Editorial
by
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The New Cities of the Twentieth Century

The twentieth century is best known for the dramatic events that marked it. Two world wars have scanned its duration, splitting it into two, but connected by a thread of continuity. In the background of the conflict between totalitarianism and democracy it has been a century driven by common ambitions, translated in decisive, contrasting transformations in terms of conquests of economic and social rights.

The twentieth century must therefore be re-read in its contradictions, in the folds of a simple mapping of the movements and ideologies. It is possible to gather the underlying reasons that led to the competition between antagonistic fronts, counterposed in claiming the primacy of change and achievements. The foundation of new cities occurred within that framework, with oscillations that distinguished their dramatic diversity.

Not only. The "Brief Century" was initially the century in which, from minority positions, the pursuit of the *alternative* objectives of a cultural vanguard's aim to exalt freedom from past constraints. And since the first post-war period, starting from the central European nucleus, it seemed to have achieved a modernity destined to spread, according to the different inclinations, in their respective continental contexts.

This has definitely rendered the idea of modernity which developed at the same time, recognizable, in the first third of the century, in the vast cultural areas affected by different forms of power. The two principal contexts affected by the Great Depression, the European and North American were thus led to pursue forms of material transformations (above all, *reticulated*) of their relative territories, but following alternative models. Roosevelt's America resorting to the practice of public intervention in reforming the extension into the socio-environmental distribution of common good, above all, its territory, the main resource made available to the community. Prevailing in

the European context, instead, totalitarianisms, antagonistic systems, in the peculiarities of the major national contexts, as well, with their colonialist implications. Preponderant are, in the phase that is most interesting here, Soviet socialism in the east and the development of an authoritarian nationalism prevalent in the west influenced by Italian Fascism. Towards them was placed an absolute trust in the power and capacity of the great industrial production to replace, on the road to modernization, the political revolution (as is precisely intended in the sharp alternative by Corbusier *Architecture ou révolution*, in 1920-21).

What is most striking in the aftermath of the human and material catastrophe of World War I – which would seem to suggest a sort of widespread uniformity of that century's "Zeitgeist" – is the the contemporary and parallel manner with which the desire for "conquest" of the territory was manifested by the different economic systems and the opposing organizations of power. It would seem to be an obvious opposition of sense, especially in terms of political and cultural meaning. So much so that in the systems organized in totalitarian form – as a reaction and compensation to the absence of a common meaning to be attributed to modernity – the language of tradition would be re-proposed, with its own symbols and hierarchy of values.

It seems necessary today, far removed, to try and understand the reasons for the conflict among the large socio-economic systems. And in the search of a modernity to be exhibited on the material level with the *new foundation* cities, the two main systems of a totalitarian character opposing each other would stand out. Exactly those which simultaneously believed it possible to build a world in the measure of the new-man of the Twentieth Century, the members of a collectivist organization guided by rational principles and norms; mostly inspired by achievements in health of physical soundness, leisure time and sport.

However, one should also observe that the will of "the new" would eventually also concern non-totalitarian national political systems, which, in turn, were not immune from desire and projects aimed at a radical modernization of the city, seen as privileged place of communication and magnificence. That is, as a new image-already dreamt of by the historical avant-garde since the time of the Ricostruzione futurista dell'Universo (Futurist Reconstruction of the

Universe) – finalized towards the original definition (not to say neo-originary) of a "new man" completely consecrated to a modernity conceived of as an inescapable fruit of the industrial civilization.

It will be indeed starting precisely from the revolution of the language of the industrialization process that the concept of modernity, even in the dramatic sequence of the various phases of crisis and political involutions of the first half of the century, will be proposed as a search for new rules, as an attempt to found a new tradition. This search will be carried out in different directions, but overall one may identify the distinctive sign of the desire for a common language, a koine, as it were, of the twentieth century, based on a "pensiero forte" (strong thought) of communication.

On a cultural level what ought to be investigated without underlying preconceptions are the reasons why a period which began from a revolutionary dream of the first historic avant-garde ended half way, ebbed back into a general *return to order*. Whether following academic tradition, with the use of historical symbols (emblematic is the heroic language of the "Doric red" of the eclectic Russians during the Communism of War phase), or according to the motifs of the, Mediterranean, Greco-Roman classicism, searching for a more solid base on which to base the very idea of the city to be re-invented.

The quest for modernity during the twentieth century, would follow contorted routes precisely because of the internal contradictions in its motivation (desire of novelty versus need for rules), already present in its initial phase, more exposed to the risk of not being connected to the reality of things insofar as a generator of abstract "models".

