

The Dynamic of Urban Elements (Stillness under the Moving Eye)

Cino Zucchi

PRIMARY ELEMENTS AND THE CONCEPT OF AREA The Dynamic of Urban Elements

Cities stand. Their stones stand up; they remain still, obeying to the laws of statics. What is then moving? Their inhabitants running around undertaking their daily activities, the flags flapping on their poles, the clouds casting shadows on their moldings and cobblestones.

A bowl contains soup, but it is made of a different material from its content. Its shape is apt to support a dense liquid and hold its heat for a certain time, but it obviously survives beyond this particular lifespan; and it could be used for very different goals from the ones it was planned for.

The famous quote by Winston Churchill “we shape our buildings, thereafter our buildings shape us”, can be applied to bowls and cities as well, in a sort of mirror-image version of the other famous motto, “from the spoon to the city”. If the latter states that the form of human artefacts is the result of a unified work-style of a supposedly ‘modern’ designer, the former casts light on how much people’s lives and behaviours are invisibly guided by the spaces in which they take place.

Are we molluscs custom-producing our own homes or are we rather hermit crabs, looking for an empty shell to host our soft body, and migrating from one to another when the previous one is not fit for purpose any more?

On the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean, and from two very different points of view, in the sixth decade

of the last century two different people discovered, or rather rediscovered, the ‘stillness’ of the city, and in a way also the autonomous character of its elements: Aldo Rossi and Kevin Lynch.

Akin to a moment in a game of musical statues or a freeze-frame video-clip effect, their written and illustrated pictures created a snapshot of the material part of the city. Or better, they froze only some of its elements, specifically those ones that could appear in the memories and the minds of more than one of its inhabitants. If remembrance is a subjective power, they attributed this privileged state only to things and images that appeared in collective mental maps.

Both Lynch and Rossi understood that this condition of permanence of the physical body of the city was a shared need. It somehow coincided with the notion of ‘habit’, of convention, of custom, and more generally with the public realm. Stillness is what founded the city as a public artefact, and prevented its spaces from being the mere result of the Brownian movement of its occupants and vehicles.

In the planning and urban design of the sixties and seventies, urban form was typically seen as the final output of a process where a series of data and inputs had to be enhanced via the means of the ‘black box’ of a planning or design ‘method’.¹ Following this attitude, the

¹ See for example the circular town planning schemes in Victor Gruen, *The heart of our cities: The urban crisis: diagnosis and cure*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1964, the mathematical formulas and the discussion on modelling and urban planning in Leslie Martin and Lionel March editors, *Urban Space and Structures*, Cambridge University Press, London/New York, 1972, ISBN 0521084148, or the conceptual diagrams contained in Serge Chermayeff, Alexander Tzonis, *Shape of Community*, Italian translation *La forma dell'ambiente collettivo*, Il Saggiatore, Firenze 1972.

² Walter Gropius, *Flach – Mittel – oder Hochbau?*, speech at the CIAM, in *Rationelle Bauungsweisen*, 1931, pp. 26-47, English translation as *Id., Houses, Walk-ups or High-rise Apartment Blocks?*, in *The Scope of Total Architecture*, MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, 1980.

³ “Beyond a certain critical mass each structure becomes a monument, or at least raises that expectation through its size alone, even if the sum or the nature of the individual activities it accommodates does not deserve a monumental expression. This category of monument presents a radical, morally traumatic break with the conventions of symbolism: its physical manifestation does not represent an abstract ideal, an institution of exceptional importance, a three-dimensional, readable articulation of a social hierarchy, a memorial; it merely is itself and through sheer volume cannot avoid being a symbol – an empty one, available for meaning as a billboard is for advertisement.” Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, 1978, new edition The Monacelli Press, New York 1994 ISBN 1885254•00-8, p.100.

issue of form had no real consistence, since in the end it was just the solidification of a functional diagram: Walter Gropius’ speech at the Brussels Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) in 1930 on the dilemma of whether to build “Low, Mid- or High-Rise Buildings?” advocated the latter of the three solutions, on the grounds of increased sun exposure and building economy issues.²

If the Italian word ‘*monumento*’ refers explicitly to the role of a building as a reminder of a historical event or of a powerful ruler, the English word ‘landmark’ overlooks issues of content and emphasises instead its mere physical relevance; according to Wikipedia, it is “a recognisable natural or artificial feature used for navigation, a feature that stands out from its near environment and is often visible from long distances.” The contemporary meaning of this word is therefore very close to what Rem Koolhaas defines as ‘Automonument’.³

The wanderings of Boston pedestrians in Lynch’s *The Image of the City* (1960) or of the four-wheeled amniotic sacs in his *The View from the Road* (1965) need landmarks to orient themselves in the flux of the metropolis; be them grain elevators (already represented as monuments by Le Corbusier in *Toward an Architecture* (1923), the dome of Washington’s Capitol (not so dissimilar from the one that Albert Speer designed for Hitler to complete Berlin’s grand axis; often the architectures of political opposite systems are disturbingly similar) or a sketch of the 1939 New York World’s fair Trylon and Perisphere structures, they represent the necessitated visual pointers in the extended geography of the new territory.

