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CONTENTS

CREDITS

"THE WORLD'S LONGEST MISTAKE"?

SUSTAINABLE URBAN DESIGN AND THE RENOVATION OF SOCIAL HOUSING ESTATES: ALSO A DISCIPLINARY PROBLEM

Italy is not somewhere that you associate with modernist planning. However while most Italian citizens managed to avoided the modernists, the tenants of social housing estates were less lucky. In March 2006 the Politecnico di Milano organized a conference to look at ways in which these estates have been tackled across Europe at which David Rudlin from URBED was invited to speak. The project was organised by Sergio Porta and this is his keynote address to the conference translated from the Italian. In it he describes how the

architects who created estates like the kilometre long block at Corviale outside Rome continue to be celebrated in exhibitions while the architectural establishment try and explain away why the celebrated estates did not work. At the same time an Italian new urbanism movement is emerging, as in the UK, that proposed a very different approach to these estates, something you would think to be self-evident to the Italians! The full proceedings are available on URBED's web site.

1 The periphery and the culture of design: failure of the periphery?

The title of this contribution, that also is the tile of the seminar held at the Polytechnic of Milan in March 2006, evokes an article published in the issue 273 of the French magazine of architecture "L'architecture d'Aujourd'Hui", February 1991, an issue that deepened the problems inherent in the large scale of urban transformations. In particular that article, written by Careri and La Roque, addressed a strict criticism of the Corviale estate, a massive social housing project built in Rome during the seventies by a group of architects led by Mario Fiorentino. The story of Corviale is similar to that of most, if not all, the social housing estates raised up in the western world in the same years.

It is similar, in example, to the story of Pruitt Igoe, a large social housing estate realized in St. Louis a few years before Corviale then demolished in 1972. The synthesis of such stories is in the very fact that, less than half a century later, the renewal of such massive residential stock is one of the most relevant issues in the urban planning agenda in all western world Countries. It has been understood that the problem is not just the renewal of buildings, but rather the social and economic renewal of all involved communities of those neighbourhoods. Such communities, in fact, almost always suffer for the same problems: poor social and spatial

Student project from Laboratorio di Progettazione Urbanistica, looking at the St. Ambrose district in Milan 2004-2005.

integration, economic stagnation, failure of the retail community commerce system, physical and environmental decay and finally the most serious, the most dangerous of all: poor generational turn-over. The sons, if just they can, they leave. To escape from the estate is perceived in itself as a success. To remain in the estate as a failure.

From time to time, often under the pressure of news items, yesterday the homicides in Rozzano, today the Parisian banlieues on fire, the debate on what to do with the large social housing estates has expanded, interwoven with the problem of the peripheries as a whole, particularly with the sprawled low density suburbs. From this point of view, that is from the point of view of urban sustainability, these are two faces of the same coin. In that debate it is possible to hear voices coming from different disciplines. Sociology, urban anthropology, micro-economy, human and economic geography, transport and urban planning,

entered the scene with ideas, evaluations, tools. From opposite positions it invokes the complete demolition and reconstruction (like in Pruitt-Igoe or Hulme) or more subtle processes of immersion and valorisation of the social, together with the architectural and environmental, context. The very existence of such a debate tells a lot of the level reached by the disaster.

The disciplines of architecture and urban design are part of this. We architects and urban designers apparently approach the question of the periphery with deep divisions, especially about the role and the responsibility of the project, of form I would say, in the production of the social disease: it is my personal conviction that to make clear the nature of such contrapositions and to take a stand among them is important to free the potential that architects and urban designers have to positively contribute to the debate. And that drives back to the title of the seminar and the Corviale estate.

2 The periphery and the culture of design: failure of the culture of design?

I'll put it badly: is the historical failure of the periphery also the historical failure of our disciplinary tradition?

I am not hanging around the question too long and I will say that in my opinion yes, absolutely yes: the failure of our metropolitan peripheries also - I underline "also", so "not only" - happened through the active contribution of the culture of architectural and urban design - if with that we intend its original root, its DNA, its constituent generator and to date still its mainstream, which is grounded on hygenism, a fundamental antiurbanism, a will of power, a top-down vision (yesterday supported by dreams of social engineering, today by the crisis of evaluative machines and the weakness of cultural discourses), an heroic image of the designer that comes together with an artistic approach to the job, and finally an inclination to separate reality in isolated phenomena missing connections and feed-backs (which means missing systems' complexity). These characters are all constituent of our discipline, as they emerged together with the formation of urban design at the end of the XIX century, and finally came to a full realization with the simplifications and formalisms as much of the modern tradition as of the so-called architectural post-modernism; moreover, we still in our days - which is mostly interesting - find such a lot of them in much of the current design production: I refer to the solipsistic, self-celebrative, sculptural attitudes that pervade the cultural circuits of contemporary design.

