

Città antica, città moderna
(Old town, modern town)

"A town encourages art, it is itself art" according to Lewis Mumford: that is, not only, as others after him have pointed out, a "container" or a concentration of art forms but an art form in itself. We should not be surprised, therefore, if, with the changing of the general system of production, what was once an artistic product is today an industrial product.

That concept is more clearly defined since with the over-coming of the idealistic aesthetic a work of art is no longer the expression of a single and well-individualized personality but the sum of cultural components not necessarily concentrated in one person or in one period. The origin of the implicit artistic character of urban culture recalls the intrinsic "artisticness" of the language indicated by Saussure: the town is intrinsically artistic. The idea of art as an expression of personality had its roots in the conception of art during the Renaissance: it is in just this period one holds - at least as an hypothesis - that an ideal town may exist, conceived as a single work of art, by a single artist. An ideal town, however, always exists within or underneath every real town, as distinct from it as the world of thought is distinct from the world of action.

Even though some examples of an ideal town have, in fact, been realized (and we all know them: Pienza, Sermoneta, Palmanova) the so-called "ideal town" is only a reference point against which the problems of the real town can be judged: and so it can be conceived as a work of art which in the course of its existence has undergone modifications, alterations, additions, mutilations, deformations, sometimes indeed real destructive crises.

The ideal town, more than an actual model, is a module of which it is always possible to discover multiples or sub-multiples which change its size but not its substance: if we are given a chessboard, centralized or stellar plan it is always possible to draw the same design larger or smaller. A typical example of the proper proportioning of a town to a profound historical change is the famous Ercolian addition to Ferrara by Fiossetti: the Renaissance town is joined to the medieval one through a system of links which reflect a desire, not to contrast, but to develop.

In general, the planning of an ideal town implies the idea that in the town a value of quality is realized which remains practically un-

changed with the changing of the quantity, because it is taken for granted that quality and quantity are proportional or comparable entities. The relationship, of proportion in the past and of antithesis today, between quantity and quality is at the root of all town-planning problems in the west.

It is just this, I believe, which explains the non-continuity of development between the old and the modern, between the pre-industrial and the industrial or post-industrial towns: as it is this break of continuity or impossibility of development which causes an artificial concentration of the town's historic character in the old nucleus.

The hypothesis of an ideal town implies the concept that the town itself is a representative or visual agent of concepts or values, and that the order of town-planning not only reflects the social order but the metaphysic or divine rationale of the urban institution. From this can be inferred that the modern town on one side is opposed to the old because it reflects the idea of a structure which, not having a charismatic foundation, can go on changing, but recognises that the changes are radical or qualitative and therefore what remains of the past can certainly belong to history, but to a concluded historical cycle.

When the problem of the ne varietur form is transposed to its "becoming" it is easy to be aware that the "becoming" never has a linear rhythm or trend: the town is not "Gestalt" but "Gestaltung": its true form comes from the dynamism of its "becoming". However, since it is obvious that it is a construction, and the departure point of every construction is its constructibility, before considering the town in respect of aesthetic categories we must consider it in respect of the techniques by which it can be not only hypothetical but planned; and not only in respect of operative but also of planning techniques.

Nevertheless, a town is not only the product of construction techniques: the techniques of wood, metal, texture, etc., also participate in determining the visible reality of the town, or rather in visualising its different existential rhythms (often distinct according to social classes and types of work). No less than the great arts of the Renaissance, craft production also has different grades within the same typologies, and reflects therefore the varied relation - but always a relation - between quality and quantity, which belongs to all craft civilizations. The techniques of town-making, which have their high point in what was called art and separate from craftsmanship as its apex and model, make up an organic system linked with economic and social structures. These techniques, contrary to those of agriculture, change very quickly, reflect competition and a desire to overcome, typical of an intense economy, as the

urban one. Competitiveness and selectivity, the gradual moving from the maximum of quality with a minimum of quantity to the maximum of quantity with a minimum of quality are the factors (or at least some of the factors) which determine the 'becoming' of a town. The historic town, in fact, never submits to being a fossil, but develops in time according to processes relating to valuation and selection which it is possible to pinpoint and describe. The difficulty of the relationship between old and modern does not depend on the contrast between the geometric quality of the models and the non-geometric quality of the actual developments: our age is too rich in planning or Utopian hypotheses, in non-geometric or completely informal model-towns (there are even some "pop" hypotheses), but this informalism, which can be linked to that of painting or sculpture, is very different from the lack of form of the town dominated by property speculation: the same threat which hangs over historic centres does not derive from a different conception of the arts but on the total incompatibility between the artistic intention and the aim of mere profit.

Coming back to the specific problem of art, tied up with that of the historic centres, it is clear that the different arts form a homogenous system because they all, with their diverse categories, procedures and quantitative and qualitative levels, make up the town, which can therefore be considered as a space où tout se tient. If today we consider as being more significant in historical and ideological values, not only the monument, but also the dwelling-house or the craft shop, and in general the social composition rather than the representative nucleus, it is doubtless because the type of collectivist society of our times refuses to recognise that only large institutions can express history.

