

Voices from Two Historical Identities Dwelling as a Matter of Being

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ABSTRACT

The following paragraphs are based on my personal experience of study and life between Italy and Albania and are going to 'use' the history of architecture in two different contexts: the first one is the physical context of the city. Historical architecture is a 'natural' presence in most of Italian cities. People's activities are very often conducted inside of buildings constructed five (or more) centuries ago. While in Albania the situation is very different. Historical architecture has a different weight and importance, and as a consequence a different impact in people's lives.

This leads to the second context: history of architecture as knowledge, as an object of study in architecture schools.

Some of the main questions are: what is the real use of studying history of architecture (starting from Greek architecture and crossing the following centuries until the contemporary times) in Albania? Is it possible to use DIRECTLY historical knowledge in contemporary design?

KEYWORDS: History of Architecture, Dwelling, Cultural Identity, Aesthetics, Body, Home, Landscape, Education.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper is meant to be a sort of echo of different VOICES. Each single paragraph represents one VOICE and does not have any "forced" relationship with the others. The historical and cultural differences of the considered contexts (Italy and Albania) do not allow a direct confrontation, which would be not only "useless" but also counter-productive. Different voices, instead, give the necessary freedom to reflect meanings based on the personal awareness and sensitivity of the reader.

2 A PLACE CALLED HOME

"Here you are at home, Knut."

These are the words that Ch. Norberg-Schulz extracts from a short-story of Tarjei Vesaas to introduce the idea of dwelling (Norberg-Schulz, 1984). Knut goes to the forest, where he had already been several times before, and finds himself within a sort of revelation: the forest "speaks" for the first time letting him know he was at home. We are in front of a specific place in a specific moment where something occurs showing a very deep meaning. The identity of the character acquires a certain form when he is able of

communicating with the place, through the movement of the wind through the leaves, the sound of the steps on the ground, the changing colors of the natural elements, the texture of each surface, the smell of the air. It is an aesthetic¹ perception of the environment.

Even considering the continuous process of change that these elements go through, there is still something permanent, something that makes the forest remain a forest; something that belonged to the fathers and will belong to the future generations. This is the gift of the place: the fact that it is perceived as belonging to a whole community, to a vast group of people living together for a long time in a certain piece of land. This sort of co-existence between man and place implies, as a natural consequence, an exchanging movement happening in two directions at the same time: from man towards the place, from the place towards man. It is through this bi-directional giving and taking that a “natural” relationship can be established.

The main “instrument” that builds everyday this relationship, from the most ancient times to nowadays is the **BODY**.

3 THE HISTORICAL BODY OF THE ITALIAN CITY

The form and the image of the city has always conditioned the form and image of the State and ethics in Italian history. Civilization, as a process of evolution of human beings, has had its most significant **PLACE** of concreteness in the cities. Squares, churches, streets, palaces in Italy are beautiful because they were born as places of meeting between people (Montanari, 2013). This sort of places of meeting cannot be created in a city without an ordered and well-planned **urban space**. All of us have a certain personal idea of what a center is. There might be a center of a circle, the center of another more complex geometric form, or the center of a city. The center of the city is obviously the first nucleus of the city, that special part where the first civic values appeared and gave form to a human settlement. The historical center of the city has always been the most important unit for the construction of the cultural identity of a place. If there is not a **CENTER** I can lose the sense of orientation at any time. In the historical center of the city I know that at some point the street will end into a square, in the square I will always find a church. After the square I will find another street. The principles of the urban design are **VISIBLE**. They repeat in this ongoing rhythm between a contraction and expansion of space that I, as a dweller of the place, can feel with my body and its senses.

4 UPON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EYE

When I walk through the streets of Florence for example, in the center of the city, I can clearly identify the presence of the gothic city, the Renaissance city, the Neo-Classical city etc. When Cosimo de' Medici decided to have a palace built for himself in the center of Florence, he knew he was erecting a new type of building, the first palace to embody the rising principles of a new era to be called Renaissance much later. I don't need to be an “expert” perfectly acquainted with the history of architecture to notice the differences in the urban texture. I just need to have a careful **EYE**.

