

Book Reviews

EVOLUTION OF CITIES

Matrix of Man

An Illustrated History of Urban Environment. By Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. Pp. 317. (Pall Mall: London, February 1969.) 90s; \$15.

HISTORIES of the city, and there are many of them, tend to suffer from the sheer vastness of the theme. Five thousand years of evolution, widespread distribution over every continent and most countries, and a variety of planning forms and concepts lead to innumerable omissions, sweeping generalizations and the lives of great cities summarized in a few lines. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy has attempted to overcome this inherent problem by making a broad classification of urban planning types. Examining these types by a method of cross-references which assumes a more or less chronological sequence, she repeatedly brings the reader to the present. She identifies the geomorphic settlement, characterized by an organic inter-relationship between building and landscape; the concentric environment in which the city is an ideological "world-mountain"; the orthogonal form, fluid, pragmatic, sometimes linear; and the modular grid, regimented and, in the West, dominated by Graeco-Roman precedent. Despairing of the ruthless application of the grid-iron plan to the city sites of her adopted America, she devotes more than a third of the book to the latter and saves much of her most stringent commentary for a condemnation of its relentless discipline. Then she comes to the theorists of the late nineteenth century, notably Ebenezer Howard and his successors, who get rather ungenerous treatment although they introduced the first planning concepts to break away from historical forms with their cluster communities and satellite towns.

The author's emphasis on the plan fits her declared theme of the "Matrix of Man", the patterns in which man has chosen to construct a human order of habitations. This aspect is profusely illustrated, about two-thirds of the three hundred figures being plans, or aerial drawings and photographs, which demonstrate the plan of the city and the distribution of its parts. But the book has a subtitle: "An Illustrated History of Urban Environment". As an indication of the environment, the plan has little value, for the forms and volumes of the city do not exist for the city-dweller as a pattern of lines on a two-dimensional plane but as the experience of masses and voids, of the unfolding of spaces and places, as progression through changes of level and plane, as light and shade, texture and colour. Above all, the city is where man meets mankind. "Despite evidence to the contrary, man is not an ape who lost his tail so that he could sit behind a

steering wheel", writes the author (who is not slow to condemn other writers for their "deafening banality"); the illustrations suggest otherwise, for the relatively few photographs which reveal the environment show more cars than people. History there is in abundance and Mrs Moholy-Nagy draws on myth and hieroglyph, cult and ceremonial, economics and ecology, philosophy and politics, in support of her analysis of the development of city forms. But the environmental experience eludes her book.

At the conclusion of the work, the author presents a number of "Options" offering alternatives for possible development in the future within her categories. She acknowledges the future of the megastructure with such an example as the intimidating ziggurats of Konwiars's "brilliant" Alsterzentrum-St Georg competition entry, and includes the plan of Ray Affleck's Bonaventure plaza system in Montreal. From the content, one would assume that only Moshie Safdie's Habitat stands as evidence of the potential of the megastructure, but, in fact, Bonaventure's massive, elephantine but superbly detailed bulk stands used, inhabited, functioning. One looks in vain for a mention, let alone a photograph, of Bertrand Goldberg's Marina City in Chicago.

Informed, infuriating, but irresistible, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's *Matrix of Man* is a highly personal declaration of "faith in the historical city". As professor of architectural history at the Pratt Institute, she probably had students in mind when she wrote her book, but it is also directed at her fellow historians and those urban specialists who "maintain a perpetual momentum of urban crisis". Sometimes witty, sometimes flippant, she lays about her vigorously, unawed by the eminence of Le Corbusier to castigate his "simple-minded" assumption of social benefits from his "vertical villages". Her refreshing asperity makes her book compelling and it will serve its purpose if it stimulates new thinking. Nevertheless, the "Options" emphasize the abandon of her demolishing side-swipes. Within the first few pages Buckminster Fuller, Doxiades, Christopher Alexander and Archigram are felled. Buckminster Fuller's ideas "might produce domes", but they "will never produce cities". Perhaps not, but she ignores the implications of climatic and environmental control of Fuller's plans, quite feasible, for roofing lower Manhattan, or, for that matter, of Frei Otto's tent roof over an entire valley for the building of the Göschenenalp Dam. Plug-In City by the Archigram Group demonstrates "the similarity between fascist systems" and makes "Orwell's 1984 look positively humanistic". In so dismissing the work of Fuller and the younger visionary architects, she clearly misunderstands their intention of providing structural frameworks for systems and services in which freedom of choice and movement would be facilitated rather than hampered. The work of Isozaki and the Japanese "Metabolists", and of Paolo Soleri and his "Mesa City" scheme, is without mention. From Tony Garnier's Cité Industrielle of 1903 (mentioned in a caption) and Sant'Elia's Città Nova of 1914, through Norman Bel Geddes's "Tomorrow's City" of 1939 to Yona Friedman's Spatial City of 1963, there is a chain of planning conceptions which goes virtually unrecognized but which may well provide some of the solutions to the housing problems that an exploding world population will produce.

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy rightly chides Lewis Mumford for his pessimism and romantic nostalgia, but she is herself unable to come to terms with the imminent problems of the future. She pours scorn on those who achieve "popular success on the civic wailing wall" for their alarm at "urban nightmares". Time never runs out, she assures us. But meanwhile, the diseased slums of Calcutta continue to sprawl and the squatter settlements spread over desert and mountain outside every historical city in the Middle East or Latin America, without matrix, and without any qualities of urban environment.

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