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Questioning about the architectural and urban design during the pandemic

Abstract

The following article consists of the accompanying text of the call for papers launched by the FAM last April, when in Italy and in the rest of Europe, normal life was gradually starting to resume after the lockdown.

The text was born as a collective reflection of the four authors following a series of discussions in which each brought certain aspects to the (virtual) discussion table. Although it was intended to illustrate the reasons for the call, it seemed of some use to the editors to propose it again at the opening to readers.

Keywords

Covid-19 — Project — City — Architecture — Resilience

The aim of this call is to solicit critical and proactive reflection on the part of architectural culture, and in particular that of architectural and urban design, on the phenomena triggered by the coronavirus pandemic which, as we write this text, sees us still in an emergency phase but with our sights set on a future regarding which a varied set of possible scenarios and perspectives is already developing. A contribution which, moreover, would like to attempt to compensate for the marginality of our active knowledge compared to others that today are much more strongly called upon to provide answers, not only for the immediate future, in the fields of bio-medics and pharmacology, new technologies, economics and social behaviour. The coronavirus problem, or rather a set of phenomena which are the effect but also the cause of that problem, to be tackled more and more in a global perspective without forgetting to also find adequate answers in the local dimension, certainly involves aspects related and strongly incidental to habitation logics and living in built-up areas as well as to those of a social, environmental and climatic nature. The contribution of architectural and urban forms will therefore be of no little importance in contributing to providing an effective response to the pandemic problem, seen not only from a viral perspective. Even more so, if we are able to propose new or rediscovered models, of both a futuristic and a historical nature, through a process of circumstantial criticism of the neo-liberal dynamic of understanding the city and its architecture and in general regarding the entire territory in a delicate balance between anthropization and nature. It thus becomes a matter of understanding, researching and elaborating habitation strategies, flow modes, urban layouts and forms, new types from the dwelling unit to collective spaces and structures, according to a multiscale logic able to encourage the systematic nature of the project as a prerequisite for its strategic effectiveness, both with respect to the upcoming emergency and to an overall improvement of urban life within a (sole) reformed "normality".



Fig. 1

Antonello da Messina, *San Girolamo nello studio*, 1474-1475. National Gallery of London.

If we consider space as the raw material of architectural and urban design, the definition of which in a complete form has largely distinguished the material identity and the civil expression of social processes, we could well immediately ask ourselves whether the pervasiveness and strength of the historical accident of the coronavirus pandemic could, or perhaps should, open a new phase in the conception of inhabited space at all the scales and in all the contexts of global geography. Can the question therefore be recognized in epochal terms, i.e., from a perspective of significant if not radical change?

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the pandemic phenomenon, already yesterday, still today no less than tomorrow, is part of evident critical planetary situations with heavy negative repercussions for local realities: on social, economic, environmental and climatic levels, against a background of uncontrolled demographic growth in many parts of the world. No less uncontrolled is the relationship between anthropization and habitation logics, according to a use of space that corresponds more to the opportunism of exploitation, in its different forms, than to the satisfaction of the primary needs of the entire population understood in its different cultural and civil identity aspects.

The question of the next upcoming space over which we should ponder therefore falls within a very vast phenomenological framework, the contradictions of which are highlighted precisely by the emergence of the virus, which on the one hand reveals to us, were it necessary, the corollary of critical conditions of which the pandemic is above all an effect rather than a cause, and on the other hand conveys us to a dimension so complex and multifactorial that, we must admit, it is not easy to outline and give effect to the action of the project on a level of renewed rationality.

It also seems evident, in this sanitary juncture capable of involving our own bodies and the places in which they live, but also of determining reactions and releasing energies, might we say, of the entire human race, that the architectural and urban component, as a science applied to the design of inhabited space, is perceived as lateral and accessory, not included in the basket of scientific fields called to give short and long-term answers such as epidemiology and health in general, but also economic, statistical rather than socio-political and institutional forms, psychological, communication and not least the new technologies and environmental sciences. On the other hand, this is evident not only now if we consider, for example, the total absence of "architecture and urban spaces" within the research topics characterizing the mission of the ERC (European Research Council).

