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urbanism after urbanism



Edited by Dominique Rouillard
Joanna Wlaczyn & Georgi Stanishev

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URBANISM AFTER URBANISM
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FROM THE-BOOK TO THE CITY / PUBLIC LIBRARIES' URBAN ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY CITY

Luigi Failla

École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris-Malaquais
Università degli Studi di Palermo (Italy) - Dipartimento di Architettura
luigifailla.arch@gmail.com

Introduction

Today our cities are afflicted by a progressive reduction of public spaces and by an increasingly loss of their identity. The word "public" holds an essential meaning concerning this matter considering that the more collective spaces subjected to business logic are created by contemporary living, the less people have a democratic space for their needs. The square is from immemorial time the heart of cultural, social and economic changes and the place where citizens can meet and exert their democratic rights. Once an open space able to create and reinforce the social identity of a community, the square is now increasingly emptying and losing its central position for the benefit of administrative centers, financial districts, shopping malls and amusement parks. According to Jeremy Rifkin's study: "After hundreds of years of market activity being peripheral to and a derivative of cultural activity, the relationships has been reversed. Today, cultural activities in the public square have been absorbed into enclosed shopping malls and become a commodity for sale" (154).¹¹⁸² The mall culture, a consequence of the development of suburban residential districts and of the so-called "highway culture", has led on the one hand to the estrangement of urban centers and, on the other hand, to the creation of spaces and architectures expecting the control of citizens' free time. Rifkin clarifies that "The shopping mall has created a new architecture for human assembly, one immersed in a world of commerce in which culture exists in the form of commodified experiences" (154)¹¹⁸³. The emergency doesn't affect only the architectural aspect, as most of them are realized with a modern design and copy the historical city in their organization (colonnades, open spaces, squares, etc.) in order to promote change activities; on the contrary, the matter of the fact is that in these spaces everything is dominated by laws and statutes of the private business and the only aim is to sell a product, whatever it is, food or cultural one.

Therefore, the scene seems to highlight a transfer of the center of gravity of the common activity towards private spaces, separating them from the urban and public dimension. The need of an inversion is already perceivable in the relationship between some recent cultural buildings and their close urban spaces [fig.1], which could exemplify useful models for the design of new common spaces.

¹¹⁸² Jeremy RIFKIN, *The age of access: the new culture of hypercapitalism, where all of life is a paid-for experience* (New York: Tarchert/Putnam, 2000), 154.

¹¹⁸³ Ibid.



[fig. 1] Paris (France), Médiathèque Marguerite Yourcenar. View from Corbon Street. Babel Architecture. Photo by Luigi Failla.

The origins of the phenomenon

The causes of the phenomenon, useful to identify a sustainable model, are not only related to the different forms of urban degradation, but they are also more and more linked to the widespread individualistic tendencies produced by the new life styles of citizens and to the different structures of dematerialization due to the birth of new digital technologies.

With the term "degradation" we often mean the architectural aspect ignoring other cultural and social perspectives having great importance today that extend their limits in an area we can difficultly delimit. About this concept Stefano Boeri argues: "Is it the periphery's fault? In Europe there are some people who perceive in the suburban areas as a concept of geographical nature, a territory recognizable by measuring its distance from the old city center" (VII).¹¹⁸⁴

Nowadays, cities have extremely heterogeneous traits. There are districts of various economical and service nature; disused industrial areas still not recovered; abandoned historical centers and districts decaying near the railroad stations. These conditions produce a series of "vacant urban spaces" creating a discontinuity of services and space quality, often occupied (sometimes illegally) by the poorest bracket of the population.

As said before, the matter is not exclusively linked to architecture: just think about the conditions of a lot of financial districts, sceneries of futuristic and expensive architectures which become veritable "urban deserts", spaces without identity if considered beyond the logic of their function. Simultaneously, life in contemporary metropolis mixed with the birth of new social classes impose an adjustment to new rhythms and life styles which have led not only to a change of daily habits for millions of people, their access to work and free time, but also to the birth of new needs concerning services inside the city.