It is no coincidence that the new of the Modern would be, from the beginning,from this confused with the neo-founding will of new hierarchies. It is sufficient to think of the post-war Germanic areas where the anarchist vision of *Auflösung der Stadte,* piecemeal dissolution of the city in the territory, would soon be transformed into neo-medieval nostalgia of the Stadkrone, in the desire to establish a hierarchical supremacy of the Center-City in the territory. And where the indefinite typological repetition of the *Grosstadtarchitektur* would have corresponded – and counterposed – the "unicum" of the *Neue Herz* of Berlin's Alexander Platz.

But what should be stressed is that, always referring to the totalitarian utopias established on the continent, though profoundly different and antagonistic, end up possessing some significant features in common. The two main ones may be considered: a) the search for modernity with great projects to be realized physically in an attempt to recover a delayed historical development; b) the idea of a newly founded city as part of the *colonization of the territory*, whose hierarchical system must necessarily be headed by a "center", to a capital city, a true mind entrusted with guiding the transformation.

The colonization of the territory: here then is the aspect that expresses the relationship of analogy between antagonistic systems. Surely aspiring to the conquest of supposedly new "empty" territories, available for "occupation", is the basis of all forms of twentieth-century colonization.

The Southern Mediterranean, for example, has been variously subject of occupation for new forms of settlement and development.

However, with regard to this basic analogy something should be made clear. One can not, above all, ignore the substantial difference between what the armed conquest of colonial territories in the name of an ancient *Roman* past meant, such as the Italian colonization of Libya (or declaration of Algeria within metropolitan France) and what was produced by the very different case of return to the *homeland* pursued by Jewish Zionism and realized with the self-governing system of agricultural Kibbutzim in Israel, certainly not comparable to forms of colonial imposition.

If, then, we wish to go back to the creative moment of a colonization aimed at the development and occupation it is especially to the avant-garde of Soviet planning that you must look. After an entire phase of researching the new models of *Socgorod* (linear or non) of the city-factory designed for a vast territory to be conquered for industrial civilization, it will be above all the imagination of Leonidov, the rising star of second generation constructivism, that will represent the ideal model of the new "settlers" inspired by the idea of disurbanism. His Magnitogorsk, which has a head (not, however, the *mind* of the system) in the major mining-industrial Kombinat Urals, seemingly like a conveyor belt that runs through the territory, formed by a chess-board

of living quarters for individuals or couples. It seems to develop, then disperse toward infinity (in the popular perspective by Leonidov an airship flies over the "city", almost desperately trying to glimpse where it ends... possibly to dock).

But Magnitogorsk will be built in the classical forms of traditional town planning and it will be Leonidov himself who will testify, with his "City of the Sun", to the great disillusionment of creative Soviet colonizers. From this work, conceived in the gloomy disillusion in the years of the drama of the second war, will begin a season destined to finally go beyond the boundaries of a historical time closed within contingent duration of the "contemporary." His city will undergo an momentous metamorphosis and from the metaphorical image (a ribbon extending to infinity) of an industrial plan aimed at the total colonization of the territory will go to the representation of a new role to be attributed to the model. That of being "ideal city", leading to a horizon of reconstruction and, as such, once more to be *re-founded* (project for the United Nations, 1951).

With Leonidov the premises are already present for an exodus from movements and ideologies and for a dialogue to be repeated and re-opened over time.

Of the twentieth century, in the drama of the events that mark the clash between opposing visions, therefore, the long-term phenomena end up by prevailing, as do the communicative functions of language, the impact of powerful imagery. In this respect mainly the City-capital of nations and political systems will reclaim the need to perform the role, not only symbolic, of managing a new power. This is true even for Moscow, "the capital of socialism". There will be a test phase in which totally alternative models will compete for the established order, in a confrontation of an international scale presented with proposals of radical implications.

Of this type of modernity was Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse*, based on the proposal of a total demolition and reconstruction of the existing city. But it was Stalinist management that brought to a peak the symbols of historical tradition, with the radical restructuring of the entire structure envisaged by his Plan of 1935, and finally in the years after World War II with the seven skyscrapers arranged in a ring around

the political center. This would be the idea of a center with strong communicative and persuasive power, even in the name of popular will, a "people who desire it", to prevail.

In Italy, just as in Soviet Russia, will the ritual of the project of a new capital be performed. Not like to Moscow with and its extended "reconstruction", but for Rome also the problem will be to create a new center and endow it with the necessary symbolism (partly modern) superimposed on an orderly system worthy of the tradition. Even in this case, in fact, the project for the E42 conceived as the center of a new territory to be colonized will witness the affirmation of the principle of an idea at the base of a "neo-foundation" culture.

