

The City as Field of Application for Various Forces: Economics

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THE EVOLUTION OF URBAN ARTIFACTS
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Economics

Several theorists have asserted that state ownership of property – that is, the abolition of private property – constitutes the qualitative difference between the capitalist city and the socialist one. This position is undeniable, but does it relate to urban artefacts? I am inclined to believe that it does, since the use and availability of land are fundamental issues – however it still seems only a condition – a necessary condition, to be sure, but not a determining one.

One of the things that is often forgotten about many of the Italian architectural theorists and practitioners of the 1960s and 1970s is just how many of them were card-carrying members of, or at the very least sympathisers with, either the Communist Party of Italy or its splinter groups even further to the left. Accordingly, when Rossi, Tafuri, Dal Co, Cacciari, Superstudio, or Archizoom write about property relations and their effect on the city, they're writing in a scenario where they believe it is both possible and desirable that private property, especially land be totally abolished. Much of the work that is occasionally interpreted as goofy futurism – such as Superstudio's Continuous Monument with its mirror-glass grid sweeping the globe – is anti-capitalist satire. And much of what can easily be seen as Adorno-like Grand Hotel Abyss pessimism – Tafuri's scathing analysis of modernism's approach to social reform – is in-

tended as a cautionary distinction between what is capitalism, however tamed and tempered, and socialism.

However, one of the many things going on in *The Architecture of the City* is an analysis of just how deep the roots of the city, the 'urban question' and even to a degree the 'housing problem' go, deeper by far than those of capitalism, which is a social formation that does not truly emerge until the 18th century, even if its bourgeoisie can be traced back a few centuries earlier than that. While some on the left – William Morris, for instance – occasionally seemed to think that urbanism, beyond a miniature, medieval level, was inherently capitalist, the existence of several pre-capitalist megalopoli belies this belief. But then this elicits a question, one that Rossi only hints at.

In his actual architectural practice, Rossi often took an approach which seemed to deliberately evoke the authoritarian architecture of the interwar years, whether the stripped down, rationalised, chilled classicism of Rome's EUR or, conceivably, the more decorative but similarly imposing and classically rooted architecture of the Stalinist Soviet Union and its satellites. Elsewhere, Rossi described the bloated, mutant Hausmannism of Berlin's Stalinallee (now Karl-Marx-Allee) as 'Europe's Last Great Street'. Sure, but was it a socialist street, and did its lack of capitalist land ownership lead to any real

qualitative difference? Did it function differently, was it structured differently, was it haptically or spatially different from anything built by the bourgeoisie, by property speculators, or even by social-democratically inclined local authorities? Or, did it resemble the urbanism of the sort of power that actually predates capitalism, such as absolutism, feudalism, or slavery? Naturally, Rossi refuses to be drawn into such matters, having only made a design preference for an approach to form with some unpleasant associations. The embrace of the historic city, meanwhile, has echoes in the practice of Bologna, a city governed for over forty years by a democratically elected Communist administration, which by the 1970s had essentially decided to deliberately arrest urban growth and architectural change in the name of a Communist approach to city-planning.

Many cities in Europe and Asia (and a few in the Americas) have quite a long record, during the middle of the twentieth century, of creating spaces that weren't governed by speculation. The results are rather mixed. It would obviously be disingenuous to see the urban results as a slightly modified version of bourgeois practice, a sort of architectural 'state capitalism'. Typologies as different as the seven neo-baroque skyscrapers placed in a circle around the Moscow Kremlin at the end of the 1940s or the immense prefabricated housing estates of the 1970s are almost inconceivable without total nationalisation of land and its conscious shaping in a certain historical interest. For sure it is not capitalist, and there is no way that any of this could have happened as a means of creating a surplus or profits for anybody. A quantitative difference, however, is distinct from the 'qualitative' one Rossi speaks of.

What is absent everywhere in these situations, is any conception of whether there is a difference between private property, state property and collective property, and whether or not that could have an effect on the architecture of the city. If democratically owned by an interventionist and collective polity, what would hap-

pen to the 'locus', and to the values of the historic city? Would it remain intact, as it did in Bologna, or would that transformation take more anarchic forms? And if it did, would it be recognisable as a city anymore?

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