

Chapter 7

The Cultural and Environmental Context

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Abstract “Città Studi”, Milan. If the name can simply reduce to the idea of a university and research district or ‘work zone’, this area encloses a series of historical signs that represent its environment. The context of the LLAW workshop was a pedestrian street of the Polimi campus that serves several departments and sport activities that have been studied through several interpretations, such as relationship, experience, imageability, identity, association, perception, knowledge and variability.

7.1 Introduction

The specific context being studied in this workshop is a section of the city where the individual buildings represent – but do not construct – the urban landscape.

What are the “rules for acting” in such a heterogeneous urban setting, made up by numerous and different buildings? How can such seemingly disconnected information help to build knowledge that can be used to benefit any work done in this city fragment? I will endeavour to provide various interpretations of the surrounding environment based on my experience and on observational expertise that goes well beyond simply *looking*.

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7.2 Relationship



Each structure in the setting must be viewed in relation to the other structures and not independently. Analysis in this section of Milan shows “the diversity of the urban landscape (...), the territorial presence of university faculties in the Città degli Studi district and the related large sports facilities (...). The Città degli Studi district is located in an additional peripheral area of urban expansion to the east of Milan. It created a less densely built up space in the compact surrounding city both because the blocks that form the original heart of the district were modelled on one or two story pavilions, as is common for complex services, and because the area became a sort of university campus with the space – as happened – to build future scientific buildings” (Borioni et al. 2007, pp 215–217).

It seems that, in this case, we can use the theory of relations between buildings introduced by Gordon Cullen in *Townscape*: “One building standing alone in the countryside is experienced as a work of architecture, but bring half a dozen buildings together and an art other than architecture is made possible”. It is an idea that is echoed by Alison and Peter Smithson in their studies on urban structuring: “Forty or fifty houses make a good street” (Cullen 1961) (Figs. 7.1 and 7.2).



Fig. 7.1 The development of the Città degli Studi district would require some fixing, at least as for the spaces between the different buildings are concerned (Source Luigi Spinelli)



Fig. 7.2 The landmarks of the red eaves created by Caccia Dominioni and of the chimneys designed by Magistretti and Soro (Source Luigi Spinelli)

7.3 Experience



Every situation must be assessed autonomously in relation to the context.

Ernesto Nathan Rogers introduced the idea of pre-existing structures in dealing with the issue of how to manage connective spaces, focusing on a “case by case” approach based on experience, rather than on setting out rules. “The laws, rules and restrictions of each genre are necessary – nobody can doubt this – yet they are only effective if they tend to establish continuity between the past and the present, that is, if they favour the harmonious integration of new structures with existing ones (...) There are emerging values that can easily be classified and defended (such as genuine monuments or some special landscapes), however the real problem is getting into the connective environments between these new emerging values” (Rogers 1957, pp 255–256).

In 1927, in a vast space in a section of the outskirts known as “cascine Doppie” – now Piazza Leonardo da Vinci – the Città degli Studi university district was inaugurated. This followed a lengthy process commenced in 1913 that “represented a real expansion policy, a change in dimension. Milan expressed its modernity, in the sphere of higher education, through a decision to focus on facing future development needs, but also by following the contemporary trend of specialising the city according to district (...) From the very beginning, the chosen urbanization mode was low-density, pavilion-style architecture. In other words, each science faculty had its own structure. The recognisability of the Città degli Studi district as a

‘science district’ aimed to achieve just such a layout and to provide a textbook-like eclecticism of shapes. In the years that followed – and still today – the development of the Città degli Studi district was certainly not under central urban planning or architectural control. The combination of similar realities (...) produced excessive effects on the overall setting that (...) can no longer be identified as a part of the city. It would require some fixing, at least as far the spaces between the different buildings are concerned” (Borioni et al. 2007, pp 223–224).

7.4 Imageability



The environmental context can clearly be read. An observer can easily recognise its features and various sections because they are organised in a coherent system. Kevin Lynch coined the term “imageability” in 1960 to signify that quality of a physical object that gives an observer a strong, vivid image. “A good environmental image gives its possessor an important sense of emotional security. He can establish an harmonious relationship between himself and the outside world” (Lynch 1960).

