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# Urban Order: Unity versus Multiplicity?

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*ABSTRACT. From the beginning the concept of Order was a constitutive and qualifying cause of urban and architectural space. The risk of contemporary cities seems to be that the idea of Order has been confused with something fixed and predetermined. The public ancient urban space seems still nowadays tidy but lively, varied but regular. The sacral sense of making City must be recovered. One must return to the idea of space as a result of a planning that cares the community in its many differences. The sense of Order should not be interpreted as a dichotomy of unity (whole) versus multiplicity (phenomenic), but as a revealing principle of the true essence of things. The city of the 3rd millennium must recover the idea of plastic Order (Van der Laan) or of complicated Order (Friedman) to pave the way for a time of spatial aletheia. Only in this way there will be Beauty.*

*KEYWORDS. Public space, aesthetics, complexity, creativity, phenomenology*

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## 1. Introduction

Today when one thinks about an ordered space, it is increasingly usual to associate with the concept of Order the more generic of Regularity, of Geometry and of Reiteration. As a matter of fact, from the beginning Order has been one of the main factors forming and qualifying urban public space, for its ability, especially, to combine the individual and collective, according to relational and transformative reports, and to generate places of unity and places of multiplicity at the same time.

In fact, the first urban public spaces were born through *spaces of Order* - Foundation of the center of the world - and reiterate over time through *acts of Order* - Ritual that transforms the individual into a community.

The existence of a specific location is determined in the secular Heterogeneity through a sign, a form. The *temenos* or the walls of a city (think ancient Jericho) become tools that separate Order from Chaos, the Sacred from the Profane.

The first point that emerges is thus about the formal dimension of a space of Order. This fact determines a predisposition not only to its unified, physical and functional understanding, but also, above all, to its visual and perceptive understanding. But the formal dimension alone is not sufficient to generate a space of the Order. With a thought to the great building of the Tower of Babel, we can understand as the Shape may generate a public place not relational and absolutely chaotic, if it is not supported by a communitarian and shared intentionality, full of significance.

In order to talk about real space of the Order it is therefore necessary that its formal and unitarian dimension be joined with the more phenomenological and holistic one, where the complexity is revisited by a broader vision of space.

The old urban spaces appear to us ordered but still lively, regular but complex, thanks to the double value of the original meaning of Order - unity and manifoldness - of which they have enjoyed for a long time. But if we look at the contemporary public space it is possible to see that it is being transformed into a space of confusion. New Tower of Babel, it is filled with marks and even more meanings. There are, however, few traces of significant spaces. The contemporary city and its public spaces reflect an emerging spatial and architectonic unease, linked to the increasingly evident gap between the project of individual architect and the urban vision of togetherness, bond that instead has always characterized the city in its original essence.

One can certainly state that our suburbs resemble assemblages of architectural fragments that are often dissonant (in language, in materials, scale of measurement, ...), where the multitude of signs overcomes the true meaning of the space itself. The public space, that has always been the *Soul* of the city, is becoming an accessory design for a City without a *Soul*.

Sometimes it reveals itself as a *place of function* (green spaces or squares cut out within high flow arteries, decentralized and unreachable by the population, monofunctional roads, or large shopping malls ...), assuming characteristics of residuality and weakness, compared to the transformative potential of the individual. It is thus less effective than the multiplicities that follow within its scope of relevance. They are places where the passage of persons is neither relational nor qualitative. Nobody changes and nothing is transformed in the places of the dispersion.

Other times the public space reveals itself as the *place of the shape*, by choosing to be identified through the use of clear and intelligible shapes, pre-determined as to the specific location. This causes a detachment between the peculiarity of the context and the stiffness of the shape-box, thus generating places without no power of identity and unable to the formation of any collective memory.

The contemporary urban public space has to recover the aura of which Benjamin (BENJAMIN, 2000. 25) talked about so much at the beginning of the last century, that distinguishes each space for its authenticity and clarity of intentions. This means that the public space must return to be an existential space, even before being the space of function or of shape. It can no longer be understood as a predetermined and fixed space, made of pre-established rules and rigid forms.

This paper aims instead to examine the primitive sense of the concept of Order, founded on the sacral ideal of architecture, which becomes an instrument of true revelation of the deepest essence of each place rather than an instrument to determine forms and signs a priori. In this way, we aims to provide a new sense of direction of City-Making, based on a new urban Order to overcome the traditional dichotomy of unity-multiplicity, through a truly sustainable approach.

