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EXPERIENCE AND REALITY IN THE HISTORY OF THE CITY

DOŚWIADCZENIE I RZECZYWISTOŚĆ W HISTORII MIASTA

Abstract

The text begins by comparing the meaning attributed to the word “experience” in everyday language with its etymological origins, which evoke the idea of a crossing or passage. Therefore, it emphasises that experience is not merely the sum of what happens to us, but rather what we pass through; it is not everything we have lived through, but the transformation that those events continue to bring about in our present.

It is in this sense that the term ‘experience’ concerns Architecture and what has been described as its “progressive character”. While acknowledging that the term is now associated with architecture primarily within lines of thought different from the one proposed here – mostly deriving from Hermann Schmitz’s *Neue Phänomenologie* – the text argues that architectural experience does not coincide solely, or even primarily, with the sensory perception of space. Rather, it consists in a critical engagement with the built environment, through which architecture comes to understand its own history and generates transformation.

A project for Naples represents a demonstrative case study for this idea.

Keywords: *architecture of the city, experience, reality, urban archaeology, Naples*

Streszczenie

Tekst rozpoczyna się od porównania znaczenia przypisywanego słowu „doświadczenie” w języku potocznym z jego etymologią, przywołującą ideę przekraczania lub przechodzenia. Podkreślono tym samym, że doświadczenie nie jest jedynie sumą tego, co nam się przydarza, lecz raczej tym, przez co przechodzimy; nie jest wszystkim, czego doświadczyliśmy w przeszłości, lecz przemianą, którą wydarzenia te nadal wywołują w naszej teraźniejszości.

W tym właśnie sensie termin „doświadczenie” odnosi się do architektury i do tego, co określano mianem jej „progresywnego charakteru”. Uznając, że termin ten jest obecnie wiązany z architekturą przede wszystkim w ramach innych nurtów myślowych niż ten proponowany tutaj – wywodzących się głównie z *Neue Phänomenologie* Hermanna Schmitza – tekst dowodzi, że doświadczenie architektury nie sprowadza się wyłącznie, ani nawet przede wszystkim, do zmysłowej percepcji przestrzeni. Polega ono raczej na krytycznym zaangażowaniu w środowisko zbudowane, poprzez które architektura poznaje własną historię i generuje przemianę.

Projekt dla Neapolu stanowi przykład ilustrujący tę ideę.

Słowa kluczowe: *archeologia urbanistyczna, architektura miasta, doświadczenie, rzeczywistość, Neapol*

1. PREMISE

In the Italian dictionary, "experience" is defined as "direct knowledge, personally acquired through observation, use or practice, of a particular sphere of reality" and, more specifically in philosophical language, as a "type of knowledge furnished by sensations or otherwise acquired through the senses (often polemically regarded as certain and indubitable, in opposition to the abstractions and conjectures of speculation and pure theory)". Yet, as often happens, common usage has narrowed the breadth of meaning that emerges when we turn to etymology and examine the content of words in ancient languages. The word *experience* derives from the Latin *experientia*, in turn from *experiri*: to try, to attempt, to put to the test. Its root therefore contains something quite different from the mere accumulation of lived events. To experience means, first and foremost, to expose oneself to a test. It is also significant that *experiri* shares with *periculum* – danger – the Indo-European root *per-*, associated with the idea of crossing or passing through. In this sense, experience is not merely the sum of what happens to us, but what we pass through; it is not everything we have lived, but the transformation that those things continue to produce in our present. The term "experience" therefore has much to do with Architecture and with what has been described as the "progressive character" peculiar to this most ancient art. Aware that today the term "experience" is linked to architecture essentially within lines of thought different from the one proposed here – mostly deriving from Hermann Schmitz's *Neue Phänomenologie*, as often happens when philosophical thought is translated too hastily into architecture – I intend to replace it with the term "realism" and to ask, rhetorically, which "sphere of reality", evoked by the most commonplace definition of experience – the dictionary definition – belongs to Architecture. From my point of view, the answer is tautological but not banal: the sphere of reality that belongs to Architecture is Architecture itself, constituted by works of architecture. This is how the progressive character of our work becomes clear. Rafael Moneo, among others, expressed it when he stated: "Architecture, which in the past was the art of imitating and describing nature, once again becomes such an art, but this time takes architecture itself as its model. It therefore returns to *mimesis*, but to a mimesis of itself, reflecting the reality of history."[1]

