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Landscape urbanism and architecture of the voids

Michele Sbacchi*

Department of Architecture, University of Palermo, Viale delle Scienze, Building #14, 90128, Palermo

Abstract

This paper is focused on the relevance of the idea of “void” for the development of landscape urbanism. The theories of Secchi and Koolhaas are considered as far as a new acceptance of void is concerned. Furthermore, the highly influential Chassé Terrain intervention in Breda by OMA is analyzed in order to show how it constitutes an important root for later landscape urbanism projects.

In linking the theme of “reappraisal of void” with landscape urbanism this paper aims to contribute to a detailed understanding of landscape urbanism and its relation to the stricter realm of architecture.

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1. Filling the void

The comparison between the urban structure of Parma and Le Corbusier plan for Saint Dié in *Collage City* by Colin Rowe¹ has become, over time, a popular emblem of the much-debated concern about the dispersal of urban space brought about by CIAM urbanism. Successfully applying the *gestaltic* procedure of figure/ground, Rowe in that image – as well as in many others in the same book and elsewhere – shrinks the complexity of the city to two quintessential components: built and void. These two entities are, in this way, directly confronted with dramatic

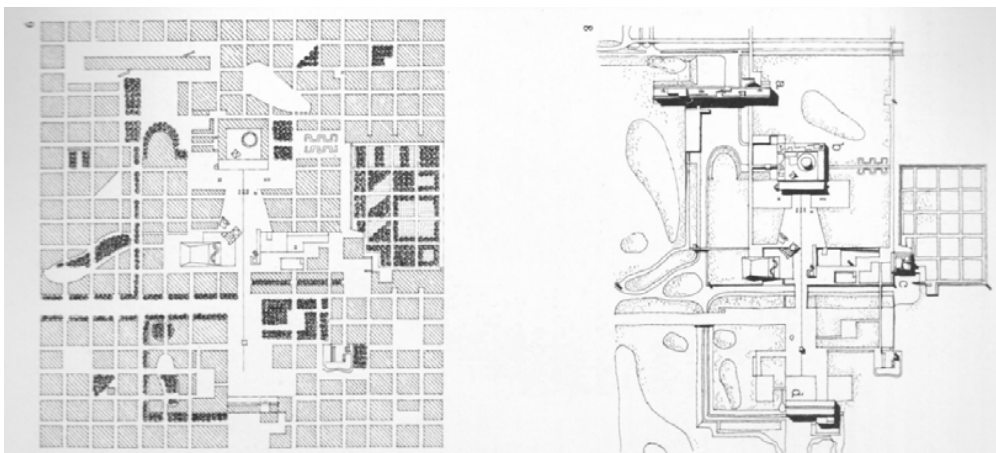
* Corresponding author. Tel.: +39-091-328-033-3400; fax: +39-091-344-631.

E-mail address: michele.sbacchi@unipa.it

result. In Rowe's images the inversion of the figure/ground convention makes voids appear black instead of the usual white with a further reverberation of their presence. The empty space between buildings becomes so the protagonist as against the background of buildings. Consequently the striking difference between the high density of premodern cities and the low density of the city conceived by modern urbanism appears in a very persuasive way. Although the theme – the failure of CIAM urbanism - is far from original, having been treated since the 40s, Rowe puts it under a rather different - and appealing - light.

In his representation the built and the unbuilt, the “full” and the “void” are revealed as continuous and uniform entities. They are like homogeneous fluids, or, better, filling substances without peculiarities and hierarchies. The representation of architectural or urban elements is carefully avoided: no buildings and, all the more so, no typologies - only an uninterrupted built mass. Same applies for the void: no streets, no squares: they are replaced by a permanent black surface. In doing so Rowe stresses the importance of continuity in space – whether it is a continuity of void space or of built space. It is, of course, an abstract representation of cities. A clever one, that adds a further view to the choir of discontent for rationalist urban planning. I have somewhat dwelled upon it because I believe that this emphasis on the fluidity, and continuity, of urban space includes a subliminal understanding on the organic nature of urban space that has some relevance in the context of this essay, and on which I will return later.

