

Confessions of a criminal

The text that follows is a slightly edited version of a combination of texts by C.A. Doxiadis which first appeared in Ekistics, vol. 32, no. 191, October 1971, pp. 249-254; and The Great Urban Crimes We Permit By Law (Athens, Lycabettus Press, 1973), pp. 18-22.

Introduction

When faced with the writing of an introductory paper for the subject of Buildings (Shells) and their relationship to human settlements, I realized that I was compelled to speak in my role as one of the criminals who are destroying the human city. [This document was the basis for the Research Discussions, after which it was re-issued in the present form, incorporating certain additions suggested during the discussions].

We are all committing architectural crimes; as criminals we have to make this confession first. Personally, I have been lucky because I learned to recognize these crimes from my youth. From my father and mother I learned what the word "human" means, and from my teacher, Pikionis, I learned what "human architecture" is. As a result I have made an effort not to commit architectural crimes, and to fight the criminals. However, the criminals *do* exist, and they are increasing in numbers at a very high rate. At the same time the severity of their crimes is also increasing. Since I live in the same world, in the same cities as all the criminals, I consider myself to be one of them and as such I hereby confess:

One: We are committing grave architectural crimes.

Two: We are not making an effort to stop. We are not even making an effort to confess.

Three: We do not acknowledge the causes of these crimes.

Four: We are not resisting their alarming rate of increase.

It is our obligation to define our crimes, to investigate their causes, to learn how to cope with the problems they represent, and to proceed in reversing our present criminal activities. This is what I will try to do here.

Our greatest crimes

We commit many architectural crimes with every day that passes, but this is an eternal phenomenon (Man makes mistakes in a certain percentage of everything he undertakes), and a natural one (we must learn by trial and error). This is not a new problem worth discussing now. The new one is that for the first time in our history we are making so many mistakes that they are developing from simple errors into crimes because those suffering from their consequences are no longer few (the inhabitants of a badly designed house) but

are many (the inhabitants of whole cities). Furthermore, the suffering of these people is no longer limited to a few months or years but will continue for generations to come.

The gravest of these crimes are the following:

● First crime: The construction of high-rise buildings

This is a very great crime because:

- Such buildings work against Nature by spoiling the scale of the landscape. The most successful cities of the past have been the ones where Man and his constructions were in a certain balance with Nature (ancient Athens, Florence, etc.) (fig. 1).

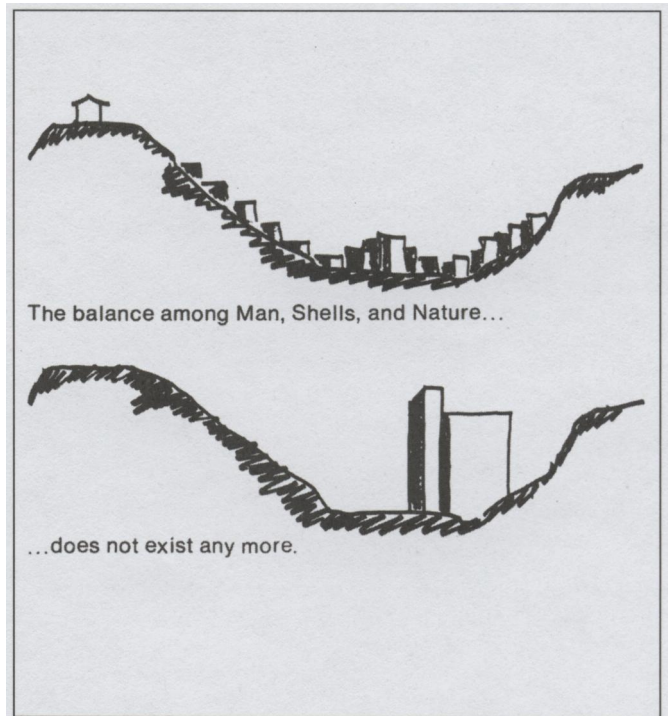


Fig. 1: First crime – first aspect: The high-rise buildings are spoiling the landscape.

