
Public spaces: *locus* of recognition and relations

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ABSTRACT. The contemporary global post-metropolis renounces to imagine/realize a certain formal finiteness and it produces a continuous, undifferentiated expansion with the disintegration of public spaces instead of supremacy of private spaces. These expansions are not finished additions but they become monotonous and indistinct 'agglomerations' without places where it could be possible to represent common values and to realize relationships like specific quality of civitas. The Italian School's debate, against the amorphous delirium of the spread city, proposed a set of alternatives only partially investigated and tested: the idea of the city for finished parts by Aymonino, the town design by Quaroni, the open polycentric city characterized for a renewed relationship with nature by Monestiroli, the new monuments - "world buildings" -proposed by Aldo Rossi. These hypothesis are a point for a possible restitution of dignity to the public spaces as a significant void full of civic values. This is the condition to avoid the danger of a undifferentiated homologation and of an abandonment of a real idea of community.

KEYWORDS. Polis/post-metropolis _ ancient city's lesson _ forum v/s acropolis _ Italian School _ identity _ significant void.

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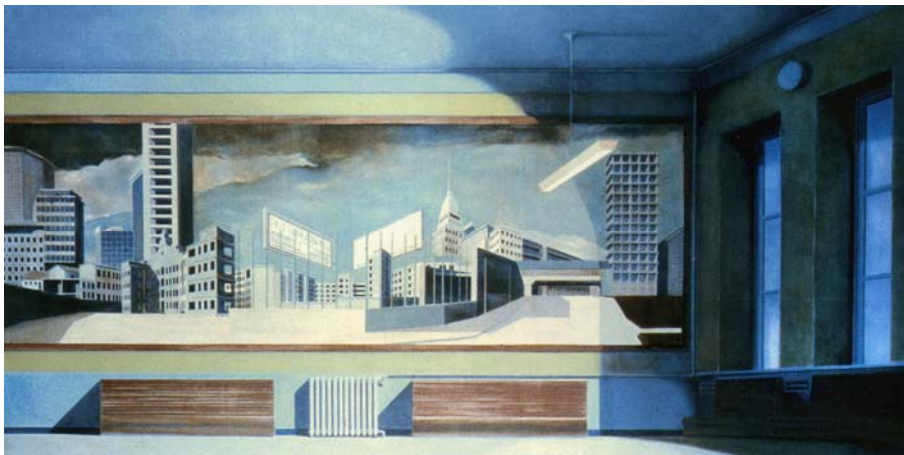
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1. Introduction

This paper reflects on the unavoidable role of the public spaces in the construction of the contemporary city, starting from an analysis of the current state of dissolution that actually characterizes the post-metropolis. In the contemporary post-metropolis, in fact, there are a standardizing and homogenizing trend but the Italian architectural school was able to give some answers to these problem in continuity with the lesson of the historical city, on one hand, and, on the other, with the idea of 'open city' elaborated by the masters of the Modern Movement, particularly Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Hilberseimer and Scharoun. For this reason the reasoning is logically divided into some short paragraphs that summarize the issues: *The widespread city and the disappearance of public space; The crossing from the polis to the metropolis_postmetropolis; The lesson of the ancient city. Two complementary models: the forum and the acropolis; Open city vs. enclosed city: the example of the masters; The contribution of the Italian School; A possible alternative: the void like a material for the construction of the public space.*

2. The widespread city and the disappearance of public space

In the second half of the last century, at the end of the 'great histories' theorized in philosophy, it was possible to observe, in the construction of the city, the renunciation to any possibility to define an urban unitary form starting from some certain principles. The idea of a recognizable and unitary form of the city – even if designed like a set of different ways of construction that were recognizable in their different morphological structures and for the dialectic between them able to define their individuality and formal identity – is replaced by a formless anarchy, the unending growth, the standardizing scattering.



