THE RECONSTRUCTION OF AL NURI MOSQUE IN MOSUL: STRATEGIES AND TOOLS FOR REINVENTING THE MEANING OF PLACES

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INTRODUCTION

The city of Mosul, the second largest in terms of population in Iraq, has recently become known in the news as the last stronghold of ISIS in the battle against the Iraqi regular army. The conflict, which (apparently) ended with the battle of Mosul in 2017, has, however, left extremely significant wounds in the fabric of the city: firstly, in fact, ISIS had as a programmatic objective the destruction, almost iconoclastic, of the monuments – a dystopian interpretation of Rossi's intuition[1] that identified precisely in the monuments and in the city the locus of collective memory is not remote, and that the monuments were destroyed precisely to eliminate the memory of the city. This cancellation of memory has involved extremely important monuments, such as the central mosque of Al Nuri, the minaret of Al Hadba, the mosque of Nabi Djirdjis, but also monuments outside the perimeter of the Old City, such as the temple of Imam Yaya, Nabi Yunis (where the prophet Jonah is believed to be buried) and the entire city of Nineveh, the ancient Assyrian capital and Mosul's true urban counterpoint on the opposite bank of the Tigris River. Secondly, the armed conflict has also caused less monumental and surgical damage, but of similar impact: since the small streets, often *cul de sacs*, of the Old City offered easy shelter to ISIS militiamen, the regular army has resorted to an almost "Haussmannian" strategy, bombing from the opposite bank of the Tigris without a specific target, causing, in fact, a *tabula rasa* of the portions of the city facing the river.

The state of destruction can be clearly seen in the survey produced by UNESCO in 2018 (fig. 1), in the document Revive the spirit of Mosul[2], which, for the first time, attempts to take stock of the consequences of the conflict and provide operational tools for a revival of the Iraqi city, elaborating an interpretative framework of the situation.

This paper takes as its theme the call of the competition, also announced by UNESCO, for the reconstruction of the Al Nuri Mosque, the city's main mosque, to be held in 2021, in which we participated with a group of students from the Politecnico di Milano, in the broader context of a Thematic Studio (a design workshop during the final year) themed on reconstruction in Mosul.

Figure 1. UNESCO's report upon destruction in Mosul Old City [V. Dogari – N.Bello Melo]

Although belonging to different worlds (the university as an experimental field, and the competition as a concrete solution), the decision was to proceed with a verification of the knowledge developed during the academic year, in accordance with the functional requirements of the competition notice, while always trying to have a demonstrative attitude – which will be described in more detail in the following paragraphs – considering the case of the Al Nuri mosque as emblematic for the reasoning on the reconstruction of certain monuments in the city of Mosul. As stated in the competition documentation, "the reconstruction of this important landmark is of utmost importance to send a strong signal of resilience and hope, as a first step towards social cohesion and reconciliation in post-conflict Iraq. Indeed, historical sites and monuments are not only a scientific tool of knowledge, but they also represent a powerful symbol of belonging, community, and identity, whose rehabilitation will facilitate recovering the memory of the Moslawis that once felt part of a vibrant and emerging city".[3] Just to give a brief indication of the requirements of the functional envelope foreseen, the competition provides: the reconstruction of the Prayer Hall with the same volume and figure as before; the insertion of an educational complex composed by a secondary high school and an advanced center for Islamic studies; the recovery of the Al Nuri Sahn (courtyard); the addition of a Festival hall for 200/300 people; the prevision of administration facilities for the whole complex.

THE MOSQUE OF AL NURI

Historically, the construction of the Al Nuri mosque coincides with the consolidation of Mosul's urban structure: the city, of Islamic foundation and therefore started out as a military camp (a garrison town), took its final form under the Zengid dynasty (1127-1259 AD) with the construction of some fundamental elements in the definition of an Islamic settlement: the walls, the Souq, the citadel and, indeed, the central mosque, which was placed in the new center of gravity of the city, on the road linking the main gate of *Bab Sindjar* to the bridge over the Tigris. Regarding the Mosque – although