- The high-rise buildings work against Man himself, especially against children who lose their direct contacts with Nature. Even in cases where the contact is maintained it is subject to parental control. As a result the children suffer and so do the parents.
- These buildings work against Society because they do not help the units of social importance – the family, the extended family, the neighborhood, etc. – to function as naturally and as normally as before.
- The high-rise buildings work against the Networks since

they increase the density, overload the roads, make servicing with water more difficult and expensive and, what is more important, create vertical Networks.

- The conclusion is that high-rise buildings work against the other four elements of human settlements and this is true also from the economic point of view (the city is overloaded with people and costs); from the social and political points of view (the few – the owners of this land – benefit against the interests of the many); and from the technological and cultural-aesthetic points of view.

Is it really the first incidence of this crime in history? Taken to such an enormous scale in terms of height and volume, it certainly *is* the first manifestation. At a much smaller scale, however, it often occurred in feudal times. When only one lord held the reigns of power, it was his tower which dominated the city, the tower of power and government which was later taken over by the people. Sometimes several less powerful feudal lords with conflicting interests erected their own towers, remains of which are still to be seen in the Mediterranean and the Caucasus as well as elsewhere. The fact that these symbols of rivalry neither became widespread nor managed to survive demonstrates the inhumanity of such phenomena. Nowhere in the world has a city ever developed successfully with such towers of rivalry.

In human cities property owners always had equal rights. Buildings rose to a certain height, varying from one story to four or five stories or even higher in some walled cities where greater density was necessary. This “normal” height was exceeded only by the edifices of the church or government or by fortresses, which were for the protection of all citizens. This is true both of ancient and medieval cities.

Why then, for the first time in history, have we become criminals in our cities? Because it is only in modern times that cities have experienced such rapid growth, are so vast, require so much space, and have an income and technology which permit any type of construction. Only now do cities have populations by far exceeding one million, which until AD 1800 was the limit. Only in our age are there so many cars that each citizen needs more and more space.

The causes of inflated land values and increased building heights are many. There is no valid reason why the few should profit at the expense of the majority. This exploitation of inevitable city growth is a result of:

One: Greed for economic gain.

Two: Ostentation and desire to achieve greater status, as is the case with many corporation towers.

The phenomenon really began in our century. When the Eiffel Tower was built in Paris in 1889, it reached a record height of 300 meters (984 feet) but it belonged to the nation. No individual was exploiting the city. Unfortunately, some great masters of the first half of our century like Le Corbusier in Europe and Frank Lloyd Wright in the USA put forward the high-rise as a solution to urban problems without taking a stand on the social and legal aspects of their proposals. As a result all towers now belong to private groups or very special services, even in socialist countries where land belongs to the state.

It is interesting to note that among the landownership battles I have witnessed in a professional capacity, one of the most severe was in a socialist country where the management of a steel factory opposed the interests of the city, represented by mayor and city council, and finally won their case. When I learned that land exploitation caused many problems in a touristic area of Poland, I was amazed, until I saw that even the character of Moscow’s Red Square has been spoiled by some skyscrapers rising just beyond it. One could

understand the erection of a building above the old Kremlin of the Czars to present the new political system, but to spoil a historic square for the sake of a few buildings of secondary importance is a pity. The cases I have mentioned, however, confirm the two motives behind these crimes: even when people do not own the land, they still want to exploit the land they occupy and want to create a landmark. Man is no different, whatever the political system.

How are all these crimes occurring? Why do city and national governments yield to pressures for greater exploitation of some areas? Forty years of professional experience in 37 countries and on all five continents, and the study of many other countries and their problems, have taught me that in most cases landowners take the initiative. Governments agree either because they are not aware of the crime, or because they are under various pressures, which are usually based on statements made by so-called experts that skyscrapers are beneficial to the city. Finally, of course, in some cases there may be indirect and concealed financial interests which can lead to mafia-like exploitation of urban space. The fact is that no matter how educated and honest the city leaders, this phenomenon continues to spread.

We can therefore ask whether we should oppose such urban developments, particularly since we are aware that although high-rise buildings may not be acceptable for families with children, they may be quite suitable for offices, hotels, or other uses. The answer is the following:

One: Very often high-rise buildings are harmful to their own inhabitants. In this respect alone they are criminal and inhuman structures which should not be permitted.

