



The Image of the Contemporary City, a Critical Reflection on the Spaces We Live in

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Abstract. The contribution focuses on a research that analyses the contemporary city in order to trace, understand and identify the transformations that have affected its image.

The image of the city has strongly changed in the last century, in close relation to the changes in the life of the community that have developed within it. Contemporary society is characterized by excess and consumerism: an unbridled consumption of land, goods, images and architecture. It is characterized on the one hand by quantitative growth, involving markets and people, and on the other by the disappearance of traditional reference categories of relational and material values, starting with the fundamental categories of space and time. Ecological, environmental and social issues are put to the test in this consumerist mechanism. In contrast to the senseless densification, aimed at occupying all the spaces in our territories and maximizing profits, the importance of associating a value to every new construction and to every single architectural and urban design episode emerges. Our territory is precious and its consumption must be considered with extreme care. The aim of this contribution is to analyze, research and highlight themes and problems related to the image of the contemporary city and the way it is inhabited, trying to trace the profile of how the territory and consequently contemporary society has changed. The research proposes a methodological approach, capable of holding together the physical and immaterial datum that constantly characterizes urban space and bringing it back to the founding values of architecture.

Keywords: Globalization · Image of the city · Ethical architecture · Images and society learning · Ethic and city

1 Society and Image. We Live in Superficiality

The forma urbis of our cities is a sedimentation not only of the built environment for the community, but also of the set of material and immaterial values which characterize our culture. The historicized forms of the European city represent our identity memory and, as such, they are the lifeblood that nourish our ways of living, of relating to each other, of thinking and designing the future.

Among the challenges that contemporaneity presents us with, the one that stands out the most is the one that concerns the preservation of the urban heritage, the attention and care for the architecture of the city, regarding the great process of environmental sustainability, climate change and transformations related to increasingly frequent unexpected events.

Technological advancement has pushed toward a mass change of values and ideals that unite parts of the territory which are thousands of miles apart, due to the globalization phenomenon and to a “single thought” conformism which economical and financial interests seek to impose.

In the European territory, the *querelle* between globalization and identity characters assume an even stronger connotation that should encourage us to read, know and enhance the identity values of places.

In a historical time where the evolutionary speed of productive technologies, of means of communication and of the behavioral dynamics, in the free time, in the private life and in the public space change surprisingly fast, the question arises as to how the atemporal physicality of the architecture can crystalize the requiring moment of the man.

The globalization process is based on scientific and technological advancement which does not take into account the history and the nature of places, the challenge is to coexist with the modernization which is literally devouring our territories and the nature of cultural values, in which a civilization identifies itself.

«From this it results an inexorable gap between reason and memory, between technological innovation and preservation of identity symbols of a local community. As a human being can not survive without memory, so a civilization without any historical consciousness would be sentenced to cultural disorientation.» [1].

The complexity of intervening in these places puts the architect in front of intricate challenges that have an impact within the society: on the one hand being respectful of values, of the wealthy heritage to be preserved and transmitted to future generations, on the other hand to meet the needs of the community, of technological advancement, trying to leave a mark of its time, in order to proceed the overwriting of the palimpsest.

The city has always been the concrete answer to immaterial values of a society, of a place and of a time (villas and cities), [2] history taught us that is possible to find ourselves within forms, relationships and spaces of different eras when these possess a peculiar value bound to spatial architectural quality, to the ability that these forms have to adapt to mutable human conditions and to become part of a new life.

The contemporary task is quite complicated: on the one hand we have stratified territories to preserve and safeguard, but at the same time to renew and adapt to new purposes, on the other hand we find urban mistakes made, to be analyzed and possibly solved (think of suburbs, peri-urban areas), as well as uncontrolled developments of cities towards increasingly extended portions of territory, to be monitored extremely carefully since they cancel that clear and recognizable separation between city and nature which reinforces, characterized and identify the connotations of the two different worlds.

The images that impose themselves in today's ruling narrative of the globalization highlight its extreme mobility, the generalized communications and the annulment of the locality and of the distance.

It is well established that we are living though yet another cultural revolution in the history of humankind: if the book has represented a crucial time of transformation for the transmission of culture, [3] with the shift from the constructed words to the written ones, today we are living again a new process of socio-cultural revolution, that on the one hand affects our way of acting, living spaces of the city and architecture, and on the other influences the tools of the profession, the digitization and the virtual world [4].