A. Cantàfora, *La città banale*, 1980

This dissolutive trend – wrongly interpreted as freedom to express the contemporary condition of tangible and intangible flows, of gradual privatization of the places, of the indifferent arrogance of the infrastructural systems – produced not only an inability to define, in any way, a recognizable, although vaguely, form: in fact it produced, above all, a really pervasive residential continuum that is consuming the natural soil. This continuum is so much uninterrupted, although seemingly discrete, that it is impossible to save, even if in residual terms, collective spaces and public space in which you can recognize yourselves. The only pauses or solutions to this nonsense continuity seem determined by the infrastructure or by the megastores but these constructions – like all the infra_structures – are constitutionally not able to structure and order the amorphous conglomeration. This phenomenon produces an unusual condition of the urban space where the form melts itself and isn't yet capable to define an order in the prevalence of a temporal and incorporeal dimension of the movements and in the predominance of the transitoriness of the urban programs. This trend is strictly related to the acceleration/dematerialization of the communication and good flows in the prevalence of the temporal dimension (instantaneous) over the physical-spatial.

The paradox of this condition is that the unending growth of the so called urban peripheries – today indeed larger than the 'central' city - gave rise to the loss not only of public spaces for the inhabitants but also of a durable bond with the 'dense' city often transformed in a downtown for business and commercial facilities instead of the place of the representation for the citizenship. But the result is not only the inability to recognize the places but also a preference for the commercial spaces to the places for the life and the until the consequent denial of the idea of a conscious community. In the widespread metropolis (sprawl) is 'dissolved' – dis-joint – the necessary link between home/work/civilian places usually at the base of an acceptable quality of urban life. On the contrary a new link appears between individual (the villas) or collective (blocks of flats) houses and 'consumer' places (hypermarkets/shopping malls). Today the globalized metropolis lost its identity places and built itself as a set of 'impermeable fences'. The contemporary city tends more and more to a levelling homologation of the ways of construction and, in this way, the city lose the collective and public centres of representation within a nebula of private spaces (MONESTIROLI, 1994) that are always equal to themselves. The city is everywhere periphery of a non-existent or virtual centre, is pervasively 'no-place' (AUGÉ, 1992). 'Widespread city' is an expression that is only a description, an observation of the 'status quo' that «in no way helps to identify tools, modalities, control methods and even development» (STELLARIO D'ANGIOLINI, 2004). But what caused this delirium, this multiplication of sprawl and *non-lieu* which, until a few years ago, was even aestheticized and exhaled as a faithful mirror of our age?

3. The crossing from the polis to the metropolis_postmetropolis

We have to investigate this loss of awareness and of sense and the related death of identity civil centres – as many say – looking for the crossing between to ideas (or pseudo-ideas) of city, apparently related but indeed conflicting: the polis and the metropolis, today post-metropolis. The crossing from the big cities (yet definable) to the metropolis (huge and unknowable) is analogous to the philosophical transition from the 'modern' to the 'post modern': lost – as anticipated – the traditional *Grand récit* (LYOTARD, 1979), the city and even more the post-metropolis programmatically give up to an order (*cósmos*) and pursue the disorder (*caós*) as the only apparatus reproducible *ad infinitum*. The European city – in the thought of Cacciari (CACCIARI, 2004) – from *pólis* becomes *urbs* or rather *civitas*

