

9

CIVIC URBANITY

The Places of Everyday Life

Francesco Saverio Fera

The increasingly manifest social contradictions of contemporary society are inevitably reflected in the shape of our urban landscapes, giving rise to even more alienating places where the sense of estrangement is as alive as ever in the consciousness of citizens. The various forms of protest put into action in an attempt to eliminate or reduce the damage are on the one hand evidence of how the transformations of the places we live in are increasingly divorced from their human and territorial context, while on the other they affirm a new sensitivity toward the public aspect par excellence, the city. The stage of the “human drama” has been transformed in a relatively short period of time from a fixed stage full of customs and rules to a moving one in continuous and rapid evolution, often not without painful contradictions. Cities change more rapidly than we do, Victor Hugo said, condensing into a single aphorism much of what has actually occurred in urban space, a phenomenon that has progressively accelerated from the industrial revolution to today. The ongoing process of the modification of spatial relations, which also occurred in ancient times albeit in generally more reduced forms, has involved increasingly vast dimensions of parts of cities, when not entire built realities. These events, which have not always been able to provide answers bearing convincing proposals for the development of metropolitan landscapes, form in the city, according to the vision of Oswald Mathias Ungers, “a juxtaposition of contradictions, a process which is more dialectical than linear” (Ungers 1979, 10). With its contradictions and discontinuities, but also not infrequently with its continuity, the complexity of the architecture of the city is thus the natural field of study and experimentation of the theories of many architects attentive to urban phenomena (Figure 9.1).

The theme is however that of the search for a sharing of objectives, or a social art, for which the question lies in the development of the tools useful for achieving this purpose. Architecture understood as collective art is therefore simultaneously a reflection and a measure of it; in fact, as Hendrik Petrus Berlage argued,

since architecture is the art of society, it is fatal that it reflects, more than any other art, the different spiritual and political orientations of society, also characterized by a



FIGURE 9.1 F. S. Fera, A. Fantini, *La città dei musei*, 2012.

slow trend. These orientations can lead to oppression and the laceration of society, or, on the contrary, to liberation and union; architecture, like a barometer, will follow these changes. The other arts are also characterized by the prerogative of promptly expressing spiritual changes; it is when it happens on an individual and not a social level, and therefore does not reflect the transformations of society, as architecture does. The examination of architectural works allows formulating a judgment on the spiritual conditions of a historical period, as architecture is materialized spirituality and stones are quite eloquent. Yes, the stones speak, as they are nothing more than an idea materialized in an artistic form. For this reason, architectural art has an eternal value and monuments arouse a moving veneration in us: it is the monuments that make history and it is history that makes the monuments.

(Berlage 1985a, 222)

If we can still share these statements today, we must try to critically question the reality in which architects are called upon to work and the social framework, not without contradictions, in which their work is placed.

The current impoverishment of the state of architecture and therefore of cities can be inscribed within a reference frame of society described by Frederic Jameson, where the

culture of a product, as the sedimentation of knowledge and synthesis of a society, has been transformed into a commodity, for the affirmation of a community in which the dominant attitude of contemporary taste and fashion is a lifestyle marked by the increasingly rapid consumption of every object conceived. The prevailing trend of today's society is that everything is reduced to entertainment culture, with the consequential loss of the sense of reality and, with its exemplification, its rendering into a simple appearance modeled by icons lacking meaning. Accomplice of this attitude of reduction, which inevitably involved making architecture a mere commercial production, is the mass information system which, by virtue of the culture of exhibition, has generally replaced the necessary critical distance in the analysis of current production with a sort of cultural consumerism. Thus, taking up Jameson's theories, a consequence of this attitude – which is a formal characteristic of postmodernism – is the lack of depth and the expression of instances with a hasty character where the image repeats itself, losing its ultimate referent in an annulment of the notion of history. Everything is lived according to an aesthetic vision of events, consumed without an expression of equidistant judgment and, according to the collage technique, with heterogeneous citations. For the postmodern world, the decrease in the exteriority of experience means for Jameson a “loss of the radical past” or of the deepest reasons of history itself. This attitude places the individual in a state of bewilderment that prevents him from planning his own experience in coherent terms, therefore from finding his own place within society and representing his complexity. For Jameson, it is precisely from this situation that the need to measure himself against irrepresentability must arise through a “cognitive cartography” that “attempts to endow the individual subject with a new, increased awareness of his position in the global system.” Continuing his analysis, he thus hopes for a political and formative challenge:

the new political art (if it is really possible) will have to stick to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say to its fundamental object – the world space of multinational capitalism – and will simultaneously have to progress towards a new, for now inconceivable way of representing it, in which we can begin to understand our position as individual and collective subjects and regain an ability to act and fight, which at present is neutralized by our spatial and social confusion.