A greater demand of mobility and flexibility led on the one hand to the birth of wider communities of "new citizens" and, on the other hand, to the development of living structures more and more individual.

¹¹⁸⁴ Stefano BOERI, *L'anticità* (Roma-Bari: Edizioni Laterza, 2011), VII.
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New districts grow and change under the spur of new migratory phenomena creating real "enclaves" of population. These people have their own origins and traditions and are excluded from most of city dynamics due to their different needs concerning integration, information and training [fig.2].



[fig. 2] London (United Kingdom), market in Whitechapel Road. On the background the Idea store of Whitechapel district (David Adjaye Associates). Photo by Luigi Failla.

Simultaneously, a great number of citizens pass gradually from a collective way of living to an individual one, on the basis of two different tendencies. On one side, people who are inside the consolidate city lives in smaller and smaller housings including spaces necessary for their "survival" beyond the working or studying time. We can add to this category the different aspects of "short-term" living typical of managers or students: citizens of a place for short periods, they have new temporary needs demanding to be satisfied an evolution of collective spaces. On the other side, people tend to build their homes outside the city by means of their economic and cultural independence, providing to the creation "in their own garden" of a lot of spaces normally located in public areas. This aspect moves the "center" towards the suburban residence, which becomes closer, from the temporal point of view, through faster and more efficient connections. Contemporary society is in a technological transition phase contributing to life style changes and, with this, closely related to the reduction of collective spaces. The practices of access to information in the last years have promoted the development of a "screen culture", produced by the rapidity and facility of the web, but also by the fact that a lot of daily activities concerning social relationships are becoming digital: we discuss using social networks, we get road indications from smartphones or tablets, we can manage our current account online and so on. We can consequently deduce that digital technologies increase the quantity of information we have access to but, at the same time, latest studies demonstrate that the level of their linear complexity is lower as the need of physical relationship with other people.

Social and urban changes lead to two attitudes: uniformity and fragmentation. Uniformity is the consequence of habits tending not only to isolate the person, reducing the need of relationships, but also leaning towards a conformation to similar approaches. The trend consists in doing few and repetitive activities and this is, maybe, the success of malls where actions are limited compared with the unlimited potential of public spaces. Fragmentation is a direct consequence of individualism: we disconnect from others, we live alone, connecting with the world just through the

Web. Therefore, we run the risk of not needing physical relationships with other people and, with this, the necessity of meeting spaces stops, supporting the gradual abandon of public collective spaces and causing their loss of identity.

New needs, new answers: the library and the city

From the latest studies in this field a greater request of third places where one can cultivate interests of various nature and having the opportunity to meet other people comes to light. In a work published in 1989, the American sociologist Ray Oldenburg supported the importance for the development of a community of the so-called "third places".¹¹⁸⁵ They represent a safe and informal space, a neutral territory where people are at ease and can relax, have meetings and socialize. A lot of cultural institutions such as museums, galleries and especially libraries, which had in the past a specific functional use, have today an important urban role able to invert the tendencies of public space abandonments and amount to an urban renaissance. Examples like the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Peckham Library and the Tate Modern in London or the MuCEM in Marseille are more and more frequent. These projects have not only provided a primary public service for the district, but they have also contributed to give an identity sense to the close urban space, strengthening the link between the square and the public building. Public libraries, since they are based on democratic logics giving the user the freedom to exert the practices more appropriate to his way of living, seem to be the suitable institutes to observe this urban role. To confirm this opinion, John Stanley affirms that they can be "third places" par excellence¹¹⁸⁶ and Antonella Agnoli argues that they become more and more an aggregation and social place, a datum point for the city as well as the new "squares of knowledge".¹¹⁸⁷ Many realisations show how a library oriented towards the city could become the driving force of the economic and social life and also an instrument to manage the urban and social transformation. In this sense the library changes from a learning space into an "espace à habiter", both from a domestic and an urban point of view [fig.3].