In the terms we have been talking about, the most immediately recognisable image is the stand of the Giuriati sports facility. The Politecnico’s sports facilities date from the early 1930s and were the work of an engineer called Luigi Lorenzo Secchi, who worked for the municipality’s technical office. Starting in 1927, he was involved in numerous projects to create sports facilities for the city.

The Guido Romano swimming pool, on via Ponzio, to the north-west of the project area, was designed in 1928 and opened in 1929, becoming the city’s first outdoor pool. The plot is located “in a Sironi-like landscape, amid fields, newly mapped roads and sections of peripheral building (...) The presence of multi-storey buildings is very limited given the surface area and would be insignificant if it were not for the linguistic choice to light-heartedly and elegantly adopt the ways of the Milanese 20th Century (...) While digging was under way for the pool on Via Ponzio, a sports pitch was being prepared nearby, more precisely on Via Pascal (...) and would be used immediately” (Ferrari 1999, pp 50–53).

The Mario Giuriati sports pitch, with the entrance on what used to be Via Pascal, was opened on 30 May 1932, without the open stand and facilities that were opened on 18 April of the following year. In addition to designing the stadium, Secchi also directed the work, experimenting with a “prototype of a local facility, to be used in

the most working-class and peripheral city districts. An uncovered section of the stand, with a seating capacity of 1800, marks the entrance to the field and covers the changing rooms and the gym, while the two lower sections, lining the two sides of the stands, contain the toilets and the showers. The basic template does not change, but the identity of each pitch comes from variations in decorative style, which elegantly and with a lightness of touch, draws on the same means adopted for the pool buildings on Via Ponzio” (Ferrari 1999, p 54).

The Giuriati ground is the historical home of rugby in Milan. Matches in Italy’s top rugby league are played here and it was the setting for a number of triumphs by Amatori Rugby Milano on their way to winning Italy’s top tier rugby league, which it last won in the 1990s. This facility has also witnessed legendary feats in athletics, such as the two world discus records by Adolfo Consolini, in 1941 and 1946. He would go on to win Olympic gold in 1948. In June 2008, Politecnico di Milano was granted free use of the facility for 35 years. It is managed by CUS (University Sports Centre), which is planning refurbishment and improvement work using other European and American campuses as a model.

7.5 Identity



The ability to identify a clear identity, which is unique and discernible from other environments, is a fundamental quality for any setting.

In such a context, the perception of those who are inside the area, without any compact limitations, is that of looking for known landmarks in the city skyline and looking out in different directions. This attempt is met by the presence of certain buildings with silhouettes that have come to form part of the city’s historical and architectural memory.

Looking west, one sees the two spires of the Giuliana Ronzoni Institute of Industrial Chemistry, on Via Colombo, designed by architect Giacomo Carlo Nicoli between 1924 and 1927. This building marks the border between the Città degli Studi district and the rest of Milan. The Writer Carlo Emilio Gadda described it in his novel *L’Adalgisa*, looking at the city from the train, as a “very theatrical building, with spires and very solid, but above all, very silly; it is informally called the Kremlin”. Looking north, at the corner with Via Ponzio, one finds the metaphysical skyline of the Santa Monica church and the monastery of the Augustinian nuns

designed by engineer Giuseppe Invitti in 1934. The monastery was moved here from Porta Vittoria, where they built the imposing court complex known as Palazzo di Giustizia. On the opposite side, on the south-eastern corner of the urban area and beyond the Giuriati sports centre, one can see the chimneys of Milan university's biology faculty, designed by Vico Magistretti and Francesco Soro between 1978 and 1981, on the corner of Via Golgi and Via Celoria. An image that "is emblematic of the capacity to make a piece of architecture easily recognisable, through the expressive use of some iconic elements" (Ferrari 1999). Looking eastwards, quite close to Via Golgi, the red outline of the eaves of the administrative buildings created by Luigi Caccia Dominioni (between 2004 and 2007) is another landmark.

Finally, there is the presence on the north-eastern corner of the twin guest-houses on Via Bassini, by Luigi Moretti. In an early version, they were supposed to be located where the administrative buildings are, as the plan was to build seven tall residential buildings, plus a utilities building. In the end, only two were built, between 1947 and 1950. They were placed in a fishbone layout, compared with Via Bassini, and the height was limited to make them fit into the Città degli Studi district better.

7.6 Association



There is a need for all of us to associate with our reference environment, and this image is rich in memory, familiarity and meaning.