In actual fact, architectural and urban science, and the project instrumentation intrinsic to it, contributes significantly to the determination of concentrated, urban or widespread habitation procedures, with the involvement of the surrounding area, and therefore to the organization of behaviour and social functions, to the relationship between man-made spaces and natural spaces, in general to forms of life and therefore to the well-being of the population. A science, as demonstrated by its historical tradition which, starting from the criticism of 19th century urbanisation through the models of industrial modernity and the new standards of public hygiene in the city, reaches the experimentation of collective living, of disurbanisation rather than the rediscovery of the morphological and life dimension of the historical city. A laboratory full of critical and propositional contributions on how to organize and shape built-up areas which seems to have lost its role on the stage of public planning. And this should give rise to further questions, and perhaps to self-criticism, on the causes of this scientific laterality cultivated, among other causes, through the trivialization of professions or pseudo-scientific nature created at mass media level which, for example, promotes alleged environmental sustainability in reality only suitable for gathering the most naive consensus.

The architectural and urban project cannot at this juncture only be called upon to reiterate the generalized hope of a so-called return to "normality" instead of a generic "restart", watchwords that certainly do not help in any way to analyse and take steps forward, with awareness and authentic critical investigation, as regards the most appropriate guidelines and criteria to deal with the current critical situation but especially that of the future and not only in terms of pandemic risk.

Starting, therefore, from a point of view which has not been completely identified and rather aimed at understanding the structural nature of the open questions, two distinct but complementary ways exist of looking at the problem, to be addressed starting from the "coronavirus" contingency.

The first is that of the predisposition of criteria and instruments which the forms of anthropized space can assume so as to face and make themselves as resistant and resilient as possible to phenomena of this nature, without forgetting other causes of risk determination on a global scale, starting from climate change. It is the dimension of an architecture and a city predisposed towards defence and therefore able, in addition to other organisational factors with a functional and material predisposition, to cope with the emergency by reducing its negative effects and consequent social costs. Collective urban spaces and equipment, predisposition and multi-functionality of places and architecture in the city, forward-looking configuration of designed housing and workplaces able to achieve in a systemic way the best possible response to the emergencies

to come. A reflection that cannot but be multiscale, from architecture to the city, but we could also say from the inside to the outside: from the architecture of habitation that affects us all as users of domestic spaces that in this situation have been severely tested and where the theme of an "Existenzminimum" also suitable for conditions of segregation/quarantine emerges, up to the spaces of the city also invested by typologically unforeseen needs, starting from hospitals, but also commercial buildings, schools, workplaces, and where the theme of the predisposition to the rapid transformability of the city in emergency conditions can be included among the strategies of the project to be developed. In architectural and spatial (and not only conceptual) terms it would be a question of evaluating a subversion between full and empty spaces, of temporary alteration of the density of uses and population of the spaces themselves. This means that the residential district and the individual housing will no longer be just places to live in, but also places to work, and that it will be necessary to reflect on the change of gradient on the endowments of the immediate inhabited community.

The second is more concerned with the root causes that generate the pandemic risk (and not only) to which the forms of settlement and inhabited and in any case anthropized places also actually contribute, as demonstrated by the genesis of the coronavirus which not surprisingly arose from the metropolis of Wuhan and from the many urban villages that constitute its marginal and degraded aspect. This theme, on the one hand, highlights the problem of the critical production and social-housing problems of large urban agglomerations, which are highly attractive, both in a global context and as regards local rural areas, according to a complementarity between poverty and wealth functional to the metropolitan regime but at risk of a social rather than health short circuit, and on the other hand, a widespread and aggressive anthropization of natural spaces both in terms of settlement speculation and above all of productive exploitation (between agriculture and animal breeding) capable of altering environmental and socio-cultural balances, with strong repercussions also on the problem of uncontrolled urbanization, thus initiating a perverse circular system of cause and effect. With respect to these phenomena, with strongly dystopian implications, the spatial structure, the constructed forms and the functional regimes of the city and the surrounding district should return to the centre of scientific focus according to a planning perspective which is planetary but open to the many different local contexts.

On the other hand, we must be aware that the pandemic emergency has obliged the world to force situations traditionally resistant to change, to create new ones, to break down a whole series of customary structures. Thereby experimenting with new forms, at least in different contexts starting from the workplace, especially through the use of the digital technologies characterizing ICT (Information and Communications Technology). Thanks to technology, it is possible to work from home, saving time otherwise spent traveling, to be allocated to leisure time, sport, family, often to the benefit of the domestic economy. The advantages for the environment in terms of polluting emissions, or in terms of business and service productivity through smart working, which seems to record significant results in certain sectors, are far from negligible. This perspective is supported by a concept of simultaneity, of co-presence, of "virtual ubiquity", so much so as to suggest a "return" to those conditions of unity, of non-specialized totality, typical of pre-modern societies. Conditions of life in which the times and places of daily activities could be less separated, ordered, by functional categories but rather by "priority values" in the simultaneity of their experience. A scale of everyday life according to an idea of "village", instead of neighbourhood, street or district, which prevails over all the others,

