Assignment 3 - Intervention on the Madison Road Corridor.

The final assignment of the quarter is to develop a large scale strategy for the addressing issues discovered in the reconnaissance and analysis work conducted for the corridor.

SUMMARY

“The ecological city.”

In my preliminary analysis of the corridor I discovered a frequency of densification around the old city centers, that can be clearly seen in the city plan of 1925. These areas are connected to each other with a dispersion of volumes and together they form the city of Cincinnati. The analogy to a group of islands is easily made. Madison Road cuts through three of those islands.

My proposal is to densify each one of those islands and to eliminate all existing sprawl (over a period of time) that exists between these islands. The rest space between these islands will be naturally filled with greenery. In that way, more dense walkable areas will be created while giving a higher value to the entire island: the city core AND the border.

The role that the Madison Road Corridor will play in this proposal is to connect these islands with each other by means of a transportation proposal. It will not only connect the islands but also the center with the borders etc.

The end result will be a sustainable ecological city that will be efficient in its land-use and therefore optimizes its usability and function.

INTENTION NOTE

1. OBSERVATION

In the first two assignments I analyzed the morphology and the typology of the corridor. During the first assignment our group provided a first view at the aspects of the morphological and typological features of the corridor, going from a extra large view to a small view. I felt we hadn’t covered the topic profound enough, so for my second individual assignment I decided to focus on the same topic. During this assignment I approached my analysis in two different parts: I took a look at the artifacts on the entire corridor, as described in Aldo Rossi’s “The Architecture of the City”. Secondly I covered the building density and morphological frequency that I noticed during the first assignment. This frequency is something that sparked my interest. It exists of high density areas, that are or used to be city centers of some kind. These were most visible in the Cincinnati city plan of 1925. Today, these city centers are(173,704),(896,993) connected by an urban sprawl. The analogy to a group of islands is easily made. A low density combined with an inefficient use of land. All together they form the greater area of Cincinnati. As a

Old City Centers

1925 MLK/Madison Corridor plan
European studying in the United States, I tend to look at things that might be very common for most Americans and therefore might be unnoticed or taken for granted. One of them is the concept of a car city. The car is the main means of transportation throughout the entire city. Corridors like the Madison Road/MLK are the best examples of that. So for an inhabitant of this city, the most normal way to get around is to use the car. Since I’m not allowed to drive a car here, I discovered how hard it is to reach certain places in an easy way. The public transport doesn’t serve the entire city and most of the destinations aren’t walkable at all. So for most inhabitants, it is common sense to use their car for everything. If you realize then that obesity is becoming a bigger and bigger problem in the United States in general, it is not hard to link those two together.

Another problem Cincinnati is facing is the loss of population. Throughout a period of 10 years, the population has gone down from 550,000 to 330,000. That is a drop of 40%. Some theorists speak of the ‘shrinking cities’ phenomenon. Research of the United Nations and other demographers has shown that for every two cities that are growing, three are shrinking. If Cincinnati is suffering from this phenomenon is something only time can tell.

Population rate Cincinnati - Source: census.gov

2. SITUATION

“What on earth are we doing?”

Today, we face a state of unsustainable capitalist consumerism fueled by a globalization that is on route to quickly empty the resources of the earth. How much longer can we maintain this path? How much longer will it take us to realize that the celebration of the status quo is intelligent only if we believe the world is proceeding in a positive direction? Is there not a potentially exciting route of discovery implied in a ‘sustainable revolution’ of architecture and urbanism that goes beyond the use of appropriate materials and climatic strategies?

During the last thirty years architecture and urbanism described their duties relative to the declining quality of life across the newly built landscape. At the same time, localities throughout the world offered land ‘made freshly available’ to newcomers, inviting them to join in the image of suburban life and abandon the city centers for the sake of cheaper property and a ‘healthier environment’. While the underused cities were previously sources of civic life, the new peripheries failed on two accounts: To provide for the features that made the city initially attractive as a social collective, and to deliver on the promise of a ‘life close to nature’ when more then just a few responded to the invitation.

The exponential growth of this peripheral urban dispersion implies the direct reduction of undeveloped
land available to humanity as a whole. Society faces a problem when the land under development includes the land needed to grow the resources to sustain the human race, which is itself in a state of expansion. Exciting as they may be, dispersed urban zones are simply too expensive and polluting when considered against the size they support. Rich countries might be able to afford urbanizing their entire territory, but here the problem is not the money, but the burden that the spending of that money exerts on society's other needs. How many square miles of asphalt can our society afford to renew each summer? How many miles of drainage infrastructure can we afford to dig and exchange periodically? How much of the surface of the earth can we afford to connect with fiber optics? How much petrol can we afford to expend on private transportation needs? The goal of all this efforts seems to be the maintaining of comfort, but for how many people? And how long will it last?