Two: In other cases these buildings may serve their inhabitants but do harm to the city. In such instances it must be clearly stated why high-rise development of one property is preferable to renovation of many others. Frequently the erection of a high-rise causes many other buildings to become slums. So much new space is provided by one building that there is no incentive to renovate or rebuild other properties which fall into disrepair as a result.

Three: Even if the high-rise is considered the best solution for the city as a whole (this may happen in rare instances), we are still faced with one serious problem: why should only one property gain all the profit?

In concluding this section we can therefore make the following assertion: with the onset of the 20th century, humanity has entered a new feudal era in terms of urban land development; these practices are criminal and it is time to try and stop them.

People are beginning to react against high-rise buildings and the world-wide exploitation of urban land. This reaction takes many forms, from simple individual statements to very systematic and thoughtful attacks such as those of Lewis Mumford; from the simple expression of opinion found in folk songs of various countries to full scale legal battles.

Those who defend the crimes, or the criminals, depending on what we decide to call them, are beginning to counterattack on a so-called “scientific” or “cultural” basis. A typical example of their arguments is that we should not be concerned about mothers and children suffering in skyscraper housing schemes because Man is learning to adapt to new conditions. What these people forget to mention is what Man will be like when he has adapted to the inhuman conditions we have created.

In spite of these “intellectual” counterattacks against those who condemn skyscrapers, a realistic and systematic opposition to these crimes has begun. The most interesting examples that I know of in Europe are in Paris, where a fierce battle rages to save certain large areas, especially the area of

the Defense, the dynamic new center west of the present one in the Champs-Élysées area. In a recent official survey, 200 foreign personalities of international status were asked to express their opinions about Paris. One of their basic quarrels was with "the skyscrapers that are everywhere brutalizing its once matchless vistas." The same thing has already happened in London, where the disaster started much earlier. Now even city officials are admitting that "high-rise blocks were overdone." In the USA, a case in San Francisco seems to be the best stated and the most successful; a book, *The Ultimate Highrise*, gives valuable data on the whole situation. There are also other examples, for instance the battle for the Georgetown waterfront in Washington DC, but these do not involve the whole city as in the San Francisco case.

This kind of opposition has not stopped urban crimes but people are at least beginning to become more aware of the situation and are ready to listen to proposals for action. Some reactions have been sufficiently positive to produce results which may solve some or even all of the problems, but are really only of local or partial significance.

● **Second crime: the dispersed buildings**

This is a very grave crime because if the dwellings are dispersed and find themselves at great distances from each other, the people cannot communicate easily and the community does not function properly. This is very dangerous and very inhuman (fig. 2).

I did not include this crime in my initial proposal because personally I classify it as a crime of the city structure and not of the buildings (shells) which is our subject; however, as