this precaution could be extended to the entire city of Mosul – there are few certain sources: the most important is the volume by the German archaeologist Ernst Hertzfeld[4], which indicates as the period of completion the years 1170-1172 AD, thus under the reign of Nur al-Din[5]. While the authenticity of some things is not in doubt in a strictly material sense – such as the *mihrab* – for other components one can only be certain of their positional role: the historical fabric of Islamic cities is often an extremely modifiable component[6], and sometimes so are the monuments themselves. Hertzfeld speculates that at some point the Mosque building was so large that it also included the entire courtyard, being able to accommodate the entire population of Mosul inside it, but there are no traces of this. The situation described – and noted – by the archaeologist corresponds to the first cartographic restitution (1906) of the building, and is configured as a basilica body – horizontal, as opposed to the verticality of Christian basilicas – composed of two naves, one of chapels and a main one, onto which the dome is grafted at the level of the *mihrab*. There are also many structures built around the perimeter of the enclosure: from residential superfetations to monumental elements such as the Al Hadba minaret (the "hunchback") and the tomb of Al Nuri. Between 1945 and 1950 the complex was profoundly modified: the mosque loses its marked horizontality, it is shortened on its sides and a porticoed volume is added overlooking the courtyard; the perimeter of the courtyard is cleaned of its previous volumes, leaving only the highly monumental emergencies such as the minaret and Al Nuri's tomb; the entrances are redesigned, no longer on the sides but facing south; etc... In essence, the mosque loses its component of urban fabric, to become to all intents and purposes a monumental emergence (this historical phase is also the one to which refer to the UNESCO competition for the reconstruction of the original volume and figure). In 2017 – after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi decreed the birth of the Islamic State from here in 2014 and later ordered its destruction – only a few fragments remain: a few columns, fortunately the dome, but only the memory of the overall structure and the minaret.

Figure 2. Aero photo in 2017. The mosque and minaret (in black), and the three courtyards proposed (in white)

OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

The violent and authoritarian breaking of the connection between collective memory and its symbols cannot but require a further effort from the discipline of architecture, which must abstract and determine a conceptual plan of action that holds together various instances: from the ability to

emotionally recall belonging to a place, making certain mnemonic and perhaps unconscious links resonate, to the ability to design (in latin languages there is a common etymological derivation from the verb to project, *progettare* and *proiettare*) new scenarios for the future. In this limbic condition, we considered useful to bear in mind Carlo Aymonino's definition of the project-program, as an intermediate design device between the project, in the concrete sense, and regulation: one of the objectives of our response to this competition is identifiable in the desire to explore a design field by delimiting its conceptual margins (a sort of operational perimeter) without remaining on the regulatory plane: instead highlighting and carrying certain volumetric, spatial and, above all, figurative issues that can be a tangible response to specific questions. "The possibility therefore of reversing the current practice between project and regulation should be extended to the point of reversing the current relationship of cause and effect: it is the project-program that no longer determines a regulation but a 'rule'. [...] It makes it possible to accept multiple hypotheses of development and to determine within these hypotheses one particular development, which becomes a 'mandatory forecast'. [...] It is a question of developing a series of concepts and relations that are reversed in partial and differentiated solutions precisely through the project".[7] If on the one hand it is legitimate to note the uniqueness and specificity of the physical damage to the Al Nuri Mosque, on the other hand it is necessary to know how to contextualize this situation in a more general panorama: Aleppo, Raqqa, Baghdad, Erbil... the fragility of the heritage of humanity is an unfortunately widespread condition, and the occasion of a reconstructive project must be seen as a synthesis of a methodological reflection on the processes and priorities in these contexts. In this sense, the design solution becomes the representation of more general settlement and regulatory intentions, aspiring to be understood as a sort of methodological *manifesto* of an approach that can plausibly be generalized to other situations, in act or in potential, as a gesture of disciplinary responsibility.

THE PROJECT

The entire Old City of Mosul, and in particular its central part, offers a certain promiscuity in the contamination between neutral and monumental elements, and this is also the case for the area in which the Al Nuri Mosque is located. Prior to the project, therefore, a reconnaissance phase was initiated to understand the entities involved in this area, with a conceptual division between monumental pre-existences, non-monumental permanences and invariant type-morphological elements. The monumental pre-existences can certainly be traced back to the remains (but also to the volumetric absence) of the mosque, the absence of the minaret (of which, however, the large base remains – and of which UNESCO will conduct a reconstruction "as it was"), the presence of the tomb of Al Nuri; in addition to these, there are other artefacts which, although built with the modernizations carried out between 1945 and 1950 – and therefore lacking a strictly archaeological/monumental value – participate in equal measure in the overall idea of the pre-war mosque: the corner entrance, formed by three pointed portals, and the ablution pavilion in the courtyard. The non-monumental permanences refer instead to the residential fabric, substantially filling in the unbuilt spaces around the mosque over time: for example, the group of houses in the north-east part and the entire western block. Of the latter, only three residences have remained partially standing, preserving their perimeter footprint, typological layout and, rarely, their distributional systems.
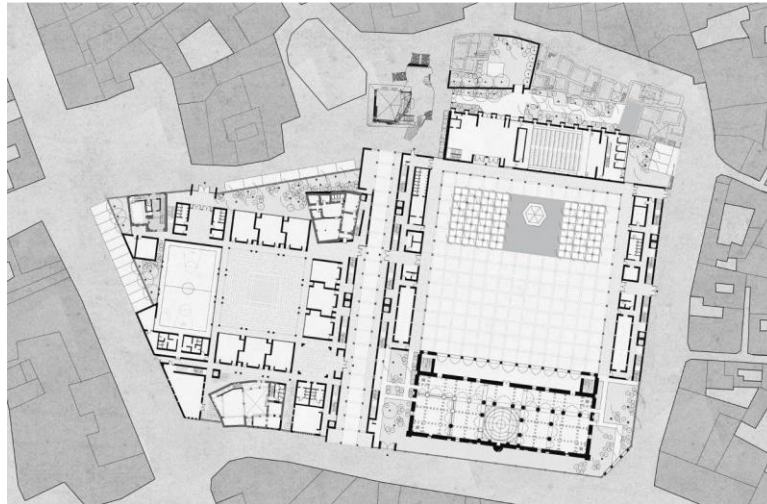
*Figure 3. *Plan for the competition call. In the left part the school complex, in the center the void related to the minaret, in the right the mosque's complex and courtyard.*

