

Contemporary architecture and historic city

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Let me first thank Georges Zouain for the kind invitation. I think I gave him some problems. Till Friday I was in U.S.; yesterday I was lecturing in Venice: tomorrow I must be in Cascais and as you can see I'm not very young. So I told him that I was not coming. But he insisted so kindly that finally it was impossible for me to say no. And I'm here.

During the late '80 I was studying Siena, the medieval city "par excellence". Siena was declared a whole monument some year before the IIWW and was considered a city where everything had to be preserved, nothing had to be modified. Siena, as Bergamo before and Ascoli Piceno or Pesaro after, taught me many things just because I was asked, entering in a great personal contradiction, to give an answer to the individual and collective demands of their population respecting the historical character of the city on one side and the collective imagery on the other.

In fact two main phenomena, apparently not coherent, were going on: on one side the growth of a periphery without any quality immediately beyond the medieval walls: a city completely different but where people living in the historic city were moving looking for air, sunshine, for the "washing machine and car", for everything the modern urbanism and architecture were promising. On the other side many small modifications of the historical tissue, formally respecting the rules of preservation of the visual aspects of the city, were anyway going on especially in the interiors spaces of the city. Asking people of Siena why they considered the city so beautiful they were unable to give me a structured answer. It is beautiful because everybody consider it beautiful. During three years I was unable to sleep, trying to give a solution to the contradictions: studying and learning.

Then what did I learn? First that Siena like any other historic city is the outcome of a continuous stratification, hybridation, manipulation of an original text. To use the Andre Corboz's words Siena is a palimpsest where each generation left it's signature. The charm of many historical cities is just coming from these aspects.

The insertion of the "new" was never perceived as a scandal even if it was the occasion for many debates. And the "new" was often global, as were global the Romanic churches, the Gothic cathedrals, and the Renaissance palaces. Till the break of modernity. I mean till the XIXth century.

The break was technological. From a technical point of view till the beginning of the XIXth century the city was suffering of a technical deficit: not everything was possible. To cover a room more 4 m. large was very expensive, as it was to build more than two levels moving heavy materials for more than 6 m. in vertical. To do that was possible only for the richest part of the society: the church and the richest and powerful families. The outcome was a meaningful grammar and syntax of the built

landscape. The built landscape was representing the values and the social structure of the city.

In the first part of the XIXth century from a technical point of view the situation is radically changed: now it is practically possible to do everything and this technical surplus potentially destroyed any meaningful grammar and syntax leaving to the architect and to the different actors involved in the urban fabric the responsibility to save the existing one, as it was in Siena, to propose a new one, as in the Haussmanian city or in the Modern Movement's city and its banalization after the II WW, or to consider the problem not pertinent and transforming the architecture in an auto-referential exercise, as it often appears today. Moreover this happened in a period of fast growth of the cities when social structure and values were rapidly changing.

So the first lesson I had from Siena, Ascoli Piceno, Bergamo and the other historical cities where I had the opportunity to work, Venice included, is the possibility, maybe the need to have a specific grammar and syntax of the urban landscape. This grammar doesn't concern only the built landscape. The open spaces maybe are more important

With their geometry and their articulation they are the true responsible of the city form and of the tissues morphology. In Siena for instance you have three main open spaces: the first one is made by streets and squares with their continuous variations (I mean there is a theme, in Siena different from Venice, and a continuous variation of it, like in music); this is always a public space; it is also the main space of sociability, The second one is made by courtyards; may be private or public and this is a space of a limited sociability. The third one is the garden and it is usually private. The three spaces are linked together by sophisticated sequences: you can pass from the first to the third in many different ways but always you can pass anyway. The city is porous and continuous. The first space, streets and squares, is the most interior part of the city, the garden is the most exterior, facing the walls and looking towards the country. The design of each space is minimal; they are open to every social practice, they are not functionally determined, their beauty is the outcome of a clever use of few local materials and of an attentive interpretation of the topography. Piazza del Campo in Siena is an example, but also many open spaces in Venice can be good examples.

Why I mentioned the two lessons from Siena? Because for me the problem of the historic city is not its absolute, total preservation. As I told before any historic city is a multilayered palimpsest, a document in the history of the ideas and techniques. In the same way the problem of the contemporary city is not to imitate the visual aspects of the historical one. The role of heritage is to teach us, to give us lessons like the two I mentioned before.

Now which instrument, which tools have we to face the problems of the relationship between the historical setting and contemporary architecture? I have only some hypothesis, for me don't exist general rules, what I suggest is an approach, not a compulsory rule.

First to elaborate a vision, a vision not a plan, for the whole city and for the long term. A vision is an exploration in the future, not a forecast, not a guess: at the same time a reflexion on what can be stable in time and what can

change, for instance a grammar and a syntax of the urban landscape; is a reflexion about what is possible even if not certain. If we give some importance to the history, we have to recover a reflexion on the long term. Not in the way of "modern urbanism", I mean the urbanism having in Van Eesteren's plan for Amsterdam in '35 his monument. A vision is different and must clarify, for instance, the role of the past history while building the future of the city. To clarify this role without any prejudgment and prejudice. Taking a critical distance from the history; avoiding to accept in an acritical way the conservative rhetorics. The city, any city, has to face today new problems, a "new urban question". They are environmental problems, mobility problems and problems coming out of growing social inequalities. I'm not saying that these problems are more important of what is the main issue of this meeting. On the contrary I'm saying that the problem of the heritage is a part of these new problems the city has to face.

Take for instance the need of recycle: the historic city is an example of a continuous process of recycling. During the '70 in Italy we explored the possibilities of a "re-use" of the historic cities, showing that this offered the opportunity to reduce the pressure of the demand in the housing market with the social consequences you can imagine. We had to fight against conservationists pretending not to insert a bathroom or a kitchen in the existing building of the historical centers (what was demanded by the Siena's people), Venice was, at that time, the champion of this policy. The outcome is that people migrate outside in the dispersed city, what we call "*città diffusa*" and the historic city was bought by rich families and by the tourist operators, transformed in a kind of Disneyland. Some historic cities like Venice are now the scene for the use of the history for commercial purposes.

Now we have to recycle our built stock for reasons different from the past: for energetic reasons for instance and the historical stock, built before the IIWW is not the worst (the worst is what was built during the '50 and the '60).

Recycling is a theme strictly linked what is worrying us about energy and about social inequalities, but is a "situated" theme, specific of the different situation and cities. That is the reason why I think the different general statement or "charts" (Venice, Vienne, and so on...) are useful but not enough. We have to change completely our philosophy and not only for what is concerning the preservation of the historical heritage. We are facing a discontinuity in our history, the actual crisis is only an indicator of this and we know that, as in the past, the city after the crisis will be different from the city before. We have to prepare ourselves to the change. Stop please to thing in terms of a new juridical device, and let us to take the time to reflect about these fundamental problems.