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THE CITY, THE BEGINNING AND END OF ARCHITECTURE

MIASTO – POCZĄTEK I KONIEC ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

Building architecture means giving the places of a city a formal definition, based on a principle of order corresponding to whatever meaning and value these places possess. Architecture and city are therefore inseparable concepts; think of the loss of meaning and purpose of architecture itself. Bearing this in mind, we might call composition, the appropriate design tool, *urban composition*.
Two projects related to a similar theme but different contexts within the city of Milan set out to show the need to start by designing a place to define the urban composition principles on which the design of individual works of architecture will be based.

Keywords: urban composition, university, masterplan, Milan

Streszczenie

Budowanie architektury polega na nadawaniu miejscom w mieście formalnej definicji, opartej na zasadzie porządku odpowiadającego ich wszelkiemu znaczeniu i wartości. Architektura i miasto są zatem pojęciami nierozerwalnie złączonymi; wystarczy pomyśleć o utracie znaczenia i celu samej architektury. Mając to na uwadze, możemy nazwać kompozycję, odpowiednie narzędzie projektowe, *kompozycją miejską*.
Dwa projekty o podobnej tematyce, ale umiejscowione w różnych kontekstach w Mediolanie, ukazują potrzebę rozpoczęcia od zaprojektowania miejsca w celu zdefiniowania zasad kompozycji urbanistycznej, na których opierać się będą projekty poszczególnych dzieł architektury.

Słowa kluczowe: kompozycja urbanistyczna, uniwersytet, ogólny plan miasta, Mediolan

1. INTRODUCTION

Personally, I remain convinced that the majority of the reasons for the forms of architecture must be sought in the morphology, geography, and character of relevant sites, so that the new works can, in turn, bring a new form to these places, with the aim of these new places belonging to the city, identifying it, not being alien to it, continuing its history, reflecting it, and at the same time renewing it through a fresh interpretation.

It is true that architecture today seems to be moving in quite another direction, considering each building as an object in its own right, independent of its surroundings, overbearing or indifferent, but sometimes, in the best cases, a test of mastery, idiosyncrasy, or a technical or technological challenge. However, this is the fundamental difference between a work of

architecture and a design object: an *object*, precisely, in the sense that it has no fixed position, is self-sufficient and finds its *raison d'être* only in itself and in its functioning, with the possibility of finding different locations. Like a chair or a table, which, as it happens, also have a problem of suitability with respect to the space where they are inserted. Let us put it better: like a computer, or a mobile phone, which have no need to adapt to anywhere. The latter are objects, tools: advanced, technological, functional, more or less captivating, and have also undergone a design which has precisely defined their form as well as their performance, to then be chosen by each person based on subjective aesthetic standards, in addition to functional requirements. They are everywhere and their only link with places is, at most, their connection to a power outlet; they are personal, portable, they can be moved, they do not define or build a space, if anything, they occupy one.

The confusion generated in interpreting architecture as objects indifferent to their contexts shows that cities are tending to lose their specific identity, their distinctive character, ending up blurring into one another. It is not simply a matter of techniques, materials and construction skills being exported, as is legitimate and arguably necessary. It is a matter of indifference to the culture and history of countries and the people who inhabit them, to climate and to geography; it is a refrainment from studying form, structure, the character of places and construction methods.

It can happen, as in Bilbao, that a single work of architecture becomes, thanks to its peculiarity, the emblem of a city, redeeming its image and destiny, triggering a major revolution also in the perception of its role: conceivably an exception, when it comes to contemporary architecture, and in any case not always a path pursued. It happens regularly that certain cities are identified by a single building, consistent with the advertiser's approach: the Eiffel Tower, "Big Ben", the Colosseum, and so on. As a result, these buildings come to be used as brands or symbols, regardless of being works of architecture, and the urban splendour of Paris, London and Rome certainly cannot be exhausted by these emblems.