## **2. Order between unity and multiplicity**

The great power which one still feels admiring the public spaces of the ancient cities is the ability to convey a sense of greatness (ROGERS, 1997. 208) beyond their practical or their formal language.

The Order, which has been theorized for centuries and on which the architects have moved from Kallikrates to Bramante, did not concern only the geometric and mathematical aspect, but at the same time it embraced the immeasurable sphere of space itself. It has produced beautiful spaces because they were ordered and proportioned within a superior vision of the world.

The ancients were used to found new urban spaces making constant reference to cosmology. Nothing was left to free will, but every stone, every sign was significant in an absolute and cosmic vision. Thus the genius loci was sanctified by a sensitive Architecture that promotes a wide sharing of the sense of *Being-there*, in eternal time and space.

One can therefore conclude that Order, in the original sense of the word, has always assumed a sacred value, for it has never represented a particular kind of geometric or language pattern, rather the superior idea that one has of the World in which one lives.

This dual approach, ethical and aesthetical at the same time, allowed the old public spaces not only to solve the formal aspect without falling into formalism, but also the phenomenal one as well without falling into disorder.

What are the spatial characteristics that are revealed in these spaces and that make them examples and points of reference for a recovery of the true meaning of Order in contemporary architecture? Though briefly, one can find out some items worthy of note, putting off the thorough investigation in another occasion.

1. BOUNDARY The first consideration is that the ancient urban public spaces were created when boundaries were fixed between the natural and urban changing environment. The delimitation of a space does not arise for reasons of exclusivity,

rather of inclusiveness, making it so more evocative and relational, highly attractive. Therefore the concept of "enclosure" of a public space becomes important; enclosure which can be characterized according to criteria of closing or opening - perceptual or physical - and developed through infinite possible solutions.

Piazza Navona is an outstanding feature of urban public space, where the enclosure is constituted by buildings, with few and distinct entrances that break the visual continuity of the limit.

On the other hand, the enclosure of the ancient *himorogi* of the Shrine of Ise consists of four poles and a rope stretched between them. Even in this case, the sacral sense of relationality emerges effectively. In both cases, resolved through forms and materials absolutely different, one feels the same high quality of a public space intended as a place of waiting and of mediation between the community and the multiplicity.

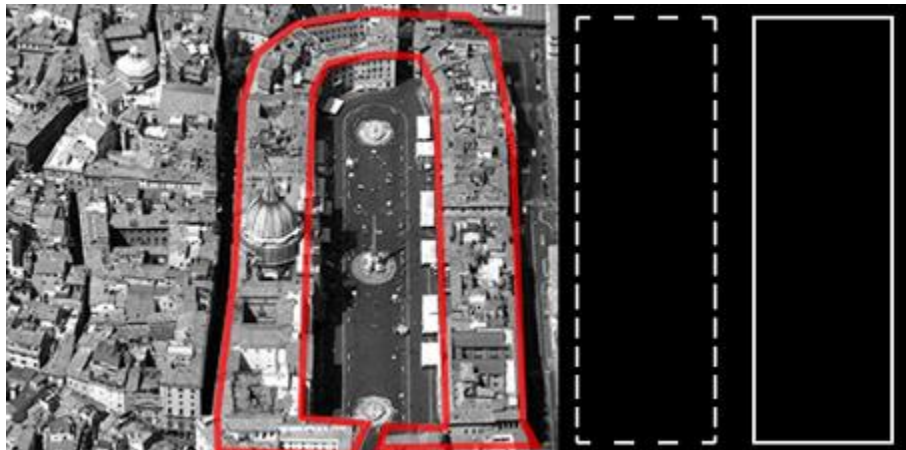


FIG.1 Boundary

2. INTERRELATIONSHIP A second consideration is on the relationship between public space and its context. The most old examples of public spaces confirm the fact that their emotional functioning is where they are integrated in the context according to a relational and dialoguing mechanism, through associations of comparison and contrast. This allows one to create atmospheres full of significance, mystery and anticipation, of awe and wonder. The public space should relate to its context through sequences of spatial actions and narrative moments. While the linear sequence, as a matter of fact, predetermines the direction of a space, the sequence of spaces (MORETTI, 1953. 9) plays upon the interaction between space and the viewer. Contrasts of volume, plays of light and shadow, sequences of heights encourage a public space ordered but, at the same time, complex and rhythmic. A new Order can be seen, where rule is accompanied by exception, where repetition integrates the changes.