The Corviale in Rome comes from this culture; it is a symbol of it and one of the more explicit. The shortcomings and failures attributed to that architectural culture in terms of inhabitability, liveability, durability is provided: Corviale, "the world's longest mistake" (it consists of a one kilometre long linear block), was taken as an icon of that failure. But this is just the first reason that I am interested in Corviale today.

The second reason is that a few months ago, which means a good 15 years after the article in question, a celebration of the same Fiorentino's Corviale together with the ZEN in Palermo by Vittorio Gregotti and the Monte Amiata in Milan by Aldo Rossi and Carlo Aymonino, has been played through a seminar and an exhibition in Parma (the exhibition is still crossing through Italy): "such estates", was argued in the presentation, "emerge at the urban and landscape scales and at the architectural scale, expressing the most advanced achievements of the housing articulation. [They] witness a possibility that the city still has to give itself forms that only architecture shapes". Lexicon apart (but that is not apart, actually, as more space would deserve the analysis of the use that the architects vanguard's cliques do of the lexicon to build the walls of a discipline's simulacrum around themselves), lexicon apart I was saying, Corviale, Zen and Monte Amiata are proposed as "unmissable disciplinary achievements"; that is: icons for the architecture of the future. Some weeks ago I read of a dispute provoked by a statement of the minister Iervolino who, on the occasion of the demolishment of one of the so-called "Scampìa sails" (huge social housing blocks soon evolved in ghettoes of social exclusion and crime), accused the designer, Franz di Salvo, who passed away many years ago; against the minister's accusations immediately rose up the President of the local architects

professional association and the Dean of the School of Architecture of the local university remembering that the designer had been - which is pure truth - an eminent exponent of the Italian architectural culture of his times, so much so that his work was celebrated in a big exhibition just three years ago.

Therefore Corviale, like Zen, Monte Amiata, the "Scampìa sails" and lots of others, is actually the symbol of an internal conflict, of a break within the disciplines of the project: is it - and what it represents - a mistake, or better the "world's longest mistake", or a lesson for the future? It is evident in short that, whatever position one may hold, here there is a problem. A substantial part of our architectural and urban culture is not able to calmly answer to the question: "what the architects have to do with the peripheries' degradation?".

Of course I have already made my point clear, but I would like to quickly proceed with a deeper reflection on this issue.

The first thing is that yes, once again, the architectural culture is not the only factor at work in the construction of metropolitan peripheries and we are not unaware of the risk to fall into a "deterministic" attitude, that is the danger that derives from thinking that certain architectural configurations will directly determine certain social behaviours, both those desired and those, like in this case,
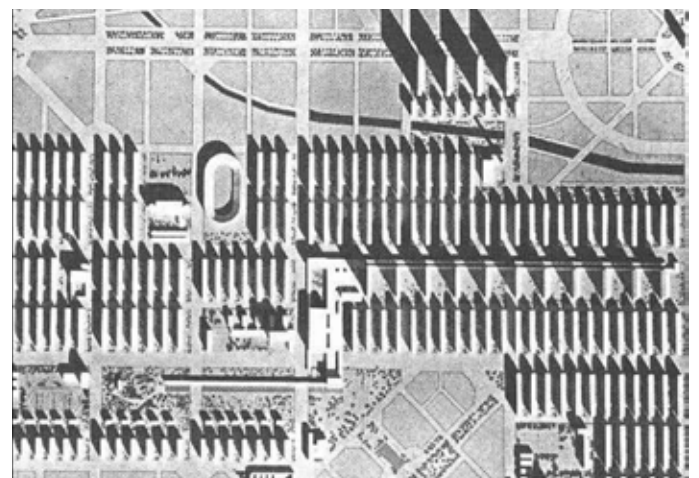
Milano Verde, Pagano, Gardella e altri, 1938.

undesired. Of course, I am saying this once and for all, we know that the form's impact on people's behaviour is mediated by thousands of other factors - social, cultural, economic, climatic. We know that the ecological system, that is the system of the relationships between man and physical environment, is a highly complex system within which the spatial dimension is just one of the many players on the field.

