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**The Pandemic Storm and the Design Culture's Rafts.
 A Review of the Main Italian Architecture Magazines
 during the 20th and 21st Century's Major Health Threats**

Abstract

While the Covid-19 emergency has launched a widespread debate about the role of architecture, it is not the only health crisis to have impacted the 20th and 21st centuries. A survey of the leading Italian architectural magazines was performed to better understand how the design culture treated past pandemics, such as the Asian, Hong Kong, and Swine influenzas. Although the review did not reveal explicit reflections, some design constants in the planning of the city emerged cyclically in the background. This paper shows how, thanks to the debate on Covid-19, an incubation process that began a century ago is being completed, allowing only today the clarification of the media function of architecture in the construction of a critical awareness towards the pandemic phenomenon.

Parole Chiave

Pandemics — Architecture review — Urban design constants — Journals/Magazines

Storm

«Mankind precariously floats to its possible survival on a raft, rather make-shift as yet, and often leaky: Planning and Design». These words by Richard Neutra (1954, p. 17) are appropriate for commenting on the evident difficulties that architectural science encounters in metabolizing the transformations of contemporaneity – even more so if the trigger is an international health crisis.

The Covid-19 emergency has prompted a widespread debate about the responses expected from the design disciplines, fueling a loud and fragmentary movement of interpretations, a movement which suffers the risk of accelerated decay. Although the debate is mainly carried out online, it is perhaps thanks to the specialized magazines, which actively participate in the exchange of reflections (Chipperfield 2020a-2020c), that it will be handed down. If we look at the different pandemic cycles that have occurred since the beginning of the 20th century, it is possible to identify a series of behavioral constants in the human reaction to dangerous health conditions (Alfani and Melegaro 2010).

These collective attitudes have been influenced by the received communicative narrative, which has shaped the sociocultural criteria of risk perception. It is worth understanding what the media function of architectural culture has been in witnessing the various pandemic scenarios: for this purpose, we reviewed leading Italian architectural magazines, including «Casabella», «Domus», «L'architettura. Cronache e storia», «Ottagono», «Controspazio», and «Zodiac», limited to moments of peak contagion.



Fig. 1

Selection of the bibliographic sources reviewed. The magazines belong to the Passarelli Fund

Review

The health crisis that began at the end of 2019 was not unique in its shaking of western societies in the last hundred years. An infectious disease passes the epidemic condition and becomes a pandemic when it spreads rapidly on a global scale. In the span of the 20th and 21st centuries, despite advances in medicine, the widespread quality of urban environments, and deep-rooted improvement in eating habits, four influenza pandemics occurred: the Spanish (1918-1920), the Asian (1957-1958), the Hong Kong (1968-1969), and the Swine (2009-2010) flus. In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the viral respiratory epidemic caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 to be a pandemic.¹

The Spanish flu was «a health holocaust removed for almost a century from the collective memory and historical investigation»² (Tognotti 2015, p. 13). It is estimated to have provoked 400,000 deaths in Italy, but knowledge of its impact was suppressed by government censorship imposed on the press and civilians, in order to support compatriots committed to the war front. «Every outward display of grief was now forbidden by law. No bells tolled» (Collier 1974, p. 165).

The Asian and Hong Kong influenzas are estimated to have caused, respectively, 30,000 and 20,000 deaths in Italy. Although characterized by very low lethality rates, the total number of infections was high.³ The attention that the press of the time dedicated to those two pandemic cycles has been progressively growing (De Luca 2020): contained and devoid of alarmism at the end of the fifties, with ever-increasing dramatic and screaming tones the following decade. So far, a lack of historiographical research has been carried out on them.⁴ The Italian design magazines, which were absent during the 1918 flu pandemic, do not report explicit traces of these events,⁵ not even when discussing the rehabilitation of the inhabited centers do they question the minimum conditions of urban health (Romano 1959) or the felt need for scientification of the discipline (Beguinot 1968).

