

Eric Mumford

associate professor,  
Washington University  
in St. Louis

# S HAPING AMERICAN URBAN PUBLIC SPACE FROM CIAM TO NEW URBANISM

FAUUSP LECTURE MAY 15, 2001

## ABSTRACT

Throughout much of the history of the United States its architects have been preoccupied with creating urban public spaces. In the nineteenth century two broad design directions emerged, one pastoral, exemplified by Olmsted and Vaux's Central Park in New York, the other monumental, based in European classicism but often given a particularly american character in projects such as Washington, DC.

In the problematic decade of the Depression, architects of CIAM (Congressos Internacionais de Arquitetura Moderna) attempted to introduce new approaches to the design of urban space derived from European avant-garde movements. In the United States in the early 1940s, the Barcelona architect Josep Lluís Sert, developed a modification of CIAM urbanism based on the four functions of dwelling, work, recreation and transportation which added a fifth element, the civic center or core. This element was demonstrated by Sert and his partner Paul Lester Wiener's project for a Brazilian "Motor City" for auto workers near Pétropolis (1943). This project paralleled Sert's participation with Sigfried Giedion and Fernand Léger in calling for a "New

Monumentality" which would express popular aspirations using an architectural language based on the work of modern painters and sculptors as well as architects such as Le Corbusier.

This direction was promoted by CIAM in its postwar Congresses, notably CIAM 8, "The heart of the city" of 1951. In the United States it inspired many corporate plazas and civic spaces and may have had some influence on the development of the typology of the suburban shopping mall. The austrian "émigré" Victor Gruen recreated the pedestrian urban shopping environment in self-contained centers at the metropolitan periphery, which were intentionally accessible mainly by automobile. All the earlier problems of congestion and lack of parking were solved by this new form, which was rapidly replicated around the country in the 1950s and 1960s and has become the normative public environment in most american metropolitan areas. It was in response to these conditions that a new planning movement was formed in the early 1990s which calls itself the Congress for the New Urbanism. Inspired by the form of american small towns, the new urbanists



appeal to history to argue that it is possible to recreate the pedestrian scale and its associated public life. They rightly point out that the typical physical form of postwar american urban development is governed by zoning and building codes which mandate widely spaced buildings and extensive provision for motor access and parking. They advocate new codes which generate a pattern of detached or semi-detached houses on small lots, arranged in patterns reminiscent of early twentieth century small towns and Garden Cities. For the new urbanists the traditional town square is an especially significant space, one in which they believe a genuine participatory public life can be recreated. As understood by architects, New Urbanism overlaps with other kinds of postmodern historicism, which include efforts to revive City Beautiful forms and strategies of urban reconstruction. In recent decades new downtown civic buildings in many cities have attempted to represent a sense of civic purpose through the use of a neo-neo-classicism. Many architectural practitioners in the United States are enthusiastic proponents of these ideas and of New Urbanism,

which they see as a realistic way of opposing the continuing trends toward what is often termed metropolitan “sprawl”

The new urbanist direction has gained considerable support, but it also has serious drawbacks which are the result of the contradictions of capitalist development. While certain parts of cities have been spectacularly revived, the results do not necessarily differ so much from the highly controlled environments of theme parks or existing suburban shopping malls. This in turn has generated considerable critical resistance, which questions the shopping and entertainment oriented “pseudo-public realm” that results, a public realm that excludes or at least does not welcome the poor and provides no room for politics. Thus perhaps none of these directions – the City Beautiful movement, CIAM, or New Urbanism – which have preoccupied american architects over the last century can overcome the inevitably limited role of architecture in creating a public realm. On the other hand, all have significantly shaped the contemporary form of american cities.



Throughout much of the history of the United States, its architects have been preoccupied with creating urban public spaces. In the nineteenth century two broad design directions emerged, one pastoral, exemplified by Olmsted and Vaux's Central Park in New York, the other monumental, based in European classicism but often given a particularly american character in projects such as Washington, DC. This direction, known as the "City Beautiful" movement, was based on architects' efforts to create orderly and imposing urban compositions of public buildings inspired by European classicism. From its beginnings at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago into the 1920s, the City Beautiful movement was immensely successful in the United States, as cities across the country remade their downtowns with monumental plazas and civic buildings. After the Great Depression of the 1930s this urban movement died out, attacked by modernists as irrelevant to modern life and rendered unpopular by the large population movement to new anti-monumental suburban environments, which were being shaped by garden city ideas. Since the 1980s efforts have been made to revive aspects of City Beautiful planning, but with limited success. At the same time, the pastoral tradition of park design has lived on, but often in diluted form and usually applied at the metropolitan periphery.

In the problematic decade of the Depression, architects of Congressos Internacionais de Arquitetura Moderna CIAM attempted to introduce new approaches to the design of urban space derived from European avant-garde movements. When the Barcelona architect Josep Lluís Sert arrived in the United States by way of Cuba in 1939, he brought with him the still-unrealized project of a large CIAM publication, which would make the congresses deliberations known in the New World. The result was his *Can our cities survive?: an ABC of urban problems: their analysis, their solutions, based on the proposals formulated by CIAM*, published in the fall of 1942. The origins of the material presented in this

book were the "Constatations" from the fourth CIAM, held aboard a cruise ship in the Mediterranean in the summer of 1933. *Can our cities survive?* seems to have been intended to create a semi-informed audience for CIAM proposals, with enough knowledge of urban development to demand planning but one, which would still be content to leave the specifics to the experts of CIAM.

The sources of this approach may be found in the work of the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, whose *The revolt of the masses* (1930) influenced both the American publisher of news magazines, Henry R. Luce, as well as Sert. In his analysis of modernity, Ortega argued that the rise of Fascism was closely linked to the overspecialization demanded by capitalist societies, which devalued the general historical and political knowledge necessary for good citizenship. This insight had led Luce to try to develop a "socially responsible" mass media which would stress the heritage of Western civilization and at the same time promote american business and world leadership<sup>i</sup>. *Can our cities survive?* can be read as an effort by Sert, perhaps unknowingly, to adapt some of the same Ortega-influenced approaches used by the Luce magazines such as *Time*, *Life*, *Fortune* and *Architectural Forum* to promote the cause of CIAM. In Sert's case the goal was not profit but to gain support for the CIAM vision, as well as to increase his chances of securing an academic position in an american university. As such, it differs considerably from the volume envisioned at CIAM meetings in Europe.

