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The Resilient City, a future theme for Europan
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In recent discussions on sustainability and the built environment a new concept has come up: the resilient city. Resilience as a concept borrowed from ecology. In general it is the capacity of a system to absorb external or internal shock and stress and the ability to "bend back" to the previous stable position. Resilience includes notions of sustainability – which can be read as stability - but besides that it allows for a certain dynamics and it looks at the city as an integrated organism, a network including interrelated subsystems like the social system, the economic system and the ecological system, all working with and within the built environment (which in itself is built up of several systems such as the infrastructural system). In essence the idea is preservationist, in the sense that it tries to preserve the existing situation if that situation is considered "good". But external shock, like economic crisis, demographic change or climate change (or poor quality of the existing fabric and or housing) may be reason to shift to a new stable position that more or less absorbs or neutralizes the results of this shock. Progress and growth, the two great mantra of modernism, are criticized, and regress, shrinkage, steps back or sideward may be better ways to re-stabilize the system.
In general for planning and design the resilient city aims at strategies to meet future challenges (to absorb future shocks). As such it is a more general concept than for instance sustainability or adaptability because it always includes the other systems besides the built system. In that sense it is a holistic approach in which everything is connected with everything. The idea includes (and looks for) diversity, interdependency, redundancy, flexibility, feed-back principles etcetera. It considers the city as a metabolism, in a certain way as a living organism.
At first glance the concept may seem to be too broad and too general to work for a design competition like Europan. But the concept may be translated into several design tasks. Consider for instance the integrated neighbourhood where the social, the economical and the ecological are equally well met and where the built environment is considered to be the catalyst for social, economical and ecological interaction. How to facilitate self-reliance and bottom-up initiatives among the inhabitant by building? Can the city be transformed into a network of interrelated "villages", small self-reliant communities that nevertheless "work together" and strengthen each other in the city network as a whole? Another approach would be strengthening one of the three pillars (social, economical, ecological) that is considered to be weak in a certain neighbourhood. For instance how to integrate natural systems (water and air, green areas, biodiversity, city ecology in general) into high density inner city neighbourhoods while at the same time enhancing economical and social needs? Or how to enhance derelict local economies, without frustrating the social and ecological needs? In general: how to localize social, economical and ecological needs. How for instance to make the building industry itself local, one that can be build, and maintained with local (if possible re-used) materials and local labour? Or approached from yet another angle; can an industrial area still be made viable and liveable with a strong social and ecological system? Is it possible to build a social and ecological paradise, that still is economically viable and even strong and successful?
This approach would maybe force the design teams to include other disciplines, like biological city ecology, sociology or economy. But that would be no problem at all in my opinion, even an advantage.