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Architecture is both a means and an end. Tending towards it allows the designer, and whoever takes part in the design activity, to make an ambitious attempt at defining an evolving entity.

Deciding today what will be tomorrow – or, even, forever – is an extraordinary action that carries with it a high degree of responsibility: before being created, everything we see today in our built environment – public spaces, buildings, materials – were first of all imagined, and even dreamed.

It is a question of accepting imagination as an instrument of creativity, as a primary element of evolution, allowing man to change and adapt to the spaces in which he lives. Dream, foresight, anticipation, invention and creativity – in other words, the overcoming of the sensitive side of our existence – represent the highest expression of man's responsibility towards the world.

By definition, a designer's imagination is akin to the ability to anticipate: the environment, the city, the habitat of man; the urban and non-urban landscape of the future; the transformations we can impose and those we must endure.

The act of designing means constantly pondering such aspects, cultivating the exercise of doubt as a primary prerogative of developing architecture. Designing means trying to never lose sight of the value of the many "maybes" that man faces every day, with courage but also with uncertainty. For architectural designers, use of the conditional is a desirable practice, given their constant battle with weak, alleged certainties and infinite unknown variables.

Our responsibility, as designers, is to take consistent and structured architectural decisions promoting the construction of buildings and such use of the environment and landscape as to anticipate new scenarios, drawing on our past yet projecting ourselves into the future based on evolving scientific criteria.

Taking these assumptions as our starting point, I wish to dwell on the relationship between history and contemporaneity, in order to outline plausible prospects for our geographical area, based on an autochthonous and original reading of the Italian and European contexts in particular. A vision that takes its cue from the purposely provocative wish to elevate history to a barometer of contemporaneity¹.

This interpretation relies on the assumption that ours is an urban world. While it is true that cities occupy less than 3% of the planet's surface, people, the inhabitants of the world, live and circulate mainly in cities, and the tendency is to reaffirm this dynamic. This cultural attitude has inevitably resulted in their growth, in number and size, in a variety of ways mirroring our different lifestyles.

The built environment constitutes the theatre of our lives, that physical context, hosting the life of man, readily identifiable with the concept of city. There can be no proper planning of our world, of our reality – whether natural or relating to man's *habi-*

tat – without constantly referring to the history of places and cultures.

Great masters have always been unanimous in reiterating the need to be familiar with history so as to be able to draw on such knowledge and adapt it to the new era. A civilization with no memory is destined to repeat its mistakes. Studying our past, instead, favours the contemporaneous experience, whether it be permanent or temporary, in continuity or in discontinuity with our past. In this dialogue between past and present resides the sequential and evolutionary value of the moment we are living.

In the world's heterogeneous urban structures, there are contexts for which a genuine history has not yet been written, and others, which, on the contrary, are strongly characterised by their urban experience.

The city is everywhere, it permeates every anthropized interstice, concentrating in magnetic form and making it seem that our fate has already been written: we *will* live in megalopolises. By 2050, the world's population is expected to increase from 7.6 billion to 10 billion people. Currently, 54% of the total population lives in cities and, again by 2050, this percentage is due to rise to 70%, with the world having over 40 megalopolises – cities with more than ten million people – by 2030.

On the other end of the spectrum, however, it is worth noting that in the countries of the European Community, Italy among them, almost two-thirds of the population currently live in small and medium-sized urban centres.

For us, history is both a constant and inescapable liability, but also an enormous asset to be protected and valued. As a result, the European city, and the Italian one in particular, is going through a dynamic, non-static age nourished by the relationship of accord and discord between these two factors. It is constantly being enlarged and modified over time, opening itself up to the territory in a widespread manner and altering the urban behaviour of its inhabitants, its visitors, its designers.

The city can no longer be measured, as it used to be, in terms of density, continuity, variety: the current urban scenario is discontinuous and enfolds considerable differences in terms of housing and functional density.

It is also increasingly difficult to determine where the countryside begins and where the city ends: new ingredients linked to the concept of free time change our set ups and habits, and contexts connected with historical tradition show signs both of development and of contraction. This phenomenon takes its place among dynamics linked with the concepts of metropolisation and urban shrinkage, i.e. an increase in the mass and a decrease in the weight of the city.