Yet the attempt to change the perception of CIAM from an avant-garde to an elite group of planning experts had a serious shortcoming. Whereas Lenin had successfully led a group of activist intellectuals to real power after the Russian Revolution, by 1939 it was becoming clear that CIAM was less likely to achieve an equivalent role in urbanism, however that might be defined. While Sert's advocacy of CIAM and its position of urbanistic control by experts appeared to make sense in CIAM's changed circumstances, the problem remained that



many of the still active members of CIAM did not in fact hold important positions in town planning in the larger and more powerful countries. Le Corbusier had yet to be given an important planning commission in France; Gropius, practicing in exile, had had only relatively small commissions since 1933; and Sert himself at this time was simply an “émigré” attempting to reestablish himself as an architect in New York. This situation must have raised questions about their claims to be urbanistic experts in the pragmatic context of american architecture and urban development.

At the end of 1940 Sert had approached Lewis Mumford about the possibility of writing the introduction to the proposed CIAM book. When shown a draft of the proposed CIAM text in december of that year, Mumford gave Sert a sympathetic hearing, but he was unwilling to write the introduction that Sert requested. As Mumford wrote a few years later to his friend F. J. Osborn, the English Garden City advocate.

Did I tell you that Sert, a very fine man, had in accordance with CIAM instructions written his whole book, *Can our cities survive?*, without a single reference to the functions of government, group association or culture in the first draft? For these progressive architects the whole life of the city was contained in Housing, Recreation, Transportation, and Industry<sup>ii</sup>

Mumford told Sert directly in a letter that though he thought the “illustrated folio” Sert had shown him was “a very able piece of work,” he felt he should point out

... a serious flaw in the general outline which CIAM prepared, and which established therefore the main lines of the collective investigation and of the book itself. The four functions of the city do not seem to me to adequately to cover the ground of city planning: dwelling, work, recreation, and transportation are all important. But what of the political, educational, and cultural functions of the city: what of the part played by the disposition and plan of the buildings concerned with these functions

in the whole evolution of the city design. The leisure given us by the machine does not merely free modern man for sports and weekend excursions: it also frees him for a fuller participation in political and cultural activities, provided these are adequately planned and related to the rest of his existence. The organs of political and cultural association are, from my standpoint, the distinguishing marks of the city: without them, there is only an urban mass... I regard their omission as the chief defect of routine city planning; and their absence from the program of the CIAM I find almost inexplicable. Unless some attention was paid to this as a field, at least, for future investigation, I should find it very difficult to write the introduction that you suggested<sup>iii</sup>

Mumford told Osborn that after this “they [Sert and CIAM] have made a few pallid efforts to meet this criticism; but the lesson they failed to learn from [Ebenezer] Howard they are not likely to learn any more effectively from me” and he still refused to give the book “the blessing of an introduction.”<sup>iv</sup>

Instead, the foreword by the Dean of the Harvard Architecture program, Joseph Hudnut, makes it clear that the point of *Can our cities survive?* was not to advocate a modern version of the ideal city of geometric clarity and classical order, “an architecture having a basis no firmer than a logic of form and a reward no deeper than an aesthetic experience,” but rather to link urban planning and design to “those processes by which material things are shaped and assembled for civic use”<sup>v</sup> The images used in the book can be read as suggesting how these modernizing processes are “inevitably” producing the constituent elements of the “Functional City, emphasizing that the CIAM polemic is indeed a scientific response to these forces. By blurring the line between the work of CIAM members and projects like Robert Moses’s highways or his Jones Beach State Park, the book furthers the impression that CIAM in somehow in a position to direct urban development along lines already being established in the United States.



At the same time, the lack of attention to the extensive urban housing and other public projects of the Roosevelt administration's "New Deal," is notable. Whereas previously CIAM had defined itself as an organization oriented to bending "the State" toward implementing a particular urban agenda, *Can our cities survive?* appears to indicate a shift in this position. It appears to be intended to mobilize mass opinion away from the then-current american governmental efforts to implement the urban strategies of the new architecture. The "something more than these official solutions" the book hopes to bring into being would seem to be widespread faith in the "Town Planning Chart" from the fourth CIAM Congress (reproduced at the end of the book) and faith in the experts who created it. Rather than rely on "official" solutions, CIAM, through the voice of Sert, seems to be encouraging a belief in a set of abstract commandments about what constitutes sound city development, presented as transcendent rules emerging from the *Zeitgeist*, "a collective spirit capable of organizing community life to the lasting advantage of the many instead of to the immediate profit of the few."<sup>vi</sup>

Sert's attempt to use photos, statistics, and cartoons to create an American mass following for what would soon become known as the Athens Charter may seem quixotic today, but in fact the book was being directed at a "popular" american audience precisely at the moment where various large businesses were successfully promoting a new metropolitan lifestyle of a different but related sort. By 1942 the power of such media to form social outlooks was already recognized; Wallace K. Harrison, in his wartime role as Deputy Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, wrote in March 1942 to Nelson Rockefeller about his efforts to counter Axis influence in South America:

... we have the greatest propaganda media possible in the form of "Time" and "Life" and "Fortune" who [sic] may be drafted to help us.<sup>vii</sup>

Though the stance of the Luce magazines was obviously different in political outlook from Weimar avant-garde journals such as *Das Neue Frankfurt* or *A.C.*, the magazines were indifferent, if not hostile, to City Beautiful efforts at civic embellishment, and were also eager to see narrow city streets lined with technologically substandard urban dwellings demolished and replaced with better highways and parklike open spaces.