The main square in Cortona, historical medieval Tuscan center, is characterized by articulated planimetry that consists of two main areas, which according to a pattern like an 8 become the fulcrum of the whole urban center. In the first area overlooks the Town Hall with adjacent tower incorporated into buildings and flight of steps

leading to the Town Hall itself. Opposite there is a system of houses side by side that appears as a theatre audience, dotted with loggias and narrow streets. From one of these one moves to the second area of the square where overlooks the Municipal Theatre and the archaeological museum of the town, to then go until the nearby Cathedral. As in a fluid and fluctuating space, the viewer feels participating of a superior ordered force that brings out the qualities of the *genius loci* in the compactness of surroundings buildings. An ordered space becomes flexible to the body in movement of the user, without losing its essential meaning (TSCHUMI, 2005. 121).

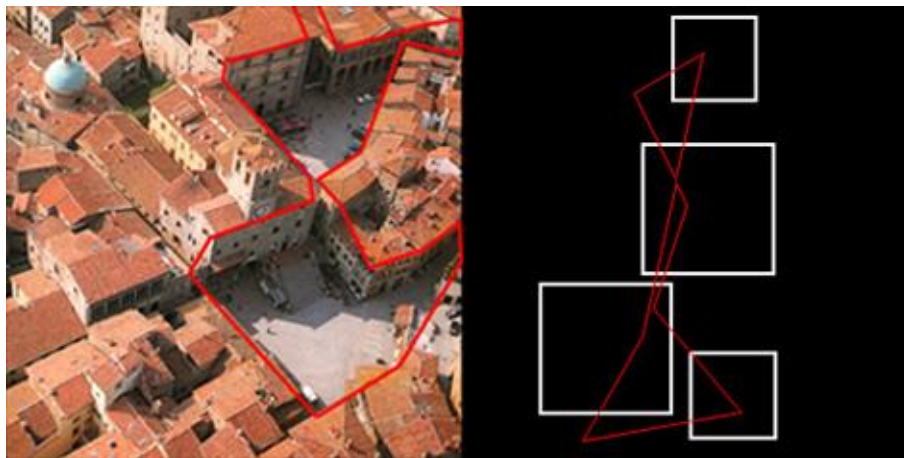


FIG.2 Interrelationship

3. THE COMPLEXITY A third consideration, as a result of the previous, is about the complex link that develops between objects and space, between fullness and voids. In fact, urban public space is often manifested as empty and not always this determines automatically the realization of a significant space. Espuelas points out in the Agora of Athens and in the city of Miletus two examples of empty urban public spaces with high spirituality, although presenting different morphologies of complexity. The former is exalted for its civic and sacred central void, on which gradually the various buildings develop, according to the technique of juxtaposition and discontinuity. While in the latter it is underlined by the Spanish architect the power of the multiple and intentional void, though the perpendicular chessboard that generates it might suggest a static result. Thanks to the calibrated relationship between full and empty spaces, they are highly uniform, without sinking the multiplicities that compose it. The atmospheric perception that they breathe is full of shades of existential tones that make up the public space. At the same time we perceive its will of globality.

The design solutions of a public space are infinite and therefore they can not be born aseptically from modular and geometric patterns, out of the context and its complexity. It indeed must be enhanced and not channeled into containers of empty and meaningless Order. Although interesting for the systematic methodology used, the taxonomical lists of Krier (KRIER, 1982. 31) can not be considered exhaustive. The complexity of phenomena can not be enclosed in some probabilistic

scheme, but they must emerge from the manifoldness and they must aim to greater communitarian unity.

