



## TOWARDS A NEW CYCLE IN ARCHITECTURE

Massimo Pica Ciamarra

### A. CHANGES

We are living in the anthropocene, the age of “scrapping”. Physicians have got rid of the Hippocratic oath and also architecture – heteronomous par excellence – needs to reflect on itself. Its etymological root [ἀρχή + τέχνη] leads to “build according to principles”. Not all the principles, however, are permanent: some are reflected in languages (in ancient Greece: Doric/ Ionic/ Corinthian) and in spatial concepts (Romanesque/ Gothic/ Renaissance, among the established ones).

The philosophy of building follows the evolution of cultural reference points: the stone age has certainly not ended because there were no longer stones, in the same way the oil age is not going to end because oil reserves are depleted. I'll not summarize the adventure of ideas in architecture starting from the stone age: I'll only show you some images to remind you that treatises and handbooks reflect in time the prevalence of different principles, different stylistic canons, confidence in the future, in reason or in Utopia: 15 B.C., over 2000 years ago, “De Architectura” by Vitruvius; 15th century, “De re aedificatoria” by Leon Battista Alberti; in the 20th century Handbooks spread (by typologies, subjects, techniques: useful, but also dangerous when they reassure and trivialize things) as well as “manifestos”(declarations of principles, driven by Utopian rush).

In the 20th century accelerations, interconnections, contrasts clearly appeared: Futurism, Functionalism, Rationalism, Organic Architecture, International Style, the end of CIAM and the rise of Team X, Architecture Mobile, Metabolism, High Tech, Post-modernism, Deconstructivism .... Philip Johnson was a contradictory figure, always with totalizing objectives: when he was 30 years old he theorized the International Style, then followed other ideas, also Post-modernism; finally, over 80 years old, - with “*Deconstructivist Architecture*” at MoMA in New York, substantially contemporary of the Berlin Wall collapse - he aimed again to a new international penetration. Hence amazing objects scattered here and there, sculptures destined for functions, indifferent to the environment, often also to contexts. The star system architects exalted thus the triumph of capitalism.

The conflict that Carlo Melograni emphasizes in his book on post-war years emerges again: “modernity” overwhelmed by “modernization”. As the rapidity of transformations makes it difficult to regulate them, here are “*episodic, exceedingly showy and spectacular actions, which can be hardly composed in an urban design, more amazing than characterized by their usefulness*”. Modernity is quite a different thing: it is “*the unity in diversity advocated by Gropius; unity of common objectives to attain, diversity of proposed solutions to compare*”, “*bearing an advanced social model*”, it uses technological innovation to make “*opportunities and living conditions less unequal*”.

After the twenty years which started with the Exhibition at MoMA, in 2008, the great recession began.

Keynes' prophecy according to which “*a day will come in which economy will be brought back to its secondary role and human relations and creativity will predominate, is necessarily a brake but is still to come true.*”

Like the 1973 energy crisis, the new one leads to a deep reassessment. It shows through Mr. Pritzker's words when the Pritzker Architecture Prize 2016 was awarded to Alejandro Aravena (“*His built work gives economic opportunities to the less privileged, mitigates the effects of natural disasters, reduces energy consumption and provides welcoming public spaces. Innovative and inspiring, he shows how architecture at its best can improve people's lives.*”) and through what is expected of the forthcoming Biennale of Venice (but in Erskine, Val Eycck or Hertzberger -the great architects of the 20th century involved in social life- Luigi Prestinenza sees a single approach to social housing and to the offices of the big multinational corporations, while in Aravena he remarks a splitting, “*almost as if his works were designed by two different architects*”).

At any rate new signs seem to give new strength to ancestral meanings and uninterrupted threads, while two big exhibitions show quite different worries: the Triennale in Milan “*Comunità Italia*” tells the architectural story of the second half of the 20th century; “*Creation for Catastrophe*”, at the Architecture Gallery of the Royal Institute of British Architects, has a different approach: ten great projects are on display which -thanks to ample collaboration and participation- aim to prevent disasters or to rehabilitate areas after earthquakes and other catastrophes. Well-known architects present big projects, not aiming to extol their own individuality.