This convergence across the political spectrum in favor of a new urbanism, however, was not identified in contemporary reviews of the book. It appeared at a point where the deluge of planning proposals for "194x," as the year the war would be over was being called, was just beginning, and *Can our cities survive?* no doubt seemed to be simply another book of same type. After the publication of *Can our cities survive?*, Giedion and CIAM sought to find a new direction for CIAM in the United States, shifting its agenda toward postwar reconstruction in Europe rather than further efforts influence american urban renewal... These efforts resulted in the creation of the New York CIAM Chapter for Relief and Postwar Planning in 1943. For american CIAM members like the danish "émigré" Knud Lonberg Holm, active in Detroit and then New York, their goal in the 1930s had been to transform the entire american building process. They were far more interested in, as the title of Lonberg Holm's 1940 book put it, *Planning for Productivity*<sup>viii</sup> than in the creation of "architecture" as such. Like the visionary engineer Buckminster Fuller, with whom he was in close contact, Lonberg Holm hoped to make buildings as lightweight, demountable and temporary as possible, believing that the traditional built fabric of the city was itself an impediment to social change and better living patterns. This position has been aptly described as a "consciously anti-aesthetic, productivist dogma disseminated through the commercial press."<sup>ix</sup> Lonberg Holm did not share the admiration Giedion had expressed in his *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941) for Rockefeller Center or New York's



Triborough Bridge as “symbols of modern times.” Instead, he sought to reorganize american building production from within organizations like the F. W. Dodge Corporation, where as the Dodge Corporation director of research after 1932, he reorganized Sweet’s Catalog of building products so as to bring to the attention of any architect or builder the full range of available choices for any type of building component<sup>x</sup>

For a short period in the United States in the 1930s there had been a certain plausible convergence between the Fordist logic of large-scale capitalism, the replanning activities of “Master Builders” like the Rockefellers or Robert Moses in New York, and the goals of CIAM.<sup>xi</sup> Yet the CIAM desire to assume a controlling role in american planning efforts had met with little direct success in the United States. On the other hand, aspects of the CIAM agenda were appropriated for the populist, consumer-oriented modernism of the 1939 New York World’s Fair, organized by Robert Moses, where Henry Dreyfuss’s “Democracity” and Norman Bel Geddes’s “Futurama” implemented some CIAM-like doctrines in the service of a politically conservative urbanistic vision of remade american downtowns served by highways linked to commuter suburbs<sup>xii</sup>

It was this vision, more than CIAM’s, which came to characterize modern urbanism as it was actually implemented in the United States. During the Second World War, the need for a common front against the Axis led to cooperation between the previously antagonistic advocates of free enterprise and various forms of collectivism. The real differences in political outlook behind the forces behind american urban renewal and the CIAM version of urbanism were blurred then and have remained unclear ever since. But while CIAM saw masterplanning by “experts” as a necessarily step to provide a better life for all, american urban renewal advocates like Robert Moses and his supporters objected to calling their highly coordinated, “top-down” efforts at urban reconstruction and control, “planning” at all.

This unanticipated turn of events further confused the direction of CIAM, and seems to have raised questions about its continuing relevance in the new wartime atmosphere. While its internationalism seemed pertinent, especially after the publication of republican presidential candidate Wendell Wilkie’s *One World* in 1943, its earlier emphasis on planning, standardization, and urban reconfiguration based on the “four functions” of dwelling, work, transportation and recreation had become so widely accepted that at a CIAM meeting called by Giedion early in 1943, Lonberg Holm is quoted as saying that “the younger generation takes the point of view of the CIAM for granted”<sup>xiii</sup> At this meeting Sert questioned whether CIAM had “really fulfilled its function” and wondered whether any other international institution could replace it<sup>xiv</sup> Giedion, however, according to the minutes taken by himself, argued for continuity, and he and Sert then went forward with organizing a revived CIAM.

Sert at this time had gone into partnership with Paul Lester Wiener, a german-born american architect based in New York, who had worked with Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer on the brazilian pavilion at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. Wiener also began to attend these New York CIAM meetings<sup>xv</sup> Le Corbusier seems to have introduced Sert to Wiener, mentioning in a letter of May 20, 1940 to Sert in New York that he could speak with Wiener about CIAM and “our friends in Rio”<sup>xvi</sup> Wiener’s father-in-law was Henry Morgenthau, Jr., secretary of the Treasury 1934-1945,<sup>xvii</sup> and Wiener had developed connections with the U.S. State Department<sup>xviii</sup> According to the 1947 Museum of Modern Art catalog, *Two cities*, Sert and Wiener were commissioned in may 1943 by the Brazilian Airplane Factory Commission to design a new town around an airplane engine factory in the Baixada Fluminense area of reclaimed marshland 25 miles northwest of Rio de Janeiro<sup>xix</sup> According to later recollections of Oscar Niemeyer, the commission was originally given to a brazilian architect-engineer, Fernando



Saturnino de Brito, who asked Niemeyer to do the architectural design. Niemeyer suggested to Wiener, then in Brazil, that he join them as a partner. After agreeing to this, Wiener returned to the United States and replaced Brito with Sert, and then suggested to the client that the Roberto Brothers should do the architectural design<sup>xx</sup>

As published a few years later, the Sert and Wiener project, which they called the “Cidade dos Motores, or Motor City, was zoned using the CIAM “four functions” of dwelling, work, recreation, and transportation. It was an application of the Radiant City, and resembled Le Corbusier’s and Pierre Jeanneret’s plan for Nemours<sup>xxi</sup> Its more elaborated “civic center” element may reflect Lewis Mumford’s criticisms of CIAM urbanism when asked by Sert to write the introduction to *Can our cities survive?*<sup>xxii</sup> While the concept of civic center as a kind of CIAM “Fifth Function” would remain important to Sert and Giedion, and would eventually provide the theme of CIAM 8 in 1951, it does not seem to have been considered as important by other CIAM members during the war years. Gropius was concentrating his efforts at the time on a non-place-specific prefabricated housing system with Konrad Wachsmann<sup>xxiii</sup> and he made no mention of civic center design at a Harvard conference on urbanism held in 1942<sup>xxiv</sup> From the same period, there is little in the writings of CIAM members Neutra, Chermayeff, or Lonberg Holm from this time that suggests much concern with the design of the civic center element<sup>xxv</sup> Although a number of CIAM members or sometime members were involved in designing american defense housing at this time, most notably Neutra, these projects were highly constrained and did not provide pedestrian community centers of the type called for by Giedion and Sert and demonstrated in the plans for the Motor City<sup>xxvi</sup>

