Regaining the culture of cities

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Regaining the culture of cities

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Abstract

When, as architects, we reflect on the relationship between architectural projects, cities and landscape, we must keep the urban degradation of the world we live in uppermost in our thoughts. Nowadays we live in a state of crisis, and this fact casts doubt on a series of values closely tied to professional and teaching activities. Understood as a tool for the building of top quality public spaces and ever better places and landscapes to live in, architecture is obscured by an increasingly common desire to impress. However, we must hold fast and seek to start afresh from the meaning of an architectural project, analysing case by case, each and every time, enquiring into the needs and potential a specific place expresses *in nuce* and revisiting all the specific features of the local area, culture and history. To respond adequately in the right tone, what is needed is silence, calm, care and the chance to rethink things and return to places, to assess even the smallest, often latent signs which are there, hidden in the *landscape*. A landscape which is not simply what we see but also a combination of our points of view on what is around us, a sign of our perspective on things and our idea of how we would like them to be. There is a fifth dimension of the space in which we live: the culture of cities, the culture of the landscape. And from this fifth dimension we must start again, regaining the culture and history of sites and cities.

Keywords: Architectural design, Landscape, Resilience, Fifth dimension, Culture of cities

Background

The sequence of insights at the heart of the considerations I am about to develop is quasi-circular. I mean this in the sense that when, as architects, we reflect on the relationship between architectural projects, cities and landscape, we must keep the urban degradation of the world we live in uppermost in our thoughts.

I do not believe I am saying anything new in recognising that architectural design is in a crisis (in effect, nowadays everything is in a state of crisis: the economy, sociality, politics, the environment, even culture) and that this fact casts doubt on a series of values closely tied to professional and teaching activities.
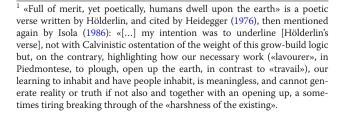
I have asked myself many times over the years what the deeper meaning of our profession is for man, «in living on the earth» (Heidegger 1976), in the landscape, in the world. Those of us working in universities have sought answers, sometimes by moving away from assumptions and preconceived ideas, and sometimes by seeking to delve deeper in a quasi-psychoanalytical way into the processes which every adventure in design brings with it.

I refer to the tension in practising architecture that often involves tackling new themes, working on new projects, building new landscapes and stories, feeding and reinforcing one's critical conscience, and trying to find a more ethical approach to modifying places to transform them and turn them into places in which it is possible to «live poetically and full of merit».[1]

On the other hand, in recent years—unfortunately—we have witnessed with a degree of impotence a progressive devaluing of the role of Architecture (and architects).

A process which, I believe, has lost its way and moved in the direction of commodifying the profession; building design has now become a matter of the lowest bid and shortest time frame.

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[1] «Full of merit, yet poetically, humans dwell upon the earth» is a poetic verse written by Hölderlin, and cited by Heidegger (1976), then mentioned again by Isola (1986): «[…] my intention was to underline [Hölderlin's verse], not with Calvinistic ostentation of the weight of this grow-build logic but, on the contrary, highlighting how our necessary work («lavourer», in Piedmontese, to plough, open up the earth, in contrast to «travail»), our learning to inhabit and have people inhabit, is meaningless, and cannot generate reality or truth if not also and together with an opening up, a sometimes tiring breaking through of the «harshness of the existing».

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As we regularly and carefully leaf through magazines, follow blogs and read the newsletters that increasingly clog up our email inboxes, we note a progressive cultural impoverishment of Architecture as a discipline. Sadly, little has been done to combat this impoverishment, especially in the public sector.

Understood as a tool for the building of top quality public spaces and ever better places and landscapes to live in, architecture is now obscured by an increasingly common desire to impress. This generates overloaded, self-referenced images which lack content and soul.

This desire to impress can prompt conflicting emotional states in us: it can depress us, shock us or leave us indifferent. Perhaps denial and rejection are the only possible reactions to these passing fashions and fads.

What I mean is that these facts create a *hiatu*s within the deeper meaning of design and its bond with the land, inhabitants, history, cities and landscape.

I perceive this impoverishment of thought as slow but relentless. The same is true of the downscaling of architecture's positive charge as a driving force for change.

There is now a myriad of material and hi-tech models, but they seem only to serve as images for products, the culture of fads and the market.

