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INNOVATION IN BUILDING TYPOLOGY

NICOLA
MARZOT

The Project of the Building Type
From Transformation to Innovation

INTRODUCTION

This theme questions the issue of change in architectural and urban design. Its specific interest relies on both historical and methodological reasons, where the two aspects are deeply intertwined in the current situation. The worldwide financial and economic crisis that started in 2007 challenges societal driving forces to find new solutions to the contemporary conditions, while it also offers a stimulating opportunity to investigate the capacity of the different disciplines to react to the never-ending transformation of the context and to test their specific body of knowledge ability to contribute to an innovative exit strategy.

THE ARCHITECTURAL DISCOURSE AND THE TOPIC OF CHANGE

Since Aristotle, the role of crisis has always been a pivotal element of the philosophical reflection, and in Heidegger's new approach to metaphysics it reached an outstanding peak of awareness.¹ More recently, the Italian thinker Massimo Cacciari opened up a stimulating discussion on the topic, leading him to take a highly critical position which can be seen as an attempt to sum up a strategic watershed in the discussion on architecture that was deliberately intended, mainly during the 1960s and 1970s, as a strong ideological reaction to the ongoing bourgeois process of civilization.² According to Cacciari, the neo-classical interpretation of the real process of transformation of the industrial production relations within capitalism tends to explain it within the theoretical framework of a cyclical deviation from the originally stated norms, to re-establish them at a different level of complexity to guarantee its further development. From this awareness, the so called 'negative thought', a sense of deep distrust for any attempt to change the existing conditions within the process of civilization itself is derived, hence leading to a paradoxical decision to counteract the system by suspending any action within it. In addition, it also shares a general mistrust for any attempt of social emancipation via labour in the capitalist order.

According to Saverio Muratori, one of the most influential architects and intellectuals at that time, undoubtedly considered the Father of the Italian way to Urban Analysis and Building Typology, crisis historically played a fundamental role to guarantee the evolution of urban form, consciously assuming the role of a creative device.³ By affecting the civilization process at its very core and foundation principles, crisis occurred whenever the leading forces – at societal, economic and cultural level – were put into discussion, not necessarily simultaneously. This also questions the project of the city of which they were claiming full responsibility through the definition of its set of rules and the related application by means of a coherent morphology. Implicitly, Muratori seemed to be aware of the political implication of his statements, but he never tempted to push them to extreme consequences. To keep within the consistent boundary of the discipline, from 1950 onward he completely reformed the teaching course of 'Caratteri Distributivi degli Edifici' (Building Layout Characters) at the Istituto

Universitario di Architettura di Venezia, freeing it from the limitations of the architectural functionalism. He wanted to define a new language according to which it was possible to follow the dialectical relation between stability and instability, order and disorder, coherence and incoherence, rule and exception within the city transformation process since its primitive inception. By doing this, he also succeeded in finding out a way to combine History of Architecture and Urban Design with Philosophy History, sharing his personal interest on Hegel writings with Giuseppe Samona, IUAV founder in the 1950s, who convinced him to take the abovementioned Chair, leaving his native Rome. By applying his methodology to a specific case study, Venice's historical centre, together with his pupils, he managed to frame a consistent and all embracing survey of the city building tissues punctuated and polarized by monuments.⁴ Combining the survey results with historical evidences extracted from many different sources, including cadastral plans and local iconography series, he formulated a first hypothetical sequence of the city transformation phases, each of them clearly corresponding to specific acts of civilization since the original byzantine foundation onward, to identify their own specific character. As a main consequence, Muratori built a completely new consistent periodization of architecture and urban form, which was the seminal overcoming of the previously existing time subdivisions based solely on architectural style and outstanding authorships, just partially completed by lacunose documents and narrative contributions. He also obtained a local architectural history where geographical constrains also played a crucial role in understanding city form.

