DOI: 10.23817/2023.defarch.1-3

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ARCHITECTURE OF PUBLIC SPACES FOR THE REGENERATION OF CITIES

ARCHITEKTURA PRZESTRZENI PUBLICZNYCH SPRZYJAJĄCA REWITALIZACJI MIAST

Abstract

The great challenges facing cities and the significant discontinuities in current contexts raise several questions about how to interpret and rethink public spaces. By exploring this specific theme, the narrative traces an open atlas of reflections, as a discourse on the essential reasons for the project of architecture of the city and contemporary living.

Keywords: public space, architecture, city, regeneration project

Streszczenie

Olbrzymie wyzwania stające przed miastami i znaczące nieciągłości w obecnych kontekstach rodzą szereg pytań o to, jak interpretować i redefiniować przestrzenie publiczne. Zgłębiając ten konkretny temat, narracja kreśli otwarty atlas refleksji będących dyskursem na temat zasadniczych założeń projektu architektury miasta i współczesnego mieszkania.

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzeń publiczna, architektura, miasto, projekt rewitalizacji

1. DUAL SPACES

It is difficult to sum up the public space in a single or even a specific term. What is certain is that public space is the form that is most sensitive to changes, shifts and transformations in society.

In the highest sense, public space is that which best expresses in its forms the extraordinary cultural and human wealth it contains. It is open to complexity and diversity. Architects, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, Nolli, Piranesi, Rossi, Gregotti, Focault, Harendt, Bauman, Virilio, have highlighted the dichotomies of the concept of public space and, at the same time, its importance in the construction of the city.

We can define public space as the whole that constitutes the negative of buildings, the scenario of civil life, whose main characteristics are its relational character, its non-privacy and its free use by several people for common purposes.

Since ancient times, the square has been the public space par excellence. It is at the heart of public, political and social life. The system of public spaces, the Greek agora, the Latin forum, the Germanic marktplatze, the Polish rynek, the French places royales, have represented the vital and monumental places of the city, the places where it was possible to meet, discuss or simply linger.

Like cities, public spaces have changed over time, reflecting the structure of each era. In the contemporary city, urban voids have multiplied and now include sidewalks, car parks, widenings and other voids.

Today open spaces are defined by opposites. They are the places of value where the community identifies itself, and the non-places where these values are absent. In their different characteristics and dimensions, urban voids do not decrease uniformly from the town centre to the periphery, but permeate the entire territory.

Recent decades have seen changes in social, aesthetic and collective practices. New semantics have sought to understand urban voids. Public spaces have been reformulated in terms of consumption. Today we live in a society in which digital forums often replace the traditional public space understood as a meeting place. This has robbed the city of its public dimension.

In architecture, boundaries and enclosures distinguish public from private space, voids from buildings, in the visionary hope that boundaries and intellectual margins are capable of orienting us, establishing sequences, geometries, perspectives, dimensions that allow us to inhabit our cities and landscapes in a new balance with nature.

2. FINDINGS

In today's city, most of the time, public space is often no longer recognisable in itself. The public spaces of the city are no longer spaces for living, they are spaces for commerce or leisure, spaces whose dimensional relationships or specificity we can hardly perceive as *genius loci*. This loss of identity corresponds to the loss of the collective character of public space. Most of the spaces that we pass through on a daily basis are not really public, they belong exclusively to someone, they are not collective spaces available to all.

Individualism and privatisation have eroded the public sphere in all fields: the idea of city and the community, the role of public space in the urban fabric, and also of the elements of figurative and spatial definition that helped to guarantee recognition and social cohesion, i.e. the identity of cities, are in danger of being lost.

At a time when contemporary society seemed to be withdrawing from public life, health and environmental emergencies have highlighted the contradictions of this privatisation, renewing the perception of the importance of the characteristics and qualities of open space.

During the pandemic, the denial of the public dimension of the city and the seclusion in our homes made us long for what we did not have, the space of community. Never before had we so intensely appreciated the car-free and therefore useless, streets, observed the beauty of deserted squares and perceived the health benefits of nature, walking in parks or green spaces. We observed in a new way not only traditional public spaces but also residual, degraded, incomplete and marginal spaces. We have come to see emptiness as surprising emptiness and urban void as a place to take care of. We have recognised the value of emptiness and the value of thresholds, between the inside and the outside, as the most important public good.

We therefore hope that this new sensibility will reposition the necessary relationship between architecture and the city as an essential strategy for the quality of the project and of public spaces.