Building and transforming the living environment are neither matters of “star-system”, nor can be easy prey for the indifference which surrounds us. The barbarians forecast by Jacob Burkhardt are now everywhere: the “*terrible simplifiers*” encourage sectional logic, find solutions to individual problems without realizing what damages can derive from them.

Thanks to the “*terrible simplifiers*” structures are only made to keep buildings stand and services correct errors in design.

In the twenty years which started with the MoMA exhibition, the “star system” architecture has often expressed sectional views, autonomy: but, in architecture, autonomy is a self-contradiction. A substantially different approach is the one which imagines a transformation understanding the context<sup>1</sup>, builds the appropriate hierarchy of reference principles and, instead of thinking of late-Vitruvian prerequisites, considers the form and the meaning of “not-built” spaces that the specific transformation will contribute to define. That is also Zevi's lesson, “*Paesaggistica e linguaggio grado zero dell'architettura*”<sup>2</sup>.

The identity of a place, like in man, is in its DNA in which new layers and background are interconnected. Dennis Oppenheim's hints<sup>3</sup> come to my mind when he magnifies the finger prints of a human being and places them side by side to particular aerial views of territories or overlaps them.

## B. TRENDS

By building we meet needs, at the same time we make mistakes, damages, trivial actions; or, on the contrary, we give meanings, sense and spirituality to our projects. The memory of a civilization is always in its “stones”, beyond the fears and the curse of the Archbishop of Notre Dame when Gutenberg introduced printing<sup>4</sup>.

Architecture can be “*second nature targeted to civil uses*” (Goethe) and “*substance of hoped things*” (Persico)? How does it participate in the epoch making turn started by the encyclical “*Laudato si*”, sulla cura della casa comune” and by the commitments of COP21?

It is not sufficient to build at “almost-zero impact” : in a short time, it will be mandatory, as obvious as thinking in anti-seismic terms or securing fitness for use, health, safety, access to everybody.

Assessing ecological-environmental aspects is no longer an additional or distinctive quality. The age of crisis spurs architecture to think of its objectives and starts a new cycle.

In the '50s the theses underlying “*Survival through Design*”<sup>5</sup> were ignored. “*I limiti dello sviluppo*” by the Club di Roma had a different destiny: they came a little before the 1973 great crisis, the origin of also political movements inspired by the “return to the good savage” against the ruling technological culture. The 1933 the Charter of Athens was complemented in 1977 by the “*Machu Picchu Charter*”; the energy crisis led to the “*search for lost information*”<sup>7</sup>; in the same years “bio-architecture” was born in Germany. Nowadays in the world a race is open to give up unsuitable behaviour, hence continuous innovations.

Two opposing processes developed: whilst technologies, products, components -even the individual buildings- met increasingly complex sets of rules and achieved higher performances, the quality of their relations decreased or even effaced itself. The internal logic of a product, a component, a building, a complex of buildings, became strict and more important than the “immersion logic”. Cities became uninhabitable, being based more on things and less on the relation between things. A living organism dies when its cells are not connected and there are no relations between its parts.

The rationalist culture introduced minimum prerequisites, urban standards, precious at that time. A rhetorical question: those who live where the standards are met are satisfied with the habitat in which they live? Today the priority is “*re-civilizing the urban*”<sup>7</sup>. What are the reference points? Re-civilizing territories and cities implies connecting memory and future, imagining the “not-places” replaced by “places of social condensation”; re-humanizing habitats to make them able to include, to make life simple and easy for everybody, children, adults, the elderly; expressing integration, never separation again

In the “favelas” of Rio de Janeiro there are extraordinary “*navios de conhecimento*”. In degraded and out of control areas public places have been included where, as De Masi says, there are “all the IT devices and all the pedagogical assistance necessary to learn the use of computers, teleworking, multimedia systems, languages, teleplay, the monitoring and the upkeep of the district” : the programme tends to increase knowledge, to promote social relations, to diffuse literacy. In a substantially different reality, the Sangiorgio Library in Pistoia proved to be a “ship of knowledge” as well. “*Miracolo a Pistoia*” was the prophetic motto of our proposal: the strong Library/Society interaction is one of the reasons which made a city of 90,000 inhabitants with a Library with 500,000 visitors and 200,000 loans a year the “2017 Italian Capital of Culture”<sup>8</sup>.