But, and this is the point, complexity can not be an alibi. It seems in fact undisputable that, in the construction of the great social housing projects, the story has not been one of a struggle led by the architectural culture against overwhelming counterpowers, let's say a generous and lost struggle. It seems on the contrary that the story has been one where the architectural culture had found in the realization of such estates the opportunity to realize in walls and mud its most advanced principles. Social housing estates have been, for the whole post-war period, the direct - I would say "crystalline" - emanation of the urban models of "orthodox modernism" - to put it like Jane Jacobs - through the work of its most celebrated masters. Here we see for instance the project "Milano verde" by Pagano, Gardella and other young Milanese rationalists (1938). Incidentally, we can rapidly see what is the opinion of the inhabitants of the Barzoni estate, realized by Arrighetti again in Milan (second half of the fifties), on some of our masters' realizations. In short, in front of Corviale we architects, like in front of a magic mirror, see ourselves, our deepest roots. That's why it is so hard for us to exert criticism and consciousness: because it is self-criticism and self-consciousness that we speak of.

How did we react, in fact, to the problem of peripheries? How it could be expected, that is in two ways. On one side there is a sheltering behind the defence of the principles of disciplinary mainstream. Why did the models fail? First, because they were betrayed in practice. Buildings were not completed, services were not completely

realized, abusive occupations occurred. The call, in short, to the invocation of Le Corbusier who stated: "The harmonious city must firstly be planned by experts who know the science of urbanism. They will elaborate their plans in total freedom from external pressures and particular interests; once their plans are formulated they must be actuated without opposition" (Le Corbusier, in Hall P, 2002). My goodness, the model was perfect, but there is always something that comes to stain it, mutilate it, to break the crystal, to smash up the piece of art. There is always some excess of criminals, some surplus of poverty, some budget cut, some personal initiative of inhabitants, some error in construction. Life, my goodness, does not seem to be collaborating.

Second, there has been no failure: indeed we witness clues of social re-aggregation, here a voluntary association, there even a local television station. But there is a third argument, particularly subtle: it is not the models that failed, it is the city that is complex. Too complex. After all, we architect are with bare hands facing such complexity: no one knows what to do in such a mess or, to put it like Stefano Boeri, director of the most important architectural magazine in Italy: "The truth is that today we do not know how to redevelop to a real urban life those nebulas of detached houses, small cottages, warehouses that has grown around our cities" (Boeri S, 2005a). But there's more: we must, humbly by Jove, "recognize at last the marginality of our actions in the societies of the multitudes" (Boeri S, 2005b). That is, here we go with the most dangerous of the arguments: the maximalism of complexity as a pretext for a rhetoric of impotence and a practice of permanent de-responsibility – 'The city is so complex, there is nothing we poor architects can do, therefore we may well give up and do absolutely what we like more and come back to our favourite little games: spun skyscrapers, technological ziggurat, neo-pop deconstructions etc. Symbols, style and let's leave all the rest to sociologists'.

But indeed in front of the crisis of the models there is a second kind of answers: the gradual reframing of our disciplinary culture. Some of the same masters had the time, force and lucidity to initiate this process of reframing in the warm body, still young and kicking, of orthodox planning. Bottoni, Rogers to look at Milan (I am speaking of Ernesto Nathan Rogers of course…). But no doubts that generally speaking that reframing follows the classical scheme of scientific revolutions, a struggle between alternative paradigms, with all the conflicts between organizations, power groups, tools. And this story, in Italy at least, is in the middle of its process. Or better, it is just begun. And at the core of that conflict today we find again the social housing estates, no more or not just the question of their construction, but the huge problem of their reclaiming, renovation and revitalization.

What are the fundamental elements of this alternative culture of urban design? To offer a summary is not hard work. There is a lot of material at hand (just for a beginning: Newman and Kenworthy, 1999; Urban Task Force, 1999; Frey, 1999; Llewelyn-Davies, 2000). And here is the news: the news, in fact, is that it is not true at all that we architects do not know what to do with complexity and with the agglomeration of detached houses. On the contrary it is true that during the last ten years and more, drawing from an uninterrupted reflection emerged since the early sixties, the international scientific community in the disciplines of architecture and urban design has found a substantial consensus around key-principles, visions, real cases and practices for the revitalization of cities, of peripheries and also, within this framework, of social housing estates.

