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Rome and the difficult task of being the capital

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Every university architecture department should be able to have books like this at their disposal to offer to student-architects who experience the city and the university at the same time, and who make the host city the first preparatory factor, the natural field of applied cognitive and design exercise. In this case the volume *Rome city of institutions, Urban strategies, plans, projects* (*Roma città delle istituzioni. Strategie urbane, piani, progetti*) edited by Andrea Bruschi and Paola Veronica Dell'Aira, Quodlibet 2022, on the release date “the last of twenty books dedicated by professors of the Department of Architecture and Design of SAPIENZA”, effectively transmits, through documentary analysis and argumentation, the meaning of the relationship between architecture and the city, between history and the phenomenology of urban becoming to which the project is called upon to contribute in the contemporaneity of having to prefigure as well as doing. The city is Rome, capital city of the State even if the title leaves this attribute implicit, already alluding to its difficult if not unresolved reification. Of course, if we look carefully at the complexity of the events carefully reconstructed and the feeling of frustration that often emerges in the various essays due to missed opportunities, one would think that the type of the capital city of a nation even before that of a state can be done with ease of intent only when we start from the blank slate, not only physical but also ideological-semantic, what Jefferson identifies as no one’s place and therefore belonging to all those who contribute to the birth of a nation. Only with those assumptions will a clear perspective appear to Pierre Charles L’Enfant and subsequent architects, and with the incipit of the Jeffersonian sketch, to design the city of Washington, the capital par excellence of the modern era, with structural and image coherence. Which also happens, although with greater difficulty, in the old cities of Europe, from Paris to London, from Madrid to St. Petersburg and then to Moscow, since they matured at most in five or six hundred years and therefore not entirely resistant to those processes of formal as well as functional restructuring of a re-foundation nature which imposes the capital role. But in the case of Rome, unique in the world, we have well over two thousand years of urban construction and, as Luca Porqueddu carefully reconstructs in his essay, the dense historical palimpsest of form and matter that characterizes it, starting from the radiocentric incipit of the origin, is very little open to

the uprooting imposed by new urban design logics which consequently, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, substantially confirm the centripetal densification of the ancient capital reiterated in the Caesaropapist one.

From here arise alternating considerations between renewed prefigurative impulses and the futility of efforts. Those of which Alessandra Capuano is aware when, in the presentation, she quotes a Ludovico Quaroni who with ironic fatalism speaks of “a possible sudden outburst which however has always been avoided, for centuries”, thus shifting the attention to the concreteness of liveability, of greenery, of archaeology, that is, of the right to be a city even before being a capital city.

On the other hand, the meticulous historical excursus on the role of the ministries in the development of Rome as a capital developed by Piero Ostilio Rossi, the dystonias in the relationship with the pre-existence told by Gian Paola Spirito in the first phase of the Risorgimento, with the support of an eloquent localization mapping created by Francesca Romana Castelli and Giovanni Rocco Cellini show a dramaturgy of interrupted, partial, occasional transformation, with great architecture that is as rhetorical as it is incapable of breaking the enveloping canvas of millennial Rome.

Paola Veronica Dell’Aira reminds us of this well also with respect to the second re-founding opportunity, that of fascist Rome, which was also incapable, beyond the imperial narrative, of determining an alternative structural design.

In a very different political and cultural context, the same attempt by the SDO in the 1960s, starting from the Pietralata district and the Tiburtina station according to an equipped alternative route to the radiocentric system, remained largely unimplemented and marked the retreat in the 1980s towards a plan of crown centrality, because in the meantime the city has expanded like wildfire and a single strong direction of polarization of the capital’s facilities no longer seems to hold, or perhaps does not respond to a broader and more distributed articulation of real estate expectations. There remain calls from many architects including Samonà, Portoghesi, Purini, Tange and many others but the design of a capital to be built definitively loses consistency, remaining the prevailing theme of a metropolis whose expansion has in the meantime accumulated significant delays in terms of formal, functional and infrastructure structure. It is no coincidence that Andrea Bruschi rightly allows himself to underline “the price of the short-sightedness, indolence and bad faith of those who governed this city” which however, to be honest, seems generally refractory to any attempt at coherent and incisive urban transformation policy. In short, the problem lies equally in the history of the civitas and the polis.

Thanks to the reform of Title V of the Constitution which drains directionality of the State established in the capital in favor of the Regions, Bruschi and others seem to definitively take note of a long phase of unimplemented attempts starting from the Unification of Italy, thus looking towards a decisive change of focusing on objectives and interpretative register, according to a project epistemology extended to other disciplines such as environmental sciences, sociology and urban psychology. This is what emerges from the Anello Verde project “between the railway system, environmental structure and regeneration based on the criteria of the liveability of the urban space without giving up elements of settlement strength of public interest, for research and culture” and of the eastern pole with particular reference at the Tiburtina – Pietralata node where the design demonstration,

supported by applied elaborations of the doctoral school in Architecture, Theories and Project and by degree theses, enters into the concreteness of the possible ambitions, without however falling into certain defeatist practices of “mending” rather than pseudo -environmental ones of “urban jungle”, rather through an architecture still aware of making, if not a capital, a real city.

However, this change in perspective will not prevent Rome, as Dell’Aira suggests, from interpreting the meaning of capital in a universal sense as in the case of Walter Tocci’s proposal for a Mediterranean Capital through a Permanent Euro-Mediterranean Forum (FERO) based on values, today more necessary than ever, bearers of “dialogue, diplomacy, interculture, solidarity”. A very different rhetoric, but no less important, of being capital.