its basic geographical facts thus by itself shows how relative the size of urban green spaces is. And if we then add qualitative criteria to the analysis, it becomes soon obvious that the question eludes stereotyped answers. Starting from plain "amateur" statements and views, we nevertheless soon face profound existential problems to which even the most advanced disciplines have only partial, reductionist answers. Cutting down a single tree in the city may prompt questions to which no convincing answer exists today. It is obvious that green spaces in various ways "represent" nature in the city, and this means that every intervention, which has an impact on the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of this urban element, may address the same questions that emerged at the beginning of man's creation of artificial, unnatural, built spaces. What we actually face here is an

archetypical issue that is beyond the competences of urbanists as well as landscape architects, and therefore remains a high priority to urban planning and development in the 21st century (Hall and Pfeiffer, 2002: 105).

2 A symptomatic postmodern question

The discussion on nature in the city thus opens up a broad and deep range of questions. If we are but slightly more inquisitive and do not satisfy ourselves with common sense wisdom, of which there certainly is no lack in the field, every professional discussion on the (in)adequacy of specific spatial planning of "nature in the city" runs into epistemological pitfalls that are hard to avoid. The basic reason lies in the fact that in theory as well as in daily pragmatics, the relationship between "nature and culture" cannot be satisfactorily encompassed by the subject-object dichotomy as the basic modernist research tool. Nature never is just an object of observation. To understand concrete nature never is a merely abstract undertaking, because the concrete image always has an incorporated, complex conscious/unconscious element, one's view of nature determined by individual experience. To sum up, even highly committed professional discussions on the status of nature in the city cannot avoid "individual and collective ideologies", which constantly construct individual and collective ideas, opinions and wishes concerning nature in the city. Is the discussion on the symbiosis of nature and the city meaningful at all, if the city is a cultural artefact, by definition something unnatural or even anti-natural? Would it not amount to discussing "wooden iron"?

In spite of the indicated reservations, the answer is surprisingly simple. Not only is the discussion meaningful, but it is of constitutive significance to urban managers, designers and planners and, moreover, the question has to be observed because it has become quite obvious that the past solutions are no longer adequate nor sustainable. Over and over again we must query what it is in an urban space that causes nostalgic longing for nature, and how the elements of nature in the city may to some extent satisfy our basic need for living in close contact with nature.

Two dangers must be pointed out here. If we start to address the first question, it is highly likely that, willingly or unwillingly, we will find ourselves once more on the anti-urban, anti-modern, or even anti-civilisation front. In principle, we can avoid this bipolar escalation by treating natural and built spaces as perfectly equal elements of the city. If we address the second question, we cannot avoid the conclusion that modernism had reduced nature in the city to a symbolic surrogate that can satisfy our basic need for contact with real nature only at the symbolic level. But the postmodern urbanite wants more and with increasing consistency demands concrete, not just symbolic "naturalisation" of his living and working environment

The "artificial nature" in the city is thus the result of a pragmatic modernist logic which deals only with elements that can be controlled with the available planning instruments, and sweeps aside or postpones to the future everything that

is beyond this pragmatic horizon (Offe, 1987). Nature in the city is part of the cultural (built) environment and as such only represents nature. One does not have to be a deep ecologist to conclude that "urban green spaces" are only a kind of mimicry of nature, which has very little in common with nature as an autopoietic, self-generating, and self-regulating entity. Nevertheless, this surrogate has performed its function with relative success, and in spite of its obvious reductionism has satisfied the basic need of city dwellers for nature for many years. This of course opens up an endless debate on the alienating aspects of such "artificial" gratification of basic human needs and inevitably takes us to well-known criticism of modernity (Offe, 1987).

The question of urban green spaces as part of the relationship between nature and the city in late modernity can thus no longer be solved merely in the classical, instrumental way of professional planning. For numerous reasons, this relationship exceeds the range of planning instruments. This inadequacy is not as much a consequence of the sudden sharp deterioration of the conditions for preserving a symbolic presence of nature in the city, but primarily the result of a reflective postmodern value shift (Inglehart, 1997). The question of the attitude to nature increasingly turns into a central issue in reflective postmodern societies, even it is actually a very old question. In postmodern society this theme has occupied the empty space previously occupied by great historical (revolutionary) questions. The dwindling credibility of professional (expert) systems has caused a proportional rise of common sense, media-boostered reflexivity. This applies to high theoretical science and as well as perfectly practical, operationally performing professional systems. At the same time, general sensitivity to the issues of nature protection has increased and reached the dimensions and idiosyncrasies of catastrophic stories about the end of the world.

