

Costantino Patestos

From the diffused city to dispersion into the abandoned villages, or: the new solitude of the compact city

Abstract

The new SARS/Covid-19 pandemic did not bring to light any major defects in the compact city, but gave its detractors another opportunity to attack it by endorsing the accusation that its density makes it insanitary. But even were we to accept that diagnosis, we are currently unable to imagine what kind of new architecture could make the city secure against any pandemics, of whatever kind. What we can do, instead, is defend the idea of the historic city, counter the new problems we face of social inequality and housing, re-assert the central importance of public space, redesign the inner suburbs, and map out a new type of territorial polycentrism.

The great loser of the present pandemic has been populism; now is also the time to definitively unmask populism in architecture, with its much vaunted smart buildings and its vertical (or horizontal, or diagonal) forests.

Parole Chiave

Compact city — Urban life — Public space — Residential density — Territorial polycentrism

As a preface to the considerations that follow I hope I may be permitted to advance a hypothesis that I believe is almost a certainty: the new pandemic has not brought to light any major defects in the existing city and its architecture such as would necessitate radical structural changes¹. Certainly, the existing city requires therapeutic treatment but despite its ailments, it does not need to be actually *hospitalised*.

Historically, as the architecture of the city has developed, hygiene (Colomina 2019, 13-59) – has been one of its inherent functions; we should not forget, for instance, how a building typology of specifically rural origin, *the courtyard building*, was transmigrated from the country into the city as a cure for the insalubriousness of the *sickly* urban blocks that had originated in medieval times; since then, moreover, issues of urban health have in fact been the generators of new trends in response to pandemics and sanitary emergencies of which our own age's most direct experience, according to Beatriz Colomina, has been modern architecture.

But in the debate about an alternative way of living in the city that began after the official declaration that SARS/Covid-19 was a pandemic, almost all those contributing to it have avoided formulating actual design proposals that would have the ability to protect the health of our cities, limiting themselves instead to putting forward suggestions for what they assert would be improvements to the housing typologies to which we are accustomed – too often forgetting that in the construction process, there are key factors external to architectural design itself that play a determinant role. But even if we leave to one side the more ingenuous of these ideas (such as, for example, one-person lifts, public open spaces marked out with squared-off areas set one metre apart, wide benches to accom-



Fig. 1

Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Allegory of Bad Government*, 1338- 1339, fresco. Siena, Palazzo Pubblico, Sala della Pace.

modate families) there are plenty of other suggestions that do impinge on matters of design, narrowly defined. (Pica Ciamarra 2020).

From a reading of these various proposals a first question arises that should be addressed to those who suggest we need apartments with balconies as big as small parks, huge areas of glass looking out on nature or the monuments of the city centre, rooms for homeworking in every apartment (even though their numbers of potential users are in fact extremely small²) and living rooms with swimming pools. What kind of people do they think would live there? And how much of our social housing, how many council homes, and indeed how many privately owned high-rise apartment buildings would be able to act on the suggestion that they use their common areas for shared activities, for erecting rooftop nursery schools, organising spaces equipped for leisure-time uses, or for creating their own green roofs?

What is more, those who are currently proposing, in various ways, that we should supersede the compact city and its architecture³, are exploiting this new pandemic, on the one hand, as an alibi for seeking to replace familiar old ideas with carefully and ingratiatingly restyled new versions whose only purpose is to bamboozle frightened local authorities and city-dwellers into accepting them whilst, on the other hand, exhuming more or less picturesque proposals and naive simplifications: old pseudo-romantic digressions passed off as new ideas that it would not be wrong to think of as a new “neo-bucolic” architecture.

The vast majority of these proposals share a common denominator: the certainty that people must now be isolated from one another; buildings must be widely separated by “in between” interstitial spaces, repudiating the urban density that exists in our historic centres with the accusation that it is not sanitary.

So do they expect us (we partisans of the compact historic city) to confess the error of our ways and admit that Le Corbusier (some decades ago) was right and that our technology-obsessed friends of today are also correct when they propose that the quality of a new architecture based on sustainability depends on ensuring that there is a physical distance between buildings? I really think not.