(Jameson 1984, 69)

For those who work in the city or those called to design it, this new ability to “act and fight” can be understood as the search for a recomposition, albeit by episodes, of “spatial confusion,” in opposition to the general flattening of contents and forms of the city's architecture. There is therefore a pressing search for ways to operate within this condition of contemporary urban agglomerations full of bewilderment and chaos, which seems to find the only answer to the babel of architectural languages that surround us today. On this question, or on the relationship between memory and invention, Ernesto Nathan Rogers intervenes by arguing that

the ideal purpose for settling the contradictions between memory and invention is to absorb memory into invention so that the history of an object is identified in the history of a culture, to the point of being an integral and inseparable part of this.

He then goes on to clearly focus on the need to share intentions with the society in which the ideas materialize, so that they are not perceived as foreign bodies,

here the individual creator merges with the society from which he emanates and gives it an immediate representation. Individual memory becomes collective memory and serves as a link between the many inventions; so that it is indispensable to found the roots of new objects (and ideas) in the terrain of history without which the masses will never be able to feel like participants in the acts of individuals and individual emergences will have no communication to establish a plausible conversation even among themselves. Cities all over the world, especially those with more intense and rapid renewal works, are unable to form a characteristic unit, because in Tokyo and Rome the same buildings sprout without any respect for the pre-existing environmental ones, that is, of the specific character of their culture: they are artificially cultivated plants, transplanted without any concern for the climate, which distort the panorama of art as much as those of the landscape.

(Rogers 1968, 144)

This lucid vision of the condition of contemporary architecture is still very relevant today; thus, the problem of the estrangement of today's city and the disorientation of its inhabitants, even after more than 40 years, do not seem to have found a solution. On the contrary, much of the architectural culture has made this objective situation its guiding principle. The unanswered questions that Rogers' theoretical assumptions generate necessarily serve to question why these are still extremely topical today.

The sharing of a form, its recognizability, but at the same time its evocative capacity, should be for the community the contribution necessarily due to the search for meaning and belonging, in contrast with today's perception of a "fluid and elusive" reality without reference points. The transformation and continuous reinterpretation of the urban fact are the revolutionary data of this examination. If what Zygmunt Bauman claims about contemporary society is true, we are dealing with a rationality whose characteristics consist

in not being imprisoned by the legacy of one's past, wearing one's identity of the moment as one wears a shirt, which can be readily replaced when it becomes useless or out of fashion, rejecting the lessons of the past and abandoning the skills of the past without inhibitions and without regrets,

because the "liquid-modern culture no longer presents itself as a culture of learning and accumulation" but "rather appears as a culture of disengagement, discontinuity and forgetfulness" (Bauman 2004, 145), hence the need to take a position in favor of the search for permanent and transmissible values of the architecture of the city, of its memory and its history. A memory, a tradition that must necessarily be constantly reinterpreted and not be a sentimental object of self-pity for an ideal world that is now lost. Just as what Karl Scheffler wrote about Heinrich Tessenow in his *Die Architektur der Großstadt* (1913) on this subject does not seem to have lost its relevance: "it has tradition in its blood, it carries it within itself, not in the brain; tradition is a vital rhythm in it, not an aesthetic choice" (Scheffler 1998, 16).

This path in search of sources for the clarification of an operating tradition necessarily passes through the study of the urban ensembles' becoming in which the space of relationship, the collective space, is, and has been, the prerogative of the specific communities that formed it. The attention paid to public places has a 1,000-year history, and the first affirmations in the Greek era and then the Roman one will remain the founding assumptions of all the Western architectural theories to follow. The ancient city found its most evident form of expression and definition of itself precisely in the creation of streets, squares, and monuments within an urban design made up of buildings designed for their mutual exaltation in which the civic reality mirrored itself through the same. It is in the classical world that, thanks also to the concept of *urbanitas*, that is, civilized living, precise strategies were consolidated capable of giving shape and creating urban hierarchies with extraordinary results that we all know and that, starting from the built or theorized cities, made the formation of the realities in which we live possible (Owens 1991). So it is precisely for the fact of living in these that the most vital impulses have been inherited, to discuss their contents but, above all, through this extraordinary permanent construction site, to experience the goodness of the solutions adopted through the many constructions built.

