

On the search of a lost urban planning modernity: throughout the legacy of Lewis Mumford

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Introduction

It is with great satisfaction that we write this article for the new international journal of the also new "Territorialist" Association founded in 2011 in Florence, a city, indeed, with a very important historical legacy on architecture and urban planning....

Some new theories and practices in planning are strongly needed today, and it is just for this characterization of "new" theories, that we link our text to Lewis Mumford's legacy, books and articles that introduced architects and urban planners during the twentieth century A.C. into a new world of modern ideas, opening, at the same time, the planning practices for the next centuries, as he himself wrote in 1975 (MUMFORD 1980):

...the astrophysicists must reckon with the possibility that their outer world is only our inner world turned inside out. So perhaps with a further twist the impenetrable Black Hole might prove the shadow of a brighter sun. Even the notion of an 'explosion' and an 'implosion', a 'beginning' and an 'ending', may be only a very human metaphor, which the universe for reasons of its own, neither recognizes, nor exhibits. On that ultimate skepticism my own faith blithely flourishes.

LET THE CURTAIN RISE ON THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY - AND AFTER! ...
So, let us open the curtains for the play...

1. First act: "the egg of the snake"

Taking into account the metaphorical idea of Bergman in the known film "The Egg of the Snake" pointing out to the dark origins of fascism in Germany and in Europe, we will expand this metaphorical meaning to those dark origins, to the fundamental theoretical and practical urban planning mistakes that have produced the catastrophic situation today in a lot of countries and more specifically in Spain, a complete paradigm of these mistakes that Lewis Mumford forecast in such a clear manner.¹

The first 'egg', and the first mistake, deals with 'free trade' and takes into account the word 'free'. Modern urban development has been tied for centuries to healthy urban trade. The 'egg' of free trade has been related with social and urban development as a

¹ More than two million of empty houses, and more than half a million of people who need social housing, show the total social ignorance of urban planning procedures. Mumford insisted upon the fact that this 'blind social' condition of planning is related with a wrong use of technologies and financial powers.

basic component for space construction. The 'egg' began to develop into a poisonous snake when we forgot that free trade cannot survive ecological destruction or social control by gigantic financial networks, as Lewis Mumford insisted upon for years and years. Then, education is converted into a rigid rule, like these days in Barcelona where children in the schools build high skyscrapers because 'they want to be as rich as their parents'. This is not modernity at all, this is fascism.

The second 'egg' is also very significant. Urban systems and technologies are totally needed in planning, both in design, in building and in dwelling. However, these tools become a dangerous egg when they confound neutrality with freedom. Then, architecture and planning become unlimited networks of freeways without historical and geographic interfaces. Urban systems are not neutral as Walter Benjamin claimed when he saw the eggs of the snake in the "glass culture" and found no modernity at all.

A third 'egg' is when ecology and participation is manipulated for political purposes of very small healthy social groups, and this produces deep misunderstandings. Lewis Mumford analyses very carefully these three 'eggs' and he was accused of old-fashioned behavior and of reformism, a big mistake and, again, a poisonous snake. In 1980 he sent to us his last book *My Work and My Days*, where it is possible to find the following thoughts:

... we discussed DH Lawrence together... you had actually seen him in Italy. His letter from Germany was written in 1924 (and it was not published until after the war). Here he wrote (prophetically) "... Germany is very different from what it was two and a half years ago ... the great leaning of German spirit, is once more eastwards, towards Russia, towards Tartary ... THERE IS A SENSE OF DANGER. IT ISN'T THE PEOPLE. THEY DON'T SEEM DANGEROUS. OUT OF THE VERY AIR COMES A SENSE OF DANGER, A QUEER, BRISTLING FEELING OF UNCANNY DANGER..."

(from a letter to Frau V. talking about a meeting in Lubeck in 1934).

And Mumford follows:

all of these prophecies by Lawrence, has come to pass in our time, what masses of men felt in their souls was already declared in the self-conscious doctrines of Moeller van den Bruck, Ernst Junger and Oswald Spengler, who provided new symbols for everything in the German soul that was dark, repressive and alien to the rest of the world....

End of the first act.

