

Architectural Diversity in Contemporary Contexts

The Role of Design between Time and Scale

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Abstract

The essay reflects on the relationship between diversity in architectural design, by observing design strategies and projects implemented in two cities, different but interesting for the actions undertaken: Milan (Italy) and Ahmedabad (India).

Starting from a broader debate on the conditions in which our planet is located and, on the fragilities, and emergencies that increasingly affect cities and their inhabitants, the text tries to reflect on the design strategies necessary to act in uncertain and fragile contexts. Opening up a critical discussion focused on two key issues of the contemporary project: the ability and capacity to ‘adapt’ to events and, therefore, to be resilient and the role of ‘time’ in architecture.

The first part of this text defines a critical premise with respect to the current situation and the necessity to modify strategies and projects in relation to the instability and lack of care that characterize contemporary territories. In the second part, two very different design experiences are described and analyzed which, however, raise important questions about the role of architectural design in the contemporary conditions. Milan and Ahmedabad have been chosen because they could give different answers at urban and architectural scale, to the questions about the relationship between time, design and adaptation or resilience processes. Milan has chosen to show its ‘new’ image through iconic objects, creating new landmarks in the city; Ahmedabad works on the dichotomy between informality and permanence, showing how punctual and

flexible projects could accommodate the needs of fragile territories, constantly evolving.

Introduction

Integration, *mixité* and diversity represent possible future research lines in architectural design; today, more than ever, we are witnessing to complex and radical phenomena, which show how the conditions of the contemporary contexts have drastically changed. There is a change on different levels: a climatic, environmental, social change, but also a change in political and economic conditions; architectural design must face new forms of emergency that mark the beginning of a new era in which we are living: the *Anthropocene*.

In the continuous change of contemporary contexts, architectural design must rediscover languages and tools to act in transitory and informal places; today, we could say that architecture must become *resilient*, it must be able to act in uncertain times but, above all, it must be able to adapt, thus modifying its state and redefining links and synergies with landscapes and architectures.

In an exhibition hosted at MAST Foundation in Bologna (Italy), called “*Anthropocene*”¹, the scenario illustrates a world subject to violent mutations, where waste and fragments, derived both from industrial productions and from the exaggerated abuse of resources of our planet, represent the design materials for a possible (and near) future. It is a future that has already, and partially, become past; it is a *past* because without the ability to imagine new design strategies, oriented and sustainable, there will be no possible or imaginable life. The idea to define the context – urban and environmental – where we live is a recent process, but useful to understand the speed of transformations that



Figure 1. Norcia: the plaza, the heart of the city, August 2019. Giulia Setti

affect our planet and, at the same time, the design tools that could be considered.

«(...) the presence of geological signals of Anthropocene in very recent layers it makes possible to define comparisons in equivalent terms with the climate change signals preserved in the most ancient strata, which makes it possible to measure the anthropic impact on a planetary scale of time and space and not only as a phenomenon of human history or ecology» (Hackett et al. 2018, 41).

Architectural Diversity

How architecture could organize itself in front of radical changes that challenge its role, but also its survival as a discipline?

In the immediate future, architecture will have to develop important forms and processes of *adaptation*, not only to different places but also, and above all, to adverse environmental and climatic conditions, or uncertain social and political issues that tell about scenarios no longer fixed and immutable, as it happened in the past, but of a fluid environment in continuous, and rapid, evolution. Therefore, the ability to adapt implies a change of state in the subject, in a territory and/or in an architecture, and recalls the ability to change continuously, innovating and establishing, where it is possible, a new balance after a sudden shock or an unexpected event.

The essay will describe, through some paradigmatic case studies, the role of contemporary design in situations marked by diversity (social, cultural, political) and, at the same time, of a *mixture* of traditions and architectural forms. The critical exploration will understand how architectural design could work, today, according to different scales and times; integrating specific projects on a larger scale, highlighting how diversity – and its preservation – represents a resource for contemporary design.

It has been said that architectural design could no longer remain indifferent to forms of change that are taking place nowadays; before reflecting on the selected case studies, it seems significant to highlight how the change in the duration of projects has raised some significant questions. Firstly, if we look more closely at some contexts, like the Italian one, but also the European and international one, we could see how these areas are increasingly affected by unpredictable and violent events. Extreme climatic events, shocks caused by earthquakes, floods or, unfortunately, by extensive conflicts, show how the necessity to adapt in architectural design processes could no longer be considered secondary.