It is quite clear how for decades the main communication tool, thanks also to the great evolution and spread of the use of the web and social media, has been images.

The composed language of words has been replaced by a direct, instant and superficial communication: the image.

Already towards the end of the last century, Italo Calvino in his *Lezioni Americane* asserted: «We live under an uninterrupted rain of images; the most powerful media do nothing but transforming the world into images and multiply it through a phantasmagoria of mirror games: images that for the most part lack the internal necessity that should characterize every image, as form and as meaning, as a force that impose attention on itself, as a richness of possible meanings.

... But perhaps the inconsistency is not found in the images or in the language alone: it is in the world.» [5].

We are living in an era of artificial lack of depth, a attachment to the surface rather than to the root, where it really matters more to appear than to be. This research tries to identify the reasons why and the actions which has brought our cities and our society to live certain conditions and reflect on the position of the architect in such a complicated context. It looks into a possible way to go back to “doing Architecture”, freeing itself from the “straitjacket” of capitalist economy, aimed exclusively at profit, returning to consider the issue of living and building spaces in the city dedicated to the community.

Knowing and studying the city, the society and the urban dynamics of our contemporaneity is the only way to comprehend how to intervene and try to find a solution to the speeds of changing needs over time. A different solution from the Junkspace, [6] moved mainly by economics conditions.

1.1 The Dominance of the Image and the Digital

«We have seen how the current world consumes huge quantities of images: it is easy to foresee that the phenomenology of tomorrow’s world is going to be entirely based on images. If it is not going to know how to evaluate, the world is no longer going to know how to evaluate itself, it is going to exist without even having the consciousness of existing.» [7].

If already fifty years ago, the predominance of the image in the society aroused attention towards a complicated and articulated phenomenon to be managed and contained, today we can no longer delay some considerations on such an impending and predominant theme in our contemporaneity.

We are living in the “civilization of the image” [8] and the implications that this involves in our daily lives.

Images have extended their domain to such an extent that it becomes hard, today, to think without any sort of image orientation. The upper hand of the visual culture of the

media, where the aspects related to the diffusion, use and abuse of optical technologies, lead the community to clash and confront itself with the theme of immateriality.

«Another cornerstone of the digital theory is the “immateriality”. It is motivated by the quick flow of images, their extreme ductility typical of things with little material weight.» [9].

This deep rootedness in the world of the digital culture, in the redundant and the superficial, result in an impoverishment of values also in other forms of expression of human life. Architecture, the human art par excellence, is strongly affected by this unbridled and obsessive worship of spectacular and fleeting images.

The image of the city has mutated drastically during the last century, in close relation with the transformations in the life of the community which has developed within it.

Contemporary society is defined by the excess and consumerism: an unrestrained consumption of lands, goods, images and architecture. It is distinguished on the one hand by a continuous, generalized and very fast quantitative growth, which involves markets and people, and on the other hand by the loss, almost exhausting, of the traditional reference categories of relational and material values: starting from the fundamental ones of space and time.

The data regarding land consumption are indicative to comprehend the development and the phenomena of conurbation. During the last sixty years the built-up area has grown enormously, leading our territories to a level of saturation that is no longer sustainable.

Ecological, environmental and social issues are put to the test in this consumerist mechanism. In a context in which the foolish densification, that aimed to occupy all the spaces of our territories and maximize profits, arise the importance of associating a value to each new construction and to single episodes of architectural and urban design. Our territory is precious, and its consumption must be weighted with extreme care from different points of view: environmental, social and economic.

This condition has led, among other things, to confuse two opposite realities: the natural one and the anthropized one. The wild consumption of land has brought to the dissolution of the limit between natural and artificial, once characterizing our territories.

«If we want to respect and preserve nature, we do not have to confuse it and mix it with the city. The city must remain a compact manifold, a geometrical apparatus for human and social life which cultivates and maintains a neat contrast with the landscape. It must retreat into his own surface, develop marked margins, focusing just on itself, become dense, solid and hard as a stone. This appearing hostile to nature in truly the sincerest and most effective way of paying it respect.» [10].

1.2 Architecture as Object of Use

«The great empires in the civilization history have always demarcated their territories through a specific architecture, and architecture has always promoted the power. Today’s globalized architecture-image reclaims the territories of the world market economy, the latest phase of globalized capitalism.» [11].

