Urban Architectures: a design inquiry

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Abstract

The contribution reformulates the field of Urban Design within the Architectural discourse, longing to enlighten almost hidden or forgotten narratives concerning the development of specific researches and works focusing on Urban Architectures. The design inquiry revolves around the related theoretical positions, basically entrusted to the architect's biographies, design experiences, and interlaced trajectories belonging to the cultural panorama of another Modern tradition. The selection of specific themes around urban architectures aims to engage a broader reflection and partially reconstruct a tree of references for a particular way of understanding and doing Architecture, which implies a critical continuity with the history of forms in constructing the built environment.

Keywords: Urban Architectures, Urban form, Architectural design, Architectural composition.

Introduction

Since the first codifications, Urban Design displays an ambiguous disciplinary field, an ensemble of diverse perspectives contributing to building its multifaceted statute. The Urban Design field, indeed, has been both associated to an intermediate design scale, in-between urbanism and architecture, focusing on rules and methods for urban construction (1); to a specific approach looking at the design of the open spaces as interlacing relations of voids and built masses (2); to a theoretical position addressing *architecture as a form of the city* (3). The last perspective, which speaks of urban design in terms of architectural composition, is difficult to state for several reasons. While, indeed, we are confident when dealing with open spaces through urban design strategies, less comfortable we are in recognizing artifacts that refer to the city as the *formal basin for architectural language*, exceeding the limits of their spatial construction to influence or subvert the meaning of the context, or the rules of urban form constructs. We consider them as exceptions, difficult to pigeonhole into a transferable knowledge, yet several examples show this subtle connection, grounding on uncertain roots.

The contribution, part of a more extensive ongoing research, is articulated in two parallel lanes. The first one embodies a broader reflection around almost hidden or forgotten narratives concerning the lateral trajectories of *another modern tradition* (de Solà Morales, 1989) and their influence on late modernism urban studies.

The second presents a morphological itinerary of compositional themes to clarify the meaning of Urban Architecture that the research identifies as a specific way of understanding and doing Architecture, which implies a critical continuity with the history of forms in the built environment.

A plural panorama

According to Bernard Huet, urban design - or the urban project - represents a critical reaction to the progressive conceptual division between the architectural and urbanistic spheres in the city's project. He proposed it «as an alternative to Urbanism that has been separated from Civic Art after the war,» so that «to claim the urban project is to claim the project against the plan» (Huet, 2003:38). Around this definition, several practices and research positions focused on the necessity to recover a link between Architecture and the City, identifying Urban Design as an intermediate scale, reactivating an interrupted dialogue, and prefiguring new design approaches. Huet further provides a more extensive definition: «the urban project does not define the envelope of buildings (...) but it consists of identifying four constitutive elements of the urban fabric: the blueprint (tracciato), the monumental hierarchies, the subdivision and finally the rules of spatial organization» (Huet, 1984:14).

Another approach relates to a critical publication entitled Urban Architectures, the second volume of The Harvard Architectural Review, edited in 1981: «Urban Architecture has been chosen as the theme of this volume […] because of the renewed and widespread concern with cities not only from architects, but also from historians, preservationists, and the public. The very diversity of recent developments in cities suggests the validity of the general concern. It is in the city that architects accept the challenges of incremental change, that preservationists discover and protect the riches of a culture, and that an increasingly sophisticated public reacquaints itself with the pleasure of urban life» (The Harvard Architecture Review, 1981: 5).

This hypothesis places the scope of the definition of Urban Architecture as an internal variation of the wider disciplinary field of Urban Design. According to that, the relevance of a new design approach emerges mainly around the central role of public open space (de Solà Morales, 1983) as an element of reconnection and necessary relationship between buildings, for defining coherent and appropriate rules in the construction, or reconstruction, of urban parts. The open extent of the term and the substantial overlapping with Urban Design is also present in another explanation recently offered by Robert Cowan. In the volume The Dictionary of Urbanism, he precisely defines the category Urban Architecture, within an A-Z index of disciplinary emerging keywords, as the design of buildings within the urban context or the creation of urban parts and fabrics. Accordingly, the role of the design arises from the possibility to consider the building and the urban space as a whole (Cowan, 2005).

This general consideration can be understood within a framework of solid interdependence between architecture and the construction of the city, as also recently stated by Franco Purini reflecting on the modern Italian tradition:

«The Modern movement separated Architecture from the city, while the Italian tradition, the Italian theoretical tradition, found in the interdependence of these terms a cornerstone of the culture of the project. The city consists of architectures and the architectures as a whole prefigure the city. It was the modern re-edition of the Albertian idea of the relationship between Architecture and City. When Alberti argued that the city is a large house and the home is a small city, it supported this profound connection and was also unfathomable, but necessary because there is a constant dialogue between city and architecture. This dialogue is sometimes mysterious and challenging but undoubtedly essential to living as genuinely human» (Purini, 2020).

The substantial ambiguity about the characters and meanings of urban design stays as a background presence along the intense period of seminal discussion during the 1980s. That is when diverse voices attempt to circumscribe this field and translate theoretical positions onto operational implications. According to the Spanish architect and theorist Manuel de Solà Morales, the possibility of defining an architectural design as an urban project is due to the (com)presence of five characteristics: the ability to extend the effects and reverberation of the (architectural) project beyond the spatial and volumetric limits of the object itself; a certain complexity of the functional program; the recognizability of an intermediate scale and time phasing; the presence of the public engagement; finally a «voluntarily undertaken commitment to adopt urban architecture, regardless of the architecture of the buildings» (de Solà Morales, 1989: 14).

