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Town planning and architecture. A Relationship to be renewed

Graziella Tonon

In 1965 the architect Shadrach Woods maintained: "It is understandable how Americans, who do not have an ancient civilization to boast of, can be satisfied with their suburbs: but that Europeans, with all the urban culture they have, can accept that their own towns be ravaged is amazing".

In the years that followed, the urban renaissance that transpired in some European towns puts Woods' negative judgment in perspective, but does not cancel it out completely. His judgment seems ever appropriate especially when discussing Italy. Here, in the land of one and many, where history has planted a number of wonderful towns, each with its own unmistakable personality, devastation continues unchecked. The topic for discussion is not renaissance but this unstoppable crisis.

According to one widely held opinion, the winning inclination in settlements, one which represents the individualistic as well as technological nature of contemporary society, would rule out traditional urban space. What makes it unnecessary is the new way of living separate, scattered, splintered, belonging to the arrangement called 'town region' in the 1960's and more recently 'sprawling town', or 'infinite town'.

And yet there are thousands of indications that many metropolitan residents would not scorn living in urban spaces, given the chance. Streets and piazzas in beautiful towns still offer an ideal place to live, thanks to their functional and architectural characteristics. They put everything that makes life pleasurable within reach, including the performance of the urban scene, with its orderly and frequently admirable pattern. Furthermore, they represent the right distance between public and private, not too small so as to appear to infringe on the sense of personal freedom, as happens in hemmed in communities, nor so big so as to create a sense of solitude or insecurity, as happens in the boundless, shattering metropolitan fragmentation.

Without a doubt, the disintegration of metropolitan territories constitutes a ponderous obstacle that is resistant to all desires to reform building in a urban sense. Acknowledging this fact, however, does not mean that the urban tradition does not make sense for humans. Nor does it mean town planning that put and puts defending and reinventing urbanity at the core of its projects is obsolete, which was the case in recent decades when only the interests of economic players and the laws of the market were allowed to govern towns, with the devastating results that are visible to all.

The lessons of town planning have actually much to offer for getting back on the road to recovery and rediscovering civic beauty and measure. Here, I will indicate just two points: one concerns the nature and character of the town; the other concerns the very way of planning archi-

ecture.

The town is an indissoluble union of *civitas* and *urbs*. One aspect conditions the other. The *civitas* affects space, but the long lasting characteristics of the *urbs* can have an impact on the quality of life that goes far beyond social changes. For this reason, if town planning sees living not only as present but also as future, it cannot consider the language used by urban building to express itself, on an architectural basis, as a secondary aspect, or something that it is outside of its own responsibility. The aesthetics of urban space is just as important as its rational functionality in making a town.

From this point of view, training in town planning can work to create an embankment against the spread of individualistic will in the sphere of architectural design that has caused and is causing much damage to the beauty of places. There is, however, a caveat: town planning must be more than a discipline that regards ordering functions and volumes in space, it must also, following in some of its tradition, be the art of bringing order to space: urban art, capable of conceiving buildings, streets, piazzas, gardens, and more generally open and closed spaces, the empty and full spaces always in their mutual relationships, as components that can create an organic, larger whole: the nature and role of public open spaces, on which the recognizable identity of places depends.

Moreover, it is the sensorial experience, more than any abstract thinking that tells us that the way things relate to each other in space, whether near or far, violent or delicate, decorous or vulgar allows us to perceive and judge whether a place is hostile or welcoming. If we value the lesson which places give us, we must accept that what characterizes space as being urban is always how buildings are arranged and their proximity, which allows making the image of the empty space appear clearly and harmoniously configured as 'insideness'.

The fascination of many town streets is hardly ever determined by the presence of a solitary piece of architecture, however great, but rather it lies in the good manners shown in how the buildings dialogue with each other and on their ability to put harmony centre stage. It is this harmonic tension, which, despite the differences in the single component elements, creates the wonderful beauty and specificity of the Italian piazza. The very identity of many urban organisms never depends only on their single monuments, but on the harmonious relationship binding them to the more modest fabric of buildings for housing.

In urban design what matters is not so much the aesthetics of the object as much as the aesthetics of the whole. Paying attention to the composition of the whole, on which the quality of open urban space is so dependent, has always been a distinguishing feature of the perspective on town planning nurtured by the functional abstractions of the CIAMs. Frederick Gibberd, as one example of many, in illustrating the Harlow plan, one of the new towns designed by Patrick Abercrombie for the regional

planning scheme for Greater London, wrote: “urban design is the art of arranging the buildings with respect to themselves, each other and the landscape. While what interests us in architecture above all is the interior of buildings, in urban design we must take care of the space between buildings”.

We must add here that all architecture which could cause discomfort should be banned from urban design. Living requires friendly spaces. Aggressiveness, madness, anxiety, the inability to communicate, and vulgarity, all of which are part of being human, are valid subjects for the other arts, but not for the street, not for the piazzas, not for public open space, namely the stage for everyday, collective living that cannot be avoided the way we can put away a book, a picture, a theatre show or a disc.

Architecture and town planning that lack this awareness, that are not helpful in promoting a harmonious configuration in these places or are incapable, for whatever reason, of either listening to the desires that even places have and express or vetoing any uncivil expression, cannot create beauty or much less make landscapes urban. When in architecture, expressive individualism, indifferent to the context, prevails over the tension created by buildings that enter into a dialogue with each other and those who have the power to lead the changes lose their ability to recognize what it is the place is asking for in order to make even its appearance hospitable, a work, which in and of itself may be very interesting, can easily turn out to be a source of ugliness for the whole. This is what happens in a show when the director is not good or in a novel when the author lacks the unifying sense of narration: the scenes appear disconnected, the characters out of place, the story does not hang together, the piece seems out of tune and it does not matter that the music is virtuoso, the writing refined and the acting excellent.

For this reason, given that towns are increasingly being ravaged even by the work of famous architects, with many unlearned and uncivil public officials and equally marred by private clients acting as accomplices, it is urgent that at least at school future planners are educated in the complex art of urban directing or to put it another way in town planning as composition. This is the art of identifying and knowing how to harmoniously orchestrate those uses that can make spaces functionally vital and knowing which forms to adopt in order to render their image friendly. The art of being capable of suggesting to the architecture the right tone to use, where within a place voices can be raised and where they must be whispers or even silent, where the stage must be empty or should be crowded, whether the choir should enter or a single player.

Without this kind of direction in town planning, without a civil awareness common to all residents to build an embankment against the arrogance of those who are stronger, in deciding the face of the town and its landscapes, only ‘mere projects proposed by property companies’ are left: the ‘current defeat’ of town planning.