TUT, Urban Planning, AYS-2510
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Thoughts about Urban Planning

The Rule & The Model by Francoise Choay as a starting point

Prologue

As a part of our urban planning course we were introduced to a book called "The Rule & The Model", written by the French professor Francoise Choay and originally published in 1980. The English translation was available in 1997.
We got the task to write an essay based on a part of this book. Right at the start Choay writes that her book "…is devoted to built space and the city. It will not, however, deal with the concrete world of the urban, but instead turns away from what has actually been built to treat urban space and the city as it has been *written*." (Choay, 1997: 1) This starting position, combined with her academic way of writing, makes this book a very theoretical work and not easy to read for a student.
Choay wrote a theory about theories - I try to not write a theory about the theory of theories, what would remind me of incest. As she writes in her introduction and conclusion, it looks like the really built world of today seems to have its own rules, independent from common theories about architecture. For me Choay's book was informative, but did not help me to understand how to deal with the problematic present situation in urban planning. Theories about urban planning can give me tools, but first I have to comprehend with what I am dealing (the city), before I can use those tools. For me the city has nothing to do with architecture in the first place, although the built environment is probably the most visible part of it. What I propose here in this text is one possible view, opposite to Choay's, towards the built city.
She writes that there are two mechanisms generating the built environment, the rule and the model (at the end of her book she softens her hypothesis). I propose also two mechanisms: the needs of us as human beings (limited by our facilities) and the decision making. So my own book I would call "The Needs & The Decision" rather than "The Rule & The Model".

The Rule & The Model

As one of Choay's main hypothesis, as the title of the book indicates, she determines two main urban planning strategies. One she calls the *rules*, which give guidelines for the planning and development process, but do not draw any picture of the resulting urban surrounding. So with *rules* she means regulations and principles which affect the planning and building process and thus lead to a certain result. The final result cannot be visualized before it is actually built. As an example on which *rules* can be based she uses Alberti's "Ten Books on Architecture" (1452). At the same time she sees Alberti's work as a first script about city planning, long before Cerdà's work about urbanization (1867).
The second way of generating built space she calls the *model*. With this she means the reproduction of an actual visualizations of a "finished" reality in the future. Or at least the attempt to reproduce it. This *model* can be drawings, scale models or of course a text. So *models* are representing a finished surrounding, without necessarily telling how this outcome could be achieved. According to Choay, *models* often have their fundament in utopias. Here she uses the book "Utopia" (1515) by Thomas More as example, which is known as the first written utopia. Choay postulates both mechanisms, the rule and the model, as fundamentally different ways of treating urban planning.
In her book, Choay examines various more or less known theoretical works about architecture, urban planning and utopias. She is interested in the order of the texts and their influence on each other. The treatment of this part of the book I will more or less leave out for this essay.
As a conclusion she does not present a "proper" solution; neither the rule nor the model. The

right way should be somewhere in between. At the very end of the book, she points out the hegemony of the rule and the totalitarianism of the model. In her conclusion she writes: “Essentially, it is the two antithetical mechanisms of the rule and the model which force us into the daunting choice between two different conceptions of building: one hedonistic, egotistical, and permissive, the other corrective, disciplinary, and medical.” (Choay, 1997: 277).
She talks about missing common values and the overvaluation of personal desires and demands in today’s societies, which leads to laisser-faire and individualism. She approves of neither of them. In such a community it is, according to Choay, difficult to reintroduce beauty to the built environment - because a shared aesthetic language is also missing.
Above are summarized only parts of the whole book. Nonetheless, these are the themes which will serve as starting points of this essay.

Attempt to understand the city without theory

For a better understanding of my further argumentation I will continue with a brief and rough discourse about my view on cities. Opposite to Choay I will try to comprehend urban development out of the built world and without theoretical foundation.
For this I will have to start from the beginning of human cohabitation. I believe in the theory of evolution, so I think that there were strong reasons why humans started to live in communities, security and love just as examples. We had needs, the same as nowadays, and by division of labor and duties we could gain benefits. There were not many needs to be satisfied by the "built" surrounding, protection against the weather and other threats, depending on the location, maybe a place to store and prepare food. Later on, the need for privacy emerged. Somehow it seems to be in the human nature that we always want to go on, further and further. With this ambition, which maybe is the main difference between humans and animals, we were capable of further developing our environment. Probably we were always driven, caused by our laziness and ego, by the desire of an easier and nicer life, but what we got - if we compare today’s life with the life in Stone Age - is a more complex world with many new needs. Or maybe I should call them desires. In any case, a minority is willing to give up those desires. I am not willing to give up modern life with electricity, internet, a huge choice of food, mobility and many other benefits; equally as my forefathers were not giving up the achievements of their ancestors. The "simple" life of the first Homo sapiens in the woods began to get more and more complex and the individuals got dependent on each other. As in present time, humans wanted to have an answer for everything, rituals and religions started to develop. To organize the growing society, politics and economic systems evolved - more or less in the interests of the citizen. All instances put demands towards the built world and through that towards the planners and decision-makers. Technical, social and intellectual progress continued, always based on the existing state. Of course development did not happen in the same way and pace in different parts of the world - the process was depending on the local conditions and roots. History shows us that obviously the progress was not linear, but the trend was always forward, even though there were times like the Middle Ages, where a lot of knowledge was lost.
What I want to say is that cities - and social communities – came about long before any theoretical basis was developed; they arose because they seemed to satisfy our desires and needs. Not for everybody, but for a growing number of citizens.