Renaissance is the time when the **EYE** becomes the “leader” in the perception of the architectural space. Almost in every didactic textbook about Renaissance we can find the description of the panels that Filippo Brunelleschi used to codify the construction of the perspective view. From this moment on the perspective perception of a space will be the key to read Renaissance buildings, but also the general “obsession” of architects when thinking about forms and space in architectural or urban design.

Of course, it is thanks to the continuous row of columns in the Portico of SS. Annunziata Square or the “folding” walls of the church of Santo Spirito that the perspective effect becomes clear, but the eye is

¹ Aesthetics here is considered in its etymological meaning, coming from the greek Aisthenomai, to Feel through the senses.

not enough without the body. I need to walk along the portico or inside the nave of the church to understand the completeness of the building. It is by simply being somewhere with my whole body (not just the eyes) that I can enjoy the presence and the relationship that occurs between me (as a dweller) and the place. The ground (the place where my body is rooted), the line of the horizon (the “abode” of the eye) and the sky (the protection over my head) need to communicate without interruption. They make the “sacred trinity” of architecture.

5 LANDSCAPE

If we move our point of view at a bigger distance from the object of vision (the building, or the center of the city) we will enter in a much larger space of dwelling: the landscape. It is in the landscape where we can read at a bigger scale the passage between the ground – the horizon – the sky. A landscape which is transformed, influenced, improved or eventually damaged by man can be always defined as an anthropic landscape (Incerti, 2013). The presence of the human action is inevitable and unstoppable on the surface of this planet. This leads us again to a matter of “bodies”. From the very beginning of the theorized architecture Vitruvius described the birth of the first dwellings as the passage from the natural cave to the so called “primitive hut”. Much has been written upon the primitive hut as a founding archetype of the human history on Earth with an enlightening critical peak reached by Rykwert’s “On Adam’s House in Paradise”. It is still the body that feels (senses) the limitations and operates the change: the cave is felt as too dark and too closed for the well-being of the body-mind, so let us think of a different solution to be realized outside the cave. This is the FIRST conscious gesture towards the construction of an anthropic landscape.

In the case of the Italian cities the landscape is still something recognizable as Tuscan for example, or Apulian. From the skyline of a historical center it is possible to understand thanks to the “bodies” of the buildings (also buildings have bodies not only human beings) if we are talking about Florence or Rome or Venice.

The European Landscape Convention (adopted in Florence, 2000) states that “The landscape is part of the land, as perceived by local people or visitors, which evolves through time as a result of being acted upon by natural forces and human beings.” or furthermore “One of the major innovations of the European Landscape Convention is the definition of “landscape quality objectives”, meaning, for a specific landscape, the formulation by the competent authorities of the aspirations of the public with regard to the landscape features of their surroundings. No longer the preserve of experts, landscape is now a policy area in its own right” (Web -1). The intention is very clear: much is left to the way people perceive and build relationships with “their” landscapes, while dwelling in those landscapes. The first way of dwelling is, of course, the presence of the body inside a certain space.

6 THE BODY AS A FOUNDING ARCHETYPE

The Albanian cultural tradition offers a very clear example about the importance of the body in the definition of a culture. The castle of Rozafa in Shkodra is the “stone” representative of the legendary archetype. The legend narrates of a young woman who sacrifices her body (her life) to make possible the erection of the stone walls of the castle. She would only ask to have one hand and one breast outside the perimeter of the wall, in order to caress and feed her little child. The “power” of the legend goes on inside the actual walls of the castle, where the calcareous liquids bathing the stone are considered by the people to be the “ancient” milk that would feed the child. This is a very important moment in the cultural history of Albania. The continuation of life, the continuation of the “blood line” of a family is assured by the sacrifice of the body of the mother, of the woman. (Dingo, 2007) There is a deep change of paradigm that needs to be made in the passage from Italy to Albania. While in Italy (as in many other European countries) the preciousness and beauty of the buildings would represent the solidity and richness of the

State, in Albania the presence of the stone would allow the continuity of life, of the family upon the solidity and cure offered by the land of the fathers. The idea of State in Albania has historically been threatened by “external” enemies approaching from West or East. One possible way of survival to this precariousness (Dingo, 2007) of being as a civic organism is that of committing oneself (and die if necessary) to mother-earth. In Albanian language there are two words to refer to the homeland: “atdhe” (the land of the father) and “mëmëdhe” (the land of the mother). It is quite singular to find the comprehension of the land of birth as “father” and “mother” at the same time. Maybe this is one of the reasons why in this country the monument or the historical architecture in general is not felt as an inseparable part of the cultural baggage inherited by the past, but only as a presence on the territory. One day it exists, one other day it maybe not. It is the personal relationship that one has with a building that matters, not its representational and institutional function.