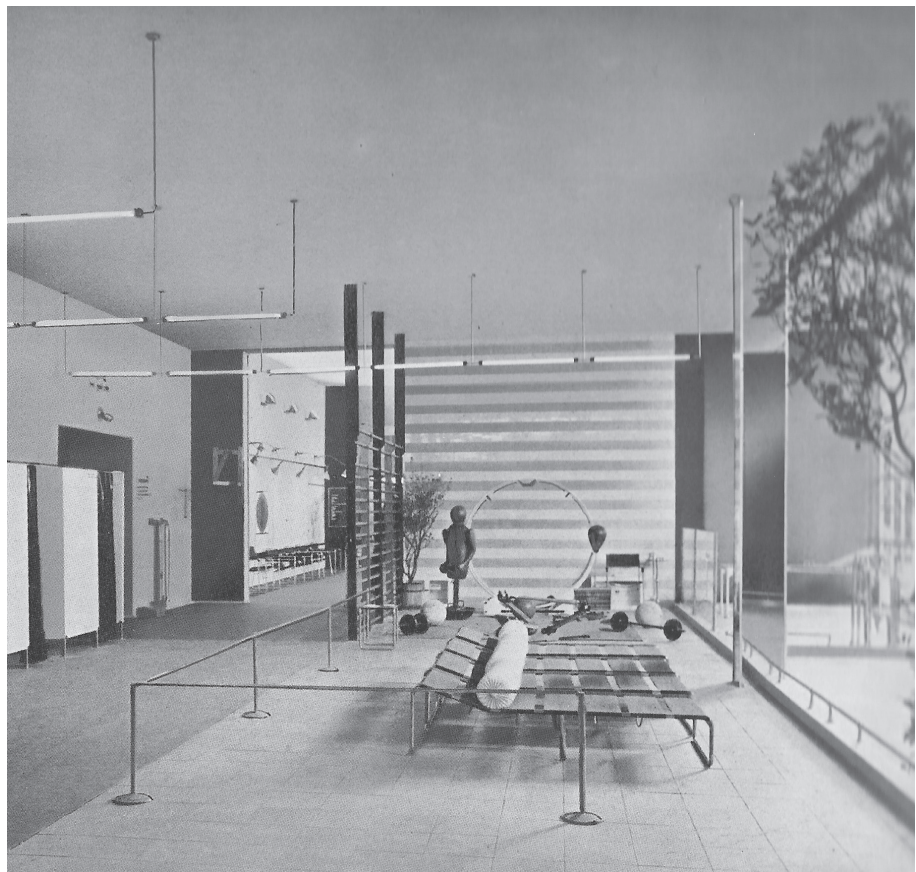
As has recently been confirmed, in fact, our actual experience of what we still call social housing shows that density of habitation (i.e. large scale *urban densification*) continues to be a decisive element in urban quality⁴. And yet on the other hand – and despite, for example, the not-to-be-forgotten, fundamentally failed experience of Giancarlo De Carlo’s so-

Fig. 2

Marcel Breuer, *Appartamento per Erwin Piscator*, camera da letto, Berlino, 1927

**Fig. 3**

Walter Gropius, *Community Lounge for a High-Rise Apartment Building*, Berlin, "Deutsche Bauausstellung" exhibition, 1931.



cial housing – it seems that in our own localised version of *participatory planning* we may be destined yet again to embark on another revival of the *neighbourhood unity* concept and a return to *advocacy planning*⁵ even though at the same time no-one is bothering to explain whether there might be any possible connection between strategies of that kind and the need to lock down our cities with high-security protection or how, in our struggle against the virus, decisions of that kind would be appropriate or would guarantee success.



Fig. 4
Good-for-You / Good for Col-
lective.
(<https://gehlpeople.com/>).

Referring to the exhortation of the American sociologist and literary critic Richard Sennett that we must “co-produce and work with open forms” (2018) we are seeing the conceptual evolution, so to speak, of the idea just mentioned. Being citizens in a metropolis where the ideas of *building* and *dwelling* contradict each other should not mean limiting ourselves to choosing whatever architectural and urban projects architects put before us, but developing them by ourselves on an equal footing with those architects or, even better perhaps, without any architects at all.

And despite the timeless German adage, which dates back to medieval times, assuring us that *Die Stadtluft macht dich frei* (the air of the city makes you free) we are also witnessing a proposal to abandon cities altogether and return to living in the villages: a way of facilitating *dispersion* and of *withdrawing from the urban*⁶, returning to live in Italy’s historic villages that were abandoned due to obvious reasons of structural stability; in that way the healthy, ever-hospitable countryside is repopulated and becomes the place for the next *Utopia* to emerge as part of a *Green New Deal* on a planetary scale.

Some others are saying – apparently – that other alternatives could consist of once again creating and cultivating urban allotments; extending to infinity the network of pedestrianised streets, or seeking out forgotten empty spaces and (without following any defined plan) transform them into communal places – once again rediscovering and re-proposing Aldo van Eyck’s by now played-out *playgrounds* paradigm.

