AFTERWORD

Problems of the Contemporary City

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With the ending of the ArchéA research, we have had an opportunity to take stock, naturally somewhat schematically, of what we commonly call “the urban project,” and the issues that revolve around it, beginning from themes that emerged from the chapters in the book in various ways.

First and foremost, we must underline a fact of no small significance, namely, that the research in question was conducted by means of projects: the latter were applied to certain sample areas picked out in different European cities, choosing cities that were similar, of a medium size, with contexts that were alike in terms of condition, generally suburban or semi-suburban, and with problems of reconversion, reconfiguration, and recomposition within the framework of urban relationships. Thereby underlining the role of the architectural project and its essentiality in defining strategies, principles, and ways to tackle the problems of the contemporary city, starting from an analysis of the sites and a knowledge of the places on which to base any work: an act that was scientific but also interpretative, considered in different ways, whose necessity was reaffirmed, and whose *modus operandi* was discussed. In addition to the possibility of comparing different hypotheses that allowed a questioning of the principles through trial and error, applied to some real cases. A way of conducting research in the field of architecture that sought to update theory through practice, bringing the goal of every reflection back to architecture, its definition, and the project itself: a procedure that, for this reason, ought to be systematically pursued on every occasion.

Let us begin from two points: on the one hand, the condition of European cities and their current problems, a situation that it is necessary to acknowledge and, of course, interpret; on the other, the current condition of architectural culture, which, while counting on a long and significant tradition of studies and projects, particularly rich in Italy in the late 20th century, has become extremely motley, divided, and at variance when it comes to the ways of understanding the city and architecture. The point of view that we will be presenting should therefore be considered partial, intentionally based on rational thought and research

done on the bedrock, and purposely inserted into the aforementioned tradition of studies with the aim of highlighting certain questions that remain open.

The problems of cities. It seems superfluous to reiterate that the contemporary city – at different times depending on individual conditions of growth – not only no longer has a unitary, recognizable, and describable form but also, in its more or less recent expansions – especially post-Second World War – has failed to put forward principles that can give a clear form to the individual parts and, consequently, to the quality of certain places, those of the residences and of social life. The city envisioned by the Modern Movement has never seen the light in any of its interpretations, even though it has undoubtedly left us episodes of great interest and absolute value. The reasons are many, and I do not think they can be attributed to the lack of a precise vision, as evidenced by the proliferation of assorted proposals that have followed one another since the end of the 19th century. Pressing needs, economic interests, lack of political direction, administrative subdivisions, privatization of the territory and more, are just some of the reasons (which we shall not be investigating) that have led to the status quo.

Having now realized the impossibility of going back to imagining a city that is unitary in its form and its principles of growth, and in re-proposing the by-now-shared condition of the growth of cities by different parts, it is easy to see that in today's cities the only truly recognizable parts, terminated, with a clear and distinct form, are still and only the ancient nuclei that grew within their own walls. Or at times a few pieces of compact cities based on a unitary design, yet generally still relying on an organization by blocks and on the block-street relationship, gradually diminished during the 19th century and subsequently thrown into crisis by the Modern Movement.

There are therefore two fundamental urban growth problems that constantly attract attention: the rapid, extensive, abnormal, and unregulated development of multiple agglomerations, which considers the countryside that has always surrounded cities in a vital relationship as a land of conquest for future expansions, including its gradual removal and expulsion from inside major urban centers. In parallel to this, the imbalance between the oldest and densest parts, which have grown over a long period of time based on an essential relationship between different activities, whether collective or private, on the coexistence of places and distinctive works of architecture, of public institutions and housing, of the public city and the residential city, and the most recent expansions given over almost exclusively to housing, with at most some essential services: a firmly rooted discrepancy, well known to all, between the center and the suburbs, which we now look upon with resignation, as if it were a structural *sine qua non* of the contemporary city.

This is a twofold problem that on the one hand has to do with the growth model used, totally biased in favor of land consumption rather than subsequent urban expansions – so that they cannot be dubbed the formless and limitless extensions of certain agglomerations – lacking in vision, unrestrained, and untidy, and on the other, to do with the definition of those parts added gradually over time, which have extended the urban boundaries but have seldom enriched the civil life.

