The contemporary city: anchored and unanchored cities

Among contemporary metropolises providing an authentic model of organised life and economic development, above and beyond national boundaries and geographical entities, two categories of individual cities can be clearly distinguished: first of all, the unanchored cities, among which can be numbered the great African metropolises, and the instant cities of the Far East – huge conurbations that have grown extremely rapidly, powerful magnets for vast masses of people and enormous economic resources, overpowering yet utterly fragile urban entities that suddenly congeal at one point on the globe, and which attract extraordinary geo-economic and political opportunities, cities whose history has not yet settled down, and who are moving in no clear direction towards a foreseeable future. Secondly, the anchored cities, which share the same contemporary metropolitan phenomena, often being, in terms of size, economic and social transformation and growth rate, quantitatively equal to and qualitatively similar to the unanchored cities, but which, unlike these, base their growth and their metamorphoses on the full length of their own past history, anchoring them (in point of fact) to the physical and symbolic structures that belong to the place they inhabit and to their memories. These urban organisms appear to be those that are destined to have a greater chance of surviving into the future, as they change and adapt yet keep alive their identity; they are predestined to bear witness to our times, and even in the most unforeseeable future scenarios, to the continuation of the history of mankind.

Limes and urban identity

However, in both the anchored and unanchored cities, one of the chief problems, which modern urban design lacks the tools to deal with, is undoubtedly the fluctuating nature of the city boundaries, which is a result of the spread of the city over huge expanses of territory, without any defined design regulations or even control over its growth. Under these conditions one can understand why the exponential spread of the megalopolises in the so-called emerging countries, accompanied by the aesthetic dazzle of contemporary architecture, has made it necessary to come up with new theories to interpret urban phenomena – such as that proposed by the new urbanism movement – which aim to make possible that which contemporary urbanistics has failed to achieve, that is, an effective alternative to the spread of peripheral settlement (urban sprawl), to the disintegration of the
city, and the lack of places where it can identify itself. Other theories, such as those put forward by Spiro Kostoff, clearly maintain that in the present state of urban development, “the city is not a work of art”, but is the only genuine theatre in which contemporary architecture can take the stage, and whose form, without definite boundaries, is moulded by mainly economic and social dynamics, which are changeable and often unforeseeable, and always unmanageable.

Other schools of thought, in examining the contemporary metropolis, have coined the word splintering to describe a prevalent type of urban growth where the form is dispersed over the territory, forcing new urban fabrics to grow only along the framework of the existing infrastructure.

At the same time, there is evidence for the opposite condition, for cities that are becoming smaller, defined by Philip Oswalt as the shrinking cities phenomenon, where the city boundaries retract as areas are abandoned and there is a subsequent reduction from the size, and above all from the shape, of the city in its phase of maximum expansion.

One can see however that this is a special and recurrent phenomenon, as are all the phenomena involving actual changes to cities, that from a qualitative viewpoint are an integral part of the history of Eastern and Western cities, as Oswald Spengler reminds us often in the Decline of the West. It is well known, for example, that the expansion of Rome under the Empire can be seen as an real example of urban sprawl, and its spread showed the features of splintering along the lines of the consular roads. The city had perhaps two million inhabitants, of whom only a part lived within the circuit of the Aurelian walls; afterwards the city began to shrink until in the darkest days of the middle ages, the population numbered little more than fifteen thousand, clustered near the Tiber, at some distance from the imperial city walls, from which they were separated by ancient abandoned ruins, orchards and meadows. The city was a vast mysterious monument, which, despite all, continued to be seen as the symbolic image of its own exceptional character and its destiny as the eternal city.

In this light, the continuous re-determining of the city’s boundaries, i.e. its limes, can be judged, even today, to be one of the most stimulating areas of investigation in the study of the contemporary city, since it is deeply rooted in the past and thus indispensible for establishing the identity of the entire city, as it acts as the most powerful anchor to its own past history; a monumental infrastructure, complex and categorical, on which the events and signs of its age-old transformations have accumulated.

Three case studies

Rome, Beijing and New York stand out as extraordinary examples of cities anchored to their location, to their history and to their perennial forms of development,
almost as if over time, in successive layers or in the continuing presence of the original plan, there has evolved a specific structural model, an ongoing design, a personality, formed from the processes of change, an authentic genetic code which seems to guide them through even the radical transformations currently taking place, by being able to adapt to all the different conditions prevailing throughout their history. When we analyse the historical and physical structure of the three cities, we can detect in each of them the urban *limes*, be it artificial – the city walls – or natural – in the case of Manhattan, the shoreline of the island and its waterfront – as a vital element in the continuity of the historical development of each individual city and at the same time as a special place that is a key to the transformation of the city in its dimensions and its passage from one era of its history to another.

Also, Rome, Beijing and New York, as well as being anchored cities, correspond to the three models described by Kevin Lynch in *Good City Form*: the cosmic model (Beijing), the practical model (Rome) and the organic model (New York). Steen Eiler Rasmussen, on the other hand, according to the theoretical scheme set out in *Towns and Buildings* would classify Beijing as a city-temple, Rome as an eternal city, and New York as a colonial city.