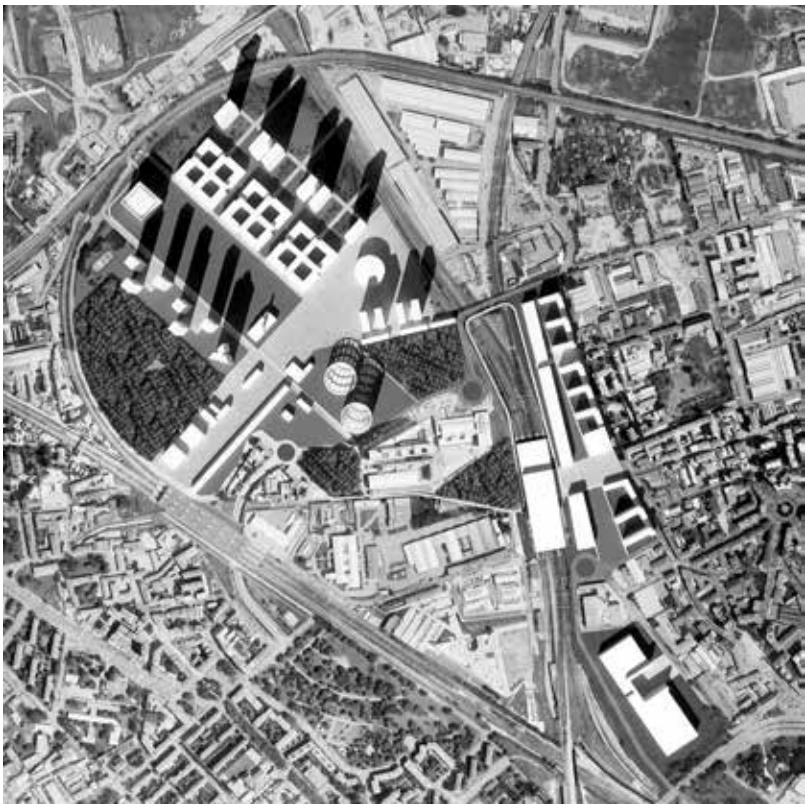
I believe the contrary to be true, that the fundamental task of architecture is to build places, to give a space a recognizable, complete form. This objective comes sooner than the design of the building itself, if it is permissible to establish priorities: it is the main purpose of the architect's work, and in this sense the composition of buildings is his or her tool[1].

The architectural project is therefore not limited to the single artefact, but to its sphere of influence, which will differ each time. I always give the example of a castle atop a hill: its construction not only defines its interior spaces and the places directly connected to it; its very presence marks a landscape as far as the eye can see, and this, in general, was precisely why the castle was built – control, defence, and affirmation of presence. The same applies to a bell tower, which does not even have a habitable interior: up close, its presence is felt almost entirely through the shadow that its slender volume projects onto the ground, but its true role consists in its ability to see, and above all to be seen, from afar; like a lighthouse.

The term composition, as applied to an architectural project and the act of establishing relationships between volumes in order to create spaces endowed with value and form, must also be extended to places: architecture composes in order to define places, spaces, and voids.

[1] For a better explanation of this point of view you can refer to my essay in the books of the XIV International Conference "Defining the Architectural Space – Games and Play of Architecture" – R.N. *The Composition Game*, "Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura" 2015, no. 8-A, pp. 173–179, to the series "Ricerche in composizione urbana", LettaraVentidue, Siracusa, and to the essays in my book *Il filo di un pensiero*, CLEAN, Napoli 2020.

The space of a city is defined through its architecture; architectural composition is therefore, properly speaking, also urban composition. An important teaching which Aldo Rossi had already recapped in the title of his fundamental book, delving into tools and relationships through which to investigate and design these associations.



Ill. 1. Project for the new Polytechnic at "the Drop" in Bovisa, Milano, 2016 (Raffaella Neri, coordinator, with Tomaso Monestiroli, Ilario Boniello, Francesco Menegatti, Isabella Balestreri, Christian Campanella, Sergio Croce, Elsa Garavaglia, Franco Guzzetti, Ottorino Meregalli, Marzia Morena, Tiziana Poli, Stefano Recalcati, Marianna Roncoi, Tommaso Truppi; consultants: Vincenzo Dobato, Stefano Riva; collaborators: Giovanni Uboldi, Elisa Cuogo).