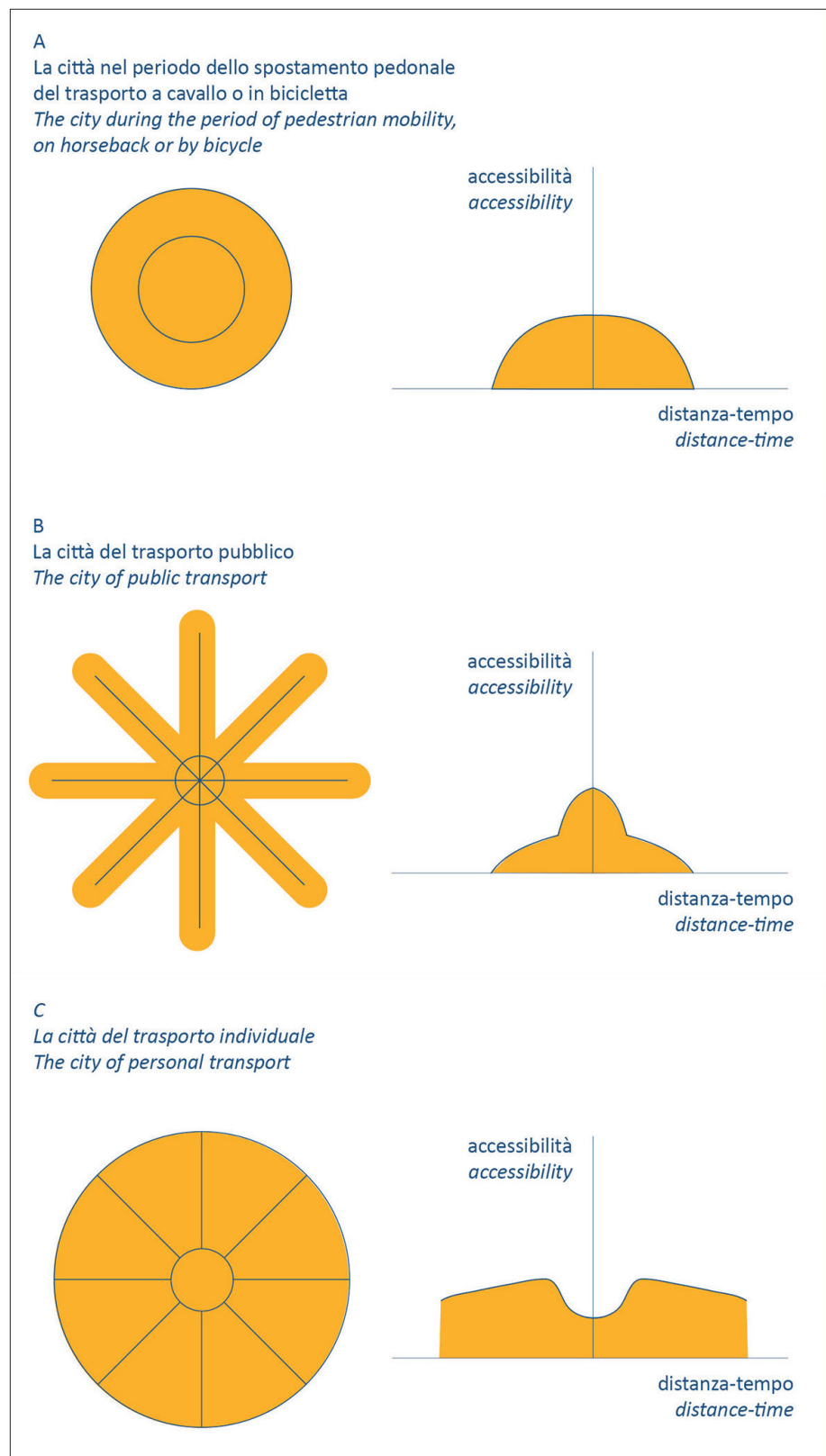
In 2009 the Swine influenza, the lightest modern pandemic,⁶ triggered a collective infection psychosis, manipulated by the virulent media ferment, which swelled exponentially within a few weeks. Architectural culture seems to have remained immune from it, at least from the magazines' pulpit⁷, despite the permeating background debate on the generational crisis (first of all, economic) and the urgency of a renewed sustainability.⁸

Ten years later, the media bubble, fertilized by the fear of the new coro-

Fig. 2-4

Schematization of the city's structure and its accessibility features.