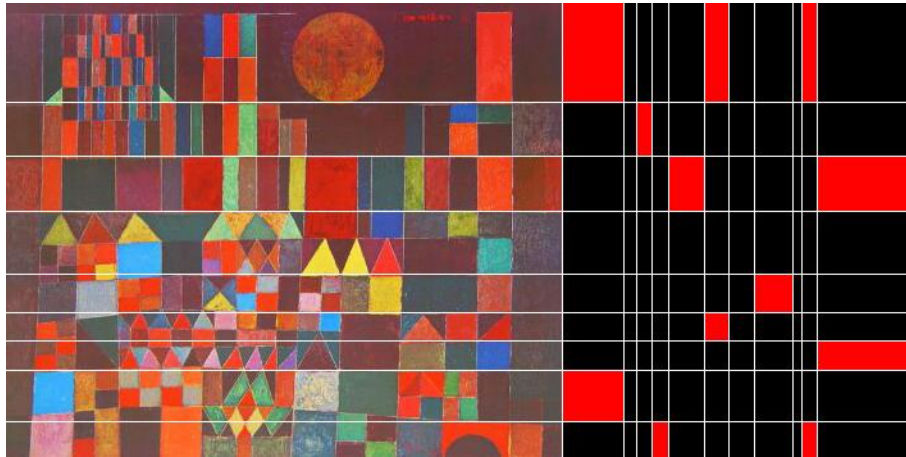


FIG.3 Complexity

In '900, at the peak of the crisis of spatial unity, were identified some signs of research for a new Order, more existential and phenomenological, interesting for the present research.

### 3. Towards a new Order

#### 3.1. Plastic Order

In the '60s the monk Hans Van der Laan, with a passion for architecture, begins to write about a certain Order of architecture, based on the *plastic Number*. This number allows to measure the magnitude of architecture, which cannot be measured by quantitative tools such as the abstract number, which instead refers to the concrete quantity. Through a scientific methodological system, Van der Laan theorizes a proportionate architectural space which is highly expressive. It is based on a complex system of relationships between objects and spaces, that does not cancel the differences but let them be ordered according to their existential affinities. Through some *infinitesimal delta* you can read and plan the manifold reality according to different *types of greatness* and *Orders of greatness*. In this way it is possible to obtain a *plastic Order*, dynamic and flexible, unitary and, at the same time, manifold.

This allows to better deal the architectural space that is characterized in being composite, that is declined in three directions simultaneously (width, height, depth). The same architectural space is read by Van der Laan in three areas: the space of action, the space walking and the space of the visual field, which overlap themselves with the smallest always in the greatest.

The new *plastic Order* is therefore determined from more spatial domains and from more epistemological phases. The physical experience of space, the sensory perception of shape and the rational evaluation of architectural greatness, therefore, give rise to a genuine phenomenological space, lived and transformative, according to the one that Pallasmaa calls *embodied understanding*.

As in a system of boxes, one inside the other, all traditional categories of space collapse, such as *in-out*, *full-hollow*. The inside, for example, will no longer be understood as an internal void, but can be experienced, felt or perceived as an external place and vice versa.

This discussion is synthesized by Van der Laan through three images: the cell, the courtyard and the domain. Translating the three images in urban space, one thus discovers closely connected the house, the square and the neighbourhood, according to a new Order, based on a system of relationships, clearly intelligible and unitary, but understandable from time to time depending on the nuances and on the specific gradients.

The research by Yona Friedman, referring in particular to the theory of *complicated Order*, may be linked to this sense of direction, set in order to recover the original sense of Order as a double moment.

### **3.2. Complicated Order**

Yona Friedman assumes that urban space is manifold and many-sided in its nuances. The *complicated Order* according to Friedman is the only one system that can regulate the real multiplicity of reality that surrounds us. This type of order is based on the hypothesis that the physical universe is composed of a granular space, made of a discontinuous set of granules interspersed with a *quasi-continuous* space, to form a grid extended to the whole granular space.

This allows to tie the idea of the Oneness to that of the complex Whole. The same Friedman says that each granule is unique and irreplaceable and that each granule is precious to define the complicated equilibrium of the reality.

The granular space, irregular and variable grid, that gives a particular value to each location where each granule finds its own individuality (FRIEDMAN, 2011. 57) determines a new type of space that is different from the traditional one. The new space proposed by Friedman is porous and permeable to the changes of the context and of its specific components.

The *complicated Order* meets the process of transformation of the city of the twentieth century, emphasizing that it is not the city to be erratic (FRIEDMAN, 2011. 56), messy and wrong. On the contrary, we have to start using new tools of understanding, less dogmatic and more flexible to mutability and changes.

The *complicated Order* means an Order which has new and unknown rules and above all that can not be reduced to mathematical formulas. Indeed these provide a result without examining the differential quality of the used process. Once again there is an appeal to the superior dimension of the urban Order.