The new center, originally designed as a venue for a Universal Exposition, would take on a symbolic meaning destined to go far beyond the occasion, almost, in fact, the *manifesto* of a new, different relationship between Rome and its territory.

Towards the preexisting sea, the weaving of a canal system to reclaim agricultural land from malaria and swamps, later, to the south, the great Pontine plain the complex of villages and new cities was already under construction in the network of *Bonifica Integrale* (Total reclamation) planned by the regime. In the territory *de facto* a radical transformation was underway and to Rome was about to begin a new scenario. Its new center will connect with a work of territorial colonization directly affecting its wider area of influence, and in the end connected with the external transformations.

E42, later called EUR, was founded precisely according to this aim and, in the designs of a plan that was to include the image of Giovannoni's "Comet Tail", would then find its own form, which will prove resistant to time, in fact to be durable. It will become the fundamental sense assumed by the location of the new Center where you can say you have all the original geological characters of the adjacent *Latium Vetus*. The site is intact in its natural conformation and the new arrangement transforms the existing peculiarities into as many strong motives for the new urban morphology. In lower heights volumetric and architectural cornerstones of the project are placed; in the middle part of the district where there is a vast marshy depression a body of water is projected, a "small lake" with standard banks, on

which a great symbolic Arch rises. The existing natural vegetation of holly oaks and laurels is transformed into a noble landscape composed of the traditional combination of pines and cypress.

It is no accident that precisely around these symbolic aspects which the difficult relationship will evolve between the designers of the *quartiere* (a term preferred by Piacentini), torn between the forms of modernity proposed which respects the naturalness of the site yet enhances the visionary architectures (proposed originally by Pagano and followers) and the regularity of an orderly and classical system (definitely imposed by Piacentini and eventually victorious).

The architecture of the final and stable part of E42, represented by the most important buildings, will thus follow the classic rules of monumentality. The choice will favor the fate of a plan destined, in the subsequent development of EUR, to last and absorb in the following stages the same modifications of its language. After the initial act of the foundation will follow the years of war and the interruption of the works. Only after the war, with the addition of new architectural projects, will the steps of remodeling the surface and the "quartiere-citta" (city-neighborhood) will be modified often following the ups and downs of the definitions of their role.

From the *political* prediction of 1942's Universal Exposition, anniversary of the fascist decade, would thus come the postwar Park-City, then the Olympic City of the 60s and the ambitious project of theb Directional and then Congressional District in subsequent developments, until today, in a continuous transformation of architectures and hybridization of forms, which has not erased the neo-founding outline of the general plan. EUR therefore as *authentic* foundation City, able to absorb the changes. Despite that the Piacentini himself, its creator, reinserted in the 50s as Commissioner of the Ente EUR, had conceived that *quartiere* as a model and therefore did not approve any changes in its image.

What can the twentieth century as the century of *new cities* tell us? Already with its definition as "Brief Century" (Secolo Breve) a temporal limit is set containing a first answer; seen by summarizing the set of events. During the first half of the century we witnessed a kind of parallel between comparable and contrasting systems, a basic analogy

between the extinguishing of a first creative and speculative burst and the ebb towards traditional forms of method and language. What happened was not without consequence, but at the cost of a painful renunciation of modernity as an ideal objective.

A fundamental point, present originally, was lost: the objective of defining a new *cultural*, as well as *spatial*, *model* as the highest symbolic element of a renewed social order.

In competition-clash between systems, we witnessed two different but complementary ways to make "propaganda art" on an urban scale unique to each system. A point in common was steadfast. The competition that developed within each short period between avant-garde and classical, between the primacy of invention and traditional representation of power, however, represented the ambition to fully dominate over the territory. Colonization as a principle and exercise of power.

In the second half of the century, paralleling the advent of a peaceful phase on the international scene, a general condition of peace would have finally been reached. Even at the cost of the loss of idealism on a universal scale that had identified the beginning of the century and, paradoxically, the period between the wars, a generalized "modernization" in the material transformation of the territory would have been realized. So while a kind of armed truce between the major powers was being created (the so-called Cold War between the two systems), innovations would then have arisen in the international panorama, with two new capitals of major emerging nations, India and Brazil, Chandigarh and Brasilia. We would then glimpse a new relationship with the territory, not of conquest, but of the exaltation and identity of national cultures it was intended to represent.