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Windows for the Trojan Horse: Information Technology and the European City

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European societies depend on information technologies to an ever-increasing degree. The boundaries of national economies have long been blurred by international trading and global money flows. A May 1987 Green Paper issued by the Commission of the European Communities calls, among other things, for the removal of legal and regulatory barriers to the free flow of information across national boundaries and concerted support for the Communities' telecommunications industries. Various countries eye the establishment of ISDNs, Integrated Services Digital Networks, conceived to carry all long-distance communication of voice, image, and data in a single medium.

Economic and political pressures combine to initiate a host of changes bound to affect cities and their citizens' sense of them. These changes have been under way for some time now, beginning with the introduction of the telephone network, but appear to have accelerated dramatically with the fusion of traditional means of information exchange. Urban systems are being monitored electronically. Cities like Biarritz in France are being wired with fiber optics. Advanced information technologies are introduced into working environments. Homes are supplied with information network stations, such as the French Minitel or the British

Teletext system. Public spaces begin to engage the casual passerby with access to various information and communication networks. The diffused presence of an electrically sustained reality cannot but modify common notions about the urban environment.

It is not clear whether information technologies constitute another dramatic milestone in the evolution of urban technology, such as previous ones of defense, building systems, and transportation means. It is not even clear to which extent technological change in itself can be credited with a primary role in the evolution of cities. However, the emergence of information technologies may present certain issues of urban change in a new way. One reasonable question in this context might be: How do emerging technologies relate to current themes of city form?

The European city is not particularly old on a global scale, yet the intensity of conflicts and innovations staged in it over the past millenium has contributed to a very specific emotional attachment on the part of its inhabitants. Cities were defended, destroyed, and reconstructed, and even peaceful urban transformations in this century have come to be seen in these terms. The city therefore triggers certain defensive reflexes,

subconscious associations with the need for protective measures. Apocalyptic future visions and unsettling or confounding new media realities have contributed to strong sentiments toward preserving the "traditional city," whatever this means, as one of the bastions of sanity in a seeming maelstrom of change.

Three recent, highly visible, metropolitan-scale programs, orchestrated to shore up the city as a stable societal dimension and a sounder habitat, are indicative of precisely this sentiment. All were initiated and supported by central public administrations. Berlin's IBA (International Building Expo) 1984/87 was organized around the salvaging of core areas as viable residential quarters. Coordinated projects scattered across the city sought to mend or reinvent the urban fabric by means of reconstruction or reinterpretation of the traditional Berlin urban block. Around Paris, the Banlieue '89 competition aimed at the assembly of design projects for the urban periphery. Three kinds of physical interventions were applied to the Parisian suburbs: enhancement of local centers, innovation in the urban fabric, and reconnection of periphery and center. And the Barcelona city administration has launched a program of urban resuscitation. It aims at a "new monumentality in the

suburbs of Barcelona, designed to dignify the city and increase public life in the urban spaces."

These and other programs, such as the Milan Triennale exhibit presented elsewhere in this issue, suggest that future-oriented initiatives tend to be conceived with a strong bias toward preserving and rebuilding the city fabric as a coherent or, failing physical coherence, coherently incoherent artifact. The two archetypically competing attitudes of tradition and innovation are being played out within this generally agreed-upon framework. This competition is not merely formal but very legibly represents the political and economic struggles that continue to shape the city. Formal disputes are skirmishes of significant icons.

Western European cities now discover a new wave of futurism, squarely in the tradition of its earlier stages, but a good deal more synchronized in terms of form, program, and use. The Eiffel Tower signalled a new industrial age, but practically speaking, it barely permits the ingestion of a sandwich and a dizzying cloud-level view. The Centre Pompidou, on the other hand, within its conduit muscularity actually contains a veritable flea market of cultural information, while managing to keep its solemnly playful pipe-dream face. Another



1 Nuremberg depicted in a sixteenth-century engraving. Reprinted from *History of the City*, by Leonardo Benevolo (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972).

2 Cologne Media Park Project, 1987

Entry by Kei Minohara, City Planner with the Nippon Credit Bank, and Prof. Dr. Hiroshi Hara, from the Institute of Industrial Science, University of Tokyo; sponsored by Shimizu Corporation and Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation.

kind of data market futuristically packaged is the new Lloyd's Bank in London. But the temptation of graphic exaggeration remains: the international competition for the replanning of Mélnun-Senart, a satellite of Paris, made telling forecasts of the needs of the future city. The leading proposals expressed a collective desire to celebrate the dawn of a new age in technology, pulsating incantations of an "information future" on vellum—unfortunately, yet devoid of content.

The West German Media Park project of 1987 was conceived as a national competition with international invitees, seeking concepts for a large, mixed-use communication center for a new Cologne. The competition brief presented the future city as a computer-aided information-processing node in an emerging national network of fiber-optics linked cities. The program integrated key notions of Walt Disney's

Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow with the idea of an inner-urban "designer" Silicon Valley.

One of the international contributions, a Japanese entry under the corporate auspices of Nippon Telegraph and Telephone and Shimizu Construction Corporation, presents a Media Plaza, an information structure composed of "media floors" and a "media tower." A formal setting of 500 meters by 40 meters will enable electronic systems to produce their fleeting effects as background and vehicle for experimental civic events. Three ideas were pursued, a "possible world" for innovations, a "permanent world" contributing to the city's organic evolution, and an ominous "staging of the social, economical and cultural activities of various citizens." For this staging, the complex is conceived as a four-part "citizen's stage," for the new life-style of burghers engaged in leisure, the creation of "media culture," the production of

hard and of software, and in residential activities. The proposal sought to resonate the block patterns of the surrounding city fabric, and polished a blank opening in the traditional city crust, where one can inspect the city's invisibly colorful and powerful data flows, without an overly strong sense of impropriety. The relation of these new bit streams to the more traditionally rooted means of information exchange remains unexplained.

Here and in other new places the formal permanence of the city is secured, while more localized and futuristic interventions attest to the "progressive" nature of the city and its commitment to technology-based transformation. The new, advanced technologies just might be the Trojan horse within the European city, an infiltration altering not only the very sense of a "real city," but also its precarious political balance.