[fig. 3] Montpellier (France). Médiathèque centrale d'Agglomération "Emile Zola". Ground floor, Forum de l'actualité (reference level). AUA Paul Chemetov. Photo by Luigi Failla.

¹¹⁸⁵ Ray OLDEMBURG, *The Great, Good Place* (New York: Marlowe & C., 1989).

¹¹⁸⁶ John STANLEY, "The Third place: The Library Role in Today's Society", *Marketing Library Service*, 19/6 (2005).

¹¹⁸⁷ Antonella AGNOLI, *Le Piazze del Sapere* (Bari: Laterza, 2009).

Two contemporary buildings: Montpellier and Pistoia Libraries

Pierrevives: people-oriented spaces

La Paillade district, created during the 1960s to receive those repatriating from Algeria and many immigrant families, was built at about 13 km from the Montpellier city center. These geographical and social conditions led to categorize the district as a ZUP¹¹⁸⁸ and to promote a series of requalification works. Pierrevives realization, a new eco-district responding at the important demand of services and social housing, has the aim to stitch up La Paillade with the rest of the city. François Rabelais wrote "Je ne bâtis que pierres vives, ce sont homes" (251)¹¹⁸⁹: according to him, no building could be justified if man was not at the center of building exigency. Pierrevives project foresees the construction of about 850 residences, for different social ranks, some spaces for proximity commerce, the departmental building for the sport, a public park and locates the site for the placement of the new building of the archives and the departmental library. The building was designed by Zaha Hadid [fig.4] and inaugurated in December 2012 and has the claim to be the heart of the new district.



[fig. 4] Montpellier (France), Médiathèque Départementale. View from the central square of the new "Pierresvives" district. Zaha Hadid Architects. Photo by Luigi Failla.

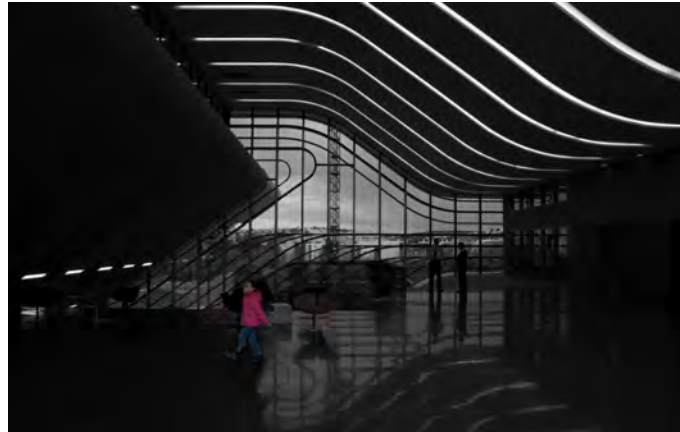
The design concept is the tree of knowledge whose ramifications materialize the architectural program in relationship with the urban system. The building, an icon in the landscape, uses a two architectural elements vocabulary: the fault and the shell. The fault creates a vacuum in the volume of the building, closed by 5,000 square meters of windows and brise soleil, and takes the form of the tree of knowledge. The shell is an imaginary notion of architectural elements of "béton brut": five shells juxtaposed creating the form of the building. Using a cantilever of ten meters, the central shell underlines the entrance directly from the square, reinforcing the link between outside and inside public space.

Around Pierresvives a small town bringing a new population to mix with the existing one grows, which means to focus not only to the architectural integration but also to the intellectual, cultural and social one. From this point of view the library represents the glue between the idea of culture and everything else that the urban context can add: it becomes the place of every kind of expression. The innovation of Pierresvives