Not surprisingly, the real concerns of the group at this point seem to have been largely to get commissions; as Gropius put it, their intention was “perhaps more going towards the practical effects

than building up a new philosophic movement”<sup>xxvii</sup> In 1943 the allied powers had established the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) “to restore the devastated areas of Europe as they were liberated, and it seems likely that the american CIAM chapter had been set up to attempt to give CIAM a role in this process. When the “Constituting Committee” of the new CIAM group met for the first time a few weeks before D-Day on may 20, 1944, at the New School for Social Research in New York, the meeting failed to produce any new CIAM consensus.

At this same moment, first Le Corbusier, and then Giedion and Sert had begun to develop a new stance toward what they eventually termed “the new monumentality,” not in the hope of preserving or reviving classical urbanism, but as a response to what they believed were popular needs and aspirations. This new direction was related to the defense of cubist abstraction in the arts which Le Corbusier and Fernand Léger had begun to make in Paris in the mid-1930s<sup>xxviii</sup> At about the same time Le Corbusier developed his Vaillant-Couturier Monument, a project for a huge sculptural artifact commemorating the spokesman on cultural affairs for the French Communist Party<sup>xxix</sup> Surmounted by an early version of the “Open Hand, and scaled to be seen by motorists in passing cars, the unbuilt monument indicated a new approach to monumentality. The discussion concerning modern monumentality was also taking place in Switzerland, in a series of articles by Peter Meyer, editor of *Das Werk*. Prompted by the emergence of Socialist Realism and the challenges it raised to the earlier avant-gardism of the Neues Bauen,<sup>xxx</sup> the debate introduced a new set of issues that would eventually be engaged by CIAM. In a 1939 essay “The Dangers and Advantages of Luxury, inspired in part by his visit to Frank Lloyd Wright’s Johnson Wax building, Giedion criticized the American Beaux-Arts tradition for “simply transferring emotional luxury-forms from earlier periods to our own” He found this “bound to be unsatisfactory,”



and linked to the suppression of modern architecture in most (and soon, very likely, in all) totalitarian countries”<sup>xxxii</sup> Yet in contrast to earlier CIAM polemics, Giedion did not criticize what he called “our need for luxury, splendor and beauty”; instead, he argued that to satisfy it “we must create for our own ‘optical vision’” by means of the collaboration of architects with modern painters and sculptors<sup>xxxiii</sup>

By 1943, at the same time that Giedion, Sert and Wiener had begun to create the New York CIAM Chapter for Relief and Postwar Planning, Giedion, along with Fernand Léger and Sert, had been commissioned by the American Abstract Artists (AAA) group to make a contribution to a planned volume on the collaboration between artists, painters and sculptors<sup>xxxiii</sup> Titled “Nine Points on Monumentality, their manifest for the first time introduced the issue of “monumentality” into discussions of modern architecture<sup>xxxiv</sup> Their decision to emphasize monumentality was a surprising departure from previous CIAM attitudes, where the concept had always been linked to the classical tradition, which they rejected. Giedion went on to develop the theme with more historical detail in his famous essay produced around the same time, “The Need for a New Monumentality,” where he attacked the “pseudomonumentality” of the nineteenth century and argued that nonetheless a new monumentality was foreshadowed by the spatial and plastic conceptions of modern artists such as “Picasso, Léger, Arp and Mirò”<sup>xxxv</sup> Such a new monumentality, however, had to flow from the “emotional life of the community,” which could only come about through face-to-face contact rather than through the new media of radio and television. Giedion believed its focus should be new, publicly-financed community centers<sup>xxxvi</sup> Giedion’s image of these community centers seems to have derived in part from his experiences of crowds in modern pavilions at the 1937 Paris Exposition and the 1939 New York World’s Fair. In “The Need for New Monumentality” he invoked these fairs as “great spectacles capable of

fascinating the people” with “waterplays, light, sound and fireworks”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Giedion did not develop in detail the link between his New Monumentality and CIAM urbanism, but Sert took up this task in a companion essay, “The Human Scale in City Planning,” also commissioned by AAA at the same time<sup>xxxviii</sup> Clearly in the line of Le Corbusier’s earlier polemics for design in accord with the human scale<sup>xxxix</sup> Sert’s essay emphasized the need to “plan for human values” and to design cities based on the compact neighborhood unit.<sup>xl</sup> In his essay Sert went beyond simply restating Garden City thinking about neighborhood units; he also argued that pedestrian civic centers ought to be created. Especially in large cities he asserted that the “civic and cultural center constitutes the most important element... its brain and governing machine, and in it should be found university buildings, museums, concert halls and theaters, a stadium, the central public library, administration buildings, “and areas especially planned for public gatherings, the main monuments constituting landmarks in the region, and symbols of popular aspirations...”<sup>xli</sup> This conception of the civic center, of course, bears more than a passing resemblance to earlier Beaux-Arts or City Beautiful notions, but Sert did not acknowledge these parallels.

