Elaborating strategies for the design of cities assumes greater significance as the world becomes more urban. Who is in charge of such a task of prime importance? One could think that it is the architects, but actually as infrastructure planning was left over to engineers, the latter have a greater impact on the shape of cities. Looking at history, infrastructure is indeed the most powerful tool to found a new settlement and to regulate urban sprawl.

The present demarcation between architects and engineers led to a division of the architectural and infrastructural interventions. On the one hand the position of architecture in our society is intricate as it is considered by the media as piece of art but has only a small impact in the built environment. On the other hand infrastructures are designed solely for efficiency following principles of pure function and generally not taking the surrounding environment into account.

If we look closer at transport infrastructures, they allow cities to be connected to territorial and international networks but on the other hand they separate different parts of a city and require many bridges and tunnels to restore a subterfuge of connectivity. These artifacts are usually unattractive and potentially hazardous places isolating districts from one another. Transforming them into connecting elements would create more homogeneous cities and integrate isolated areas into an attractive urban life.

INFRASTRUCTURE AS A PARADOXICAL ELEMENT, CONNECTING WHILE DIVIDING

Without infrastructure there is neither architecture nor urbanism. Infrastructures are prerequisite that make it possible to establish an settlement. Traffic and infrastructure have shapped the city of Basel since its early origins. Positioned at a major intersection of European highways and railways and the only port of Switzerland, Basel is an important logistical center. The surrounding geography turns it into a bottleneck with all the traffic roads being squeezed in or nearby the city. The railway tracks have always been shaping cities but without a large consideration of their separation of territories and these infrastructures represent rightly an opportunity to merge areas but could also provide additional functions making these connectors attractive elements in the urban landscape. Besides being a connection, it would also become a destination in itself.

If we go back at the original definition of the word “infrastructure”, it designated the railway fundamentals opposed to the idea of “superstructure” which regrouped all the railway equipment above the ground. A “superstructure” is exactly what we could do to bridge over traffic infrastructure. The management of flows and movement would be laid as a basis of the design, to which could be added more programmatic richness. A new urban typology could emerge, the so-called “superstructure bridge”, providing connection but also new spaces for apartments, offices, public institutions, recreational areas and parks. A close relationship and interdependence between architecture and infrastructure would be engaged and fostered.

HOW TO MAKE A SPACE FROM A STREET?

Public good is served not only through the provision of needed infrastructure but also through the provision of public space. We can see examples of such designed public spaces in some urban roadways as the Henry Hudson Parkway in New York or the Cinturón in Barcelona. In order to create a space and a feeling of location out of a connecting element, it is important to bring an added value and a richness of situations. The structural authority of the unbuilt environment will be acknowledged and squares would be considered as rooms. The public spaces will form a structural sequence. Pedestrians, making the city through walking, will regain power over the mechanization of cities. Walking will be considered as an everyday act profoundly constitutive of the urban fabric.

The superstructure bridge is bringing together various activities at various speeds; the railway, the cars, the travelers going to the train station and the pedestrians strolling around. The public space will allow looking at these various movements, the architecture being the framework of this complex ballet. The space will also open towards the city and provide an exclusive view of the urban landscape. Presenting various situations of public squares, the project aims to fulfill the varied desires of the urban dweller, be it of socialization or of emphasizing the individual forms of personal existence. With its particular position nearby the train station, the project at Peter Merian-Brücke will also provide a wide break into the open after the confinement that characterizes train travel and train stations. It will provide spaces for the anticipation before a journey and for the reunion at the return.

DEVELOPING A PILOT SCHEME

Traffic infrastructure have always been shaping cities but without a large considerations of their separation. Linking areas that are currently divided by railway or highways could enhance development and make these areas more attractive. Moreover, to the action of connecting could be added more functions and programs, turning the connecting element itself into a destination. A new superstructure bridge would act as a motor of urban development and create a new network of relations in the city.

The project in Peter Merian-Brücke aims to be seen as a pilot scheme that could be repeated and adapted to other crucial points in Basel such as the Badischer Bahnhof or the connection Basel Nord - Hardfeld. Therefore it is designed by simple rules reflecting a stance on enhancing urban development by crossing infrastructures. The model could eventually be exported in other cities of western countries and advocate for highlighting the potential development of traffic infrastructure in urban areas.

A potential for urban development

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