All this of course does not mean that the question of green spaces in the city is not a genuinely practical question of urban planning and design. The novelty lies in the fact that it is increasingly hard to treat the question at the symbolic level only. Postmodern reflexivity reopens presumably solved questions and intensifies the scepticism about operationally routinised planning and managing practises. Urban green spaces are therefore certainly not only an municipal planning and regulating issue, nor just an issue of aesthetics, but are becoming a symbolic and practical indicator of the irreconcilable conflict between "nature and culture" to increasing numbers of city dwellers

3 The symbolism of green spaces

Because of the irreconcilable antagonism between "nature" and "culture" as it physically reveals itself in the relationship between the natural and the urban space, nostalgic longing for everything the city, an artificial space, cannot offer, has more or less accompanied townspeople from the beginning to the present. Attempts to solve this problem thus have ancient roots. And this is why historically townspeople, if they could afford it, rented land outside the urban areas. The motives for this practise were quite clear. They involve

an understandable eclecticism: to experience, in addition to the amenities the city offers, nature as the original space, the space of origin. Mumford mentions that already the citizens of Ur satisfied this archetypical need by creating suburban gardens (Mumford, 1988: 490). Opinion surveys on the ideal living (dwelling) environment thus have a long tradition. Criticism of towns, feeding on a presumed lack of "nature" and "naturalness" are therefore common not only in semi-urbanised societies like Slovenia. In England, the pioneer country of modern (industrial) urbanisation, opinion surveys have established a similar nostalgia for a more natural, rural environment (Halfacree, 1997: 75). These wishes may be an expression of a Jungian "collective" memory of a "natural" state, but are in their essence a symptom of the unabated stress that is caused by the insolvable, and consequently continual, problematic relationship between "culture" and "nature". Many writers of the past have been quite explicit: God created the countryside, man created the town (Thomas, 1983). Living in a town is therefore a punishment, expulsion from Eden, and the motivation to return to nature is very high. In this context, it is not surprising that years ago people proposed to plant a bushy linden in the most urban (cultural) space of Ljubljana – in Prešeren Square at the Tromostovje bridge; and there should be a bench under it where "people would recover from the exhausting city in the cool shadow of the tree" (Gantar and Kos, 1993). The demands or wishes to "regreen" the most urban square of Ljubljana are but the concrete expression of beliefs about the unnatural, stressful urban living space, which contemporary planners try to solve with symbolic patches of nature in the city. Users however often link the symbolic level to the practical one and this among others leads to instances where people will fiercely defend a single endangered tree. People often even fight urgent planning interventions in green spaces, because they conceive them as symbolic and concrete attacks on the city's "lungs". And that is why green spaces are no longer a marginal municipal issue, but are turning into the principal symbolic and practical element of the urban space's quality. If nature was first understood in modern towns largely as a mandatory decorative accessory, it has today turned into an issue on which the survival of modern towns hinges. In ecologically reflective postmodernity it is increasingly obvious that simulating nature in an urban, built environment is no longer adequate, that this scenery can no longer alleviate the stress caused by unnatural urban spaces. Moreover, nature in a town which preserves only a nostalgic memory of a "long lost paradise" actually strengthens the motivation to return to the presumed ideal space.

That this is really about the survival of urbanity as we know it is indicated by the increasing suburbanisation trends which threaten to empty densely built up urban areas. Suburbanisation is in fact the most obvious evidence of the failure of past attempts to find compromise solutions to the issue of nature in the city. And because suburbanisation is unfortunately a highly "unsustainable" way of combining the built and the natural, alternative solutions are urgently required. The last conceptually radical attempt to reconcile the city and nature dates back to more than a century ago. The "garden town" may have been a quite influential model, but it far from succeeded in harmonising the town and the countryside as it was imagined by Ebenezer Howard at the end of 19th century.

Mass motorisation made a decisive contribution to the development that what we got instead of garden towns are individualised, suburban picture-postcard homes. Conceptual and practical innovations are therefore urgently required in the "post-oil era". If changes are not introduced systematically and gradually, the outcome will probably generate conflicts and will certainly not be the best possible one. The question of nature in contemporary postmodern cities is therefore much more than nostalgia. The naturalisation of the urban space must move to a new, functional phase.

