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STRATEGIC DESIGN RESEARCH JOURNAL

Bad Strategy and Dark Matter. Reframing Italian Architectural Debate on the Post-Pandemic.

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates into the inability of Italian architectural debate to produce sensible effects on the society – architects have not been involved in any task forces, nor have their proposals been taken in account for the norms for the post-pandemic. Our hypothesis is that the suggestions emerging from the debate are much vision-oriented, but are so weak from a strategic point of view that they could even be seen as an example of bad strategy – as defined by Richard Rumelt. In the first part, through an extensive survey on various sources (e.g., interviews and video-messages on leading newspapers, social media and TV broadcasts; debates on architectural journals and web forums; official proposals and manifestoes by professional associations), the article analyses and reframes the Italian architectural debate, for highlighting and defining its strategic weakness. The second part explains the main reasons for this weakness, showing that such inefficacy comes from the inability to deal with what Dan Hill called dark matter, i.e. the network of organisations, culture, bureaucracy and norms. The final part hints at a different perspective on architectural design for better dealing with the dark matter, thus giving the possibility of changing the generic proposals into strategic ones.

Keywords: Architectural Design, Bad Strategy, Dark Matter, Italian Debate, Post-Pandemic, Potential.

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic caused a tremendous shock. Health measures aside, the attention toward space – the right to live and use it– has leapt to an unprecedented level. Indeed, while sharing a general approach and wide-ranging statements of respect, coordination and solidarity, European Countries have applied very different restrictions and confinement measures (European Commission, 2020). Furthermore, in Italy, the Regions can set rules on an individual base, generating inequalities that worsened the situation. Space was at the centre of the debate. Only after some silent weeks, the world of architecture reacted, with proposals, debates, forums, interviews: thrilling new activism (Pierro & Scarpinato, 2020). As the polemics involved all types of space (e. g. the value of public space; the conflict between private space and remote-working requirements; the difference among urban settlements and the countryside) architects have made wide-ranging proposals, trying to influence the government's regulations and inspire future changes.

However, despite the enthusiasm, results are depressing so far. The task-forces for the emergency involve more than 800 people (Perrone, 2020), but no architects; and although

the government have already approved more than fifty decree-laws, directives and special measures (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2020), no one concerns architecture or design, nor take into account architects' suggestions. Thus, by surveying and reframing the debate contributions, the article aims to show that this inability of producing sensible consequences depends on the fact that those contributions are weak from a strategic point of view, or even, that they could be seen as an example of bad strategy – as defined by Richard Rumelt (2011).

The survey takes into account sources of three main types. Interviews, video-messages and letters authored by single (usually very famous) architects make the first one: often, these messages are reported many times in the leading newspapers, social media, webpages and TV broadcasts, thus gaining the broadest appeal. The second type includes the debates and forums organised either by leading Italian architectural journals, like Il Giornale dell'Architettura (hosting two main forums with no less than forty contributions by both academics and professionals) or by professional boards and associations, like the Order of Architects of Roma (OAR). These contributions are usually field-related and continuously nourish the architectural debate. The official proposals and manifestoes made by formal organisations, like the National Order of Architects, Urban planners and Landscape Designers (CNAPPC) or the National Institute of Urban planning (INU), are the third source.

1. BAD STRATEGY

> Bad strategy tends to skip over pesky details such as problems. It ignores the power of choice and focus, trying instead to accommodate a multitude of conflicting demands and interests. [Bad] strategy covers up its failure to guide by embracing the language of broad goals, ambition, vision, and values. (Rumelt, 2011, p. 4)

Bad strategy can be seen as suggesting incoherent, or even impracticable strategic objectives using high-sounding words. Therefore, it is a result of a misconception of what strategy is which actually produces consequences – notably, disadvantageous consequences. In other words, bad strategy "is not the same thing as no strategy or strategy that fails rather than succeeds. Rather, it is an identifiable way of thinking and writing about strategy" (p. 36). Rumelt also identifies four (quite picturesquely named) hallmarks that characterise bad strategy: fluff; failure to face the challenge; mistaking goals for strategy; and bad strategic objectives (p. 32). Although this scheme does not automatically mark a proposal as bad strategy, the hallmarks may be seen as symptoms of a bigger problem. Thus, it could work to reframe Italian architectural debate after the pandemic, and better understand its limited efficacy.