Public space is, in fact, the armour of the city, the deepest formal structure of the architecture of the city, of society, of the human being.

To rethink public space is to work, to think about voids and solids, to shape them in such a way that are able to resist change, to improve the quality of life of people, animals and plants. There is no other meaning to building architecture, which is such when it defines its elements and figures in relation to the city, ensuring the sociality and well-being of its inhabitants.

The relationship between architecture and the city, which has characterised a whole season of Italian architecture, sensitive to spaces and the nature of places, is still a necessary practice for identity and quality transformations. We move on this basis, recycling the existing.

3. SUBTRACTION

In the modern city, the traditional relationship between built and empty spaces came to an end, resulting in the dissolution of public space.

In Casabella, Vittorio Gregotti discussed the issue of space in modern cities as a problem, highlighting the challenge of defining and interpreting public and open spaces and insisting on the importance of designing residual spaces. What tools can the project use to rethink fragments as a system and make them intelligible?

Re-reading the resilient and profound archaeology of Aldo Rossi's urban fragment, Rem Koolhaas's junkspace, Donough and Braumgart's cradle to cradle of recycling, we find the illuminations for a re-foundation of thinking, a knowing how to look at things with an argumentation that recognises the apparently random interaction between the elements of the project, with different implications at each scale, capable of giving a new meaning to different materials, of recognising even distant effects.

The first objective is to subtract the design of open spaces from the fragmentation. This means looking at observing the existing spaces from different perspectives, as a palimpsest to be overwritten, in order to interpret the different traces as a system of identity. Point, line and surface, as the taxonomy of the project, is the tool that we prefer to identify the nature of the different elements, to name the figures and traces, to identify new connections between spaces, memories and flows, to reconnect the fragments in order to give shape and identity to open public spaces and consequently to the city.

This methodology is based on the idea of architecture as the art of building and transforming urban places, the project as a recomposition of fragmented, residual realities, the attention to the void to be reinterpreted with the specific qualities of space. Invention requires separation and disjunction, which is made possible by the void, an element of composition and an instrument for architecture. The landscape scale experience of void as significant distance, movement, and subjective perception, reinforced by the picturesque lesson, can be seen as a scenic device that can create multiple and multi-scale spatial relationships.

The project on voids and for voids is the red thread that binds together my personal research on the construction/composition of the urban landscape, voids necessary for the imagination and the intelligibility of forms, voids that unite, distinguish and relate the different fragments of reality, as expressed by the School of Venice.

The focus of this research is on the points of conflict between places, the desire to create meaning, connections and figure for contemporary spaces that seem to have unexpressed

potential. Gianugo Polesello taught me about the design interpretation of the existing signs of physical space, not as singular episodes but as polarity in completed recompositions, which is one of the issues. Thinking compositionally about the voids, especially the closed ones of urban expansion and suburban areas, compositionally, is tantamount to defining the positioning of boundaries, and their size, tracing precise geometries in relation to the new plans in these places. Considering the void as full in order to imagine spaces of quality is the basic compositional procedure, both for the reading of the consistency of the signs present, and for rendering sequences and intervals, external and internal, and for transforming contexts that have lost their quality or have never had it, into mechanisms of habitable spaces through design techniques.

This teaching also confirms my preference for the project of subtraction, for subtraction rather than addition, as a poetic method capable of defining the figures of a project, as well as the phrases of a thought.

Subtraction is a fundamental compositional tool that allows us to distinguish and unite, to create a tension between different elements of the same space, as well as between places in a city.

The fragment can become a potential, evolutionary value by introducing new perspectives through design, an active project in space and time, relational balances and uses linked to the contextuality of reality. This means introducing a concept of freedom of space, as opposed to the practice of control and domination of space. Spontaneous use, which is generally perceived as negative, has not yet found its legitimation because it bases its principle of virtuosity on the capacity and interface of social realities.

Inverting this disciplinary thinking, the poetics of the fragment recognises the operations of distinction, adaptation and subtraction in order to guarantee a new life cycle to the existing. A minimal overwriting of the existing is able to highlight the expressive relevance of reality, for the construction of an evolving space. Physical materiality, the recognition of surviving traces and possible erasures, is the basic condition.

The subtractive project aims to activate relationships between imperfect and apparently disconnected elements, it is a work on measurements and intervals, on the weight of voids, in the reciprocal and multi-scale relationships with the set of anthropic and natural fragments of the city. The project on voids, establishes an alliance between memory and oblivion, absences and mutations.

