

Architecture and territory. Role, legitimacy and construction of the contemporary project

Cesare Macchi Cassia, opening speech at the 2007-2008 Academic Year Inauguration. Milan Polytechnic, Faculty of Civil Architecture, 3.12.2007

We talk about it, we write about it, we discuss it in public debates and in architecture schools: the city is one of Italy's most talked-about topics. We talk less about architecture, and when we do it, it's always in terms of its impact on the urban environment.

In architecture, the specificity based on values such as autonomy and persistence seems to have grown progressively dimmer. We recognize that this is the consequence of a shortfall in terms of capacity and expressive modalities. A shortfall that contrasts sharply with the multiplicity of the shapes put forward. These shapes are often the sole value of architecture, as, for them, there are no higher occasions, no civil objectives, and thus, no relationship with the place and its culture.

Architecture does not build the contemporary city. The more it expresses its significance through mere self-references, the more it becomes a parasite of the city. City-dwellers would then cease to be rightfully described as such if they lived in a place completely built by an architecture whose shapes only converse with each other. The existing city saves them, and allows contemporary architecture to exist. City-dwellers are then rescued from what has been built in the past, and from the presence of a texture that talks to the them, and not to single projectual interventions.

We thus insistently talk about the city, in a time when there are no projects of a city. And this is not just because there are no design efforts moving towards this purpose, but because the urban territory – the place where the city has migrated – doesn't lead to an awareness of shape. There are only – and as such they are interpreted – separate portions of the city: buildings, open spaces, infrastructures – each of them not connected with the rest. The city is thus formed of single, disconnected projectual interventions.

What has happened in Europe's most vital regions has led the city towards a new cultural dimension – greatly differing from the traditional growth around one culture and one place – and this raised to the same level the need to work on the city. For what concerns us as architects, this translates into the need to work on the shapes of the city. But Bernardo Secchi in his *Diario di un urbanista* reminds us that "... talking of the shape of the city and of the territory is a near taboo nowadays. We are allowed to talk about it in reference to the past, but not as a current issue. When we do it, we are immediately looked upon with suspicion as though we were dealing with matters of no relevance..."

And just a few years earlier Giuseppe Dematteis, as a geographer, had stated that "... if we try to define the city based on its essential properties, we risk to get tangled with the meaning of the word. But there are no misunderstandings of sort if refer to an apparently extrinsic property of the city, which is indeed the physical shape of a phenomenon that everybody considers to be fundamentally social."

In reality the urban territory raises the question of shape in completely new ways: not as much in the accidental growth of its physical outline, but rather in the awareness of truth that should lay at the basis of our efforts to place that physical outline against its formal rights/duties.

The direction we are today called to pursue, in order to reach an authentic project, is twofold: extend the meaning of architecture towards a non-hierarchical integration of its operating scales, and closely examine a more general meaning of every single act of modification. By these two steps we are able to draw closer to the most pressing need of the contemporary project: the building of its context. These steps enable us to maintain the role of architecture alive through the years.

We need to design every thing. Not the whole. We need to seek a designed condition, which would imply re-connecting architecture to a higher opportunity. I believe this opportunity consists in the physical definition of welfare - the most significant representation of European specificity. In it are expressed the city's mutations, which happen with an eye to society's needs. Moreover, among the themes of the Italian debate, the one dealing with the absence of an unitary design in the most developed territories is becoming increasingly political rather than returning to being cultural, a connotation long lost since the end of the 60s. The need to prevail over this absence is becoming, for instance, a civil necessity in Italy's northern urban territories.

To see the construction of the territory as an act of architecture means taking a compositional approach. This approach is able to exploit the absence of hierarchies that spell out the edification of contemporary landscapes. The absence of a propaedeuticity in the relationship between timing and means, between decisions and executors, divests the theme of scale of the structural meaning which, among others, had formerly characterized it: zenithal vision and three-dimensional vision, relationship between plan and project, a-spatial decisions and physical choices, urban planning and architecture. The orientation of the didactic project -and with that, of the professional praxis- is thus re-discussed and re-examined.