1.1. Fluff

Although the term fluff may be considered just a little bit too strong, it is fair to say that, too often, architects express their ideas through fascinating, but also ambiguous words and text. We are not referring to the properly specific terms and their meaning, the so-called archispeak (Porter, 2004): "fluff masquerades as expertise [...] and analysis" (Rumelt, 2011, p. 37), being consciously void of arguments and only aiming at gaining attention. Even if a right amount of fluff is ontologically connected to architects' attitude of producing poetics more than theories (Deregibus, 2016, p. 34), there is a well-detectable inclination toward fluff in Italian debate. Pierluigi Nicolin (1991) even defined ten styles used by architects for

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presenting their project and ideas, all of which showed a variable degree of fluff, lacking concreteness and aiming to charm the audience more than explaining something. During the pandemic, Kate Wagner (2020), coined the term coronagrifting, i.e. “using such a crisis for shameless self-promotion and the generation of clicks and income, while providing little to no material benefit" – a definition recalling Gillespie’s (2008) greenwashing one. Quite curiously, as one of the first devices against coronavirus – the so-called CURA (Connected Units for Respiratory Ailments) – was designed by the Italian architect Carlo Ratti, coronagrifting at the product scale is indeed quite limited in the Italian debate. Quite the opposite, at the architectural and urban scale, there are plenty of examples.

Stefano Boeri just claimed his plan for Tirana (on which he has been working since 2015) to be the “first neighbourhood in Europe [...] able to respond to the new needs of the post-Covid 19 pandemic phase” (Ravenscroft, 2020). Renzo Piano (2020) have envisioned that it will be critical “to build buildings able to live with the environment” – as sustainability was never conceived; or to enhance “the fragility, the sensitivity of architecture as a new expressive frontier”, whatever this could mean. Massimiliano Fuksas has claimed that architects must build “more flexible spaces” – maybe a little bit too generic aim? – envisioning blocks of apartments in which levels “may change anytime for hosting smart-offices or healthcare space”, and flats are like “pleasant refuges” (Merlo, 2020) – just like architects usually designed bad houses on purpose. The same absence of real contents can be detected in many claims about “future houses” being able to react to this emergency (Bertelli, 2020) – which, although utopian, would be as desirable as useless, as the next emergency will be, by definition, unexpected. In all these cases, proposals do not show any substantial contents: they are merely moral exhortations aimed at presenting architects as prophetic and illuminated “builders of the future” (Piano, 2020). The same can be said about Fuksas’ and Boeri’s suggestion to “come back to villages and enjoy smart-working” (Varlese, 2020. Brunella, 2020), which totally ignores the main problem concerned with such hypothesis – the digital divide – or the gravest consequences of diffused remote-working on cities (OAR, 2020a). Such proposals, more than having no effect (which would be the effect of “no strategy”) reduce to fluffy slogans the efforts of numerous architects and academics for overcoming the separation between urban environment and the countryside (De Rossi & Mascino, 2020), not by chance triggering quite upset replies (Bussone, 2020). Thus, even if the use of ethics and visions in a rhetorical way is, unfortunately, quite common (Deregibus, 2016, p. 14), all these examples show an unprecedented degree of fluff.

1.2. Failure To Face The Challenge

We may think that fluff is just enough for reducing most proposals to self-promotion. Nevertheless, the limit between propaganda and ethics (Deregibus, 2016, p. 45) is all but easy to define. That is why the other hallmarks identified by Rumelt are so important. The “failure to face the challenge” directly derives by the misconceptions of the problem. For example, in the case of the CURA module, the problem was carefully limited, and it was possible to design a solution: defining the problem, as difficult to solve as it may be, allows to make specific proposals. On the contrary, most of the suggestions emerging by the architectural debate are generic precisely since they do not deal with “a” problem, whatever it may be. For example, one of the priorities proposed by INU is a Green New Deal, which “by decarbonizing production systems, supporting the circular economy, and pushing urban renewal and sustainable tourism, aims to pursue the adaptation and the mitigation of risks

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deriving from climate changes, for healthier, more sustainable and more equitable urban communities" (INU, 2020). However, while stressing the application of existing (and much-ignored) plans is an embraceable call, its relation with the pandemic is quite indirect, not to say obscure. Thus, it becomes a moral call, more than a practical proposal. Similarly, various soft-mobility measures are being proposed to improve the quality of the city. However, while there could be a relation between commuting rate and the pandemic (Musolino & Rizzi 2020), much less obvious is the specific advantage of soft mobility. Possibly, this unclear relation is why, even if several Italian cities (Rome, Bologna, Turin, Bari and Milan) are among the twenty most enthusiast cities in announcing permanent or temporary cycling measures, actually implemented actions are far less impressive (ECF, 2020). Small changes followed grandiose announcements, probably because these measures relied on (respectable and shareable) political and moral reasons, but failed in facing the true challenge. By contrast, just a few lines after, there is a clear call to drastically improve broadband connection and the existing Plan for Digital Italy – aimed at improving broadband diffusion (Bonora & Vaccari, 2014). Even without proposing practical measures, this call at least faces a definite and recognized problem (UNCEM, 2020), thus entering the debate (or rather, the debate on how to do it or how much would it cost).