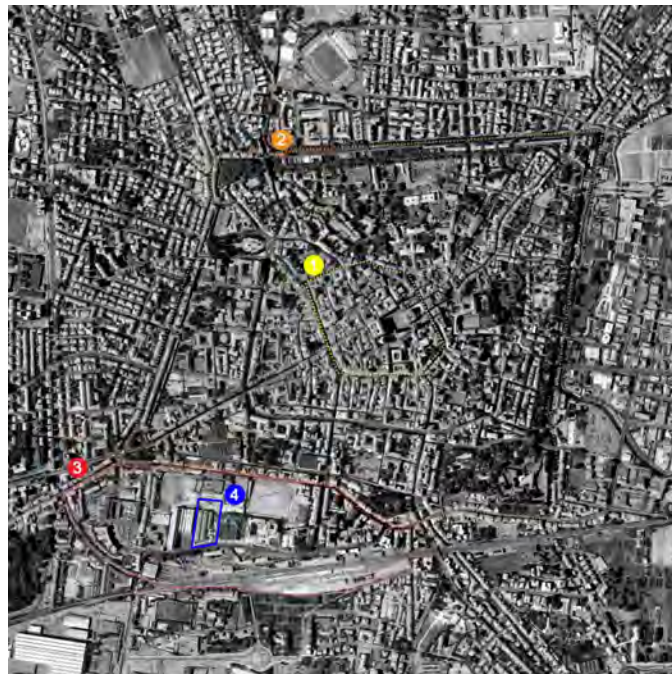
¹¹⁸⁸ "Zone à Urbaniser en Priorité", priority urbanisation area, editor's note.

¹¹⁸⁹ François RABELAIS, *Le tiers livre* (Genève: Droz, 1964), 251.

is in the fact that the core of the district is not attributed to business centers (like malls) but to a cultural institution in order to develop social encounters. Therefore, even if the main objective of a departmental library is not to offer a public service but to assure an interlibrary loan, Zaha Hadid has nevertheless chosen to destine 1,000 square meters of its space to public users showing the possibility to create proximity services for the community [fig.5]. The lack of collective spaces has opened the door to the progressive importance of the library inside the district: it is a convivial place where children and parents can look for a variety of information (training, job, health, home, legal help, etc.) or just watch television or play video games.



[fig. 5] Montpellier (France), Médiathèque Départementale. First floor, archives and library common hall. Zaha Hadid Architects. Photo by Luigi Failla.



[fig. 6] Pistoia (Italy). 1. medieval historical city center, 2. city center, 3. Breda's disused industrial area, 4. San Giorgio library building and external parts.

Places of memory: San Giorgio library

The new library of Pistoia (Italy), inaugurated in 2007, was a part of the renovation project of Breda's disused industrial area, very close to the city center [fig.6]. Inside the entire project the library is only a fragment but just for its particular character it is the most suitable building to mark the transition from the places of the factory to those of culture. The conservation of the industrial character of the site has permitted to maintain the memory of the places and to perceive the evolution process.

Therefore, the aim is not only to satisfy functional standards, it would be done probably in any context, but to be the starting point of the change of the entire district. It has been necessary to give a signal to new citizens, a mixed population of students, professionals and migrants, without giving the impression to prefer anyone of these categories.

According to those questions, the project does not modify the industrial frame of the existing building and uses the model of "three levels" library, with a ground floor extremely open and flexible, in continuity with the external environment.

The idea is to work on the principle of openness: opening of the building to the city, particularly evident in the covered ground floor square; opening in management policy, to create the hinge of the district renovation process; opening in documents management, to answer to the different categories that live in the district.

Conclusion

The two examples demonstrate that we have to face the matter from two different points of view: on the one hand by strengthening the physical relationship between the public building and the city and, on the other hand, trying to extend the target concerned, confirming the prominent role of social glue and promoter of cultural politics.

We often wonder why a library may have a greater strength to answer to this challenge than other buildings and the answer can maybe be suggested by Luigi Crocetti who affirms that "the others [buildings] have a specific purpose, from the wider to the smaller. Everyone in some way is paradoxically limited by it. When there are no limits, and the purpose is not limited and defined in concrete terms, because the purpose is human beings, we have a public library".¹¹⁹⁰

¹¹⁹⁰ Luigi CROCETTI, "Pubblica", *Il nuovo in biblioteca e altri scritti* (Roma: AIB, 1994), 54.