2. Second act: Lewis Mumford's legacy

A serious analysis of Lewis Mumford's legacy will need some books, so we will use a long private interplay of letters with Josep Muntanola, taking place since a personal visit to the old professor in Albany (New York) in 1963. This interplay is summarized here in three different diagrams. The first - diagram I - is the last letter he sent, dated 6 of July 1981, when he was 86 years old; it is a somewhat sad letter, but full of deep considerations. The second - diagram II - is a multidisciplinary mix of texts, in order to grasp the complete range of understandings he had. The third - diagram III - gathers some opinions and ideas about the questions that the research by Josep Muntanola arose into his mind. You should keep into consideration that there was a difference of age of 45 years, however this was never a barrier for a long friendship and mutual concern. Each diagram carries its own comments with it.

LEWIS MUMFORD : AMENIA : NEW YORK : 12501

6 July 1981

... . It is a pleasure to hear from you again,
 dear Josep Montañola; and the news that
 you will not be in the United States until
 October increases the possibility of our
 meeting again. Of course I am gratified and
 flattered by the fact that the Chancellor of the
 University of Barcelona is interested in my
 visiting Barcelona. But you and he forget
 my age! Neither my wife nor I myself are ^{now}
 young enough to travel. At ~~that age~~ ^{out age}
 we hardly moved beyond the limits of our
 village, despite the ^{increased} interest in my work
 that leads to ^{repeated} invitations to ^u Buenos Aires,
 Mexico and Japan, where most of my books have
 been translated. Meanwhile, my own work is
 no longer confined to architecture, as you would
 find if you examined the books I have written ^{since 1960}
 beginning with the two volumes of "The Myth of the
 Machine". No matter! I value our friendship,
 and hope---despite the increasing breakdown of

of human culture all over the world today,
^{you and I}
~~we will~~ find some way of meeting again,
 face-to-face! Meanwhile, please thank ~~me~~
 friends
 you ~~friends~~ and colleagues for their interest
 in my work! What I was writing fifty years

ago has, in recent years, found the audience
I have been working for among the new generation
here in America---and in other countries; ^{too,}
That gives me great satisfaction, and en-
courages me to face the ~~xxx~~ unhowable future,
which otherwise has ^{also!} become darker than ever.
Please salute your colleagues and give
them an old man's blessing!

Ever yours
Lewis Mumford
Original II

In relation to this first diagram, his last letter in 1981, it is important to point out the significance for him of the new ecological trends, especially in the recent generations. He was active and with a lot of invitations, but he also felt to be misunderstood by intellectuals and more specifically by architects. The idea that he was considered an 'old fashion' urban planner depressed him deeply.

Diagram II - Letter, 2 June 1970

LEWIS MUMFORD : AMENIA : NEW YORK : 12501
2 June 1970
. . . It was a pleasure to hear from you again, dear Muntanola; and I would have responded sooner but for the fact that I have been under great pressure, correcting the proofs of a long book I finished in February, to be called The Pentagon of Power. This is the second volume of the book that came out in 1967, The Myth of the Machine; and it rounds out the study of technology I began in Technics and Civilization more than thirty years ago.
Your proposed studies on the social and educational effects of architectural space should be fruitful;

for there is a great deal of knowledge, both traditional and scientific, that has not yet been put together; and once this is done, it will point to further areas that need to be explored. I have not been able to keep up with the recent literature on the subject. One of the best books on the social effects of space is that by J.L. Moreno, published in 1934: *Who Shall Survive?* If you care to, I shall be glad to send you my copy, before you come over. E.T. Hall, an anthropologist at the University of Illinois, has ~~published~~ written on the effects of space: his book, *The Hidden Dimension*, is now in paperback. He would be an excellent person to consult by letter, before you come over. On the ecological side, the outstanding leader is Ian McHarg, of the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania: his recent book, *Design with Nature*, is worth studying, and he himself should be consulted, too.

* Urbana, Illinois

** Philadelphia, Penn. 19104

The Center for Environmental Studies at Williams College, Williamstown, Mass. may also be helpful to you: the name of the Director is Andrew J.W. Scheffey. There are probably ^{many} psychological studies in existence, following up the work of Moreno and of Kurt Lewin (*Field Theory in Social Science*) and Professor Hall will probably be able to tell you about these. As you see, this is an area I have only the most casual acquaintance with, except through experience!

If you come in October, you will find me in Cambridge where I am a Visiting Scholar, with a little apartment in one of the new Harvard Houses. My address from the middle of October on will be:

F-111 Levee House
Cambridge,
Mass. 02138

It will be a pleasure to show you both around Cambridge; and some of my friends at Harvard, like David Riesman, will probably be able to tell you whom you will find it

profitable to consult, there and elsewhere. I look forward to our meeting.