Let me now return to the contribution by Alison and Peter Smithson on the legibility of an environment. This concept was introduced when they started regularly visiting the sociologist Judith Henderson and her husband Nigel, a photographer, at their home in Bethnal Green. Nigel's shots showed models for association and identity "for which no equivalent form has yet been discovered (...) a true 'street aesthetic' (...) assigned the role of element unifying the structure of the city" (Spinelli 2008, pp 74–81).

In the very same areas as those being used for workshop projects, a neorealist film entitled *Miracle in Milan* was shot in 1950, under the direction of Vittorio De Sica and using a script by Cesare Zavattini. Various scenes show those elements in the skyline that define these spaces. The film is about an alternative city, with makeshift architecture, pushed to the margins of Milan and threatened by building speculation. It is a film that should have had another title: *The poor are a nuisance*. It should also have another finale: not the flight on broomsticks from Piazza

Duomo, but rather an eternal diaspora of shantytown dwellers across the skies of the world looking for a place without any “Private Property” signs. However, the Director of Enic (National Body of the Cinema Industry), which funded the film, considered such a title and an ending too dangerous in the cold war (Fofi 2010) (Figs. 7.3, 7.4, 7.5, 7.6, 7.7, 7.8, 7.9, 7.10, 7.11, 7.12, 7.13, 7.14, 7.15, 7.16, 7.17 and 7.18).



Figs. 7.3–7.6 *Miracle in Milan*, Vittorio De Sica, 1950: various scenes show the elements in the skyline that define these spaces (Source Mereghetti and Fofi 2010)



Figs. 7.7–7.18 *Serial Visions*: the reaction takes place through a sequence of surprising aspects and a recording of sequences (Source Luigi Spinelli)

7.7 Perception



An image of the environment causes a reaction in our visual perception and memory of past emotions. This reaction takes place through a sequence of surprising aspects and a recording of sequences. It is what Gordon Cullen calls “serial vision”: “Our original aim was to manipulate the elements of the town so that an impact of the emotions is achieved (...) The human mind reacts to a contrast, to the difference between things, and (...) it comes alive through the drama of juxtaposition” (Cullen 1961). Each relationship with our environment must also be assessed considering our physicality, that is, the position of our body in relation to the space and what it presents.

The sense of position is an instinctive automatism that is an indicator of where we are in relation to our surroundings. The existence of spatial compression or rarefaction, being inside or outside of a place, feeling constrained or feeling well, and above all the sequence in which these opposing conditions occur – since one cannot occur without the others – must form part of the project content. Gordon Cullen again defined this concept as the “art of relationship”. He goes even further to analyse the space created between grouped buildings, arguing that this space has “a life of its own over and above the buildings which create it” (Cullen 1961).

Let’s now take a look at the buildings in sequence along the northern section of this area.

Building no. 19, compact with a steel structure clad with clinker bricks, is home to the nuclear engineering faculty. It is dedicated to Giuseppe Bolla, who arrived in Milan after the war to hold the position of Professor of Higher Physics. He soon started focusing on nuclear physics and its applications for industry and energy. He promoted – working with some of the leading companies of that time – the Information Studies Experiences Centre (CISE) in order to create an experimental low-power battery using uranium and heavy water. In 1957, he was behind the creation of the Enrico Fermi Centre for Nuclear Studies (Cesnef), equipped with a reactor for teaching purposes. He was the director of this institute until 1973. Today, this building houses the Micro and Nano Materials labs. Building no. 20, with a long south-facing four-storey façade, clad with dark framed cement panels, houses the IT and electronics department (DEI). This is one of Europe’s leading ICT departments, as well as being among the biggest. The building is dedicated to Professor Ercole Bottani, who in 1940 began studying electrical networks to perform automated calculations. In 1999, the building was hit by a fire. Behind the 19 bays on the ground floor, one finds meeting rooms, offices, classrooms and

laboratories. On the right of the entrance hall, off centre, there is a large lecture hall. Since 1927, the tall building at no. 21 Via Golgi, behind the utilities room, has housed the Politecnico's Institute of Chemistry and Physics-Chemistry, designed by Giovanni Bonicalzi. The imposing fire escape creates an architectural sculpture, backed by four chimneys.

7.8 Knowledge



The environmental context must be viewed in light of traditions and available materials, the local cultural, geographical and weather features, the specific landscapes and the relevant orientation systems.