which sees the radical reduction of the daily range of movement as an assumption of a new socio-habitation paradigm as an alternative to the phenomena of dormitory neighbourhoods in urban suburbs. Certainly limiting movement is ok, but how can this be done without in any other way undermining the absurd rhetoric of infinite freedom of movement? That which, if we think about it, has made low cost tourism proliferate, and which in twenty years has cost us the lethal aggression of cities like Venice, the air traffic of millions of flights filled with trolleys and people and goods of every kind and everywhere.

In this scenario, at the architectural scale emerges the need to rethink living spaces, and once again include in these those "work spaces" that modern culture had expelled from the home for at least a century (the shop, the laboratory, the study have always been an integral part of the home). It is hardly by chance that for some time now all E-commerce strategies have been moving in this direction, through the progressive use of devices, home deliveries (lockers, delivering and pickup points, hubs, etc.) and where marketing is oriented towards multi-tasking and multi-purpose strategies in which urban public space is the place of hybridization of experience, between shopping, leisure, leisure, services. A system of urban behaviours, individual and collective, but not without contradictory and disturbing implications, linked to the idea of a citizen who is first of all a consumer and of a bio-politically understood amazonization of life forms in which domestic space, in certain conditions, assumes the alienating dimension of socializing which is only virtual and regimented by technological devices. And where there is a redefinition of the limen between categories semantically misunderstood as necessary, urgent, indispensable, useful, superfluous, routine, all of them drugged in their conceptual, content and operational scope by neo-liberal models of consumer induction.

No less involved in this fantasy are the collective spaces in which to live "collaboratively" the experience of the city in particular in terms of housing and work, environmental sustainability (containment and energy production, waste collection, water resource management, etc., etc.) but also an urban morphology designed for a new sense of community and revaluation of space-time in the present.

In any case, quite apart from the formulas that can be adopted, there is no more justification for the uncontrolled growth of human settlements in land areas. There is no more space for the so-called "informal city". Certainly, the city, like society, of Information and Communications Technology, could be the freest, the most adaptable, the most efficient (and perhaps the richest) only if it were to renounce, a priori, some degree of (presumed) unconditional freedom, which neoliberal practices have conveyed towards uncontrollable critical situations in different areas, including that of settlement development.

But how can we redefine in terms of spatial proxemics an idea of a city animated by community effects and at the same time capable of producing protected but participating individualities? To exemplify, it is as if the aggregative character that we find inherent in the bounded horizontality of collective spaces of historical matrix, could be subverted by architectural thickenings which see deep inhabitable loggias surrounding (and protecting at the same time) the perimeters of the built volumes, and the visual contact between people and families which populate these transitional spaces were able to generate new relational models (only by living during the day in the apartment in a city do you have the opportunity to see, i.e., to know visually and dialogue with the community overlooking the street, the courtyard, the open space, and exchange opinions, advice, impressions, to listen to the silence of the city on the one hand

and, on the other, to experience the new habits of the inhabitants). In this way new types but also new figures of architecture and of the urban scene, new landscape are prefigured.

In this dual yet unified vision of the problem, as it emerges from the "coronavirus" phenomenon, it becomes necessary, however, to overcome the clichés of architecture and the sustainable city, of which the mitigation of greenery, up to the paradox of its verticalisation is emblematic, to identify in depth the possible themes on which to focus real alternatives capable of influencing both the sets and the timing of the problem, considering them as part of a single process, as coherent as possible, of a holistic nature, of patient construction, through a dialectic in which knowledge and design are the basis of non-modelling logic project progress.

The objective of this invitation, starting from a number of considerations aimed only at stimulating those to whom it is addressed, is to realize a first corollary of propositional analysis that opens and solicits the definition of a clear and unavoidable perspective of the contribution of architectural and urban design that cannot be postponed and which is as systematic and generalized as possible, albeit in the declinations which the local conditions of the global world can positively put in place.

What should we learn from this emergency situation and from what is implied? What aspects of inadequacy has architecture and the city shown in this situation? What themes and objectives should be identified and what kind of project strategies should be developed according to short, medium and long term perspectives?

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