augescens (sine ullo limite e sine ulla mensura): the *polis* was based on the *ghénos*, on the community and it had in itself the idea of *péras* (border/boundary), of *nomos* as precept. On the other hand the *urbs* was defined by its law and so it could grow infinitely (*a-péiron*): the city becomes de-lirious, it goes out of the track (in Latin *lira*), out of the fence that was the physical and symbolic boundary of the city, the sacral 'sill' near the city gate. Maurizio Ferraris, according to this interpretation, wrote that «postmodern aesthetics is [exactly] an aesthetics of the postmetropolis» (FERRARIS, 1983). In a certain way the 'modern' philosophical constrictions (Heidegger - Benjamin - Weber) and but also those of literature (Baudelaire - Proust - Balzac) remain tied to the idea of *pólis* with a clear relationship between an 'artificial interior' and a 'natural exterior'. The city-*pólis* (culture) is oppositional to the nature (*chora*) that surround and bound it. The city-*pólis* is a circumscribed place, bounded and recognizable as an "solitary artifact" in the natural territory. On the other hand, in late modernity, the metropolis is not only an larger and more technologized extension of the city. The metropolis isn't a place opposed to the natural exterior – place of the Being opposed to Culture -, it radically abolish all references to the Nature [mind the Enlightenment], to the origin [to the founded, the *Grund*], it declares the triumph of the Culture, of the beings, of the technologies [agreed] as 'will of potency' [...], it refers [- in the oblivion of Being -] simply in itself, it is *causa sui* and *index sui*, it is an all-comprehensive and unlimited space without intermissions» (FERRARIS, 1983). The metropolis/megalopolis, transmuted into the post-metropolis (GREGOTTI, 2011) – even if the origin of the word is *mèter-pólis* – is no longer a city procreated by a 'mother-city': instead it is disconnected from the specific characters of the territories, it invades and produces, as in Heidegger, a 'construction' without 'dwelling' and so without 'thought'. The post-metropolis – well described by Derrida and Deleuze - communicates and connects – never relates – with other cities that, sooner or later, it will touch in its 'agglutinating growth' where «it is difficult to cull the complexity of culture [if it not already become *Halbbildung* by Adorno] when the nature disappeared as opposite» (FERRARIS, 1983). In this way the city is no longer the most high human construction but it reduces itself to the *performance*. The 'non-city' of our years is revealed as a confused deposit of individualism, congestion, in-discriminated consumption of land, 'envy of the centre' (STELLARIO D'ANGIOLINI, 2004) and search of the formless. It is the hypostasis of 'pure repetition' that renounces the "critical difference" between Being and beings, and becomes a mere 'representation', an aesthetic of the image and of the de-territorialisation which has no origin nor end: all 'becomes' incessantly. The dispersion, the explosion of contemporary megalopolis – for example in the Far East - determines conditions of urban life based on 'distracted' experiences of movement, of the great and the immeasurable: a 'nomadic' and 'wandering' where «nothing deserves to be 'recalled'» but only quickly 'consumed' up to the *Junkspace* joyfully mentioned by Koolhaas. This condition is the endless space of the *sprawl*, of dissemination where nothing is possible to represent and where it's no possible recognize themselves. This is different form the 'widespread, urban-rural city' described by Agostino Renna in the book *L'illusione e i cristalli* (RENNA, 1980): a city with an important relationship with the soil, with its design, its rules and signs, with the skilful and orderly use. The contemporary *sprawl* is only an undifferentiated *continuum*, place of the inedited and extravagant things, of the sensory aggression without materiality where all things become virtual. This large 'changing simulacrum' is only an 'event', a temporary installation where the dehumanizing Nihilism is stated in the prevalence of the individual (*mônade*) on the community. The 'weak' solution by Baudrillard (BAUDRILLARD, 1980) or Vattimo (VATTIMO; ROVATTI, 1987), echoing the "gay wandering" mentioned by Tafuri (TAFURI, 1987), is really inadequate: a wandering between big *outlets* within an absolute, physical and psychological, disorientation. We need today a reflection on the ancient tradition and on the modernity and, on the other hand, a "return to the

things in themselves”, a ‘strong’ realist view (FERRARIS, 2012) where it will be possible another time to build the city as “an unitary design...of definite artefacts” (ROSSI, 1966).

4. The lesson of the ancient city. Two complementary models: the forum and the acropolis

As Antonio Monestiroli wrote (MONESTIROLI, 1994) the ancient city during its millenary construction proposed ultimately two basic models for the construction of the public spaces understood as anti-poles, exceptions, recognizable figures in the background determined by the residential texture that represents the recurrence, the weft of the city. These two conceptual models hypostatize themselves in the urban types of forum and acropolis and, in this way, they recall two concepts of space described by Giedion (GIEDION, 1968). The forum, also as archetype of the European piazza, is based on the identification of a completed, ended and bounded void. The city breaks into this void and here represents itself. The principle axis, the public buildings of the city are unified and synthesized, as in the Pompei forum, by an architectural system on the perimeter: the portico (in other cases by the uniformity of the characters of the public buildings). This paradigm is similar to that of the architectural ‘box-space’ defined by its horizontal boundaries and the regularity of the internal space.