A powerful void exists today between the city's physical presence and its citizens, between the *urbs* and the *civita*s, with a tangible crisis and consequent inadequacy of the contemporary *polis* models.

We cannot remain indifferent to this state of affairs. I personally feel concerned and even somewhat indignant.

We must resist this upheaval, seek to start afresh from the meaning of an architectural project, of that *recherche patient*e Le Corbusier (1960) spoke of, analysing case by case, each and every time, enquiring into the needs and potential a specific place expresses *in nuce* and revisiting all the specific features of the local area, culture and history.

To respond adequately in the right tone, what is needed is silence, calm, care and the chance to rethink things and return to places, to assess with great dignity even the smallest, often latent signs that are there, hidden in the *landscape*—in a sense its watermark—to then throw everything open to debate, start afresh, and listen once again.

The landscape

At every opportunity, we must try to define 'landscape' once again, so as to add something new to our academic research.

In this sense, I think that our relationship with the *landscape* must be *cultivated* in the form of education and teaching, just as is generally the case with the arts or foreign languages. If we are not able to recognise the *landscape,* because we have not been brought up to read it, we might look at it forever without seeing it, just as we might a work of art or an unfamiliar language.

Corbusier (1963) said: «la clef c'est: regarder… regarder/observer/voir/imaginer/inventer/créer». This sequence of verbs might at first glance seem a series of synonyms: it is not.

It is here that the key to our profession as architects is to be found: look, observe, see, imagine, invent, create. These are the actions an architect must always put into practice every day in every project.

I believe that these attitudes, this approach to the subject, are fundamentally important. The *right attitude* to work is crucial.

But what is the landscape?

As is well known, a great deal of theoretical work has now been written on the meaning of this word. Everyone has something to say on the subject, it seems.

The landscape has become a critical issue for architects, too. Because housing and landscape issues are very closely interconnected.

Every project we build interacts with the landscape and, once built, is an integral part of it: «[…] architecture is a collection of modifications and alterations to the earth's surface for the purposes of satisfying human needs […]» (Morris 1880).

It is important to emphasise, once more, that it is precisely because we live in and on the landscape, that it is crucial we look after it and put it first and foremost in our priorities.

The fifth dimension of the space in which we live

To explain better what I mean by the term *landscape*, I would like to introduce a new concept.

Usually we think of the world in which we live as having the three dimensions of space: width, length and height.

We can also consider the fourth dimension: time.

I think there is also a fifth dimension, however: the culture of cities, the culture of the landscape. Culture signifies the knowledge that we must acquire to be able to propose a change in the landscape we live in.

It is a difficult dimension to measure or quantify, but it is probably the dimension that belongs most to man.

Culture is a matter of memory, history and layering. It is the heritage—the architectural, topological, topographical, urban, social heritage—expressed in a single word: the cultural heritage of a city. It belongs to the men and women who live there, to their collective imagination.

Hence, it is a question of landscape.

In these contexts the task of architecture—and not just architecture with a capital A—is not simply to make the world more beautiful but, above all, to help man live on

the earth, to carve out the best spaces and trajectories for his daily activities.

And it is this, I believe, that should be the starting point of projects in these city areas: they should be spaces in which to live, spend time and dwell.

We need to form our own opinion on architecture; this should be, I think, the primary objective of each and every architect.

Until this happens, what is important is to be aware of History, in the sense of acquiring direct experience, drawing on elements from the Architecture of the past through which to comprehend the traditions of our profession.

To come back to the definition of landscape, I believe that the landscape is not simply what we see but also, perhaps, a combination of our points of view on what is around us, a sign of our perspective on things and our idea of how we would like them to be.

To understand and plan the landscape, we need to immerse ourselves in it and, at the same time, to see or imagine how it could be, how we would like it to be.

Landscape is not simply a backdrop. It is neither a photograph nor a portrait, the scenery of our daily lives, but an entity, a re-worked image of the memory of sensations linked to a place, or via the images of a film, or the interpretation of the pages of a novel that describes a landscape, encompassing all our senses.

The landscape can take on various tangible forms. Each of us may have subjective perceptions of it relating to time, or to the play of light, or our state of mind.

In a certain sense, landscapes are part of our approach to life, we have to dwell in them (and thus design them).

The concept of landscape belongs in a sense to the culture of mankind, hence to the culture of cities. To transform the landscape, therefore, we need to know it, in every sense. Which means, first of all, knowing its history.