In *La solitudine degli edifici*, the Spanish architect emphasises that, in the end, what remains and endures is that "piece of reality" constituted by the work itself, by the architectural artefact. Everything produced throughout architecture's many millennia of history stands before us, simultaneously present in the physical, tangible space of our cities. We may therefore affirm that the city constitutes not only our field of action but also the first repository from which we learn, and that architectural experience does not coincide solely – or even primarily – with the sensory perception of space, but with a critical passage through built reality, by means of which architecture understands its own history and brings about transformation.

A project for a small work of architecture in a highly significant place in my city, Naples, offers an opportunity to address this subject and attempt to demonstrate it.

2. THE REALITY OF PLACES

The site is Piazza Bellini, on the eastern edge of the ancient centre which, in Naples, forms the formally defined cardo-decumanus subsection of the much larger historic centre.

[1] R. Moneo, "Considerazioni intorno alla tipologia", in Id., *La solitudine degli edifici e altri scritti*. vol. 1, *Questioni intorno all'architettura*, Umberto Allemandi, Torino 1999, pp. 15–54.

Within its UNESCO boundaries, the latter extends eastwards as far as Piazza Garibaldi, westwards to Posillipo and northwards to include the Capodimonte woods; its municipal planning boundary is broader still. A reading of historical iconography, beginning with a celebrated oil painting by Antonio Joli, shows the site as a widening of the axis of Via Costantinopoli – formerly known as Strada della Sapienza – towards Porta Costantinopoli, with the Capodimonte hill forming its perspectival backdrop. Although its date is not entirely certain, the view by the Modenese painter, who worked at the Bourbon court from 1756 until his death in 1777, presents a frontal image of the complex of Sant'Antonio di Padua at Port'Alba after Giovanni del Gaiso's new façade had been completed. On the other side, Cassiano de Silva's late seventeenth-century view depicts the monastery before its final transformation, although its forms already resulted from the acquisition and remodelling of pre-existing properties. In any event, the rectangular form of the open space already appears established in relation to the alignment of Palazzo Conca and of the entire long side along Via Costantinopoli; it was also determined by the closure of several alleys that had entered the space transversely. Palazzo Conca itself soon became part of the monastery known as Sant'Antoniello, in an area distinguished by major religious complexes: San Pietro a Majella – now the music conservatoire – the Monastery of the Croce di Lucca and that of the Sapienza. Following the late nineteenth-century demolitions undertaken to build the university polyclinic, only the churches of the two monasteries survive: the first still presents its imposing Baroque façade, attributed to Cosimo Fanzago, on Via Costantinopoli; the second, deprived of its apse and cloister, has been reduced to an isolated fragment.

The already complex history of this site is compounded by its position on the eastern margin of the walled city: the definition of this "edge" underwent continual change as the fortifications were repeatedly enlarged over the city's long history. Nowhere, it would seem, is the definition of a palimpsest more appropriate than in this area, subject to continual rewriting. At the theoretical level, however, the project presented here firmly rejects the idea that acknowledging the city's stratification should entail suspending – or, rather, relinquishing – critical judgement of the condition of reality that has resulted from it today. This is especially significant in Piazza Bellini, where in 1954 excavation work for the installation of an electrical substation revealed a piece of the city's earliest Greek fortifications, dating from the sixth–fifth centuries BC. In a thoughtless and uncritical response to the discovery, it was decided to leave the walls exposed yet inaccessible, sunken and fenced off, thereby precluding any clear relationship with the other elements that shape the site. Indeed, the excavation has retained the form dictated by the substation works, while trees, street furniture and outdoor dining areas have accumulated across the square without any overall design. They inevitably distract from the important presence of the Greek walls and conceal the statue of Vincenzo Bellini. The busts of the female protagonists of his operas have been removed from its pedestal and are now kept in the nearby music conservatoire, with the exception of the stolen bust of Elvira.