Keywords are: neighbourhood, community, density, compactness, diversity (of persons, buildings, functions), public space, public life, ecological network, alternative mobility, traffic calming, traffic demand management rather than offer provision. In short, hierarchy of communities that should be individuated,

approached and structured by means of a hierarchy of collective and individual alternative mobility. The goal, as in a recent European research named Eco-city, is the "city of short distances" (see the final report of the Eco-city project at: http://www.ecocityprojects.net/uploa d/00Library/ECOCITY_Publishable_ Final_Report.pdf).

A recognizable disciplinary body, ready to provide ideas, experiences, attitudes, that are suitable for complex arenas and rich of tools. Useful stuff, theoretically grounded, oriented to action. This is so true that in native countries (United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, even the United States) the time for experimentations, the time of adolescence if you want, has been overcome by the time of a critical reflection on the delivered achievements. Not only it is not true that we don't know what to do, but we already have known what to do in the past, we have experimented and are now reflecting on such experiences; the adolescence of a new culture of urbanity is over and we are entering the adult age.

Have we got the keys for the solution of the problems of peripheries? Well, let's not joke. But we have something: we have larger shoulders, large enough to take some responsibilities. To this culture of urbanity and, I would say, of civil responsibility (our School
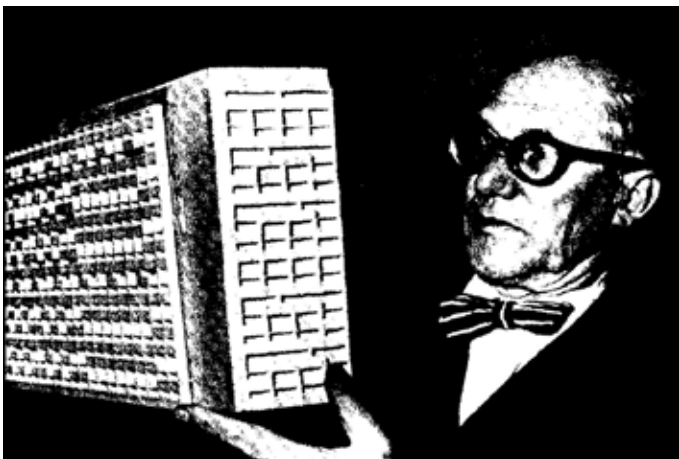
is named "School of Civil Architecture"), the students' works at our Laboratory of Urban Design are inspired. Students produce projects for the renovation of social housing estates built in Milan after the second World War. Key steps: 1. Field analysis; 2. Manipulation of the urban model. Field analysis builds arguments, not truths. It builds and validates them within the discipline, then arguments are proposed outside, put on the table of social negotiation, the language opened, an open and consensus-based process formed. The manipulation of the urban model, not just the intervention on single buildings, is the major contribution that we can and must give. It emerges from the self-criticism that we mentioned before.

Therefore the renewal of social housing estates should be also, and maybe mainly, a process of urban design, which should grow around a specific urban design "device": the Master Plan. As for that, we that work in the cradle of the Renaissance ideally place ourselves within the stream of "an urban Renaissance" as well.

This wink to the Renaissance comes of course from the reference to the work of the Urban Task Force in the UK (Urban Task Force, 1999), but it also comes from an indeed great contradiction that refers to our country, Italy.

One strolls around the university departments of all the world and sees, attached to the walls, the streets and squares of our historical cities taken as models for the sustainable city of the future. On the contrary in our country the debate does not seem to escape the pendulum between conservation (including conservation of the modern) and oblivion. We should instead recognize that in historical settings we can find operating lessons for the nodal informational city of the future (Newman and Kenworthy, 1999) in terms of the public space framework, the functional mix and the fundamental interface between public and private realms. It is in that, not in problems of style or language, that the premodern city teaches us a new urbanity for the future.

I believe that this lesson is relevant for our times. Indeed, I believe that it has been long waited for, not just by the people but by the builders and real estate agents as well. The feeling I have is that it is not true that the market is as bad as it is claimed to be. I have the feeling that builders and real estate agents would benefit a lot from a change in design that can reduce the distance between common sensibility and architectural culture; a distance that, at the end of the chain, increases the entrepreneurial risk by provoking alienation to places and environments, de-qualifying both products and brands, "firing" the decisional arena through the diffusion of lethal cynicism and suspicion among the actors. The hope is that it is possible to walk together for a while, more together than we have been doing so far, between builders with a long sight in the future, subjects capable of common vision and reciprocal trust, and architects that, following the invocation of an old Corviale inhabitant, "do not commit certain mistakes anymore, never commit such mistakes!" (Careri and La Roque, 1991). us

Le Corbusier,
Hall P, 2002.