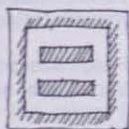


# A DISCUSSION WITH ROB KRIER

The following are excerpts from a taped discussion held by a group, composed largely of third year students of the McGill University School of Architecture, on February 23, 1982. The guest was architect Rob Krier who was in Montreal in view of a lecture he was to give that evening as part of the Alcan Series. Our many thanks to architect Peter Rose who made the session possible, to Professor Emeritus John Bland for his role in coordinating the weekly discussions and, of course, to Rob Krier for his kind participation.



**R**ob Krier: Everybody in the street has a precise notion of what a city is but not the technicians, not the architect. It was a dramatic evolution begun by LeCorbusier and other pioneers which were then the best architects, tremendously good architects; but they mechanized the urban dimension. LeCorbusier's notion of *La machine à habiter* was one of the biggest faults of thinking of the beginning of the Twenties. He destroyed with that machine interpretation the notion of a house. A house was a very clear thing: one family, two families or a little bit more but never five hundred families. That destroys the notion of a house. Parallel to that interpretation went the destruction of the city because with these huge, single, freestanding houses you could never make a city. After all these experiments, after fifty years, we rediscover what we love really.

**Panel:** Is it a case of reaction and, in LeCorbusier's case, was it an overreaction? Was he endeavouring to find a solution which he felt was needed at the time?



**Krier:** I would say that way of thinking was the right way and it was a very moralistic way, trying to find with all their energy a solution for the overcrowded nineteenth century city: the block with a block inside with another block inside. You know, the schemes of Berlin and London where you don't have a block with one courtyard but with thirty-five very narrow ones and very insane living situations inside. That was what they were fighting against. They never had the idea that with this kind of new scheme they took away the urban quality of living in the city. They couldn't anticipate the result of what they planned.



**Panel:** You speak a great deal about typology, like many people in Europe these days. You define typologies, which we can recognize to a certain degree, in European cities. Is there the possibility of looking at the North American city and deriving the same typologies that you do in Europe or

distinct typologies that we can in turn use as a tool for analyzing our cities and designing in our cities? Does the model translate to North America?

**Krier:** After my understanding of the city there is only one model for a city. There are not twelve. There is only one and I can ask you where are the models? In human scale, in the scale of your legs because I think as long as we have bodies with *des membres qui fonctionnent*... There is distance, there is a scale which is extremely important in a city. When you can't walk, you have no city. When you don't have the interaction and the communication on a very humane level, then you have not the city. You have something remembering it, perhaps, when you go pro-car. Montreal is very good pro-car. So you have all these impressions coming in at the speed of fifty kilometres. But when you don't have the possibility to look at the faces of the people running around or meeting somebody or saying hello and so on, then you have no city. These kinds of models are everywhere in the world, even in the States — but they are very seldom. You have too many cars. In my understanding of America, you have a situation of a civilization with all this technology behind it in a state of a beginning of a development. We are the end. Even beyond that. Our new cities are completely American cities. We have the chance that something is left, mostly in the middle. Not in Germany but somewhere like in Italy or in Austria. The city of Vienna is still there, eighty percent, and I think that the modern American city will make a similar evolution in another way, where certainly you will have some nice cities in two hundred or three hundred years.

**Panel:** So you see it as a comparable beginning?

**Krier:** Yes, I see it similar to the Greek city foundations around the Mediterranean which were grids, extremely



abstract. But I hope that the scale will work on this kind of cities, but with skyscrapers and these abstract buildings you will never build a city anywhere in the world.

**Panel:** In Europe the war shattered your cities so you could rebuild what was there in a present-day fashion while reassembling the types of the city which are already established. I don't think we have any immediate prospects of war damage in North America.

**Krier:** Your damage is continuous.



**Krier:** You know the discipline of a medieval town, to build up the very few square metres inside the city wall. The city wall forced them to build with an extreme discipline inside and the moment that the wall fell down, this discipline was lost. The medieval towns, inside the walls, are the best prototypes of how to build with a certain discipline in a very dense way. You don't need skyscrapers. You can have with three storey buildings tremendously dense situations.



