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The Image of the architecture in the City

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Abstract

The city is built over time on the stratification of events and transformations, that define its distinctive aspect. During this time, some monumental buildings have become a symbol of the city, able to give them a meaningful image that remains in time. Urban theories of the '60s have identified in the large scale architecture one of the main elements for the construction of the city image. The authors of these theories, even if they share the bond with the city of Florence, come to different interpretations of the urban image.

In 1960, Kevin Lynch published "The Image of the City", which would have become a milestone for urban space perception theory. In his text the image of the city is identified with the result of a process of interaction between the urban scene and the observer, who develops his perception according to his own direct experience of space, his own personal disposition and culture.

By focusing on a subjective perception, the building of an urban image can considerably change from one observer to the other and, at the same time, it is not immediately attributable to a canonical representation, but to a topological map.

Lynch tries to reconstruct a collective image of the city, starting from a mental framework that a large part of the population carries with them, detecting some socially recognized variances.

Therefore, perception takes a relevant role with relation to the city and its image ability, which he defines as "the form, the color or the disposition

which facilitate the creation of vividly detected, powerfully structured, highly functional environmental images" (Lynch, 1964). From this statement it seems clear that the elements which contribute to the creation of the image of the city are varied and their detection can only happen if they can convey a clear and readable identity.

The city gives itself to the eye of the observers through signs and elements that make it a memorable subject matter. Moving around and finding one's bearings with confidence in the body of the city allows to establish a relationship with the places and, it also unveils the potential of its being iconically representable, and, for this reason, transmittable in its appearance.

The relationship between the form of the city and its image is analytically clearly stated by the breakdown of its elements: PATHS, EDGES, DISTRICTS, NODES and LANDMARK. (Lynch, 1964) The author's theory explains that these five elements, if taken singularly

do not allow for a representation of an image of the city; they have to be analyzed and superimposed: this way the form characteristics cooperate to the making of the image of the city.

A few years later, in 1966, Aldo Rossi, formulated his urban theory, with the book *L'Architettura della Città*, in which the author addresses the theme and which can be summarized in this statement: "The city, which is the subject of this book, is here to be intended as an architecture. Talking about architecture I do not only refer to the visible image of the city and to the totality of its architectures; but rather of architecture as construction. I refer to the building up of the city in the course of time" (Rossi, 1999).

This statement by the author clearly defines his approach to the discipline and studies on the city which are totally distinct from Lynch's, since the former interprets the reading and representation of the urban space, not as a perceptive experience, but through an inquisitive action to detect its constructive essence.

In his renowned essay Aldo Rossi reformulates the city as proposed by the modernist thought and by the CIAM also restoring themes often considered as outdated such as: memory and monumental character.

The theory articulated by Aldo Rossi in this text is based on three main concepts:

1. The city is made up of parts, which can be brought back to autonomous facts and they evolve in time, thus the city is constantly changing.

2. The parts of the city called urban fragments are the so called urban facts, of which a principle of individuality can be established. They are the product of a community and each one of them is the result of a decision that has taken into account the full complexity of the city. He called the parts of the city, urban fragments and so these constitute his theory of "individuality of urban facts".

3. The "theory of permanence, through which Aldo Rossi investigates the role of the old buildings inside the city. Having survived through the Second World War, they appear to Aldo Rossi as a dramatic dimension, since they evoke "a past we can still experience". The city grows, and it has to do so, on the foundations built by a collective memory and by the primordial idea which remains in its urban facts and its monuments: "the city for its own sake" (Rossi, 1999).

The theories exposed in the works of both Kevin Lynch and Aldo Rossi, outline an idea of the city that is somewhat different from the one formulated by modern thought, which dominated in the first half of the 20th Century, falling into the functionalist trend.

Kevin Lynch puts man at the centre of the urban system, i.e. the observer who is able to find his bearings inside the space, clearly and readably structured according to the interrelation among the five elements, as described in his text.

The result is a very physical, absolutely concrete, kind of city, in which the relationship among the buildings, the distances among them and the role of some strategic elements, like nodes and landmarks, become central to the creation of an enjoyable and well organized urban environment.

Aldo Rossi's city develops itself starting from the physical entities too, the so called urban facts, which make up the essence of the city and of life inside of it. "[...] architecture is an essential part of man; it is its own construction. Architecture is a fixed scene on human happenings, [...]" (Rossi, 1999).

