

Ottavio Amaro
Which measure for the invisible

Abstract

In the condition of post-Coronavirus catastrophe for the architectural project it is not a question of identifying new urban foundational models on a territory reduced to its zero degree, but rather of intervening on the existing city and the sense of living.

We are in the presence of an epochal ideological inversion: the house, as a new centrality, arrives from the *existenzminimum* to the need to expand, overcome 'free space' for new individual 'enclosures', proposing itself as a workshop.

The city revises the concept of identity, in the search for new 'measures' in the relationship between the workplace and the place of living, between public and individual space, between extensiveness and slow infrastructural networks, in a new process of demineralization and therefore of mingling with nature.

Keywords

Catastrophe — Measure — House — City — Security

«At the beginning of the scourges and when they are over, there is always some rhetoric. In the first case the habit is not yet lost, and in the second it has now returned. Only in the moment of misfortune does one get used to the truth, that is, to silence».
(A. Camus, *The Plague*, 1947).

In the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic state, the only certainty on which we need to reflect is that we are facing an epochal change, with uncertain and unpredictable outcomes, which in any case has upset, for the first time on a global level and with the involvement of all forms of social and urban communities, lifestyles, habits, customs and consolidated cultural characteristics, individual and collective organizational statutes. The awareness has taken over that there is a watershed between a before and an after. All created by an 'invisible enemy', as much as it is active, capable of causing a 'freeze-frame' proposed to rethink and review our relationship with the world and the things that surround us, starting with the home and the city. As Olga Tokarczuk (2020) says «It is as if we had been subjected to a test, thanks to this we will also know what kind of society we really are»; a test administered in the midst of a silent catastrophe, which, unlike those we are used to historically – wars, earthquakes, tsunamis, – does not have the appearance of a destruction capable of wiping out the space and time of a place, but manifests in its abstraction of data and statistics, leaving the city immune in its condition of spectral emptiness.

But speaking of catastrophe also means bringing back the reflection on its meaning linked to *overthrow*, to *revolution*, and therefore also to change or *transformation* (Curi 2008), which presuppose, above all for the city and places, new founding acts and prefigurations. This in an existing physical scenario that has not changed, which has not lost its evolutionary time,

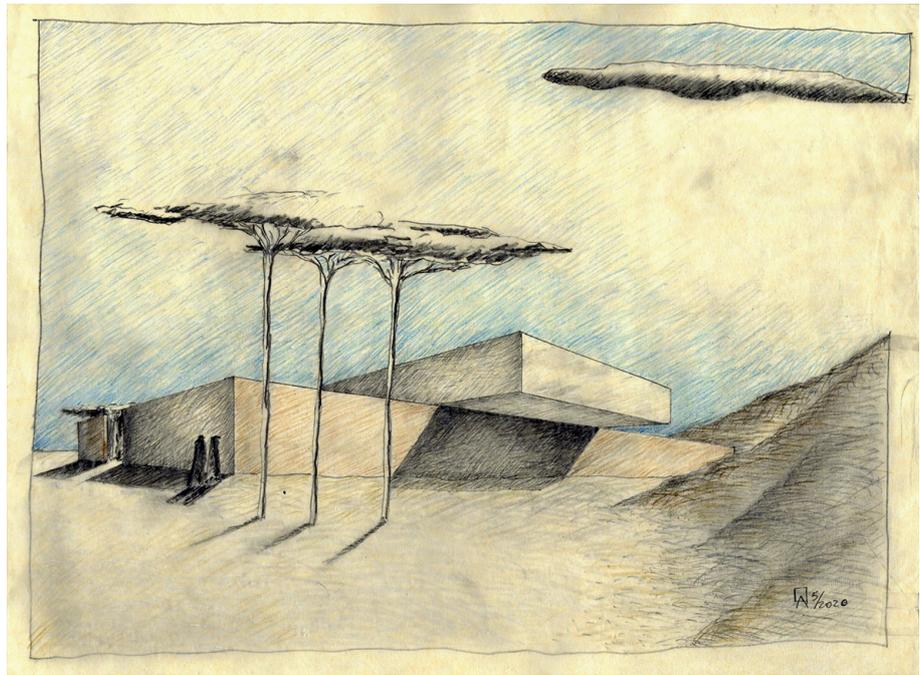


Fig. 1

Ottavio Amaro, *Casa con scala levatoia*, may 2020, perspective.