In a different way from Colin Rowe, the Italian approach of “*analisi urbana*,” years before, had contributed to the same theme. For the protagonists of that school – Rossi, Aymonino, Grassi – the city was seen as the complex interplay of singles buildings- exceptional sometime and repetitive more often. Typologies therefore where an essential element of their view. Urban morphology was the outcome of the repetition of building typologies. Despite the different approach, as against Rowe's, they also ultimately challenged the inconsistency of rationalist urban planning. The famous - or, rather, infamous – “*rue corridor killing*” by Le Corbusier was once again attacked.



1. Rodrigo Pérez de Arce, Reurbanization of Chandigarh, 1976

Of course, as already suggested, these are important examples, yet the realm of this debate is much wider: I might quote the more conservative ideas of the Krier brothers or the attractive reurbanization projects carried on by Rodrigo Pérez de Arce in which the voids of Le Corbusier's Chandigarh and Kahn's Dacca were filled with extra buildings.² Above - and before - all these positions stands the much earlier and well-known "revolt" of the Team X architects that occurred in the very core of the CIAM.

All these ideas have produced projects in which density was higher and buildings were reconnected to the city. Following Rossi and Rowe further developments of these ideas have been carried on, in later times, namely as "urban project" or the so called "reconstruction of European city", still pursuing a "filling of the void" and "urban structure construction" ideology³. The debate is well-known and too articulated to be fully reported in the context of this essay: what I want to focus here is how the issue of void space is crucial for it and how the theme of void spaces acted within it.

For Le Corbusier, Gropius and their likes empty space was inevitably good in a rather positive way. It was, somewhat physiologically, destined to become green, so naturally that they did not need to bother how. Besides, there was no need to be very precise in terms of quantities and qualities for it: as long as buildings were detached and clearly distanced one to the other quality was guaranteed. *Plan Voisin* against old Paris; St. Dié against Parma and so on. Rationalists *Siedlungen* - in unambiguous oppositions both to the old city and to the Viennese Hofe - had layouts focused on the placement of buildings in relation to remote entities such as the course of the sun and not to the immediate context. The ground was just an irrelevant yet unavoidable physical base, not to be considered beyond this. Void was constantly left in a rather unconscious background and was a kind of leftover of buildings with no character: focus was on buildings and on their mutual detachment.

On the other hand, criticism by Rossi, Rowe and others led to an opposite urge for a strict containment of void space. In their ideas the pursuit of detachment of buildings had to be abandoned and consequently void could come back to be directly identified with streets and squares. "A simple architecture of streets and squares" was the slogan of Leon Krier at that time.⁴ Urban elements – streets and squares – returned to be determined by the absence of buildings: nothing could be in between these two simple entities. The figure/ground images of Colin Rowe leave no choice. Yet it must be noticed that often this significant attitude deteriorated to an extreme and uncritical literal "fear of the void".

An important issue needs now to be underlined. In all these approaches, despite their divergence, no role is given to vegetation, nature or whatever could be ascribed to the idea of landscape. If we exclude the indirect, and probably unconscious, natural twist of Rowe's concept of fluid space, no attention for landscape or countryside is given by the rationalists as well as by their critics. The idea that landscape is inherently antiurban was solidly rooted. It appears very clearly for example even in the attitude of a person like Alison Smithson in making a clear-cut separation between city and countryside. According to her, integration between the two realm was just unconceivable.

2. Landscape into Architecture

The Leça da Palmeira swimming pools, built in the Sixties by Alvaro Siza, represent a paradigmatic project for it marks the gradual dissolution of architecture into landscape, a chief phenomenon of the last 50 years which is at the root of what today we call landscape urbanism. That project by Siza signs a new approach, according to which there is no gap between indoor and outdoor, built and unbuilt, artificial and natural, architecture and landscape: a disciplinary blend to which we are now accustomed to. In that project the actual buildings, the topography of the place, the panoramic views, the promenades linking indoor and outdoor, the interplay of materials are all conceived out of the



2. Alvaro Siza, Leça da Palmeira swimming pools, 1966

conventional notion of “architecture in the landscape.” In that project it is actually very difficult to say where building begins and landscape ends. Not that this interplay did not exist in earlier times: Palladian villas, say, are also tightly linked to the surrounding landscape, yet in these cases the two realms – building and landscape – are clearly defined, something that does not happen in Siza's swimming pools in Leça da Palmeira.

