TRADITION - A CONTRIBUTION TO CIVILIZATION

Alexis Theodossiadis
Architect and Planner
Cyprus

I have to admit, I am unable to make any prediction on Urban Planning and Architecture, the title of this session. All I can say is that we are nearing the close of the second millennium. If we remember that the first millennium brought us to the Middle Ages and then to Renaissance, the second period of thousand years brought man to the surface of the moon but also to the present problems of this planet. So how is it possible to predict what life will be like after a thousand years?

No-one, of course, can either imagine or predict what or how life will be that far away. Being an optimist, I will take the stand that life will continue up to the year 3000 and that Homo sapiens will still exist, as long as no nuclear, biological, "star war" or other type of devastating catastrophes occur, and pollution is limited and controlled. Anthropos will then continue to exist, provided he understands thoroughly his obligation to respect the equilibrium of the bio-system in which he exists. Bios (life) in the next millennium will depend on the consumption/investment ratio in relation to the respect for the environment. "Bios" and "millennium" have a common factor - "time" - and a parameter - "repetition" of events or facts. Bios and millennium also differ considerably; the former relates to quality and the latter to number or size.

The quality of bios was developed mainly through life in the polis. The evolution of mankind is the result of events related to bios in the polis or biopolitics. Speaking about biopolitics, I should say that it has been clarified that bios is life in all its aspects. And now, I should like to say a few things about politics. "Politics", a Greek word, derives from the word "polis". "Polis" means "town" and at the same time means "order". Whatever the result of life in "towns", according to the past tradition, was called "politismos", which is civilisation. Thus, "polis" is the essence of life. Taking a brief view of the past, we know that towns were created for different reasons, some for commercial or religious purposes, others for military reasons. So many towns all over the world do not look any more as a "polis" but more as transitory dormitorium. They are places you reach by bicycle, by foot, by car, by bus - you just sleep, you do not live there any more - then you return and work in equally unpleasant conditions.

People used to concentrate in certain areas creating a polis. The quality of life attracted rural populations in increasing numbers. Many of the European urban settlements consisted of a core which gave origin to the development of the "new town". The historic centre of a town being the part which existed before the industrial revolution. The historic centre has a very characteristic identity, determined not only by its physical aspect, but also by the process through which it was transformed. The historic centre comes to life when the town starts to expand. Often, the historic centre is a "walled" city, in which all citizens live under the same law. It is not uncommon to notice that in many towns no care is taken for the historic centre. Developers and city administrators demolish old buildings of social, cultural and historic importance replacing them with ugly, commercial edifices. In 1877 William Norris warned against the dangers of restoring historic buildings, declaring that in many cases it implied deception. Whenever erecting new constructions or preparing urban designs, great care must be taken for the protection and respect of the cultural heritage. As John Ruskin said, monuments are not our property, they belong to those who created them and to those who will come after us.

I would like to make a reference to the cover design of the Biopolitics book. I refer to the straight lines like a star. In the Renaissance period, actually in 1450, there was an attempt to identify the "best town" design. Among those who decided to produce designs, was an Italian by the name of Lorini. The external design of this emblem is the exact design of Lorini. I do not know if it is by chance that this cover was selected but it is an ideal envelope in which life should be enclosed. I make this reference since Nikosia, my home town, and Pannanora, a town between Venice and Trieste have exactly the same design. In the Renaissance attempts were made to identify the ideal conditions of bios. Since to know means to plan, to plan means to conserve, to conserve means civilisation.

When a man loses his memory, he goes mad and is no longer able to organise his thoughts or plan his future. When a town loses its historic memory, it becomes chaotic and resembles an ugly, urban fringe area. Historic memory is of great importance for the quality of life. It is everyone's duty and responsibility to join efforts, resources and talents in order to plan in accordance with the man-made and physical common heritage.

To achieve this result, the following is needed:

- legal framework;
- financial resources;
- good technicians;

- specialists, and
- true governmental will.

For this reason I have chosen in my speech to press upon the need to preserve and re-use the historic centres of our past. All environmental problems have their origin in three main factors. They are due to ignorance, indifference and intention. The substance of environmental problems is due to size, dimension or correct selection of criteria. The solution is not individual, it is a common effort. It is an ecumenical need, a universal need, and a duty to co-operate and resolve environmental problems which increment the quality of life in many towns.

Bios needs equilibrium in every country and peace among nations.

Alexis Theodossiadis studied Architecture and Planning at the Politecnico di Milano, Italy, and later became assistant lecturer in Architecture at the Faculty of Civil Engineering. He is currently vice-President of the Association for the Protection of the Cyprus Environment. He was appointed by the Environment Office of the European Economic Committee to chair the working sessions of the International Conference for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea and is also a founding member and Secretary of the Association for the Protection of Old Nicosia. He served as board member for Tourist Planning and was recently appointed member of the Planning Board in Cyprus.