The drawings illustrate three primary phases of urban development in relation to evolution in technology and communications (reproduced from Allpass et alii 1968).



navirus, assimilated even the architecture magazine's circuit. Trying to interpret the persistent silence detected by our review, three hypotheses have emerged: the absence of comparable circumstances, a lack of interest from the architectural community, and the presence of undercurrent reflections attributable to the pandemic matrix. The number of infections and victims, as well as the growing media pressure, confute the first hypothesis. The second also seems unconvincing. Our idea is that an incubation process, which began a century ago (with the threat of the Spanish flu), is being completed

only today, allowing us to clarify the media role of architecture in building critical awareness towards the pandemic phenomenon. The fervor of today's debate is the most tangible sign. It is possible to identify – specifically for past major health crises – some undercurrent premises, even though they may still be imperfect analysis tools, which constitute the first rafts to reach «the future of urbanity» (Chipperfield 2020d).

Undercurrent

Beatriz Colomina (2019), in *X-Ray Architecture*, explores the strong connection that exists between medicine and architecture. The 20th century witnessed the consolidation of the modernity-hygiene dogma. Le Corbusier's medical semantic is one example (p. 20). Yet, although the pandemics cyclically represented an opportunity for specific reflection, there was no apparent reverberation in 1900s architectural criticism.

One possible explanation considers pandemics as *processes-accelerators* rather than generative causes. This thesis is applicable in interpreting the processes underlying the urban evolution of the last sixty years.

Those of the Asian flu are the years in which the Modern paradigm is found to be weak in elaborating a reaction to the transformations that society is undergoing. The architecture magazines do not face the effects of the ongoing health crisis (of which even the experts and the media minimize the danger). They are committed to analyzing Modern architecture's fate: the discussion reaches its climax in the famous exchange of articles between the then director of «Casabella-Continuità» Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1957) and Reyner Banham (1959).

In the meantime, some design questions about urban planning sprout, which return with punctual recurrence on the occasion of the health emergency of the following decade (when public nervousness begins to increase) and during the pandemics of the new millennium. Already sixty years ago, the key issues to discuss were the programmed decentralization of individuals and functions, the progress of communication systems, and the transition towards a global society.

The obvious but necessary premise is that the spread of an infectious disease is proportional to the number of interactions. *Density* and *accessibility* are crucial variables not only to manage urban planning and the mobility of information, goods, and people (Allpass et alii 1968), but also to contain the propagation of infections transmissible via personal contact.

In the early 1960s, not far from the Asian pandemic and the aforementioned Rogers's editorial (1957), «Casabella» turns its gaze to city models from England, dedicating a special issue to them (250, April 1961). It presents the *New Towns*, urban self-sufficient units dimensioned on non-vehicular mobility and efficiently connected with the metropolis (Lewis 1961, p. 30). The decentralization topic returns to prominence during the Hong Kong flu season. In those years, the potentiality of new means of communication brought to abandonment the necessity of concentrating the distances for traveling within the pedestrian scale (Beguilot 1968). The ever-increasing role of telecommunications in the city structure is reflected in the projects by Kishō Kurokawa, published in «Casabella» in 1968: elementary cells, whose expansion matrix is based on «the density, rapidity and multiplicity of communication» and which «lives and spreads freely in all directions» (Riani, p. 10). At the same time, awareness of an increasingly global society is growing. In November 1968, John McHale, artist and futurologist, writes in «Zodiac» a programmatic agenda for mankind and the environment, start-

ing from the prerequisite that humanity was heading toward a unique global ecosystem.

Evolving and strengthening, these theories invade the «Domus» editorials by Flavio Albanese in 2009, the year hurt by the Swine flu's "media virus": *Architectures of Thought in Perpetual Beta* (2009a), *Sustainable Mobility* (2009b), and *Planetary Landscapes* (2010), to mention some.

Rafts

By sifting through the examined time intervals, it was possible to observe the evolution of the media role of the design culture concerning pandemic processes. Despite the press hype during the Swine era, the shock of the 2020 lockdown has been the determining factor for the architecture magazines to openly take a critical position. During the past world pandemics, even if the topic was not directly debated, undercurrent bases of those reaction behaviors to the emergency horizon were outlined, capable of enabling the contemporary society to manage the Covid-19 emergency. Some rafts took shape, unexpectedly solid. In particular, the karst recurrence of thoughts on density and accessibility has modeled specific urban design constants, which are extremely current today.

The article was composed in collaboration. Sections 1-2 were written by Elisabetta Canepa, while sections 3-4 were written by Valeria Guerrisi.

Notes

¹ Sexually transmitted pandemics (such as AIDS, which is ongoing) are a separate matter, due to their contagion mechanisms, not being linked to daily social behaviors, and on which therefore architecture does not exert any direct repercussions.