Some of these issues are now recognized as distinct and universal trends. The polycentric city model, extended to the regional dimension, seems to be a shared future vision and a target aspired to by the majority. Based on this rationale, a city is not only its compact constructed part, contained within boundaries that are no longer identifiable or solely within administrative boundaries. Instead, it is to be seen as a more complex and extensive entity,

a grouping of poles, of settlements of different sizes, relatively distant from one another but unified in a single network by an (efficient) public transport system. To clarify the sense of this, these new territorial or regional entities have been repeatedly defined in various evocative ways, *archipelago*, *constellation*, and the like, analogies that seek to underline the idea of *unity*, even when composed of different and quite distinct parts. Similarly, the polycentric city should be made up of *parts* that differ in their substance and in their physical and formal identity, and of heterogeneous *elements*, meaning not only aggregations of buildings and built-up areas but also of free, open spaces, empty spaces that are equally indispensable – natural elements, the countryside, water, hills, and so on: elements of a different *nature* established in unity, as an *archipelago* in fact, by virtue of their cultural ties, their belonging to a geography with common characteristics, their proximity, and their potentially rapid interconnection: the equitable distribution of community facilities that are urban in the proper sense of the word.

As Giuseppe Samonà suggested, Le Corbusier had previously pointed out, and many have experienced for themselves and emphasized, Venice is the city that, even today, fully conveys the idea of this latter principle, albeit on a rather reduced scale: perhaps because it really is an archipelago, perhaps because the water makes it more difficult to appropriate the land beneath it and make it fit for building, perhaps because no one dares modify it, in awe of its incomparable beauty. Here the parts are effectively separate and unequivocally distinct, interconnected thanks to the public transport system, with many communal activities, on an urban scale but not only, spread across the various islands. And then, a fundamental fact, each of these islands has its own physiognomy by virtue of the variety and individuality of the public places it houses and the works of architecture that define them. Because if the parts were all the same and, in some way autonomous, like the “self-sufficient” neighborhoods of the 1900s, perhaps they would not form a unity: each would be self-sufficient (or insufficient). To give rise to a rich, articulated, complex unity, it would be desirable that the parts of a city were different but necessary to one another in order to recompose the bigger picture of urban activities. This would mean that, for example, in one you could find the hospital, in another the university, in a third the cathedral, in yet another the institutions of justice, and, in all of them, the basic facilities for living: shops, schools, play and meeting areas, public parks, and so on. Distinct, separate, identifiable parts, recognizable above all thanks to their public places: these are the recognized values of the center of every European city.

But how can we distinguish the parts in general when we are not constrained by geography, as in Venice?

In a similar way to the amphibious city, the distinction is, first of all, unquestionably physical, a separation due to an alternation of solids and voids, the presence of open, empty spaces that distance and close off the parts, as happened with the ancient city walls, traces of which are almost always still present. In this regard, Le Corbusier argued that built-up areas should end up “overlooking the countryside,” in a clear-cut, precise way, without becoming lost within the infinite fraying of scattered houses and random warehouses, which leave the margins of settlements so vague.

However, such a distinction is also obtained through the recognizability of each part, the differentiation and identification of places, in particular those for the community and the most representative ones, their completeness, precise character, architecture, and formal quality. Also in this respect, Venice is a true master: the city, with its complex layout, is a succession of places, which can be recognized by their formal precision, the relationships

that the artefacts establish between each other, the relationships between the solids and voids, their size, and their proportion.

Both modes presuppose finiteness, a certain boundary, a clear limit between built-up areas and open spaces, a precise and therefore recognizable formal configuration, and it is the architecture that is always responsible for these.

This is a fundamental theme that emerges from the chapters and which I believe it is useful to reiterate. A city is made up of *places*, open spaces, specific in their meaning and in their consequent configuration. Architecture is the tool that can give form to indistinct and empty spaces, and this is equally true in the case of a single building: because the definition of a space, the identification of places, is undoubtedly the primary task of architecture. The inseparable relationship between the typological characteristics of buildings and the morphology of places derives exactly from this imperative purpose of architecture, from this almost instrumental condition, we might call it. Architecture dons the character of contexts, affirms it and reaffirms it, amplifies it and flaunts it, transforms it into typological features to give a new definition, to modify the spaces and endow them with a new identity.

If this happens in the case of a single work of architecture isolated in the landscape – suffice it to think, for example, of the role of Palladio's villas in the Venetian countryside, or of a castle on top of a hill – then this is even more true when defining the places inside a city, the large and small squares, the lanes, and so on, which depend upon the layout of the architecture, or better, on the way the individual buildings are composed. Reiterating that the city itself is an artefact is useful when reaffirming the need for form, for that control which only the layout and form of works of architecture can exert on the quality of places. Since the city has a physical substance, it is only through the formal clarity of its constituent elements that it manages to represent the value and meaning of the life that gave birth to it – its fundamental *raison d'être*. An urban project for the places and settlements of a city concerns the composition of the works of architecture and seeks to bring identity to the single parts.

With the same objectives and the same tools, the elements that separate, and at the same time unify, the built-up parts of a city, the open spaces we mentioned earlier, the parks and the countryside, need to be brought under control. And, in the notion of the polycentric city, once again they then become their own, constituent, necessary elements for the construction of the contemporary city.