According to the sensitivity and cultural values of a community, each regeneration is the result of an interpretation of the material with which it is measured and which it reinterprets. It is the project that produces differences by measuring distances and becoming a new meaningful synthesis, between continuity and discontinuity, text and context.

The availability of large empty residual spaces does not mean a transformation into an imaginative multiplicity of functions. It seems useful to base the transformation of empty spaces on the implicit multiplicity of adaptation, favouring tools capable of reconnecting the usability of fragments.

The project makes intelligible or re-meaningful the signs, traces, forms, unknown and invisible qualities of places by working in the conforming layers of contexts, to discover the values and constituent elements to be preserved, hidden or betrayed, searching for their expressiveness, exploring their potential and limits.

The design of a public space requires a new measure of time is needed, that is, an acceleration of the project. In other words, it is necessary to identify some operations that make the

space immediately accessible, regulating a measure of time that derives from the recognition of high social flights of spontaneous uses. The appropriation of residual spaces by citizens and spontaneous occupation are valuable signals for valorisation.

4. CONTAMINATIONS

We live in an omnipresent structure, fluid and changeable, suspended between nature and artifice. This structure is interrupted by situations of environmental, architectural and social degradation, it is saturated and shattered, in crowded metropolises as well as in small towns and other still wild places that will soon become inhospitable. In such conditions, architecture is less and less a project of singular objects of the *tabula rasa*. The architecture of the city must interact with the text, with what is already there, through acts of contamination.

Contamination means that a rewriting does not close itself within the limits of the repetition of the same structure or the same forms, but becomes a generative with its ability to recognise, separate and shape diversity. Establishing relationships and harmonies, or enhancing contrasts and dissonances. The architectural composition project is a useful tool when it is able to establish relationships between spaces and architectural elements that can improve the environment in which we live.

Starting from the concepts of hybridisation and parasitism, this reflection identifies three possible design operations, that underlie as many issues, described through the figure of musical writing. The pentagram, from the Greek *penta*, five, and *gramma,* line, is used as a metaphor for the artificial structure that is the contemporary context. By definition and configuration, a given staff is made up of signs, lines, and spaces between lines. Lines identify, among other things, the harmonic scale of a piece of music. Musical notation writes the notes through other signs, a melody that is impossible to read and practice outside of the mutual necessity between the three components, spaces, scale, notes, notes of its own writing. The metaphor of the pentagram is an effective image for our reasoning, because of its natural quality of receiving and configuring itself through signs that guarantee its significant role and its own reason for existence.

The first question concerns the saturation of the pentagram and emphasises the reasons for spatiality, or rather the need for spacing. In today's artificially structured context, dominated by the superimposition of images, sounds and objects, the primary objective of the project is to free up space, working through subtraction, physical and conceptual, rather than addition. Freeing up spaces means not filling them, digging into what is already there and densifying the potential of emptiness. Emptiness is a design hope that takes on the prerogative of value rather than defect.

Empty space, a material rich in potential and productive, is the true material of the composition, it is the fluid and dynamic space of Mies Van der Rohe. The reinvention of the emptiness that is otherwise left between the buildings, becomes the primary fact of the composition of the city. An absence finds its *raison d'être* in a space where physical and perceptual flows intersect. The emptiness that defines an architectural space that allows the movement of people and the gaze, and that at the same time defines its specific character.

Empty space is a complex space. The void created by spacing, like the pause in the piece of music, is also the place that welcomes the event and the exception within the saturated continuity. As in John Cage's compositions, it is background noise, otherwise it is imperceptible. The silent void accommodates the different possibilities of being, a flexible space for different and unexpected uses.

The second issue concerns the scale of architecture. The transformability of a city refers to a broader analysis of the dimensional and qualitative parameters of the different contexts and is defined in relation to their availability to change according to the intentions set by the motivations of the project and, consequently, by the need to define the ways of the relationships between existing and new parts.

In the first question, the pentagram is read as saturated, to be designed for the benefit of the void. In the second, the territory, studied as a divided fractal, is constructed through new scalarities. This means working on the principles of settlement, following the relational character of landscape architecture, where the relationships between objects are more important than the objects themselves.

No less important is the need for an architecture of the city that explores new means of re-establishing a sustainable pact with nature. The pentagram, read in the first question as saturated and distanced, and in the second as divided and related, is understood here as an inhospitable and essentially uninhabitable place. Marginal voids, abandoned or degraded, large abandoned or inaccessible areas, ordinary spaces, physically or mentally uninhabitable, can be left to nature, where people can live with other living beings.