If composing architecture means giving urban space a form, measuring it, identifying it, attributing meaning and value to it, then the central problem becomes the decision on the principle of order to be adopted for the construction of new buildings and new places in a city. Because composition, which is the tool to achieve an end, must contain a meaningful objective: composing in relation to the idea of order to be imposed on places, an order which, of course, has nothing to do with geometry but with a *meaning* which is then translated into a *form*. This may be an existing principle, suggested by or found in places and their history, which is recognized, reproduced and transfigured, or a brand-new, different and alternative principle: but in every case, a general principle of order must be present and recognizable to guide the act of composing.

If on the one hand we cannot stop proposing new settlement methods to typify our culture and knowledge, on the other it is necessary to guarantee continuity: principles closer to the extant, in general, for interventions of completion or for minor adjuncts, often rather out of kilter and disruptive in the case of projects to replace large urban sectors, for new growth, or large-scale expansion.

This is the difficulty which any urban composition project must face: to establish the balance between the extant and a transformation, aware of the fact that any intervention, however minimal and minute, will nonetheless modify the original spatial structure. One example among many is the debate around the opportunity to build tall within the ancient parts of a city, inserting a modern typology which presupposes different reasons behind the composition of buildings, and possibly different principles of order, within an ancient fabric.

In relation to the search for a balance between the principle of order and respect for the pre-existing characteristics of places, I have decided to show some projects developed at the University: these are two university sites which address an issue that the city of Milan has been debating for some time, located in two opposite parts of the city, in contexts of different character and history.

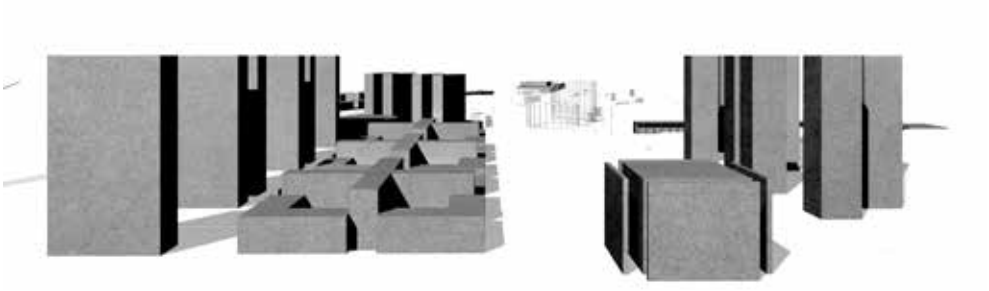
The first is located in an area of the historical suburbs north-west of Milan, known as Bovisa, and made famous by the paintings of Mario Sironi. An important industrial site and headquarters of a former gas supply company but abandoned for decades. The project concerns a new building for the Polytechnic, which wishes to establish its second city seat here – and in part has already done so.

The other one would involve the transformation of areas and the replacement of buildings belonging to the State university and to two major hospitals, the National Cancer Institute and the Carlo Besta Neurological Institute, in the process of being transferred. These sites are adjacent to the original seat of the Polytechnic, located within a firmly established area in the Città Studi district, laid out by plans of the early 1900s.

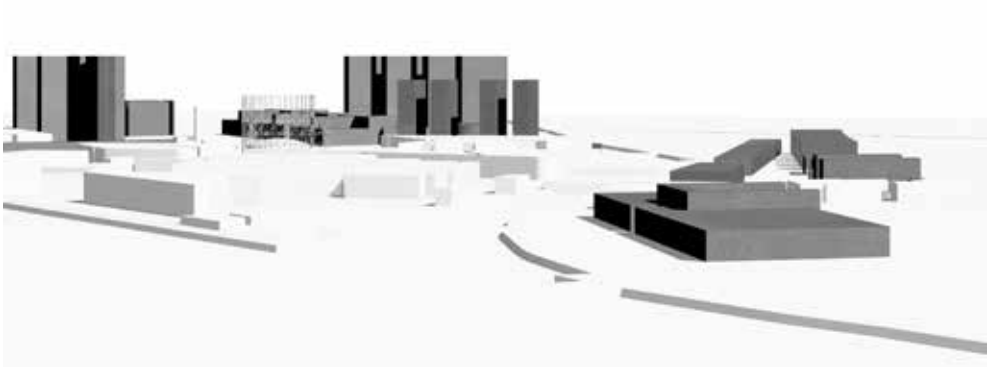
The two projects propose similar themes and suggest similar aims in very different urban conditions within the city of Milan. In both cases, the fundamental undertaking of the project is to define the compositional principle for the sites, or the principle of order to be implemented through the establishment of buildings and services for the universities and the city, considering the relationships with the context, the differences in character and history of the areas, and the intended destinations. Only then to develop the design of the individual buildings following the indications of the resulting Masterplan, trying out possible alternatives for the individual works of architecture to verify their suitability.