7 HEIDEGGER

I shall propose here an extract from the famous conference known by the name of “Building Dwelling Thinking” that Martin Heidegger held in 1951. No comment is needed. Words speak on their own.

At some point the philosopher talks about the meaning of the words starting with “building”: «The Old English and High German word for building, BUAN, means to DWELL... This signifies: to remain, to stay in place. The real meaning of the verb Bauen, namely, to Dwell, has been lost to us.... When we speak of dwelling we usually think of an activity that man performs alongside many other activities. We work here and dwell there. We do not merely dwell – that would be virtual inactivity – we practice a profession, we do business, we travel and lodge on the way, now here, now there. Bauen originally means to dwell... What then does ICH BIN mean? The old word bauen, to which the bin belongs, answers: ich bin, du bist mean: I DWELL, you DWELL. The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is Buan, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on earth as a mortal. It means to dwell.» (Heidegger, 1971).

8 HISTORICAL ARCHITECTURE IN ALBANIA

Albania has a particular relationship with the historical architecture. Even though the roots of the origins go back to an ancient past, little has been conserved of the past. Except for Berat and Gjirokastra² where the historical texture is more solid and still recognizable, showing the continuity between the centuries, in the rest of the country the situation is different. In Durrës, for example, the city I know better, you will not find public or private buildings of the XV century, not even of the following centuries, until the XX. And still Durrës was founded somewhere in the VII century BC. Some ruins of ancient architecture are present on the territory, which do not establish any visual or physical communication with the rest of the city. They are considered, even by the citizens, as mere “rests”, “remains” of a past they maybe don’t even know and don’t belong to. Quite comprehensible, if we consider that those ruins were built by “foreigners” who happened to rule over the country for some time.

There is also another cultural phenomenon that needs to be considered in order to have a clearer image of the issue: the historical state of *precariousness* that has characterized Albanian people through the centuries. The succession of wars (internal and external conflicts) and instability of the image of the “State” has caused a process of construction-deconstruction-reconstruction of the national identity features – a sort of permanent anxiety of being “annihilated” by a foreign power which was also carried on with astonishing power by the regime of Enver Hoxha (Guza, 2013).

² Today under the protection of Unesco.

This cultural phenomenon might have its reflection as well in architectural matters.

Many of the things that have been built in Albania in the last years are part of the concept of a “generic city” (Koolhaas, 2006) where shopping malls and multifunctional buildings hold the “crown”. But... what if we considered the precariousness of being from a creative point of view? While in the rest of Europe (the cultural context where actually Albania belongs to) the “crisis” of architectural form started somewhere after the industrial revolution, in Albania it is not even perceived as crisis, because it did not interrupt any specific process in the definition of a national architectural language.

A possible strategy would be: using the capacity of adaptation through change (that a state of precariousness can teach) as a potentiality for future development projects in order to create a dynamic identity. New architectural projects that truly match the needs of the people, projects that search solutions to the problems of the ALBANIAN cities, not general solutions that might suit anywhere else in the world.

After all (or before all) project means “throw forward” (from latin *pro-jectus*) and everything that is thrown forward need great responsibility of VISION and ACTION.

9 WHAT THEN WITH HISTORY

The name of this paragraph is obviously a provocation, which leads to an educational issue.

What then with History? What is the use we can make of the History of Architecture today?

The Italian school has an academic program that is divided in two sections basically: from ancient history to Enlightenment; from the Industrial Revolution to nowadays, with quite a heavy load of lecture-hours during the week. Older “formats” had an even more detailed program divided in three different periodizations. Of course the Italian “physical” context gives the possibility to visit and see with one’s own eyes the buildings illustrated in academic programs.