The last feature identified by de Solà Morales interests the point of view proposed by the present contribution. It consists of observing a specific architectural design approach to urban design, placed in Urban Architecture, independent by the specific typological and functional attributes. This observation shifts the central point of discussion on the possibility to define an urban project from the internal perspective of the architectural design.

Methodology

Urban Architecture refers to an elusive meaning which, although it appears with continuity in the work of some architects from the twentieth century to today, defines ambiguous artifacts and challenging exceptions to be framed in our disciplinary field. The proposed contribution attempts to reconsider these fragmentary narratives, through a double articulation. The first focuses on reconstructing the reference framework, starting from the meaning of Urban Heritage and its interpretations along the XX century.

The second point of view concerns a design inquiry on compositional themes that aspire to partial definitions of the architectural features of such artifacts. In other words, diachronic and comparative visual frames are

a collection of architectures as references to four (urban) design topics. They refer to: settlement geometries and positioning, transitions, anomalies of scale and gigantisms, facades. Through these visual collections, the attempt is to approach possible morphological itineraries of architectures that recognizable contribute to the Urban Architectures, architectures that move from a constant dialogue with the urban forms.

Another modern tradition: the heritage of the city through two XX century narratives
Heritage presupposes the awareness of an open dialogue between the pre-existing built context and the design process aimed at its transformation. Thus, on the one hand, it recognizes a pre-existing formal order and, on the other, the need for its continuous re-signification through the project:

«Modification in architecture means nothing more than the recognition of characteristics and qualities in reality and their transformation into a new form of reality. Basically, it is neither more nor less than the constant renewal of the forms of thought and real situations.» (Ungers, 1984: 28)

At the beginning of the XX century, the imaginary athletic ring of the Modern saw various traditions parading in distinct lanes that would merge, in a more or less direct way, in the codification of a new language. Max Dudok, Pieter Oud and Hendrik Peter Berlage in The Netherlands, Kay Otto Fisker and Carl Petersen in Denmark, Sigur Leverents and Gunnar Asplund are just some of the protagonists of another tradition of the Modern who «treat the city as a field open to new architecture without that the latter never lose its connotation as an urban structuring tool» (de Solà Morales, 1989:8). Accordingly, two important publications, such as that on Hegemann's Civic Art (1922) and Sitte's treatise (1889), somehow clashed on the theoretical premises and operating methods for another Modern, warning the danger of a definitive break between architectural design and urban construction. However, there are significant differences. If Sitte and Hegemann (Bohl, Lejeun 2009) work on a tradition affected by the more rigid settings of the Beaux-Arts, the exponents mentioned above focused on more innovative research of the Enlightenment regarding the morpho-typological codification of the city.

Another architectural research tradition considers the European and international research positions of various exponents of late modernism, such as Oswald Mathias Ungers, James Stirling, Aldo Rossi, John Heyduk, Saverio Muratori, and Ludovico Quaroni. Albeit with profound linguistic differences and theoretical approaches, they exposed the predominance of the city's role in architectural composition. Therefore, the idea of Heritage assumes a value of repertoire from which to draw, in a diachronic manner, the laws of spatial regulation and linguistic relationships. The reading and analysis of the urban phenomenon, free from historical and value judgments, «offers the opportunity to operate a series of montages taken up in projects, relationships and in the sketches, synchronizing temporally even distant architectures (...)» (Rossi, 1999: 12). By comparing these interpretations of the architectural project as an expression of an urban making, firmly and indissolubly anchored to the city, some characters emerge, sometimes unspoken, which refer to the

notion of history as material and of diachronic language, both contributing to the theoretical formulation of architecture as an expression of the collective action.

Conclusions. On Morphological routes

«I wanted to talk about this building rather than the city, which others can study, yet I realize that the two terms are inseparable.» (Rossi, 1986)

What are the compositional themes that architecture offers to the construction of the urban fact? What are the design characters of Urban Architectures? The contribution, grounded on the previous architectural review, identifies four features for defining urban architectures, that attempt a brief preliminary codification. A first feature about Urban Architectures implies the *positioning*, i.e., the physical relation architectural objects establish with the city through specific spatial settings and settlement geometries. A second feature relates to the presence of *transition elements*, i.e., the components of the architectural buildings that mediate the scale of the city to that of the building, referring to the creation of specific spatial sequences. For example, the use of porticos, and passaged that organize the ground level of the building as an open promenade, starting for instance from the Broletto's configuration of the *Palazzo della Ragione* and the Piazza Vecchia in Bergamo. The third feature relates to the anomalies of scales, elements that transpose the scale of architecture to the urban project. several architectural examples from the Italian urban tradition can be reported as the gigantic staircase of the *Duomo of San Giorgio* in Ragusa Ibla, or the urban basement of *Palazzo Consoli* and piazza Grande in Gubbio. Finally, the fourth relates to the façade composition as urban scene construction, as the *Angelico* of Giovanni Muzio (1942) demonstrates.

The contribution voluntarily chooses to work through the idea of Heritage as an operating method, and therefore transmissible in our disciplinary field precisely through its expressions, that is, the architectures themselves. It is a question of working on the syntaxes that build the design project starting from its urban value, and which for this reason must not be confused with the context as a given reference. Urban architecture wants to be a design model by re-establishing the meaning of Heritage, not as a catalogue of forms, but as an analogy, metaphor, and montage. It constructs an alternative perspective to the predominance of market-driven production rather than civic-inspired objectives for the architectural discourse.

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