In many projects called-for by the reality of European regions, we perceive a compositional resolve developing around themes and methods far more extensive than those traditionally applied. Within those projects we see choices of expressive language, non limited to a single dimension or meaning, coherently made in accord with realities that raise the question of interconnection between local scale and large scale.

The objective of the project is to build an urban landscape that can accept fragmentation as a primary aspect of contemporaneity, while perceiving it as the wealth of a comprehensive dimension. In Europe this constitutes the sense and value of architecture, much more than those projectual choices that become a tool of urban marketing; it allows the theme of style, through brand-new modalities, to surface in scales never before examined, in which one can easily recognize the specificity of a projectual, as well as human, experience. To put it in Ernesto Rogers' words, it's a "fusion of aesthetic issues and ethically-based issues".

Basing the teaching of architecture on ethical connotations may represent, today, a chance to rebuild a “school”, through an autonomy of formal research that becomes a constituting step of a specific vision of the contemporary city.

The use of the form as a tool in the large scale is significant not so much where the project expresses a greater level of precision which needs morphological expression, but rather in what concerns the very structural definition of the project. From here may derive the meaning of a method that sets off a didactic position but aims at obtaining results of civil utility. Institutional practices, as well as the very meaning of the choices assigned to different technical fields, receive from the choice based on a shape the capacity to obtain more meaningful results.

This is by no means an assumed set of notions, nor has it been in the past. The primacy of economy has not only governed the multiplicity of the choices that have influenced the creation of contemporary landscapes, but it has also endorsed a vision of the territory as a neutral depository of decisions that systematically disregarded a structurally significant portion of it. The widening of urban meanings to a broad universe of available choices has brought physical space back to its substantive condition.

The specificity of the Italian architectural project is represented by urban design. A project that contributes to its context by choosing a scale in which to operate, regardless of the level of the question it is called to answer. Failing to connect scale and formal level is today a fertile starting point for a reflection on didactic themes worth revisiting: expressivity, autonomy, and persistence. Our in-field work has helped us gain an awareness that talking of shape is one of the less ambiguous ways through which our proposal may be understood, even in its more instrumental implications. Much more so than in the -yet fundamental- aspects which city-dwellers have a growing awareness of: the ability to recognize the quality of their personal landscape through the meaningfulness of the common landscape. According to a process whose grade of advancement represents the diversity of European cultures.

The centrality that the Italian tradition has given to architecture as builder of the city originates in an inherent interest towards history, or, as we would put it, towards the *context*. If this ceases to be our point of reference, becoming the object of the project, though revealing the characteristics of a problem, it will still characterize, against a landscape of commercial separation from those same points of reference, the Italian contribution in its most qualified examples. Using that tradition as a starting point for the reflection on the relationship between project and contemporaneity -within the perimeters of a classical vision of the city as representation of the society that redefines it- means using the architectural project as a tool of research. In life, but even more so in academia.

The violent changes that have occurred over the territory have often dimmed the laborious emerging -in the spaces of the “latent city” contiguous to the established city- of new functional configurations as well as new social meanings. While the traditional city, in all its aspects, seems to have lost the central role it traditionally played against the extended territory, different centralities emerge in the renewed dimension of the urban territories.

In the spaces of metropolitan leisure, in the urban countryside growing around the weak traces of the suburban dispersion, in the large natural spaces somehow preserved, new innovative forms of social identification, and new impulses of space appropriation gain recognition.

The voids are increasingly permeated of cultural interests, acquiring a new central role.

Reinterpreting the sense of centrality of the contemporary city constitutes a radically projectual attitude. While traditional centrality finds its roots in historic sedimentation, in the slow piling up of values and recognized meanings, it is the project that generates the new forms of centrality. It is the project that gives meaning to the landscape and the collective territorial assets, indicating the diversity of local identities. From this perspective the relationship between culture and nature changes, and so do the “geometric patterns” man has used to measure up against the world, constantly re-designing it.

New architectures are needed: architectures equally committed to the object and its surroundings, capable of going beyond the logic of domestication and simulation -which have up to now prevailed over nature- in favour of an authentic collaboration between different processes of modification.