This diversification needs the type of input that comes not only from urban subjects, such as sociology and politics, but also from contemporary aspects of evolution, such as those studied in anthropology and ecology. Reading the context entails a cultural choice because “it is closely linked with the choice of the ‘means’, that is, the organization that makes the architecture ‘communicative’ (...) To see a shape means to choose a category of ‘means’ or ‘canals’ and ruling out others” (Cerasi 1966).

It is common in Italy to find signs of the past and Milan is no exception here, with a small memorial garden next to the fence around the sports centre. The tombstones speak volumes.¹

The city's historical memory is also represented by the Carlo Besta Neurological Institute, on the corner of Via Ponzio and Via Celoria, overlooking the western side of the Giuriati sports field. The current building is the result of many extensions and additions. The complex, equipped with cutting-edge devices for the study and treatment of nervous system diseases, was opened in 1932. After the bombing in

¹“Folli Attilio, 18 years old, Giardino Roberto, 22 years old, Rossi Luciano, 22 years old, Botta Renzo, 21 years old, Ricotti Roberto, 21 years old, Serrani Giancarlo, 18 years old, Bazzoni Sergio, 18 years old, Capecchi Arturo, 19 years old, Rossato Giuseppe, 21 years old, shot here on 14 January 1945, the blood you split here helped created Italy's new destinies. This Resistance Memorial Garden, dedicated to the 14 partisans who were shot here in January 1945, was inaugurated on 20 April 2009 following restoration work supported by Sezione ‘ANPI’ 25 Aprile in Milan Città Studi and local citizens”. Plus: “On 2 February 1945, the following fell in the name of liberty: Campegi Luigi, Volpones Oliviero, Mantovani Venerino, Resti Vittorio, Mandelli Franco”.

1943, the building was rebuilt and one floor was added, to house the paediatric neuropsychiatry ward. New buildings were added in the 1960s. At present, the possibility is being looked into to relocate the building, given the safety and equipment needs.

7.9 Variability



The environmental context changes constantly over time, appearing fragmented and partial.

The environment is the result of work done by multiple and different subjects: engineers, sociologists, politicians, demographers and communication experts. Their work constantly changes the structure of the city, even though these changes are visible only in the long run, and the perception is fragmented and confused, with contradictions brought about by new assessments. Fortunately, people live in cities and go about their business, adding mobile elements that have the same importance as the fixed ones. It is this second presence that ensures the openness and constant transformation of the environment and the vital evolution of its image.

In this sense, the presence of a children's playground offers some dynamic possibilities and potential for use. Let us now turn to a milestone in the history of architecture, namely the playgrounds designed by Aldo Van Eyck immediately after the war on areas that were considered "lost". At that time, he was working for the city's Development Department. From 1947 to 1955 Van Eyck designed some sixty playgrounds in the most densely populated parts of Amsterdam. In this example from the Netherlands, these grounds had the potential to build networks, although this is not the topic we are currently looking at. What is of interest to us is how he explored these places with small projects, adopting a "theory of relativity", which acknowledges the importance of the elements in a playground, where there is no hierarchy, but an interdependence of the overall composition. Above all, it is interesting for us to note his way of seeing the city as an object of planning that evolves and adjusts because users are left free to imagine these spaces, which were deliberately left simple so that they could be constantly re-invented by the imagination of children. "Such suitable places already existed and were awaiting (just like many of those places or similar places in any city in the world), forgotten,



Figs. 7.19–7.20 People live in cities and go about their business, adding mobile elements that have the same importance as the fixed ones (*Source* Luigi Spinelli)



Fig. 7.21 It is this presence that ensures the openness and constant transformation of the environment and the vital evolution of its image (*Source* Luigi Spinelli)

useless and dead (...) These children playing demonstrate the latent possibilities of urban renewal in general (...) places where children and parents meet, true extensions of the doorstep – for it is on the doorstep that the outside and inside worlds meet, the spheres of collective life and of individual life, intersect” (Van Eyck 1959, pp 34–37). Taking on board these words by Van Eyck, and even though it is currently considered as an attachment to the Giuriati pitch, a playground for children, inside the campus, could trigger far more interesting dynamics than leaving it all up to the university’s management (Figs. 7.19, 7.20 and 7.21).

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