

Multidisciplinarity and Meaning in Urban Design

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This paper examines the tension between two concepts that underpin the Theory of Knowledge and represent two opposing epistemological statuses: meaning and multidisciplinarity.

Multidisciplinarity concerns a miniaturisation of knowledge that divides reality into parts, thereby defining autonomous and specialised fields of knowledge. As Edgar Morin has said: “The fertility of disciplines in the history of science has been demonstrated; on the one hand, it circumscribes a domain of competence, without which knowledge would be impossible to grasp; [...] However, the establishment of disciplines implies at the same time a risk of hyper-specialisation of the researcher and a risk of ‘objectification’ of the studied object, as there is a risk of forgetting that this has been ‘extracted or constructed’. The object of the discipline will then be perceived as self-sufficient; the links and solidarity of this object with other objects, as treated by other disciplines, will be neglected, as will the links and solidarity with the universe of which the object is a part.” (Morin 1999).

Meaning is a difficult concept to define. In semiotics, Algirdas Greimas said that the concept of meaning was undefinable; then he added that it is “that which grounds human activity as intentionality” (Greimas, Courtés 1982, p. 187), which moves within the tension between motivation and finality. In his book on synchronicity, Jung (1960) contrasted “meaning” with the separation of knowledge and, drawing on the Chinese philosopher Chuang-tzu (a contemporary of Plato), imagined an original state in which the separation of things had not yet begun: meaning, said Jung, is the whole or the effect of the whole, and the meaningful part is that in which the whole is recognisable, that is, the effect of the whole. This definition of meaning can also be applied to cities, where, for example, the so-called “city effect” and the pleasure that comes with it are greater when each individual part contains all the functions present in the city as a whole. This homogeneity of

parts, or functional mixité, is the reason why Richard Sennett (*The Open City*) much prefers Naples to Frankfurt, where the parts are functionally distinct. While uniform distribution of functional quantities is the task of precise disciplines such as urban planning, sociology, and economics, the homogeneity of the urban form is the task of urban design, a weak discipline which, precisely because it is mixed with art, Oswald Mathias Ungers dubbed “the art of urban design”.

If art is unification, then the art of urban design also brings together determinism and intuition, reason and imagination, and a sense of the city, which, according to our definition, is such if the whole or the effect of the whole is recognisable in the part. This can be achieved formally, through the magic of form or – to quote Jung – its syncretism. Thus, form acts as an antidote to the mathematisation of the world, to its division into ever smaller discrete units, separate from one another and devoid of emotional content. Unlike the probabilistic relief promised by Rhine’s experiments, the pleasure derived from form is certified by Gestaltpsychology studies, which include the concepts of “conclusion” and “figure/background” among its principles.

The above considerations will be illustrated through a number of architectural projects for cities.

References

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