With warm greetings

Ever yours
Lewis Mumford

In relation to diagram II, the selection of professionals is linked to the proposition of the correspondent about studies on the interaction between psycho-sociological research and architecture. The inclusion of professor J. L. Moreno, of German origin, and his "theatre of spontaneity", a very difficult book to find (MORENO 1934), was a proof of his modern vision, since the connections between theater and architecture, and their psychoanalytical implications, have been uncovered many years later by the theoreticians of architecture and urban planning. So the multidisciplinary perspective of Lewis Mumford was not simply erudition, but a deep understanding of the design and planning innovations in relation to science and arts in general. And, of course, the same can be detected in their ecological view points, very different from Patrick Geddes' previous orientations, in spite of the deep reverence to his master mixed with a need to take distance from what he evaluated as an excess of arrogance and self-esteem.²

Diagram III, Letters, 17 September 1967, 18 October 1972

LEWIS MUMFORD : AMENIA : NEW YORK : 12501

17 September 1967

Dear Muntañola:

Forgive this long delay in answering your two letters. When your February letter came, I was slowly recovering from a severe attack of bronchitis, which followed the finishing of my new book, *The Myth of the Machine*. (When it comes out in the Buenos Aires Spanish edition, I shall try to remember to send you a copy.)

By the time your May letter came, I was in Italy, where the University of Rome, through its faculty of architecture, gave me the Laurea Honoris Causa, as Doctor of Architecture. We spent two months in Europe, mostly just for pleasure, though I gave a few lectures in Zurich, and at the moment we are getting ready

to move to Cambridge, where I shall spend the winter working on a new book, the sequel to The Myth of the Machine.

I wish I were able to give a satisfactory answer to the questions you have put to me. I am delighted to learn of the project you have under way for Sabadell; but I am not sure that there are any new books that will help you, except in the most general way. The Israeli architect and planner, Artur Glikson, wrote a series of important papers that might help you; but he died a year ago, and I have not yet been able to find a publisher for his work, although some samples of his thinking have appeared this last year in 'le carre blau' in Paris.

Perhaps the book that would help you most is The New Towns, by Frederic Osborn and Arnold Whittick; for the problems they faced freshly for towns of from 30 to 100,000 people are similar to yours, though all their plans must be re-thought, of course, in terms of your Spanish needs, purposes, and desires. It is easier to tell you what to avoid: avoid the

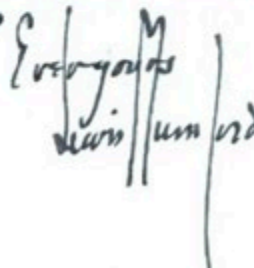
* F-III Leverett House
Cambridge 38
Mass.

variations on the Voisin plan that Le Corbusier originated and could never get away from! His high-rise buildings are extremely costly and the open space around them is an obstacle to normal social life. The same applies to Costa's Brasilia, and even more to extravagant and inhuman buildings in Caracas. This conception of planning is obsolete. Some of Ernst May's early planning in Frankfurt, like Römerstadt, would come closer to your needs; though for good industrial quarters you should investigate the English New Towns closely---and if possible visit them, especially Harlow, Crawley, and Bracknell.

The other problem you raise in your May letter is an even more difficult one to answer, as you yourselves have doubtless already found out! Thirty years ago I might have given you a confident answer, for at that point architecture and planning both seemed ~~on the way~~ on the way to producing a unified answer. But the last

thirty years have revealed weaknesses in the over-simplified answers that ^{over}satisfied both the architects and the architectural schools, and we are now in a great state of confusion, which reflects the even greater confusion, indeed the chaos, of modern society. Here in America our architectural schools are in a state of intellectual turmoil: some of the essential traditions and disciplines of all architecture have been thrown aside as if they were worthless. There ^{with} are teachers and students who are ready to turn the problem of design over to a computer. This seems sheer madness to me: but we live at present in a mad world, in which those of us who seek to maintain their own balance ~~are~~ and to restore balance in the community are looked upon as enemies of progress. But I am now too far away from schools of architecture and from teaching to be able to give you any real help on your problem.