Italy, like many other places, is a country that has been able to rebuild itself time and again following disasters like earthquakes and floods,

recurring cyclically after World War Two. Today, it must face process of reconstruction, maintenance and care of buildings and infrastructures both at urban and territorial scale; precisely because the inability to learn from the past – and from catastrophic events that have affected it – has highlighted the lack of a shared memory and knowledge of projects and actions useful in case of emergency, as well as the lack of care for a vulnerable and fragile territory, but extremely rich in its diversity.

At the same time, however, there is a lack in the definition of strategies able to support decisions and design actions; if the emergency represents an unpredictable state, therefore, by definition, capable of catching unprepared, it is from the *past* that we should learn practices and projects useful to intervene, with rationality, downstream of sudden events and shocks.

For this reason, architectural design could try to build forms of adaptation, changing and innovating, to intervene in unstable territories, marked by violence of various aspects. Adaptation implies a radical, strong and precise design action; capable of constructing strategies to protect and care, through actions not only linked to emergency and post-emergency processes but capable of acting preventively, safeguarding territories, buildings and inhabitants.

The ability to adapt is often accompanied by the concept – often abused – of *resilience*, or the ability to modify, partially, to overcome sudden changes; being resilient is a property of architecture where it adapts according to different times and, therefore, changes its state. Resilience is, at the same time, a property of the inhabitants in different places who, tenaciously, manage to act through strategies and projects in the post-emergency phases, remaining in the same places affected by shocks thanks to synergistic relationships with those contexts.

The design experiences described below do not tell of contexts in an emergency conditions, from an environmental or climatic point of view, nor that these are projects that intervene downstream of sudden catastrophes; on the contrary, these studies have been carried out in a *peace condition*, to reflect on how architectural design could act in different times and scales in contemporary places, be able to show a resilient approach to transformations.

The essay will describe two cities, different and incomparable, on one side Milan (Italy), and its force of change, on the other Ahmedabad (India), a metropolis in the East, marked by a



Figure 2. Norcia, fragility. Giulia Setti

continuous cyclic nature of uses – and projects – that constantly change the city and its public spaces. The essay does not want to compare, nor find pre-packaged solutions, but to reflect on how architecture could act, today, and which forms of inclusion or segregation could be implemented.

Milan: redefining a new identity

In Milan, the recent projects of transformation have radically changed the image of the city, on one hand giving back spaces that have been abandoned and forgotten for long time, on the other, generating strong processes of gentrification and removal of intrinsic identity in those neighbourhoods.

The projects of Porta Nuova, City Life or the Feltrinelli Foundation represent, in many aspects, the power of solid real estate actions, aimed at taking the best from the glossy image of contemporary architecture, at the same time they pose crucial questions on how the surrounding architectures could be integrated within the completed transformations.

The long-time of architectural projects in Milan highlights the latent *tensions* that these operations could trigger. Architecture has acted with the transparent objective to transform the urban and architectural form of these places. This has generated deep contradictions, but



Figure 3. Milan, Porta Nuova project and Gae Aulenti plaza: pseudo public-space, 2017. Ivan Ashkinadze.



Figure 4. Ahmedabad, stratification between informality and permanence, 2018. Ottavio Pedretti

interesting results: firstly, it highlighted the necessity of public spaces, of how strong is the idea of sharing and finding ourselves in the open spaces of cities. But it also showed, with extreme frankness, the economic and financial power that moved these operations: private clients who wanted to show themselves and open a window on the city.

This led to different consequences in the neighborhoods marked by the aforementioned projects; if we consider the case of Porta Nuova and Gae Aulenti plaza this reflection may appear clearer; the traditional and historical city of the Isola district has been, in fact, separated from the new projects, the sparkling new architectures of Gae Aulenti plaza, including the tower designed by Cesar Pelli and the Vertical Forest by Stefano Boeri no longer look back and show a wound between past and future.

Integration and *diversity* of architectural objects that characterize Porta Nuova project are the icon of a fundamental step in the design development; a semantic passage, after all, that gives back to architecture –in all its plastic and expressive strength – the role of undisputed protagonist of the scene.

The relationship between the new projects in Milan and the extremely precarious situation that Italian (and European) territory shows emphasizes that there is a critical distance between the precise actions, on a small scale, that would be necessary for the safeguard of the country and the great transformations taking place, icons of the global city that builds its public showcase.

Porta Nuova project shows how a progressive separation between new architectural objects, which look at a certain typology of social class, and the traditional city neighborhood was outlined. These are conditions where cultural and social diversity are gradually removed, where the slow time of the historical city is almost completely lost. Porta Nuova and City Life show, in their own way, a different form of integration, in the use and construction of public spaces, in that common ground that is the background for informal and spontaneous activities that populate the open spaces of the described projects.

