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A Design Agenda for Rural Vulnerable Territories

By Alessandro Rocca

The concentration of people and resources in the metropolitan areas, in Italy as in Europe, provokes the weakness, the abandon and the decay of the rural territories. We are developing design theories and methodologies for intervene in these places introducing architectural elements which generate a strong upgrading in terms of centrality, accessibility, appeal, comfort, cultural identity. A new architecture, especially oriented to public facilities and open spaces, can change the course of the natural decay, and offer, to investors, inhabitants and stakeholders, a better perspective of a more sustainable and human friendly development.

Fragility as Agent of Innovation

“Designers are always understood as solving a problem. Artists, intellectuals, and writers are expected to ask questions, to make us hesitate, to see our world and ourselves differently for a moment, and therefore to think. Why not design as a way of asking questions? Why not design that produces thought-provoking hesitations in the routines of everyday life rather than simply servicing those routines? Why not design that encourages us to think? Design as an urgent companion species have become?” (Beatriz Colomina & Mark Wigley, *Are we human?*, Lars Müller, Zürich 2016/18)

In the last years, territorial fragilities and vulnerabilities became the central challenge and the common ground for many programs and actions which involve any physical transformation. In Italy, the ground is collapsing, in many sloping maritime and mountain areas, and modern infrastructures, such as highways and railways, are facing processes of obsolescence and decay, asking intervention of maintenance but also demanding the elaboration of a new way of thinking the relation with the territories, the countryside, the landscape.

What is fragility? It is “the quality of being easy to break” (Cambridge Dictionary); fragile means “a: easily broken or destroyed; b: constitutionally delicate: lacking in vigor” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). That is, fragile is something, or someone, which tend to evolve into a state of alteration, or to its destruction. Then, fragility means that the status quo is no more stable and it has to, or it is going to, change: this is a perspective that embodies destruction and regeneration, catastrophic and cathartic events, but also, and it is equally important, it suggests the possibility of an evolution towards a better status.

In other words, fragility can be assumed as a relevant factor of disruption, of collapse, but also innovation. Since that, it should be easy to come to the point that everything is vulnerable and fragile, but for the ones who study territorial transformations, it is convenient to imagine that we look at places, settlements and constructions where the levels of fragility have some

evidence, or where is ongoing a process of weakening, of “fragilization”, which is a threat, an attempt to forcibly change an existing state, a situation.

In the Italian context, fragility and vulnerability are very useful to define the weak condition of the underpopulated and abandoned villages and countryside on the Apennines, where agricultural activities are no more profitable, and where people prefer to leave their homes and fields to reach the coasts and the cities, looking for a modern and comfortable life. There is a large debate about the different strategies that could revitalize these regions, but, of course, there is no recipe to solve a problem that last from a century, at least, and that is now evolving along many different perspectives. Arts and crafts enterprises, biological agriculture, migrant hospitality, green tourism, accommodation for elderly people, are just some of the many ideas and projects which sometime success, in giving a new life to environments suffering of process of abandon and decay.

For us, the question is: how can architecture elaborate answers for these areas? How can we imagine a new future, new settlements, new facilities and lifestyles? How to give a promise of a better horizon, a vision of growth and health, of social and economic wellbeing?

In this frame, we want to test an option based of the effectuality of architectural design in transforming the environment, in giving new life and energy to these places, in establishing new points of quality, of attraction, of production. So, the goal is to define a set of tools that, in different conditions, can be used to reclaim and transform neglected, ruined, abandoned places.

In a way, we think that we can take out of the city some of its characters, in terms of density, of visual impact, of quality, of appeal. Our challenge is: how to express this intention in practical design terms. We can choose among so many references that we decide to go straight to a sample that, under many aspects, is a perfect representation of the city without the city, embodying all its symbolic and political elements without the real matter of it.

This sample, the inspirational model, is the Acropolis of Athens, maybe the most relevant architectural place, in Europe, and the clearest representation of how architecture can fix a centrality, a point of reference, for an entire territory (that, in this case, is the entire western civilization). Then, looking at the august acropolitan place, we can elaborate some guidelines that can be used to establish a program, a generic one, to be applied and developed in different situations.

