THE AESTHETICS OF ARCHITECTURE
BEYOND FORM

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FROM TODAY'S URBAN ANONYMITY TO A NEW BEAUTY OF THE CITY

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Any discussion concerning ideas and considerations about the city should start by asking three rather important questions, to which, however, we still cannot provide answers. The first involves the dilemma between the existence of a goal behind the evolution and history of cities and the haphazardness of their actual evolution and history. In short, I always ask myself whether urban historiography imposes a rational organisation on events and people *a posteriori*, conferring on them a sense of what has happened and the personality of the figures who played a role in the city's history, or whether the city's objectives reflect a pre-established plan, a long-term *a priori*. The second question is whether cities, especially after the advent of globalisation, can be understood on the basis of the many interpretations that reveal them as texts of texts, plural texts and therefore infinite, a type of text to which Claude Lévi-Strauss had already implicitly referred in his definition of the city as "the human thing par excellence". The multiple visions of the city produced by various fields of learning – legal science, written and oral history, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, geography, human geography, climatology, environmentalism, economics, psychoanalysis, psycho-geography, statistics, medicine, urban planning, architecture, painting, film, theatre, and literature – have given rise to a cognitive labyrinth consisting of unavoidable narrative superimpositions, thematic stratifications, and descriptive contradictions. A labyrinth that allows us to formulate limited, changeable, and experimental interpretative hypotheses, rather than achieving theoretical synthesis and long-lasting, comprehensible operational strategies.

If we then add to this the duplication of the city between reality and virtual reality (which seemingly ensures that the latter be considered true and the former as its sub-product), a mitigated duplication, plus the loss of every city's identity in a globalised world due to growing homologation and the contemporary and contradictory glorification of the uniqueness of every urban settlement, we can easily understand how knowledge of the city – now more than ever – can only be partial, transitory, and hypothetical.

The incomplete and temporary nature of our knowledge of cities is also due to the speed (with a remote futuristic matrix) with which they are changing; to a rupture in the historical congruence between layout and fabric in favour of an incoherent and unregulated distribution of buildings competing with each other; to the abandonment of the structural relationship between typology and morphology and the loss of the concept of *forma urbis*; and to the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of grounding proposals regarding urban evolution on absolutely predictable scenarios. The third question involves asking ourselves exactly how the size of cities creates the differences between them, on a scale ranging from small hamlets to metropolises. On the one hand, thanks to the Internet, every hub, however small, has the same possibilities of communication as a metropolis does; on the other hand, the presence of local features increases if there are fewer cities. It's no accident that cities of art are notoriously small- or medium-sized urban organisms. Understanding the role of differences in the study of cities seems to be increasingly important for capturing some of their authentic features as accurately as possible. In addition, the extremely contradictory media system tends to harmonise every settlement and yet also enhance it in order to create a sort of exciting urban mythology.

Having posed these three questions, which I do not intend to answer in this contribution but simply wanted to highlight as a premise to what I will say later, I would like to mention that in modern Italian architecture the centre was the organic relationship between city and architecture. The protagonists of Italian research in this field – Gustavo

Giovannoni, Marcello Piacentini, Giuseppe Samonà, Luigi Piccinato, Saverio Muratori, Ludovico Quaroni, Giancarlo De Carlo, Carlo Aymonino, Vittorio Gregotti, Aldo Rossi, Paolo Portoghesi, and Bernardo Secchi, amongst others, and historians Bruno Zevi, Leonardo Benevolo, and Manfredo Tafuri – reintroduced a working symbiosis between the two terms into the modern theories of the avant-garde movements. It involved a twentieth-century reinterpretation – an alternative to the way in which the avant-garde pitted architecture against urban structure – of the concept present in the humanist treatises of Leon Battista Alberti and his famous definition of the city as a "big house" and the house as a "small city".As regards the relationship mentioned above, we should not forget that we must move beyond the generic concept of suburbs by introducing important distinctions concerning settlement and type. Suburbs are not homogeneous, each one is different. There are old suburbs that have merged with the city centre; middle-class suburbs and suburbs that developed as working-class residential structures; suburbs planned as part of the development of a city envisaged by Town Planning Schemes, and urgent interventions, for example the borgate in Rome built to provide accommodation for people whose houses had been demolished; isolated suburbs and peripheral areas that are well-connected; atypical suburbs equipped with services and therefore able to provide urban living conditions and suburbs without the facilities that allow a community to call itself a community; legal suburbs and suburbs that initially were illegal but were later legalised and absorbed by the city, whilst many others are still semi-rural. If you look at a map of any Italian city, you will easily see that suburbs occupy almost 90% of every urban settlement in Italy.