Today the image of architecture is superficial, fleeting, that respond to the mass society, focusing its attention and research in generating appealing and persuasive images, almost as if they were showcases, without fossilizing on their intrinsic nature and without reflecting on the true essence of the architecture considered as an art of building.

A deep consideration on space, matter, place, a return to the origins, in terms of association of cultural values and the actions of construction, which have always characterized the spaces of our cities and of the collective living.

The fundamental and essential definition of architecture is in deep opposition with the current ideology of consumption. The life of buildings and building materials should be projected to a long period of time, in antithesis to the dynamics related to the obsessive consumption and scheduled obsolescence that involves most of the “devices” commonly used.

If the architectural culture of a specific historical moment is always the idealized portrait of the community who lives it, the contemporary society is living a time of an articulated and hard to manage digital transition. The dominance of images in daily life in addition to an increasingly predominant presence of the digital and the virtual lead to an acclaimed difficulty in finding an unequivocal identity in our culture in the contemporary society.

1.3 The Experience of Reality the Ethical Role of Architecture

In such an articulated and complicated context of the contemporary society, we try to focus the attention on the purpose of the architect and of architecture, of today and tomorrow. We live dipped in a condition which oscillates between the real and the virtual, in which emerges more and more the difficulty in recognizing and perceiving the values and the significance of tangible.

«In this scenario architecture can and must have the role of strengthening our experience of reality both in the perception sphere and the experience, and in cultural and social interaction.» [12].

What man builds has the duty on the one hand to preserve and conserve the traces of the past, making us capable to know and to get in touch with the continuum of culture and tradition, and on the other hand to keep designing and meeting the needs of the contemporary society; interpreting and translating the necessities of the community without losing sight of the ethical role of building, seen as an image of a specific society which represent a tool to transmit culture overtime.

The contemporary architectural project, whether in concerns the existing or the ex-novo, must be able to find the right collocation within condition which oscillates between reality and utopia, between innovation and tradition. It is mandatory to try and find the perfect balance, through a critical reflection that measures the contribution and the possible implications of a given choice.

It is needed a constant interweaving between operative and theoretical dimension, between architectural and urban themes.

The new architectural solutions must be the result of a reading of the constituent principles of the existing city: the paths, the pre-existences and the urban voids define the texture within which the project of the new must be placed and attempt the finalization of this design through the reinterpretation of the fundamental values that have always characterized our urban spaces.

We are living in a contemporary world based on the stunning image, an architecture able to charm and intrigue through processes that aimed to the transformation of buildings

into iconic images, often subjected to consumerist economic laws that only respond to the necessity of the market.

The high reproducibility of images generates a dangerous habit of “devouring” them together with objects and figures unbelievably fast. This attitude, being also the result of an extreme consumerism, has a strong impact on the *forma mentis* of the society and regarding the construction of individual artifact and the city with an increasing detachment from associating ideal value to individual urban fact.

Complex articulated and expensive projects, far away from utopian visions, which aim to imagine a different configuration based on ideals. In a world increasingly devoid of material and immaterial values, devoured by the fleetingness of time, by the wild consumption of land, gods, images and architecture, what really stands out as an emergency is exactly the architect’s commitment to the production of an ethical architecture, which is able to isolating itself from the dynamics of the globalized world and designing and building urban spaces that are generated to improve quality of human life, bringing it back to the middle of a critical reflection.

The task of the intellectual architect within contemporary society is as needed as ever. «The aim of the architect as an intellectual should be to have great visions even in small dimensions. If it is no longer time for utopias, it is still time for projects; targeted projects, circumscribed, even if minimal, but in any case, designed in the sense indicated above, having architecture as subject in its most comprehensive sense.» [13].

Contemporary architectural culture is, luckily, rich in examples of concrete actions of designers, capable of reflecting on forms, space and time, through neat architectures that are distinguished from historical forms, but are structured starting from the recognition of what remains and simultaneously transforms overtime. Architectures which are deeply rooted in places and times, that dialogue with the pre-existing without any form of mimesis.

The aim of architecture must be, once again, a concrete answer to the need for improvement of life and recognition of the community. Perhaps it would be necessary to subvert that condition according to which architecture is the plastic image of the ideological structure of society, expression of a collective feeling; in an ideal architecture which is able to defines and generates changing.

«In a world that is always transformed into a “fiction” by a commercialized architecture image and by a appealing and seductive retinal image architecture, the purpose of the critical, deep and responsible architect is to create and to defend the sense of reality.» [12].

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