2. THE BOVISA PROJECT, MILAN

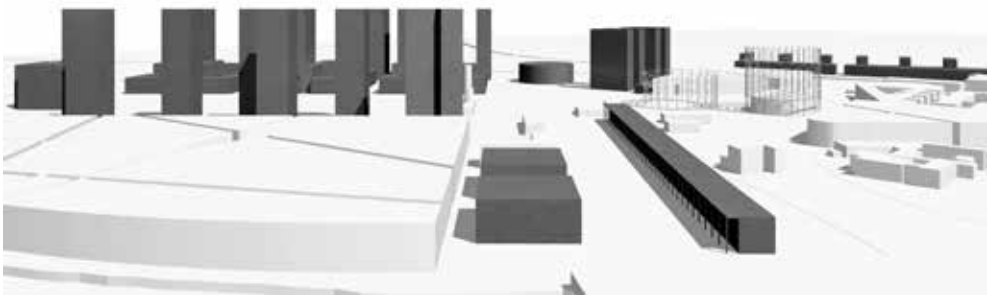
The area in the Bovisa district, an industrial site outside the urban rail ring, is known as “The Drop” because of the shape of the tracks that surround it. This area had already been identified more than 30 years ago as the site for a possible expansion of the Polytechnic thanks to the studies of a group of its professors. This choice was based on an idea of the city that considered the establishment of public institutions on a territorial scale a necessary condition to bring an urban quality and new identity to these suburban areas cut off from the life of the city, as Bovisa then was.



Ill. 2. View of the central meadow towards the old gasometers.



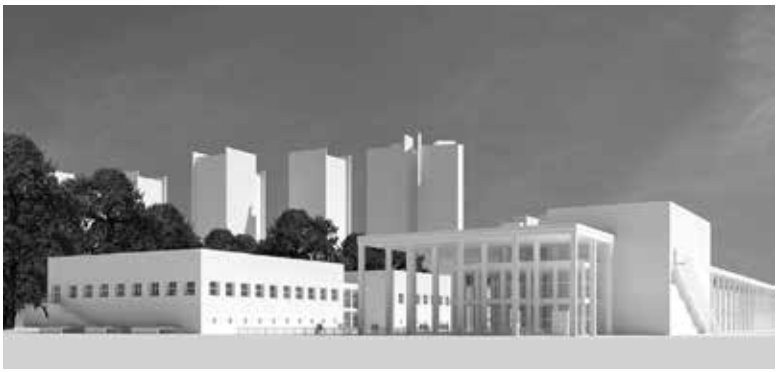
Ill. 3. View of the central meadow from the opposite site.



Ill. 4. View of the central plaza with porticoes from the station.

The proposal was reinforced by a very important and decisive condition, considering the extension of the catchment area of a university: the area was served by two different railway lines with two distinct stations, in turn well connected to the metropolitan transport system which, according to the forecasts of the railway operator, would be further expanded.

The Polytechnic seat would therefore constitute a new urban landmark, the new pole of a polycentric city which was not based on the presence of a single dominant centre where institutions and places of value were concentrated, with an extensive surrounding, substantially residential suburbs: it therefore represented an opportunity to affirm new places and new collective buildings in this part of the city that was historically devoid of them.



Ill. 5. View from the station towards the plaza with the sport facilities and the high-rise residential buildings (Laboratorio di architettura delle costruzioni complesse: prof. Raffaela Neri, Sergio Croce, Elsa Garavaglia, Edoardo Mariani, Paolo Oliaro; master thesis 2017–2018, students: Leonardo Farrauto, Elisa Rossi, Simone Teruggi).



Ill. 6. View of the central plaza with porticoes towards the station (master thesis 2017–2018, Leonardo Farrauto, Elisa Rossi, Simone).

