

"BREATHING SPACES : INTENSITY RATHER THAN DENSITY"

Belgian architects and urban planners have, for centuries, created a very specific way of perceiving and conceiving space, allowing them to build places and cities that have a soul and in which every stroll takes you to breathing spaces for everybody and for all.

Bruges, Tournai, Anvers, Liege, Brussels, are all cities in which the urban fabric has been woven, over the course of centuries, around a plurality of diverse cultures. Because our cities result from a synthesis of a multiplicity they have developed strength, identity and charisma allowing them to shine.

The way we conceive architecture and urban planning consists, on the one hand, of translating into the spaces we conceive the synthesis of the context, time period, and a variety of parameters to which they belong and in which they are inscribed.

On the other hand, to the contrary, we also have to incorporate the new spaces we create into an existing context, a body of work, which our projects contribute to create and recreate, within a constantly evolving city, in which we need to generate and preserve coherence.

Separately, each new building is a particular opportunity to represent a moment and a place in time and space, (which the architects and their clients choose to validate). But it is only together that all buildings, all created spaces, coalesce into the world we live in. This aggregate network contributes to the materialization of a larger theoretical 'mindscape' whose overall coherence is our concern.

It is the aggregate of all these dynamics that brings intensity to the city. We create breathing spaces so that we can perceive the city's soul.

Urban intensity does not have a scientific definition.

It could be defined as the expression of density in terms of quality.

Indeed, when we speak of the city today, we inevitably gravitate to the question of density. But density alone can never fully qualify the city. Urban intensity goes beyond the mere quantitative notion of urban density by maintaining or expanding urban nodes of respiration, and by creating mixed and multifunctional spaces. Urban intensity is, and must continue to be, the engine and the essence of the sustainability of the urban fabric.

Our work consists in translating density into intensity. It is a research into the recreation of intensity. This methodology and this research is integral to every step of our thought process



and is present at every scale of our work.

The city is a system perpetually in search of equilibrium. It's inner processes and characteristics create a combination of interrelated, and often conflicting/antagonistic, elements. The city has to answer to the various constraints it is subjected to: pollution, and the various nuisances it is tied to: overpopulation, circulation, parking, rhythms, lifestyles, needs, desires?

In its very nature, the city is linked to the notion of consumerism. This need, which our time expresses with so much eagerness, has a counterpoint we should not forget: our sensibility to daily urban life. The city of everyday and every morning, which, to paraphrase the urban sustainability theorist Philippe Madec, can be lived in slippers.

The concept of intensity facilitates the integration of a phenomenological approach to urbanism within the politics of urban development.

The objective of this approach is to enhance the quality of our daily living spaces: service spaces and public spaces, thereby enhancing the quality of life as well as of cultural and social relationships.

It is, therefore, about imagining new urban spaces that will offer the cultural, sports and social facilities expected by all citizens; at the same time answering their needs and building the foundation of a sustainable urban fabric.

Developing a sustainable urban fabric requires a human perspective. It demands the creation of a dense and compact city through a process dedicated to increasing urban livability. We need qualitative densification, achieved through the management of intensities which will retrieve the necessary plurality of the public urban space. This means producing an urban form which encompasses all spaces and provides all essential urban functions but also allows the simultaneous creation of a sensitive living framework.

This can be done by ensuring the quality of urban developments as well as of the environment and service infrastructures. When taking into account the rapid changes of our time and needs, this requires innovation in the way we conceive dwellings and services.

Innovation cannot be accomplished on only the formal level but must also be implemented through: the development of a variety of residential typologies (mixing duplexes, apartments, town houses and open spaces); expanding the scope of what the built environment offers, in the way we live, and its relationship with the public space (communal garden, public promenades); and the integration of an urban infrastructure of services (kindergarten, schools, etc.).

Managing intensity means distilling the pluralities of the urban environment into a coherent design from which a readable

framework emerges: a meaning.

The key question when it comes to intensification is, therefore, how to work towards densification while also bringing a qualitative improvement of the living spaces involved: more built floor area but also more infrastructure and more green spaces that are better managed and accessible. From a practical point of view, we have to consider various mixed-uses in order to address the various spheres of daily activity (living, services, green spaces?): dwellings and service spaces but also beautiful squares and welcoming streets, meeting spaces, and breathing spaces within public parks mixed with proximity services.

In the Asian environment of accelerating development, it is a challenge to adequately represent and materialize the requirements of a changing society, one is evolving at high-speed attaining high thresholds of social and economical change.

Faster, bigger and ever more ambitious projects characterize the new urban development challenges in Asia. Here the ability to create visions that will tomorrow's needs cannot always keep up with the speed of development. Yet it remains essential not to miss the opportunity to create spaces that adequately represent the future needs of Asia, while also confronting radical new challenges including urban densification, climate change and the rising cost of fossil energy.

Although china's development speed has slowed, it is still projected to have a GDP growth at 7.8% and urban development will remain a major focus in years to come. More specifically, there will soon be a need to upgrade the general urban, spatial and environmental quality in downtown areas of Chinese cities by creating network cities, projects that can link to their context and connect with a bigger urban pedestrian and traffic network.

Development speed has been the recent focus of urbanization in China leading to what some have called "sprawling generic cities". The upgrading the environmental and urban qualities, however, will likely be the focus of the next developmental wave. This will be a slower, more sustainable wave of development giving additional emphasis to creating sustainable developments and programmatic mixing while simultaneously trying to develop more public amenities which are better integrated in a coherent urban fabric (giving precedence to parks, squares, and public amenities).

It is our belief that Belgian architects have the expertise to help upgrade urban spaces in downtown Chinese cities, by developing quality public spaces that are able to tie together various programs (whether cultural, commercial or residential), and at the same time propose the most advanced sustainable development strategies.

Thereby substituting the concept of intensity in place of density.

An intensity that draws from the rich cultural life in china and builds upon the potentials opened by denser, more populated urban centers, thus allowing for breathtaking vertical implementations of public space and circulation. Intensity that

is conceived in the form of a pedestrian sequence that allows for alternating dense and breathable spaces, and which incorporates high quality green spaces from the very inception of urban feasibility studies. Indeed, the core value of our urban and architectural education is built on pedestrian square and streets that tie together neighborhoods, development strategies that value cultural heritage and environmental qualities. Furthermore, it should be remembered that the large scale urban developments found in China can often be compared in size to a European downtown area.

Density does not make a vibrant and thriving city. Spontaneous interactions that occur along a busy street where there are a variety of uses attracting different groups of people does. The importance of the pedestrian street lies in its contribution to the success of an urban environment, and in its unifying potential in a vertical development model. Urban studies at various scales have shown that sustainable development strategies require a meaningful and pertinent multi-scale approach: integrating design strategies that tie the project's various circulation networks to the urban scale, the neighborhood scale and the development plot scale, allowing for the creation of specificity. Thus implementing a unified design strategy the simultaneously looks at the masterplan, the architecture/spatial design and the project typology scales. Indeed only the integration of mixed-use typologies within the urban network will create inspirational cities as opposed to overwhelming CBD spaces in New York or Shanghai, cities with mixed-use development.

Intensity rather than density.

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