Not coincidentally, Sert’s essay was written as he and Wiener were preparing the plans for the Brazilian Motor City. In contrast to earlier CIAM projects like Stam’s and Schmidt’s plans for Orsk or Le Corbusier and Jeanneret’s for Nemours, the civic center element was here developed and presented with much greater architectural specificity, possibly in response to Lewis Mumford’s comments when asked to write the introduction to *Can our cities survive?*, where he had particularly objected to CIAM’s lack of focus on the design of buildings intended to house the political, educational, and cultural functions of the city<sup>xlii</sup>

For CIAM the concept of the New Monumentality was more definitively presented in Le Corbusier’s



1945 plan for the French town of St. Dié, destroyed in the German retreat at the end of the war. Here he interpreted the concept somewhat differently from Sert and Wiener<sup>xliii</sup>. In the St. Dié plan, first exhibited with other work by Le Corbusier at Rockefeller Center New York in November 1945, the civic center—housing a theater, café, museum and administrative buildings—was explicitly not an enclosed space like the one at the Motor City. Instead, in the St. Dié plan the civic center is an open platform with free-standing buildings: a high-rise administrative center, a civic auditorium, a museum designed as a square spiral, a department store, cafés and shops, and a hotel<sup>xliiv</sup>. Giedion later called the proposal “a long stride from the enclosed Renaissance piazza, and he asserted the buildings were “placed in such a way that each emanates its own social atmosphere,” demonstrating “a more dynamic conception of space” than traditional enclosed urban space<sup>xlv</sup>. The placement and design of the buildings were governed by Le Corbusier’s Golden Section-based proportional system, soon to be codified and published as *The Modulor* in 1948<sup>xlvi</sup> and well as by Le Corbusier’s intuitive visual judgments.

These two unbuilt projects – Sert and Wiener’s Brazilian Motor City and Le Corbusier’s plan for the reconstruction of St. Dié – both displayed a much greater focus than previous CIAM-related projects on the civic center element, and they emphasized its political role as a public gathering space. The two projects set the stage for part of the postwar work of CIAM, providing the conceptual basis for its uncertain efforts to remain an avant-garde movement in the immediate postwar years.

In the United States, however, other architects stepped into the vacuum left by the loss of interest in Beaux-Arts planning after the war. One of the most influential was the austrian “émigré” Victor Gruen, who perfected the typology of the suburban shopping mall. Gruen recreated the pedestrian urban shopping environment in self-contained centers at the metropolitan periphery, which were intentionally

accessible mainly by automobile. All the earlier problems of congestion and lack of parking were solved by this new form, which was rapidly replicated around the country in the 1950s and 1960s.

Appearing at a moment when many american cities were experiencing economic decline and racial conflict, the mall and its less sophisticated cousin, the strip mall, quickly supplanted most traditional downtowns as the focus of everyday shopping. These commercial spaces became the auto-accessible “de facto” public sphere of decentered metropolitan regions, but without the earlier public institutions, monuments, and spaces of assembly found in traditional downtowns.

Architects began to identify this loss of the urban public sphere as a serious problem in the 1960s, and variety of efforts were made to propose alternatives, many of them related to the Team 10’s efforts to suggest pedestrian-based urban forms which did not replicate the pre-automobile city. At the same time, existing cities built before 1930 began to be revalued as environments, which had physical patterns no longer available in the new suburban environments. Efforts in the 1950s by cities to remake themselves to compete with their suburbs gave way to nascent preservation movements in the 1970s, which tried to restore central urban areas which had been in decline for decades. These processes of urban conservation have continued in an uneven pattern across the country, with outcomes ranging from the spectacular success of parts of cities such as New York, Chicago, Boston and San Francisco to the continuing decay of many others. At the same time, suburban metropolitan expansion has continued at a rapid rate, to the point where cities such as Denver or Atlanta now cover huge territories and nearly all of the commercial built fabric consists of the new mall typologies, with little possibility of pedestrian public life.

It was in response to these conditions that a new planning movement was formed in the early 1990s which calls itself the Congress for the New



Urbanism. Inspired by the form of american small towns, the new urbanists appeal to history to argue that it is possible to recreate the pedestrian scale and its associated public life. They rightly point out that the typical physical form of postwar American urban development is governed by zoning and building codes which mandate widely spaced buildings and extensive provision for motor access and parking. These codes were developed in the 1910s and 1920s in response to what were then the major problems of congestion and overcrowding. The new urbanists argue that things have gone too far in the other direction and that a certain degree of well-planned higher density development is desirable. To this end they suggest new codes which generate a pattern of detached or semi-detached houses on small lots, arranged in patterns reminiscent of early twentieth century small towns and Garden Cities. For the new urbanists the traditional New England town square is an especially significant space, one in which they believe a genuine participatory public life can be recreated.

As understood by architects, New Urbanism overlaps with other kinds of postmodern historicism, which include efforts to revive City Beautiful forms and strategies of urban reconstruction. New downtown civic buildings in many cities have attempted to represent a sense of civic purpose through the use of a neo-neo-classicism. Many architectural practitioners in the United States are enthusiastic proponents of these ideas and of New Urbanism, which they see as a realistic way of opposing the continuing trends toward what is often termed metropolitan “sprawl.” The Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Clinton administration, Henry Cisneros, strongly supported New Urbanism and was supported the effort to replace high-rise slab housing projects loosely based on CIAM Functional City planning principles with lowrise townhouse developments influenced by new urbanist ideas. For new urbanists, as for many postmodernists generally, CIAM and the Modern

Movement were primarily responsible for the decline of american central cities. Much new urbanist rhetoric has been based on the idea of bringing cities and towns back to their supposedly ideal conditions before the destructive era of Modern Movement urban renewal in the 1950s through the use of urban infill in the form of buildings which as much as possible copy the surrounding context of pre-1930 buildings. This use of historical imagery has tremendous appeal for contemporary american urban dwellers, who know that american cities were safer, more prosperous, and had better schools and public transit systems sixty years ago than they do now.