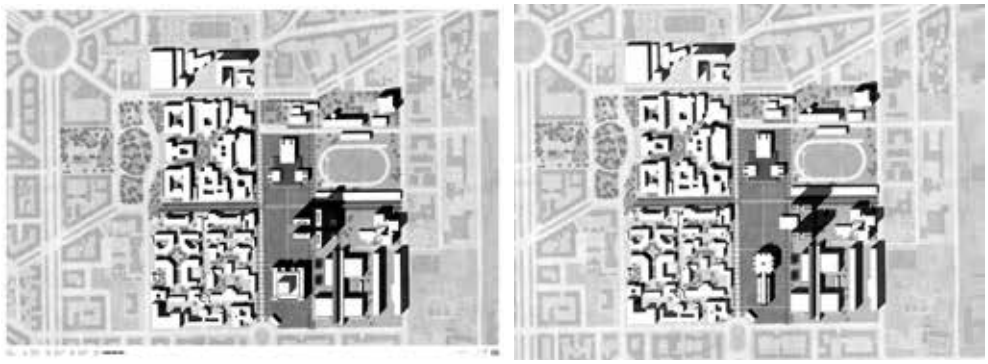


Ill. 7. View from the central plaza towards the sport facilities with the swimming pool and the gym (Laboratorio di architettura delle costruzioni complesse: prof. Raffaela Neri, Sergio Croce, Elsa Garavaglia, Edoardo Mariani, Paolo Oliaro; master thesis 2017–2018, students: Leonardo Farrauto, Elisa Rossi, Simone Teruggi).

An initial project for the Polytechnic seat – in which I participated as a young PhD student – was developed by the Polytechnic's Departments of Architectural Design and Urban Planning on behalf of the Municipality, coordinated by Antonio Monestiroli[2]. After multiple vagaries – including serious problems of soil contamination where the gas supply company was located, an invitation to tender, projects, and unfulfilled assignments – the Municipality partially reclaimed the area and reinserted it within the Territorial Government Plans, to a certain extent redefining the site's destinations and perimeter. In 2016, the Polytechnic launched an internal Call, addressed to teachers and researchers, to develop a new project[3].

In this latter hypothesis we took for granted the general principles that had led to the identification of the site, we took note of the easy railway accessibility, which had increased over time, the persistent inadequate road links and the installation of classrooms and departments in several neighbouring industrial buildings, abandoned and repurposed.

The principle of order underlying the project did not differ much, in its general lines, from the original one, albeit in different forms, while taking into account the changed conditions of the site: it hypothesized the presence of a large central collective place, a park open to the city overlooked by departments, research laboratories, classrooms, and residences, both for the university and outsiders. On one side the park is bordered by the surviving gasometers, a memory of the site's industrial past, repurposed as performance venues, on the other side by the central public library, a remarkable building for this study place.



Ill. 8–9. Project for the "Città Studi" area in Milan with the new buildings for the universities, sport facilities, new library, auditorium and student houses: two masterplans with different architectural solutions (master thesis 2016–2017, students: Elisabetta Coati, Chiara Garattini, Simone Barbieri, Simone Bonaldi, Edoardo Marcandelli, Stefano Piatti, Irene Arosio, Martina Eusli, Camilla Ottolina, Gianluca Cassia, Tommaso Colombo, Mohammadreza Sarsharzadeh).

Perpendicular to the park, a second public place will connect the new seat with the two railway stations and the districts outside "The Drop": this is a plaza featuring commercial, cultural and sports facilities, as well as a multi-hall auditorium and other buildings for research and work.

[2] Among the publications of this project, see "QA Quaderni del Dipartimento di Progettazione dell'Architettura" 1990, no. 11.

[3] The results of the call are collected in: A. Moro (ed.), *Bovisa. Un parco per la ricerca e il lavoro*, Maggioli, Santarcangelo di Romagna 2017.

The two railway stations guarantee accessibility and connection with other parts of the city, and with a new mixed residential district, also a subject of the new plan, but again outside "The Drop". Car accessibility is guaranteed but will be restricted, e.g., excluding the possibility of crossing the new seat.

