

# **The American corral - the European souk**

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this essay is not to unravel the entire history of urban civilization in America. That would be impossible. It is not about unfolding the evolution of European cities either. It should rather be seen as an attempt to explore the main principles that created cities in both continents, in order to interpret their urban morphologies and their particular character. Following this direction, one should go back in time and primarily focus on the forces and conditions that made it possible for cities and settlements to happen. For that reason, this essay will try to investigate the initial states on which both the American and the European cities were founded. This type of investigation will allow us to extract legible conclusions regarding the urban form of cities on the two sides of the Atlantic and more specifically, regarding the American cities. It is more than obvious that, as it is always the case in academia, this particular research (as any other) only reflects the author's ideas on a particular time in the history of a scholar, and in that sense it always remains open to further explorations and interpretations. Additionally, it should not be regarded per se as a crystallized result, but rather as an open-ended process.

## **Tracing the origins of Settlements-The European Approach on Cities**

As this essay tries to argue, in order for someone to understand and interpret the shape of cities, the focus should go way back to the city origins. In other words, as any cityscape is the result of processes in time, the conditions that initially created a city should be examined, in order to extract the forces that guided the evolution process.

It is probably one of the ironies of history that, even if today we regard cities as an apotheosis of human civilization, the first settlements were created around cemeteries. After the first inhabitants of this planet managed to cover their demands on sheltering and cover their basic needs,

the first kind of gathering shifted from the cave, where they would gather around the fire, to another kind of space that had a spiritual and religious dimension. According to Lewis Mumford, people would gather around tombs on a frequent basis in order to mourn the beloved ones. Thus, as people were gathering around the tombs, they started creating a built environment that could cover their needs for a particular time lapse, and it could be argued that this kind of settlement evolved to the first villages. Even if there is no scientific proof of that, one could just take a look at the pyramids of Egypt and realize that one of the first landmarks on earth, that seized human civilization, was a mausoleum that would host the king to eternity.

From that point of view, one of the basic functions that gave birth to cities was articulated around religion, and probably it would take thousands of years for that function to be put aside on the process of founding a city. However, in addition to that religious aspect, one of the key elements of any kind of city had to be the landmark of the local authority. In other words, the second main characteristic of a city needs to be related, in one way or the other, to the man or the group of power. After the temple or the tomb, the second element that generated a concentration of population was the palace, an entity that would be later transformed to the parliament.

But one of the key aspects of human settling and probably, the key feature of man's activity is always based on the discipline of the economy. For a particular time lapse the main activity that generated the economy was a kind of nomad-based stock raising. There was a particular moment in history when the economy shifted from that to the individual agriculture. The first result of that was the birth of the notion of land-ownership and this would bring changes to the evolution of the city. The settlement expanded from a nucleus based model to a spread of several properties. And as agriculture evolved, this led to the need to start exchanging goods, and that of course, had to take place in the center of the cities. The city of the medieval times was there, a place of commerce, a place to exchange goods, that had not yet lost its religious character (since temples were still there), and it had not still lost its agencies as local authorities were still exposing themselves through gigantic structures.

But aside from the above mentioned principles, as history evolved, it brought another parameter that would affect the way cities were articulated. As the population was growing in several parts of Europe,

empires were growing and that generated the notion of the city-state. The nation-state-city had to protect itself from any enemies, and that led to the creation of fortification. This created an urban morphology that was more or less typical in Europe, that kind of a settlement that had the right size to protect itself within designated boundaries, where the main human activities were articulated around commerce and religion with a parallel exposition of the local authority in terms of the built environment. From that particular context where the reflection of an agency of any type (clergy or ministry), luckily, there were a series of Europeans that could not conform with these conditions, and in that way they would discover the New World later on.

### **The Absence of Ethos-the Spirit of Freedom and the American Landscape**

Lewis Mumford could not have put it in a better way: "Human life swings between two poles: movement and settlement". From the origins of civilization until today, these two principles have guided the formation of the cities. And if European cities were initiated as castles and fortresses that followed an expanding process, the American cities were created as settlements from scratch and they were perceived as future cities that would host larger populations. If one would have to select what was the primary axis that created the American cities, this would rather be the idea of movement.

As the first settlers moved to America, there is one main principle that guided them on how to create their new settlements. The spirit of freedom and probably a slight exaggeration of that made it possible for them to perceive the new land as a land of freedom, a land of no rules, a land of anarchy. The spirit of individualism would lead the growth of the American cities for the years to come. Probably one of the key aspects that played a really important role in the formation of the American cities was the absence of a strict ethos, an absence of moral problematics that would form a series of principles that could have shaped a specific framework of a particular tradition. This absence of ethics should not necessarily be considered as a disadvantage, but rather as a driving force that was born under the principles of freedom.

But none of the above would have ever happened if there was not another variable that absolutely played its role in the growth of the American city. And this would be the vastness of the American landscape. At the end, the American city was the outcome of these two main principles and values, the

spirit of freedom, and the american landscape. Probably for the first time in history, a huge area of land was inhabited with such a speed. The topography of America gave the colonials the chance to expand rapidly from the one part of the continent to the other. This was the moment when the cell of the american growth was born, the egalitarian grid. The grid represents the idea of equality and at the same time the right for individual growth to everyone. And this is precisely how the Jeffersonian grid should be perceived, as the unique corral that represents the right of ownership.

