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Abstract

The architecture of theatre and the scenic urban space, which has always provided a venue for celebrations and been the scene for collective actions, essentially concerns those places that contain their theatricality in the architecture, like all those places whose shapes make the rituals of performance and the event possible by mimicking theatrical forms.

Keywords: urban space, theatrical scenery

Streszczenie

Artykuł o architekturze teatru i scenicznej przestrzeni urbanistycznej, która zawsze dostarczała scenarii dla świętowania i zbiorowych działań. Dotyczy miejsc, które charakteryzują się teatralnością. Miejsc, których kształty przez naśladowanie form teatralnych umożliwiają zaistnienie rytuałów przedstawień i wydarzeń.

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzeń urbanistyczna, sceneria teatralna

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1. Urban scenery and rediscovered architecture

The picture accompanying this essay represents urban scenery in a city that “is rising”, the piazza of a city that might be in the hills or overlooking the sea; it could be Trieste, Genoa or Marseilles, a Mediterranean European city. The scene illustrated consists of some *rediscovered works of architecture*, some of my own projects that are waiting to actually be built. Pet ideas and images, where the things dreamed up are mixed with favourite works of architecture. An urban scene that is presented therefore as a montage of projects, the prefiguration of an actual condition and the construction of an imaginary city. Hence, an *analogous city* represented by invented works of architecture, which are also realist. In this sense, the scenographic component of the urban space harks back to Serlio’s reflection on the theatrical nature of city architecture and its tragic and civic spirit.

However, it is architecture’s meaning as a *steady scene of human events* that this analogous city draws upon in its quest for sense and an image of reality. In accord with Aldo Rossi’s reflections, I think of the theme of the *analogous city* as a rational, fairly free theory of architecture, where all can choose their own cultural references, their own pet works of architecture, but where it is always and exclusively the works of architecture themselves that are the constants being researched, the only ones that can really be “rediscovered” and therefore remembered and reinvented. The “analogous city” idea allows understanding of what images of projects for our present and future cities are analogous to, and how to communicate this.

Theory and communication that are nonetheless expressed through a logical procedure, which makes it possible to abide by the principles and rules of tradition and the profession, but where the singularity of personal experience, which emerges through how things are chosen and combined in fresh ways, make the architectural project extraordinarily alive, raising expectations and human hopes. Images of rediscovered architecture expand the intelligibility of a work and mean that the tale can be read in several ways, including through the evocative value of elementary figures. This transcription into architecture that does not deny modernity in proposing new forms of use is nonetheless based on awareness of the value and richness of evocative forms taken from history.

In this sense, the urban scenery in this imagined city also represents a piece of city. In fact, pieces of city are proposed that are rooted in the built city and in the imagery it evokes. The attempt is to “construct useful beauty” and to propose a possible alternative to the existing city through the imagination. In fact, the projects were born as a vocation and a civic response to the problems posed by the contemporary city, beyond bureaucratic choices, and safe from fashions. In this respect, the “analogous city” idea proposes reflection on the relationship between construction technology and the memory of places.

What does contemporary architecture represent? What kinds of architecture characterise places?

The technological image, so fashionable in the contemporary communication panorama, seems to me quite insufficient to answer these questions. In fact, it “is not enduring” and demands ceaseless changes and adjustments, mandatory to continuously amaze people’s eyes, or, more exactly, to fool them, by gradually forcing them towards an ever-changing reality.

The unreal scenery of the urban spaces in a contemporary city, unlike the fixed or real scene of the analogous city, appears to propose continual interchangeable scenes, whose sole end seems to be that of satisfying a consumption of images as an end in itself. A consumption that does not reflect memory and therefore does not generate a future.

Hence, the consequence of this neurotic consumption of images is an emptying of the urban space's scenographic and representative mechanism. However, in spite of everything, the representational aspect of city architecture, in its steady scenery, seems to be holding out against the risk of disappearing. It is holding out because, as Shakespeare said, the still scene is profoundly human: *All the world's a stage*. The scenic aspect of the urban space also constitutes the conceptual nucleus in the reflections and projects of architects such as Palladio, Schinkel, Boullée or Adolf Loos, to recall but a few.

2. Urban space and theatrical scenery

In the painting titled *Procession of the True Cross*, currently on exhibit at the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, Gentile Bellini portrays one of the most important processions of the lagoon city's history and myth. It celebrates the liturgical display of one of the relics most treasured by the community, a fragment of the True Cross. The procession marches around Piazza San Marco, the definite and circumscribed space of the piazza is evoked by the front of San Marco Basilica standing in the upper part of the painting, there as the steady background of the religious and civil ritual.

As Denis Cosgrove wrote, Gentile Bellini regarded Piazza San Marco as "the theatre where the Venetian civil ritual was celebrated in its uniqueness. The state procession celebrating the Doge's enthronization and his bride's investiture or any other religious and civil festivity, used to march composedly all around the piazza, with costumes and symbols expressing the harmony of Venetian society and the faith in its perfection"[1, p. 82].

The theatrical metaphor Cosgrove used to describe the specific quality of Piazza San Marco as the main stage of the Venetian urban theatre is a testimony to the essential theatrical quality of the urban space. That vocation was splendidly described by Ludovico Zorzi in his writings about places and forms of Italian theatrical quality as the key to understanding urban architecture, and Italian urban architecture primarily, as a quality most peculiar to it and expression of a strong tradition: the Renaissance urban sceneries for instance have had quite a part in establishing the importance of collective spaces in which to celebrate the ritual of representation, whether it was religious or civil [3].