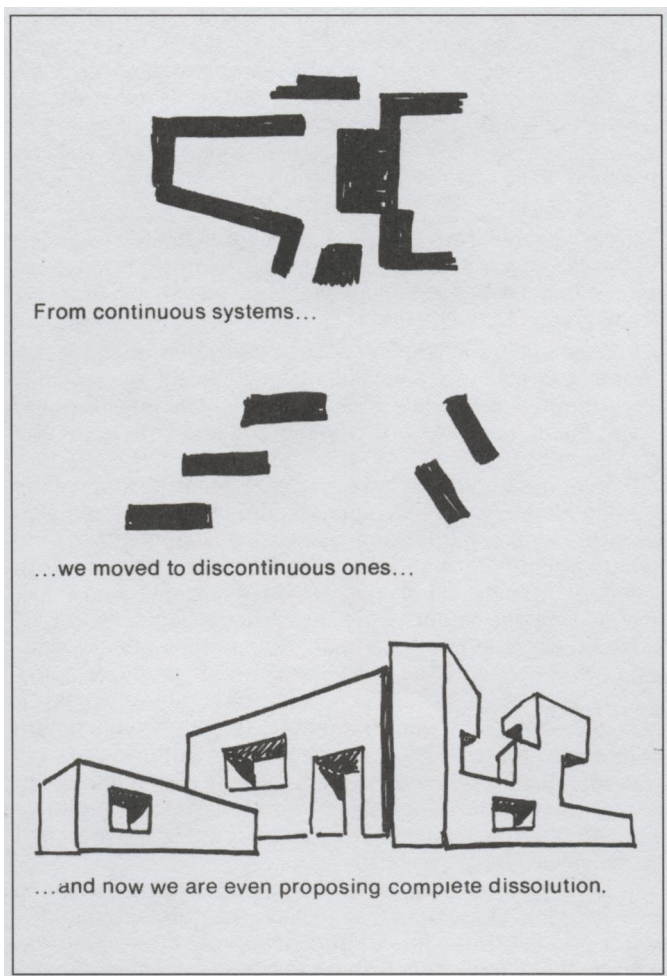


Fig. 2: Second crime: The unconnected buildings.

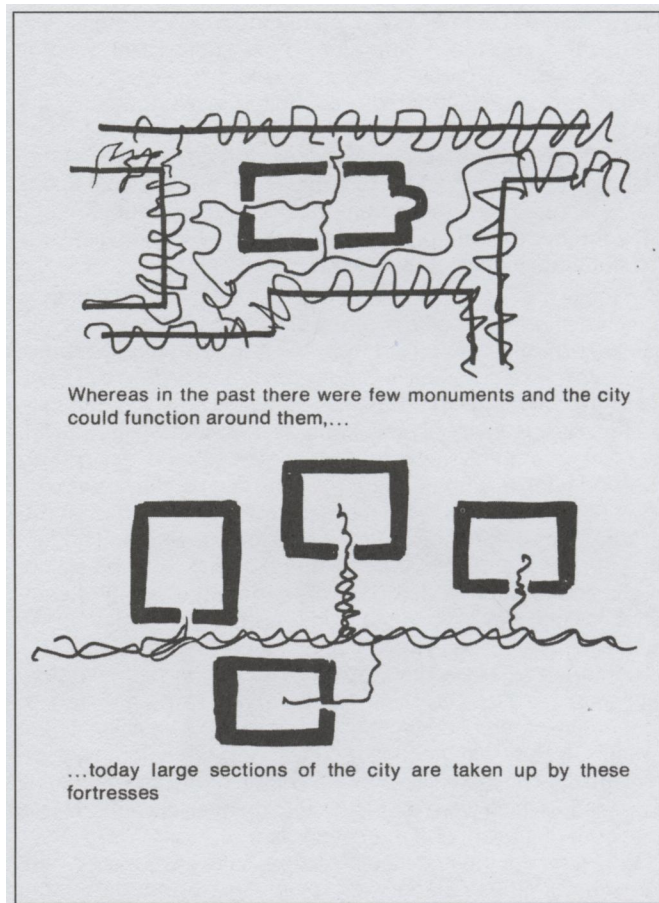


Fig. 3: Third crime: The monumental buildings.

many members of the research group thought that we should include it as the other extreme of the crime of the high-rise buildings, I had to agree.

The big question is: what is the density that is below the reasonable minimum?

● **Third crime: the unconnected buildings**

When primitive man built his first settlements, quite often the buildings were separate and unconnected (fig. 3). Gradually he became aware of the need to connect them into continuous systems, finally arriving at the successful formula (street, square) of the great cities of the past. Now once again we are breaking the continuity – first in the horizontal synthesis, and now recently, in the vertical. These buildings destroy the balance with Nature, and go against the interests of Man who needs a reasonable system within which to function, and against Society by not facilitating its operation, and against Networks by breaking their continuity. Consequently such buildings work against the economic, social and cultural-aesthetic interests of Man and his City.

● **Fourth crime: the monumental buildings**

No doubt we do need some monumental buildings, but are now trying to turn each skyscraper, each corporation headquarters into a monument – to whom or what I do not know (fig. 4). Their monumental character isolates these buildings from their natural and human environment and as a consequence the city itself becomes a discontinued system. This becomes more evident when we remember that these buildings close their doors at 5 p.m., thereby freezing life around them. But even during working hours these buildings do not function except as isolated forts.