The drawings are taken from the virtual exhibition *Te.CA Altrove, Viaggio intorno alla stanza. Visioni domestiche* edited by Marina Tornatora, in *TE.CA, temporary compact art*, Dipartimento d'Arte, UNIRC, april-july 2020 - www.teca.unirc.it

which is not reduced to 'zero degree', but which has found itself inadequate, subjected to concrete adaptive experimentation during a specific time frame. In this context we are faced with a role of the project that seeks its dimension of immanence in the idea of transformation, adaptation, re-thinking of the city and the existing sense of living.

An architectural and urban role relaunched by the emergence of new security needs and by the innovative acceleration posed by the spread of the pandemic that overwhelms historical customs consolidated on the level of work and collective and individual relationships. In this sense, we can say that the indispensability of architecture in the construction of human well-being is still returning, understood as being better on earth and therefore as an approach to the beauty of living. Therefore a need for a project that does not renounce its premise of vision and 'utopia', but that looks at the metamorphosis of reality with new points of view that from the terrestrial scale reaches that of the city and the house.

A vision now capable of reading the phenomena of entropization in their global relationship of use of resources, of territorial governance and above all in a new idea of soil transformation, putting answers to the excessive 'mineralization' in the expansion of the city, to the immeasurable energy consumption and a distorted idea of unlimited development, often suited to the nihilism of a science that is not always positive.

The biggest victim is certainly the city, as it has historically been determined. Simultaneously struck by the virus worldwide, from a place of crowds and a 'wonderful machine to live in', it has been brought back to the place of silence so far 'appreciated' only in De Chirico's figurative metaphysical atmospheres or in Hopper's melancholy.

All the past terminological apparatus of definition of city: metropolis, megalopolis, ecumenopolis, or widespread, generic, indefinite, postmodern, postindustrial city, is subordinated to the predominance of fear, therefore to security, dictated by an invisible entity, as much as present its own citizens.

The same division between the center and the periphery of the city, the historic city and the contemporary city, collide with a condition of horizontality of destiny to be rethought, not only in their settlement relationship, but

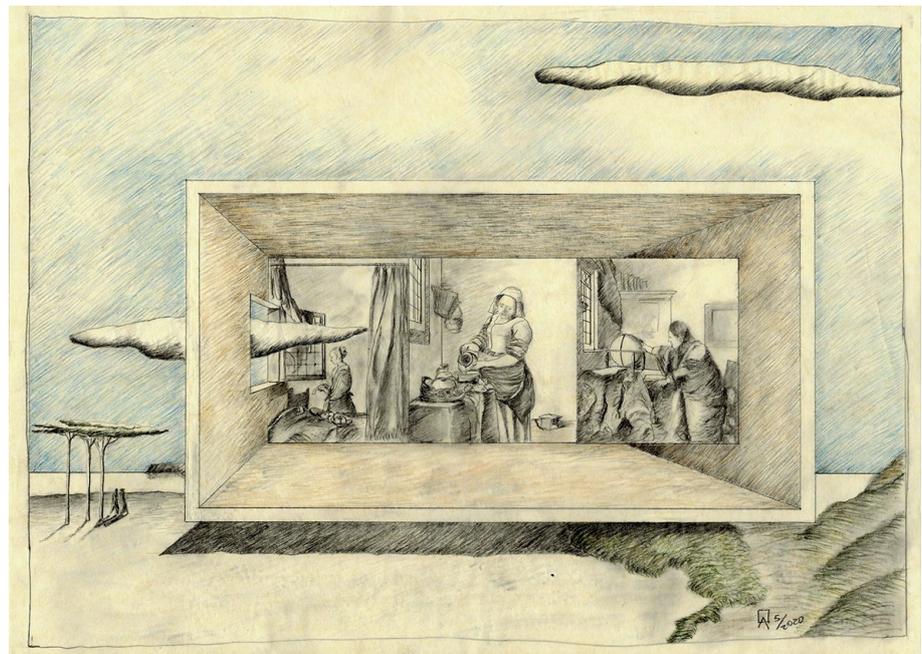


Fig. 2
Ottavio Amaro, *Casa con scala levatoio*, may 2020, interior.

in the response to the security needs of the pandemic crisis, in terms new with respect to urban science and contemporary evolutionary certainties. And it becomes obsolete to express definitions as a ‘dormitory area’, when compared to the new dimension of a real workshop crammed into its domestic interiors, inverting the relationship entirely within modern culture between the house and the city. Modern culture supporting a zoning that built a city for homogeneous areas, opposed to the needs that emerged in the current crisis of a city for self-sufficient parts, where categories such as multifunctional, ‘disorder’, ‘disharmonic’ are not a negative factor, but perhaps a quality necessary for the city of the future. A scenario that together with the condition of multi-ethnicity will assume heterogeneity as an identity. We could speak in this sense of what Mirko Zardini a few years ago defined as a return to the ‘picturesque’, as a result of an inclusive and integrated action in the functions.

