

The Importance of the Spirit and the Sense of Place

Side Effects of the Underestimation of It in the Modernist's Town Planning

Prof. Arch. Ettore Maria Mazzola
University of Notre Dame School of Architecture Rome Studies
Via Monterone n°76
00186 Rome
Italy
archmazzola@tiscali.it – archmazzola@alice.it

Abstract. Does the spirit and the sense of place influence the quality of life of inhabitants? Is it possible to find any relationship between the reactionary behavior of inhabitants of the so-called French *banlieuse* and the lack of the sense of the place? The social-architectural evolution of those quarters developed in Rome by the Institute for Social Housing at the beginning of the 20th Century, gives us the possible answers to the problems of nowadays cities and to the improvement of life quality. Those quarters, built for the working class, are considered the best examples of urban-architectural composition of the 20th Century; the real estate market valued those houses like the historical centre, and the inhabitants are extremely proud of their neighborhoods, differently from what is happening in more recent developments.

1. Background

I remember when, in 1990, still as a student of Architecture, I did my first trip to Paris. I was terrified by the mass of buildings just finished, as well as by the ones under construction, to satisfy Mitterand's *Grandeur* fancy. What was terrifying me was not the character of those places, but the abomination they were realizing around Paris, in the new "neighbourhoods" such as *La Défense*, *La Villette*, and in the so-called *Villes Nouvelle*, like Cergy Pontoise, Préfecture, Marne la Vallée, etc.

My friends, obviously students of Architecture - since this “species” tends to make a group on his own and to appreciate all the architecture abhorred by all the other humans – were deeply fascinated by the new Parisian buildings and, according to the lobotomy received in the School of Architecture, they were always repeating the same old story inculcated to them while students: “ ... *at least, here in France they build! It is not like in our Country, where everything is forbidden. Here you can breath the true Modern Architecture!*” I couldn't get over they were so enchanted from such shameful things, that could not understand those neighbourhoods were like powder kegs ready prepared to explode soon.

Even if nobody spoke about the modern slavery, the true is that France, in order to satisfy Mitterand's vagaries, “imported” from her former North African colonies a lot of low-costs manpower. This labour was involved in the construction yards, but was never allowed to live in the city, so that it was relegated to the worse peripheries, paid next to nothing, and built only as dormitory towns. In these places there are no spaces for socialization. Except for the presence of local transportation, no public utilities, nor social services, are provided for the citizen.

I remember our Parisian friend's fear walking through the streets of the district Préfecture: was not only the fear for the local gangs, he also warned us for the possible falling-out of the veneer materials of the new buildings, since often was dropping on the heads of the people. Many of the buildings, indeed, were to enveloped into fishing nets in order to avoid this problem. Despite the evidence of the absurdity, as a reaction on my criticism, I was always listening the above mentioned adage: “*at least in France they build!*”

On those days I just took the exam of Urban Sociology (an optional course that was possible to follow in the school of Sociology that was, “obviously”, later suppressed for the students of Architecture and substituted with the class of Urban Geography). Before that, I never thought that at certain point of the human evolution it was necessary to create a specific discipline (and I consider it fundamental for all the architects) in order to study the side effects of our profession of architects. Nevertheless, architects responsible of those defaces, as well as for my friends, were so short-sighted to don't comprehend that are us, with our job, the responsible of the social disease of the inhabitants of the peripheries.

The super-ego, and the consequent total lack of respect for whosoever, demonstrated by almost all those 20th Century architects, with their presumption to be infallibles, but especially the not understanding of passive submission to the worse abominable speculative ideas, masked as distorted concept of modernity (Modernism), have been generated the flattening of the world, as well as the social unease of the peripheries and, finally, the traffic congestion of the historical centres. In conclusion they drove Architecture, and our cities, toward a blind alley.

2. Side-effects – If You’re Not Prepared Do Not Open Pandora's Box

Recently the streets of Paris, as well as for many other French cities, were burned. The govern, in order to stop the “revolution” of the suburbia’s citizens, was forced to re-discover a special law imposing a curfew! As for the responsibilities, the politicians washed their hands of course and took advantage, worse of that, to make demagogy (their favourite sport). So did the interviewed architects, who didn’t even imagine the far hypothesis to be a little bit responsible for this situation. In Italy, in addition to demagogy, there was someone who followed his/her ideology and took advantage to use racist arguments, with a religious background, to justify the needs of paying attention to Islam ... as if violence in the suburbs were a religious problem.

The truth is that we are no longer able to learn from history, since it was seen by the architects – following Gropius and Zevi teaching – “*restrictive for the mind of architects*”. This is the reason why the socio-political lessons, even the most recent ones, are ignored ... probably to avoid to admit one’s own mistakes. This attitude brings the architect to waste a lot of time, and money, looking for a “modernistic” solution to problems already solved by traditional urbanism and architecture. In this way they generally never reach the target, except inside the shadowy and self-celebrating words of architects and of their promoters.

The main limitation of 20th Centuries’ urbanism and architecture was exactly the presumption to don’t take into account what happened before: it could appear strange that the modernists showed, inside and outside the Schools of Architecture, such deep disregard of the way of making architecture in the past, but this appears absolutely normal if we consider that is a typical habit of all the “*dark religions*” and the

new “*Messiah*”, to repudiate their own origins, asserting that their titles are deriving from themselves!

Just to remind something forgotten, or rather unacknowledged to most people, I would like to narrate – and to comment on – some events that should serve as a warning for those who design and/or run the cities.