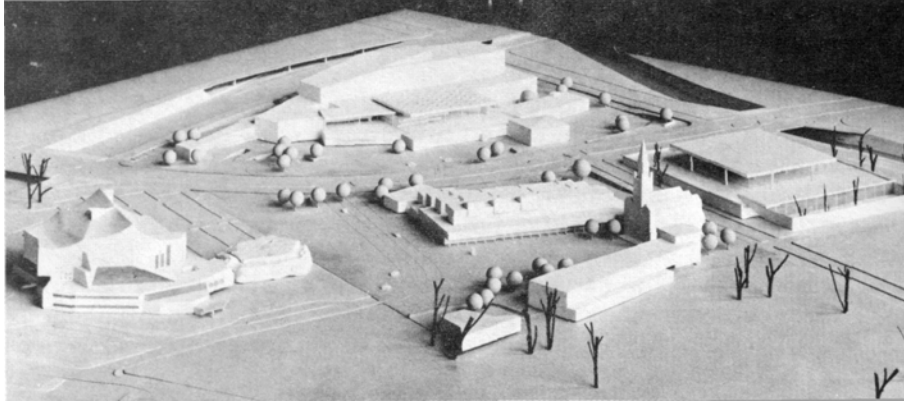


A. Cantàfora, *La città anaolga*, 1973

On the other hand, the acropolis – as well as certain Greek *agorai*, Axos for example – is defined starting from the proxemics and topological relationship between the public buildings. The civil buildings establish long distance relationships and reciprocal stresses starting from the definition of a void like break, spacing. In this way the space is determined, as in the *Campo dei Miracoli* in Pisa, not only as the place of the relationships but also as a way to include the nature understood as constitutive element of the urban construction. In the case of the acropolis too, the similar architectural space is the polar space where the relationship between the elements is not a syntactical relation of conventional symmetries but a relation of interferences, different planes of arrangement, counterpoints, dynamic equilibriums. Both these models, as discussed below, have and can represent possible alternatives, not necessarily excluding, for a new beginning – with the appropriate re-significations of scale and sense – of the needed construction of public spaces in the contemporary city.