The monitoring desk of needs

As I mentioned before, everyday life has not really got simpler – physically easier maybe, but socially a lot more complex. There is apparently a cycle of desires and facilities. For every desire a new facility or ability is developed and because of that new desires emerge - for which we educe new facilities and abilities. This cycle takes place in politics, economy, religion, lifestyles, art, hobbies, sports and all other human disciplines - and this is, in my opinion, what forms our cities - independently from *rules* and *models*. As time passed, we were able to satisfy a huge amount of desires, which we are not willing to give up. At the same time, there are a vast number of different characters who want to have their individual combination of desires to be satisfied by the city. This does not have a lot to do with architecture in the first place, more with

our ambitions as human beings. But of course the impact of the evolving lifestyle has a big impact on the city and puts new demands on it over and over again. This is the huge challenge we face today, it seems to me that as an architect I am sitting in front of a big monitoring desk. The amount of “controllers” – standing for different demands towards the city - has steadily grown since the Stone Age, but not because we architects wanted it that way. Every controller stands for a need or desire which life places to the city on one hand, and on the other hand the controllers are limited by technical facilities, laws and regulations, cultural rules and financial resources.
The following comparison is just to illustrate in a simplified way the very different initial situations of an ancient city and of a city of today. In ancient times the requirements regarding the built environment were assessable and the scale for “adjustments” was not so big. To live together first human beings needed housing, maybe a square for rituals and other gatherings and some pathways. Depending on the location maybe defense systems and some public buildings were also needed. The local circumstances (and the level of technology and intellect) dictated more or less materials and typologies. As the social structures became more complex, new instances arose, which created new demands towards the city. But I think it was not the architects who had for example the antique idea to introduce an agora (market square) to the city, rather it was the way how life was organized that asked for this kind of infrastructure. The architect was charged to find a solution how to make this place work and look nice. The amount of needs and desires for which solutions had to be found was and is still growing. Furthermore the scale for “adjustments” is growing, too. If we think about mobility it seems clear that we have to be able to move in a city. But the question is how we organize it, do we push roads, public transportation, pedestrians, and bikes and how should the whole network look like. How dense should we build? How and what part of the wildlife do we preserve? How strict regulations do we have or should we provide? How should the other entire infrastructure be solved? How sustainable do we build? What do we assume to be nice? Are short-term values more important than long-term values? How do we treat the existing structures? With all these and many more topics the ancient “architect” was not confronted whereas today’s planners are facing ever growing challenges.

Ancient cities/housings

Source: www.upload.wikimedia.org

Cities/architecture of today

Source: www.predigt.tankstelle.org

Every “controller/switch” stands for a need, desire or demand that the city has to deal with.

Decisions

For me the big question is not whether we plan with rules or models. Nowadays it seems that it is not clear who is sitting in front of this “monitoring desk”. Who decides which are the most important issues concerning a plan or planning process? Is it a planner, an office, citizens, politicians, a dictator, a CEO or all together? Whose desires and interests have how much weight? At the same time it is a lot more difficult to measure the quality and success of urban development because common yardsticks are rare.