Misconceptions and biases can lead to similar failures. The CNAPPC (2020b) suggested that a priority topic should be the adoption of "a systemic approach". Still, it refers it to the traditional concept of the city, made by the centre and the outskirts – a pretty outdated vision. Just a few lines after, the same list invokes a quite obscure "system of strategies" for improving the relationship between the city and the territory, even if the challenge would be precisely the defining a comprehensive strategy based on the relation between them, more than putting aside two separate strategies. Another example is the compresence of claims to the beauty of the countryside – an invitation to spread people far from the city – and suggestions for proximity cities (Carta, 2020), mainly inspired by the "Ville du quart d 'heure" plan for Paris or the 20 Minute Neighbourhood Portland's plan. Unfortunately, these examples are usually interpreted as a generic closeness between houses and services, without further insights.

1.3. Mistaking Goals For Strategy

While strategic objectives "should address a specific process or accomplishment" (Rumelt, 2011 p. 47), goals are the desired status in the future. In systems theory terms, this future of the present is ontologically different from the present of the future, i.e. the real state of things when the future will happen (Luhmann, 1996, p. 51). Here the difference between goals and strategic objectives originates: we may, and should, select a series of purposes, but then, the strategy for reaching those goals is a different thing. A clear example is the repeated misuse of the concept of resiliency. Initially defined as the normal development under difficult conditions, it gradually turned into a positive adaptation despite adversities (Luthar, 2006). Therefore, since it entered architectural debate (Pickett et al., 2004), it was intended as a most desirable goal, eventually becoming the 11th Sustainable Development Goal in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: again, a goal, not a strategic objective. But in Italian architectural debates, resiliency inspires more poetic vision and metaphors – being defined as "a more appropriate circular metabolism of all functions of the city" (Carta, 2020) – than practical suggestions on how to improve adaptation. In a 24-hours marathon called DIALOGARE24H, organised by CNAPPC (2020b), one of the main topics was "Italy as a net of

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Resilient Cities": the resulting claim was the invitation to "Promote the renewal of outskirts through polycentric socio-cultural-environmental regeneration projects, integrated into a widespread system of poles and centres, joined in a network". Not only this claim fails in defining any strategic action, but it is also outrageously obscure. The other topics (Global challenges; Sustainable dwelling; Urban and territorial renewal; Innovative virtuous models) produced similar statements, ending in a manifesto with little or no strategic outputs.

Another example is the hope for a "happy city, supplied with extraordinary as inevitable technologies, […] an "organism", […] a network of all parts of the extended territory, where even the remotest places are like safe locations, and social cohesion is enhanced through the local dimension" (Alvisi, 2020). Even supposing that this statement was something more than fluff – as this polished phrase simply means that countryside should work as a refuge for citizens during emergencies – it shows a clear shift between the goal (the "happy city") and the proposed strategy: that is, "to redesign sections of the city". An impossible task indeed due to the historical buildings and Italian cultural background – paradoxically, this resistance is a real example of urban resilience. The same strategic weakness can be detected in Stefano Boeri's cathedratic enunciation for the "three top priority for Italian cities", i.e. soft mobility, forestation and energy transition (Pierotti, 2020): unquestionably essential objectives, but void of any indications about how to make them real. Thus, again, goals, presented as strategic without being as such.

1.4. Bad Strategic Objectives

The last hallmark of bad strategy is having "bad strategic objectives", that is, in Rumelt's colourful style, either "dog's dinner" or "blue-sky" ones: both highlight the true reason behind bad strategic objectives, i.e. the inability of making choices and, consequently, actual proposals.

