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The lesson of Rome and the utility of urban morphology studies

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In opening the 4th Isufitaly Conference on the theme “Learning from Rome - Historical cities and contemporary design” I would like to propose some considerations on the relationship between the reading of the built reality and architectural design.

I'll say right away that, in my opinion, the Urban Morphology studies could form one of the foundations on which to base a new, rational, anti-romantic, design culture. In fact, I believe that one of our problems is the architect's way (the very essence of contemporary design) to look at the world according to his own individuality.

The shared adhesion of the architect (operating subject) to the object of his work, to the concrete “physicality” of the construction, has been replaced by an abstract, individual, distant relationship. The design thus finally develops its own complete autonomy with respect to the physical reality. Today, it is part of an immaterial circuit where each project refers to other equally abstract projects without place, despite the contrary claims of articles and technical reports. It is no longer the historical “exportability” of the project, the exchanges between areas that have led to fertile contaminations: the very notion of a cultural area has entered into crisis. We are no longer dealing with the exchanges that led to the formation of national languages, where even the dialect had a function of innovative contribution, to quote a comparison dear to Gianfranco Caniggia, but we are moving towards simplified metahistorical forms that do not derive from any civil process.

Of course one can agree with the present state of things, but I believe that the studies of Urban Morphology contain, in their DNA, a critique and a proposal.

Not by chance have these studies remained, for a long time, outside of the contents of the Italian architectural faculties, even in Rome, where we have a long tradition based on adherence to the reality of construction through reading the architectural organism as a result of a historically identified formative process.

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Yet Rome, turning to the theme of this conference, is a lesson in Urban Morphology aimed at the project. This fact is evident if we consider not only the continuity of the ancient substratum within the modern city, but also the role of the notion of type: not only the basic building in pre-modern fabrics, where the constructions were not designed, but, until recent times, were built on the basis of the current, shared and consolidated notion of house.

Here the design of buildings and aggregates surfaced, so to speak, from deposits of a shared memory..

Perhaps for this reason, for the many experiences that have been stratified in the congruence between building, type and fabrics, for many years especially in the period between the two wars and in the immediate post-war time, a clear awareness of the internal solidarity of the built world developed, where the base building shared the same formative matrixes of special ones, virtually indicating new tools, largely left unused, for the contemporary design. Tools that, of course updated, could be very useful to our students.

Since the current crisis of the project based on autobiography and artistry is evident, I believe we should also propose a clear definition of "form", the object of our research, intending it as a readable and transmissible manifestation of a structure, investigable through logic and economy, as well as the product of an aesthetic synthesis.

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The first is searching for the limit. In an age when everything seems to be possible and compatible, when each value is interchangeable, the forms replaceable and often we talk out of turn about ethics in architecture, morphology studies propose clear and defined choices, for which we assume responsibility. They propose a truth, even if provisional and coexistent with other truths of which we must take note and which we must respect. Urban Morphology suggests, in my opinion, an organic unity between method, reading and design. Not the endless possibilities, therefore, allowed by any experimentation based on perception alone, but the identification of the principles of unity and distinction in the built world, from the territorial scale to the building one.

These studies can allow us to read the same richness and complexity of the built world by recognizing the relationships of necessity between parts, the specific relationship of opposition and complementarity between different elements, that critical reading which is the basis of which every true project of transformation.

Of course, the contemporary territory is home to endless contradictions, it is no longer a true organism. Yet the recognition, through a careful reading, of its characters could show the need and the intention to establish the bonds that have been missed, restoring, where it is appropriate and possible, the severed links.

This consideration introduces a second point: the need of the project as

a projection of what already exists towards the future. The form of Rome, from the operating substratum to modern transformations, teaches us how each changing phase is an update, every new life cycle an adaptation to new conditions. Nothing in the built world is erased and nothing is truly "creation", a term which is amongst the most abused by the architecture literature. We do not inhabit a world of fragments. Every fragment could be a part of a new whole, it could constitute the seed of a future life of the cities and of the territory. Hence the idea, in my opinion new and fertile, that any legacy of decisions taken *against* the form of the city, does not exist in the built world. Every reading, choice, project, however contradictory, has been a contribution to take into account, of which we need to grasp the potential congruence, even if we cannot share today. For this reason, the third point has to do with the economy, in its broadest sense, with the wise use of the resources at our disposal.

On the wave of a resource availability considered infinite, the modern city has squandered the economic ties between the parts. The Roman historical fabrics, its basic and special buildings, still teaches us a lesson of wisdom and sobriety, even in the examples of the monuments. This desire to understand the rational essence of the forms, which can now be found in many studies by young architects, can be fulfilled by finding in the Urban Morphology studies a solid methodological base to replace the ideology of waste with a new ethic of construction.

I therefore believe that we can open this conference with optimism, thinking that our work can, together with the efforts being made in the same direction in other disciplines, contribute to the formation of a new architecture.

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