Library as a meeting space

III Volume

Complex Projects_ Chicago _ South Works
Giorgio Larcher
The project of architecture

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“Architecture has been popular in recent years. Ironically, however, its growing popularity is inversely proportional to the increasing sense of political powerlessness and cultural disillusionment many architects feel about their effective contribution to the built world.” ¹

My claim is that Architecture has a great political and social importance. The buildings with there forms, their connection or disconnection with the context, their relation and transition between the public and the private, and with the meanings that more implicitly or explicitly represent, construct the frame where we live, influencing us, influencing the way in which we perceive ourselves and the others.

This importance however with the spreading of postmodern culture was largely negated.

As David Harvey writes: “Whereas the modernist see space as something to be shaped for social purposes and therefore always subservient to the construction of a social project, the postmodernists see space as something independent and autonomous, to be shaped according to aesthetic aims and principles which have nothing necessarily to do with any overarching social objective, save perhaps, the achievement of timeless and ‘disinterested’ beauty as an objective in itself.” ²

“The present condition of architecture is one in which the architects debate academic, abstract aesthetics while they are in fact in the thrall of the real-estate developers who are running our cities and turning working class people out of their homes.” ³

I think that the importance of architecture cannot be limited anymore to a formalistic research, but should re-engage with its political, social and cultural implications.

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Methodology

Architects should be more conscious of the meaning of what they design, of the spaces that they create and the messages that they want to send. Therefore, to better understand the political, social and cultural implication of architecture I think is very important to make both a typological and a phenomenological reflection on the build environment.

One analysis without the other for me would be incomplete, useless and misleading. Why? Because when we perceive a space we don’t think in a scientific way, we perceive it with our senses, with our emotions, and we interpret it with our culture, our background, our ethic, our beliefs and our experience.

On the other hand, when we design a space we try to formalize and translate our perceptions and our beliefs in something tangible. We need to be more pragmatic and we need to use concept and categorization in order to make comparisons and guide our speculation.

An architecture that question the reality

It seams to me that during the whole twentieth century, and still now, the discourse about the city is very much dominated by the glorification or the rejection of different ideas of city and of typology.

From the very beginning I understood that these praises or criticisms were not only related to objective qualities or problems of these types of built environment, but also to the meaning that these kinds of building assumed.

Some theorists have written that some typologies are wrong. Is it true? Or these judgments are just instrumental to propose a new vision of city and are used as a scapegoat hiding more complex social, economical and political problems?

In order to find an answer to these questions and prove my point that there is not such a thing as good or bad typologies per se, I decided to cast some light on the critiques that were addressed to three housing types that mostly represent the controversial discourse about typologies and the city from the 1960s till now: the tower block, the single family house and the perimeter block.

These three typologies correspond on three very different visions of how to dwell the city. These visions were criticized by some and prized by others. In my opinion these criticism are very dogmatic. Their goal is not to propose a complete analysis of pros and cons of these types, but as I have already said to present them in an instrumental way in order to propose a new idea of city.

Therefore, the understanding of these criticisms becomes very interesting not for the purpose of recognizing who is right or who is wrong in the debate, but in order to raise some important questions about problems and implications of the different typologies. Questions that allow us -architects and planners-, to be more critical and to give us some point of reflection in order to question the reality.

One of the most passionate and long-lasting debate of the twentieth century is the discussion about the modernist planning and the modernist typology of the tower block.

In this debate, in my opinion it is interesting to refer to Jane Jacobs’s theories and especially her book The death and life of great American cities. A book that violently attacked the modernist way of planning
and that had a great influence in the postmodern conception of the city.

In her book, Jacobs underlined the importance of the street as a space of social interaction brutally criticizing the modernist plans in which the street was seen only as a place for movement.

This criticism, underlined what is for me one of the crucial problems of the modernist typologies, the weak or even missing relation with the street.

However, even though the modernist architecture and planning have several critical points, it is too simplistic to stigmatize the modern movement as Jacobs and postmodern architects and theorists do.

The modernist planning, in fact, developed ideas for rebuilding cities devastated by the war, for improving the infrastructure systems, to build public schools and other public amenities, to house many people with very big budget’s restrictions, and, even though some projects turn out to be great failure other became success.