### **A Dialect between the American Corral and the European Souk- The Fox and the Hedgehog**

If the European city up to a point was partially based on commerce and it existed as a souk, the American city should be perceived as the corral. At this point, regarding this dipole, it may be worth recalling Colin Rowe's ideas about another dipole that could be detected on the urban morphology of the cities, the one between the hedgehog and the fox. Colin Rowe quotes Isaiah Berlin trying to state that there are two main elements in the city, the one would be the fabric(adaptable to any situation as a fox) and the other one would be the monument(the hedgehog that only does one thing). This could be a relative analogy between the European and the American city. The corral is the monument, the boundaries between properties, and the souk would be the commercial centre at European cities.

However, what might be happening is actually the opposite. Sartre perceives the American city as a camp in the desert, as an ultimate expression of ephemerality. The american city is there just to repeat itself in time. "In the United States, communities are born as they die, in a day". Later on he says: " For us [the Europeans] a city is, above all, a past; for them it is mainly a future;what they like in the city is everything it has not yet become and everything it can be. In that way all of a sudden the corral, even if it can be perceived as the "hedgehog" it becomes a fox. The egalitarian grid was the ultimate background to make anything to happen. The European fabric has lost its abilities as a fox a long time ago. The Jeffersonian grid would be exactly what Colin Rowe had on his mind when writing about the fox.

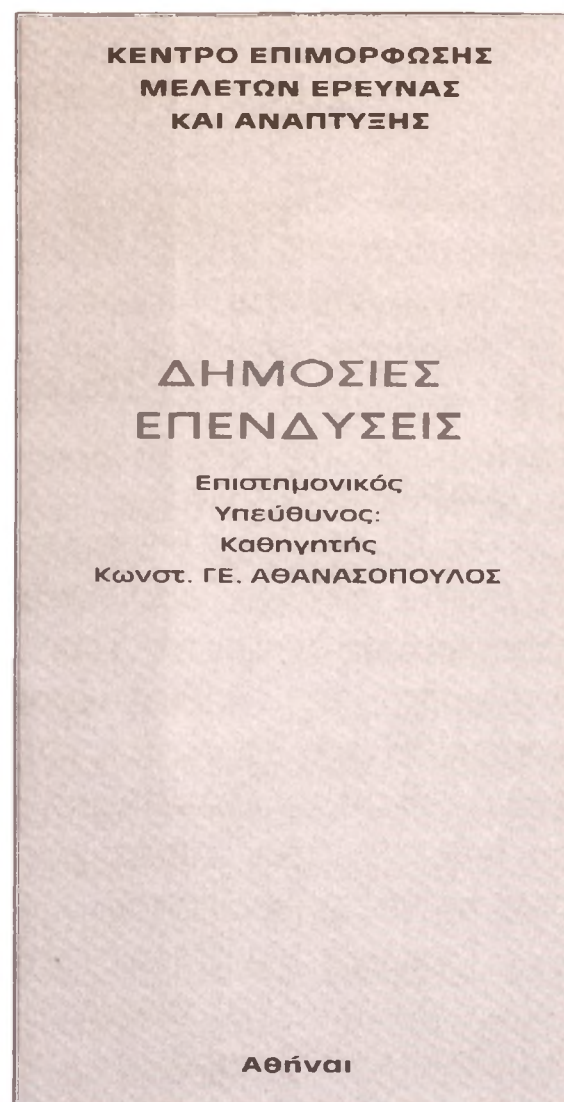
On the other hand, what is left regarding the European city is a strict conservatism, a place of inertia where everything becomes and stays related to its history. It rather stays fixed to a condition able enough to

offer what Mumford would call "a sense of defensive isolation". European cities lost their evolving character exactly because the American cities were created. The spirit of freedom and the notion of evolution has abandoned Europe centuries ago, right when the discovery of the New World happened.

### **Concluding remarks**

Throughout the pages of this essay, there was the attempt to reinterpret the forces that gave birth to European and American cities. Following a particular process, it was argued that the American cities were based in the notion of freedom and thus, they maintain their ephemeral character. On the other hand, even if European cities have faced a series of transitions through the ages, it could be argued that their urban morphology does not reflect any attempt to evolve or transform. It rather reflects a more conservative approach regarding the city. And this would be the idea of a city as a secure shelter for its inhabitants. The dipole of the corral and the souk turned out to be the exact opposite of what the morphology of the city on the two locations implies and as a result, the American city becomes the fox, that can adopt, because of its grid and egalitarian character, as opposed to the European perspective that wants the city to remain steady and not seeking its future.

As a final remark it could be argued that the urban morphology of a city not only reflects the way it evolved in time, but at the end, it can stay open to interpretations regarding its inhabitants. In other words, even if the morphology of the American city reveals its main principles it does not necessarily reflect its character, the ephemerist character of the American city cannot be directly seen at one snapshot. One really needs to understand and seek the values for this characteristic. As opposed to European cities, where agency is significant, even visually (everything seems to belong to history, nothing is actually evolving), one could not extract the relation between the American city and how it can change over time just by trying to understand its visual morphology. From that point of view, once again, the Jeffersonian grid was probably the right tool at the right time. As it was laid out on the American landscape, it allowed plenty of space (metaphorically) for any future adaptation and adjustment to the inhabitants.



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