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FROM THE “MEDITERRANEAN CITY” TO “THE CITY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN”

I – Mediterraneity, modernity, adriatic-city

In the 20th century the idea of “Mediterraneity”, beyond the myth, has often represented a critical *passé partout*, generally evoked when the dispute between classicists and modernists or, even more, between different tendencies within the Modernist grew pretty too hard. When the CIAM group seemed about to break off, or when Corbusier’s “plastic” research seemed to be formally distant and ideologically incompatible with Gropius and the German’s scientific spirit, the ‘good guys’ used to appeal to the idea of a Mediterranean architecture or city as a common and undeniable root, mother of any modernity. Likewise – just think about the dispute over Italian rationalism – the “Mediterranean spirit” returned over and over as a crucial argument to appease the polemics between those who defended the vernacular, and those who backed functionalist internationalism. Again within the frame of Italian history, more recently, people resorted to the most aulic version of the Mediterranean spirit to find an ideal leitmotiv joining “rational” classicism and the most “Doric” modernity, a sort of Apollineo-Dionisiac connection allowing the breeze of the Parthenon’s white stones and the many Acropolis lost along the Mediterranean coasts to be extended, via Schinkel, to the works of Libera, Mies and Le Corbusier. This very last approach to the Mediterranean subject has evidently grown stronger and stronger in most recent times. As the utopian tension and ideological construction of the modern movement were slacking, different groups of European architecture were in fact feeling the strong necessity to restore their historic perspective, which was supposed to be less idealistic and “progressive” than the one that modernism had fed. The renewed interest for those “less” western architectonic cultures was

somehow implicit in the postmodernist conception and grew factual through a strong attention towards architectonic traditions of extra-European countries facing the Mediterranean as Maghreb or Asia Minor, “Islamic” Spain and Egypt – which moreover represents an acknowledged fatherland of Mediterranean literature. From Alexandria to Beirut, physically and conceptually, the step is short. And Beirut represents today an extremely appropriate site to discuss the origins and permanence of the architectonic and urban “Mediterraneity” myth vs the more specifically contemporary idea of Mediterranean metropolis. What in fact should be openly discussed is just the possibility of still applying the Mediterranean myth. I don’t mean in historiographical terms – which have been used even too flexibly – rather within the context of a discussion, as for the one over contemporary architecture, which seems to be no longer in need of unifying critical devices and historical-ideological schemes which let us all feel part of a sole and progressive movement.

2- Mediterranean City – Contemporary City

The Myth of a Mediterranean Identity concerning Architecture and the idea of town, friable in its very nature, is today passing through a crisis for two glaring reasons. On the one hand, we have the hyper-global perspective spreading one sole pan-metropolitan (or post-metropolitan) model and presenting the towns of the whole world as if they were all suffering from the same sprawl virus. The “Design” (or rather “undesign”) of this urban, or post-urban, space obviously owes very little to the peculiarity of the specific site and its geographical conditions and quite a lot to the connections between infrastructure and exchange poles, to the

hyper-communication, to the flows of immigrating and transiting populations, to the demystification of the modernist concept of “dwelling” and residential quarters. A Mediterranean – contemporary town, then, the nature of which we can much better penetrate reading Rem Koolhaas’ essays about the “generic town” rather than through Joseph Rykwert’s continual call to the specific common origins and the idea of the Mediterraneanity as a philosopher’s stone of modern architecture.

On the other hand, we find the renewed strength of local identities, asserting itself as necessary and vital counter-balance to those processes of globalization and making it very hard to rely on such a vague and omni-comprehensive concept as that of “Mediterranean Identity.”

Thus it makes very little sense indeed to talk about the idea of the “Mediterranean City” if we don’t put this concept in relation to these and other matters peculiar to urban and metropolitan phenomena inside and outside the Mediterranean area currently and finally altering the very nature of the traditional characters: density, centrality, dimension, social articulation and “public” space etc. One of the first consequences of the contemporary urban state is namely the weakening of large unifying identity concepts, suspended between history and utopia, and in particular those associated with Mediterraneanity. As a matter of fact, the permanence of the language allow us to refer somehow to a Mediterranean literature, as it has been already mentioned, or to a Mediterranean music, today enjoying great favour. This could hardly be said about architecture, as those very peculiar relations between shapes and sites, buildings and nature, density and rarefaction, once allowing us to identify a Mediterranean area, seem to have grown very hard to isolate within overwhelming contemporary spaces.