We are aware that the ways of development within urban territories lead to a continuous shrinking of the open areas and natural spaces wedged between settlements: a process that is considered unavoidable by some, and that reduces the leeway for a project in the vast scale. At the same time we are distinctly aware of the impossibility/incapability to foresee a planning scenario in a scale that may suit the processes. From this, the loss of huge and yet unexploited structural potential, and the degrade of the value of democracy, represented by the collective administration of one's own environmental future.

Together with this, the system of open areas -the shape outlined by it on a territorial level-plays a significant role even now, though not deriving from a unitary vision. This could become a structuring role if a projectual vision assigned value to this material, finding in it inspiring suggestions to interpret the shape of the territory, thus triggering the potential denied to traditional planning.

Through the years some of these open spaces have been granted a condition of safeguard based on environmental potential, ecological motivations, or the survival of an agriculture seen a-critically as a chance for preservation. Local communities have taken part in this process accepting or proposing the restraint of opens areas that, by their image, represent all which is non-urban, in contraposition with an urban value supposedly converging to a few major poles, or often to a single main pole.

To update the vision of centrality, to adapt it to the cultural dimension of the contemporary city we need to focus on two actions. On one hand, give traditional centralities a role that overrides that which is played within single urban sites. They stand as witnesses of a bygone urbanity, part of a different urban dimension: if they are construed as systems, they can testify of the continuity of the urban connotation characterizing the territory today.

Second, couple traditional centralities with a new type of centrality, today only partly seen, made up by a different material: the open space, the void. The

dialogue between these two systems of centrality may contribute to the spatial figuration of urban territories. In other words, it may give an answer to the absence of a unitary design which is perceived as a political issue, denounced as civil setback, read as joint-cause of an economic delay.

Innovation consists in finding the significance of centrality in its repetition, capturing its value not merely in the relationship between equivalent materials -hich couldn't transcend the dated slogan of the polycentric city- but rather in a dialogue between different materials: high density and absence of density, built areas and open spaces, dwelling quarters and entertainment districts, full and empty, both arising from a projectual will.

Our Doctorate of Research, in a recent thesis discussed by Nicola Russi, has analyzed this category of projectual steps taken in the area north of Milan: "Empty spaces emerge environmentally and dimensionally, their shape and orientation obtained according to the traces that have strongly conditioned, through the years, the partition of agricultural spaces and built lots. This constellation of voids is highly dependant upon the relationship established with the filled spaces and their capability to relate with the introduction, within them, of new spatial conditions. This suggests that the functioning of voids as a system depends both on the relationship that they each initiate with the filled spaces along their borders, as well as on the capacity of textures and infrastructural systems already present in the territory to keep them in tension with each other.... We seem to be able to affirm that these projectual proposals interpret the context according to an idea in which each element and each environmental condition may be the offshoot of artifice, accepting thus the responsibility and the risk to interpret this potentiality architecturally and proactively. The shape of the void is not thus the result of the containment of filled spaces, but it's rather an additional project that joins, overlaps, becomes entwined, and sets up relationships with all the other elements of the territory. Planning the void implies thus to take the opportunity to plan all the intermediate conditions between filled and void, all their possibile configurations, and recognize, within them, which may, more than others, grow into structures or, in other words, which may be able to give direction to a later development of the numerous fragments that make up the contemporary city."

Shifting the meaning of open spaces from nature to culture is the measure of the urban value, and thus the cultural significance, attained by the new city.

So it was in the last decade of the 1700's, when public parks became the instrument for the affirmation of modernity, and through it, affirmation of the rank of the city, starting from forerunner projects: the Ausgarten in Vienna, the public gardens of Villa Giulia in Palermo, the green spaces designed by Piermarini in Milan as a lucid and explicit project of the city. From then on, parks have become a structural element of the urban design, through the different aspects of great pregnancy for the perception, and high usefulness for the new, complex fruition, and new possible urban behaviours.