These efforts must however take account of a key limitation. The city as a cultural space by definition cannot replace the natural space. That would mean to try and eliminate the basic difference between nature and culture (Beck, 2001). The reverse is equally true: nature cannot replace the city. These self-evident truths must be emphasised because we live in an environment where we continue to encounter hugely simplified criticism of the urban space as being nothing else than iron, concrete and asphalt, a grey unnatural, even anti-natural jungle. Such criticism probably results from a condition where people have not yet recovered from the shock caused by the cultural colonisation of the natural space. Those who view the city as the absolute opposite of nature and the natural space, are of course right – the city is culture and cannot be nature. Those who want to alleviate the shock are equally right, but the past ways of using symbolic patches of nature have obviously become ineffective.

4 Conclusion: combine the incompatible?

Analysts and planners of the urban landscape have been asking themselves the following question for a long time. What do the demands for "more nature" in the city actually mean, what do the constant demands of the inhabitants for nature really mean in Ljubljana city that is literally squeezed between two green, forested hills, has an above average share of green spaces, where a five minute drive from the centre of the city takes you to a genuine peasant environment, and if you are (un)lucky you might even have a close encounter with a bear on the doorstep of the city. In these conditions, the motivation for demanding more and more "nature" is obviously so powerful that these wishes undoubtedly exceed the options available to the designers of the urban landscape.

This means that we are in an interpretation field where even in affluent societies nostalgic longing for a lost Eden has survived, directly associated with old "indigenous" interpretations of the urban space. The starting point for these notions is the belief that towns are literally the "devil's work" (Jeraj, 1933). The other interpretation pole has come to terms with reality and expects the "opposition between the city and the countryside" to be of constitutive importance for a certain period or a certain type of city" (Rotar, 1981: 28), meaning, in other words, that the **unnatural state** is the key or even determining feature of cities. In the case of the first, the search for alternative solutions is uncompromisingly anti-urban, while according to the second, new compromise relationships are possible in the future.

Urban planners thus face a difficult task: how to combine the incompatible. Is a discussion on nature in the city possible at all without turning into a discussion against the city, against modernity, and against culture? Do postmodern "de-urbanisation as nostalgia, and anti-urbanisation as a life style" (Halfacree, 1997: 84) not provide evidence enough that cities have failed and that the atavist, but idealised memory of a formal natural state is too powerful, that people desert the city and opt for "nature" (the countryside) as their living environment as soon as they have the opportunity. Howard's idea of a constant – nowadays we would say sustainable – and synergetic symbiosis of the city and the countryside seem even more utopian today than it was at the time of its origin. Strong de-urbanisation trends, motivated precisely by the search for "more natural" living spaces, will obviously soon change the relationship between the urban and the rural space to the point that is indeed questionable whether the discussion on "nature in the city" will have any relevancy.

Howard's idea of the symbiosis of nature and the city was a kind of modern urban utopia which tried to use pragmatic rational logic to solve the ancient antagonism between the urban and "natural". Social and spatial development did not solve this problem, but only radically changed the context for solving it. The question of symbiosis between "nature and culture" is no longer raised within the urban space, but is becoming a topical, pragmatic issue at the level of the wider, metropolitan, regional or entire space. The idea that we will solve the problem of nature in the city by leaving the city leads us up a blind alley. The problem of nature in the city reveals itself increasingly as a generic problem of nature and society. The question of green spaces in the city should therefore be taken to a higher level. Actually, the time has only now come to operationalise Howard's idea of a partner symbiosis of the city and the countryside. Urban green spaces should therefore be seen as part of the ecosystem's whole. Instead of discussing nature in the city it would be better to discuss the city in nature. This conceptual shift envisages that urban green spaces will include the rural environment of the city and possibly even more remote nature. Such an approach is in harmony with the actual practise of townspeople who daily or weekly visit "green spaces" close to the city and often also more remote "meadows". City parks and other green spaces have thus partly lost their past substitution role, even though their substitution and symbolic role remains very important to many categories of townspeople. The shift of the planning level to a higher level, that is to at least the level of the urban region, also facilitates operational implementation of the ideas of sustainable or nature-friendly urban development (Plut, 2007: 14–15), and this seems to be the consensually legitimised development direction of contemporary developed societies. Such ecosystemic understanding of urban green spaces (or elements) would eliminate partial and consequently reductionist treatment of nature in the city. This would be the only way to relevantly address this key issue of modernity. To sum up, in the postmodern global world it makes more sense to stimulate discussions on the city in nature than on nature in the city. This shift promises the elimination and replacement of the conflict, rival relationship between the city and the countryside with a

partner relationship. Though this may seem a new utopia in the existing, inflexible conditions, evidence has been accumulating that such a shift is actually the only feasible way to reconcile the archetypical conflict between the city and nature.

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