In 2008 in Paris -at Palais de Chaillot (here in 1946 the Assembly of the United Nations approved the “*Declaration of Human Rights*”)- “Le Carré Bleu”<sup>9</sup> launched the “*Declaration of Human Duties*” in connection with habitat and living styles: only can a widespread awareness generate change.

Then, always the CB, after the issue on “architects education”<sup>10</sup> published the one wondering what comes first to improve the living environment: educating architects or educating citizens to ecology and the quality of architecture<sup>12</sup>. It is difficult to give the right answers to inaccurate questions, but the high quality of demand requires adequate answers.

Nowadays “re-civilizing the urban” is mandatory. It is essential to link plan and project, architecture and context, landscape and the built; to act in a systemic view, then with actions aiming more to over-individuality than to individuality. Present cities show that the whole of precise answers brings about greater problems than the individually solved ones.

Architecture then is not only a matter of buildings, nor does it concern what occupies the territory rather than developing its potentialities, enriching it, giving it a “gift”. Architecture concerns mainly the “not-built”, the city on the whole: where do we move, where do we meet, where do we relate to one another; how can the air we breathe be regenerated, how do the different activities interact. On the other hand a city is inhabited not only by those who live there, but also -sometimes above all- by those who cross it, use it, abandon it, find it again: at present a sizeable amount of people almost simultaneously experience different realities both physically, and by computer.

Since in a short time each new construction will be at “*almost zero impact*”, to what aims shall we go on flying?

Re-cycling means putting rejects or rubbish into a new cycle. For architecture it means starting a new cycle to better meet the present needs and the future we wish: i.e. increasing the complexity and the intensity of relations between the parts, not restricting our interest in the individual buildings.

## C. VISIONS

The 20th century, more than any other time, extolled the culture of separation: the one of specialists and direct answers to individual problems - answers, however, unaware of their impact on the whole. It appears in education processes, in regulations machinery, in administration logic, in the relation between plan and projects, everywhere. Therefore also in the physical spaces in which we live.

Nowadays, technology and innovation are increasingly able to relate different aspects and feed confidence in the future: but they are mitigated by mushrooming pleonastic forms of planning; by over-specialization; by fragmentation, autonomy, individualism. Individuality is still predominating on over-individuality. It is not only the environmental issue which stresses the -non utopian- urgent need to proceed together. The future rests in interaction and integration.

Subject matters subdivisions and over-specializations have to be discarded in their own assumptions. Warnings, claims, upsetting of balances, everything -not only Latouche<sup>13</sup>- spurs to de-growth. Rather, today more than ever, it is necessary to integrate: not dissolving identities, but strengthening them through dialectic exchanges of views, stressing them in their interconnections to make them converge towards shared aims. In the same sense a positive and heretic – even provocative – historian of architecture states: “there is no historic city. History is analysis and knowledge of the existing past and intuition of the future”<sup>13</sup>

The systemic view -advocated by Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi in “*Vita e natura*”<sup>14</sup>- has to invade every aspect of civil organizations. Integrating means ruling complex systems; rejecting sectional autonomy; searching for “informed” actions in the contexts in which they will occur. Designing in an integrated form implies simultaneous thoughts on “spatial physicality and functional connections” and on “human behaviour and memory (sign, meanings)” permeating the place. Ecology-science of relations -urges to conceive architecture as a system; it leads to the “poetics of the fragment” for which any action – whatever its scale- becomes a part of the environment, of the landscape, of the layers of memory: factors which in their connection characterize every place, making reference to the trilogy I launched some years ago in an exchange of views with Arup, Richard Rogers and Thomas Herzog<sup>15</sup> on the themes of sustainability in architecture.

A “fragment” is what does not aim to solve everything in itself, what acts in a system of relations. The systemic view banishes the anachronistic theses on the autonomy of architecture.

