

Review of: "A Conceptual Review of Discontinuity in Urban Design: The Morphological and Ethical Dimensions"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

STATEMENT – QEIOS

A Conceptual Review of Discontinuity in Urban Design: The Morphological and Ethical Dimensions

Matters of contents

The central theme of the article refers to one of the central issues of modern architecture at the scale of the city: *discontinuity*. Urban configurations from the pre-modern city to the modern city implies, world-wide, the rupture of the continuous urban fabric. Not that this is completely new in cities' history, but to understand why this has, again, come to the fore from the end of the 18th century onwards is paramount to reveal the social logic of present times. However, the first impression is that the focus of the paper is not empirical but resides on the analysis of theoretical speculations. And, in doing so, it focusses on various dimensions of *discontinuity*: "intellectual, moral, and physical realms". (In passing: the article should avoid self-appraisal remarks as in "this paper substantially contributes to the body of knowledge concerning urban design", as in the abstract – let the reader or the critics do this.)

However, from the beginning of the text, there is a confusion between *ascientific* approach and an *ethical* one: not only things *as they are*, but also, without alerting the reader, things *as should be*. This is a common problem in architectural writing. Not that the two instances should not be addressed, but this should be made explicit, and not expressed as if this one and the same thing: "It involves the arrangement and organisation of various elements within an urban environment to create functional and visually appealing spaces." No, it does not necessarily, and the paper strives just to exemplify circumstances in which this does *not* occur.

As follows, the turn is to "architectural style", and how this affects "pedestrian experience, accessibility, and the overall cohesion of the city". Well, it is not *style* the main issue – it not an *aesthetic* matter that is involved, but rather the configuration of the city fabric, the way buildings relate to each other and to public space by means of intense relations between inside and outside or otherwise – through direct or indirect permeabilities etc. Here perhaps a fragile theoretical framework begins to show.

Then, comments are made concerning the imposing of Western principles and values and the Arab city – it is as if such values were not world-wide disseminated, including in Arab cultures, particularly in times of globalization. They are.

Now, the article is very ambitious, in its three sections: it goes from "linguistic and philosophical aspects of discontinuity",

through “the ethical dimension of urban discontinuity”, to “the concept of urban discontinuity within both Western and Arab urban design contexts”.

A lengthy discussion follows on linguistic and philosophical issues, and, here again, the worlds *as is* and *wishful thinking* are blended: “they all share a commitment in improving the built environment in ways that benefit people and communities”. No. this remains to be proved.

Then the papers goes on to issues related to medicine, surgery, biology and mathematics, and one begins to wonder if it is necessary to go this far to understand the issue of discontinuity in urban fabric, or if, in fact, these are completely different types of the theme: do we really profit from bringing this to the discussion? Again, the theoretical fragility of the argument is exemplified here: “Catastrophe theory provides a framework for abstracting the behaviour of a system *by observing its structure or configuration* (i.e., the form that can be seen with the naked eye) rather than observing *the internal detailed structure of the system* (Dendrinis, 1987)” [my italics]. Now, a definition of *configuration* and of *structure* is needed – and it is not offered.

Only on p. 15 we arrive at the subject matter of the article: “Physical or morphological discontinuity (break)”. And, in what follows, other concepts come to the fore: “visual”, “spatial”, “form”, “layout”, “architectural styles”, “materials”, “urban fabric”... Such concepts *cannot* be used at leisure – that is, without a rigorous definition of them, which is not offered, and, rather, is taken for granted. However, finally, in the following paragraph, some explanation is sketched, which, understandably, *do not* encompass all concepts put forward before: “size, shape, scale, proportion, and spatial relationships”.

Finally, we find this in the last paragraph: “Discontinuity in urban design refers to a lack of harmony or coherence among different elements of the built environment in a particular urban area. This could be due to planning decisions, differing architectural styles, or a lack of consideration for the overall aesthetic of the space”. It is thus clear that no *theory* is being offered here, in order to explain the *social logic* of “discontinuity”: why were such planning decisions made? What is actually the “aesthetics of discontinuity” and how is it constituted?

Although the paper has the merit of going through a vast bibliography, it lacks cohesion and theoretical clarity.

Final statement: NOT ACCEPTED.

Matters of form

The writing is very good – a pleasant and fluid reading. Some typos occur.