This new trend spread in other building projects, and in the Eighties this different approach began to take place also in urbanism. What had occurred for single buildings could be done for group of buildings or parts of cities.

This happened not only because of this “internal” development of the discipline but also because the so called urban projects of that period turned out to be often unsatisfactory. As we have noticed most of the plans based on the reconnection of architecture and the city started to show their limits and the idea that reconnection should be made with landscape, rather than city, started to make its way. As Charles Waldheim writes “disciplinary realignment in which landscape replaces architecture as the basic building block of contemporary urbanism. Landscape has become both the lens through which the contemporary city is represented and the medium through which it is constructed.”⁵

This has happened in an indirect way for manifold converging circumstances but also by means of two diverse thoughts: the primacy of soil sustained mainly by Bernardo Secchi⁶ and the reappraisal of the void, notoriously supported by Rem Koolhaas, firstly with his project for Melun-Sénart in France. As we shall see in both cases the notion and role of void plays a central role.

Secchi moves from a straightforward observation: the actual domain and material of urbanism is the soil. There are buildings, of course, yet the soil is the omnipresent and primary element. Soils boasts also a very important feature: it can connect parts, also extensively. Urban space, therefore cannot rely only on buildings and in the way their facades appear. A special attention must be devoted to this sort of “newly considered façade” which is the soil. Of course the treatment of the soil that Secchi was suggesting was not the superficial idea of urban embellishment that became also very popular starting at that time. Secchi’s project for the Kortrijk Cemetery in Belgium is quite symptomatic of this attitude. What I want to stress, again, is that this conception by Secchi is strictly linked to the acceptance of the void. After all, the soil is nothing but the façade of the void.



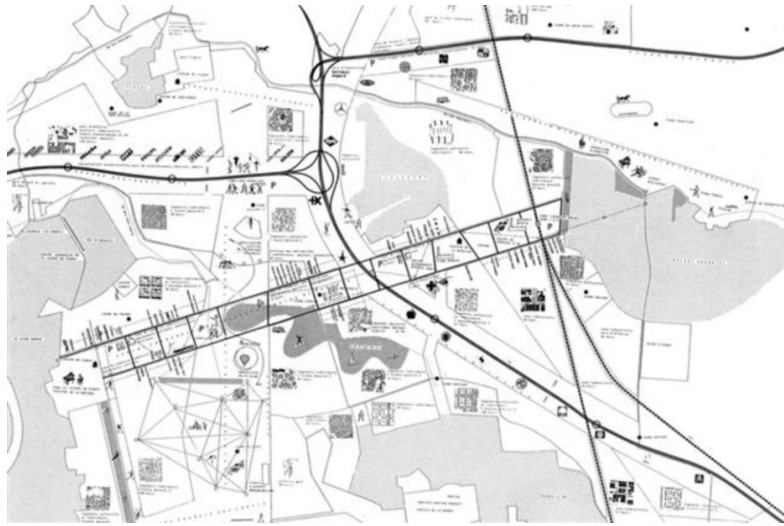
3. Bernardo Secchi, Paola Viganò Kortrijk Cemetery, 1999

Similar, but not identical, to Secchi's is James Corner's conception of "field operation" by which he stresses the importance of extended topological surfaces which act mainly horizontally. And we might add that in the very term "field" is included an agricultural suggestion which is a further step beyond Secchi's soil. We do not have to forget that James Corner, with the architect-photographer Alex MacLean had scrutinized the American agricultural landscape with exceptional areal photographs. Thomas Sieverts theory of *Zwischenstadt* also contributed to these low density awareness.⁷



4. Alex MacLean, Red River Valley, North Dakota, agricultural grid correction

Koolhaas had speculated theoretically on the void in the unbuilt project for the new city of Melun Sénart, North of Paris. Partly echoing the ideas of the Soviet disurbanists of the 20s, he proposed a system of ribbons where nothing like an urban center or any sort of urban agglomeration could be present. The plan is dominated by huge empty spaces. Buildings are in the background and are the minor protagonists of the story. Landscape, or countryside, takes over: "Instead of projecting onto the landscape, we deducted from it, hoping that we could invent a reverse argument."⁸ His philosophy for this project was: "How to abstain from architecture?". Symptomatic terms by which he describes the project are "emptiness," "linear voids" "nothingness" and similar ones. Later Koolhaas returned to the "strategy of the void" applying it to buildings, notably in the competition entry for the Bibliothèque de France in Paris. In that case, again, an external enclosure envelopes a big void with "floating elements". It is a sort of extreme speculation on the archetypical idea of patio which, in Jorge Luis Borges's effective statement "is the slope down which sky flows into the house." And certainly it has a reference to the notion of *ma* in Japanese culture.