THE PROJECT OF THE CITY AND ITS TRANSFORMATION

According to Muratori, the city survey was a special kind of text, a highly layered palimpsest through whose objective interpretation it was possible to trace back the original intentions of those who claimed political responsibility for the city construction at any time. He accurately observed that, during periods of social, economical and cultural stability one can witness a corresponding stability of building behaviours and urban form arrangements. At each level of complexity, called 'scales', he subsequently recognized structural invariants and named them 'types'. He also studied the related configurations to internally analyse reciprocal implications. Types, within a well defined historical period, offered evidence of the existing struggle among the involved driving forces to firmly state their own will and the related intentions through the endless process of anthropization. Muratori, at this stage, seemed to be more interested in the transformation issue than in the ontological status it implies. This is understandable if we think that, during the 1950s, all European countries were facing the post-war reconstruction phase. For the first time, since its appearance and theorization, modern architecture had the chance to really affect the existing cities and to pursue its own purposes. The problematic confrontation between modernity and tradition thus became a central point of the

current discussion.⁵ This is why Muratori mainly focused his own concern on the issue of the crisis, taking advantage of the Venice case study analysis. By mapping transitions from a certain period, which he called a 'phase', and the successive one he witnessed two different phenomena. On one side it was possible to record an endless amount of individual attempts to adjust existing building structures to new needs, based on specific necessities. On the other, similarly to what he had already observed within periods of civil stability, it was also possible to derive evidence from the survey that individual transformations demonstrated irrefutable similarities. He proposed the use of the term 'emulation' to precisely describe the implicit aspiration to unity which was fostered by this 'spontaneous' process. A unity which was problematic in the sense that it was not explicitly declared, but simply subsumed within individual attempts to adequate them to those building solutions which tentatively better seemed to perform the new contextual conditions. However, elaborating his own research work, he also recognized that the search for unity, after a period of experimentation, became explicit when a new phase overcame the previous one. This is when the crisis becomes positive, or evidently produces a leap of innovation showing the ability and the mastery performed by people to give rise to a new equilibrium within the process of civilization, resulting from a change into the driving force nature and the corresponding configurations. He described the abovementioned process as *Storia Operante* (Working History) to firmly state that innovation in building typology and urban forms always derives its legitimization from a critical awareness, or crisis, of the previously existing built structures, which also brings a certain destructive character. This consideration implies two different crucial consequences, still actual in the discussion. First of all, the existence of any sort of typological stability historically demonstrates the existence of a project of the city, performed throughout its architecture, and the explicit character of this project is collective. This statement does not imply that the individual effort to the abovementioned project is irrelevant, but that it is important in the sense that it contributes, even critically, to consciously create the conditions through which a new collective proposal could arise and take root in the reality of the built environment, leading to a new process of civilization. This is a fundamental output by Muratori, which emphasizes his manifest criticism towards the overwhelming authorship which was characterizing the discussion on architecture and modernity through the legacy of the Masters, at his time.⁶ Furthermore, the second effect is not less important and fruitful. By stating that crisis occurs whenever the stable equilibrium among social, economic and cultural forces is questioned by the rising of the new ones and their expectations, which progressively demand a political stance in both space and time, Muratori explicitly considers that any process of transformation is rooted in the real condition of the urban appearance. In other words, any attempt to criticize the *status quo* implies taking a position with respect to reality within the existing conditions,

and not outside of them. Muratori, in this way, clearly distinguishes between a 'positive crisis', or a crisis which aims at substituting a new project to the old one, based on a sincere understanding of the nature and qualities of the rising new forces, since their own first appearance, and a 'negative crisis', which aims at counteracting the existing conditions regardless of reality, or shifting the discussion on a different level, that of Representation.⁷ This is a crucial watershed within the discussion on the fundamental relation between Building Typology and Urban Morphology, whose effects are still alive within the professional and academic debate. If the project of the city, intended as a collective effort, results in producing a 'world' into which the driving forces fit and operate through it and by using it, its representation leads to a 'microcosm', which is simply one of the endless interpretations of that 'world', intended as its playful simulation.⁸ Combining the two inevitably leads to a misinterpretation of both the nature of the project and its output. When Utopia takes root in Reality, distortions always occur.