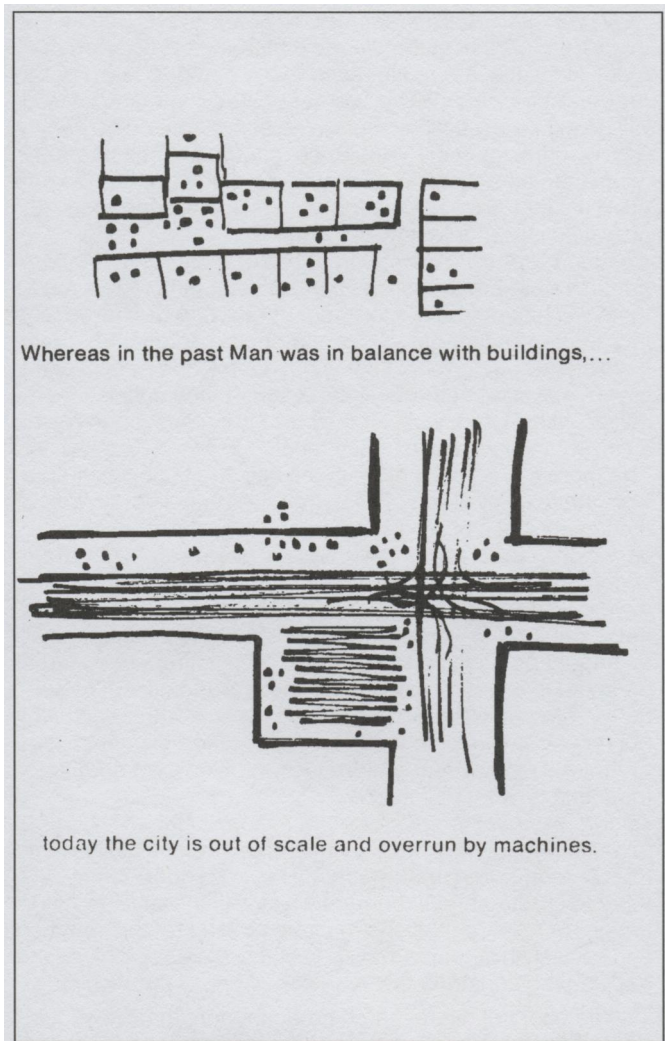


Fig. 4: Fourth crime: The loss of human scale.

● **Fifth crime: the loss of human scale**

As a result of the previous crimes, but also because we relinquished our control of the streets and squares to the machines – mostly to the automobile – the human scale has been lost in most parts of the city. We can first hear it in our apartment and then feel it much more in the street. This is harmful for Man (particularly the child), for Nature, for the functioning of our Society, and it does not facilitate the development of reasonable Networks. The city has lost its value.

● **Sixth crime: the anti-human city**

If we compound these four crimes and the numerous other ones we haven't mentioned, we will realize that the greatest crime of all is that we are constructing buildings which, both as single units and as systems, create a city working against the most important human interests: the balance of Man with Nature, of Society and its artifacts with the man-made environment.

The causes of the crimes

One crime at a time or a series of small crimes in one locality may be the result of normal causes, individual mistakes, or bad luck. This is not the case, now, for we have many great crimes occurring everywhere all the time. Some of their basic

causes are now clear:

- *The first cause: The huge increase of dimensions.* City population has grown from 50,000 people, which it was for thousands of years; to hundreds of thousands three centuries ago; to millions one century ago; to over ten millions during the last generation. City population has increased over 200 times, but city income has increased over 10,000 times and its energy has increased even more. A similar situation was created for buildings. Where in the past one master could build one major building in one city in one lifetime, now many people have opportunities to create huge buildings. This change of dimensions for cities and buildings was unexpected and people were not prepared for it.
- *The second cause: the unbelievable increase of alternatives.* The dimensions of the subject have increased more than 10,000 times in three centuries, but the number of alternatives existing for every building have increased in an unbelievable way. Because of the much greater number of building materials and technologies than at any time in the past, the number of feasible solutions to architectural problems is, perhaps 100 times greater. Similarly, the number of different types of buildings needed has increased 10 times at least. However, the number of solutions has enormously increased, because every culture today knows a great deal about the other cultures in the world. This may have increased the cultural heritage 100 times. Finally, the number of experts and schools of thought has also increased perhaps 100 times. The result is that the choices for a new building are made from among 10,000,000 possibilities or 10⁷ more alternatives than in the past. Although Man has a much better preparation to create a better solution, he has lost his road. The increase of dimensions by 10⁴ and the increase of alternatives by 10⁷ has led to a disastrous spectrum of choices in which we have gotten lost.
- *The third cause: the loss of cultural continuity.* As a result of the previous causes we have witnessed a new phenomenon: the lack of cultural continuity or the loss of an understanding of human experience and its lessons which were recognized a few generations ago. Historically, invasions of new people, such as the Dorians in Greece, have often caused a loss of continuity. It seems now that the invasion or new forces (new dimensions and alternatives) has resulted in the same interruption of cultural continuity which was in the past caused by "barbarians".
- *The fourth cause: man, the measure of our world has become forgotten.* One result of the loss of cultural continuity is that we have lost the ability to measure our phenomena and decide on our goals and objectives on the basis of the only thing that matters: Man himself.
- *The fifth cause: we do not have people who understand the whole subject.* Though this is definitely a result of the previous causes, it has become a cause in its own right. We now train excellent experts – never before have we had people with such knowledge of transportation or structural engineering as now – but we have over-specialized and as a result the explosion of knowledge has led to many people knowing each aspect of the subject much better than before but no-one who understands the whole subject: the city of Man.
- *The sixth cause: change in the designer-builder owner relationship.* This is an important cause, added during the research discussions, which demonstrates the danger of splitting responsibilities among too many people.
- *The seventh cause: imposition of foreign culture.* This was also added in the research discussions, and is important if we think of the many forces which infiltrate the developing nations from the so-called developed ones, meaning they are economically and technologically more advanced,

though they may well be less well balanced with nature.

- *The eighth cause: the lack of the architecture we need.* We have become overwhelmed by the problems. We are confused. We do not understand the city and we do not have the proper architecture for our time.

Some people blame the architects for this failure. They are right if we remember that they do not refer to specialized aspects of architecture or to all architects (some of whom have not failed), but to the average architect of the world, the expert in building the Shells that humanity badly needs.

We have already mentioned some of the many forces, which form the great Goliath of the modern city. Before him stands the architect, a small David who is losing the battle. Is David responsible?

The man who did not commit crimes

We have to learn from him

If we see so many criminals around us we begin to feel like members of a criminal gang, and to wonder whether there was any Man who did not commit architectural crimes. We can discover this Man back in time; the Man who learned, by trial and error. He did not face the problems of today's dimensions and he had more time at his disposal. He even had opportunities to start afresh when his settlements were destroyed.

If we look back carefully we can find this Man – the builder of many cultures – who may have disappeared a few generations ago. He was not always a good Man. Often he was a cruel feudal lord or a war lord. In some ways he was a great criminal but he had learned not to commit architectural crimes.

I present two ways in which we can learn from this Man of the past:

His first lesson: the ancient Greek city. We so admire it, we so praise it, but we only study it in terms of history or archaeology, art and style, not for what we can learn of Man's basic characteristics and the ways in which he filled his needs.

The Athens Center of Ekistics is now making this attempt. We are beginning to measure the basic characteristics of the human scale. If we can connect the solutions with their causes (the biological and physiological needs of Man) we can learn how a culture which developed over thousands of years created the buildings that we admire so much today. The main goal of this study is to understand the basic principles of the solutions.

His second lesson: the creation of the human room. We all live in a fundamentally standard type of room, which we usually consider as traditional and which some of us try to change. The truth is that the now universally accepted room was not accepted initially. Many people started with completely different rooms in terms of dimensions, form, and construction, but once they arrived at the orthogonal form with certain dimensions of size and height, they never changed it. We too cannot change it without suffering. The room is really a biological extension of Man. We have to understand it and learn that our buildings are conditioned by Man; not Man the criminal but Man the builder for Man.