In order to express this, Rossi resorts to a number of existing cases such as, the Palazzo della Ragione of Padua, to give you an example (Garbin, 2014).

It is interesting how both authors see Firenze as an example of their theoretical views, although being

set on different postulates. Kevin Lynch sees the capital of Tuscany as a model of figurability and readability (Lynch, 1964), as the images evoked by the city in the casual observer or in the citizen can be brought back to the ideal city.

The city is identified in its natural aspect, among the hills "in a mutual visual relationship", and from it, the dome of the Duomo stands out, sided by its steeple, making it "an orientation point" from every part of the city, but also visible from outside the city for miles and miles. This steeple is the symbol of Florence (Lynch, 1964). Brunelleschi's dome works in Florence's system as a landmark and at the same time as a node, since the lanes and streets all come together to the square facing the Duomo, which is the centre of the city's economic and social life.

In the introduction of "The Architecture of the City", Aldo Rossi cites Firenze, though a "concrete city" (Rossi, 1999), as the place where the memory of its past is ever present, and so are the values that overlap on the substance of the city, in its physical character, enhancing its understanding and its experience. Aldo Rossi welcomes Lynch's contribution, who was his contemporary, by confirming the empirical importance of the way in which men find their bearings and move inside the city; yet, after a first reading of the essay, from the point of view of the Italian author Lynch's theory of the city may appear as shallow and rather unsatisfying. Actually, the real essence of the urban substance lies above all in its history.

Monuments, fixed points in urban dynamics, become a fundamental element in Aldo Rossi's understanding. We can thus affirm that monuments are the human artifacts par excellence, since they are the centre of social life and through their persistence they embody a city's shared system of values. They make the distant

past become present through the coexistence of history and memory.

Although Lynch aims at the creation of the image of the city, through appearance, whereas Rossi deals with the historical-constructive essence, both find a common ground in the monument, as a constituent value in order to build an image of the city.

Still in the 60s, right in Firenze, groups like Superstudio and Archizoom, who were the protagonists of the so called Radical Architecture, start formulating their theoretical provocations about the condition of the city, ironically exacerbating monument value of architecture in the building of new dystopian scenarios and putting "an end to the idea of classical modernity" (Pettena, 1996).

The city is not scrutinized through analytical or perceptive studies, to reveal its appearance or its essence, but through graphical experiments trying to capture its transcendent nature. In the images produced by Superstudio, the city and architecture are not seen as construction art, tangible and factual works, but as shapes of thought, able to offer theoretical and figurative solutions to the issue of the relationship among men, the environment and the built landscape (Gargiani R, Lampariello B. 2010).

The image of the city is built through significant architectural superimpositions which take a territorial dimension, aiming to become global. The fact that the photomontages are made on the portraits of urban landscapes, cut out from magazines and published books, leaves out the possibility of a direct experience of the places involved in their project. The urban space and its monumental peculiarities, as landmarks of the place, are seen as already existing representations, in which the layers of new signs, characterized by pure forms, exalt their figurative value, generating visual

suggestions and existential questions. The first project by Superstudio, that would bring them to international fame, is the "Monumento Continuo" (Superstudio, Mastrigli G, 2015), which proposes an architectural model of total urbanization: a titanic modular wall that repeats itself, always the same, in every region of the planet, from New York to Rome, even reaching Mecca. Obviously, it was an ironical project, to make a statement: "un'architettura tutta ugualmente emergente in un unico ambiente continuo: la terra resa omogenea dalla tecnica, dalla cultura e da tutti gli altri imperialismi" (Superstudio, 2016). This was presented by a storyboard for a movie storyboard and photomontages and posters, also published on Casabella.

With their written and conceptual architecture, Superstudio show a feature that produces visions and sceneries connected to the condition of impasse of contemporary life. Large scale architecture not only has a conceptual value, but also becomes a figurative device which allows to question oneself on the future of the city.

An example are the photomontages that accompany the texts on the rescue of Italian historic centres (Superstudio, 2016).

The urban theories developed by radical groups are not structured according to scientific postulates, as those by Lynch and Rossi, but through visual suggestions and conceptual elaborations, which create a new imaginary of the city as a critique and the drift of modernist views.

The evocative force of these images deeply influenced the young architect Rem Koolhaas, who, in those years, met Adolfo Natalini, in Firenze and that later would conceive his dissertation thesis at the Architectural Association of London with a project named EXODUS.