The discovery of the walls is of historical and documentary interest not only for hypotheses concerning the course of the city's earliest defensive circuit and its construction – two parallel walls with transverse bracing elements and loose infill – but also because it explains certain otherwise enigmatic forms, alignments and orientations found in the area. In Federico Schiavoni's 1877 *Plan of Naples*, the wing of the Monastery of Sant'Antoniello aligned along Via Costantinopoli is trapezoidal because it enlarged the pre-existing Palazzo Gaetani, later Alarcón, specifically in order to align it with the street. We can now understand that the earlier palace had been built using the Greek wall as its foundation. Here, therefore – as in the better-known instance of the only deviation from the straight course of the ancient city along the

decumanus of Via Anticaglia, caused by the presence of the Roman theatre – the city's form follows rules inherited from its history, while continually transforming itself, selecting materials and forms and repeatedly re-establishing an order. Or at least it should. As already suggested, this important place seems instead to have become progressively and chaotically congested, not least by trees whose presence is not necessarily beneficial and which, as historical iconography demonstrates, are largely extraneous to the history of this open space.

3. THE REALITY OF EXPERIENCE

Today, then, Piazza Bellini is a heavily frequented yet fundamentally chaotic place. The excavation containing the Greek walls relates neither to the spatial form of the square nor to the precious fragment of Cyclopean masonry. The statue of the composer after whom the square is named – Sicilian by birth, Neapolitan by education – is concealed by trees, while the chaotic restored composition of Palazzo Conca's façade is compounded by an equally disorderly accumulation of furnishings serving the commercial activities at ground level.

The project[2] recognises the stratification of this place but takes a clear position on the need to modify it by re-establishing a possible order – or, more precisely, by composing different systems of order. Too often we forget that *palimpsest*, from the Latin *palimpsestus* and the Greek παλίμψηστος ["scraped again", from πάλιν, "again", and ψάω, "to scrape"], refers to an ancient manuscript whose original text was erased by scraping and replaced by another while retaining traces of the former. This could occur either in the same direction, generally between the lines of the first text, or transversely across it: in other words, by "composing" orders and not in an arbitrary way.

The compositional technique employed here is based on clear figures held in mutual tension: a line reorganises all the areas occupied by the bars that nevertheless animate the square, while also resolving problems caused by its slopes; a rectangular figure made of natural elements preserves the most important trees and allows the statue of Vincenzo Bellini to be reflected in a pool; and a square figure regularises the excavation, rotated to follow the orientation of the Greek walls, and rises into a "shelter for antiquity". Once the square has been reordered, the shelter interprets the theme of archaeological covering, although a qualification is necessary here too. As the archaeologist Andreina Ricci has written, archaeology suddenly appears in our urban realities as a "wound"[3], because it does not always reproduce the city's orientations, levels and alignments. Yet it does not invariably need to be protected by a roof. Although their fragmentary condition has now made them more vulnerable, the Cyclopean Greek walls were structures built to withstand even the weather, and their extraordinarily long survival bears witness to this. Within the square's multiplicity of signs, the shelter is therefore itself a fragment, but a revelatory one. It is intentionally without function: it does not keep out the rain and provides, at most, a little shade. The shelter reveals the ruins and thus affirms an idea of urban architecture that

[2] The project *A Shelter for Antiquity: Archaeological Covering in Piazza Bellini* was developed by Renato Capozzi and Federica Visconti with the students Maria Rosaria Alfano, Alessandra Arena, Filomena Castiello and Claudia Luna Cioffi.

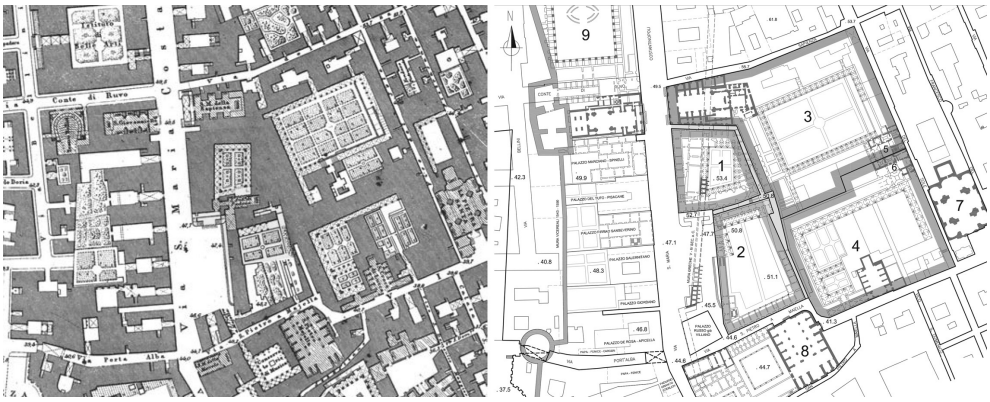
[3] A. Ricci, *Attorno alla nuda pietra. Archeologia e città tra identità e progetto*, Donzelli, Roma 2007, *passim*.