Such places – collective and theatrical – are needed to build a collective identity and effectively give that sense of belonging that only an official manifestation of community life in the theatre of one's own urban space could give. The architecture of the city is then mainly concerned with those spaces that make that representational ritual possible. So the architecture of the city, in permanent analogy with the architecture of the theatre – its fixity, its still scene – is the material scene where the collective action of everyday religious, civil social and mundane rituals takes place.

The certitude implied by the theatre's scenographic space, a character implied by the public collective urban space as well, tells us about the role played by architecture in making public spaces effective and significant, and the truth of Aldo Rossi's statement when he defines architecture as the steady scene of human events. The architecture of theatre has to be



scena urbana con architetture ritrovate
gino malacarne

III. 1. *Urban scenery with rediscovered architecture*, Gino Malacarne, 2004, in collaboration with Sandro Bortot

still and steady, the Roman scenic buildings were such, and so are our squares and collective spaces.

Collective memory is then tightly bound to urban sceneries because of their theatrical quality. Not all places suit and favour aggregation and the ceremonial representations coming with civil life the same way. Theatre is the medium that most effectively establishes a connection between architecture and human life events, and the medium that most brings architecture inside human life. There are at least two issues about the definition process of the theatrical space, two moments in its evolution. First comes the travelling mediaeval theatre tradition, that is, the theatre of religious and civil processions, a street theatre, enacting the eternal human comedy on real urban sceneries. Then comes the Renaissance renewal of theatre's practice and places, the rediscovery of classical texts and architecture, of the steady scenery of Roman theatre, which made attention shift from open air settings – squares and churchyards – to a more specific definition of the architecture of the theatre and to spaces especially conceived for theatrical displays. The influence urban space and theatrical scenery had on each other has been described by Sebastiano Serlio in the treatise *Regole generali dell'architettura* (General rules of architecture) where he also points out the relation between the three kinds of theatre – tragedy, comedy and satire – and the respective settings as it was according to Vitruvian tradition and the modification brought to it by Leon Battista Alberti. The tragic scenery is characterized by the dignified appearance of Renaissance buildings and by the profundity of perspective; the comic scene by late mediaeval buildings, while satire takes place in a natural setting. A deep awareness of the theatrical quality of urban architecture is still an empowering resource and a significant contribution to the construction process of the spaces of collective life.

In that urban theatrical dimension architecture – as in Bellini's painting – can still find a space of action and a representation.

3. Theatricality as project

I have always thought in more general terms of theatres, theatrical places and the architecture of the urban scenic space as places featuring their own architectural reality that recalls theatrical action (or the unfolding of events), even in the absence of an actual performance.

Hence, theatre architecture cannot help but be “still and immobile”, a theory corroborated by a great French actor and director's considerations on the nature of theatre, namely, Louis Jouvet. He was to turn the director's point of view on its head; it almost seems as if for him the performance counted for nothing, the only important thing being the architectural construction. “only the theatre as a building can give us a precise idea of what theatre is in essence, whether in Greece, Italy or France, in Vicenza, Parma or Orange, whether amphitheatres, arenas, or ancient and modern theatres; it is when one suddenly enters the deserted building and allows oneself to soak up the place's enigmatic emptiness that one can come close to an authentic idea of theatre (...). When the auditorium and the stage are lit, only then do the memories come flooding back of all the works that have been staged in that theatre and other particular theatres, and it is at this point that the generic idea of theatre vanishes and makes room for a more particular one related to the specific nature of the theatre one finds oneself in”. [2, p. 9–17]

From the considerations on the nature of the urban scenic space, and, more generally, on theatre architecture so marvellously recounted by Louis Jouvet, some issues arose that I made the basis of some of my projects, even when they were not actual theatre buildings but simply collective spaces and places. This interest in the architecture of theatre and the urban scenic space, which is part of a wider passion for city architecture, and that has always provided a venue for celebrations and the scene for collective actions, essentially concerns those places that contain their theatricality in the architecture, like all those places whose shapes make the rituals of performance and the event possible by mimicking theatrical forms.

The architecture of the urban scenic space is a theme that is present in my work. In the project for the Piazza della Libertà in the town of Cesena, whose motto was “steady scene”, the piazza was conceived as a meeting place but also as a space for celebrations, theatrical and musical events. The Loggia, the porticoed brick wall, the portico of the seventeenth-century *palazzo* and the apse of the Cathedral define an urban public space that is unitary, complex and recognizable, and also delimit a space that aims to be theatrical in the sense that it is open to performance, something that the project can only hope for but not actually determine. Alternatively, the Loggia can become a stage from which to watch events as well as a set scene for shows or life to take place on it. This is a fixed, immobile space that awaits the start of the performance, or life to happen inside it.

Urban scenery is a figure that recalls the mysterious and profound analogy between theatre and architecture, and that continues to recur in my research and in my work, as in the latest projects, part of an urban project: the major urban project for West Modena, the project for two residential blocks in Verona, the project for Piazzale Stanga and Via Venezia in Padua, and lastly the project for the Farini railway yards in Milan.

These projects seek to demonstrate that it is the urban project’s task to recover things and forms, above all, their weight, concreteness and substance, i.e. the authentic dimension of form, in opposition to the tendency to technological evanescence practised by the contemporary project, which has cancelled from our mind the solid reality of matter, replacing it with the fluid one of the media image.

I repeat, therefore, that awareness of this theatrical dimension of city architecture still constitutes, in my opinion, a possibility for architecture to contribute to the construction of places for collective life.

References

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