The first categories refer to the tendency of enumerating a (long) series of unconnected aims, without imposing a priority rate or relating them. The Order of Architects of Rome collected no less than 31 information clips (OAR, 2020b), by selecting just the most significant "strategies, objective, models and outlooks": obviously, many are inconsistent with each other. Also suggestions for post-pandemic houses typically take the form of a dog's dinner list – apparently showing that existing ones are uninhabitable. New homes should indeed: have at least 50% of the façade covered in green, avoid 5g and wireless technology, be supplied with water-saving devices (Pica Ciamarra, 2020); be less obstructive and limiting (Cucinella, 2020); offer new possibilities for living together, most likely on roofs (Musillo, 2020); valorise balconies and terraces (Carpenzano, 2020); be bigger (Politini, 2020). But achieving these goals would require a complete revolution in regulating, financing, commissioning, designing, producing, buying, and living houses: problematic for new ones, it is obviously impossible for the already the existing ones – and it's worth noting that 75% of architectural market in Italy is about renovation, the highest rate in Europe (Mura et al., p. 12). The result is that the market actually orients housing evolution way more than architects and their smart, but vague suggestions.

Instead, blue-sky objectives are simply "restatements of the desired state of affairs" (Rumelt, 2011, p.54). This is the case of the manifesto by the CNAPPC (2020b): strategic suggestions as "following the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)", as well as enhancing architectural competition as opportunities, simply reiterate a hoped state of things by a

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moral invocation, without suggesting any measure that could change the situation. While the 17 SDG are generically present in most debates, rarely they actually enter architectural debate; and the limited use of open architectural competitions is a long-term problem in Italy (Bonfiglio et al., 2018). The same can be said about some of the suggestions made by INU (2020), like the indication of "improving soft mobility, railway, public transport, and street network" – that is, all existing communication routes. Or the invocation to "simpler processes and less bureaucracy": a moral claim will change the situation which will not change this long-term problem – it has been said that in Italy there is a sort of "Truman Show of normative simplification" (Basilica & Barazzoni, 2014, p. 224). An easy way for detecting blue-sky objective is noting that, not too surprisingly, quite all the keywords appearing in the proposals were already there before the pandemic: most suggestions simply revamp them, now just relying on the emergency state for holding a broader appeal with the general public.

2. WHY SO MUCH BAD STRATEGY?

This reframe shows an alarming strategic weakness of proposals emerging from the Italian architectural debate. Three are the main reasons for this lack of thoroughness. The first is the inability to understand the problem, the deep reasons behind it, and its possible outcomes (Rumelt, 2011, p. 77). In the case of the pandemic, most issues related to space (e.g., the difficulty in managing remote working in the homeplace; the problem of social distancing in public areas) could have been foreseen, but architects started to speak about them only when they were evident – working on what Okashah and Goldwater (1994) called known knowns or known unknows, when the problem was an unknown unknown. The second is the conflict of interest. Many proposals are definitely aimed at getting commissions of some kind – like being hired as a consultant for urban renewal, smart-cities implementation or cities forestation – and self-promoting. It is a different kind of coronagrifting, indeed: a rivalry resulting from the outrageous number of Italian architects (more than 150.000 out of a population of 60 million people) and their desperate search for visibility. The third reason is the "unwillingness or inability to choose" (Rumelt, 2011, p.59). All official statements report long lists of objectives, even conflicting ones. Way more useful would be to propose just a few actions, but very carefully chosen (Ivančić, 2014), but this choice would imply a proper strategic view.

Communication enhances these problems. Newspapers and TV broadcasts report only the most famous architects' opinions as they represented all architects – which is false. Webpages and social media usually report comments against these very same opinions, even if praised by the press. Forums, journals and reviews report soliloquies more than disputes, as the contributions show no reference to each other. Associations favour a (well-disguised) top-down approach trough proposals coming from restricted boards. In other words, debates are amazingly fragmented, so that there is a sensible shift between the actual proposals and the perception of these proposals. Most suggestions seem erratic and unconvincing because, elsewhere, there are opposite or at least inconsistent ones.