With warm good wishes, both for your personal life and your work,



LEWIS MUMFORD : AMENIA: NEW YORK : 12501

14 October 1972

. . . Y ur visit toward the end of October, dear Montañola, comes alas! at the worst possible time for our meeting, for I shall then have to devote all my time to correcting the proofs of my new book, Interpretations and forecasts, which will come out next spring. Though I have not had time to digest the outline of y ur preent work, for my mind has been busy with other matters, even your outline in English seems to ^{me} beautifull, and correctly conceived. Unless I havemisjudged your intentions, you are perhaps the first p erson who

has advanced beyond Patrick Geddes's early description
of the multiple functions performed by the city.

I hope we shall have an opportunity to meet before
you return to Catalonia ; and I regret that the
chances of our meeting this time are so small.

With warm good wishes

Ever yours
Lewis Mumford

Finally, in relation to letters in diagram III, their ideas about planning and the city are very clear. Perhaps some arguments in the letter of 17 September 1971 are the best summary. Following these short texts, two ideas worried Mumford the last years of his life: the role of technology in social wellbeing, and he wrote a lot of books and articles on that; and the second topic was the need for a criticism of the contemporary urban planning practices in relation to ecological misconceptions and wrong social practices. The two questions were related to the bad use of technologies, not to the technologies in themselves. This is the reason for the last fundamental book: *"The Pentagon of Power"* (MUMFORD 1970). And it is clear that the computer was for him a dangerous snake, hopefully for us, less poisonous than he felt it to be.

We should read Mumford's books as a basic heritage to start thinking on the best future for planning activities. In his book *The Culture of Cities* (MUMFORD 1938), he summarizes his views of a new urban planning that today still sound very modern and contemporary.

