Chapter 11

Cities With Grid Layout: Ubiquitousness and Flexibility of an Urban Model

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ABSTRACT

Might it be meaningful to think that an urban model such as the orthogonal grid layout, which has been a feature of cities for millennia, could still constitute a valid and practicable model today in the planning of contemporary cities? The authors believe that this reflection on the grid model might respond positively to earlier propositions, and these notes aim to supply a synthetic contribution to the book in that direction. In detail, in the first part of the chapter, an attempt is made to overcome a critical judgement as widespread as it is superficial that is traditionally applied to grid plan cities. The reflection is as follows: relationships between the physical form of the urban grid model and its evolutionary processes, its capacity of adhering to places and flexibility, its experimentations for a theory of special equality. In the second part of the chapter, setting out from the performance features of the model, the real conditions of the topicality of the grid plan are observed in contemporary experimentations of city planning.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3613-0.ch011
1. INTRODUCTION

Might it be meaningful to think that an urban model such as the orthogonal grid layout, which has been a feature of cities for millennia, beginning with Mohenjodaro (3300–1300 BC) in the Indus Valley civilization (today Pakistan) or with the first settlements of workers and supervisors of Kahun around the great pyramid of Illahun in Egypt (3.000 BC), could still constitute a valid and practicable model today in the planning of contemporary cities? Might we moreover believe that, in the light of its ubiquitousness in the long history of human settlements, it may still offer efficient performance characteristics when faced with the challenges of contemporaneity in the environmental, social, technological and aesthetic fields?

The authors believe that this reflection on the grid model might respond positively to earlier propositions, and these notes aim to supply a synthetic contribution to the book in that direction. In the afterword of the Italian edition (1993) of his perhaps best-known work, Planning in the Public Domain: From Knowledge to Action (1987) John Friedmann writes: “We are living in truly unusual and difficult times. The Euclidean way of thinking, with its straight lines and its angles measured with precision, is unlikely to prove adequate to the tasks facing us. What we need is a non-Euclidean, non-linear type of planning”. This is the response made by Friedmann to one of the main criticisms of his book which “speaks of planning abstractly because contributions to urban planning, especially physical and urbanistic planning, are not discussed”. Kevin Lynch too in his 1984 A Theory of Good City Form, translated in Italy in 1990, in the chapter on the Three Normative Theories of City Form, sees many examples of cities with a chequered plan ascribable to the first: the “cosmic or cosmogonic theory” of city form which refers – like the other two – to a metaphor which in Lynch’s view better clarifies what a city is and how it functions. In the case of the “cosmic” urban model, the form of any settlement of a permanent nature proposes a magical copy of the divine universe which results in a use of the urban place and its crystalline form which reinforces and symbolizes power, as shown by the long history of western civilization and the vicissitudes of its contemporary cities. So in this urban model a connection is created between divinities, humans, rites and city plans. If it is devised by shamans, absolute monarchs, military hierarchies, this model cannot but be characterised as rigid, abstract and therefore unfit to adapt to the multiformity of the natural places and territorial contexts on which it is sometimes brutally superimposed. Moreover, its schematism and abstractness would show a desire to project a cosmic order on earth, politically legitimizing those who devised, designed and created it.

If these ideas arise from certain real elements, it is not hard to call them into question because it is believed that they are of a theoretical nature and not wholly justified when subjected to scrutiny. In fact it will be argued that the grid may be
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