As Gregotti (2008) said, «history is the irremovable terrain we walk on, on which our state is founded, even if [and I add 'luckily'] it tells us nothing of the direction we should go in».

We have to learn to interpret it.

I believe that in our relationship with History there can (or must) be an explicit, voluntary reference to *tradition*: as a showcase, recollection, citation or in a melancholy sense, as nostalgia which is sometimes ironic—why not?

It is not tradition, however, in the sense of uncritical reiteration, or unimaginative copying. Quite the opposite: I mean recognising the permanence of the past, and reworking it, in a contemporary interpretation.

One of the most intriguing and characteristic features of our cities is precisely their architectural, material and long-term spatial stratification, their History.

We must, however, «learn to forget and forgive history», Isola (1993) wrote citing Ricoeur. That is, we must have a passionate attitude towards our past, look after it, think of it with compassion, with *pietas*.

We must use our critical ability to re-read history and distinguish between, on the one hand, what has been and has been passed down to us that is of value and must be maintained and enhanced and, on the other, what should be forgotten and perhaps even cancelled out.

We have to design, if we want to live well

Consequently, we have to design. It is our mission. Because dwelling is a need, and will always be a need, essential to the very existence of man on earth.

I believe that Architecture has a *design attitude* to offer in response to this desire to dwell, namely the ability to propose synthetic images that will interpret both the nature and deep character of places and are already inherent in them, thus evoking a deeper awareness, but also juxtaposing continuous gaps, shifts and changes in the banality of the existing, to steer us away from what is already there in the direction of what might be.

What I mean is that in urban transformation projects we architects should perhaps try to define the sphere and limits of our action better; we should interpret the resilience of the city's critical places, that is, their ability to autonomously and spontaneously reorganise themselves. The urban system has the ability to resist, adapt and positively respond, with innovative forms and techniques, to the changing strains and stresses—climatic, historical, economic and social—it is subjected to.

What if we were to try not so much to place our buildings on a site, or camouflage them, but rather to design houses and places that are welcoming, to *host* those living in them—in the meaning Jabés (1991) gives to this term[2]—and not simply to contain them? What if we were to succeed, once and for all, in convincing ourselves that the threats of the built environment against which we often attempt to defend ourselves, could actually be opportunities?

What if we could understand the potential these very threats might offer to cities, areas and nature?

We would be able, I believe, to bring new languages into the equation, make them richer and go beyond what has already been done, what we know, what we have already seen.

The homogenisation and monotony to which we have been accustomed in recent years, which come from

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[2] «On this side of responsibility, there is solidarity. On that side there is hospitality. Giving into the needs of hospitality, to its unspoken requirements, means to some extent grasping the practice involved in our dependence on others», Jabés (1991).

globalisation and unfettered capitalism, could easily be defeated if only we were to remember that every place has its own specificity and each project is a story in itself.

Any city project, or rather any project for the city, should be capable of defining a strategy, putting forward new frameworks and implementing the urban system by getting all local players involved—from utilities to universities, from citizens to the service society—and garnering all the necessary skills.

Today we need to know how to read the differences that make up our know-how and to take on board the need for dwelling that emerges, to then provide a response which is responsible, authentic and well thought-out: a *scientific* response.

To give this kind of response, we need to be able to muster our grossly limited know-how, as well as what we have learned from outside our own discipline and, above all, the hard-earned knowledge consolidated in our everyday practices.

The design attitude I referred to earlier is not exclusive to Architecture. It is multi-disciplinary: an attitude that Architecture and Town Planning share with Geography and History that can interpret the universe, instead of simply reducing it to objectivising paradigms of descriptions, data and documents. Many other disciplines are also capable of this attitude: Technology, the Sciences of Building and Energy, Environmental Engineering and ICT.

By no means am I saying that we should abandon the *arché* architecture that has developed throughout history. This remains the backbone of all our work.

I do believe, however, that within the wealth of fluid and varied perspectives the need for dwelling presents us with we should adopt the design attitude.

This means *opening u*p the languages of our disciplines to other forms of knowledge, cultures and people.

We must open up to a multiplicity of explorations, at all the diverse scales of a project and according to different points of view; they must have in common that same *design attitude* which aims at making the places of the project hospitable and lived-in.