carefully reads the many traces of history without renouncing its claim to legitimacy in its own time. The shelter stages tectonic construction through four supports placed at the mid-points of the sides of the square. Two beams of varying section rest on them and intersect at the centre, where their depth is greatest in response to structural stresses. A square perimeter ring completes the figure, defining four fields, themselves square, with secondary members laid alternately in the two directions. The shelter is golden, not because it is really made of gold, but because – in addition to the chromatic choice of painting the steel *Giallo Napoli* – the colour symbolises the importance of this element, which in turn undertakes to reveal the significance of the archaeological fragment. Alongside the technical drawings, produced to represent and test the design intuition – and intention – a final image places the golden shelter within a collage of Antonio Joli's eighteenth-century oil painting. We often use this mode of representation in our projects, selecting images each time of the city belonging to an age when architecture was not yet forgetful of its history, as has so often happened in more recent times. It therefore represents an attitude that continues to regard architectural design as the moment of choice: a critical selection of reality, founded on knowledge and value judgement, directed towards its still necessary transformation.

In *Discourse on Thinking* [*Gelassenheit*], Martin Heidegger distinguishes between the two paradigms of calculative and meditative thinking: the former, proper to technology, continually presses forwards; the latter, proper to the humanities, repeatedly returns to reflect upon itself. In architecture, we might perhaps speak of "design thinking": neither entirely confined within the paradigm of the nomothetic disciplines nor within that of the idiographic disciplines, it is capable of reconsidering its own acquisitions and experiences and thereby, through reflection, of producing advancement and new thought.



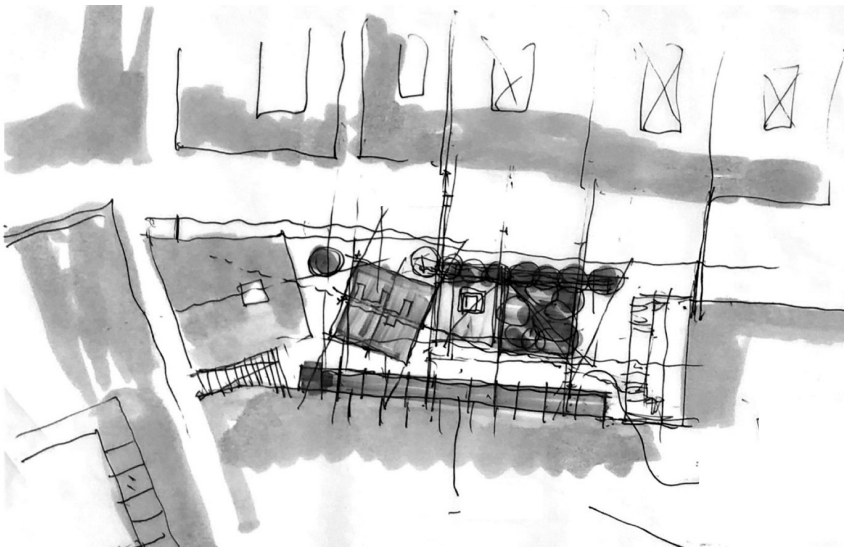
Ill. 1. Antonio Joli, *Piazza Bellini* (1759 ca.) and Francesco Cassiano de Silva, *Veduta della strada della Sapienza verso la porta di Costantinopoli* (1700 ca.). Source: Pinto A., Valerio A. (eds.), *Sant'Antoniello a Port'Alba. Storia-Arte-Restauro*, Fridericiana Editrice Universitaria, Napoli, 2009.