I often make reference to “*L'influence de l'odeur des croissants chauds sur la bonté humaine*”<sup>16</sup> by a contemporary French philosopher: if the smell of hot croissants affects human goodness, imagine how the quality of physical space can affect safety, economy, well-being, happiness. Aldo Van Eyck defined forgetting these relations “crazy”.

The influence of space on behaviour was analysed by Mitscherlich<sup>17</sup>; others analysed the reactions of the physiological and cognitive system in fragmented spaces with no relations between urban components and inhabitants: «the physiological stress indexes (heartbeats, dilation of pupils) in the presence of these types of forms, can be objectively measured, and their subjective and social corroborations (unrest, urban violence) can be subjected to statistical measurements» maintains Serafini in “*Totalitarismo del brutto*”<sup>18</sup>. For this reason too economic power and political power must leave room for the power of beauty.

Architecture has today other objectives and meanings than in the past, fit for the future ones that the acceleration of everything makes closer, able to grasp the regional identities and perhaps also those of the spatial habitats (as the research with “OrbiTecture”<sup>19</sup> shows).

History is rich in periods of deep commitment in transforming the territory: in Italy the pre-Unity period, but also the post-Unity period or the Fascist twenty years were inspired by strong visions and by the will of building the future. At present, a nostalgia for the future is in the air again. To “re-civilize” the urban also surpluses are needed, such as the surplus once due to the presence of works of art or to the commitment of those who would build and who -without coming to meet precarious needs- aimed to bring a “gift” to the context. That's why in the past many private works had a substantial public function. These values too have to be topical.

Aware of the importance of the quality of its living environment, a culturally developed society allocates to it great resources, gets rid of obsolete norms, avails itself of appropriate participatory procedures. In short, it distinguishes between what should be shared (“the frame of form” and its logical bases) and what is language (which is within the competence of designers): by now the “real designer is a diffused being”<sup>20</sup>, a wonderful definition which can however prove to be dangerous if naively interpreted.

In the long run, every representation of the future appears naïve, sometimes laughable. That's not the case for the world of ideas. Architecture is beyond form: it is first a conceptual experience and then a figurative experience, it is a hope for the future rooted in ancestral realities. Today's priority is re-civilizing the urban, moving “*from the not-places to places of social condensation*”. It is not Utopia: it is [οὐ-τόπος + εὐ-τόπος] what is not yet there and what should be there. I'd like it to be a prophecy: shifting interest from individual works to their relations, privileging the “not-built” against the built, correcting the course and opening a new cycle for architecture.

### notes

1 plurale: fisici, spaziali, economici, culturali, ...

2 Bruno Zevi, Discours à la Conférence de Modène 1997

3 Identité extensible (1976) -of “Terrassements» cycle Dennis Oppenheim- chevauchements et interagit plus grande empreinte, un texte et une séquence de photos, faisant allusion au potentiel de l'art d'influencer et de changer la réalité

4 Victor Hugo, Notre-Dame de Paris, (1831)

5 Richard Neutra, de survie grâce à la conception (traduz italiana., Community Editions 1958)

6 Espace et société, n° 9/1980

7 Le Carré Bleu, n° 1/2014

8 Bibliothèque Sangiorgio, achevée en 2007: plus de 500.000 entrées / an; 35.000 abonnés (4 fois la moyenne nationale), 200.000 prêts (3 fois la moyenne nationale); TCl, en Janvier ici 2016.

9 Le Carré Bleu, n°4/2008

10 Le Carré Bleu, n°3-4/2010

11 Le Carré Bleu, n°1/2011

12 Serge Latouche, Pour Une société de décroissance, Le Monde diplomatique, + 2003

13 Alfonso Gambardella, lors d'une conversation

14 Aboca ed., Sansepolcro (AR) 2014

15 Bologna, «Construire durable. Europe », Saie 2002

16 Ruwen Ogien, Grasset, Paris 2011

17 Alexander Mitscherlich, fetish Urban / Les villes inhabitables, instigateur de la discorde, Einaudi 1965

18 Stefano Serafini, Totalitarisme de la laideur dans «bio-architecture», n° 59/2008

19 groupes de recherche de l'Institut italien pour l'avenir

20 MPC, Grandir avec Art / Architecture et Société pour la troisième ville