If the relative density of the settlement is low, the communities cannot develop sufficiently to substantiate an efficient public transportation system, a pedestrian network, a bicycle network, cost-efficient local recreation facilities or cultural venues: in essence, a city. Faced with the impossibility of 'making a city', the creating of life quality remains instead in the hands of automobile manufacturers. They continue to transform what was once simply an car into an enlarged piece of private living room that not surprisingly ends up consuming more petrol, more space, and more of many other resources that the city used to have available for the generation of life quality. Instead of building cities, we build better cars. Even if our motorized world survives the imminent disappearance of petrol by rediscovering hydrogen, regenerating water or using electricity, what is going to happen to our way of life once we realize that we have a long ago reached the global population that can be sustained by the available amount of arable land? Will we be successful in freezing the world population? And even if we do, knowing that the periphery grows independently of population growth and in direct proportion to the wealth of nations, how do we stop the periphery and its offer of marginal living qualities from expanding indefinitely?

We end up working more to be able to spend more on a life of lesser quality. Life quality is thus reserved for the driving ('working') population, while the rest of the people are forced to either waste considerable time on inconvenient public transportation or simply remain sadly isolated in a state of 'urban exile'.

3. DEFINITION

"An urban plan represents the culture of that time through the eyes of the urban planner."

In the history of the city, minimum standards of collective living were observed in urban situations where a precise equilibrium between the area of territory occupied and the number of inhabitants was achieved. This equilibrium resulted in a collective form that was able to produce and sustain an appropriate quantity of public programs and services.
Other historical examples show that density is sometimes produced in places where there is an enduring contrast between built and non-built territories. Waterfronts, river drives, piazzas, squares and parks are situations that naturally spur desire along their edges. Be it from our natural inclination to control large portions of territory to ensure security or from our fascination with the mysterious world of nature, properties with vast perspectives or extensive views command more value than those that do not possess them.

What my plan strives to achieve is not more land on which to build, but the generation of land without building and without infrastructure; land that, instead of generating a cost, generates a gain; land that turns from being consumed to being preserved; unbuilt land that becomes attractive to settlement because it remains a void. In cases were urban dispersion is widespread there are no voids. Thus, to generate them, an initial investment is required to clear and/or purchase the land by the community.

What today is a collection of houses with surrounding voids used as buffer zones between neighbors could tomorrow be redistributed into larger voids. Instead of avoiding neighboring situations, these voids would embrace them with shared views, recreational facilities, pedestrian promenades and efficient transportation systems: an economy of territorial resources sustainable for generations to come.

4. PROPOSITION

"Madison-MLK Corridor - Connecting the ecological city."

My plan proposes to do an intervention that takes place on three different scales.

First of all I would propose to identify a clear border around the so called islands (existing city cores). This border would be based on the city plan of 1925. Once these borders are clearly identified, I would densify the existing city cores and focus on the development of those areas.

The space that is left between these islands will serve two functions. One is to preserve the land; greenery will be used to fill up this space. The space can also be used to provide natural resources. A second function is to give the community a shared space were they can enjoy the nature and the surroundings. The existing sprawl will be eliminated over a period of time. Those building that are of special value and serve the city as an artifact, will be used for community purposes.

By densifying the city cores, more dense walkable areas are created. There will be a possibility to develop an extensive pedestrian and bike network that can serve the entire community. In this way the value of the land will rise: the existing city core will keep its original value, while the newly created border will increase heavily. The land there will offer a view over a natural area and a close connection to the city center.

The MLK/Madison Road Corridor will play a crucial role in this proposal. It will connect these islands by
offering a new transportation proposal. There can be room for a bike track or even a streetcar. It will not only connect the islands with each other but also the center of the island with the border of the island. That way there will be an efficient public transport.

There will be a delicate balance between the built areas and the unbuilt areas. By taking advantage of modern techniques such as water filtering and re-using, there can be a cooperation between the islands and the rest space. In that way, the presence of the built zones can be reduced by the presence of an unbuilt zone.

The end result will be a sustainable ecological city that will be efficient in its land-use and therefore optimizes its usability and function. The MLK/Madison Road Corridor will act as a Great Street that will connect the ecological city. At every entry of an island there is room for an architectural Gateway that will take shape as an artifact.

5. VISUALIZATION

The representation of the proposition will be with images that represents each one of the issues that I mentioned above.