The day after the industrial revolution, the English utopian sociologist Owen was observing: «*When the bourgeoisie realises that cities have become powder kegs, that revolutionary ideas, not to mention actual revolutions, are brewing, it will deem it appropriate to act not so much to seek to improve working-class conditions, as to conserve itself and its power*».

Today, considering nowadays situation in France we could make paraphrase of it, and could say: *When the politicians and the Town Planners realises that historical centres of cities have become unliveable, because of traffic-jam created by the needs of public spaces of the peripheries' inhabitants, who are forced to come here looking for the missing spaces, it will deem it appropriate to act not so much to seek to improve suburban conditions, as to conserve the historical centre and its quality!*

To segregate the needy classes is not bringing good things, and the way public housing is conceived today aims at this.

Our selfishness manage to, when something bad is happening far from us, that according to the popular phrase “*far from eyes, far from heart*”, we are not upset anymore, or rather, if this happens, our emotion covers a short lapse of time. This is what, sociologically is defined *blasé attitude*. But this shameful behaviour, child of the frenzy of the industrial age, cannot and shouldn't be considered the standard to be used when we build, or “re-qualify” a city. Today the French events must bring all of us to thought, since the periphery's revolution could move, very soon, toward the centre: especially if it were considered symbol of the power of those who segregate into periphery people considered “*the well-off society's waste*”. It is not by repression that we can put down a rebellion, since violence brings violence.

Before explaining my opinion about the possible reasons of periphery's social hardships, first I would like to discredit an often abused legend, used to justify the awful building of 20th Century: architects, critics, professors, builders and politicians made us believe that there wasn't another choice for our towns, “*it was the only way to follow in order to satisfy the forecasts of urban growth*” ... FALSE!

Indeed, if that were true, how can we explain the reasons of the environmental and architectural quality of social housing neighbourhoods built in Rome from 1907 to 1927?

On those days, they were not *master plan predictions*, but *objective reality*. It was urgent to provide houses to the new inhabitants of Rome, grew in a short time from 400.000 up to 1.400.000; to these astonishing numbers we must add all those inhabitants evicted from the centre to leave space to the so-called “*sventramenti*” (Urban *disembowelments* made in Rome after the 1870 and increased during the Fascist period). On that purpose, it will be necessary to consider that the maximum laps of time covered to build the “*quickly-built houses*” of the so-called *evictee’s district* of *Garbatella* (A large Social Housing neighbourhood, built in Rome as a Garden City between 1919 and 1930) was six months ... mostly of those houses, eighty years from the construction, never required restorations, and today they are sold as sumptuousness houses!!!

The truth is that the corrupted power of the speculation was able to manipulate the news on his advantage, and it is also true that we should be outraged thinking that who was in charge for teaching inside universities didn’t oppose himself to passively accept the idiotic lies, but even did a theory on its favour!

Trying to comprehend the reasons causing the suburban inhabitants’ rebellion, I think is sufficient to know, even if roughly, the results of the analysis made in his pioneer sociological study by Domenico Orano inside the neighbourhood *Testaccio* of Rome. Inside that study we can learn how the initial speculative development of the quarter and the subsequent inhumane living conditions generated violent phenomena, like the ones happening today in France.

This study shows how the irreverence and vandalism of the suburbs – forgotten and ignored by the centres of power – are the natural answer of those who feel themselves *invisible*: the vandalistic acts against other people’s – or public – property, in those days and nowadays are the expression of the suppressed bitterness of the individual, vented against something they don’t feel as proper, but identified identify as a symbol of that power forcing them to live in such a kind of world.

Due to the will of the Committee for the Improvement of Testaccio, Orano’s sociological study was later applied in the design for the urban completion of the quarter developed by Giulio Magni and Quadrio Pirani: the *environmental reclaiming* generated by them

put an end to the unease of the inhabitants of Testaccio. Today, what was born and grew as a Social Housing Quarter, is one of the most sought-after of the real-estate market!

When the construction was ended, in 1918 the President of the I.R.C.P. (Roman Institution for Social Housing) Malgadi in the text titled “*the new group of houses at Testaccio* claimed”: *«To speak of art when speaking of Public Housing may seem exaggerated to say the least; but it is undeniable that in the decoration of public housing, seeking to create some effect, even with the simplicity imposed for financial reasons, that will make it seem, even to a minor worker, something different from the old and oppressive building where he had lived [...] Public housing, which brings together an attractive outer appearance with the proper distribution of apartments is preferred to other types [...] and where this is to be found it can be observed that tenants take good care of their lodgings as well as all the community property of the same district [...] A house that one likes is better kept, which means that it performs an educational function for those who live there».*

Later on, the slogan of the Social Housing Institution became “*a healthy and educational home*”.

Still in 1926, before the Fascist’s policy put an end to the right way of building, by imposing to prostrate oneself before a speculative interests facilitated with the foundation of Governatorati (satellites of the Fascist Party, that were controlling the municipalities erasing their decisional autonomy), the *Ufficio Municipale del Lavoro di Roma* – the institution who took care to the construction of public housing – regarding the construction of Social Housing pointed out: *«[...] the blending of social classes can be facilitated. Society will be indebted to you for the accomplishment of an important task».*

3. Epilogue

In the light of what has been pointed out above, it seems clear that the value of continuity in buildings, streets and *piazze* needs to be reaffirmed, that is, among places assigned to private aspects of daily life and those designated for extended relations: new districts (but also pre-existing ones that are to be renewed) should be conceived as composite spaces where houses and/or special buildings are only one component of the urban composition, important but not sufficient to satisfy the need of gathering together and of social relationships!

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