At the same time, the earth and the air, or rather the ground and the sky, return as fundamental elements of the urban scenario. The historical construction of the city was characterized as a subtraction of nature, becoming, as Emanuele Coccia (2020) claims, «a strange project of mineralization of life based on the illusion that human life can be nourished only by contact with stones, steel, glass». The liberation of horizontal space, already hoped for in Le Corbusier’s urban visions, is a response to the dual need for public places and distances between people, just as the ‘sky’ can respond to articulated and self-sufficient housing functions «*Sur le toit de l’Immeuble-villas, existera une piste de 1000 mètres où l’on pourra courir à l’air*» (Le Corbusier 1956).

A return to the primary and concrete elements even at the time of the primacy of virtuality and the digital world that bring the city back to revise the concept of ‘measure’ as an enlargement or narrowing of its relations between workplace and place of living, between public space and individual, between density and increase in open space, between extensiveness and slow infrastructural networks, between public space as a ‘place of the crowd’ and the need to isolate oneself and distance oneself.

This does not mean less city or giving space to an unlikely debate on the natural as opposed to the urban, on a return to the rural dimension of an

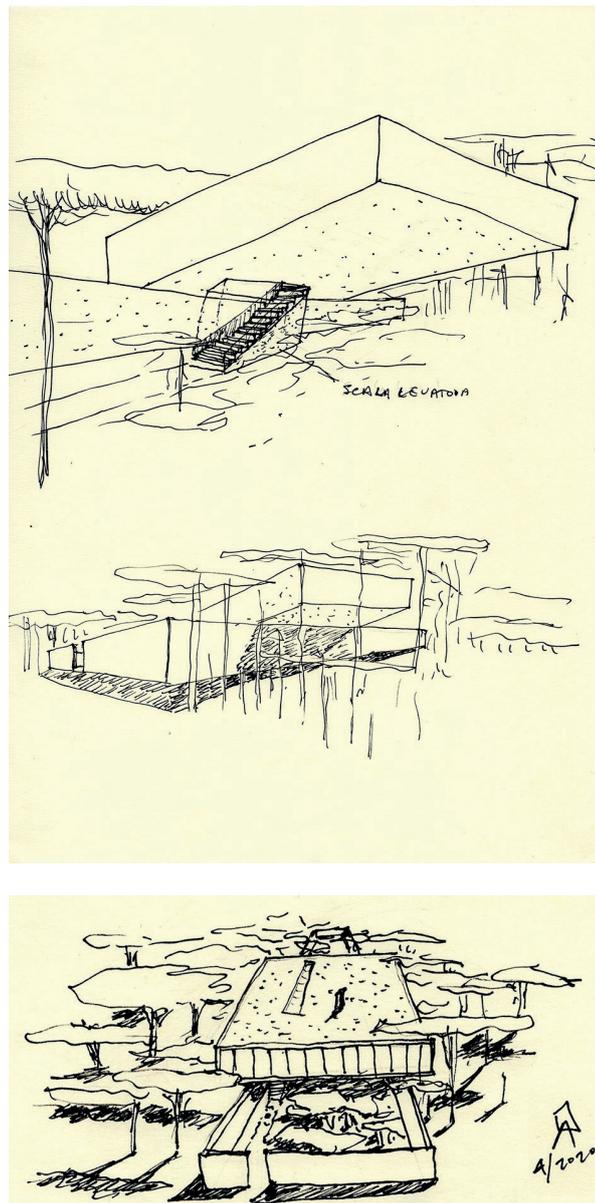


Fig. 3-5
Ottavio Amaro, *Casa con scala levatoia*, may 2020, sketch.

ideal pulverized settlement system that perhaps presupposes a new ‘ruin’ of the existing city. When Le Corbusier called to contribute to the new urban visions evoked by the Russian Revolution, he peremptorily stated that «One of Moscow’s disurbanization projects proposes thatched huts in the forest. Wonderful idea! But only for the weekend» (Ceccarelli 1974), he did not reject the concept of nature as much as the prevalence of a subordinate and non-interactive relationship with it in response to a contemporary living and settlement condition.

