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Carmine Gambardella

XIX INTERNATIONAL FORUM

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The architecture design at different scales: a question of landscape

Paolo MELLANO[1]
(1) Department of Architecture and DESIGN, Politecnico di Torino, Torino, Italy
paolo.mellano@polito.it

Abstract
"From the spoon to the town" is an expression becoming famous after E. N. Rogers' Zurich conference (1946).
Since then, the world has changed, the architect's profession and the ways of teaching architecture have also changed.
Today, futuristic techniques are taught in place of architecture and students are encouraged to design buildings that are beautiful, shiny, fashionable … but no one thinks about man anymore. Everything seems to be subject only to the laws of economy and finance.
Is this contemporaneousness?
We need to combat the progression of these upheavals, seeking to start again from the sense of the architecture design.
Architecture should be able to combine innovative techniques and materials with the values of the locations, history and traditions: this could become a new challenge for those building the landscapes of the third millennium.
Landscapes - and not just buildings - because the locations in which we live are a compendium of houses and spaces, and because the architect's activity should embrace all scales, from the general to the particular.
Perhaps, again, we need to question everything.
We must try, every time, to give an additional definition of landscape, to seek to add something new to our scientific research.

Keywords: Architecture design, scale, landscape, architectural project

1. Introduction

"From the spoon to the town" is an expression, perhaps coined by Hermann Muthesius in 1912, definitely used by Walter Gropius in 1919 as a slogan for Bauhaus, but later becoming famous after Ernesto Nathan Rogers' Zurich conference on 3 November 1946 [1], when he used it to explain the typical approach of the architect who, in his daily activity, must be able to manage simultaneously designs at different scales (of representation and execution).
Since then, the world has changed, the architect's profession has changed, and I believe the ways of teaching architecture have also changed. I think the evolution of the profession has been accompanied by serious attempts - as well as fundamental educational experiences - to consider together the changing of the times and the ways in which to equip design culture for the duties and responsibilities that accompany the passing of the generations. Unfortunately, however, these examples appear to have been forgotten. After their removal, the research and debates faded away and the discussions dried up. Their gradual fading out is now followed by a silence that is deafening due to the concerns that it evokes and the undisputed perspectives that it seems to open up.
Today, futuristic techniques are taught in place of architecture and students are encouraged to design buildings that are beautiful, shiny, fashionable, fantastic, striking, astonishing … but no one thinks about man anymore; architecture celebrated by the media no longer seems to care about the final recipients of the city spaces.

It is a generational issue, perhaps; a reflection of the times, someone said a few years ago. Today, globalisation and the single market reign supreme. Everything seems to be subject to the laws of economy and finance.
In all this, the role of Architecture and of architects has gradually been devalued.
Is this contemporaneousness?.

2. About contemporaneusness

Beyond the sentiments that this can all arouse in us, the conflicting moods that this situation can induce (we may get depressed, shocked or be indifferent), for those who have now formed an opinion on the utility of this contrast of slogans (moreover short-lived) there only remains negation, refusal, as a possible way out.
I mean to say that these facts create a sort of break with the profound sense of the design and the link to territories, to inhabitants, to history, to the city, and to landscape.
The impoverishment of thought, I would say, is slow but inexorable, as is the reduction in the positive charge of the architecture design, as an engine of transformations, in the face of a hypertrophy of samples of materials, high technologies, almost at the exclusive service of the image of the artefact, of the culture of the ephemeral, and of the market.
There is a strong detachment, today, between the physical city and the citizens, between the urbs and the civitas, with clear crises and consequent inadequacy of the models of the contemporary city.
I believe that we cannot remain indifferent to this state of affairs.
So, I think that we need to combat the progression of these upheavals, seeking to start again precisely from the sense of the architecture design, analysing case by case, investigating the requirements and the potential aspects that a certain environment expresses in nuce, revisiting every time all those specific aspects linked to the territory, to its culture, and to its history.
Perhaps what is strange, extravagant, what challenges the laws of physics and nature, what exploits technological innovations to exalt the load-bearing capacities of the materials, going so far as to produce extreme, unlikely and sometimes even ridiculous solutions to simple, ordinary products, is not so contemporary.
In order to appear in the media (and no longer those of the industry, but also mass media) the fashionable architects - by now archistars - produce very beautiful buildings, if you like, but they are almost always clearly detached from their context, uprooted from the specific aspects of the locations, indifferent to the needs of man.
I do not believe, however, that modernity means abandoning traditions, denying the values that characterise the location, forcefully imposing forms and materials entirely extraneous to culture and to collective memory.
Modernity should not even be synonymous with fashion; rather than fitting in with the trends of the moment, I believe that we must adapt to time and to uses. I think that architecture is contemporary when it meets the needs of the certain timeframe in which it is created, the needs of those who commission it, using all the possibilities offered by technique: this does not mean, however, that it should manifest its impertinence at all costs!
Perhaps being able to combine innovative techniques and materials with the values of the locations, history and traditions could become a new challenge for those building the landscapes of the third millennium.