At the same time, New Urbanism has been strongly criticized for its backward looking approach and for its assumption that its use of certain kinds of planning will allow for the reconstruction of the community life dispersed by suburban sprawl. Just as the City Beautiful movement could not solve the real problems of poor sanitation, overcrowding and violence in the early twentieth century american cities, New Urbanism seems unlikely to be able to solve american social problems through new urban patterns. Like the City Beautiful movement, New Urbanism assumes that architects’ visions have a kind of totemic social power to call into being a new way of life. Although its urbanism is based on opposite premises – mixed use instead of zoning by function, and a preference for relatively dense lowrise instead of widely-spaced high-rise housing – it appears to be similar in its assumption that architectural and urban form has the power to reshape society.

Like CIAM, New Urbanism is a carefully orchestrated effort by architects to determine urban patterns. Both seem problematic under contemporary conditions, where most new building in the United States now occurs in peripheral, previously undeveloped areas on the metropolitan periphery of fast-growing cities in the South and West. For this kind of development architects typically have no involvement in the urban design, which almost



always means wide auto-based commercial strips of “big box” retail outlets, fast food restaurants, drive-in banks, and gas stations which are set back from the street by large asphalt-surfaced parking lots. This metropolitan pattern is entirely based on automobile transportation and has in effect eliminated “architecture” in the usual sense altogether, with the occasional exception of a distinctive commercial building or private house. The negative social and environmental effects of this pattern have been the subject of extensive discussions by architects in recent years, but since the implementers of these now quite standardized patterns have little interest in architects’ ideas, these discussions have a futile, pointless quality.

This problematic condition of disciplinary knowledges which in a sense no longer have much larger social purpose, that this impasse has produced marks a new step in development of architects’ efforts to shape urban design, and suggests that positions, such as either CIAM’s or New Urbanism, which assume a different architect-client relationship than what typically exists are unlikely to succeed in their ambitious project of social change through design. What this likely failure means for the future form of american cities, with some high-profile exceptions, is the continued expansion of a monotonous pattern which no one actually seems to like that much but which is at the same time granted a kind of historical inevitability based on its low cost and ease of implementation. Thus any alternatives – CIAM, New Urbanism, or other possible positions – appear to be luxuries which can only be made available at either high cost or through extensive additional efforts and are thus not suitable for everyday use. While this need not be the case, this is the present reality for urban design in the United States. For architects this has meant either renewed attention to the material specifics of individual projects, without the social vision of earlier stages of modernism and postmodernism, or continued efforts to revitalize existing urban environments.

This revitalization direction seems to be promising, but it also has serious drawbacks which are the result of the contradictions of capitalism. While certain parts of cities have been spectacularly revived, the results do not necessarily differ so much from the highly controlled environments of theme parks or existing suburban shopping malls. This in turn has generated considerable critical resistance, which questions the shopping and entertainment oriented “pseudo-public realm” that results, a public realm that excludes or at least does not welcome the poor. Thus perhaps none of these directions – the City Beautiful movement, CIAM, or New Urbanism – which have preoccupied american architects over the last century can overcome the inevitably limited role of architecture in creating a public realm. On the other hand, all have significantly shaped the contemporary form of american cities.

## NOTES

- i. James I. Baughman, Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media (Boston, 1987), 111-112.
- ii. Lewis Mumford to Osborn, May 5, 1945 (Lewis Mumford and Frederic J. Osborn: a transatlantic dialogue 1938-70 (Bath, 1971), 83).
- iii. Lewis Mumford to Sert, Dec. 28, 1940 (Folder E1, Sert Archive, Harvard Graduate School of Design).
- iv. Lewis Mumford to Osborn, nov. 27, 1942 (Lewis Mumford and Frederic J. Osborn, 34).
- v. Joseph Hudnut, Foreword to Sert, *Can Our Cities Survive?* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1942), iii-iv.
- vi. Sert, *Can Our Cities Survive?*, 41.
- vii. Letter from Wallace K. Harrison to Nelson Rockefeller, march 13, 1942 (Harrison Archive, Avery library, Columbia University, 2: 1989 gift, box 2).
- viii. Knud Lönberg-Holm and Theodore Larson, *Planning for Productivity* (The Hague, 1940).
- ix. Marc Dessauce, “Contro lo Stile Internazionale: ‘Shelter’ e la stampa architettonica americana, *Casabella* 604 (Sept. 1993), 71.
- x. Lönberg Holm is the subject of a Columbia University dissertation by Marc Dessauce, who has generously shared much information with me on Lönberg Holm, Weissmann, and other CIAM members in this period.



xi. Giedion wrote in 1941 that he thought Le Corbusier should be Moses's adviser, although he said he himself had not had time to meet him (Giedion to Le Corbusier, February 20, 1941 Giedion Archive, ETH Zurich).

xii. For illustrations of the 1939 Fair see Larry Zim, *The World of Tomorrow* (New York, 1988). For an interpretation of it, see Warren I. Susman, "The People's Fair: Cultural Contradictions of a Consumer Society," in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984).

xiii. Inofficial [sic] Meeting of the following CIAM-members: Giedion, Lonberg-Holm, Sert, Weissmann, 850 Seventh Ave., february 19, 1943 (Ernest Weissmann Papers, New York).

xiv. Sert had met a month earlier with Eliel Saarinen and Philadelphia planner Edmund Bacon at Oscar Stonorov's farm, a meeting which may have had some connection to CIAM. (Letter from Stonorov to George Nelson, Jan. 13, 1943 (Sert Archive, Harvard Graduate School of Design).

xv. Born in Leipzig but an American citizen since 1919, Wiener had returned to Berlin in the 1920s, where he worked with Bruno Paul. In the 1930s he worked as a product and interior designer in New York. For an example of his work, see "Manhattan Apartment, P. L. Wiener, Designer," *Architectural Forum* 61 (nov. 1934), 339-341. In 1936 Wiener, in association with Levi and Higgins designed the American pavilion at the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris ("U. S. Pavilion carries skyscraper motif to Paris," *Architectural Record* 82 (December 1937), 20-23).

xvi. Le Corbusier to Sert, May 20, 1940, courtesy of Josep Rovira.