**Krier:** It's a pity we don't have anymore the quality of *artisanat*.

**Panel:** Whose fault do you see that to be?

**Krier:** Whose fault? It's this crazy industrialization. They cut the wood, put it in a machine, it comes out something like chips, then they glue it together to

make the kind of drawers we have. Isn't that crazy? And after five years, twenty years you throw it out. That's not progress. It's an easy way of money-making and a very immoral way of money-making.

**Panel:** Do you think you should try to stop that?

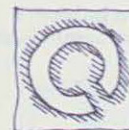
**Krier:** I could never. I could not. I know only that things I did in my life as an architect, in some years, will have to be repaired completely. Totally. And I hope, in some years, an intelligent client will throw out the plastic and he will build some beautiful wooden windows.

We have to build with a certain responsibility for the next generations; a good aesthetic and craftsman quality and not something to throw away after ten years. It's the same way with the quality of drawings. If you make a quick drawing you throw it away afterwards. Our offices have plenty of these kinds of things. You have to throw them immediately away. It's another point if you make a drawing as a watercolour on good paper and you take a month drawing it. Slowly and precisely. That you keep.

**Panel:** Now that industrialization has a foothold — is established — in what sort of way are you going to give birth to a craftsmanship?

**Krier:** No, I would say that the problem is not industrialization because in a factory you have people working in the same way on the same problem of building a window or a chair. It's really the scale of how many you produce. But you can have a tremendous quality in industrial products. The big factory is not the problem. Neither is the term *industrialization*. That is not the problem. The problem is the quality you bring out from the *fabrique*. They produce in the cheapest way to take out the most money. That is the thing.

**Panel:** You're an educator. We're interested in knowing what architecture students should go through in school. What sort of program do you believe in?



**Krier:** I'm in a very bad situation. We have a tremendous amount of students in one class. In one year: four hundred fifty. After a year about one hundred fifty come through. The rest sort themselves out or are expelled for bad results. It's quite a normal process. It's not a dramatic process. It looks dramatic but half go away by themselves. Another part began by studying chemistry, philosophy, and architecture and tried to find their way. I teach the introduction to design in the first year so I have the biggest problem of teaching in my school.

As we are in a still-beautiful city, Vienna, I have a certain amount of exercises and I send the students to the city to look for the best window, the best door, for the best entrance room, for the best staircase. My exercises are about



elements in architecture and how you can put them together. Twice a year we have a designing exercise where they learn how to connect several rooms together in a plan and how to organize a facade. I force my students to make clear geometrical interpretations of space, and this looking at the city and learning from the city is the best book of learning of architecture and urban situations. I'm glad to be in Vienna. I would perhaps be not so glad to be somewhere else. In Stuttgart I couldn't do the same thing.

**Panel:** Are these students totally taking courses or are they working in architectural offices?

**Krier:** They are mostly working. We have eight years as the normal rate of study. Sixteen semesters.

**Panel:** So it is in the office where you learn to be a professional. You don't have to teach professionalism in school. You teach to see and to observe and to be an architect.

**Krier:** You are absolutely not able when you come out of the school to make a construction drawing. You are absolutely not able. They have to learn it in the offices.

**Panel:** What about drawing?

**Krier:** When you see a good thing with the intention of making it visible you go on and draw it in an extremely naturalistic way; a right way and not in a superficial way. If you solve the problem you have a good drawing. There are situations where somebody has a left hand in drawing and I understand it very well when somebody found a very good thing and he couldn't draw it very well. Then I would say the eye is important and the medium comes behind.



**Panel:** What about the types of drawings you make when you think and design and the types of drawings you use for the presentation of your ideas?

**Krier:** That is not so important, the presentation of an idea. It's good for publication. I try to make drawings in a very simple way so that everybody can understand it. Not only architects but mostly people who are not professionals. I never make a drawing for an architect. I am against abstract drawings. Drawings as axonometrics. Things which are not at the eye in reality. I like the architectural drawing as a way of artistic expression. Not as an abstract instrument for technicians or for some illustration magazine.



