

Weekendavisen #38 21. september 2012

Everyday Life.

Is it really the case, that shame praised Copenhagen is a closed city, while troubled Teheran is open?

”Copenhagen is naked, but wears sunglasses”

BY PERNILLE STEENSGAARD

Philosopher and urban researcher Modjtaba Sadria has come directly from Tehran, capital city of Iran, to Copenhagen. From one of the top ten worst cities in the world to one of the best. According to some sources “*the best*”. From a mega city with suffocating pollution, murderous traffic and a dense population of 8-10 million with record high stress levels to a small clean city of bicyclers inhabited with the “world’s happiest people”.

Still, Dr.phil. Modjtaba Sadria, born 1949, is hardly overcome with admiration. He knows Copenhagen and has been here on several occasions. Furthermore, he is educated in Germany and France. He has taught at universities in Canada, Japan and Australia. In the last three years, Dr. Sadria has lived and worked in Teheran, his native country. His interests concentrate around what it takes to create good cities to live in. “Copenhagen is proud of being full of relaxed and informal overlapping relationships, but moving across these highly structured groups is not easy, and demands knowledge of some local “oldboy-clubs”. You have given the world the illusion that the Scandinavians are an open society. And this illusion works even for the people themselves.

As guest speaker in the mobile network of the Nomad Academy, whose goal is to exchange knowledge and ideas on art, design and architecture across borders, Dr. Sadria maintains a critical view of the networks that split modern man into atoms.

“One part of your person belongs to one network, another part to a different network, but what is “our” city, and how can we live together?”

In Sadria’s view, cities have moved away from the notion of common utopia and have set other goals that although good enough, are nothing more than cosmetic. For example, when Copenhagen wants to be CO2-neutral in 2025, or Shanghai aims at jumping over four centuries.

“These type of goals are not common goals. They are not consensus or bottom-up goals. They have become icons, and concepts developed by strong networks. These networks have an idea of how people should be living, that is - they know better.”

In China, recently, the Chinese employees of the Japanese company Canon were attacked by a group of Chinese workers. Which he finds just as predictable as shocking.

“We aggressively barricade ourselves in our networks, while the common ground is disappearing. If we do not pull ourselves out of our barricades, it will be the end of cities and our lives together. We are all imprisoned in our networks, that we all have the possibility to reinvent ways to link ourselves to others.”

What is an example of a network that knows better?

“A network of technocrats in all departments, urban planners, environmental directors, university people. One closes oneself around oneself and one’s own fantastic ideas. Citizens no longer come up with ideas. Designed and prefabricated aims for our cities are handed down to us.”

What is the difference between Teheran and Copenhagen?

“I’d rather start somewhere else, let me start with an anecdote” answers Dr. Sadria. “When I moved to Vancouver, one day I happened to find myself at a nudist beaches, where people were obviously naked, but they all had sunglasses on. It suddenly occurred to me that these naked people hiding behind their sunglasses covered more than I did with all my clothes on. Copenhagen is naked, but covers itself behind sunglasses. Tehran just has clothes on. Tehran is considered to be a very much closed city, but in my eyes, it is a wildly innovative and young city. People try to define themselves in non-oppositional ways. When you cannot oppose directly, then you have to be constructive, and become propositional and dialogical. This is how fluid networks are created instead of rigid organizations.”

Nader and Simin – A Separation, which won the Golden Bear in Berlin in 2011 for best film and an Oscar for the best foreign film, is a good example demonstrating the Iranians tight balancing-act and their creativity.

“A young man and a young woman in Tehran live in 2012. They live in the same world and age as anyone else in this world. Our students might have to sit in slightly overcrowded classes or work under less favorable conditions, but the issues and subjects that an urban-planner student, for example, has to address and learn are exactly the same as in rest of the world. People travel in and out of the Iran constantly, have strong ties to international communities and are very well informed. Flights to and from Iran are always full to capacity, demonstrating Iranians’ close contact and strong ties with the outside world. “

Is it be possible, that the citizens of two cities, such as Teheran and Copenhagen, headed towards opposite directions, could have the same problems and same goals for achieving a good life in big cities?

According to Sadria, city dwellers, regardless of which city they happen to live in, share common characteristics when it comes to their wellbeing in their cities: they are part of the decision making; ideas come from the people; they are heard and their ideas used.

“You have many good things in your society, but there is a difference between you wanting to teach them to me, and I wanting to learn them from you.”

Translated by Nousha Friis & Edgar Dahlin