The ultimate result of such weakness is that architects fail to significantly influence what Dan Hill (2012) calls "dark matter", or the "amorphous, nebulous yet fundamental", network of organisations, culture, bureaucracy and norms (p. 81). Excluded from the task forces, ignored in the writing of laws and decree-laws, architects at most inspire massive plans (e.g., soft mobility plan, green city plan), which, not too curiously, most often get lost in the maze

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of procedures, like any long-term proposal which mistakes goals for strategy and scarcely cares for proximate actions. It could seem that this ineffectiveness, for Italian architects, comes from social factors – either a loss of authority and credibility (Armando & Durbiano, 2017) or the idea that architects have more aesthetical than practical skills (Abis & Airoldi, 2018). But reframing the debate shows that most proposals, while being imaginative and sometimes operative, do not have any capacity to influence the dark matter: thus, the problem could be a lack of competence in changing wishful thinking in strategic design actions. For example, even if the main debates were about how to live the public space, only a few architectural proposals actually proposed concrete actions for making it usable while ensuring social distancing (Hitti, 2020). Quite all similar Italian projects, as those reimagining beaches (Carillo, 2020; Giannitielli, 2020), failed because they favoured the conceptual (demagogic) dimension over the dark matter – for example, they were too complicated or expensive, or they were against rules and regulations, or did not take in account how people act and live. That is revealing, as so many international cases show possible solutions – think to Domino's Park or High Line in New York, or Centrum Sztuki Galeria EL in Elblag, Poland, or, speaking about beaches, the smart solution adopted in La Grande-Motte, France.

3. WHY DO WE NEED ARCHITECTURE?

> Few designers would see that their design challenge is to understand, and often reorient, [the net of] relationships. [...] Designers, like clients, are themselves attracted to the shiny end of projects, rather than delving into the dark matter and settling in for the lengthy engagement with an organization. (Hill, 2012, p. 93)

Comparing the proposals made by architects with other suggestions, like those by the Order of the Engineers of Milano (2020), it is clear that the last ones are much more practical and dark-matter-oriented. Indeed, architects' reactions to the pandemic seem more aimed at self-promotion – or to the promotion of architecture itself, for the less famous architects – than at solving a problem or influence future changes. In other words, proposals emerging from Italian architectural debate are certainly "vision-oriented", but lack any strategic dimension, rarely dealing with the complexity and even proposing conflicting aims. That is probably why the dark matter has ignored them so far. Invocations for a law of (or for) architecture (CNAPPC, 2018. MAXXI, 2020) are understandable, also considering the severe job crisis of architecture in Italy (Mura et al., 2016). However, much stronger these invocations would be if they could explain why exactly Italy do "need for architecture" (CNAPPC, 2020a) as claimed by all architectural organisations – moral reasons aside. Indeed, the answer could be that architects can "spatialise strategies" (De Rossi & Deregibus, 2020), using the project for exploiting, and orienting the potential (Jullien, 2004, p. 16) of dark matter: this attitude would allow architects to deal with infrastructuring (Pipek and Wulf, 2009), working both on things and the relations between them (Larkin 2013) for designing all along the process (Chia, 2014). This conceptual shift implies using the project as a tactical tool for shaping the process as long as architectures, influencing the dark matter as long as dealing with it (Star and Ruhleder, 1996).

The pandemic has highlighted several topics which would critically benefit of this kind of architectural attitude. For example, care facilities for the elderly, almost always isolated buildings with no direct contact with the rest of the world, proved to be totally inadequate: instead of being preserved, they suffered a dramatic contagion rate (Noli, 2020). Instead of

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nursing homes, probably it would have been better to have diffused residential facilities. An alternative hindered by the fact the most houses in Italy are private, and rarely people relocate: older people move to hospices only when they cannot avoid it. At the same time, remote-working is already shaping city's spaces, both the way of using buildings and the ground floor of commercial activities: consequently, the availability and the values of spaces and buildings will change a lot, while new opportunities for the smaller town will rise. However, as the so-called "inner areas" (Tronca, 2020) lack facilities and service, this transition risks being difficult. These three topics – house facilities, city's space, inner areas – are close connected: and they all concern spaces, requiring architectural projects able to infrastructure the dark matter, instead of decorating the places.

Even so, architecture could play a role even at a smaller scale: epitomic is the case of the vaccination campaign facilities. Clearly, vaccinating about 50million people require an infrastructuring of some kind. Awkwardly, the architectural answer to this demand was the so-called Primrose Pavilion by Stefano Boeri (De Iuliis, 2020): a useless, purely symbolic project unable to fit the vast majority of the historical squares to which should be destined, for either its dimensions or its too pure form. Above all, cheaper, smarter, more flexible and practical solutions already exist (the emergency tents used for earthquakes or similar disaster, for example). So, self-promotion of the design team aside, the project just has aroused polemics against its pointlessness: and, by extension, against the pointlessness of architecture tout court. Only the ability to influence and orient the dark matter will make it possible to evolve those generic, vague and unpractical proposals into strategic ones: and only then, architecture will become indispensable in Italy.

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