This aspect raises yet another major question posed in more than one chapter, which has become current again in this period with the indications contained in the documents of the “Green Deal,” which are steering the future of the European cities and regions toward a desirable ecological transition: the green issue.

Green is an extremely generic term, too vague to be considered an element of the construction of landscapes and territories. To wit, green is the color of the meadows, of the leaves on the trees; it is the color with which we generally refer to the elements of nature. By extension, green has become the direction of our future development, a synonym of what is natural, respectful of cycles, and the preservation of nature's assets for the survival of the planet. Green is the guideline of the new European project that is supposed to steer every choice of urban and regional expansion or transformation, every attention to land consumption versus a greater density among the already built, to energy-saving and mitigation, to the curbing of climate change, and to guarantee populations a sense of well-being and conditions of equilibrium. However, to be understood as an element that participates by right in the construction of the city, this green must be sorted into the various identities and

forms that it can take: a cultivated field, a meadow, a wood, a pine forest, a park, a garden, a courtyard, a row of trees, and so on, including a “green roof” or a planted terrace.

This theme has actually come from afar in time. Back in the 1700s, the Physiocrats had already posed the problem of the loss of balance among urban nuclei as voracious consumers of products, and the surrounding countryside, a supplier of raw materials, general provisions, and food. The point of observation was purely economic, aimed at balancing resources and consumption between city and countryside, but the repercussions quite clearly aimed to plan and control the ways cities grow. So much so, that bright Enlightenment architects such as Ledoux and others took these aspects seriously enough to transfer and interpret them in their urban theories. In an already turbulent period, Howard confronted them with his *Garden City of the Future*, where *green* took on a greater specific meaning and distinguished between different roles. A little later, the need for *green* was invoked to improve the hygienic conditions of the housing in the decrepit urban nuclei of the early 1900s, in the form of free spaces to interrupt the houses and guarantee light and sunshine, guidelines that were then transferred to the worthy experimental housing estates built across Europe. Le Corbusier, Hilberseimer, May, and many others would end up champions of the need to think of a city of quite different dimensions, one that bore the countryside within it and one that made meadows, parks, and natural elements the general context within which to construct a city in its new expansions and also, rather more provokingly, to replace the old nuclei.

All this is known history and, for some, also water under the bridge. I personally believe that these theories, in addition to the manifesto aspect and the differing temporal collocations, have the merit of emphasizing a theme that has not yet received unequivocal answers, and which today, as often happens in the recurrences of history, is again relevant in the face of pressing climatic and survival problems. Yet again, the question comes from other fields, but it falls on the role that natural spaces – extending the term ‘green’ to other elements, for example, water, open landscapes, and the productive countryside – can or indeed must have in building a polycentric city today.

The need to understand the agricultural countryside, not exactly a natural space, but, on the contrary, a space designed from time immemorial by man down to the tiniest detail, from the sprawling systems of ditches and channels that spread across the land, to the rows of trees to shade certain crops, and the hierarchy of local routes that allow the organization of fields and farms, as already mentioned. The same delicate role of distinction between the parts can be taken on by parks and gardens, inserting themselves within uninterrupted urban extensions and salvaging unfinished and abandoned pieces of land, testing out new relationships between architecture and open spaces, similarly to what already occurs with our cities’ historical or historic parks.

Furthermore, green spaces can become elements to construct modern urban squares, collective places on a smaller scale, always defined and given measure by the surrounding architecture, similar in meaning but different in principle to the squares of historical cities. If we look closely, history has handed down to us many extraordinary examples where nature has entered in no small measure as an element that constructs places, bestowing extraordinary quality and a special character upon them. Without harking back to the exceptional Venetian “water piazza,” lying between Saint Mark’s Square, the island of San Giorgio, and the Punta della Dogana with the Salute watching over it, for me, one of the most exemplary squares today is still the magical “Square of Miracles” in Pisa. Or again, so unexpected in such a dense fabric as the center of Milan, we have the Basilicas Park, an

unplanned side effect of the wartime bombing, overseen by the apses of the two churches of San Lorenzo and Sant'Eustorgio: a true place of collective gathering, corresponding to an ancient square, characterized by the two important works of architecture that guard it, a park contained in its measurements, yet which has managed to reverse the frequentation of the streets around it, to bring the community life back inside it. And in addition, the recent revamping of the Darsena area, another "water piazza" in which a natural element is once again the protagonist, mirroring the houses and the city gate designed by Luigi Cagnola, which has acquired a fresh quality and vitality thanks to its new architectonic definition. These are merely a few examples, to suggest the possibility of imagining elements of nature inside a compact city, to investigate their potential role in the construction of public urban places, to study their extent, certainly different from that of the "stone piazzas" of history, and above all the compositional principles imposed by the works of architecture that must define them, including their type, character, identity, and form.