As much as I had the chance to observe, in Albania the same things (buildings, periods, architects) are mentioned in university programs though maybe not in the same level of details.

Why?

I guess, one of the answers is: knowledge. For the pure scope of knowledge. Which might be enough from an intellectual point of view; for the simple pleasure of knowing a part of human history.

Can this knowledge be used in contemporary design processes?

The answer can be articulated in two different levels. When we talk about restoration projects the knowledge of the history of a certain building can help the designer to better approach some of the problems that arise.

When we talk about new buildings the answer is different. The following words might be of some help: “When we say Classicism we mean a type of architecture that is all available to who wants to use it, an architecture that can be understood, appropriated, codified and re-codified, that is completely solid, reified, accessible. Classicism coincides with the humble intelligence of a “thought without an author”. Classicism, as a point of view towards form that is able of establishing a connection between words and forms, allows a rational discussion of the choices that determine form, and brings as a consequence a non-hierarchic organization of the places where architecture is produced. Classicism exposes the possibility of a collective work, where shared criteria allow to take decisions upon forms, without referring to inexpressible interior experiences – but without even pretending to eliminate them.” (Baukuh, 2012)³.

With Classicism here we can identify that specific way of “making” architectural forms that characterized human history from Ancient times to the beginning of the XX century, where the “big” change occurred as we all know. The condition today offers a double scenario.

1. Thinking of a possible way of “making” architecture that holds the same operative potentials of Classicism. If this is accepted then History of Architecture becomes a very important theoretical instrument.

³ The translation from the Italian text is mine.

2. Using History of Architecture as a knowledge instrument to forge the AESTHETICAL sensitivity of the future designers, as a way to recover the participation of all senses in the process of design (non-physical “senses” such as conscience, responsibility etc. are also considered here).

What about teaching History of Architecture in Albanian schools?

A very deep relationship with the local realities should be pondered. The architecture of the XX century (basically regime architecture) that has created one of the most important components of the “image of the cities” as we know them today needs to be analyzed from an “Albanian” point of view, continuing the precious research work already started by several Italian universities. The historical realities of Berat, Gjirokastra or even the ancient sites of Butrint, Apollonia etc. should be studied not only from a typological/archaeological point of view, but also from an anthropological point of view, trying to integrate the knowledge of the “object” with the cultural identity of the places and people.

10 CONCLUSIONS

There is no real conclusion to this paper. The intention was one of raising several questions, attempting possible answers while letting open the construction of the solutions. Solutions might be of a theoretical order but also of a practical one. If considered under a wide point of view the “voices” that have been exposed in the previous pages go under the same denominator of: DWELLING, as that fundamental condition of BEING in this planet as BUILDERS of architectonic realities. Both the Italian and Albanian contexts - so utterly different from a historical point view but so basically near from a geographical point of view – live in a moment of *crisis* when talking about architecture, which only means a moment of separation of a way of being from another (greek Krisis, separate, etimo.it). In Italian historical centers we notice a progressive commercialization campaign of the cultural historical-artistic heritage; it is the Era of the Exhibition Industry (or Big Events) where the artistic masterpieces are shown in a way to produce astonishing emotional effects upon the viewer which is treated as a child and not an adult, with a critic consistency of his own derived from the knowledge of the art work (Montanari, 2013). This peculiar viewer is one who loses the right to participate aesthetically to the artistic manifestation, because the “marketing” operations surrounding the single art-work reduce Art to an *aesthetization* of its condition, which has very often *anesthetic* effects due to the emptiness of significance it goes through. In Albania, on the other hand, we are living a process of construction of a new cultural identity, that ideally wants to get away from the “heritage” the totalitarian regime left behind, in search of a contemporary “place” to fit in.

There is one element that might reveal itself as the key to a possible way to follow: THOUGHT. It is thanks to the PRODUCTION OF THOUGHT as a creative process where knowledge dialogues with emotions that “new worlds” can arise. It might sound as a utopic or *démodé* conclusion, but in the end (or at the beginning) “...as soon as man GIVES THOUGHT to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer. Rightly considered and kept well in mind, it is the sole summons that calls mortals into their dwelling.” (Heidegger, 1971).

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