I should explain that when we study suburbs, we tend to think that they were built in areas with no sign of the past, thereby increasing their anonymity. In actual fact, every peripheral project is spread over a palimpsest of remains that are often very important; the new buildings are frequently in a dialogue either consciously or unconsciously with these remains (e.g., the Quadraro district in Rome); they produce striking, captivating results and underscore lively urban dialectics between

continuity and discontinuity. These amazing ruins – aqueducts, monumental tombs, old roads, buildings from every era, main streets, and secondary roads – generate a complex infrastructure network narrating how the city has evolved over the years; as an ensemble, this network generates a "scattered" monument, which also bestows an implicit but crucial morphological essence on a suburb, once its existence has come to light. Pier Paolo Pasolini was one of the major narrators of popular suburbs; he depicted them as places of poetic dwelling where exclusion from the city centre was redeemed by an innocent sense of existence dominated by primary needs. In Rome, all the popular suburbs create a universe unto themselves. These suburbs – unlike those of the lower middle and middle class – have been portrayed not only in films, but also in Pasolini's novels *The Hustlers and A Violent Life*; they became a monument to neorealism in Rome at a time when the capital sought to establish a new model of community after the World War II. Although this interpretation was inspired by the Roman *borgata*, it is true of every city in Italy.

What these multiple suburbs suffer from, not only in Rome, is caused by three factors. The first is the almost generalised lack of social architectures in popular districts, i.e., services the inhabitants need in order to feel they are an active part of an urban community. One noteworthy example is the unfinished church in Piazzale Spartaco, designed by Saverio Muratori who, together with Mario De Renzi, designed the Tuscolano district. On paper, the church had a huge dome crowned by a lantern but, after construction was suspended, only the crypt was actually built and later used to celebrate Mass. Lack of maintenance is the second factor that has escalated the deterioration of many suburbs. A work of architecture will deteriorate physically unless work is frequently performed on it to stop the natural decay triggered by multiple causes; this may also affect the load-bearing structures of the building and cause irreversible damage. Furthermore, it is unfortunate that very often people do not really respect their homes; they add all kinds of supplementary features. For example, they add new windows or place different protective grilles on the windows of each apartment.

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Other actions involve vandalism in the communal areas such as hallways and staircases. The third factor is single-class makeup of the population, which inevitably produces a sense of reclusion and exclusion. We should not forget that before modernism, different social classes lived in cities side by side, resulting in strong urban cohesion.The inhabitants of suburbs lack spaces where they could meet and create a new sociality; in addition, their digital relationships on the Internet do not lead to strong, physical relations, so they tend to become radicalised in a private environment negatively considered as voluntary segregation, where everything is self-referential. This produces unusual forms of hostility, which, in turn, further separates individuals from the community. It triggers resorting in vain to the type of sociality offered by shopping centres, a refuge for people and families in search of social exchange which, in actual fact, is only a monadic pilgrimage to the deceptive paradise of consumption.

The same is true of multiplex cinemas, the solitary fragmentation of a rite which in past decades had an inspiring collective meaning. During a meeting entitled The Ills of Rome, convened in 1974 by Cardinal Ugo Poletti, Vicar-general of Rome, the discussion focused on the fact that the suburbs had no spaces for the social and cultural life of the community; this meant that families lived in a solitary dimension, without exchange, agreement, or conflict. Moreover, in the last thirty years, the presence of immigrants in the city – resulting from events triggered by globalisation as well as an inadequately governed decolonisation – has created additional problems regarding hospitality. It has prevented these new Romans from fully integrating into the community. Then there is the issue of the hardships endured in the suburbs, or rather in some suburbs; I believe that Rome has not experienced the same kind of revolt as the banlieues did in Paris in 2008 (even if conditions were ripe for such action) thanks to the hundreds of churches and parish centres in areas outside the city centre; they acted as an outer wall against a potential rebellion by those who feel, and often are, outsiders vis-à-vis the places they inhabit. The work that the Roman Diocese does in the peripheral desert is what maintains a residual

amount of functioning sociality and allows the capital to remain a city. The genesis of important projects in the suburbs was governed by Law 167; it was promulgated during the 1960s and 70s season of international utopia, when several design cultures proposed neo-futuristic urban scenarios. These visionary projects, based on greatness, were part of a neo-avant-garde trend that envisaged the advent of endless megacities dotted with fantastic architectures. Some of these ideas were transformed, others remained on paper. Greatness undoubtedly helped in the design of several buildings, for example Corviale, Laurentino 38, and Tor Bella Monaca in Rome, the colossal Rozzol Melara fortress in Trieste, and the Zen district in Palermo, where I was one of the designers. Due to the provisions of Law 167, these projects envisaged the construction of settlements for far too many people; this resulted in extremely repetitive districts that inspired a housing model that was, in a sense, tested too late, when the social class for which the model was designed had fragmented into classes with the same level of income but with different expectations; thus the model was increasingly ineffective and did not have the right features required for community life.