**Panel:** You suggest competitions as a way of solving the problem of everybody trying to get the most out of their architectural contacts.

**Krier:** The competition is a chance. It is not a solution for better architecture. It's a chance. If the opportunity is good,



if the jury is good, you can find good architecture. It's a chance for young people to get a job.

**Krier:** I finished my studies in '64. I had the idea that in some years, perhaps five, I would be able to build up an office. It was my idea, my primitive and naive idea, and I started entering competitions one after the other and I lost at forty competitions before I got one prize. But I had a good time training.

**Panel:** These were competitions you were doing on your own while you were working with another architect?

**Krier:** Only at home in the evening.

**Panel:** You have worked with Frei Otto and with O.M. Ungers. Did you gain a great deal from both of them?

**Krier:** Oh, yes. Ungers in those times, before his coming to America, was a very hard personality, a very difficult one, and I suffered very much under his regime. So after nine months I went away and went to Frei Otto because I was curious about his constructions.



**Krier:** What I admire most are the Romans. They were, in my interpretation, perhaps not as good as the Greek architects, not so good as the Greek

sculptors but they were fantastic urban designers. They found the Greek cities as open layouts. The Greek agora was prototypically freestanding. The temples were freestanding. There was no urban situation putting them together. The Romans began putting these elements into an urban fabric. The forum was a Roman invention; so was the basilica as two layers of arcade types with a roof between and with an ending and entrance; and the arcade street and how they bend it, in Palmira for example — arcade streets in different typological problems, how they come together, the joint; the plan of Pompeii, the forum and all the different things behind in all the geometrical shapes you can imagine for different functions. And all that just cut out of one piece of urban texture; the quality of urban spaces in the composition of the Trajan Forum and the very accurate compositions of how to enter and to find the different sequences of different types of spaces glued one to the other. You had nowhere in the Roman city an axis, something going through a city like the Baroque cities, something cut through just like Haussman. That's a very modern, dangerous thing. Everything was nicely put one to the other in a very labyrinthic way.



**Panel:** What about your brother Leon? Do you have any debates? Are there issues you don't agree on?

**Krier:** Dramatic, tragic debates. I would have been glad to work with him but that doesn't work. We tried several times to make plans together. He refuses to build and this is something which I really cannot understand very well because if you have an idea you have to push it and put it through to reality, to test if the theory works in practice or not. I offered him, several times, projects to do, but he refuses. He will never do a drawing with some numbers. He was never involved in real constructive problems and he refuses building as such, he personally doesn't want to do the job. I have a certain central relationship to the building. Something just like an erotic approach. I need it. If you have ever built something and the people inside are glad, it is a tremendous event. Even if the building is badly realized and not an idea of perfection. In the apartment building I finished last year in Berlin no one has furniture or something I would appreciate. All the apartments are totally bankrupt inside. They put in the worst *tapisserie* and the worst curtains but they are glad inside and we had a tremendous feast in the courtyard. That's quite nice.



**Panel:** All your schemes are for holes in an existing fabric. How do you face the reality of cases where you have to build on untouched land?

**Krier:** It would be fantastic to build on untouched land. What a dream!

**Panel:** What route would you take? Would you try and set the same restrictions to obtain the same results?

**Krier:** On untouched land you first have to make a good plan. Then choose good architects.

**Panel:** In the plan would it be in the tradition of what we have or...

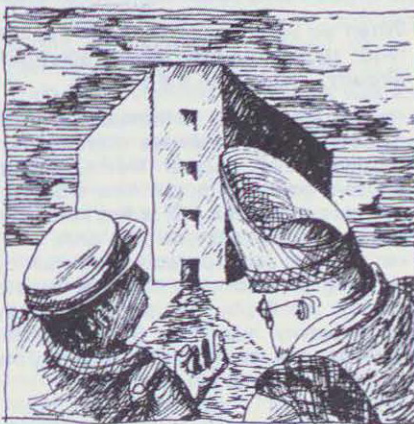
**Krier:** Well, it is very difficult. Today it is very fashionable to make schemes for irregular city environments, you know. Things very picturesque. I have a problem in making something artificially irregular on plan. I find it a very curious thing. I would prefer to be disciplined on a geometrical level and be rich on architectural detail and scale and how you mix the composition from one to another. Therefore I mentioned the Roman situations. You never were in Rome? Did you see the big plaster model the ancient city in a museum? It is tremendous, the variety and tremendous freedom.