Furthermore, as Harvey wrote, in these projects that were highly criticized and stigmatized as distopian as the project of Pruitt-Igoe in Saint Louise, “the social conditions were much more at the heart of the problem than pure architectural form”\(^4\).

I totally agree with Harvey, the main causes of failure of these projects were not architectural problems but other issues, such as: lack of maintenance, lack of social mix and high concentration of people with social problems.

This tradition of blaming the buildings and their typology for social ills is still supported by many politicians, architects and planners, on both sides of the Atlantic.

In name of this tradition, right after the Parisian riots in the fall of 2005, the municipality of the French capital decided that in order to reduce the social problems that were characterizing the suburbs and in order to prevent other insurrections, was necessary to destroy the modernist social housing complexes.

The French architects Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal strongly opposed to this idea. They claim that blaming the tower blocks of creating social problems was wrong. They argued that the solution of destroying these buildings and rebuilt new social housing would have been very expensive, would have created a lot of displacement and would have cancelled a whole layer of history.

Lacaton and Vassal proved their statements and their famous motto “Never destroy, never divide or replace, always add, change and use” in the publication of a book, Plus\(^5\), and in 2011 with project of renovation of Bois-le-Prêtre tower in Paris.

In this project the French architects showed how with a renovation these buildings can re-become functional good-quality living environment and how the bad image that characterize them can be changed. They proved that the typology is not the problem, and most importantly demonstrate the political power of architecture, and the importance of being critical of the current established solutions in order to find new answers.\(^6\)

An other kind of built environment and of typology that are largely accused to be the cause of several social problems is the sprawl, and one of its founding elements: the single family house.

Sprawl in the last decades, and still now, was blamed for every sort of problem, from health to social ills. Many of these issues are important, especially the great environmental footprint of this type of development, however not every types of single family house neighborhoods are the same.

In fact, as Edward W. Soja writes: “sprawl is no longer what it used to be”. What we call sprawl is now often served by efficient lines of public transport, is more dense and less monofunctional than some decades
ago. Sprawl is changed and as Soja underlines, even Los Angeles, the sprawling city by definition, is now become the most densely populated urbanized area in the United States.\textsuperscript{7}

Many theorist and planners that blame the sprawl and the single-family houses so strongly, see as a solution the return to the city; however, as Robert Bruegmann writes in his Sprawl: a compact history: “gentrification at the center and sprawl at the edge have been flipsides of the same coin.”\textsuperscript{8}

In fact, in recent years due to a greater attention to the beautification of the city center fueled by the hard competition between cities to attract tourists, new businesses and inhabitants, the city center is becoming less mixed both functionally and socially. The city centers are becoming more specialized as business or commercial center loosing resident, and mainly young single professional and the wealthy class inhabit them since the lower classes and the middle-class families cannot afford them anymore. As Bruegmann adds: “In a typical paradoxical situation, no matter how much the new, more affluent residents profess to like the ‘gritty’ urban character of the place, so different in their minds from the subdivision of the far suburbs, what makes the neighborhood attractive today are less the things that are actually traditionally urban but those that are not. The most important of these are sharply lowered population densities, fewer poor residents, less manufacturing activity, and the things that the Lower East Side finally shares with the suburbs: reliable plumbing, supermarkets with good produce, and a substantial cohort of middle-class residents.”\textsuperscript{9}

In the postmodern struggle against modernist towers and sprawling suburbs the solution was found not only in a ‘return to the city’ but also in the creation of new neighborhoods designed using typologies typical of the old city: town houses, row houses and perimeter blocks.

One of the first neighborhoods in Amsterdam in which this theory was experimented is the Eastern Harbor District, a district created reconverting some artificial islands and peninsulas that were formerly part of the port of the Dutch capital. The inspiration from old models is visible both in the urban plan and in the building’s typologies that are inspired for the case of Java Island by the palaces of the Amsterdam 17th century ring of inner canals and for the peninsulas of Borneo and Sporenburg by the houses of the neighborhood of Jordaan.\textsuperscript{10}

The typologies of this expansion of the city are urban and the density are comparable with the one of the inner city, However, in this neighborhood the idea of creating ‘urbanity’, the ultimate goal of the theory of the ‘compact city’, failed.