It is therefore basic the role of the concept of *process*, which implies the one of *relationship*. Besides, the urban space is a processual place, where the sequence of actions and emotions is unexpected and sudden. Friedman argues that the image of a process can look like a doodle (FRIEDMAN, 2011. 59). So that it is quite fascinating the idea of being able to provide ourselves with an ever-new way of reading, through a space-time which is no longer linear, but cyclical and mythical.

Without falling into the trap of an over-structuralistic approach, which would stiffen once again the concept of order, it appears very interesting the revealing potentiality of a *complicated Order* so understood. It therefore discloses itself there where one gets ready to listen and understand it, according to a less analytical idea of the space in favour of a more holistic one.

This new sense of the Order, specific yet universal, area in between, becomes the *complex Order* of Robert Venturi, according to an increasingly articulated reading gradient of phenomenal multiplicity.

### **3.3. Complex Order**

Robert Venturi identifies the complexity of the modern phenomenal city like the power that generates significant places, and a cornerstone to enrich the architecture. The complexity is a reflection of many lives, according to Venturi, and this is good for the urban and architectural quality itself.

Order proposed by Venturi accepts the complexity and the contradiction, without denying the important *desire for simplicity* of Kahn. As a matter of fact, Venturi says, that the Doric temple has reached an apparent simplicity through a real complexity (VENTURI, 2005. 21).

The city of the third millennium, fragmented and manifold, can not stand without this complexity. It must however become a constructive resource, through a new urban order, capable of producing results of simplification by relationship and complex processes. Complexity does not therefore preclude the concept of Absolute, on the contrary it includes it indicating it as the purpose of superior research (VENTURI, 2005. 16). In order to do this, the new urban order must be based on reading through levels of the complexity and on making the most of the nuances rather than the objective categories. It should affect the liminal zones rather than the centralization of space, thus producing places of expectation and astonishment, tension and ambiguity.

Architecture has to be made instrument of revelation of deeper essence of space and no longer only instrument of form and function. The architect must return to serve the community, designing public spaces that are not conventionally regular, but places of real life. In this way the epistemological process will happen more easily through not only the intellectual channel but, above all, through the perceptive and physical channel, soliciting all the senses according to an embodied consciousness.

## **4. Order beyond Unity and Multiplicity**

From what so far said, it is evident that we need to get a new sense of urban order, more inclusive and phenomenal, but leading the city and its public space to an unitarian sense.

We have to master the uncontrolled forces and place them into a new order, that is namely an order which gives free rein to unfolding life. It is, however, an order that relates to Men. We do not need less science, but of a more spiritual science, so wrote Mies van der Rohe (PIZZIGONI, 2010. 52).



Here is the right path for the authentic understanding of the new urban order. The public space, a place of mediation between the individual and the community, as a sacred place, should enable the free revelation of the essence of each of us.

The public space of our cities should be brought back into the scope of freedom, in the most spiritual and ancient sense. Free to choose *to be-there* in the World, as a place of Truth and Beauty. But unfortunately it is evident the difficulty with which these words are now put aside in favour of concepts such as fashion, taste, business, for an economic immediate feedback.

In view of this discomfort it is necessary to recover the concept of *essentiality*, as a sign of an epiphanic superior Order, based on the idea of being *What*, not *How*. It is the Idea, the vision of the world, that guarantees the new urban order.

*A man with a book goes to the light: it is the beginning of a library* (Kahn). The public space should be born from the idea of what we want to be, namely the idea of what we are in the World. Only after having made it clear, we can talk about Form, Function... or other issues strictly related to material aspect of the project.

More intentional clarity is required to resist the drift of the urban complexity. Mies in his essay "The premises of the architectural creation" criticizes the chaos of contemporary architecture, indicating the causes of this in the non-spiritual inspiration of the architects (PIZZIGONI, 2010. 52). Indeed, the emerging discomfort of the contemporary cities reflects the existential malaise of the third millennium's Man, adrift without landmarks. The architecture have to recover the ancient principles of order, not geometric and formal, or purely functional-deterministic, but perceptive and emotional, according to an atmospheric aesthetic.

*Only in this way there will be Beauty*

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## **Biography**

Annalisa Ventura (1975) is an architect, graduated in the School of Architecture of Rome – La Sapienza. She is finishing her the PhD at the School of Architecture of the University of Rome (DRACO). In this moment his scientific research is focused on the relationship between the public space and the sacred space, through the more authentic and primitive sense of idea of sacredness. The research aims to establish a new sense of public space much more phenomenological and similar to the first sacred spaces, that were more emotional and relational.