This development, mainly associated with a population decline, involves much more than just a falling demographic trend. It is viewed, instead, as a phenomenological and unplanned result

of economic and political decisions resulting in excessive urban spaces, buildings and obsolete properties. Consequently, while some realities grow culturally, physically and economically, others experience deindustrialisation, economic crises, demographic nosedives that result in a redundancy of empty and abandoned buildings.

The housing heritage passed on to posterity, often unused and obsolete, represents a serious challenge for the community in terms of dealing with the existing scenario and with the built city. “New” settings exist, and make sense, even where man has already carried out transformations: in the European context, there is no need to design a “new city”, but rather to identify new development strategies in line with the existing reality.

This concept has been universally accepted as the primary means of giving whole parts of the city a new lease of life: the act of making *urban regeneration* a driver for the rebirth of areas that have lost their identity. In the case of Italy, the idea is to regenerate neighbourhoods springing from a historical design but that have in fact lost the population that originally defined and nurtured it.

Regenerating means restoring a state of dignity and grandeur by reconstructing the injured or lost parts of an urban organism. More specifically, it means tackling the new demands of contemporary living within historical fabrics, adapting the forms that the city has taken on over time to the changed needs of new urban populations. Building in an existing, on an existing, within an existing context: this is the challenge our generation must face.

«The underlying theory», writes Paolo Portoghesi, «is that architecture, every architecture, is born from other architecture, from a non-fortuitous convergence of a series of precedents, combined by a synergistic process of individual thought and collective memory»².

The Italian landscape owes its survival to the fact of giving attention to local cultures and rejecting standardised developments, because it is in such “differences” that beauty, continuity and harmony lie. Every urban context is inevitably the result of multiple stratifications, and as such can be referred to as *historical*. Contemporary designing continues this historical process based on an inescapable rationale of continuity.

The juxtapositions of *continuity-discontinuity* and *assonance-dissonance* lie at the epicentre of the dialogue between the past and the future. It is for these and other principles that we must live the city, we must preserve it and value it, not as antiquarians or museum managers, but as citizens-architects with a highly developed sense of civic duty. We need to leverage the best of our past and of our experience and adapt it to our present and our future. This is because life – and, even more so, the work of an architect – is the sum of experiences, in the very same way as the city is, too.

As Italian singer-songwriter Francesco De Gregori sings in a beautiful song from the 1980s, “we are history” (*La storia siamo noi*)³: history, therefore, is not about buildings, or rather, it is not just about buildings and spaces; history is made by the men and women who live and interpret them.

The dialectic relationship between memory and contemporaneity, in every discipline, sums up the ambiguities and difficulties we are going through. Consequently, the relationship between expressions of contemporaneity and traces of our past directly involves the debate on the range of action of design and constructive practice. Since modernity-related phenomena often tend to weaken the natural, historical and cultural environment, in Italy it is inconceivable to have an idea of architecture that disregards the concepts of memory and identity, also in relation to topical modern-day environmental problems.

The process of creating our contemporary world must also serve as a fundamental instrument of analysis, elevating the critique and study of history to a constructive filter of new trends. Utterly inadequate, therefore, would Frank Lloyd Wright’s alleged dig at Siegfried Giedion be today: “we both deal with history, the difference being that you write about it while I make it”.

Critical action, an awareness of the past, an understanding of the present and an inclination towards the future are strategic and synergic factors for the dissemination of knowledge, since every age must represent itself: it must leave a trace, through the built and the unbuilt environment, of its style and tenets. We must, therefore, counter an idea of the *past* as a phenomenon in itself, as something that is over and done with, separated by an irreparable fracture from the present.

This is an attitude that the younger generations tend to adopt: for them, the past is obsolete and the here and now advanced and progressive. Our young people’s growing ease with the use of electronic instruments should be set against a growing weakening of their critical ability.

Contrast, hybridisation, fusion, allegory, reference: in contemporary urban architecture, these factors are elevated to legitimate and desirable processes. The *vexata quaestio* regarding the logical connection between *contemporary architecture* and *historical contexts* sums up the daily relationship between the old and the new, with the concept of *historical continuity* – in functional, semantic and technological terms – being the constant element of the equation.