Repentance and action

We have confessed our crimes and have tried to learn from these men of the past who did not commit them. Confession and education, however, is not enough. We have to act. Here are some proposals for experimental action to be undertaken, connecting experience from the past and an understanding of the present so as to form proper contemporary human solutions.

- *First proposal: punishment and reward.* For every crime that makes the people suffer we must impose a proper punishment. How else are those responsible going to learn not to repeat their crimes? This will not be easy; in many cases it will be extremely difficult; but we must find ways. The people who own tall towers, for instance, should pay much greater taxes than others, because they put a much greater burden upon the city. Similarly, people who own buildings which improve the city should pay less taxes.
- *Second proposal: elimination of criminal features and functions.* We cannot demolish all tall towers, although some of them will have to be demolished, but we can turn fortresses into human buildings. We can impose a special tax on all buildings whose ground floor is not open to the people of the city as a system of human interaction. If they enclose themselves with marble walls, if they turn their back upon me as a citizen, they will have to pay for it. The more a building is open to the city and to social interaction, the less it will pay. The owners will start thinking less of monuments than of serving the people and the city.
- *Third proposal: the human house.* We need regulations which prevent the creation of non-human houses such as tower apartments for families with children, or houses without courtyards or gardens. No more such non-human houses should be allowed to be built. The existing ones should be taxed in a way that will force them gradually out of existence. We know the sort of houses our children need. Why not require that such houses be built and forbid construction of those which do our children harm? Don't we do this for food, and now for pollution?
- *Fourth proposal: housing for the extended family.* It is time for us to understand that it is not enough to speak of the need for a contemporary resurgence of the extended family. We have to create an environment which will facilitate its resurgence. Special regulations must be passed for this purpose and special advantages, mostly in taxes, have to be given the people who construct this type of building cluster which we so badly need.
- *Fifth proposal: human streets and squares.* To try to fight air pollution while doing nothing about the criminal pollution of human space by machines is neither intelligent nor honest. We must create human streets and squares where the pedestrian is in control. To achieve this we need regulations for new developments and tax benefits for those existing ones which can be gradually transformed into human environments. If a residential street is closed to the automobile the residents will pay less property taxes and will raise happier children.
- *Sixth proposal: the human community.* We have begun to realize that we badly need communities in human scale. We must introduce new types of regulation for these communities. Consider, for example, the great confusion created by the immense number of choices in building materials and house forms alone. We should not limit alternatives because that would slow progress, but we can define areas of limited alternatives. For example, one community may decide on one and two story houses with pedestrian walks and with all buildings constructed of bricks and clay products (another community may limit itself to concrete, and another to steel or aluminum). In such a way we would not limit alternatives but we would give people choices in an orderly environment. It is the order we need. This would increase higher quality through competition among communities each of which will have its own character. If a community prefers to allow complete freedom for all types of buildings, let it do so. We shall then see what kind of communities Man will gradually support; the ones with local order in a chaotic city or the ones with disorder. Let us give Man his chance and we will

see.

- *Seventh proposal: regulations and taxation.* We have to alter our regulations and we have to help changes to occur through taxation. These two means have to be used on every occasion when we can demonstrate that they are supporting non-criminal solutions and alternatives. The city has to permit all choices, encouraging the best and punishing the crimes.

The death of the dinosaurs

What is going to happen if we do not act immediately? Are the criminal tower apartments and fortress-like monuments going to survive forever? I don't think so for I believe that Man always learns, although slowly. These criminal buildings are going to die like their medieval counterparts of the past.

Some of them will remain as historical landmarks, such as the Tower of London, which you visit but you don't copy.

The criminal buildings will die and disappear as did the dinosaurs, but it will take time. Humanity will suffer in the meantime. It is our duty not to wait patiently for the death of the dinosaurs but to fight for their extermination.

I can see only three ways to do this:

- Proceed by reasoning. Develop an objective and scientific approach to implement the right solutions with intellectual and moral courage.
- Turn to psychiatrists for those who cannot follow the first way.
- Pray for those who cannot understand the first way and who cannot accept the second.

I believe that the first way can work for most of the people most of the time. Let us try it, and the dinosaurs will die.