² Quote translated by the authors. Original: cf. the Italian text.

³ The Asian flu has infected about half of the Italian population; the Hong Kong pandemic nearly one in three Italians.

⁴ Cf. the sources mentioned within the bibliography note by Alfani and Melegaro (2010, p. 162).

⁵ Magazines analyzed in the context of the Asian flu (1957-1958; the first cases in Europe were recorded toward the beginning of summer 1957).

«Casabella-Continuità», edited by Ernesto Nathan Rogers: numbers 215 (April/May 1957, year XXI), 216 (September/October 1957), 217 (November/December 1957), 218 (February/March 1958, year XXII), 219 (April/May 1958), 220 (June/July 1958), 221 (September/October 1958), 222 (November/December 1958), and 223 (January 1959, year XXIII) ▪ «Domus», edited by Gio Ponti: numbers 331 (June 1957), 332 (July 1957), 333 (August 1957), 334 (September 1957), 335 (October 1957), 336 (November 1957), 337 (December 1957), 338 (January 1958), 339 (February 1958), 340 (March 1958), 341 (April 1958), 342 (May 1958), 343 (June 1958), 344 (July 1958), 345 (August 1958), 346 (September 1958), 347 (October 1958), 348 (November 1958), and 349 (December 1958) ▪ «L'architettura. Cronache e storia», edited by Bruno Zevi: numbers 20 (June 1957, year III), 21 (July 1957), 22 (August 1957), 23 (September 1957), 24 (October 1957), 25 (November 1957), 27 (January 1958), 28 (February 1958), 29 (March 1958), 30 (April 1958), 31 (May 1958, year IV), 32 (June 1958), 33 (July 1958), 34 (August 1958), 35 (September 1958), 36 (October 1958), 37 (November 1958), and 38 (December 1958).

Magazines analyzed in the context of the Hong Kong pandemic influenza (1968-69; In Europe the pandemic spread at the end of the 1968).

«Casabella», edited by Gian Antonio Bernasconi: numbers 330 (November 1968, year XXII), 331 (December 1968), 332 (January 1969, year XXIII), 333 (February 1969), 334 (March 1969), 336 (May 1969), 337 (June 1969), 338 (July 1969), 339/340 (August/September 1969), 341 (October 1969), 342 (November 1969), and 343 (December 1969) ▪ «Controspazio», edited by Paolo Portoghesi: numbers 1 (June 1969, year I), 2/3 (July/August 1969), 4/5 (September/October 1969), 6 (November 1969), and 7 (December 1969) ▪ «Domus», edited by Gio Ponti: numbers 468 (November 1968), 469 (December 1968), 470 (January 1969), 471 (February 1969), 472 (March 1969), 473 (April 1969), 475 (June 1969), 476 (July 1969), 479 (October 1969), 480 (November 1969), and 481 (December 1969) ▪ «L'architettura. Cronache e storia», edited by Bruno Zevi: numbers 157 (November 1968, year XIV), 158 (December 1968), 159 (January 1969), 160 (February 1969), 161 (March 1969), 162 (April 1969), 163 (May 1969, year XV), 164 (June 1969), 165 (July 1969), 166 (August 1969), 167 (September 1969), 168 (October 1969), 169 (November 1969), and 170 (December 1969) ▪ «Ottagono», edited by Sergio Mazza: numbers 11 (October 1968, year III) and 13 (April 1969, Year IV) ▪ «Zodiac», edited by Renzo Zorzi: numbers 18 (1968) and 19 (1969).

⁶ In Italy, the victims related to Swine influenza were 229, according to data provided by the latest statement of the Ministry of Health (February 2010).

⁷ Magazines analyzed in the context of the Swine flu (2009-2010; the World Health Organization declared the pandemic alarm in June 2009).

«Casabella», edited by Francesco Dal Co: numbers 778 (June 2009, year LXXIII), 779 (July 2009), 780 (August 2009), 781 (September 2009), 782 (October 2009), 783 (November 2009), 784 (December 2009), 785 (January 2010, year LXXIV), 786 (February 2010), and 787 (March 2010) ▪ «Domus», edited by Flavio Albanese: numbers 926 (June 2009), 927 (July/August 2009), 928 (September 2009), 929 (October 2009), 930 (November 2009), 931 (December 2009), 932 (January 2010), and 933 (February 2010).

⁸ Cf. the editorials by Flavio Albanese in «Domus» in the years 2009-2010.

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