The type-morphological invariant is, however, the enclosed settlement structure – as is evident from the non-monumental remains themselves. Both the western block and the mosque clearly present this characteristic, which becomes a relevant element in the interpretation of the built space. In the economy of this reconnaissance phase, the only element that is poised between various historical-spatial justifications is the minaret, straddling the two areas but without a space of its own – as evidenced by the irregular course that the mosque's boundary wall makes to incorporate it. With this pretext, it was thought possible to insert another linear void in correspondence with it. (fig.2)

The design
The project, therefore, starting from the first layouts identified during a montage phase, adapts the planimetric intuitions to the actual conformations of the area and with the quantities indicated in the call. The west side hosts the two planned schools, united in a single architectural organism that identifies its unitary matrix in the courtyard, around which the classrooms are arranged on two floors. In the accidental areas created by the non-monumental structures, collective services such as the library, individual study rooms and the complex's cafeteria are located. In the center of the building is a transitional volume with a dual role: on the one hand it is a hinge-empty to allow a passage of meaning between the school complex and the mosque complex[8], and on the other it creates a respectful space to frame the minaret in perspective (figg. 3-4). The mosque complex is developed in the entire right-hand portion of the intervention, around a square-shaped courtyard whose sides echo the dimensions of the mosque building, thus relying on the identity of the building to determine its representative role. On either side are two linear elements enclosing the courtyard, below which are the new ablution rooms which act as a filter for the entrance to the mosque. On the north side, the complex's auditorium, the festivity hall, is located, and a garden is developed around Al Nuri's tomb, as a reworking of an Islamic Garden.

Figure 4. *The view of the Minaret.

The building of the Mosque is based on the desire to maintain the proportions and volume of the destroyed building, assimilating its original distribution logic, and incorporating its lasting remains. In order not to risk a mimetic reconstruction, the balance between continuity and discontinuity (which is necessary, as the preservation of memory also requires emphasis on certain scars) is entrusted to the new roof and the development of the façades. The roof is slightly detached from the wall perimeter, emphasizing the structural support system, a frame of beams that absorbs the rhythm of the pillars of the mosque. The façades, on the other hand, reinterpret the scanning of the destroyed masonry (fig. 5), maintaining its image but altering its substance: some openings are closed and extruded beyond the line of the masonry; the pilasters, instead of extruding, dig into the façade.[9]

The result is an architectural complex that articulates structures with different functions – educational, public or religious – around a hierarchical system of courtyards, in which the orthogonality of the newly designed volumes mediates between a refined contrast with the pre-existing buildings and the morphology of the urban fabric; moreover, it attempts to confirm, in an interpretative key, the typical density that structures the relationship between full and empty spaces, a frequent feature of cities of Islamic foundation. Interpretation, re-elaboration and restitution, also by means of formal contrast, is however responsible for elaborating a strategy in balance between continuity and discontinuity, articulating a series of questions, including:

• Identification of the maintenance value of the architectures, i.e. the will to preserve what maintains the possibility of having not only a memorial but also an operational role in the social patterns of a community, without having excessive reverential/archaeological fear at the expense of the experimentality of a vital design solution.

• Insertion of a conceptual and physical gap between the new and the old. The project promotes the clear recognition of the parts that make up the building: in the plan respectful

*Figure 5. *View of the façade from the street and section on the courtyards.*

gap is maintained between the orthogonality of the new volumes and the pre-existing buildings, monumental or not. This void makes it possible to clearly recognize the matrices of origin of the parts of the building. But just as constants are "absorbed" at the settlement level (alignments, typological structures, settlement mechanisms), so too, at the figurative level, elements are taken up and re-elaborated that allow the operation of summation of the parts into a single reference whole.