This practice leads us to immerse ourselves in places in a self-aware way, and perhaps with the humility to look at architecture from the point of view of those experiencing its effects, of designing the landscape from inside too, so that buildings can once again enter into a dialogue with those living in them and belong to the collective imagination of those using them, contributing to improving environmental quality.

There is a very beautiful painting by Caspar David Friedrich[3] which depicts a landscape in the fog seen from a

hill. The painter, however, added a person (perhaps himself?) to the painting (and thus also to the landscape) seen from behind, looking towards the horizon. Now, I believe that like this person, the protagonist of the painting, we must try to enter the landscape, and take our place within it, not simply look at it from the outside, from beyond the frame.

Designing a landscape, I believe, means removing the picture frame, opening the window, understanding that we too are part of the landscape we are designing.

I have already said that every architectural project, by its very nature, generates change. The difficulty consists of ensuring that this change is for the better.

Our first concern should therefore be to try not to damage sites.

We need to think how buildings can communicate with what was there before them in an interesting, intriguing way.

Modifying the landscape sometimes means making it denser, building in any gaps that still exist. But building does not always mean pouring tons of concrete onto the land. Sometimes it simply means creating movement in the landscape with artificial hills or by designing a row of trees, working on perspective.

For landscapes do not always consist solely of the uncontaminated nature so dear to intransigent environmentalists. In fact, these utopian landscapes hardly exist anywhere today.

The invention of new landscapes as a matter of resilience

The invention of new landscapes thus becomes an urban requalification and regeneration project, in which the issue of resilience takes on new meanings and becomes an entirely new specific discipline.

In physics resilience is a material's capacity to absorb shocks without breaking, while in psychology it is the human ability to positively reorganise one's life when faced with difficulty, without damaging one's own identity.

In architecture, and also in town planning, resilience is «a specific idea of intelligence capable of remodelling itself around the complexity of events which are destructuring the cities» (Infante 2013).

Dealing with what remains of past times does not necessarily mean going in search of the traces and signs of an often-compromised image, so much as attempting to *sew up* the loose ends.

It is certainly an arduous, challenging task, which cannot and must not take the form simply of grand infrastructural work (as it often did in the past). Quite the contrary: it involves the building of a capillary network of relations, some of which simply informal and not

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[3] Caspar David Friedrich (1818), Wanderer above the sea of fog (exhibited at the Hamburg Kunsthalle collection).

necessarily physical, networks whose purpose is to give new meaning to the city's places and engrave them into the city's consciousness.

It is thus a weak but widely disseminated re-connection that must be implemented.

We need rules—with a preference for a slightly out-of-focus thought process—which go beyond the confines of scientific rigour and geometry, and are more suited to the reality of the unconsolidated, degraded spaces of the *dimension between* open space and built space, between the city's masses and the energy of those who live in it.

It is certainly important to pay attention to the real historic and environmental values of places. However, designing for these borderline landscapes also means having the courage and, sometimes, taking the responsibility for turning an area's framework upside down and establishing new spatial and hierarchical relationships. Naturally, on condition that the purpose of these new developments is always to improve urban and environmental quality, with the ultimate goal of disseminating quality.

Attempting a conclusion: the city requalification project of today

The difficulty involved in regaining the past is not one of reintroducing past materials, or reusing lost technologies. These are all accessible to modern building sites. This has already been done.

The difficulty lies in a concept of inhabiting which has changed entirely—in the space of just a few generations.

Sixty years ago we were still building out of need, using a few low-tech technologies which had been verified by lengthy experience, with the solid reference points of architectural schools and the managerial classes. It was all very straightforward. Only learning was difficult. But the direction to be taken or the way forms were chosen—that was simple.

Nowadays, things are different: we build for false reasons and following short-lived fashions, with an avalanche of technological data and a plethora of ever-changing laws, in the total absence of formal reference points.

On the other hand, there is no way that architecture's star system can prompt virtuous behaviour: it is more likely to trigger petty jealousies and an unhealthy ambition to emulate.

How can we transform and recover a part of city, or a block or square, to make them accessible to the inhabitants of our era?

How and why should we build once more in these places?

It is the architects who should be telling us this: it is their job.

I do not believe, however, that it is an easy task.

Exactly the opposite in fact: it is an arduous task and one with no secure reference points. This is even more the case today, when we have to wage a daily battle with the Internet and thus with an infinite array of uncontrolled possibilities.