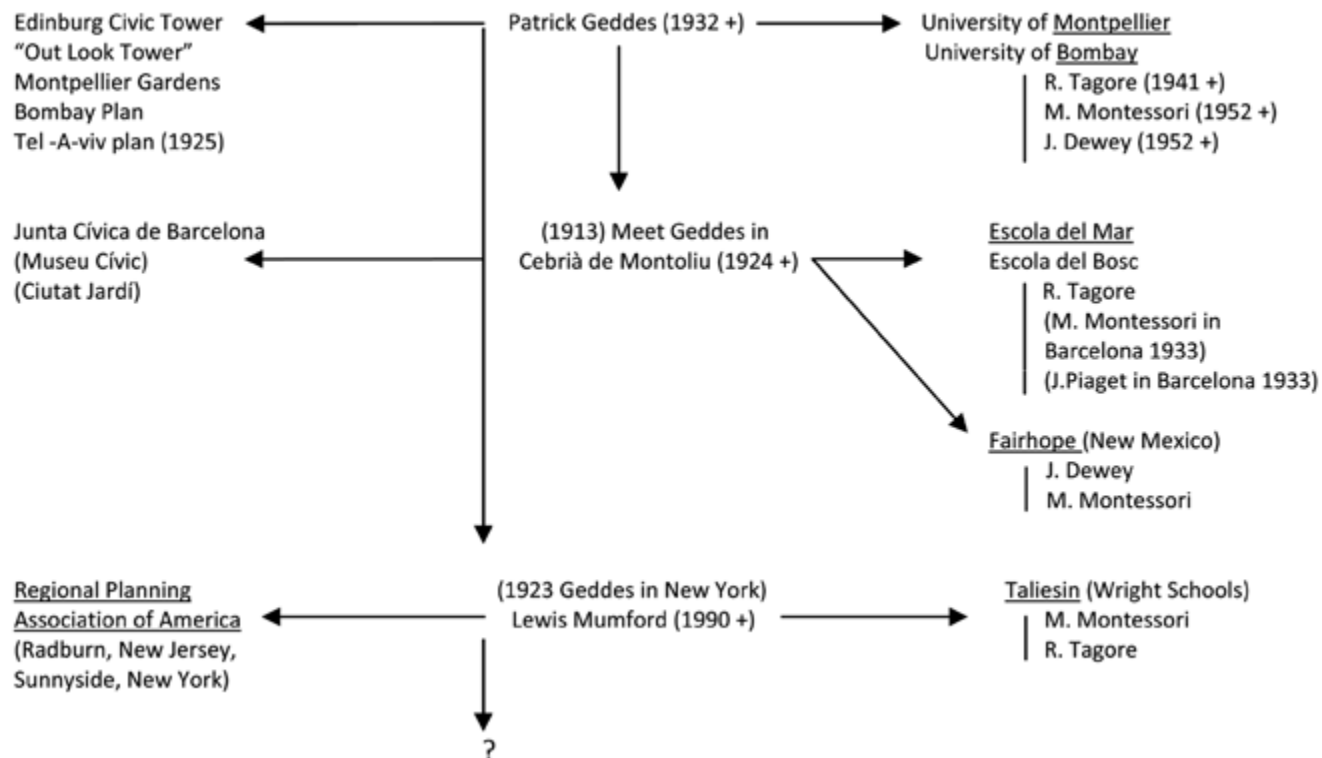
3. Third act: the course of planning

Taking again some concepts from Mumford's legacy, we have in mind the extraordinary article written in 1934 in *The New Yorker* (MUMFORD 1934), about an exhibit in the MOMA on abstract paintings by Picasso, Duchamp, etc., where he describes the power of representing reality in a modern way, in such a way that abstraction becomes closer to reality than figurative representation. The "Course of Abstraction", which was the title of the article, means the course of art, science, and social life altogether, in an extraordinary modern manner. Following the open path by Patrick Geddes, biologist, urban planner and sociologist (see diagram IV), he was also very impressed by the ecological studies and by biosocial theories, lying outside of the scope of the present article.

This is an extraordinary theoretical point, since this view on modern art destroys forever the incompatibility between the new and the old, and the local and the global, in architecture and in urban planning. Almost one hundred years after abstract art began, millions of architects still misunderstand the point. From now on, to build new buildings or to rehabilitate old frames is exactly the same, and translations or new writings are no more split into two different worlds.

This was the deep sense of the text by Mumford in 1975 about reality and virtuality in astrophysics that we just quoted above. We can be free, but this increases our ethical and political responsibility.

Diagram IV: Cities, Planners and Schools.



Our question today is how we can prevent the snakes to develop without the destruction of the eggs. The book by Alberto Magnaghi (MAGNAGHI 2000) on a new urban planning based upon the chart and upon an atlas for each place, is already a very important step in the right direction, but the implementation of these planning procedures is another matter, it demands:

- the Urban Chart of each place prior to any plan;
- the consideration of the whole environment: natural, social, etc., and the evaluation of the existing physical qualities and cultural social activities and forms, as heritage;
- the three basic dimensions of planning: education, professional architectural and urban design, and social and political regulations, should develop simultaneously, by linking the local to the global environmental qualities, the natural to the technological dimensions of the city, and the scientific to the aesthetic dimensions of design.

This is the legacy, not only of Mumford, but also of Aristotle. If not, see in Diagram IV the relationships between urban theories, planners, children schools and fragment of cities where these links are very clear. Paradoxically enough, children's schools remain and cities do not survive education. That means stressful lives and frustration, even suicides, and also it implies another diagram v about the Dark Cities and the Dark Schools. But we do not want to depress, in this new journal, more the atmosphere, just a last note. Short before the war Mumford

participated, with an energetic article against monumentality in modern architecture (MUMFORD 1937), in an English book that had references of a letter by Gropius to Hitler as a last strategy to save the Bauhaus, where he insisted unsuccessfully upon a school of architecture only open to the best white and blonde German students... The egg of the snake, again, but this will be another play....

The end

Barcelona, March 2012

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Abstract

Starting from the correspondence held by Mumford and Muntañola, the article follows a critical trace developed by the same Muntañola with Saura Carrulla, pointing out some key issues faced by Mumford in his vast work. Such issues allow to highlight, among the rest, the very contemporary, innovative and critical strength of the message left by the American Regionalist movement, centered on an integrated and complex relationship among man, nature and technology and a multidisciplinary vision considering planning as a 'civic' practice, emphasizing its 'education' and communication dimensions. Using the metaphor of "The Egg of the Snake" for the basic theoretical and practical errors of urban planning, the article highlights how Mumford had carefully analyzed such 'eggs' over time - a critique of contemporary urban planning in relation to ecological balances and wrong social practices, an analysis of the role of technology in relation to social welfare and so on - and for this had been charged, to his regret, of retrograde attitude. This critical reading of the typical approach to urban project, especially revealed in his last years, shows perhaps a state of anxiety that, in Mumford, was about to flow into a trans-disciplinary approach.

Keywords

Lewis Mumford, planning, multidisciplinary, trans-disciplinary, critical reading.

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