5. Open city vs. enclosed city: the example of the masters

The aforementioned models recall two ideas of city – open city and enclosed city – that the Masters of the Modern Movement studied with interesting overlaps. Here ‘idea of city’ means ‘form’ of the urban settlement, overall order of the urban construction; the main characters of each idea of city are referred to the underlying order structure, to the notion of urban structure, texture, to the dialectic between recurring and exceptional elements, to the theme of the general configuration of the city and to its finitude/measure/in-finitude. The idea of city – when clearly presented and pursued – is always a rational answer to the problem of the formless, chaotic, unknowable and immeasurable through some principles that are able to define the characters of generality and intelligibility of the idea. The thought and the projects by Le Corbusier, Mies, Hilberseimer and Scharoun elaborated – starting from a critical analysis of the structure of the compact historical city – alternative hypothesis with many variations of the distinctive characters of the public space. Le Corbusier starting from a criticism of the *rue corridor* (at the limits of hygienism) produced a certain number of proposals for the *City for three million inhabitants* and the example of *Plan Voisin* and of *Ilot n.6* that, in same way, comparing by denial to the compact city and isolating its monuments, proposed a substantial alternative to the construction of the urban texture reversing the relationship between construction and open space. These proposals, even if formally different from the ancient city, remained ‘closed cities’ with only a hyper-centre of towers (the centre of business and tertiary) and, around it, an urban texture, here founded on the residential typology of *redent*. It is possible to observe a relevant evolution of this unipolar system in the project for the city of Chandigar in Punjab. The city is built on a clearly hierarchical road system (the 7V) that fixes the general order of the plan. Inside the various residential blocks are crossed by strips of nature with facilities for the districts. The general urban structure is constituted by roads, green areas, collective facilities and all the project is summarized in the central *Plazza of the Three Powers* with a explicit recall of the *Campo dei Miracoli* in Pisa, moreover evocated in the project of the *League of Nations* too. The piazza organized the various monuments (Palace of Justice, Governorate, Parliament) around a large void where, as well as the public buildings and the famous ‘open hand’, the Himalaya and the surrounding landscape attended to the composition in a sophisticated system of balanced symmetries determined by inertial equilibriums inverted with regard to the distance from the axes of the buildings. Also Hilberseimer proposed, in his *Grosstadt*, an idea of city mainly due to the scalar expansion/amplification of the European city, particularly referred to the eighteen-century city plan of Berlin. Also in the work of Hilberseimer there is a crossing from an idea of closed city (the *Vertical City* and the proposal for the *Gendarmenmarkt*) to an idea of open city (for example in the studies for Dessau) with a precise definition of this idea in the American experience of Lafayette Park. In the same way, also Mies – his work is specifically and primarily a research on the identity of the civil buildings – in a first moment proposed mainly a linguistic innovation of the type of the eighteen-century blocks (so in the office building in cement, in the skyscrapers in *Friedrichstrasse*, in the building of the *Reichsbank*). Starting from the competition project for *Alexanderplatz* with Hilberseimer and then in the U.S. with the projects for *Lafayette Park*, for the *IIT campus* and, above all, with the superb *Neue National Galerie* (the building that resume, better than any others, this evolution) in the *Kulturforum* area designed by Hans Scharoun, Mies van der Rohe designed his hall-buildings like new cornerstones of an open to the nature city that are able to polarize and define the places where they are located just like the other buildings of equal civil rank (so happen in the *Kulturforum* with the *Galerie* and the *Philharmonie* and the library by Scharoun).



H. Sharoun - L. Mies van der Rohe, *Kulturforum*, Berlin 1968

Against the contemporary city, unable to continue and renew these ideas and also to establish new procedures, new scalar references like a fragment of order in the indefinite settlement of the city, able only to emphasizing the chaos as symbol and essence of its groundless, today the experiences of the Masters could represent still a great effort of re-foundation, a precious asset of the modern 'unfinished' project mentioned by Habermas that it is possible to oppose the dissolution of the contemporary city.

6. The contribution of the Italian School

In the last century the Italian architectural culture provided some significant answers to the liquidity of our condition made of images, incessant flows of communication, renounce to the possibility of found new relationships between urban areas to contrast the infinite growth of the city. The Italian School (CAPOZZI; ORFEO; VISCONTI, 2012) – within a consistent effort of re-foundation of the discipline – was on top of the international debate about architecture and the city in the second half of the XX century through the contributions of its new masters – Rogers, Samonà Quaroni – and of the most recent – Aymonino, Rossi, Monestiroli – starting from a critical re-consideration of the heredity of the Masters of the Modern Movement. Particularly the careful analysis and interpretation of the structural characters of the historical city (ROSSI, 1966) is an instrument able to offer a set of alternatives – 'bank' to the formless delirium of the widespread city – partially investigated and tested: the idea of the *city in finished 'parts'* (AYMONINO, 1965), the *town design* (QUARONI, 1965), the open, *polycentric city* with a renewed relationship with the nature (MONESTIROLI, 1995), the *new monuments* (*Deutsches Historisches Museum* or "world-buildings" proposed by Aldo Rossi in the last years of teaching in the IUAV of Venice).