Our times are characterised by an excessively broad range of possibilities, one that is above all not subject to criticism, except as far as costs and practicability are concerned. This is not enough for a value judgement.

In this context schools of architecture can perhaps help those studying today to work with wisdom, competence and intelligence within landscapes that may be powerfully compromised (at least this is often the case in Italy) but, at the same time, full of potential.

This hope has come partly from the work that our students at Turin Polytechnic have been doing. For many years now—in the design laboratory, in degree theses and workshops—we have been attempting to familiarise students with landscape and environmental issues, and urging them to put forward projects to redevelop abandoned areas.

Some of these ideas are very courageous, because they are frequently developed in very short time frames (a few weeks) and perhaps, above all, because they are the work of young students who have not yet fully learnt the tricks of the trade and have not been compromised by professional practice.

They have nevertheless had the great merit of seeing outside the box, of extending boundaries a little, to design new landscapes that are innovative in formal terms, but also in the use of materials and building technologies.

They are often ideas that have grown from a shared conviction: the intrinsic beauty of the landscape, its evocative power, its capacity to become the source of inspiration for a project.

But every student gives the subject his or her own personal touch and interpretation, and almost all the design ideas are valid, plausible and practicable, which demonstrates the fact that there is no single way of doing things, no preconceived formulas, nothing is right or wrong in itself, a priori.

The proviso is that the projects grow out of places; they must remain strongly rooted in the soil they rest on and belong to the landscapes they are developing, accompanying their transformations.

As Bonesio (2001) has affirmed, every place, every landscape has its own specific identity and physiognomy: «there is no single solution which is applicable to any place or culture but neither is there any single space for subjective *creative* judgement. A place's dimension, the spirit of the place, its *genius loci*, dictates implicit rules which we can argue are respected when the result

is that of a good form and profound, stable harmony. This harmony does nothing to disfigure the place's physiognomy, but makes it recognisable in every intervention».

It is not by chance that the way we build (and dwell) on our territories, hills and in the country, has remained unchanged for centuries and has been passed down to us.

These building methods were, and still are today, the most suitable for an environmental context characterised by especially harsh, challenging living and working conditions.

This certainly does not mean that nothing new can be invented, that everything has already been said, or that all research is now in vain.

But that all new styles must use what already exists as their starting point, aware that the solutions adopted by our ancestors were chosen for a reason and have stood the test of time precisely because those reasons were good ones, had a solid basis, were rooted in the territory and understood as space, environment, soil, climate, culture and so on.

We can of course replace solid chestnut wood with wood laminate, stone walls with reinforced concrete, larch wood planks with sheet metal.

We can create new forms on our computers: polylines, *nurbs* and *blob*-volumes hold no secrets for the architects of our day.

New forms and technologies must, however, face up to the world around them and find harmony with it, *a sense of proportion.*[4]

They must be capable of adapting to their locations gracefully.

This is the point: to find an equilibrium between what exists and what we want to do, to work with similarities and differences always seeking modifications that improve, which could change almost everything, as I said earlier, without distorting the identity of a place.

In order to rebuild and regenerate our urban landscapes, give them fresh meaning, breathe new life into them and bring people back into them, we need to start from here, from the *ethical* design issue: the quality and beauty of a building depends to a considerable extent on the habitability of the site on which it is built.

Improving places means making them hospitable and—to be hospitable—architecture must be integrated into a site elegantly and gracefully. There is no need to shout to make our presence felt in the dialogue with the pre-existing. We need to look, observe, listen, know, understand and interpret.

A complete reading of the theme and a precise reference to those who will live in the place can help us in our approach to the project.

We must regain the culture and history of sites and cities.

We must start again from the *fifth dimension* of the world in which we live.

Urban landscape identities need to safeguard, enhance and regain, but they must not crystallise or mummify.

Cities change and mutate, they transform together with the civilisations living in them.

It is fundamentally important, however, to manage this evolution and provide solutions to the various demands made on cities. These may include economic, political, social and other demands that should not be evasive or superficial: they should be capable of adapting intelligently to the changes we are experiencing.

This is our responsibility (from the Latin *responsare*, which means 'to give a response to') as architects, and I believe it is in this direction that our projects, research and teaching should move.

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[4] «The question we pose today is finding a sense of proportion which allows the complexity of the world to be preserved in both time and space terms without us getting lost in it», Berque (1995).