In recent years, the word *regeneration*, used in the discourse on cities, has been intended to trigger an evolution to improve their physical, productive, and cultural conditions. Regeneration has replaced the previously used *requalification* and *restructuring*. More precisely, regeneration indicates using a city's native energy to generate change, now and in the future. A change that involves everything. For many reasons that, due to the limitations of space, I will not discuss here, this regeneration has involved only the functional side of the city, without providing solutions to the more important needs and values that are crucial for the city, for example, the relationships between old and new, permanence and mutations, the city of the individual and that of the community. Nor should we forget the need for an urgent critique of the ancestral notion of territoriality. This neo-functionalist orientation has found its centre in the digital universe and its symbol and programme in the English word *smart*, which I dislike because it recalls Mercury rather than Minerva.

In fact, the city needs not only more efficient and convenient services, but more importantly, it needs re-founding again and again, age after age, based on all of the many topics discussed above.The year 1968 was a watershed for our generation. The renowned philosopher Galvano Della Volpe had been invited to an important meeting in the lecture hall of the Faculty of Architecture in Valle Giulia. At the time, his most famous book, *The Critique of Taste*, had profoundly influenced the education of most of us, students, especially the difference he posited between the independence of artistic languages and the heteronomy of scientific languages. That distinction prompted us to reconsider all aspects of architecture within the framework of a reaffirmed semantic organicity of construction, in which the technically oriented simplification imposed by modernity was negated in favour of a comprehensive reconsideration of the entire system of values of our chosen profession. At the end of his presentation, someone asked him to define architecture. He said: "Beautiful houses for as many people as possible". I have never forgotten that short, concise sentence, because it linked beauty to the need for a place of dwelling, stating a concept very similar to the one expressed by Friedrich Hölderlin: "poetically man dwells".

Function in architecture is undoubtedly crucial, but construction should not only involve producing cities and buildings, landscapes and territories – words that incidentally indicate two different aspects of the same part of the earth's surface; although their use has to be effective, there must be a more complex outcome: the quest for beauty. The latter should not be construed as the imitation of paintings or sculptures in figurative art – for example Germano Celant's "archisculpture" – or neo-naturalistic forms, ranging from vegetal to mineral and on to the mimesis of biological tissues and configurations between the microcosm and macrocosm. Bearing in mind Vitruvius and his *venustas*, today we have to reformulate this concept, just like it was reformulated when Vitruvius' treatise was rediscovered: beauty must render the relationship between tectonics and architecture artistic.

The task of construction is to transform beauty into a specific entity based on the expression of the rationale and poetics of a composition. An expression that requires measure, excess, and the modelling of volumes, which must never coerce building logic and its archetypical relationship with space. All of this has to be achieved by implementing the best possible organisation of the objectives and means of attaining them.In the three questions I posed at the outset of this essay – to which I am trying to find, if possible, an answer – I maintained that our knowledge of the city can only be partial, transitory, and hypothetical. Coming to the end of these considerations, I'd like to add another word indicating the dynamic quality of this knowledge: that it must be not only relative, but also passionate. Reason is the best tool we can use to think about ourselves, others, and the world, but reason without passion remains inert like a cold fire. Only passion can confer on reason a genuine, ideal goal by coupling it with an emotional vector. Without emotions, reason would not be able to turn our ideas about the city into something more than just necessary abstractions, i.e., into essential expressions of our body, our memories, and the expectations we wish to see fulfilled. With this in mind, all the suburbs mentioned above are currently an aspect we need to interpret, but without the mechanicism of zoned cities, proposed and implemented by modern architecture, and their resulting social divisions. If we imagine a unitary city with its potential evenly distributed in all its districts, then the exclusion of the suburbs can be replaced by inclusive strategies that fully acknowledge the fact we are living at a time of epochal changes – the richest sources of urban energy. Given the aforementioned conditions, one possible strategy could be to avoid starting from the centre and working out towards the suburbs (a twentieth-century strategy) and instead work from the suburbs to the centre. In short, we should pass from inner to outer and from outer to inner. I am convinced that such a reversal could generate a new kind of beauty, the opposite of occasional, ephemeral beauty; an unusual urban aesthetics representing a fusion of the past, present, and future. This would give citizens back their uniqueness in an active and continuing re-discovery of truly being a community.