

CELEBRATION OF CITIES
INTRODUCTION

Today, over half the world's population live in cities and urban agglomerations. In comparison with life in the country, life in cities definitely seems more promising because the latter offers inhabitants possibilities not only of an economic nature but also cultural which do not exist in the country. The promise of a better life is an incentive to the rural exodus the extent of which has varied throughout the centuries. Particularly strong in the 19th century, this migration was justified in the sense that employment and revenue were more attractive in the city than in the country. Nowadays, especially in developing countries, cities and particularly large cities and metropolis continue to be an attraction for the rural population although they no longer have as much work to offer, at any rate not in the formal sectors of the economy.

A few decades ago many town planners and sociologists, even writers, considered that the problem of cities could and should be resolved in the country. Today, we admit that the urbanisation process is irreversible but we also realise that in many countries neither the national or municipal authorities nor the town planners possess the means of controlling the urban growth.

Thus cities present striking contrasts: they produce a large part of a countries wealth but they also carry the heaviest part of the poverty burden. For too long habitat policies were exclusively oriented towards satisfying housing needs, convinced that "housing for all" would resolve the problems of the big agglomerations and create healthy and convivial cities. However, the experience of the last decades has shown that this was but a simplistic view of the problem.

The extensive housing programmes, the huge complexes and even the new towns rarely gave birth to a true urbanity and an urban life in all its diversity, offering all the possibilities that the inhabitants have the right to expect from their city.

Despite their insufficiencies and their dangers, cities and agglomerations have to be accepted as a reality which cannot be replaced by fiction or a utopia the future of which will always be uncertain. The UIA programme "Celebration of Cities" is the opportunity for the architects of the world to propose a series of realist and feasible projects in agreement with interested municipalities. Initially, four scenarios may be distinguished:

◆ **The historic city**

Over the years, the original reasons for the creation of many of our cities have been lost and they no longer correspond, or in a very reduced way, to the needs of a contemporary city with the associated social and cultural realities. While often remarkable efforts have been made for the restoration and highlighting of our historic monuments and centres, the same cannot be said for housing and the infrastructures. However, monuments can exist only if they form an integral part of an urban fabric with a population that accepts the historic framework and is motivated to preserve it and ready to redevelop it.

We can observe, therefore, that while efforts are concentrated on the preservation of monuments, habitat and the quality of life are deteriorating. Economic problems and the unstable property situation may sometimes be factors that slow down and make the maintenance and restoration of housing impossible. In other cases, it is the absence of co-ordination between the various technical services of the city that hinders the implementation of any coherent projects. More and more often, the role and the support of the inhabitants represent an indispensable asset for the success of any renovation operation in a neighbourhood, a complex or a city.

◆ **Large housing complexes – outskirts of metropolis**

The large housing complexes created, generally speaking, since the 50's in almost all cities and particularly on the outskirts of cities and metropolis to satisfy urgent housing needs as rapidly as possible, today require reflection and substantial restoration programmes, both from the architectural and the social points of view in order to redefine the co-habitation that is a prime necessity for living in society

It was definitely necessary at that time to make provision, close to the urban agglomerations, for the influx of hundreds of thousands of families attracted by the urban dream. But neither the political awareness, nor the town planning concepts, nor the technical and financial capacities were equal to the task.

Thus, it rapidly became clear that these buildings, generally designed as towers or blocks, in response to the economic situation, presented problems from the point of view of construction techniques and maintenance but also and above all from the social point of view. This is true for both the industrialised and developing countries. Social segregation, marginalisation and, in many cases, the danger of an upsurge of crime that results, are characteristic of these large housing complexes. The municipal authorities often admit, in fact, their incapacity to manage these "sensitive" areas.

Here again we are faced with a major topic that deserves, more so than many others, the close attention of architects and town planners who are called upon to develop ideas, in consultation with the political deciders, to improve this situation, not only on the aesthetic and construction levels, but also from the social point of view. Here again, a series of experimental projects ought to be developed and applied in close association with the users.

◆ Precarious habitat – shanty towns

One of themes rarely dealt with by architects and town planners is that of precarious habitat. It can be observed that in some countries, and around certain cities, the percentage of the population living in illegally built housing is easily over 60% of the urban population. As the regretted Jorge Hardoy, eminent historian of Latin American cities, used to say: "It is the poor that are the main architects and town planners in Latin America". And this is true not only in that part of the world; the same phenomenon is characteristic of Africa and Asia, perhaps even Europe.

The shacks being built progressively on the periphery of cities, on unhealthy sites, dangerous slopes, these "squatters settlements", "barrios", "favelas" and "shanty towns" are generally considered to be the scourge of the urban fabric and their inhabitants as being "unlawful", "illegal immigrants", "dropouts".

Despite the extent and impact of this type of habitat, very little research has been done on their origin, their inhabitants, their social structures and even less on their economic situation. Rare are the occasions when architects have been involved in these areas, and very few programmes have been created to improve the living conditions of their inhabitants, who generally speaking lack everything: infrastructures, schools, health services, transport etc.

Nevertheless, one is surprised to observe that many of these "illegal" cities function efficiently according to a traditional model of social hierarchy and community structure. And, even from the architectural point of view, one can frequently find traditional forms of construction and decoration which are part of the ancestral traditions of their inhabitants.

The latter are usually capable of building their house and have no need for an "architectural design", but rather of assistance and the participation of an architect in their efforts to improve their living environment. Perhaps the term "participation" could take on a new sense which would inverse the traditional roles.

We feel that there is urgency for the profession to concentrate on this aspect of habitat, recognising nevertheless that the habitual forms of professional practice are not well adapted to intervention in the areas of precarious housing. It is highly desirable that methods of intervention and projects be developed – with all the necessary precaution and all the modesty– for chosen areas.

♦ Suburbs

Besides the large complexes and shanty towns, another urban phenomenon exists on the periphery of metropolis: the suburbs. The growth of these agglomerations, linking different and autonomous entities, often results in an anarchic development of the buffer zones where craft, industrial and sometimes even agricultural activities mingle and where individual or semi-collective housing is constructed in the absence of any planned urban structuring. These suburbs deserve special attention in order to give them a meaning, to create social links and provide them with the facilities indispensable for true community life. Distance from place of work, insufficient public transportation and the lack of a personal identity make of these zones a collection of nuclei scattered over a non-defined territory, that evolves at the mercy of real estate pressure and the progressive provision of facilities (transportation, cultural and social facilities etc...).

For these 'non-places', it is often a question of reorganising the over-stretched and heterogeneous urban fabric, of restructuring the space by introducing the elements necessary for community life, of reviewing the public spaces to make them capable of hosting socialising activities for an often multifarious population. Here again, it is often a case of specific actions aimed at encouraging the blossoming of community life through the creation of social links.

In light of the fact that many other themes could be found and developed on the subject of the programme "Celebration of Cities", launched by its President Jaime Lerner, today the UIA would like to give the floor to the architects of the world, inviting them to reflect on this issue and present ideas designed to correct such failures observed in their cities. These exceptional proposals, that may be compared to an "urban acupuncture" programme, would make it possible not only to identify and analyse these imbalances, but also to suggest concrete ideas to remedy them.

The international consultation being organised will hopefully make it possible to present the UIA Congress in Istanbul, in 2005, with not only ideas in response to a certain number of problem aspects in cities, but also with some completed projects thanks to the mobilisation of the other actors in the art of construction - the political and financial deciders.