**Panel:** But isn't that a product of time? How do you capsule time into a single motion? The Roman city is a product of three to four hundred years of acquired building and each new emperor inputs his own aspirations of how he's going to make Imperial Rome greater, his city. There's always a number of monumental buildings built and there's a rearrangement of the geometry of the streets and things like that, so all these things are acquired but they are always subservient to what is already there. But can you really make a wonderful city in one move? Can one designer or design do it?

**Krier:** If it would be possible, as planners, to understandably define for everybody the house for living, the house for community, for school, for church. All that. To make the difference between urban fabric and a place for a monument. I don't believe it because a church today is nothing. Because who makes it a monument? The people. Just like in the thirteenth century. A cathedral. That was a church. That was a temple. With a significance. But today? Who takes that as a monument? Who believes in the morality of a state government so deeply that we could really make out of that town hall a town

hall. Just like the Greeks did it. They had the prototype of the town hall image through one thousand years. All of them the same. A temple: one thousand years the same prototype, with the same importance, the same significance. Everything is moving today. The church can be a station. The station can be a church. A tent can be everything. There's confusion today. That is our problem. Therefore we cannot build cities because we don't know what to do.



**Panel:** You have an admiration for the Roman city which is really small.

**Krier:** I never saw a Roman city. I have an image in mind.

**Panel:** But it's small compared to a Baroque city.

**Krier:** Very small.

**Panel:** What do you think of the Baroque cities?

**Krier:** That is the beginning of the degeneration because, for example, the layout of Versailles is something abstract or the layout of Baroque towns and *quartiers*.

**Panel:** When Pope Sixtus decided to join the great monuments so the pilgrims would be able to move freely...

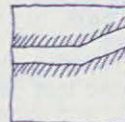
**Krier:** That was nice because there was enough texture around to keep it strong together. But Ledoux's plan for *les salines de Chaux* was the beginning of the breaking down of the city with a good plan and with beautiful architecture. One of the most beautiful in Europe. If ever you are in the country of Besançon you have to go to Arc-et-Senans and have a big architectural shock. But this idealistic city was the beginning of the prototype of the modern city which falls apart.

**Panel:** Do you think you can cross cultures and times?

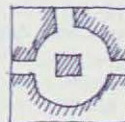
**Krier:** Naturally. History is our baggage from which we can learn. The city is not something to be invented in the twentieth century. Cities have been invented since five thousand to six thousand years ago.

**Panel:** Cities develop in different ways depending in which part of the world you're in.

**Krier:** Yes, but there is only one really makeable model for the city. Others function with cars or with metros but they don't function really. Paris is not yet a city, only the city centre.



**Krier:** I think it is important that people which have nothing to do with building understand how it is done because otherwise the building technology loses its comprehension.



**Panel:** How do you feel about the work of Aldo Rossi?

**Krier:** I like him very much. I asked my brother in the only competition I won to build a house. I had the impression it was important for him. He said no. Then I asked Aldo Rossi and he accepted. We are just planning. He was my first promoter. He asked me for the Triennale in Milan in '73. That was for me a big hope because for years before I was without any success. His architecture is a little bit straight. It has, when you see it in reality, a poetic quality. A very good poetic quality. They are very roughly constructed. No big detailing whatsoever.

**Panel:** Do you see any parallels between some of the things that are happening in the United States? For example, Robert Venturi who proposes looking at Las Vegas and drawing upon icons of North American culture and so on?

**Krier:** I have absolutely no understanding of this because Las Vegas is for me the death of everything. It is my problem because I'm not familiar with this kind of iconography. A gas station is for me nothing to look at. It is something you need but not something to glorify. This kind of transforming the background... is extremely bad.