In this work he exposed his critique to both the urban outcomes of modernist functionalism and to the neo-avant-garde myth of mass utopia, culminating into the proposal of a visionary, hedonistic megastructure – indebted with the contemporary research by the Italian radical group Superstudio – controversially superimposed to the texture of the metropolis of London, as an oasis of individual desires, where the citizens are free to take refuge (Koolhaas, R., Mau, B., 1995).

The image of the existing city is almost deleted by the overlapping of a new city that transfigures it and, at the same time, exalts it. The city is inextricably tied to its drifting away or to its rebirth. The body of the city is marked by the greatness of the new monument of itself and it acquires a new awareness. From this excess of imaginative prediction that impresses a form in the city, Rem Koolhaas develops his urban theory, that will be the scientific subject matter of his book "Delirious New York", a representation of the city that does not originate from the urban structure, but from its architectures and, in particular, from the psychology of those who built them.

In the words of the architect, in his book: "New York has managed to produce a gridlock culture. It has managed to express the technology of the fantastic, an ideal that has little to do with the rules of architectural composition, yet, it manages to produce building manufactures which are certainly not less interesting than those coming from the academies, old or new, and from our architecture schools" (Koolhaas, R., 2001).

In this text, Rem Koolhaas, makes an analytical survey of the various neighborhoods of the city through a psychological X-ray of those who conceived and built them. He provides an approach to the creation of the image of the city, beginning from its more hidden aspects, revealing its



Fig1 / Alluvione di Firenze

Source / http://www.literary.it/occhio/dati/degl_innocenti/a_45_anni_dallalluvione.html



Fig2 / Canaletto, Capriccio con edifici palladiani 1756-1759. Source / http://www.artearti.net/magazine/articolo/VICENZA_E_PALLADIO_un_architettura_a_colori/

most obscure and mysterious nature. The Dutch architect affirms that the architectural grid of the city should not be analysed through the study of the buildings which constitute it, but by investigating on the psychology of the people who built them. That so called "manhattanism" that takes life

in fantasy and then, at a later stage, in reality, where the urban space becomes fascinating and conquering by virtue of its disorder, finally flowing into hallucination.

His urban studies, which originate from the breakdown into parts and



Fig3 / Boston 1955, from *Perceptual Form of the City*, research project by Kevin Lynch. Photographer Nishan Bichajian
 Source / <https://failedarchitecture.com/kevin-lynch-and-the-gps-predicting-the-culture-of-navigation-in-1960/>



Fig4 / *Superstudio, Salvataggi di centri storici italiani (Italia vostra)*, Firenze, 1972.
 Source / <https://www.maxxi.art/en/events/superstudio-50/>

neighborhoods, exalt the imaginative and delirious aspect of the buildings that make up the city, where the absence of any scheduled planning becomes the real drive for the development of the urban scenery. The building takes on an importance that goes beyond the form of the city itself and that will find in the theory of Bigness its highest celebration.

The author states that the generic city, freed from its centrality, in which no identity or writing is recognizable (and also its image), is therefore incomprehensible, yet this "does not mean that there is no writing; it could just be that we have developed a new kind of illiteracy, or a new kind of blindness" (Koolhaas, R., 2006). Therefore, he redrafts a theory, that



Fig5 / OMA-Rem Koolhaas, CCTV headquarters, Pechino 2002-12
 Source / <https://www.archdaily.com/775327/av-monographs-178-179-rem-koolhaas/56114a1be58eacad21000157-av-monographs-178-179-rem-koolhaas-image>

starting from these conditions of widespread vagueness and from the impossibility of detection of an identity code, substantiates itself through the concept of Bigness: "Bigness no longer needs the city, it competes with the city, it represents the city, it pre-empt the city, or better still, it is the city" (Koolhaas, R., 2006).

Therefore, the image of the city appears so entirely assimilated inside an enclosure which rewrites itself and rebuilds itself, revealing the immanent character of the urban space and taking significance on the becoming of the city.

For all these authors, the value taken on by significant buildings in creating the image of the city can be thus summarized:

Landmark for Lynch: apparent image of the city.

Monument for Rossi: essential image of the city.

Megastructure for Superstudio: transcendent image of the city.

Bigness for Koolhaas: Immanent image of the city.

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