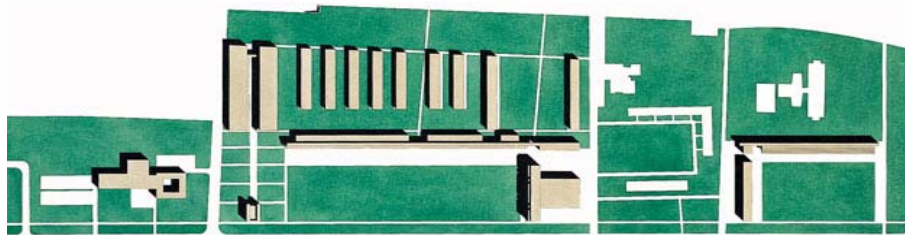


A. Rossi, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, Berlin 1988.

From these hypothesis it should be useful to restart with the aim of restoring dignity to the public space as void full of civil values that our society should be able to express against the indifferent homologation and the waiver to the idea of community.

7. A possible alternative: the void like a material for the construction of the public space.

The above evoked construction or reconstruction, in the contemporary city, of elementary 'parts', new centrality, new and adequate public spaces able to polarizing, in multi-scalar terms, new urban and social relationships is particularly efficient for the presence of new civil buildings – the new monuments – topologically composed and able to establish long distance relations where the void becomes the "place of the relationships between separate objects" and "significant space" – as in the Athens acropolis or in the Capitol in Chandigar – in which the nature can break either as background either as a counterpoint to the buildings. A kind of *natura naturans* – already noticeable, as said, in *Lafayette Park* by Mies and Hilberseimer or in the *Berlin Kulturforum* by Scharoun – that could be the "general context of references" for the contemporary life and city. This approach, proposing the construction of the contemporary city through elementary and repeatable units and 'exceptional' places, makes already possible a kind of formal completeness 'by parts' and 'fragments of order' able to reveals the 'clues' of the presence of a rule and to indicate a 'trend line': a practicable direction to follow. The right location – along the great infrastructural systems – and the identification of new centralities could represent the recognizable 'pauses' in the uncontrolled repetition of the residence. So a 'polycentric city' (MONESTIROLI, 1995) – as the Greek city but without 'auroral' suggestions –, a new *sed antique* form of settlement able to restore a right relationship with the infrastructures (today a 'continuous flow' that deface the territories they go through with indifferent overlaps) and to introduce a possible new order: an underlying structure that is not 'abstract' but 'extracted' (PEZZA, 2005) and always verified in the particular territories where "the reality modifies and materializes the abstraction". A 'shared' construction where the context of references is, another time, the nature (MONESTIROLI, 1995) and the construction by 'defined parts' (AYMONINO, 1975) is reportable to a whole (*Hòlos*) or at least aspires to compose itself in an 'intelligible mosaic' in which unavoidable 'constrains' have to be critically interpreted (ADORNO, 1979).



A. Monestiroli, *Civic center*, San Donato Milanese, Milan, 1991

A city able to interpret the geographical and morphological singularities and the new multi scalar measures of the 'regional city': these are the elements that require the architects to find new instruments for their discipline and to update the techniques of composition and spatial control of the buildings. A 'balanced' city where the different 'parts' are in relationship not only through material or immaterial 'connection' (*link*) but also through formal and syntactic relations (*ratio*). A city where the void between the objects becomes another time place of recognition and of the long distance relationship – an 'open' space that becomes structure of order every time revealable and interpretable - a city where the 'architectures' happen and the metrics of control, the measures and the whole complexity change. A 'desirable' city where the confused 'forest' can, once again, become living clearing, capable of referring a collective construction of the "standing scene of the human life" (ROSSI, 1966). A city where is still possible to understand and explain the world and find, once again, in the city of our age, our civil values and «*silent and spacious places, wide-range to reflect; places with high and long galleries in case of bad weather or if there is too much sun; places where the noise of carriages and barkers can't enter and the finest sense of education would forbid also the priest to pray aloud: buildings and public gardens that, together, express the sublimity of meditation and of withdrawing*»

(NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (später mit dem Untertitel "la gaya scienza"). KSA 3, 1882.)

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