INNOVATING THE PROJECT OF THE CITY

Muratori's position, far beyond his intention, was inevitably leading to assume a strong political meaning, especially within the harsh discussion which arose in Italy in the second half of the 1960s. To him, the existing city is the battlefield on which the civil struggle has manifested itself since a community settled in an urban environment and defended it from hostile conquerors for the first time. Any attempt to subvert its principle therefore has to compete with the inertia to modification implicit into urban form and its highly layered configuration as an unavoidable counterpart, stabilized and consolidated by existing forces. These statements imply that any claim for transformation has to break through the existing city and its long-lasting endurance, to subvert its built manifestations intended as pure expressions of a power into action. This is the main reason why Muratori often seemed to almost overestimate urban form itself. Being the building type the real and coherent expression of the collective intentionality, which aims at rooting its will into the project of the city and its landscape, a new one needs to manifest itself through type innovation. Transformation is therefore always a subversion of the existing conditions to adapt them to a new emerging intentionality. The latter gestation is implicit within the transformation process itself and becomes explicit through space and time. The existing city change is therefore an *en plein air* laboratory of civil experimentation through the acting of architecture and urban design. The raising of a new project of the city identifies with the widespread evidence of an innovative building type, which witnesses the self-consciousness of a social reality resulting from the establishment of new productive forces. By emphasizing the continuity of the built environment, Muratori was not addressing a sort of primacy of what already existed with respect to the appraisal of new demands and expectations, but simply the necessity to systematically refer what is 'not yet', the world under construction, to what is 'not anymore', the

old world, making it immediately understandable. New energies lead to new types and urban form through a process of adaptation of what already exists as a form of working criticism. On the contrary, Carlo Aymonino, who took the 'Chair of Caratteri distributivi degli edifici' after Muratori's return to Rome in 1963, assumed the abovementioned emphasis on the resilience of the existing city, or its capacity to adapt to change and transformation, as an implicit recognition of supremacy and survival of the *status quo* in the process of transformation and as an attempt to find out a self-sufficient capacity of the city structure and form to cross over any political concern of the city itself. This is why he recognizes the importance of Muratori's work, especially in its coherence to relate the architecture to the city, on the one hand, while on the other he firmly marked a critical distance with respect to what he considered Muratori's simplistic division of 'history and structure'.⁹ Because Aymonino considered urban form as the living evidence of the political struggle to control and manage it according to a new set of shared values, we do not find strong differences with respect to the methodological approach framed by his predecessor, if not in the selected content. In fact, Aymonino was progressively shifting his group interest to the affirmation of the bourgeoisie society, as a revolutionary way of getting rid of the existing structures stressing an evident discontinuity from them, namely those of the *Ancient Regime*, on all levels: political, societal, economic and cultural. Aymonino was not following a generic historiographic interest. Acting as a former member of the Italian Communist Party, also being involved as a practicing architect within the INA CASA reconstruction programme, he aimed at defining a new building language coherent to the values of the rising welfare state, which he mainly pursued in the design of institutional building.¹⁰ This is why Aymonino mostly stressed the idea of architecture as a means to convey public instances and their endless interplay with the private ones in his research. Jean Castex in France took international advantage of this critical shift in perspective to better understand the political implications of the project of the city in his own work on Versailles.¹¹ The embodiment of the state power through the Royal Palace construction, over space and time, is always related to changes in contemporary society and their widespread evidence in the progressive transformation of the existing village into a completely new configuration. In such a way the project of the city stem by a working criticism operating at all level, from the territorial one to the building scale. The situation completely changes when Aldo Rossi, Aymonino's former assistant in Venice, takes a critical stance on the subject. He matured a completely original position during the period which intercourse between the publication of his own completely individual and systematic reflection, *L'architettura della città*,¹² and the launch of his design Manifesto, *La Città Analoga*.¹³ In the former he outlined the importance of representations and unbuilt design proposals as a fundamental counterpart to understand the city form transformation over the centuries, while in the latter he claimed

the importance of imagination as a way of counteracting a reality to overcome making use of a theoretical project, offering in such a way a radical support to a strategic retreat from it, of which the so-called *Tendenza* embodied the ultimate legacy.¹⁴ As Antony Vidler accurately argued in his well known essay on the 'Third Typology',¹⁵ Rossi and his followers aimed at defining a new ontology of the European city, which was intended as a way of keeping both a critical distance from modern functionalism and organicism, however not losing the universal message prompted by modernity and implicit in the Enlightenment. But the epistemological foundation of his attempt was misleading in the sense that, so acting, it inevitably led to an international 'Esperanto', unable to explain the unrepeatability of any social reality, of which every city is the highest evidence. It is particularly interesting to observe that, in the field of human geography, at the time of Muratori's research, M.R.G. Conzen was pursuing a similar attempt to relate driving forces to urban form. Sharing the leading spirit of the Italian colleague, the German geographer's investigation focused on territorial and urban transformation as a means of understanding through the evidences of building surveys and cadastral maps the evolution of local society according to a wider civil development.¹⁶ Even more, the fine-grain analysis of the original plot subdivision infill and ongoing transformation to give space to new needs and expectation was incredibly converging to the results Muratori was achieving for his own purpose. In addition, introducing the idea of the *Fringe Belt* as the peripheral condition into which the urban structure driving forces weaken, leaving room for the unexpected to progressively raise and elaborate a possible new order in the near future, he also originally shared Muratori's interest on the dialectical relation between polar and antipolar urban conditions, used by the Italian master to explain the endless struggle between the stability of the existing building set of rule, close to the most enduring institutional centres, and the emergence of innovative behaviours far from the "panoptical perspective" of the official types.