Finally it is being suggested that in order to create voids (but not the *urban pauses* defined by Giuseppe Samonà) we should create cities that rely on long journeys and low densities; voids that are not collective places, not settings for social interaction, but makers of social distancing. A city, we are told, whose internal fabric would have the ability to “dilate” and breathe, and could weave a new relationship with the land.

Over time the consolidated concept of the historic city centre has been subjected to attacks of various kinds. Simplifying for the sake of clarity, our city in the here and now is no longer the complex and composite organism it used to be, but has been reduced (by the dominant building culture) to a multicoloured jumble which even at its best is nothing more than an assemblage of spectacular buildings that in every case are only an expression of personalism and indifferent to the context to which they ought to belong.

We can also record that there have been some attempts to purloin a number of characteristic urban building types (museums, libraries) and some of the city’s physical elements, for the purpose of creating a hyper-technological immateriality. In *18 Lessons of Quarantine Urbanism* Benjamin H. Bratton notes that:



Fig. 5
Restaurant in Amsterdam, after
the pandemic, 2020.

«We are uncomfortably adapting to psycho-geographies of isolation. In course we learn new vocabulary, such as “social distancing-compliant building design.” As amenities that were once known as places in the city are transformed now into apps and appliances inside the home, public space is evacuated and the “domestic” sphere becomes its own horizon». (Bratton 2020).

So what proactive role and what appropriate action can now be taken by a politically committed form of architectural and urban design, i.e., that is aware of its social role in the new sanitary conditions imposed on us by this new Covid-19 pandemic but in the certainty, whatever may happen, that the current situation is a temporary one that must be resisted, firstly, by an effective public health system that operates in a redesigned territorial system, and by a reforming administrative political will of good governance?

Perhaps this is a moment in which we are not able to think about, conceptualise, or develop the elements of an architecture that would be completely different from that we inherited from the great masters, or from architecture as it has evolved over time; perhaps in the here and now we are not ready to define precisely, for example, new residential building types that would need to be completely different from those in which we are now living. Even those who are currently experimenting with such ideas are limiting themselves to reworking examples they have extracted from a particular modernist epic, and particular experiences that are concerned with the common spaces in large residential buildings. Broadly speaking the same can be said of the work being done on new types of spaces for work and education, and increasing in scale to include the design of public open space.

But when it comes to types of building like cemeteries or hospitals, perhaps now things may indeed be done differently. For some time hospitals have become debased to the status of “health factories”⁷ and this seems to me like a significant point at which to note that there is certain new interest, on the part of some authoritative specialists, in returning to pavilion hospitals: a typology that was abandoned much too recklessly⁸.

In order for this to be a contribution to delineating the perspectives that are now being disclosed for architectural and urban design, I think I should mention, *inter alia*:

* Defending the idea of the historic, compact city and ordinary architecture

against the architecture-as-spectacle that has dominated the world panorama of design in recent decades.

- * Countering the old and new inequality, and the unacceptable housing problems that go along with it; the social regression we are experiencing; the effect of the politics of the dominant (neo) liberalism, its *gig economy* and, importantly for us architects, its way of *understanding the city and its architecture and in general, the territory as a whole*.
- * Redesigning the inner peripheries of the city and promoting a new territorial polycentrism; enhancing our semi-rural places by re-collocating them as components of a new system, in a new ecology of functions; and mapping the real needs of the inhabitants of cities (i.e. not attempting to satisfy their simple, abstract *desiderata* with rhetoric and demagoguery) .
- * Demanding a politics that produces high-quality public space; defending and re-proposing the central importance of public space as the essential and indispensable *core* of the historic European city that was abandoned in recent times by local authorities that are now at the mercy of financial speculators.

If, in these pandemic times, it can be said that populist rhetoric has been the big loser, it can also be said that this is the moment to finally tear off the mask of multi-coloured architectural populism with its so-called *smart buildings* on the one hand and its vertical (or horizontal, or diagonal) forests on the other.

Notes

¹ «For now what we have found out is that Covid-19 has not killed our cities and did not infect, overwhelm, or redesign them. That is because cities are resilient: ready to face and resist pandemics, floods, wars, earthquakes and other human and natural disasters»: Elena Marco, “Dopo il Coronavirus: come ricominciare a convivere nella città” [“After Coronavirus: how to begin living together again in the city”] «7»- supplement to «Il Corriere della Sera», corriere.it, 2020.

² «Italy has responded to the coronavirus emergency by making massive use of homeworking. According to an Infojobs survey that also analyses the future expectations of businesses and users with respect to the development of remote working, in a very short time 72% of companies made available the means and tools to enable their personnel to continue working remotely. However it is clear that not all types of business, and not all functions, can be carried on by working from home; only 15% of all Italians are working in that way. The remainder of the workforce currently appear to be staying at home without earning any income (45% of respondents, a percentage that rises to 50% for women) or are on holiday or leave (25%) whilst only 13% are still going to their workplaces without making any changes to how they carry out their tasks.». www.corrierecomunicazioni.it/digital-economy.