In his lecture *Über moderne Baukunst*, Hendrik Petrus Berlage insists on the need for an architecture that does not base its essence on subjectivity and thus, taking up the assumptions of a writer, reaffirms the need to search for the universality of architecture:

There will come a time when those who have put their art at the service of the community and in whose labors and in whose soul a new love for humanity has vibrated, there will come a time when they will form a unity in which all that was particular will flow into the universal: into that universal which makes beauty so much higher. From this it follows, among other things, that the more universal the beauty, the less it will be necessary to discuss for reasons of taste. In fact, beauty exists only in ourselves, and is therefore relative; and when we turn to the particular, beauty also follows the same path. Spinoza says that beauty is a concept proper to human beings and therefore it is not a prerogative of certain objects. This universal character finds its place today, as in the past, in simple and natural constructions.

(Berlage 1985b, 119)

The search for a universal language that rediscovers its reasons in the particular appears extremely topical today; the expressive babel surrounds or sometimes constructs our urban realities, demolishing, intervention after intervention, the aspect of formal unity and uniformity that characterized the historic city. This dramatic transformation was authoritatively observed by Pier Paolo Pasolini who, in his famous documentary on the shape of the city, noted:

I chose a city, the city of Orte [...], I chose the shape of a city as a theme, the profile of a city. [...] I chose a shot that previously showed only the city of Orte in its stylistic perfection, that is, as a perfect, absolute form, and that's more or less the shot; it is enough for me to move this thing here, in the camera, and lo and behold, the shape of the city, the profile of the city, the architectural mass of the city is cracked, is ruined, is marred by something foreign, which is that house that you see there on the left. Do you see it?

(Pasolini 1973)

A similar observation made about 60 years earlier by Adolf Loos regarding the inability of contemporary architecture to relate to the landscape and the city reveals a general inadequacy of architects to intervene on the territory or on the city without distorting its whole:

The sky is blue, the water is green and everything is profound peace. The mountains and the clouds are reflected in the lake and so are the houses, courtyards and chapels. They seem to stand there as if they were not created by the hand of man. As if they had come out of God's workshop, like the mountains and the trees, the clouds and the blue sky. [...] But what is there? A discord sneaks into this peace. Like a useless squeal. Among the houses of the peasants, which were not built by them, but by God, there is a villa. The work of a good or a bad architect? I don't know. I only know that the peace, the stillness and the beauty are already gone.

(Loos 1980, 241)

The answer to the question regarding the inadequacy of contemporary architecture is perhaps to be found in the precise desire not to want to read the repertoire that founded its disciplinary corpus. The city therefore is a treatise on architecture, made up of stately examples and anonymous and simple artifacts, which nevertheless reveal the history of a specific community. As Pasolini clearly remarked, there must be multiple levels of interpretation of a building and therefore even those small signs left in the territory assume extreme value, such as the cobbled river path filmed in his documentary and commented on when he says:

It is a humble thing, it cannot even be compared with certain wonderful works of art, of maestros, of the Italian tradition. And yet I think that this small street of nothing, so humble, must be defended with the same persistence, with the same good will, with the same rigor, with which one defends the work of art of a great artist.

The defense of the city built by unknown authors of the history of architecture derives from the elementary observation of the concretization of an indisputably absolute form reached in the city of Orte, by virtue of a condition governed by a homogeneity of intent and, to quote Berlage, of a universal unity. Later, in fact, Pasolini goes on to underline the collective value of architecture:

Nobody would fight rigorously, with anger, to defend this thing and I have instead chosen to defend it. [...] I want to defend something that is not sanctioned, that is not codified, that no one defends, that is the work, let's say, of the people, of an entire history, of the entire history of the people of a city, of an infinity of unimportant men who however worked within an era that then produced the most extreme and absolute fruits in works of art and author. [...] Whoever you talk to, he immediately agrees with you in having to defend [...] a monument, a church, the facade of the church, a bell tower, a bridge, a ruin whose historical value is now established, but no one realizes that what must be defended is precisely [...] this anonymous past, this nameless past, this popular past.

(Pasolini 1973)

Despite the awareness of the current impossibility of a recomposition of the fragments into a *unicum*, if not for parts of the city, the architectural vision should be closely linked to

the knowledge of the real architectural fact and not just the abstract. We should move in this direction to find within the built city, in other words within its constitutive logic, the source of continuous inspiration and stimulus for new urban prefigurations that refer to it, without seeming to be a copy or, conversely, foreign body. Therefore, one should aim at the creation of urban scenes capable of constantly grasping the intangible secret of the relationships present between the spatial devices of the city and its architecture. Once again it is Ernesto Nathan Rogers who gives methodical indications about the necessary dialectical relationship between the city, its history, and its contemporary interpreters. The same noun “continuity” used to distinguish his *Casabella* places its position within a precise choice of field that on the one hand clears any possibility of misunderstanding but on the other does not elude the complexity of the problem. In a programmatic way, his thinking and teaching have given body and substance to a school – not only Italian – which has taken up his threads of reflection on the dynamics of the city. The urban phenomenon should be studied in a progressive perspective and observed, as Rogers identifies, as a set of logical structures in which the sense of tradition gives life to an expressiveness whose foundation “is the composition of ever new yearning to grasp the essential nature of the architectural reality, which concretizes those different relationships” (Rogers 1958, 22).