More than that, we can probably affirm that it is exactly the observation and study of the urban “continuum” spreading along the coasts of the “Mar Mediterraneo” that urges us to abandon the idea of “Mediterranean City” in favor of a “City of the Mediterranean”, both less abstract and more physically determined. Where the first paradigm (the “Mediterranean City”) stands for a cultural identity, tied to a more generic geographical condition (a specific latitude and climate, a specific relationship between land, sea and urban culture), but valid in Spain as much as in some areas of Asia or of Central America. The second instead (the “City of the Mediterranean”) is the possible name for the site specific “endless” urbanization that has recently occupied European coasts from Gibraltar

to Croatia and Greece, already overflowing towards Morocco on the west side and Turkey, Syria and Lebanon on the east side. In this view the cities sitting on the Mediterranean coasts now deriving their identity less and less from being the seaside terminal (harbours, infrastructure of defense and movement, nature, therapy, leisure, season holidays) of continental urban regions, and more from being a section of the endless coastal city, an infinite waterfront very self-referential but also very sensitive to local phenomena, both physical and social.

3- The Adriatic City

If we just take a look at several Italian cities, Mediterranean par excellence and lying in most cases along the coast, we find one of the “clearest” examples of that jarring overlap of the new urban “territory” upon the Mediterranean landscape. In order to point out some aspects of these subjects and to give a contribution to the formulation of new description and intervention devices, I would like to appeal to a very specific case study of the Italian coast, the Middle-Adriatic case. Which is very specific of the Mediterranean condition, but at the same time far away from the all Mediterranean stereotypes.

The “regional” architecture of Romagna, Marche and Abruzzi – hemmed in by Venetian, Romanic and then Apulian Baroque influence and distant both from Corbusier’s and Aalto’s cahiers and from nineteenth century travellers’ – faces the sea being in fact “inland” architecture. Apart from some Spanish fortress or some spin tower, what we find on the Adriatic coast are still the shapes of Urbino and Senigallia strongholds, of Aragonese citadels of Abruzzi, of the infinite web of houses, farm-houses and brick-walled forts dotting the landscapes of these regions for hundreds of kilometers. Few “volumes in the light” and few smooth and sensual surfaces, as if the Adriatic Koiné so many talked about, from writer Claudio Margis to architects like Gianugo Polesello, had nothing to do with Mediterranean tradition. And if it’s true, as Catalans use to say, namely that modernity is deeply Mediterranean, IT MAY EXPLAIN why the Adriatic coasts have been so far disregarded by modern architecture. The absence of which, in this region, is only contradicted by rare and sporadic masterpieces: some seaside settlement, a Church by Libera pulled down during the 20s and 30s, a Church by Quaroni and little more during the 50s – in two of the most creative periods for Italian Architecture.

The Three Landscapes

Nonetheless today the Italian Adriatic “strip” assumes a new and particular interest. Besides receiving impetuses and tensions from the Dalmatian side, the region has turned into one of the most typical among Italian contemporary mega-cities and therefore a critical case for those who want to focus both on the local and global new urban phenomena. The infinite urban waterfront connect south Romagna, Marche and Abruzzi, as an outcome of economic, social and touristic phenomena, shows all the features of contemporary dispersed urbanism, based on infrastructure networks and single-family houses, shopping/ leisure malls and historic centers as “museums”, generic industrial sheds sitting on agricultural plots, suburban neighbourhoods working both as permanent residences and as summer-houses.

Compared to other national large metropolitan areas, all suffering pretty much in the same way from the diseases of contemporary post-urbanism, the Adriatic coast shows such a rich and evident stratification of problems and historical, architectural, urban and landscape matters, to become – on the one hand – an utmost meaningful case study leading us to the general re-formulation of the disciplines investigating both urban contemporary matters and those concerning the “environmental project”. On the other hand the Adriatic-city is also a specific and typical example of sites marked by the presence of the coast and by a peculiar configuration of local natural and historical-urban landscapes. It becomes a particular and interesting case of Mediterranean identity. What makes this context such an interesting site is the palpable presence, in their inner strength and clarity, of the three grand topographies representing, during the course of time, the flesh and blood of contemporary landscapes and revealing a neat and unmistakable image of the ongoing transformation of time and space.