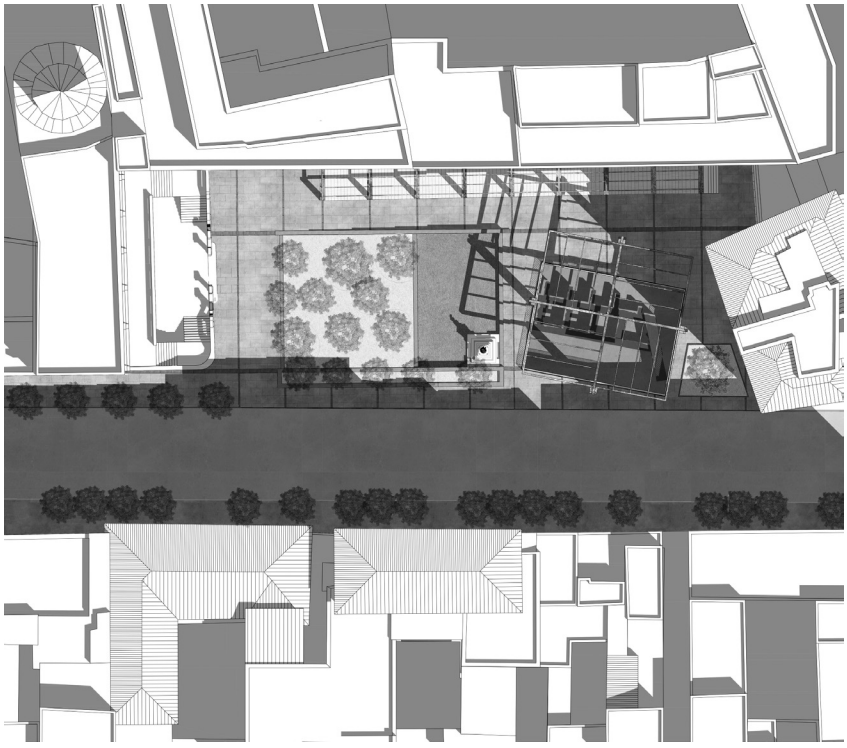
Ill. 2. Federico Schiavoni, *Pianta di Napoli* (1877, detail) and drawings by Aldo Pinto on Piazza Bellini stratifications. Source: Pinto A., Valerio A. (eds.), *Sant'Antoniello a Port'Alba. Storia-Arte-Restauro*, Fridericiana Editrice Universitaria, Napoli, 2009.



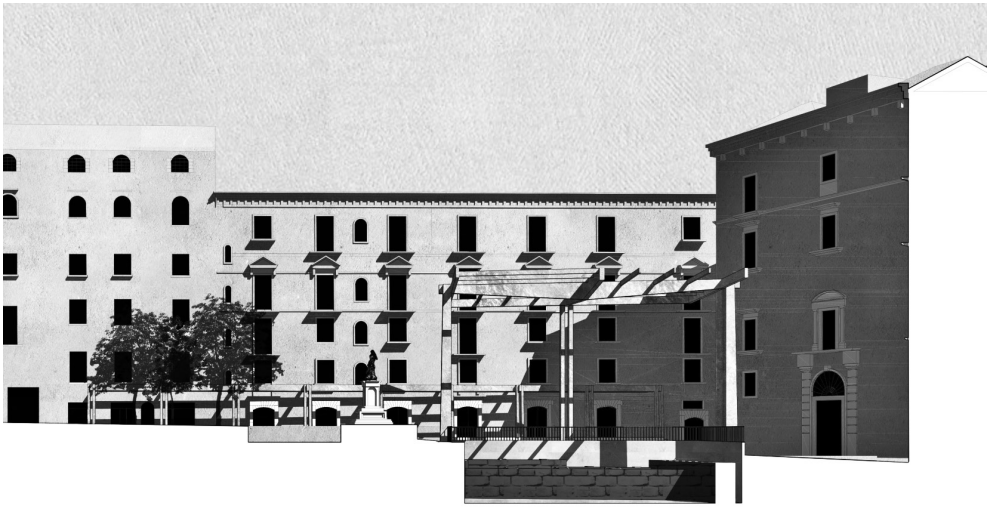
Ill. 3. Piazza Bellini today. Photo by author



Ill. 4. Project for Piazza Bellini. Drawing by Renato Capozzi



Ill. 5. Project for Piazza Bellini. © Authors



Ill. 6. Project for Piazza Bellini. © Authors



Ill. 7. Project for Piazza Bellini. © Authors

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