So it is the built inheritance, with its form or its building materials, in which everything had a strong relationship with the meaning that a particular architecture wanted or had to express. This wanting to continue to build an architectural place in constant dialogue with history so that it can still be named as such – that is, a place for which terms such as street, square, or palace can still be used – is neither a trivial operation nor as obvious as it might hastily seem. The danger of which it is easy to be victims is evident, that is, to fall into what has already been said, to renounce the invention, understood in its Latin meaning, of finding by investigating. Invention, then, is a fundamental means in finding fragments of a mistreated language present in the city but still intelligible, alive, and in any case belonging to contemporary society. The search is to find the unspoken aspect of places according to a “principle of revelation” always and in any case guided by a precise corpus of rules made available by the experience of the architecture, be it the great masters or anonymous master builders. Perhaps the compositional principle lies in the ability to be amazed by the normality of things, similarly to what Giorgio de Chirico observed:

a truly immortal work of art can only be born through a revelation. Schopenhauer has perhaps best defined and explained (why not?) such a moment at the point in which in *Parenga and Paralipomena* he says: “To have original, extraordinary and perhaps immortal ideas, one has to isolate oneself from the world for a few moments so completely that the most common occurrences appear to be new and unusual and thus reveal their essence.” If instead of ideas, you imagine the birth of a work of art (painting or sculpture) in the mind of an artist, you will have the principle of revelation in painting.

(Calvesi 1981, 11–12)

This compositional procedure of revelation, as outlined by de Chirico, can perhaps be adapted to architectural research in which the devices of civic urbanities are relived with an apparently pragmatic detachment in order to build renewed and unprecedented architectural structures in the city.

Bibliography

- Bauman, Z. 2011. *Vite di scarto*. (Translation by Marina Astrologo. Original title *Wasted Lives. Modernity and Its Outcasts*, 2004). Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Berlage, H. P. 1985a. Sull'architettura moderna. Conference held on November 26, 1910, (original title *Über moderne Bouwkunst*, 1911). In *Hendrik Petrus Berlage. Architettura, urbanistica, estetica. Scritti scelti*, ed. H. v. Bergeijk. Bologna: Zanichelli.
- Berlage, H. P. 1985b. Architettura come arte sociale (original title *De bouwkunst als maatschappelijke kunst*, 1919). In *Hendrik Petrus Berlage. Architettura, urbanistica, estetica. Scritti scelti*, ed. H. v. Bergeijk. Bologna: Zanichelli.
- Calvesi, M. 1981. Formazione, poetiche ed ideologie della metafisica. In *La Metafisica. Museo documentario*. Casalecchio di Reno: Museo documentario della Metafisica – Grafis.
- Jameson, F. 2007. *Postmoderno, ovvero, la logica culturale del tardo capitalismo* (translation by Massimiliano Manganelli. Original title: *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1984). Rome: Fazi.
- Loos, A. 1980. Architettura. In *Parole nel vuoto* (original title *Architektur. In Trotzdem*, Wien 1931). Milan: Adelphi.
- Owens, E. J. 1991. *The City in the Greek and Roman World*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Pasolini, P. P. and P. Brunatto. 1973. *Pasolini e... la forma della città*, Rai documentary edited by A. Zanolini shot in autumn 1973 and aired on February 7, 1974.
- Rogers, E. N. 1968. Memoria e invenzione nel design. In *Editoriali di architettura*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Rogers, H. N. 1997. Prefazione. Il mestiere di architetto. In *Ernesto Natan Rogers. Esperienza dell'architettura* (I ed. Turin 1958). Milan: Skira.
- Scheffler, K. 1913. Heinrich Tessenow. In *Die Architektur der Großstadt*. Berlin: Bruno Cassirer.
- Scheffler, K. 1998. Heinrich Tessenow. In *Heinrich Tessenow. Osservazioni elementari sul costruire*, ed. G. Grassi. Milan: Franco Angeli, 1998.
- Ungers, O. M. 1979. La memoria collettiva. *Lotus* 24: 10.