To rethink these spaces as public spaces is to allow a new beauty to emerge, one that is corrupted by the pentagram and in turn contaminates it, acts of a minimalist architecture that, by means of punctual and lasting notes, allows the pentagram to be reinhabited in harmony with the earth.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Public open space as a strategy and system, as a series of points, lines and areas, accessible to all, is a fundamental element in achieving the regeneration objectives of the city and the community. The urban voids must be conceived as recognisable places that participate in the construction of a new quality of urban space, constantly expressive in the complex and articulated whole of its different parts. The design of new public spaces passes through the definition of architectural figures, structures, systems and programmes. A monument is not enough, to build a square or animate a new urban space, we need to think about an experience.

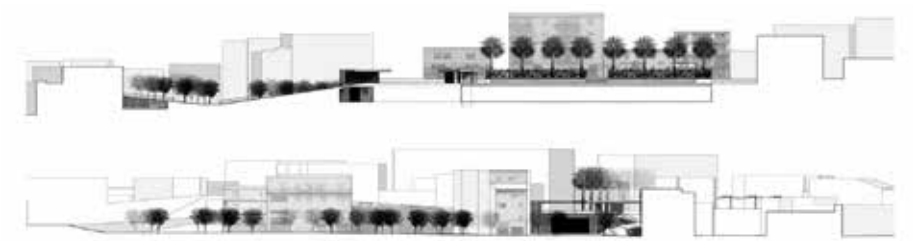
Public spaces are necessary for us to access our private enclosures, to reinforce the free social interaction with which we identify urban life, and to respond to the new challenges of climate change, risk, safety and health of citizens.

In contemporary city, neither urban nor rural, design must be based on relationships rather than objects. It must also take into account the development of mobility spaces according to activities and flows, because travelling is much more than just going from one place to another. Moreover, public space increasingly belongs to different cultures, which have different ideas about society and nature. Fluidity, hybridity and depth of meaning should be the salient characteristics to look for in the architecture of public space.

In our research and experimentation, the theme of open public space has always emerged as a topic of discussion and investigation, and has also become a key element in our design work. Rethinking voids as palimpsests seems to be a fundamental tool for reconnecting existing fragments, for imagining special and multiple densities. Working with subtraction design can allow for an immediate re-appropriation of space that does not hinder long-term regeneration. To strengthen the character of places, it is useful to imagine elements, geometries and figures in continuity and dissonance with their contexts, studying architectural devices that allow the open extension of space. It is necessary to strengthen the natural-architectural continuity and the perception of the landscape, giving space to the open and free extensions, views and perspectives where artifice and nature overlap. Working with the land line to imagine topographies of variable configuration, leaving room for the unpredictable and learning from spontaneous uses.

We believe that a few simple and clear gestures can highlight the qualities of places and establish relationships with them.

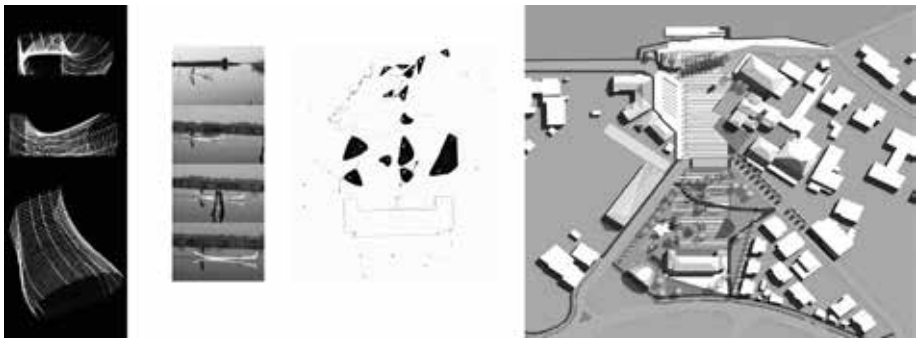
Laconicity is a way of thinking and acting. It is difficult to name and operate within this poetics, both in the construction of the architectural project and in the transmission of a thought.



Ill. 1. *Elements, figures, landscapes for public/open spaces.* Macomer (Claudia Battaino).



Ill. 2. *Elements, figures, landscapes for public/open spaces*. Borgo Valsugana (Claudia Battaino).



Ill. 3. *Elements, figures, landscapes for public/open spaces.* Cavallino (Claudia Battaino).



Ill. 4. *Elements, figures, landscapes for public/open spaces.* Palmanova (Claudia Battaino).

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