**City limes and limines**

It thus becomes obvious that when we talk of city walls, or rather, of an artificial or natural *limes*, in the case of contemporary metropolises, we have to remember that we still have to deal with the problem of urban form. This form, in the examples given above – Lynch and Rasmussen – is portrayed as a symbolic form, even if the meaning is different – though not greatly so – from that which inspired the designs for ideal cities in the Renaissance or enlivened the period in which architecture on a large scale was seen as the means to define the image of the city. Perhaps nowadays, realistically speaking, the problem of urban form has been absorbed into the problem of the heritage of collective memory which is preserved, or should be preserved, in the city. The idea of the city as collective memory involves the need to create identifying factors that would induce the current inhabitants (who belong to many different races and cultures) to have an awareness of themselves within the spatial boundaries and symbolic elements of the city that surrounds them. To this end, the physical, historical limines of the city, where they exist, are certainly among the factors that help to give a sense of belonging and an identity which every person or group of persons needs and expects from their city. To give an example, a complex urban culture that has been crucial to the creation of European civilisation, namely that of the vast area of what is now Germany, has regarded the question of the boundaries of a city, the *grenze*, as so important that German scholars have continuously carried out studies and researches into the definition...
of the external and internal confines of past and present cities, which they see as complicated structures made up of a multitude of demarcated areas containing different social classes and different ethnic groups (historically, Germans, Jews, Slavs, Italian merchants, etc., now partially replaced or enhanced by communities of American military personnel, or Muslim communities from various countries), each one distinct from the others yet all enclosed within a larger perimeter which includes them, defends them and controls them. Surprisingly, the classical Chinese city (preceding the Mongol empire of Kublai Khan) was also constructed, to an even more rigorous extent, in demarcated blocks, each one of which corresponded to a different social class or ethnic group, whose separate identity was illustrated by symbolic images set up at the boundaries to each block.

**The limes as a place of Continuity and Change**

The city wall system of the three cities, Rome, Beijing and New York (whose *limes*, as we have seen, is a natural city wall defined by the shoreline protecting the peninsula from the surrounding rivers), can be analysed using a method which identifies certain categories that involve the creation and the Continuity of the city's identity (which we shall call Genesis, Material, and Separation) and other categories that involve the role of the city walls themselves in the stages of Change to the urban form - which we can name the Transformation and Reverberation of the form-structure (the gestalt) of the city itself. The different ways of presenting these categories reflects the differences between the three cities, and highlights the principal elements of their original form.

In the case of Rome, which we shall use here as a more detailed example for applying the above-mentioned categories, the *Genesis* of the city walls was a question of expediency; the emperor Aurelian, in the 3rd century AD, had few resources at his disposal and had to protect the city quickly from offensives from the north; in building a new circle of walls, therefore, he used terrain that was predominantly within the confines of the city and enclosed within the circuit already existing structures such as the Pyramid of Cestius, the Sessorian amphitheatre and the Porta Maggiore aqueduct, etc.

The *Material*, the stonework of the walls, which defined their physical relationship with the urban fabric, as well as enabling them to survive throughout the following centuries, happened to be the most evolved and long-lasting building material *invented* by the Roman construction industry: walls built in concrete and overlaid with lines of brickwork. In Rome, therefore, the *Material* of the city walls gave them, from the beginning, the same appearance as the great imperial and late-republican monumental buildings, the more evolved and massive of the *insulae* built in the time of Hadrian (2nd century AD), and the major innovative infrastructures of the Roman world, the bridges and aqueducts.
Thus the Material of the walls made them part of the urban fabric of Rome. They formed part of a system of fabrics and linear monuments that made the architecture of the city into an interconnected technological and functional unit. The category of Separation explains how the limes forms a boundary that separates different territories and designates the city as a completely distinct physical place, different from, or even inimical to, the space outside. In the case of Rome, the archaic limes, at first under the kings and then under the republic, underwent several transformations and enlargements, and even today the line of its earliest perimeter is an issue of debate for many archaeologists. The Separation between city and non-city varied as the former expanded to the detriment of the latter, until, under the empire, the whole concept of separation began to lose its meaning with the massive expansion along the consular roads with their imperial and senatorial country estates. Yet the building of the walls and the separation between what was and what was not the city, redefined Rome and gave it the individuality that was to last centuries and which still today is a source of its fascination.

The category of Transformation of the limes over the centuries is seen in the changes in the role played by the circuit of the walls as regards the evolution of the city as an organism. In Rome, changes in the function of the walls were very gradual, and to some extent, happened at a much later date. In fact, the walls of Rome retained their basic purpose as a line of defence for over twelve centuries, despite improvements in siege warfare. Only at the Unification of Italy and the annexation of Rome into the new kingdom, did the function of the walls, placed as they were between the historical city and its new rapid expansion, undergo the changes that had become natural in all other major European cities. However, given the late date at which the transformation took place, this did not give rise to a coherent system of boulevards or some form of continuous infrastructural links between the ancient and the modern city. The Transformation happened to different segments, sometimes actually corresponding to the classic transformation of the limes of the walls into the lines of roads serving the expansion of the city, and sometimes corresponding to an archaeological viewpoint of the walls in which they passed, in one impressive historical leap, from being a still-functional military structure to being part of ancient memory, romantically isolated from the modern context of the city, and very often desecrated as obstacles to the spread of the infrastructure of the modern city.