The most important character of the Acropolis is that it is composed of three buildings that are completely different and specific, under any profile. The Propylaea, are the more urban of them, a building that is a gate, a point of transit from the wilderness of the mountain, located in the center of the city, and the monumental architectural compound on the top of it. The Erechteion is the more introflexed one, a complicated and stratified sum of parts, of different ages and destination, with a relatively low impact on the surrounding, with the exception of the sculptural presence of the Cariathidis. The third is the most iconic, the Parthenon, that is the landmark that keeps all buildings and space together and that represents the possibility that is relevant mostly for the effectiveness of the spatial relation with all that is around it.

Simplifying, as a programmatic act of design, these three buildings create a pattern, a model of settlement, that can be taken and repeated in whatever situation, in any place that needs a new centrality, new quality, new public space and architecture. We want to assume the

Acropolis as a model, to be applied to the recovery and the urban development of the rural depressed areas.

Driven design research, an experimental approach

We are developing this project on fragile territories through a driven design methodology of research, trying to establish clear processes and new tools which can work on the two lines: research and design. This effort is ongoing now at the doctoral program of Architectural Urban Interior Design (<http://www.auid.polimi.it>) at Politecnico di Milano. Doctoral research projects are expected, by definition, to comprise high quality academic work, independently developed; it is, however, through collaboration, the exchange of ideas and the sharing of experiences, that research projects are enriched – especially in a field as intensely diverse and informed by other disciplines, as it is architectural design. There is no doubt that design is more a technique - or an organized and flexible system of different techniques - than a science, and that it is difficult for it to fit into the parameters that many other, so called scientific, disciplines share without particular complexities.

For architecture, study, observation, recording and understanding of reality are always aimed at a construction that, however convincing, remains questionable, and based on elements that cannot be completely objectified and plainly communicated. The personal and creative aspect, which is the living core of design, turns out to be an irreducible obstacle to any scientific codification. Indeed, this ambiguous status of architectural design, its specificity, its interweaving of various implications with many different branches of knowledge - techniques, humanities, arts, social sciences - are the elements of its richness and uniqueness.

Looking at academic research in the field of architectural design, we meet, from the very beginning, deep insights, complicated questions and very few practical instructions and solutions. Some international organizations, such as the European Association of Architectural Education (EAAE), have tackled the topic on several occasions, and the best universities have sought to establish fruitful connections between design and research by elaborating formulas such as “research by design” and “research through design”. In our AUID doctoral program, we choose the “Design driven research” formula, which implies that research activities always stay in a close relation with design and that this relation can be managed through many different options.

Therefore, the carrying out of a doctoral program, if based on architectural design, must openly address these disciplinary problems, and it must clearly identify the topics that compete with it. The possible contiguities with historical, urban and technical studies should be explored with a positive inclusiveness but also treated with caution, to avoid research paths which drive far away from the focus of architectural design. How to avoid these ambiguities, it is something that cannot be told once and forever, and it is necessary that researchers in architectural design accept the challenge that every research must somehow design its own premises, motivations and disciplinary boundaries, just in the same way that every architectural project is being called upon to express, through its form, the reasons of the order through which it informs and regulates itself. As our field is characterized by fluid and recurrent issues, our discourse needs to be of a kind that self-determines its profile, balancing,

in a continuous oscillation, a process that combines learning by doing with a critical gaze, open to comparison and change.

Our program, through its seminars, cannot provide recipes that do not exist, but can give access to some tools indicated for a full awareness of the terms that each research project addresses, of the methods that can be developed and of the results that the research aims to achieve. Being AUID a founding partner of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership called CA2RE, we work in this doctoral network composed by the following higher education institutions: University of Ljubljana, Aarhus School of Architecture, KU Leuven of Ghent, Politecnico di Milano, TU Berlin, Cofac – Lusofona University of Porto, Hafencity University Hamburg, Norwegian University of Science and Technology of Trondheim, and TU Delft.

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