xvii. Henry Morgenthau, Jr. (1891-1967) had also been the publisher of the *American Agriculturist* (1922-1933) and was the author of the controversial wartime "Morgenthau Plan" for postwar germany, which called for eliminating the country's industrial base and returning it to farmland.

xviii. See the "U. S. Department of State" correspondence files in Sert, *Can Our Cities Survive?* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1942), particularly Morgenthau's letter on Wiener's behalf to Secretary of State Cordell Hull (Morgenthau to Hull, dec. 17, 1940 (Wiener Papers, University of Oregon Library). The exterior of the Brazilian pavilion was designed by Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer.

xix. Museum of Modern Art, *Two Cities: Planning in North and South America* (New York, 1947). Chronologies of the work of Sert and Wiener generally give the date of this project as 1945, but it is clear from the correspondence in the Wiener papers that it was commissioned before the end of the war. A letter from Sert to Wiener of April 2, 1945 mentions he was working on "modifications of the plan for the Cidade dos Motores." (Wiener Papers, University of Oregon Library).

xx. Letter from Jorge Czajkowski to Alan Colquhoun, may 2, 1994 (Courtesy of Alan Colquhoun). Niemeyer recalls that he was furious.

xxi. Illustrated in Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre complète 1934-1938* (Zurich, 1945), 27-30. This plan was exhibited at the 1935 Functional City exhibition in Amsterdam.

xxii. The project was first published in "Brasil Builds a New City" *Progressive Architecture* 27 (sept. 1946); for a more detailed description, see my "CIAM and Latin America," in *Sert: Architect a Nova York* (Barcelona, 1997), 50-56.

xxiii. On Gropius's prefabricated system, see Herman Herrey, "At last we have a prefabrication system which enables architects to design any type of building with 3-dimensional modules: Konrad Wachsmann and Walter Gropius produce the General Panel Corporation's packaged building," *New Pencil Points* 24 (april 1943), 36-47; and Gilbert Herbert, *The Dream of the Factory Made House: Walter Gropius and Konrad Wachsmann* (Cambridge, 1984).

xxiv. Walter Gropius and Martin Wagner, "Epilogue: the New City Pattern for the People and by the People," in Guy Greer, ed., *The Problem of the Cities and Towns: Report of the Conference on Urbanism*, Harvard University, march 5-6, 1942 (Cambridge, 1942). Parallel to Gropius's and Wachsmann's efforts, in 1943 Wiener had received a grant from the Federal Office of Production Research and Development of the War Production Board to develop a prefabricated housing system called "Ratio Structures," a project which Sert was also involved with. The work was carried out at the New School for Social Research in New York, and lasted at least until 1945. See U. S. War Production Board, Office of Production Research and Development, *Modern Designs for Prefabricated and Demountable Buildings* (Washington: War Production Board, 1944); and P. L. Wiener, "Ratio Structures," *Architectural Forum* 79 (dec. 1943); Josep Rovira, "Sun and Shade," in *Sert: Architect a Nova York* (Barcelona, 1997), 106-108.

xxv. An exception is the pamphlet published in 1943 by Oscar Stonorov and Louis I. Kahn, then in partnership with George Howe, which proposed a neighborhood unit with a school and a drive-in shopping center at the center of the neighborhood (Oscar Stonorov and Louis Kahn, *Why City Planning is Your Responsibility* (New York: Revere Copper and Brass, n.d. [1943]).

xxvi. At Neutra's Channel Heights, a defense housing project in San Pedro, near Los Angeles, most of the project was one and two story apartment units on cul-de-sac streets on the Radburn model. An Administration and Community Building was provided, but was sited to take advantage of the rolling topography and had no plaza element, only a parking area ("Channel Heights Housing Project," *Architectural Forum* 80 (March 1944), 65-74; Thomas S. Hines, *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture* (New York, 1982), 182). Other defense housing projects by CIAM members, like Gropius and Breuer's Aluminum City Terrace, near Pittsburgh (see Isabel Bailey, "New Kensington Saga," *Task* 5 (Spring 1944), 28-38); Howe, Stonorov and Kahn's Pennypack Woods, in northeast Philadelphia; or Neutra's Avion Village, in Grand Prairie, Texas, were similarly lacking in pedestrian civic center elements (*Architectural Forum* 75 (october 1941). Sert and Wiener also designed a defense housing project for an aircraft equipment factory near Sidney, New York at this time, which does not seem to have been published.

xxvii. Gropius to Sert, feb. 21, 1944 (Sert Archive, Harvard Graduate School of Design).

xxviii. Le Corbusier, "The Quarrel with Realism, The Destiny of Painting," in J. L. Martin, et al., *Circle*, 71.

xxix. Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre complète 1938-1946* (Zurich, 1946), 10-11; Gilles Ragot and Mathilde Dion, *Le Corbusier en France: Projets et réalisations* (Paris, 1997), 253-254. Vailliant-Couterier was also the editor of the French Communist Party newspaper, *L'Humanité*.

xxx. See Peter Meyer, "Zur Architektur des Zürcher Kongressgebäudes," and Martin Steinmann, "Das Kongresshaus und die Frage der monumentalen Architektur," *Archithese* 2-80 (march-april 1980), 42-43. These debates over monumentality in Switzerland are discussed in Jacques Gubler, *Nationalisme et internationalisme dans l'architecture moderne de la suisse* (Lausanne, 1975).



xxxi. S. Giedion, “The Dangers and Advantages of Luxury,” *Architectural Forum* 70 (May 1939), 348. This was an abridged version of the article that appeared in *Focus* (London) 3, Spring 1939. In this article, Giedion also suggested that Nazi and Fascist monumentality had had “subversive influence on neighboring countries” like Switzerland and Holland, and he criticized Oud’s ornamented and symmetrical Shell Building in the Hague (1938) on this basis.

xxxii. S. Giedion, “Dangers,” *Architectural Forum* 70 (may 1939), 348.

xxxiii. The American Abstract Artists group, who admired the work of Picasso, Kandinsky, Klee, and Miró, was founded in 1936.