Arguably even more difficult and uncertain, arduous certainly yet urgent, is an equally essential issue for envisioning the form of the future city and responding to the challenges posed by the guidelines from Europe. I am referring to the issue of housing estates, still the quantitatively most consistent destination of cities, which defines the structure and organization of the largest swathes of fabric.

Here too, it may be necessary to distinguish between two issues. When speaking of suburbs, we are not referring so much to the physical distance from a center but to a distance in meaning and value, to the condition of parts that lack genuinely urban qualities, the institutions and collective places that identify them and encourage a frequentation that is not limited to local residents but extended to the inhabitants of the whole city. The beauty of the Old Towns, at times despite deprived dwellings born as council housing, redeemed almost everywhere from decay in the later decades of the 20th century, depends precisely on the extraordinary wealth of the public places, as well as the public, secular, and religious buildings present, which sum up their identity in a nutshell. Because, as Pausanias was wont to say, a city cannot be called such if it has no theatre. Translated into modern times, this means that there can be no city without institutions and public places to represent the civil community. It follows then that any redemption of the suburbs inevitably derives from the establishment of public places that must belong to the city as a whole, interlinked with others and accessible. This condition is conclusive.

After which, the second urgent issue is to define the compositional principles of residential areas, in search of a relationship between the private home and the public spaces of the city, a relationship that has been the city's main quality throughout history. The direct relationship between the house and the street is none other than the ability of the former to define collective, open, vital places, something the street has always represented in European cities. The question we must ask ourselves is this: is this model still valid and practicable, even in the face of the changes in the role of the street which almost everywhere has become a route for car traffic? Is this model the only one possible? And, above all, is it the same in new settlements, in those extended areas that increasingly offer themselves up to radical transformations?

Research into the definition of public places is intricately linked to this theme, which, in specifying its meaning, could be defined as a search for the principles to define a minimum dwelling unit, similar to that of the block in its relationship with the street and on the hierarchy of semi-collective interior spaces, so that the quality and richness might be equaled

and surpassed. As always, this entails rethinking the building types that constitute it, their interrelationships, and the form of the places that their composition can generate, along with the ways of aggregating the units and the fabric they create.

The issues of climate mitigation and the possible role of natural elements, as suggested by the European guidelines, must be included in research into the general identity of spaces that can be defined through the use of *green*, to also be included in residential areas. This too remains an open question, one that finds special opportunities for experimentation in the large areas where our suburbs have been reconverted, the industrial ones, whose activities have long since been expelled from European cities: railway marshalling yards, disused barracks, and so on.

The importance and delicacy of this theme, addressed in the project seminars and cited in the chapters, is particularly evident if we consider that the destiny of the contemporary city, its hoped-for new “green” course of action, its transition toward models with a social and economic balance as well as a stable quality of life – which includes the quality of places – can only be decided in our cities’ suburbs, in those parts where the greatest transformations can actually take place, the most consistent changes remain possible, and where the most massive interventions will prove necessary. Given that our centers are already rich and have their own identity, the possible operations here are precise and few. The destiny of the cities will lie in the transformation of the suburbs, which must not catch us unawares.

In closing, just one last question: why talk about cities that are European and medium-sized, the main theme of this research?

Because these, I believe, already possess some of the qualities that we would like our future cities to possess: the recognizability of the parts, built up over time and still not muddled or completely swallowed up by the new expansions, the quality of the public places and works of architecture, a relationship still more or less in balance between expansions and the surrounding natural environment. These conditions allow us to glimpse a direction of development that has not yet been compromised and is therefore more easily feasible. They also present some of the problems set out, the existence of large outskirts with no identity, for example, but also the conditions for their effective transformation plus various abandoned areas for conversion of a sufficient area to allow a broad reflection on issues of development and urban design. These cities are the real wealth, the priceless heritage to be preserved and governed as well as possible, which probably only Europe possesses on such a large scale and in such variety.

Indeed, what was it that attracted Frederick Barbarossa in the far-off Middle Ages to descend into northern Italy to conquer Lombardy? None other than the wealth of a territory that, favored by its location on a plain, consisted of a large number of municipalities scattered with regularity across a fertile countryside. A single large city, we would say today, a well-distributed urban presence, because, it was said, there was no farmer who, in the space of a day’s walk, could not reach a marketplace to sell his products: a place that could be recognized from a distance thanks to the bell tower that showed him the way, and, closer to, thanks to the compact city walls he had to cross through to reach the market. This was the great, palatable wealth of a balanced territory. A polycentric city, we would say, which, updated in its forms and ways, is what we wish for the destiny of our cities. An ancient teaching, yet still very up to the minute.