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OPEN FRAME- WORKS. – SOME STEPS TOWARDS URBAN DESIGN

Looking at recent European practices in urban design means looking at its role in urban strategies, its position between different themes, its shape according to these needs; and means asking oneself how all these things have changed during the last few years.

In a period when every intervention is a sign laid on an already stratified territory, something is still indubitable: the relationship between different scales is more and more becoming a real design material, even though not always explicitly.

On one hand, urban designs are more than before defined as local answers to large-scale themes: areas seen as a crux where different urban needs can be found and must be solved; sites designated for new strategic functions are like cards in the developers hands played in the competition between cities; districts to be transformed to capture international events. At the same time, re-qualification and not expansion still represents the most frequent task; and urban analysis, historical development process investigations, economical and social studies have been called up to a new role, mainly in interventions or plans for historical centres, not only in Italy, but also in the rest of Europe.

In the process of translating all these large frame suggestions into architectural and urban choices, sometimes something gets missed or is underestimated. It is almost as if the project could derive from a simple description of a context, for instance, just like a linguistic copy of the surroundings; or on the contrary, a re-proposition of abstract models, thought for places that are totally different (a simple example: how many times big Asian or North American urban agglomerations have been used as the only rhetorical reference to define "the urban condition", often to exalt chaos as the only possible answer, and even to present a single building in a small village?). Sometimes other misconceptions are still detectable: the confusion between large-scale effects and big dimensions, as if complexity could be a consequence of a large architectural project that pretends to contain the entire city in a single gesture. And sometimes some limits derive from a lack of consciousness of the non-linear process that must be followed in contemporary conditions; as if every development could be defined in advance in a sort of "urban forecast" that conceives a local intervention only as the last detail of a large-scale frame, coming when everything else (functions, roles, connections) has been already decided.

In some of the most interesting recent European projects, a different awareness is evident. These proposals, in fact, focus on a specific site, but are also able to offer themselves as a suggestion of towns' development and their new role; we would say, like a word as part of a sentence. They are neither a sterile nostalgia for a lost past nor a "trendy" invention of fragments, where they cannot be found; because contemporary towns are recognizably different from the historical ones but, nevertheless, fragments are just one possible description of the contemporary town's condition. Not the only one, and not always necessary, especially in small contexts.

Today this awareness seems to be the one of carrying the most interesting suggestions for a renewed idea of urban design. It becomes more and more clear that no simplified solution can be accepted. Copying the past, importing abstract models (no matter whether "fragmented" or "synthetic"), or looking always for a personal linguistic coherence are just different ways to do the same thing: to look for a ready answer, and not to settle one's account with the real meaning of architects' and planners' job, that is first of all looking for a new point of view on a site by transforming it answering a social demand. This task doesn't simply mean looking for a new empirism, but wondering where a general answer can be given, and when a specific one must be found.

It's an usual challenge for the architectural and urban planning practice, since when the differences between Modern and Contemporary have been focused on. But it can also represent a test for the traditional idea of separation between different disciplines. Without any confusion – but more than before – it seems necessary to be able to cross scales in different ways; not only from general to particular, but also in an opposite sense, in order to find a new and flexible hierarchy of choices.

A simple observation with an immediate consequence. Urban quality depends not only on the quality of singular architectural objects; but also on the relationship between the objects and their context.

Therefore the real challenge isn't defining how a new intervention can be shaped; but it is how the site and the rest of the town may change as a response to that intervention; it's always a renewed and re-invented connective system, that uses existing references and new ones. All these links with the context – urban form, functions and images – cannot be found unless working in a specific, but always different, site (a morphological, historical, social site). In any case, they must be a design material; a way to ask the site right questions, wondering how every single area's renewal can be useful to diffuse its effects.

In this frame, some design themes must be considered in a new perspective: sustainability should be considered not only in an environmental sense, but in a wider and social one, as democratic participation in transforming the cities; accessibility and connections between different parts; and mixture of spaces and functions, searching complexity of uses and ways of living the city, to give the city a freedom of choice. Focusing on these topics could mean re-inventing the complexity of European historical town centres, even though in different conditions.

In this frame it is not useful looking at urban design as only made of finished and defined projects.

It is the suggestion of a process, more than a design that is important: a process based on clear proposals, that starts from a point of view of the town's existing situation and on its possible transformation. A transformation that cannot only be identified with the description of the context; it must also be deeply founded on it and on its collective evaluation.

Urban development can derive from master plans, urban designs, single architectural or infrastructural interventions, sometimes independent one from each other and even spontaneous (especially thinking about different countries, like Mediterranean ones). In this process, continuity and breaks can have the same value, depending on their spatial and temporal collocation.

More than ever, the city's present conditions require ways to link all these transformations together in a general vision. Not rigid and concluded choices (a misleading ideal), but a flexible framework resulting from a collective process, made of projects but also discussions, aiming to define the right modifications of previous urban order.

In a word, urban design makes sense only if it's linked to a general idea about a possible town's re-qualification, allowing a new idea on urban development to spring out.

Thus, architectural competitions, undestood as a chance to compare and test different ideas, are fundamental. Chances where projects aren't a definitive order, but can be seen as a reasonable base from which to discuss a possible urban view.

This is one of the most challenging themes clearly suggested by the Europan 8 programme for Kirkenes.