On the other hand, some people are already talking about being burned out by homeworking: “Lavorare da casa stanca: domande e risposte sul burnout da smart working” [“Working from home makes you tired: questions and answers about burnout caused by homeworking”], repubblica.it, 2020.

³ I am thinking, for example, of the attacks suffered by public open space and the supposedly “advanced” proposals to replace public squares with *cyberspace* and *internet cafés*.

⁴ «Low-density urban developments have led to erosion of the territory, an increase of harmful emissions, and higher energy consumption» (Gelsomino, Marinoni 2009). The long-term objectives of sustainable development, on the other hand, impose the densification of our cities”: A. Boito, “Housing sociale: strategie di densificazione per la rigenerazione urbana”, «Urbanistica 3», no. 6, January-March 2015, p. 59-64; see also L. Gelsomino, O. Marinoni, *European Housing Concepts*, Editrice Compositori, Bologna 2009.

⁵ *Advocacy planning* was formulated in the 1960s by Paul Davidoff and Linda Stone Davidoff as a pluralistic and inclusive planning theory in which planners try to repre-

sent the interests of various groups within society. See also the theories of Christopher Alexander.

⁶ This is nothing but kite-flying: yet another of Stefano Boeri's "ideas" (which even arrives at the disconcerting proposal to establish a new Ministry!). However, at least one person has already promptly dismissed this suggestion, likening it to a videogame: see F. Cotugno, "Wi-Fi, amore e fantasia. Che cosa fare per ripopolare i borghi italiani (e avere tutti un po' di spazio)", *Linkiesta*, 23 April 2020.

⁷ «Up to this point, everything seems to follow an incontestable logic. It is a pity that many European hospitals have pushed a policy of 'industrialising' their care offer by constructing large floor areas with shared services, where dozens of doctors of different specialities offer hundreds, if not thousands, of consultations per day. Working in large open spaces with secretariats, nursing care, porters, and shared auxiliaries, can ensure a number of economic advantages but the clinical gain is less clear: these 'health factories' are a long way from the desired personalised medical treatment and, what is particularly crucial for chronic illnesses, the centralisation in large 'efficient' systems means it is not possible to respond to the need for rapid personal contact between patient and caregiver». G. B. Piccoli, "Il vaso di Pandora, il Coronavirus e gli ospedali 'fabbriche della salute'", in: (AA.VV. 2020).

⁸ «Has the time come to return to the Utopia of healing with nature and beauty, and to the elegance of pavilion hospitals? (...) The limitations of large common spaces may lead us to reconsider a way of organising activities that privileges direct contact, a hospital as a home, recognisable and reassuring, in which the patient can identify not only the doctor, but also the secretary, the nurse, and, why not, the walls themselves as reference points», *Ibidem*.

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Costantino Patestos was born in Athens on 22 May 1955. He is an architect at the Politecnico di Milano (1982), PhD (1990) and postdoctoral fellow (1991, 1992) at the IUAV (University Institute of Architecture in Venice), associate professor (1998-2004) and full professor (2005-) at the II Faculty of Architecture, now DAD - Department of Architecture and Design of the Politecnico di Torino, where he teaches Architectural and Urban Composition. In 1991 he participated in the Fifth International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale with his project for the new Greek Pavilion, and in 1995, with his project for the Milanese site "ex Innocenti est" at the XIX Triennale di Milano. He has translated into Greek and edited the publication of the following books: Aldo Rossi, *Autobiografia scientifica* (Hestia, 1995), Giorgio Grassi, *Scritti di architettura* (Kastanioti, 1998), and Antonio Monestiroli, *L'architettura della realtà* (Kastanioti, 2009). He has published in Greece, for Kastanioti, the following collections of architectural writings: *To Kivotio tou Modernou – Kimena yia tin arhitektoniki*, Athens 2001 and *Apo to Vima tis Arhitektonikis*, Athens 2004. In 2006 he published the collection of writings: *L'ostracismo del Partenone. Scritti d'occasione sull'architettura*, LibreriaClup, Milan 2006; reprint: Maggioli Editore, 2008. In 2013 he published the monograph: *Architetture in attesa. Scritti, progetti e un edificio*, LibreriaCortina, Milan 2013. In 2018 he published the monograph: *Racconti urbani. Cinquantanove elzeviri d'architettura*, Maggioli Editore, 2018.