

MIGRATION AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE MIDDLE EAST

CAUMME III

Contemporary Architecture and Urbanism
in the Mediterranean and the Middle East

PAUMME I

Projects of Architecture and Urbanism
in the Mediterranean and the Middle East

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**MIGRATION AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE MIDDLE EST**
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edited by:
Paola Galante

Graphic Design and Application:
Emma Di Lauro, Francesco Scisciola

Cover Design:
Claudia Sansò, Olga Izzo

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NEW TENTS

MICHELE SBACCHI

DArch Dipartimento di Architettura,
Università degli Studi di Palermo, Italia

michele.sbacchi@unipa.it

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Anthropology has had a remarkable impact on modern culture in stressing the role of cultural diversities as unfitting with the universalization brought about by technology. Space and the city, of course, were not exceptions. Team X's revision of the orthodox approach of Modern Movement was grounded on this cultural shift, epitomized by Levi Strauss's discoveries, a main reference for those architects. Of course the cultural context was much wider, including sociology, art and existentialism. I just mention Paul Ricoeur's seminal theories on the risks of universalization. Since then, other cultures were no longer overshadowed by the technology-oriented idea of progress. Non-Western cities and spaces became a non-marginal reference. The Smithsons' idea of mat-building, just to quote an example, was brought about by this new attitude.

At that time anthropologists had to travel to "foreign countries". And so did architects: van Eyck for example. Nowadays, in the tragic age of migration, we no longer need to travel to confront other societies: they reach endlessly the Western world. Yet the broad approach of those architects needs to be further broadened and partly modified. Indeed we are urged to envisage a future architecture for a society which is not simply multiracial. For migration is colossal and migrants are, not merely uprooted and homeless, but also "spaceless". A complex condition, far from the mere "cultural exchange" of the Sixties. Architecture has to rethink the principle of settlement, and partly reconsider nomadic and ephemeral conditions.

Le Corbusier's, rather whimsically, gave to a tent camp - *le temple primitif* - the primacy as original architecture. His hierarchy unexpectedly turns out to be profetic, much as Quatremère's tent, or Laugier's *cabane*. An unusual return to the origins permeates our future vision of a world with the "primitive" architecture of shelters and refugees camps.

I will try to focus on the architectural outcomes of cities where the ephemeral parts will become increasingly extensive.

I. NO LONGER INHABIT

In *Refuge for the Homeless* so writes Theodor Adorno: "The predicament of private life today is shown by its arena. Dwelling, in the proper sense is now impossible ... They live, if not in slums, in bungalows that by tomorrow may be leaf-huts, trailers, cars, camps, or the open air. The house is past." (Adorno, 1951).

Regrettably and tragically, never ever as nowadays, Theodor Adorno's statement is real. The contemporary age, marked by unprecedented flows of migration, increasingly produces an horrifying stage-set for the "taking place" of life. We hardly need to recall the daily images of crowds of people literally positioned "on the edge of life" in unnamable living conditions. The inner phenomenon of homelessness - who has had its outrageous presence in our society since about fifty years - is now booming because of the migration flow.

"Life" in our cities has become a rather difficult notion to sustain - at least in the manner we did till no more than 20 years ago. Is life in the city indeed a personal story out of the filter of inequality, or is it rather a human endeavor which can enclose a fraction of meaning only if it is an actual shared social condition?

Can our millenary culture - condensed in concepts and realities such as "space", "city", "house" - still behold a meaning in a world where these notions are daily negated by dramatic situations? Of course not.

The very idea of dwelling, so much in the architects' mind, especially in the last century, is no longer a possible shared idiom if pronounced as against such a reality. Modernist architecture's myth of a socially shared environment is so dramatically failed.

I want to focus on the "post-migration" stage, when, after the initial "transfer," immigrant peo-

ple loose its nomadic status and somehow – and often unexpectedly – “settles” within cities. This has produced a manifold variety of possible ways of living, filling the voids of our cities in a manner that I think is totally architectural. This should lead to a different attitude. In fact the widespread attitude is the obvious one of pursuing separation and avoiding contamination. This is achieved by keeping the two things - existing city and new inhabitants - conceptually and somehow physically separated. The new inhabitants can be added to the city by means of recoveries or camps, or even new houses, because their presence is temporary. The underlying idea is that of “emergency”: a “special” event solved by means of special spaces. Yet the condition is different since migration has produced a mutation in our cities. The movable part of the city has become much more lively and variegated and this has immediate outcomes on physical space. We are facing a new permanent condition which will probably be the condition of our cities and territories for a lengthy period if not for ever. We shall see how this condition is matching an innate condition of our space which produces cities as contradictory compound of planned areas and “urban villages”.

2. HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE

Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione* depict dramatic scenes where prisoners are kept in obscure and deep walled vertical spaces. In these extraordinary representations emphasis is placed not much in the conditions of the prisoners but in the peculiarity of the space. Its dark and chthonic character, the sinister play of light, its total bareness. The scene is dominated by tall rough walls and wood scaffoldings. Joseph Rykwert (1980) has acutely observed how the *Carceri*, de facto, theorize the idea of an architecture based on a twin condition, lithological and xilological. On one side a continuous, bold, hard part and on the other the more crampy wooden one. Furthermore if we look at other works by Piranesi we find that, out of the material condition, a double essence for space is more than often assumed. This is the case of the *Antichità Romane*, where monuments and parts of the city are depicted with a bold opposition between “big buildings” and “remnant small parts”.

Rykwert furthermore makes it clear how this conception of architecture is opposite to the equally widespread idea of an architecture made of composed and balanced diversities inspired by the notion of *bienseance* as in Laugier.

Of course the latter is an architecture that, far from being twofold, lean toward uniformity. These two different conceptions do not belong only to the 18th century, but they are rather common up to our age, in which the universe of building is strictly separated from all the rest: furnishing, objects, nature, cars, people.

This conception of a twofold physical space is not far from Adolf Loos' idea that the real architecture is “interior design.” And interior design is something based on textile which needs construction and structure only to be upheld. Such a condition is not new. We know how the interplay of textile decoration and “upholding” buildings has been used in urban scenography for centuries.

We see so that architecture includes an archetypal idea of duality between stronger and

fig. 1 - Giovan Battista Piranesi, *Tempio della Fortuna Virile* (from *Antichità Romane*, Rome, 1784)



weaker parts. The difference takes place in shape, size, material. There is an hard part – more durable and solid - and a soft part more ephemeral and weaker.

3. URBAN VILLAGES

This immanent condition of architecture - the copresence of weak and strong parts - which we have already seen in buildings is all the more so present in the city as a whole. Indeed the city is a more eloquent stage for the manifestation of this double essence.

Aldo Rossi's notion of "primary elements" includes exactly this condition (Rossi, 1966). In the city there are parts which are stronger; they are generally bigger and therefore they last for a longer time. They therefore constitute a sort of skeleton of the city. Against those, the city is "completed", over time, by weaker and smaller parts that fill the available spaces. They are monuments or other public buildings: churches, palaces, theatres. But also what we nowadays

fig. 2 - Olivo Barbieri, *Canton*



call infrastructures: walls, city gates, aqueducts, bridges.

These permanencies, as Rossi acutely notes, can also be empty or absent parts, like a destroyed building or an old track. Nevertheless they perform as solid parts that constitute the strongholds for the remnant part, generally houses. These are more subject to decay and change.

But cities are made also of other parts: urban elements, fountains, canopies, trees, movable transportations, people, animals. This is a even more changeable universe, and indeed it is the most lively one. It is the realm where public life mostly takes place and it is the realm more directly affected by the phenomenon of migration.

Furthermore it has been noted (Shane, 2012) how modern cities increasingly tend to be constituted by a twofold structure of solid planned structure and a manifold presence of urban villages. These weaker parts can be very various: from preexisting small centers that have been included within the city to favelas and other sort of slums. Just to mention two immediate examples, the first is the case of Gracia in Barcelona or the Greenwich Village in Manhattan. The second is the case of other examples such as Kolkata's dwellings on the border of the railway or Lagos' market assembled on the train route.

If we look at Western cities it is clear that the migration flux is pouring people into these realms, with a huge proliferation of markets, shelters, self-construction. Hong Kong is for example a pivotal case of intense infill in every possible empty space of the "solid" part of the city. All the weaker parts of the city are rapidly changing becoming the daily residence of a swelled population. The remarkable point, in my view, is that this pathological condition is actually de-veloping pushing architecture to its archaic twofold essence.

4. NEW TENTS

It is curious – yet relevant to my topic - that in *Vers une architecture* Le Corbusier depicts the original act of construction with the making of a camp. And, more remarkably, it is a camp made of tents. Architecture so, once more, has its origin in a textile realm.

Furthermore this peculiar origin marks the passage from a nomadic status to a sedentary one: “The primitive man stops, he decides that it is his place...”. (Le Corbusier, 1923). According to this narration the way architecture begins lays in the realm of the ephemeral: no buildings, no wooden huts, the chosen model being the tent.

Much as in Loos’ idea of architecture as textile decoration and in Quatremère de Quincy proposed models for architecture.

Tents are the main elements used in ephemeral architecture. They are tightly linked to the idea of temporary dwelling. They are amply used nowadays in the swelling phenomenon of urban

fig. 3 - Hong Kong, Causeway Bay market



street markets. They are also one of the primary materials in the first stage of settling in slums within modern cities. Le Corbusier’s, rather whimsically, gave to a tent camp - *le temple primitif* - the primacy as original architecture. His hierarchy unexpectedly turns out to be prophetic, much as Quatremère’s tent. An unusual return to the origins permeates our future vision of a world with the “primitive” architecture of shelters and refugees camps. I believe that architects should focus on these disciplinary conditions in order to overcome the limited notion of emergency architecture.

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