Naturally, every town-planning and building intervention in a town implies, besides the necessity of answering actual needs, an attitude, an obligation to intervene, and therefore a valuation of the objective and present condition of the town. Nowadays this attitude is no longer determined, as it was in the past, by a purely aesthetic criterium, according to which only the absolute work of art, the monument, was worthy of preservation. The attribution of historic and artistic value, not only to monuments but also to surviving areas of the old urban fabric, still depends certainly on a judgement of their artistic quality, but this judgement can be applied to a field much broadened by present trends in artistic historiography which have adopted the methodology of sociology and anthropology.

The basic problem remains however, without any precise formulation; the modern town cannot become united or function unless at

the rise of the old town. Because not everything can be preserved, it seems necessary to decide what we must preserve at all costs. We must keep in mind that the possibility of survival of the old remaining nucleus is determined by the general town-planning solutions, that is by the criteria by which we discipline the perikon of the suburbs, around this historic nucleus. If we allow that the art historians, being also town historians, must exercise a decisional function in the management of the town, their action must not be merely one of protection and censorship, but it must participate in the selection of plans for the town.

The opposing integralisms of conservationists and innovators seem to find, at all costs, a motivation in the radical changes in the way of life and work which took place in the last century due to the crises in the craft economy and the increasing hegemony of industry. We cannot state a priori that the modern town has no aesthetic character just because the system of industrial technology has no artistic models. The institutional worth of a town, as a privileged or elite social aggregate, is indirectly recognised and even widely exploited by the same industrial society which seemed to endanger it, whilst on the contrary it cannot do without the historical prestige and intensified functionality of the town and professes to occupy it because in this way the industrial society feels it can appropriate for itself the place of power.

We all know that in their initial phase the big industrial complexes installed themselves around the large towns and cities, causing a migratory flow which multiplied as much as ten times the indigenous population and practically destroyed the cohesion of the traditional communities. The quantity was multiplied and the quality degraded: some more industrialized settlements reached an almost total annulment of their quality in favour of their quantity. The need to defend elements which keep a value and a meaning, even if purely figurative, in the modern town or city, has brought out a distinction between the so-called "historic centres", protected by controls, and the peripheries, often spreading out without real and proper plans or even without authorization. The concept of a "historical centre" is instrumentally useful because it slows down, if not completely arrests, the invasion of the old areas by business organisations or by new residential schemes which lead, inevitably, sooner or later, to their destruction. This same concept, however, is theoretically absurd because if we want to preserve the town as an institution, we cannot allow it to be made up of a historic part with a qualitative value and a non-historic part with a merely quantitative character. Let us make it clear that it is the town, in its entirety,

old and modern, which has not only good order, but historical substance, and to call in question the whole historic quality is the same as calling in question the value or the legitimacy of history in contemporary society; and that is maybe what some people want.

Because, indeed, they are cyst-like formations inside the modern towns, the historic centres are in very grave danger. This greater prestige of the old nucleus has become a cause of attraction, it attracts business activities opposed to its structures and its history, and favours the willing diaspora of the traditional population which lived there once but which now no longer feels at ease there. During the period in which I was Mayor of Rome - a capital city where there are strong concentrations of office centres, I realised that even rigorous local protection, circumscribed however to a privileged area of a city or town, is not enough, and that historic centres can be saved, and not just given a respite, only in the global context of a town-planning policy which takes into account all the problems of the town. Economic and social paralysis of historic centres is almost unavoidable; small craft activities and shops are suffocated by commercial production and its large centres of distribution. The costs of restoration and conservation of old buildings are so high that the non-wealthy class cannot afford them; traffic blockages and the number of obstructions caused by motor vehicles fight against the old structures; the process of abandonment, above all by the younger generations is rapid. Despite this, urban land maintains very high prices which favour speculative manoeuvres, unauthorised but difficult to control. The substitution of the old working-class and lower middle-class levels with the wealthy classes causes architectural forgeries, firstly because only the facade of the buildings is kept, with a restructured interior, and secondly because the population of the historic centre is itself a cultural heritage which should be protected.

The City Council of Bologna has already restored a large part of the historic centre with scientific criteria. The Council of Rome has, even if for the moment on a much more reduced scale, started important restoration works in two areas where the building composition was more gravely deteriorated; but there is no doubt that when the material is necrosed, social and functional recovery is extremely difficult, especially when not encouraged by the goodwill of the old inhabitants.

To revitalize historic centres we cannot simply rely on reinstating them technically; if the reanimation is to have a more organic refunctioning it is clear that the presence of conservationists is necessary from the first phase of the planning studies, and that this presence should

not be limited to strictly defined historic centres, but extended to the whole area of the town. And restore, it must be pointed out, means neither reinstate nor remodernise. And this also holds good for works such as the exceptional experience in Bologna: the restoration of the facade of St. Petronio. We must see to it that the example of Bologna can be repeated everywhere on a large scale, in a shorter time and with less expense.