3. A question of landscape

Beyond the sentiments that this can all arouse in us, the conflicting moods that this situation can induce (we may get depressed, shocked or be indifferent), for those who have now formed an opinion on the utility of this contrast of slogans (moreover short-lived) there only remains negation, refusal, as a possible way out.
I talk about landscapes - and not just about buildings - because I believe that the locations in which we live are a compendium of houses and spaces, and because I still think that the architect's activity should embrace all scales, from the general to the particular.
I believe that we should start with a search that originates from what is there, from its history, from the latent signs of the past, even from the small details, to seek adequate responses to the problems, to operate with tones suited to whatever level you are working at, whether it be a construction detail or a master plan: therefore, I believe that we need firstly to have a little silence, to restore calm, to pay attention and to rethink things, to return to the locations, to assess with great dignity even the small signs, often latent, that are just emerging from the landscape, just visible. Then perhaps we need to question everything, to start again, and to re-listen.
We must try, every time, to give an additional definition of landscape, to seek to add something to our scientific research.
To explain more clearly what I mean, I want to introduce another concept.

We are used to thinking about the world in which we live in the three dimensions of space: width, length and height.
We can then consider a fourth dimension: time.
However, I think there is also a fifth dimension [2] of space, of the landscape in which we live: culture.

Fig. 2: The fifth dimension of architecture (photomontage by the author).

The culture of cities, of the landscape. This, in other words, could mean the acquisition of knowledge which we must learn in order to propose a change to the landscape that we inhabit.
Culture of the city, therefore, not so much in the sense that Lewis Mumford [3] talked about it.
As I understand it, the culture of the city is a difficult dimension to measure and quantify but perhaps it is that which most belongs to man, since it is a question of memory, of history, of stratification, and of individual sensations: architectural, topological, topographic, urban, social, etc. - in a word - cultural heritage of a city, it belongs to the people who live there, who inhabit it, to their imaginations.
For this reason, it is a question of landscape.
This landscape is not just the background, or the photography or the portrait, the scene of our daily life, but it is also an entity, an image reworked by the memory of feelings linked to experiences in the locations, which can manifest with different tones.
We can all have a subjective perception of the landscape relating to time, or the incidence of light, or even our moods. In some sense, the landscape forms part of our being, we must inhabit it (and therefore, as architects, we must design it).
In this sense, architecture - not just that with a capital A – does not only have the task of making the world beautiful but, above all, it must help man to inhabit the land, giving him spaces and paths in which to best perform his daily functions: spaces to be lived, spaces to be visited, landscapes to be inhabited.
The concept of landscape, in some sense, belongs to the culture of men, and therefore to the culture of cities. Therefore, to transform the landscape, we need to know it, in all senses. This means, before anything else, knowing its History.
I believe that in the relationship with History there may (or must) also be an explicit, voluntary reference to tradition: as a representation, memory, citation or as melancholy, as nostalgia; sometimes, even with irony, why not?
Tradition, however, does not mean uncritically repeating, unimaginatively copying; on the contrary, it means recognising the permanence of the past to redevelop it critically in contemporary key.
One of the most intriguing and characteristic features of the quality of our Italian, European cities is precisely the stratification of architectures, of matter and space over time, throughout History.
And we must design - this is our mission - to give a response to the question of inhabiting which is there and always will be there: because it is a question inherent to being man on earth.
Every location has its own specific features and every design has its own story.
Every architecture design, by definition, produces a change: the difficulty lies in making this transformation become an improvement to the initial condition of the locations.
An architect's first concern should always be that of not damaging the site: we must always think of the buildings that we design as a way of dialoguing in an interesting, intriguing way with what was pre-existing.