5. OMA, Melun Sénart Nouvelle Ville plan, 1987

It is easy to understand that the issue of void, despite apparently opposite to the very idea of architecture, it is actually embedded with the archetype of architecture. We could also further consider Heidegger's conception that void (*Leere*) is not a missing thing but "an unconcealing of things". Void is therefore ontologically essential for the very essence of architecture.

The large intervention in Breda in the Chassé Terrain area is the pivotal project where a "strategy of the void" is fully employed. It is important to stress how and it is propaedeutic to landscape urbanism procedures. The project was developed by OMA together with Adriaan Geuze/West 8 and Xaveer De Geyter. It is new residential area where any possible reference to urban blocks or urban structure is abandoned. The reference is, instead, the 60s' business district or the university campus layout. Symptomatically it is named by Adriaan Geuze "residential campus." Accordingly void areas and detachment of buildings are openly embraced and so they come back in urban planning. It is actually a very realistic intervention where an attempt is made to get the advantages of the modern city, in terms of circulation, traffic, parking, availability of services, insulation. Pedestrian traffic is on the elevated floor on top of a wide indoor parking area. A wide "void" area allows for active use of public space. The layout has been symptomatic drawn, as we said, together with a landscape architect – Geuze – and it is various, much as the buildings which are all different in typology and form.⁹ The idea of variety, as in 18th Century Abbé Laugier's theory of "city as forest" is a primary principle of the project.¹⁰ The big central void is traced as a park while a garden by Petra Blaisse within this void completes the layout. Expanded empty space is manifestly the protagonist. It is important to consider that it is only partly meant as the in-between relational space that had an important role in architectural debate and was so important notoriously for Aldo van Eyck and his circle. Certainly for Koolhaas void contains this important dimension, yet it is not thought of as an interstitial space.



6. OMA, De Geyter, Adriaan Geuze, Chassé-Terrain Residential campus, Breda, 1996-200

From 18th century Naturalism (Laugier, Milizia, Dance) comes also the idea, that variety – the same variety of nature – had to be included in the city. Therefore, in Chassé Terrain, buildings are different in shape, typology and position. As Manfredo Tafuri has rightly pointed out, Laugier’s idea is not simply that of a straightforward analogy between city and forest.¹¹ Laugier actually relies on the notion of fragment: fragmentism is present in nature and it can be imported within the city. Notoriously Le Corbusier referred to Laugier’s ideas in *Urbanisme* and in the description of the Pisa Camposanto, touching exactly the issue of fragmentism. In the Obus plan for Alger Le Corbusier made use of this very notion epitomized in the famous sentence “chaos, disorder and wild variety in the general layout, uniformity in detail”, which was taken literally from Laugier. This connection is quite remarkable for our argument since the Obus plan is an early prototypical example, although very radical, of fusion of architecture, urbanism and landscape.

It is important to note that this important shift in architecture and urbanism, of which Chassé Terrain is a pivotal example, was brought about not only by theoretical and disciplinary speculations. Circumstantial conditions certainly played their role. In the last decades the fluxes of tourism towards cities have boomed. Under the so called Bilbao effect cities have been reappraised especially as cultural and leisure places. A totally new attitude has raised for the use of public space. Active and multifunction space is what these masses of tourists and inhabitants expect. These understandings of public space partly have resumed what the Situationists and some of Team X architects had foreseen already in the Fifties. The idea of ludic dimension of architecture, derived from Huizinga has been developed both by the Situationist Constant and by Aldo van Eyck. What interests us is that a space usable for sport,

leisure and entertainment certainly leans towards landscape and nature. It becomes a complex entity that can hardly be framed by traditional urban elements such as the “park” or the “boulevard”. And it is also logically linked to an idea of fragmentism and variety that landscape can more properly support, as in Laugier and Le Corbusier views.

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