• Balance between autonomy and heteronomy in accepting the morphological structure of the city: given the centrality of the project area, it was considered necessary to identify a link with the form of the city, an elaboration of the project alignments to favor a harmonious relationship with the context. On the other hand, the project itself is characterized by a marked orthogonality and parallelism according to the layout of the mosque building. The result, poised between respect for urban layouts and an autonomous geometric rule, recalls a settlement mechanism typical of Islamic contexts: think of some of the most famous structures in the history of Islamic collective architecture (the great mosque of Isfahan in Iran, the madrasa of Sultan Hassan in Cairo, Egypt, etc.): the rule is set by the internal courtyard, which respects determined proportions – which in turn carry an iconographic and iconological value – while on the perimeter are positioned service and/or accessory volumes, which have the architectural task of mediating from the regularity and representativeness of the center and to weld with the randomness and irregularity of the surrounding urban margins.[10]

• Monumental remains as compositional fulcrums: the pre-existing monuments become central points for reconstruction, not only in their rehabilitation as closed buildings, but also and above all as reference elements in the articulation of a public and collective space around them. Thus, the mosque building dictates the side of its own afferent courtyard, as much as the presence/absence of the minaret becomes the inhabitable margin that unites and separates the two east and west wings of the entire complex.

• The functional adaptation and rehabilitation of buildings become not only technical interventions, but figurative expedients: like the best Italian post-war tradition (Carlo Scarpa's Castelvecchio, BBPR's Castello Sforzesco, etc.)[11], the structural and technological additions maintain a linguistic register different from the original building, but not completely autonomous: the same technical structure (be it a structural or distributive apparatus) interprets some characteristics of the building of origin, but it self-denounces itself as an "addition" without disappearing into the host structure.

*Figure 6. *Bird-eye view of the all complex.*

CONCLUSION

The response to the call was an opportunity to conceptually measure some of the tools related to architectural operations in contexts that have suffered a high level of monumental destruction; the case of Mosul requires a considerable design effort, as well as an emotional one, in order to hold together all the instances involved in the reconstruction. On the one hand, the need for the place emerges, to recognize its deepest meaning and to manifest it through the enhancement of what makes up the architectural space. On the other, the desire to convert memory into a narrative mechanism that represents absence, a conceptual and practical operation that restores a value of livability alongside the maintenance of collective and historical memory.

From this point of view, the process that guided the development of the project, although often icastic, has the value of wanting to set itself up as a tool for reflection on an architectural process and experimentation with a method, rather than on the project as a response to an individual need, so as to tickle and stimulate operational reflection on events, unfortunately, central to the recent past and to the current civil and social tasks of the discipline of architecture.

* The groupwork was composed by D. Chizzoniti (team leader), H. Pessoa Pereira Alves, Q. Wang, T. Lolli, F. Menici, A. Salihbegovich, A. Abdelhafez, N. Bello Melo, V. Dogari, R. Khatibani, R. Lallemant, Z. Ma, R. Mishieva, S. Qiu, G. Scotto, Y. Shi

NOTES

[1] Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura della Città [The Architecture of the City]* (Milano: il Saggiatore, 2018), 170-172.

[2] UNESCO, *Revive the Spirit of Mosul* (2018).

[3] UNESCO, *Reconstruction & Rehabilitation of the Al Nouri Complex in Mosul* (2020), 8.

[4] Ernst Hertzfeld and Friedrich Sarre, *Archäologische Reise im Euphrat – und Tigris – Gebeit.* (Berlin: Verlag Von Dietrich Reimer).

[5] Theories confirmed by more recent studies as: Yasser Tabbaa, "The Mosque of Nur al-Din in Mosul", *Annales Islamologiques* 36, no. 1 (2002): 339–360.

[6] Stefano Bianca, *Urban form in the Arab World* (London: Thames&Hudson, 2000).

[7] Carlo Aymonino, *Il Significato della città [The meaning of the city]* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2000), 46-48.

[8] Franco Purini, *Comporre l'architettura [How to compose architecture]* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2009)

[9] This process of iconographic reworking is similar to the one used by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown for the Sainsbury Wing in London, is part of a transformation that keeps the data of the original organism legible. cfr: Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, "The Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery, London", *Zodiac* 6 (1991): 90–115.

[10] It is interesting to confront this idea with: Colin Rowe, "Program vs. Paradigm: Otherwise Casual Notes on the Pragmatic, the Typical, and the Possible", in *As I Was Saying Vol. 2*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 7-41.

[11] But also, in the whole European context of the post WWII (for example, the Koldinghus Castle by Johannes Exner), cfr. Guido Canella, "Conservazione, Restauro, Rivitalizzazione, Reversibilità" [Conservation, Restoration, Revitalization, Reversibility], *Ananke* 38 (March 2003): 101-104.

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