Once again we face the need to give shape to a shifted perception of the city, and to provide answers to new urban behavioural patterns. Italian cities had

already been in this same condition: when the renewed urban life expressed itself through the institution of *Comuni*, and the opening of gaps within the thick texture of the medieval city. Identifying the sites, outlining the shapes of the new collective spaces, setting the rules for their boundaries, and deciding on financial strategies for the realization of *piazza*, represent a process comparable to that needed today for the creation of centralities in urban territories.

Even today the process can't help but rely on local authorities and culture, on the same aggregation of consent which in latter years has produced opportunities to safeguard numerous open spaces. City-dwellers will be offered a twofold opportunity: to find self-representation in one material and one single, ancient shape -the historic parts of the city- and at the same time, find self-representation in a contemporary material and shape such as the open space, the real collective space of the contemporary city.

The transformation of urban voids from nature to culture, finds a tool of implementation in the imposition of a shape. This means recognizing that the value of the contemporary landscape is defined by characteristics that cannot be recognized through aesthetic perception, as they find reference in the pregnancy of the relationship between reasons of the change, and shape.

Dwelling on these themes, while working on the plan of the province of Milan in 1998, Ugo Ischia wrote: "To take on the values of the territory as potentials to build, rather than presences to notice and record, means to adopt a pragmatic concept of value. A concept that doesn't necessarily deny the fact that territorial assets, or open spaces, have an intrinsic value, but recognizes how, in the projectual phase, values cease to be merely connected to emotions (and judgment), and yield to projectual will as things to implement: they then become goals or objectives, or contribute to determining goals and objectives, and develop into courses of action and projects. They do not simply constitute resources or means to reach ends foreign to them, but they are rather a set of conditions that allow the attainment of "practical objectives", or purposes whose relevance is measured according to social usefulness."

In Italy, unlike other countries and projectual cultures, only rarely are the contemporary city and territory discussed in terms of the issues they raise, nor such reflections move beyond a mere description, see contributions by Bagnasco, Boeri, Indovina, Martinotti, Munarin and Tosi. Similarly, only rarely is "what needs to be done" discussed starting from the tradition of this field of study revisited by a new cultural awareness, see Secchi, Sernini inter alias. I believe it necessary, today, to look at these two approaches from an essentially projectual perspective – an attitude adopted in Europe by authors working in-field as designers, present also throughout Italy's tradition of architecture and city-planning, from De Finetti to Quaroni.

This methodology lies somewhere between reality and academia, and is built from those experiences that have engendered questions over the one as well as the other. In this sense, this methodology may well aspire to become a working tool also in academia, thanks to its contributions to today's central reflection on the relationship between modernity, project, and democracy.

Today our job is not to analyse reality starting from our own desires, but rather to find answers to the questions posed by the contemporary city: what are its projectual challenges? what resources, potentials, and binds does it present to the project?

It's precisely in this sense that our research can only be projectual. It must investigate realities that bear significance in more than one direction, build images that interpret transformations -probing the social context through them-, and try to measure convergences and divergences. This appears to be a rather tactful way to justify our role within the academic, research, and professional world.

These approaches still belong to the tradition of modernity, though we are well aware of the metamorphoses that have taken place to what we term modern. In order to renew modernity today we need to start from a decentralized idea of innovation and evolution. An idea that does not eliminate the space for the conscious project nor for social imagination, but simply repositions it, redefines it.

In this sense some of our tentative projects, which may appear superficial if taken as representations of future worlds, are actually affirmations of modesty: they abandon the ambition of establishing a new idea of city, to discover unexpected novelty in some of the less ostentatious buildings designed by others, to find newness in the leftovers of a process, and in all that which lays around the outer margins and not in the centre. The claim of realism of those proposals, or the affirmation of legitimacy of those approaches, passes through the perception of the sense of the project as such, in its being strictly connected to its role as interpreter of the contemporary city and its society.

As we reflect upon these themes, I chose this opportunity to talk about the role, the legitimacy and the construction of the contemporary project. If the role of the physical proposal changes, and if we recognize the legitimacy of our contribution, the ways projects are constructed must change accordingly. But does the form of projectual imagination change, or is it a constant? Do these projects retain a margin within classical tradition?