Sometimes modifying the landscape means densifying, building in the interstices that are still free, thickening the wings of the building blocks….
It certainly means paying attention to the real historic and architectural values of the locations but always with the aim of improving the urban and environmental quality, to create widespread quality.
The design of the city, rather, for the city, should always be capable of defining a strategy, proposing new aspects and implementing the urban system by involving all local players and all necessary skills.
Today, we need to know intricately the differences that constitute our knowledge, and to gather the question of inhabiting that emerges, to give a responsible, authentic, mediated, and therefore scientific response.
To give such a response, we need to bring to the field our knowledge, albeit limited, even that gained outside our disciplines, but, also and above all, that consolidated in the practices, often arduous, of everyone's life.
The design attitude to which I referred previously is not exclusive to Architecture: it is multidisciplinary; it is a behaviour that Architecture and Urban Planning share with Geography and History, interpreting, far from the objectifying paradigms of the description, the data, the document. It also involves Technologies, Structural and Energy Sciences, Environmental Engineering, ICT.
I certainly do not want to claim the abandonment of that element of architecture that has been built in history, which indeed remains visible as the basis of our actions, but I believe, on the other hand, that we need to assume these differences from the perspective - rich and fundamental - that the question of inhabiting poses to us.
We must, therefore, also open the languages of our disciplines towards other knowledge, towards other cultures, and towards others.
We need to perform multiple explorations, at the different scales of the design and according to different perspectives, which have in common that design stance aimed at rendering hospitable the locations of the design, at making them live. This is a way of working that leads us to immerse ourselves in the reality of the locations with awareness, and perhaps also humility, seeing architecture on the part of those who live there, designing the landscape looking also from inside, ensuring the buildings once again dialogue with those who inhabit them, belong to the imagination of their users, contribute to improving the quality of the world in which we live.
Landscapes to be seen hanging outside of windows, outside of frames that hold the views of painters, precisely like the wanderer above the sea of fog painted by Caspar David Friedrich.

Fig. 2: Caspar David Friedrich, Wandererer above the sea of fog, 1818 (kept at the Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg).

Seeking what exceeds the design, going beyond what already exists, to rediscover our identity.
We cannot deny our roots, the histories that belong to us and to which we belong; the landscapes that host us and which will host those who come after us. We must design locations from which we can look out over a horizon that has not yet been designed, but that, in the end, must belong to us, must be our friend.
It is a theme, but also an ethical issue, which must involve us all.
It is the essence of our work on landscape, that is, architecture as landscape.
Our landscapes are not only to be preserved; they are not residues of time- as some would have us believe - but, increasingly often, they are to be re-invented, re-designed.
We need to re-start - I believe - from the fifth dimension of the world in which we live.
Our position as architects with respect to the issue must be mobile, ductile, never absolute or apodictic. I think that our trade is real precisely because it is available to others, in a specific location: the architect cannot, in himself, be an authentic inventor, almost alchemist, closed away working in his workshop among mysterious ingredients, with processes known only to him. Conversely, I think that technologies, constructive elements, and details must constitute a language available to everyone, comprehensible by everyone, must become something more than a simple part of a performance system: a beam, a window frame, a pergola on a terrace can even - in my opinion - be a gift, offered to those who see, use, inhabit the building that includes it.
Because the houses, locations, landscapes that we design – let's not forget - will then be inhabited by others, they are and will remain in front of us, for many years of our existence.
This is - I think - our responsibility (from the Latin responsare, that is, to give a response); the responsibility of our trade as architects. It is in this direction that I like to think our designs, our research, and our teaching, are moving.

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