xxxiv. For other discussions of the New Monumentality, see Joan Ockman, “The War Years in America: New York, Monumentality,” in X. Costa, ed., *Sert: Arquitecte a Nova York* (Barcelona, 1997), 22-47; and Christiane C. and George R. Collins, “Monumentality: A Critical Matter in Modern Architecture,” *Harvard Architecture Review* 4 (1985), 15-35.

xxxv. Sigfried Giedion, “The Need for a New Monumentality,” in Paul Zucker, ed., *New Architecture and City Planning* (New York, 1944), 549-568.

xxxvi. Giedion, 556-557, 566. Following Keynes, Giedion asked, “Why not keep the economic machinery going by creating civic centers?”

xxxvii. Giedion, 568.

xxxviii. J. L. Sert, “The Human Scale in City Planning,” in Zucker, ed., *New Architecture and City Planning*, 392-413.

xxxix. See for example Le Corbusier’s 1937 proposal for an “Exposition internationale de l’habitation à Vincennes” in *Le Corbusier, Oeuvre complète 1934-1938* (Zurich, 1945), 140-141.

xl. The neighborhood unit was usually defined as an urban sector housing the population necessary to support an elementary school (which usually implied populations ranging from 5,000 to 11,000 inhabitants), and designed such that no child need walk more than a one half-mile to the school, preferably without ever having to cross a major traffic artery. In the United States the term was first used by Clarence Perry, “The Neighborhood Unit: A Scheme of Arrangement for the Family Life Community,” *Regional Plan of New York*, vol. 7 (New York: Regional Plan Association, 1929). The concept had been used earlier by Grosvenor Atterbury and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. at Forest Hills Gardens, Queens of 1908, a Garden Suburb based on the British town planning work of Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker.

xli. Sert, “The Human Scale in City Planning,” 403-404. Joseph Hudnut wrote to Sert in 1945 that he “agreed heartily” with Sert’s essay, saying “I have just finished reading the Hilberseimer book [The New City] and I found it exceedingly depressing. The author assumes that practically all urban problems can be solved without the aid of art.” (Letter from Hudnut to Sert, Jan. 8, 1945 (Folder E2, Sert Archive, Harvard Graduate School of Design).

xl. Letter from Lewis Mumford to Sert, 28 Dec. 1940 (Folder E1, Sert Archive, Harvard Graduate School of Design).

xl. See Edouard Mure and Nathalie Régnier, “Saint-Dié: Chronique d’un échec,” in *Le Corbusier: une encyclopédie*, (Paris, 1987), 363-364; Anatole Kopp, Frédérique Boucher, and Danièle Pauly, *La Architecture de la Reconstruction en France 1945-1953* (Paris, 1982), 71-75; Jerzy Soltan, “Working with Le Corbusier,” in H. Allen Brooks, *Le Corbusier: The Garland Essays* (New York, 1987), 5.

xl. The St. Dié plan, which replaced Le Corbusier’s Nemours plan as the prototypical example of CIAM urbanism in the immediate postwar years, is illustrated in *Le Corbusier, Oeuvre complète 1946-1952* (Zurich, 1953), 132-139. It was displayed at both CIAM 7 and CIAM 8.

xl. S. Giedion, “Social Imagination,” in his *architecture, you and me* (Cambridge, 1958), 161-2.

xlvi. The Modulor, a proportional system based on the 1.10 meter square, was developed by Le Corbusier, Gérald Hanning and the French ASCORAL group beginning in 1943. It used the Golden Section (a proportional relationship where the ratio of the whole to the larger part is the same as the ratio of the larger part to the smaller, usually expressed as the relationship between a square and a rectangle whose longer side is the same as the diagonal of the square) to arrive at the “ideal” human height of 1.75 or 1.82 meters (or 6’0” in countries using the English system of measurement), from which two series of ideal proportional dimensions (the red and blue) were derived. These dimensions were to be used to standardize the components of all parts of a design. (*Le Corbusier, The Modulor I and II* (Cambridge, 1954).

(\*) O artigo foi transcrito do original e manteve a norma americana

Eric Munford

Professor na Washinton University, St Louis (USA), na área de História da Arquitetura e Planejamento Urbano. Foi docente em Harvard (1995-96) e na Columbia University. Doutorou-se na Princeton University, em 1996, com a tese “The Discourse of CIAM on Urbanism” É autor de *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928-1960*, MIT Press, 2000.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary sources

CIAM, "Statements of the Athens Congress, 1933,' in Auke Van der Woud, *Het Nieuwe Bouwen Internationaal/ International: CIAM Volkshuisvesting Stedebouw/Housing Town Planning* (Delft: Delft University Press, 1983), 164-167.

Le Corbusier, *La Charte d'Athènes* (Paris: Plon, 1943), translated into English by Anthony Eardley as *The Athens Charter* (New York: Grossman, 1973).

José Luis Sert, *Can Our Cities Survive?: An ABC of urban problems, their analyses, their solutions, based on the proposals formulated by the CIAM* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942).

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Human Scale in City Planning," in Paul Zucker, ed. *New Architecture and City Planning* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944).

\_\_\_\_\_. "Brasil Builds a New City," *Progressive Architecture* 27 (Sept. 1946).

José Luis Sert, Ernesto Rogers, Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, *CIAM 8: The Heart of the City* (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1952).

Paul Lester Wiener, *Uma Nova Era Cultura para as Américas* (Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Brasil-Estados Unidos, 1943).

P. L. Wiener and J. L. Sert, "A New City in Brazil,' *Architects' Year Book* (1949), 75-86.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Urbanisme en Amerique du Sud/Town-Planning in South America" in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 33 (1951).

Secondary sources

Xavier Costa and Guido Hartay, eds., *Sert: Architect a Nova York/ Arquitecto en Nueva York* (Barcelona: Museu d'art contemporani, 1997).

Nan Ellin, *Postmodern urbanism* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).

Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

Michael Sorkin, ed. *Variations on a theme park: the new American city and the end of public space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).