TOWARDS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FIELD

The abovementioned premises confirm that urban morphology and building typology define a crossing border framework, into which fit several disciplines with the shared aim of witnessing the relation between driving forces operating within the anthropic space and the related urban form. They all confirm the importance of ISUF, the International Seminar on Urban Form, to gather them, since its inception, into a promising perspective of confrontation and mutual exchange for additional implementations. Within the theme session 'Innovation in Building Typology', the proposed papers range from a critical revision of the most important school related to Urban Form and Building Typology, namely the Conzenian and the Muratorian, to case studies or best practices that confirm previously achieved results in a consolidated field of both analysis and intervention; from the discovering of



new research challenges in emerging new countries, especially in the Far East and South America, to the reuse of well-established historical situations; from huge hybrid complexes witnessing the 'impatient capitalism'¹⁷ of the global trends to the small-grain refinement of traditional building tissues absorbing capillary mutations; from the political awareness of the endless struggle to be recognized within the embodiment of the existing urban form to the new environmental and sustainable sensibilities that aim at all-encompassing local specificities, fostering the importance of architectural and building tissue resilience as a new kind of emerging trend. However, the actual condition seems to relate all of them according to a shared awareness: it is no longer the time for utopian visions in favour of a new approach to reality, where architecture and urban design regain their commitment to perform new worlds to face the challenges urgently prompted by the crisis. We need to devote a proper attention to what we already have with respect to what we wish. Responsible architecture asks for civil consciousness, and this approach requires a systematic questioning of the built environment with respect to changing society in order to verify the capacity of the former to coherently cultivate the latter.



NOTES

- 1
It is not by chance that Heidegger's reflection is widely known as the 'Philosophy of the crisis'.
- 2
See CACCIARI, M. 1976. *Krisis. Saggio sulla crisi del pensiero negative da Nietzsche a Wittgenstein*, Milan, Feltrinelli.
- 3
See MURATORI, S. 1963. *Architettura e civiltà in crisi*, Rome, Centro Studi di Storia Urbanistica.
- 4
See MURATORI, S. 1959. *Studi per una operante storia urbana di Venezia*, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato.
- 5
In Italy, especially Saverio Muratori and *Casabella* Director Ernesto Nathan Rogers were highlighting the debate on the topic.
- 6
The topic of 'anonymity' will be central in the European discussion in the 1960s and 1970s.
- 7
This position will be that of the so-called 'Autonomy' in Architecture. On the subject see the International Journal *Oase*, no. 62, 'Autonomous Architecture and the Project of the City', Rotterdam, Nai Publishers, 2003.
- 8
To really understand the subtle distinction between 'world' and 'microcosm' see BENCIVENGA. E. 2013. *Filosofia in gioco*, Bari, Laterza.
- 9
AYMONINO. C. 1977. *Lo studio dei fenomeni urbani*, Rome, Officina Edizioni, p. 13.
- 10
See his School Campus in Pesaro, 1974–1978.
- 11
CASTEX. J., CELESTE. P., PANERAI. P. 1979. *Lecture d'une ville: Versailles*, Paris, Editions du Moniteurs.
- 12
ROSSI. A. 1966. *L'Architettura della città*, Padua, Marsilio.
- 13
ROSSI. A. 1976. 'La città analoga', in *Lotus*, no. 13, pp. 4-7.
- 14
To understand the origins of the phenomenon and its further developments see AURELI. P. V. 2008. *The Project of Autonomy. Politics and Architecture within and against Capitalism*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press.
- 15
VIDLER. A. 1976. 'The third typology', in *Oppositions* no. 7, MIT Press, Cambridge, p. 1.

16

CONZEN. M.R.G. 1969. *Alnwick, Northumberland. A study in Town-Plan Analysis*, London, Institute of British Geographers.

17

I explicitly refer to Indian architect Rahul Mehrotra's position.