Despite this, however, the role performed by the Roman city walls in the formation of the modern city has been significant and clearly visible, especially in the light of the second category of Change, that of Reverberation. In fact, during the urban development of Rome, the new road systems, such as the Great Outer Ring Road, the railways, the city bypasses, all re-echo the circuit of the original Aurelian walls; even when increasingly distant, their layout and routes follow the radiocentric
pattern and geography of the territory of Rome. We have here, therefore, a slow process of *amplified replication* of the circuit of the walls (a closed circle), which often surprisingly remind us of pre-existing ancient territorial structures such as the *Ager Romanus Antiquus*\(^\text{10}\).

Without going into similar detail, we can briefly point out that the case of Beijing presents us with a comparatively clearer and simpler picture as regards its city walls. The ideological *Genesis* of the city-temple of Beijing prescribed a regular, rectangular circuit of walls, over sixteen metres wide, since its *Material* consisted of earth faced in brick, using a technique that was exclusively employed, throughout Chinese urban history, for city walls and dams. Thus in China, the walls of a city became a specialised form of defence and also a sign of collective identity for the inhabitants. In fact, the Chinese character *chen* has the double meaning of wall and city. During the Mongol (Yuan) dynasty, Beijing, then known as Dadu, was built by Liu Bingzhong on the orders of Kublai Khan around 1267. The perimeter of the walls of Dadu did not correspond completely to that of Beijing dating from the Qing dynasty – these walls were destroyed in 1949, but it is to the earlier set of walls that we should look to identify the *Genesis* of the Chinese imperial capital. It was in fact during the Mongol dynasty that Beijing (*jing*, capital, *bei*, north) was conceived and created by Liu as a city-temple. Hence in medieval China, it was impossible to envisage or build a city that did not have walls. The concentric design of the walls of Beijing, centred on the core element of the system, the Forbidden City, can also be seen in the *Transformation* phase, when the walls were demolished by Mao Dze Dong in 1949, and would be replaced by a highway called the second ring road, whose route exactly matched the circuit of the demolished walls, and which would reverberate over the following seventy years in four successive concentric road systems, up to a present total of six city ring roads.

In the case of New York, on the other hand, the physical limits of the island of Manhattan define the boundary between land and water, where the land is the city and the water its opposite. This physical boundary, from the colonial occupation of the island onwards, has been the site of the most dramatic transformations and the bitterest social conflicts: the *Waterfront*\(^\text{11}\), famous both in trade union lore and in the movies. This perimeter, reverberating both inwards and outwards from the island, provided the geometrical point of reference that guided the creation of urban spaces such as Central Park and the isotropic grid plan of Manhattan, which directed the transformations, almost as if it were the direct legacy of the lessons of Hippodamus, freely interpreted to meet the needs of a modern management of terrain destined for housing. The street plan crosses over both the Hudson and the East River, reverberating on the shores of Brooklyn, Queens and New Jersey, and is the major principle underlying the organisation of urban space. The grid pattern, created in order to achieve maximum exploitation of available ground, was put
to good use by American entrepreneurs who had envisaged the success promised by the systematic use of Otis’ invention, the elevator, at the end of the nineteenth century. Manhattenism, whose manifesto Rem Koolhaas produced retroactively in his Delirious New York, is based on the interpretation of the architecture of Manhattan as a paradigm of the exploitation of density, and upholds the structured theory of ‘the culture of congestion’ proposed by Koolhaas in his book, as a general category of interpretation for New York. Even this brief mention of a critical work on Manhattan, which has had such a profound influence on European urban culture over the last twenty years, shows how important is the question of the limes of Manhattan island, its continuous physical re-modelling and the inclusion within it – often for economic and functional reasons – of territories that are outside the natural boundaries of the island.

Provisional conclusions
The City Walls – or rather, the Limes of the city – appear to be an essential and incontestable indicator of the attributes and identifying features of the urban design governing the foundation and growth of modern cities, in the case of anchored cities. In the preceding pages we have put forward a line of research which we feel is productive in the light of what has been said about the three cities chosen as exemplars.

Notes
1. By 2020, United Nations demographers maintain, more than half of the world’s population, around three billion people, will live in cities. This is one of the most important phenomena of contemporary urbanism, most apparent in ‘emerging countries’ – until recently known as ‘developing countries’, such as China and Brazil.
5. The research has been published in two volumes, Shrinking Cities Volumes 1 – 2, in 2005 and 2006 by publisher Harje Cantz Verlag, edited by Oswalt Philipp for Kulturstiftung des Bundes.
10. The Ager Romanus Antiquus was delineated by a series of roads that can still be travelled today, which since the 5th century BC connected up at the fifth milestone the roads which radiated outwards from the centre of Rome.