The first of these topographies is obviously the “natural” one, where valleys and hilly ridges perpendicular to the coast alternate in a web smoothly following the whole coastal trait along the 300 km area, shaping the territory as a proper backbone. The second is the urban historical structure – archeological, medieval, Renaissance, XVIII Century – perfectly organizing this area until a few decades ago. The Adriatic network of historical settlements is actually based on a double layout. On the one hand we find the urban “comb”, lying along the major valleys, where we find a certain

number of important ports, about 40 km away from one another, and a certain number of inland cities, about 25 km away from their ports, ancient centres of military and political power, protecting the main communication routes. On the other hand we the “widespread” and ubiquitous net of fortified urban centres built from Medieval times onwards, shaping the landscape and occupying the peak of every hill. The third and most complex topography, overflowing with brutal neutrality the former, is that of the metropolitan and never-ending contemporary city, uninterrupted and totally unconcerned both about the layout of the landscape and the urban historical structure, ruled by new infrastructures and by the transformations within the yielding tissue. The temporal and economic process stays the same. Yet, compared to other Italian and European megacities, each of the three landscapes still keeps a clear and characteristic identity within the “rational chaos” representing our lives and activities’ background, both from the most general and global points of view and in the fragments’ local stratification.

The “Mediterranean” interest of the phenomenon must be traced in the cities’ location along the coasts, in the acknowledgement that the coast represents both the sole limit to the development of the “never-ending” city and the theatre of some interesting edge-conditions of infrastructures, permanent and temporary residences, production and entertainment places. Moreover, the coastal towns dramatically show the deconstruction of the concept of “city-centre” and of the relevant hierarchies on which most of modern urban and architectonic doctrine is based.

The idea of “centrality” – watered already down in the numerous specialized centers’ web from XIV Century onwards – represents today its visible and factual splitting in the superimposition of the pre-existing network of coastal and hilly cities and the new uprooted centralities, created by railways, highways and superhighway tracks, by the position of main junctions and access roads, by the development of ports. The drawing of a hypothetical “Nolli’s map” on a cross-section of this territory, along one of the grand urbanized valleys, would reveal in details, for instance, the complex articulation of public spaces which are in need of a language and a doctrine able to set a possible co-existence between historical “piazzas” and commercial malls, megastores and urban arcades, cathedrals and sheds. Architectures, in a word, forcing, or rather helping us, to re-define – as we said at the very beginning – in a contemporary language, some crucial concepts as those of scale, monumentality, urbanity, relationship between design and function.

The Adriatic Laboratory

The Adriatic landscape, thus, seems to be a source of information and a crucial case to explain two fundamental purposes of this discussion. On the one hand, its consolidated lack of concern about mythical Mediterraneanity shows how fragile these identifiers prove if considered as unifying canons, and how ambiguous is their role of historical-critical passe partout if compared to the supremacy of local identities. On the other hand, its infinite waterfront and its historical and morphological specific characters bestow a very precise identity – Mediterranean because “coastal” – to the “generic” contemporary city. This way leads us to the need of searching new description devices, recognizing new taxonomies, improving planning instruments and topics. The mere superficial observation of this territory clearly shows how those consolidated academic principles – dialectically based upon the differences between city and suburbia, residence and services, residential quarters and industrial areas, town and countryside – have proved totally insufficient to face transformation forms and phases of this territory. A territory, by the way, which reveals an undeniable capability of fulfilling the requirements of its inhabitants and an extraordinary disposition to give vent to that feverish economic vitality which best characterized the society dwelling in this area during the last decades. At the same time, we must acknowledge it pays heed neither to the architectonic quality, nor to the issue of public space, thus putting into a crisis the role of architecture itself in contemporary society. This problematic gap between the actual efficiency – economic, social, political – of this territory and its absolute hostility to any issue of quality of space, care for the landscape, ambition to contemporary artistic and architectonic search, together with its topographic richness, historic patrimony, seem to allow us to consider the Adriatic territory as a crucial architectonic and disciplinary laboratory.

4- the “urban” structure

Once we identified both the “Adriatic” segment of the greater metropolis of the Mediterranean and the main layers of its body we’ve to start working on the search of the “architectural” elements that rule its life and growth.

What we’re looking for are actually the architectural devices which connect the large XXL scale (or better “no scale” of the geographic system and landmarks to the local pre-existing urbanization, based on the traditional physical sequence of monuments, axis,

“piazzas”, neighbourhoods, waterfronts etc. The framing idea, in this case, is that the traditional architectural and urban tools we use to design the modification of those spaces are of no use in the case of the “extended” metropolis. Besides traditional town-planning, apparently as useless and ineffective, what we’re now looking for, thus, are new “type of spaces”, new tools, new approaches to design which would allow us to understand and modify urban structures that are NOT based on physical continuity. Through analysis and innovative investigation (photography, data analysis, thematic mapping) we came to define a series of “system of spaces” (since they generally don’t enjoy physical continuity we could call them “networks”) which overlap on the Adriatic territory creating a very definite urban condition. I will introduce this series of networks through some critical examples:

- Infrastructures for people and good transportation (roads, railways, highways, ports, airports etc.) This the only “continuous” network and in fact the only realistic mean for “founding” a city nowadays. It is the spine of this urban territory and corresponds, for more than three hundred km, to the motorway A14, to the railway tracks, and to the rhythmic sequence of highways connecting the coastline with the inner areas of the region. Once the place for the representation of pure and fast movement, infrastructures are today the ultimate urban structure and at the same time the contemporary “urban scene” for the gigantic windows of the showrooms, mega-signs and hyperbuildings trying to capture the attention (and therefore the attitude to consumption) of the highway user. The same is true for ports and airports, where the relation between infrastructure and urban transformation gets just a bit more sophisticated. A new operational base for Ryan Air (Ancona has one) or a new line of ferry-boats to Croatia and Greece have today a wider and deeper impact on the territory than a local master plan.

- The sequence of river parks

The urbanization of the Adriatic territory is essentially “designed” by a series of major river valleys, running transversely to the sea, where we find the most important cities. The valleys have worked as a strong attractor for cities and infrastructure, finally “guiding” the invasion of the sprawl. This calls now for a new role for them. On one side they have to be “preserved”, as “natural” sites and scenarios threatened by the quest of “industrial” areas. On the other they have to be treated as 30 km long “urban” parks, with facilities for people who live,

work and have fun in the infinite number of mini-cities leaning towards the rivers.

■ Industrial areas

If we draw a map of the industrial areas in the “Adriatic city” we will have a clear picture of how contemporary urbanization is redesigning the entire landscape. More than that, if to the existing industrial areas we add all the dismissed sites we will be able to identify the critical areas for the future development and transformation of this land. Industrial sheds and storage buildings are today the largest and most “understated” share of “new” buildings. A cultural and technical commitment to improve the quality of these buildings would imply a better approach to architectural expression, technology, innovation and possibly a better balance between those who produce goods and income for this land, those who inhabit it and those who have the responsibility to rule it. In this view, the “dismissed” industrial sites stand then as a great opportunity for the requalification of urbanized areas, for a new approach to public space, for developing a strategy for a network of cultural sites.

■ Spaces for culture and art

The three regions facing the “mediodriatico” have both an immense heritage of history and culture and a lively contemporary production of art, theatre, cultural events. The map (in this case a real potential network) of “cultural” sites – ancient and modern – reveal to us a further layer of critical importance, strictly connected to the economic development of the areas, to the fluxus of tourism, to the role of the region will have in the larger map of European identities. This is also the layer where architecture is called to perform its best and most creative, in order to produce images and spaces as strong and memorable as the preexisting ones.

■ The “market street”

One more homogenous (and in this case continuous) “ecology” running along the whole length of the Adriatic cities is that of the infinite “main street” of hybrid buildings (production, housing, commercial, leisure etc.) created far away from the city centers on the two “banks” aside the state 16 road. In Europe this is a brand new urban issue, very different in scale and phenomenology from the North American archetype, so far totally uninvestigated by the design disciplines.

■ The housing issue

We generally agree that the overall tendency in housing is towards “individual urbanism”, i.e. the

“sprawl” attitude to single family houses finally shared by most urbanized countries. Nevertheless we all know we cannot realistically think to give each family space and land for a “detached” house, we have to challenge our discipline to develop housing types which can at the same time respond to the quest for individuality and identity coming from the individual user and allow the community the realistic rate of economy of space and resources that comes with “collective” housing. Besides, there are still cases, within “the city of Mediterranean”, of cities with high rates of growth (for example in Greece, Albania, Lebanon). Those situations cannot obviously be faced only through the deregulated sprawl attitude: on the contrary there we find a urgent need for innovative approaches to collective and low-income housing. Contemporary architecture culture should be able to give a valuable, creative and innovative contribution to the solution of these problems.

There are of course other issues (or layers, if we want to be consistent with our premises), as the “beach”, considered as a neverending site for public and leisure space, or the “natural parks” running parallel to the coast on the Appennini, or the generic touristic structures. Nonetheless we think the “layers” we listed are the most important and enough to display our approach, which consider the Adriatic segment of the Mediterranean city as a whole and tries to “decompose” it into single spatial elements (networks, systems) that can be studied and “modified” through design. The difference compared to a more traditional approach to urban studies is that most of those elements (and as a whole the contemporary city) do not imply physical continuity and visual relationship.