If cars flow around the fixity of the ‘Monument/Automonument/Landmark’ in Lynch’s continuous ‘Space’, little armies of masons and carpenters climb on them in Aldo Rossi’s seamless ‘time’. His conception of the Monument is a lively one, as its ‘autonomous’ form – whose founding elements are typological simplicity, significant mass, and formal clarity rather than stylistic issues –

seems to ignite in successive generations of urbanites realizations of unexpected potentials. The original title of Aldo Rossi’s chapter is actually “Tensione degli elementi urbani”, where ‘tension’ is still a term belonging to the discipline of Statics before the one of Dynamics.

Rossi’s monuments are peculiar points in the urban structure, enduring in their ‘final’ incarnation whilst at the same time endlessly reworked over, like the never-ending story of the *Fabbrica del Duomo* in Milan or the plans by Pope Sixtus V to convert the Colosseum into a housing block containing a wool mill.

The monument is still, yet the monument also stirs the dynamics of urban mutation, and focuses attention on the patterns of the open public spaces around it. It is a clear and simple concept; but as with other ‘necessary’ ones, it re-emerges periodically from the sea of intellect like a wandering whale.

In fact, the dialectic between the structured body of the monument and the flowing paths of its visual and cognitive perception was masterfully expressed seventy years before the first edition of Rossi’s *The Architecture of the City*, by a twenty-three year old writer who was asked by the magazine *La Nouvelle Revue* to write something about the work of Leonardo da Vinci. Although puzzled by his output, they had the courage to publish his astounding ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’:

“The monument (which composes the City which in turn is almost the whole of civilization) is such a complex entity that our understanding of it passes through several successive phases. First we grasp a changeable background that merges with the sky, then a rich texture of motifs in height, breadth and depth, infinitely varied by perspective, then something solid, bold, resistant, with certain animal characteristics – organs, members – then finally a machine having gravity for its motive force, one that carries us in thought from geometry to dynamics and

4 Paul Valéry, *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci*, in "La Nouvelle Revue", 1985, pp.742-770, English translation from Paul Valéry, *An Anthology, Selected, with an Introduction*, by James R. Lawler, from *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry* edited by Jackson Mathews, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and Henley, 1977, pp.79-81.

5 See previous reference.

thence to the most tenuous speculations of molecular physics, suggesting as it does not only the theories of that science but the models used to represent molecular structures. It is through the monument or, one might rather say, among such imaginary scaffoldings as might be conceived to harmonise its conditions one with another – its purpose with stability, its proportions with its site, its form with its matter, and harmonising each of these conditions with itself, its millions of aspects among themselves, its types of balance among themselves, its three dimensions with one another, that we are best able to reconstitute the clear intelligence of a Leonardo. Such a mind can play at imagining the future sensations of the man who will make a circuit of the edifice, draw near, appear at a window, and by picturing what the man will see; or by following the weight of the roof as it is carried down walls and buttresses to the foundations; or by feeling the balanced stress of the beams and the vibration of the wind that will torment them; or by foreseeing the forms of light playing freely over the tiles and corniches, then diffused, encaged in rooms where the sun touches the floors. It will test and judge the pressure of the lintel on its supports, the expediency of the arch, the difficulties of the vaulting, the cascades of the steps gushing from their landings, and all the power of invention that terminates in a durable mass, embellished, defended, and made liquid with windows, made for our lives, to contain our words, and out of it our smoke will rise.

Architecture is commonly misunderstood. Our notion of it varies from stage setting to that of an investment in housing. I suggest we refer to the idea of the City in order to appreciate its universality, and that we should come to know its complex charm by recalling the multiplicity

of its aspects. For a building to be motionless is the exception; our pleasure comes from moving about it so as to make the building move in turn, while we enjoy all the combinations of its parts, as they vary: the column turns, depths recede, galleries glide; a thousand visions escape, a thousand harmonies.”⁴

Once written, texts are like monuments; they need to stand still to allow our minds to move around them, and appreciate “the balanced stress of the beams and the vibration of the wind, which will torment them”.⁵

“A rose is a rose is a rose”, and The Architecture of the City is the architecture of the city: It has built our image of a prototypical urban environment, it has helped us to give a bold form to a series of scattered realisations of the true nature of the built environment; bold and at the same time ever-changing, the beloved backdrop of our busy lives.

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