Of course different ideals and ideologies as well as cultural and political backgrounds are affecting the planning process probably more than anything else.
In some cultures, still today, there are one or few persons making the decisions. This has a big impact on the planning process because this instance of power can declare very clearly what it wants – in which positions the different controllers are. So it does not take a lot of time to make a plan that pleases the power-holding instance – and of course the decision making is a short process, too.
In Western society the planning procedure usually takes a lot of time, due to the fact that almost every instance and citizen has, in some way, access to the monitoring desk of each project. Everybody wants to say something, but nobody wants to carry the responsibility. During the planning process the positions of the different controllers are continuously changed. During the planning period the “settings” may change in a way that the just finished plan is already obsolete. At a first glance it looks like we would make a lot of work for nothing. Nevertheless I see it as a good achievement that there are many views towards common planning issues. Just the way how it is organized maybe has to be improved. The challenge is not only to find good solutions for the built environment, but how to plan more efficiently without curtailing the expression of opinion of all instances involved.
One possible way is to gather all instances around one (big) table and collect all ideas, comments and desires. It should be a goal to "adjust" all “controllers” as precisely as possible, before an actual plan is made. The key word is communication, not the execution of a certain plan. The clearer the needs, interests and facilities, the easier it will be to design a plan. There will always be many discussions around every plan and the result will always be some kind of compromise. But the clearer the needs, interests and facilities are determined before the planning process, it is much easier to plan, discuss and measure the quality of a plan.
It may seem complicated to have negotiations on each urban project, but still I think that the result would satisfy a larger public and be more sustainable. One important aspect is of course that the involved instances have direct access to the discussion and to each other. Some kind of diplomatic qualities will be needed from the “moderator” to bring through projects.
A main question is on which fundament we should make our decisions. We can study history, but we will not find in the past a similar situation as we are currently in. Our human life has never been that global, in terms of mobility and communication, that fast changing, with that amount of big investments and developments, that range of different opinions, and never before we have been exploiting natural resources as nowadays. As an architect I am naturally dreaming of designing an ingenious plan which will be executed according to every line I have drawn. But in a democratic system the only solution will probably be the discussion. A challenge is to avoid making decisions only with a focus on short-term profit. Maybe that is - in addition to its long duration and tendencies towards individualism - one of the biggest weaknesses of a democratic planning process.
Somebody still has to work as a mediator and must be able to oversee the "monitoring desk". This person or instance has to interpret, evaluate and consider all inputs and try to put them into a plan - which will for sure be discussed again - and again. For this role a skillful architect will probably be a good choice, but of course everybody can do this job. In the end somebody has to make the decision and carry the responsibility. To involve as much instances as possible in the planning process before a decision is made should help to avoid long lasting law cases. In such a process the foundation for a decision is the result of many opinions, and that result could correspond with our complex social structures. Who finally makes the decisions is another question that depends of course on the political system and the scale of the project. In any case I think that decision making is the most important aspect in urban development.

The role of rules and models

Knowingly – as an opposite to Choay – I am not using any specific examples from the past. I consider both, rules and models, as tools to communicate and execute visions and plans. As a source of inspiration and understanding architectural treatises and utopias should not be underestimated. Both – treatises and utopias - give a basis for education, discussions and for dreams.

I cannot really agree with Choay that models are totalitarian and rules hegemonic. To me this does not make a lot of sense. It seems to me that the way how a project is implemented has more to do with the actual political, economical and cultural system. The system determines if a plan – communicated and executed by rules and/or models – is hedonistic or corrective.
To ensure the continuous development of our society we have to make decisions, depending on the choices we make we can think about whether to convey and implement them as rules or models. There are issues that are easier to enforce by rules as for example regulations about the space between buildings. On the other hand there are items which are easier to put across by models, for example to show the beauty of a project. Anyway, I think that a rule can be as totalitarian as a model. If we decide to restrict the building height for a whole city and for all times to a certain amount of floors, I would call that totalitarian. If we plan a model that allows adaptations I would call it corrective. Is it not also a question of marketing which strategy we prefer?
For long-term plans one must consider that nobody can know what the future brings, what kind of needs and desires a city has to satisfy. But it looks like we are over and over and more often forced to plan in larger scales and with a farther temporal horizon. So there must be a sort of flexibility in those plans, which allows adapting to new circumstances. In my opinion both, rules and models, can be used for visions – for every issue the better working strategy can be chosen by the planners and decision makers.

Epilogue
I guess my essay makes clear that “The rule & The model” is in my eyes too theoretical. The topic in general interests me, but I think that the solutions for the present challenges have to be found rather in practice than in theory. Of course many decision-making instances and people “adjust” their own controllers based on a theoretical foundation. But maybe right there – and this is just a wild speculation – lays the problem of the reason for the gap between what is discussed and planned at the universities and what happens out there in the “real world”. Maybe it would be good to forget all architectural dogmas and theories for a minute and open our eyes for the demands of the present day – and the future. Essentially I think we will not find solutions for the present challenges in urban planning if we – even as architects - only concentrate on theories and the architecture of the city. But of course this is a theory too…
So far I have left out the topic of beauty. I accept the human desire for beauty as a need. Beauty relational to urban space and the buildings. Everybody can sit at the “monitoring desk”. In any case I hope that for an architect the aesthetical “controllers” are essential. How to generate beauty will probably remain a secret. In our Western world of today we maybe have to look for beauty rather in heterogeneity than in uniformity. Perhaps we must also accept that a city of the 21st century cannot look nice in every corner – because we are not willing to pay for it and the urgent demands force us to fast developments (that apparently cannot have the same appeal and character as a city that has grown over centuries). I do not know. And of course the tastes change continuously, but this fact should not lead towards giving up trying. The worst excesses will be straightened out by time.
For my part, I will try to find creative solutions that meet as many desires as possible, whether they are basic needs or something subjective like beauty. It will not be possible to perfectly please all instances, maybe something would actually be wrong, if everybody was content with an urban development. Because I think in such a situation something would be wrong with the freedom of speech.
To find solutions I will try to learn from the past, face the needs of today and regularly dream of a better and nicer world.

Source: Francoise Choay, “The Rule & The Model” (1997)