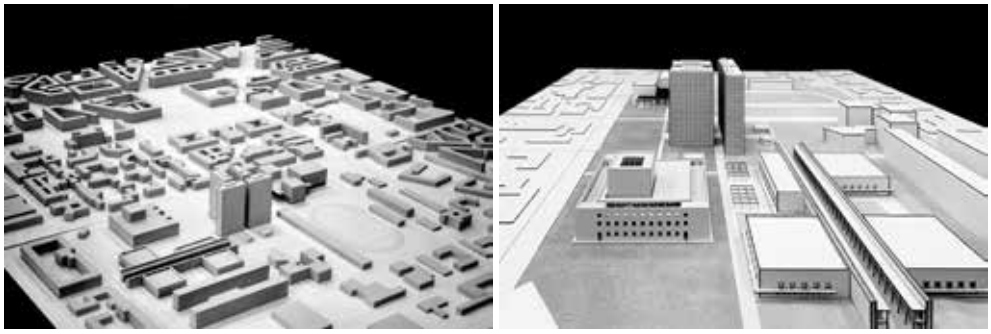
The degree theses then developed several architectural projects, following the indications of the Masterplan.

3. "CITTÀ STUDI", MILAN

In the Città Studi area, the planned transfer of the two hospitals to Sesto San Giovanni and some departments of the State university to the former Expo area makes it possible to reallocate the areas and rearrange the entire district, which has expanded over time in a haphazard way, in order to redesign it based on a principle of greater unity, to offer new services and to bring a fresh definition to the places of life of the two institutes living side by side, as well as the city at large.

As the name itself suggests, Città Studi grew rapidly around the seat of the first Polytechnic and the scientific departments of the State university from the 1920s onwards, in the wake of 19th-century plans that foresaw the city ordered by blocks. Over the years, the built fabric became welded to the ancient village of Lambrate and its industrial settlements, hemmed in, to the east, by the railway embankment and the Lambro river. Surrounded by their enclosures, the buildings of the two university poles and the hospitals have grown on top of themselves, besieged by a city that has expanded around them in a fragmentary and disjointed way, occupying all the available land and preventing any further development.

Thanks to the transfers, which have freed up large areas between the buildings of the universities, the theme is now to design a system of open spaces whose task is to establish clearer new relationships between the parts through the arrangement of some urban public places, squares, and gardens, along with the construction of some university facilities – a library, an auditorium – an enhancing of the extant sports facilities, and provision of residences and services for students, of which Milan has a great need.



Ill. 10–11. Maquettes of the project.

A study of the road network has allowed us to hypothesize the pedestrianization of Via Celoria, an axis straddling the two enclosures of the old Polytechnic and the departments of the State university, to become a tree-lined avenue – a *rambla* – for meetings and relaxation,

a thoroughfare that would represent a continuation of the park of Piazza Leonardo da Vinci, which is already a reference point and meeting place for Milan's university students, extending as far as another open, green place, defined by the presence of the new library and the plaza of the Auditoriums.

The pedestrian street would continue alongside the existing athletics track, recently redeveloped, and, on the opposite side, a new sports centre linked to the existing neighbourhood further south.

Bordering this thoroughfare, which, continuing in the opposite direction towards the city centre to the west, becomes a key urban axis, among places for sports, the park and the existing departments, would be a group of tall buildings, visible from afar, intended to accommodate new homes for students around a square and communal services.

In this project, the Masterplan was further developed together with a group of students who, in their theses, designed the individual works of architecture that constitute the scheme.

Here too, the decisive importance of the design of the buildings and their possible variations in the principle of organization and composition of the places established by the Masterplan was substantiated.



Ill. 12. Aerial view towards the green plaza with the students houses, the library – on the right – and the cover plaza with three auditoria – on the left (rendered by Mohammadreza Sarsharzadeh).

References

[1] Neri R., *The Composition Game*, "Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura" 2015, no. 8-A, pp. 173–179.

[2] Neri R., *Il filo di un pensiero*, Clean, Napoli 2020.

[3] Moro A. (ed.), *Bovisa. Un parco per la ricerca e il lavoro*, Maggioli, Santarcangelo di Romagna 2017.

[4] "QA Quaderni del Dipartimento di Progettazione dell'Architettura" 1990, no. 11.

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