Here, then, is the paradigm: architecture is the *barometer of an era*, while the consolidated city sets the *stage for comparing different eras*. There is no single road to be followed, but multiple approaches, which can be mutually contradictory or complementary.

Man was born to be a builder and modifier of the world he lives in: a child left alone on a beach will show his instinct as a builder as he plays with the sand. Hence the human mind’s faculty to

preserve and call up memories and experiences that represent a founding element of the individual and collective identity of the city. Memory, in this cultural context, is an essential requirement for the birth and development of a people's culture.

Man simply adds to or subtracts from this memory, seeking a dialogue with pre-existing frameworks within which new designs can outline the transition from past to future. We channel the passage from before to after, without ever being extraneous to either.

Aldo Rossi believed that the question of *ancient-new*, of *conservation-innovation* «can no longer be seen only from the viewpoint of the relationship between the old and the new [...]but from that of the necessary modifications that are produced with every work»⁴.

Architecture is such when it favours its usability, in line with the idea of an entire community. The hope is that, in a thousand years' time, when future archaeologists find our ruins, they can easily date our buildings and our cities due to the forms, the materials, the technological and construction systems used.

Buildings, like men, are living, pulsating beings in continuous evolution; and the city, to use an oxymoron, is their natural environment. Moving beyond the metaphor of architecture – referred to by Goethe's as “petrified music” – and widening our horizons, it is worth noting that every human sphere regards the history of society as the engine of contemporary design.

The relationship between memory and contemporaneity is the barometer of all the elements that make up our existence – society, work, well-being, health, interpersonal relationships, lifestyles – and of our relationships with them. Every transformation can be positively experienced when it is welded to its own past, not in opposition but in continuity with same.

Every day we are reminded by the experts that global warming is progressing faster than expected; every action connected with altering the built and the natural environment must necessarily be carried out with this in mind.

In order to try to outline some future scenarios, paraphrasing the context in which this paper is placed, and acting within that paradigm, I would like to reiterate certain concepts on which future strategies should be based.

The historical city is a more resilient entity than others are because, having had to confront that very historical aspect, it has had resilience imprinted in its very DNA. The city is where most of the world's infrastructure is concentrated - a vital element for quality of life and always a critical factor within the Italian scene; it is the primary place and a democratic instrument of inclusion, integration and enhancement of differences through the plurality of its configurations; it represents the framework and a paradigm of acceptance and reception of inhabitants from rich and poor lands alike, who have decided or have been forced to leave their native home; the city and its spaces, its forms, play an

educational role in the behaviour and habits of people.

Three actions are consequently essential for our modern-day reality, incorporating a strategic significance for the future of our contexts and landscapes.

It will become increasingly necessary to invest in urban regeneration, both in a material (space) and an immaterial (society) sense, without ever forgetting that cities are the people and not the containers that house them.

It will become increasingly important to foster and promote dialogue with the built city and not to interpret the two entities as diametrically opposed, drawing on the concepts of valorisation and use, and not of simply preserving and treating cities like a museum - because the city only survives if it lives.

It will become increasingly useful to consider the city as a living being, developing new formulas to graft and transplant “new organs” through micro and macro urban surgery operations on the city's living body. And there is no doubt that the citizen is the city's best possible doctor.

We are the outcome of the experiences that have formed us. Each of us preserves his or her own memory of the past, and this will emerge subconsciously when facing anything new, combining rational reason with subjective need.

The city is the sum of many architectures. Likewise, architecture – and history – are the sum of many stories.

We are history.

NOTES

¹ The text refers to Emilio Faroldi's talk at TEDx Parma “Della Città e Del mondo”, held on 25 November 2018 at *Workout Pasubio*, Parma, entitled: “Built experiences. History as a barometer of contemporaneity”.

² Portoghesi, P. (2016), “Combinando cose lontane (Combining distant things)”, *Technè, Journal of Technology for Architecture and Environment*, Vol. 12, Firenze University Press, Florence, p. 40.

³ De Gregori, F. (1985), *La storia (siamo noi)*, from the album “Scacchi e tarocchi”.

⁴ Rossi, A. (1972), “Architettura e città: pasato e presente”, in Rossi, A. (Ed.), *Scritti scelti sull'architettura e la città 1956-1972*, edited by Bonicalzi, R., Edizioni Clup, Milan, Italy.