Bernard Hulsman in an article about the Eastern Harbor District explained its failure making a parallel between the Vinex districts and the EHD underling that even though the density in the EHD is 3 times higher than in a Vinex district, and the former is way nearer to the city center than the latter, both are characterized by a uniformity of function, emphasized residential use, and a retail that is condensed in a shopping mall with big chain-shops.\textsuperscript{11}

A new development crate in the name of the ‘compact city’, which managed to create more a sense of ‘urbanity’ is the newly built IJburg. This neighborhood was created on four artificial islands in the north-east of the city of Amsterdam, a project completed only in 2014 but envisioned already by Van den Broek and Bakema in the mid 1960s.\textsuperscript{12}

The urban plan of Haveneiland, the biggest, most dense and ‘urban’ island of IJburg is a simple grid made mainly by rectangular-shape perimeter-blocks of around 90 per 180 meters, a similar size of the blocks that forms the Amsterdam’s canal belt. The dwelling density in this neighborhood is very high, and has its climax around its main axis with typology of 6 to 8 story-high apartment building. The urban density has a light decrease on the north fringe of the island.
were some apartment blocks stand next to some sequences of row houses.

The attention given to the design of the street, to the research of a human scale, of the permeability of the urban fabric as well as the visual permeably of the ground floor is great and seems to reflect many of the elements and the characteristic that were underlined by many architects and theorist -such as: Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl and Allan Jacobs- that promoting the ‘urban life’ wrote about public space and movement in the city.

In an article about IJburg13, Baumschlager Eberle architects explain how in this new neighborhood the topic of sustainability is addressed in a very peculiar way, taking inspiration on the sustainability of ancient buildings of the city center. Buildings that are very solid but that can easily allow change of function and in this way will be able to be used for many years.

This concept of adaptability is one of the main quality that John Montgomery describe as one of the 12 physical conditions for making a city14, that John Habrachen theorized in its definition of ‘Open Buildings’15 and that Richard Sennett defined as one of the most important aspect of his concept of the ‘Open City’. Sennett in it’s theory underline the inevitable change of function of the buildings in the city. For this reason the American scholar conclude that the buildings should not be over-determined and that “the form and the function need to be lightly connected if not actually divorced”16 to allow more easily change of function and guarantee an ever-changing use of this buildings.

We are living in the post-modern society, a society where due to very complex global phenomena and extremely fast technological changes is seams not possible to find new answer and to change anything. I don’t think this is true. I think that especially in this condition of uncertainty where people feel powerless we need to search new answers, re-engage with social, economical and environmental issues. We cannot retreat ourselves in pure aesthetic speculation.

To try to understand more of the complexity of the reality and in order to engage with the project of architecture, in my opinion is interesting to confront different theories, and to confront them with the built environment, the places where we lived and that we experienced.

I think that the importance of the architectural discipline should be searched in what Pier Vittorio Aureli calls the ‘autonomy of the project’ “the possibility of architectural thought to propose an alternative idea of the city rather than simply confirming its existing conditions.”17

Only ‘questioning the reality’, as for example did Lacaton and Vassal in their project of Bois-le-Prêtre Tower, architecture can evolve and can find new answers to new and old questions.

16. Richard Sennett, “The open city” (The understanding society lecture series, Centre for research in the arts, social sciences and humanities, University of Cambridge, Cambridge UK, February 21, 2013)
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Fragment
meeting place

The piazza, the emblem of public space, become a center where different activity meets. It gives a sense of hierarchy and importance that will make this space become a landmark, not through the use of iconic building, but through the creation of a iconic space.
I studied parks that were familiar to me in order to understand how the built environment was reacting to the park and the opposite.
Volkspark am Weinbergweg
Berlin

Gorlitzer park
Berlin

parco Santa Chiara
Trento
The block that I designed is the result of reflection and use of different typologies and a study on the transition between its different parts (park-piazza-Metra station-street-alley-public building and private building).
Program
The idea designing a school is the result of the preliminary analysis on the city of Chicago in which the bad public school system one of the main causes of inequality. The idea of choose to design a vocational school is due to three main reasons:

**manufacturing tradition of the area**

**manufacturing still an opportunity**

**interesting outcome in the area**
Schools are often impenetrable islands
SOME PARTS OF THE SCHOOL CAN BE OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

-use the structure not only in the teaching hours
-use the interesting output of the vocational school

big LIBRARY

serving the school but also the whole neighborhood
Library
Library

why a library is South Side?

bridge between the school and the neighborhood

can be used by everyone

one of the last remaining cultural services

change to become again center of knowledge
Library need to be reinvented

Why?

digitalization

budget cuts

middle class highly educated orientation

How?

focus on their users ‘from collection to connection’

create networks with other public institutions

become a socio-cultural hybrid platform

become a meeting place
1° PART OF MY ‘STRATEGY OF RESISTANCE’

THIS SHIFT FROM ‘COLLECTION’ TO ‘CONNECTION’

“The Library will be needed even if we abandoned the books merely because it brings people together in the pursuit of knowledge.” (Edwards 2009 xii)
2° PART OF MY ‘STRATEGY OF RESISTANCE’

RESEARCH IDEA OF FLEXIBILITY

flexibility to adapt to different uses, users, change of thechnology function and needs

3 PARTS OF THE BUILDING

↓

3 IDEAS OF FLEXIBILITY
I The vocational school

Flexibility of the industrial building.
Free plan with movable partitions
II The Interior street
interface between the library and the school

Flexibility of the street.
Unprogrammed space that allow appropriation.
III The Library

Divestity of spaces and atmospheres.
The three parts

The vocational school, the interior street and the library.

A collage of the three references Highland Park Ford Plant in Detroit, Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milano and the Bank of England in London.
plans
Building
LIBRARY

DIVERSITY OF SPACES

- DIFFERENT ATMOSPHERE
- DIFFERENT LIGHTS
- DIFFERENT VIEWS
- DIFFERENT CLIMATE
DIVERSITY OF SPACES MEANS FLEXIBILITY

WHY?

- EVERYBODY CAN FIND ITS OWN ‘SPOT’

- POSSIBILITY TO ALLOCATE DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS AND CHANGE THE FUNCTION AND THE USE OF THE SPACE IN THE FUTURE
DIVERSITY OF SPACES MEANS FLEXIBILITY

HOW IS ACHIEVED?
1. SPATIAL STUDIES
2. CLIMATE STUDIES
3. ATMOSPHERIC STUDIES
spatial studies
climatic studies
atmospheric studies
The block that I designed is the result of reflection and use of different typologies and a study on the transition between its different parts (park-piazza-Metra station-street-alley-public building and private building).
STRUCTURE OF THE FIRST TOWER OF BOXES
ROOF DETAIL: SECTION EAST-WEST

ROOF DETAIL: SECTION NORTH-SOUTH
in-between
Zone
Box
a facade that is not only
the facade of a building
but also the facade of the
piazza and the facade of
the park
EAST AND NORTH FACADES
WEST AND SOUTH FACADES
FACADE DETAIL
Conclusion
MAIN THEME OF MY RESEARCH

THE PUBLIC SPACE

THE PUBLIC BUILDING

ONE OF THE MOST ‘PUBLIC’ INSTITUTION: THE LIBRARY

MASTERPLAN → PARK

FRAGMENT → PIAZZA - SCHOOL

BUILDING → LIBRARY

DETAIL → FACADE
THE LIBRARY

-HOW CAN THE LIBRARY STILL BE IMPORTANT?

-HOW CAN THIS INSTITUTION RESIST? (PUBLIC BUDGET CUTS, NEW MEDIA)

-WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT TO TAKE IN CONSIDERATION IN THE DESIGN OF A LIBRARY? AND HOW THESE ASPECT CAN BE INTERPRETED IN THE DESIGN?
MULTI-SCALE APPROACH
VERY IMPORTANT

DIFFERENCE FROM
ARCHITECTURE AND MERE
BUILDING IS WHEN THE
PROJECT IS NOT ONLY
DESIGN BUT HAS INSIDE A
REFLECTION ON THE CITY.