In the case of City Life, and of the three towers built by Daniel Libeskind, Arata Isozaki and Zaha Hadid (2004 – ongoing), the scale of the entire project contrasts with a city that was, up to that point, mostly horizontal. A change in the spatiality of Milan, in its third dimension, which necessarily places the attention on the lost

integration between new and old; finding and copying common images in many international cities, now sadly homogenized.

Time, project and life of these architectures will give some answers about the success of these interventions and their future impact on the city and its inhabitants. Perhaps, even the towers of City Life could, tomorrow, adapt to sudden changes, and become, in turn, resilient.

Ahmedabad: a continuous space

The second place, subject of this study, is instead the city of Ahmedabad, capital of the state of Gujarat, located in northwest of India: *why do we focus on Ahmedabad?*

Ahmedabad represents, for different reasons, a fertile ground for theoretical and design experimentation²; it is a laboratory of projects and ways of transforming the architectural space that appear very interesting in understanding the processes of integration between diversity and forms of emergency or recovery, at different scales. Ahmedabad, like many other cities in the Indian context, presents a strong and radical overlap between informality and permanence of places, architectures and spaces; an informality that is not only shown in the extended development of temporary settlements, but which is also seen in the uses and forms that *public* or *collective* space assumes.

It becomes even more interesting if we could understand how architectural design, in this context, unequivocally loses its ability to be lasting, to go through extended times. Furthermore, designing in the context of Ahmedabad means working in a fluid context, always subject to new and unpredictable needs; it is a project that, even when it does not encounter emergencies, always works in a precarious state, never clearly defined.

In Ahmedabad, the classic places of the city community, such as squares, streets, are not uniquely defined, but cyclically changing; therefore, they show a strong capacity to be resilient, as well as to adapt effectively to changing conditions.

Manek Chowk Square, the heart of Ahmedabad Old City that is part of the Unesco World Heritage, is a melting pot of different cultures, activities and spaces; *diversity* is the emblem of this paradigmatic place in the life of the city. It is the perfect stage for a succession of different activities. It is a place for grazing and foraging the sacred cows of the city; later, the commercial activities gradually started to operate and the central area hosted parking areas. The clearest



Figure 5. Ahmedabad, Manek Chowk Square: diversity as a design resource. CEPT University Winter School 2015.

and most fascinating change occurs during the evening hours: on the fronts that delimit the square, food kiosks open and transform the central area into an open-air restaurant. The extensive use is a fundamental characteristic of the Indian public space that wants to intercept the most diverse categories of users in few, crucial, places.

Although in a condition of uncertain stability, the Indian context shows how the design of space, as well as of buildings, must take into account a series of complex variables, linked both to the dynamics of uses and traditions, and rooted in the image of a sacred, monumental architecture – the one of representative and religious buildings – which contrasts with a more uncertain architecture – usually destined to public life. Architectural design is called to respond to conditions of diversity, but also of vulnerability. To interventions of large scale and urban impact that persist in peripheral areas closest to the city, measured interventions must be countered on a local scale, working both on the design of flexible structures (pavilions, shelters) that could accommodate collective activities and, at the same time, change radically according to different necessity.

Architectural Oppositions

Milan and Ahmedabad present opposing and different responses which, however, try to reflect on the role of the contemporary architectural design called to intervene in uncertain contexts, sometimes in search of new landmarks, new icons, sometimes in search of precise and flexible interventions in contexts facing rapid transformation.

It opens a reflection on the relationship between diversity/integration, time and scale of architecture. Milan chooses the massive scale to transform the city with the inclusion of iconic and powerful architectural objects; it chooses to bet on the iconic strength of author's project, giving up, partially, to a more measured relationship with its context and with the existing urban and architectural space.

Ahmedabad does not choose, but represents a flow of actions, projects, strategies that work by fragments, trying to intercept the variety of times, conditions and scales that the Indian context shows.

The diversity that emerges in this essay tells about how it is fundamental to develop a certain capacity for adaptation (to different contexts, conditions, policies and cultures) as a key design strategy in the contemporary imaginary. The

diversity of times and scales, involved in the project, is a resource, particularly in face of growing forms of emergency and uncertainty affecting our continent: it is a possible form of actions and interventions.

Endnotes

1. "Anthropocene. E. Burtynsky, J. Baichwal, N. De Pencier" is an exhibition curated by S. Hackett, A. Kunard, U. Stahel from 16 May 2019 to 05 January 2020, it has been shown at MAST Foundation, Bologna, Italy.
2. Since 2015, it has been established a cooperation between CEPT University (Ahmedabad) and Politecnico di Milano; this has brought to develop research and activities focused on transitory, diversity and understanding of public life and architectures.

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