It is time that the restoration of historic centres should pass from the experimental and pioneer phase to that of generalized praxis, with all that is involved in terms of research and operative personnel, financial means, and above all with the founding of schools for the formation of specialists in the different categories.

A town plan always consists of arranging and adapting the existing layout and forecasting future developments which might also not be merely extensive or dimensional. Often a historic centre is linked to the negative concept of a 'museum town'. It is an expression of which we should not be afraid on condition that the museum is not regarded as a deposit or a hospice of works of art, dead and out of context. In Italy we have an extreme example of a 'museum town': Venice. Because of its special or peculiar situation and configuration, the industrial development was hived off, in an apparently correct solution, to the nearby town of Mestre, which has grown as rapidly as all industrial towns. But for that very reason the result is an urban monster, a purely quantitative accumulation of industrial plants and their complimentary living quarters. The next thing that happened was that Mestre acquired an importance, not only economic or demographic, superior to Venice, which thus found itself exposed to a process of impoverishment which was not only functional. Today we could say that Venice is an appendix - of high historical prestige, deprived of any function not related to tourism and its relative traffic - of the nearby devouring industrial town. Not very different from Rome, where speculation has caused crowded and confused suburbs around an extremely fragile historic centre, in Venice also the modern city tends to destroy materially the old: the fumes of the industrial plants of Porto Marghera disintegrate the stones of Venice just at the miasma of the motor vehicles and the central heating plants disintegrate the stones of Rome. The objective at which the art historian should aim is not therefore a freezing into immobility of the old town, but a coherent development, so that, even with the diversity of its order and levels, an organic innovation of functions can ensure the dynamism of the entire urban texture.

That does not at all mean modernising old towns, which is absurd; they have a value in the consciousness of contemporary people just because they are old, and modern culture has, or should have, the capacity to take in its own historic structure, both as a 'memory-presence' of its own past and a 'project-forecast' of its own future.

But what instruments have we to prevent the life of the historic town from freezing in complete and intransigent conservation, from becoming distorted in a ridiculous attempt to modernise the old, from becoming bogged down in compromises and not visually expressing and handing over any other historical image but that of the great institutions or of power, without collecting the everyday history, the residual presence of many human lives, almost as if life could be founded otherwise than on living? On one hand we have government or municipal offices for the protection of the environment, which can only veto or limit without possibility of active intervention in the vital processes of the town or city. On the other hand we have the technicians, the town-planners and the architects who draw up long and short term plans whose perspective on the future is Utopian or mechanistic, as if a limitless and continuous growth were taken for granted, as if it were the duty of the present generation to establish the urban areas for the future. Lastly, we have the political and administrative authorities which alone have the real decision-making power, and which are often more concerned with responding to contingent opportunities or needs, or even perhaps with saving class privileges and interests, than with organising the historical transition from the present to the future of the town.

But can we say that the town, a complex reality which finds in art its unifying elements, is the object of full historical-artistic study in our Universities? Or is this not, in the majority of cases, left to sociologists or to economists? Can we say that our schools of history of art prepare scholars able to take part in équipes of planners, to collaborate in the study of the vital processes of a town, and not just to exercise vetos which are not always respected? Controls and vetos are certainly justified, but only insofar as the points of conservation are enclosed, and, in a way, guaranteed by a framework of urban culture which does not repudiate its history but is conscious of it.

Can we say that the complementary disciplines, from sociology to economics and statistics, which are essential to the study of the history of a town, are taught with reference to the town? Can we say that our University schools of art history collect and systematically

elaborate the informative data necessary for a historical not univocal study of the town? I have often heard it said, and it is certainly true, that for the organic protection of a cultural heritage it is essential to catalogue monuments on the basis of a legally defined concept of a cultural legacy. I consider the scientific catalogue and its continuous bringing up to date as essential, but I consider as extremely dangerous the definition a priori of things protected and to be protected, with the implicit admission that anything not on the list is not worth protecting at all. It is certainly possible to co-ordinate the methodology of protection with that of planning, and to form équipes of art historians and architects who would study the present status of a town and its evolutive thrusts in relation to the rhythm of its past developments.

While deploring the excessively theoretic and barely applicative character of higher studies of art history, which do not sufficiently hinge on that 'caring for things' which is the first deontologic and methodologic point of our discipline, I certainly do not intend to propose a prevalence of applicative empiricism on scientific research - on the contrary.

The scientific research of the art historian always aims at the preservation of works of art, and in this practical task he realises and verifies his own methods of scientific research. We must remember however that if it is always possible to take empiric applications from advanced scientific research, the inverse process is never possible: that is, an ascent from empiricism to science.

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