A condition that is confronted mainly as a return to the primacy of the home, still a formidable moment of interpretation of the evolution of human needs and social changes.

The return to its centrality, accelerated also with respect to the preconceptions of Alvin Toffler (1987), coincides with a theoretical and functional reinterpretation that distorts its connotative elements assumed above all in the contemporary city.

Definitions like those of Gaston Bachelard return

«It supports man through the storms of heaven and the storms of life, it is body and soul, it is the first world of the human being. Before being ‘thrown into the world’

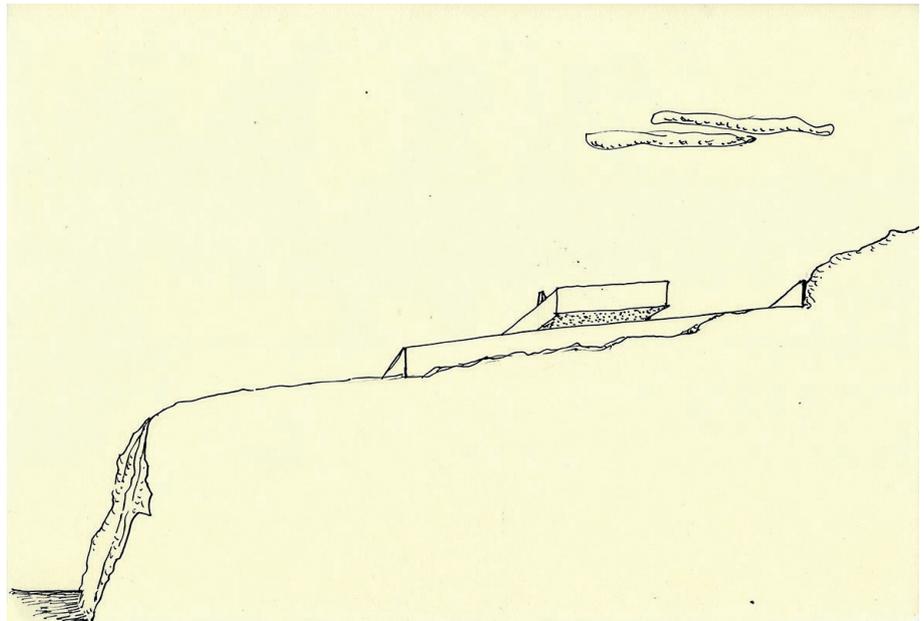


Fig. 6
Ottavio Amaro, *Casa con scala levatoia*, may 2020, sketch.

as the lightning-fast metaphysicians profess, man is placed in the cradle of the house and always, in our rêveries, the house is a great cradle» (Bachelard 1975).

In the current epidemic crisis, the most evocative dimension of living in fact – the house as a ‘treasure chest’ of memories or the house object of ‘desire’ where we would like to live – is added, until it prevails over the others, the dimension of the house as ‘protection’. There is an ‘involutional’ return that brings us back to the idea of ‘fortress’ perhaps not far, given the ‘prison’ condition, from that of a ‘cell’, bringing the house back to a suspension that makes it isolated and immune from interference therefore safe from contamination.

The concept of physical limit, barrier, pre-modern separation between interior and exterior is re-proposed, as a necessary return to the universe of eternity. As in Vermeer’s interiors in a newfound slowness, ‘domestic microcosms’ are recreated, everything passes while we live: we tele-work, study, love, take care of the body, socialize, laze, rest.

We are in the presence of an epochal ideological inversion: the house, from the *existenzminimum*, where the individual was himself a cog of the ‘perfect’ dimensional mechanism, arrives at the need to expand, widen and reformulate spatial modularities, overcome ‘free space for new individual enclosures’. The house needs to assimilate new functions, that is, to propose itself as a workshop, no longer a place of silence.

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Ottavio Amaro is Associate Professor in Architectural and Urban Composition at the Mediterranean University of RC, Department of Art, where he is a member of the PhD in Architecture and Territory. Since 2014 he has been scientific director of the Landscape_inProgress (LL_inP) research laboratory founded with Marina Tornatora, which carries out research activities both nationally and internationally.

His projects and drawings have been shown in various exhibitions: Italian architects under 50 - Triennale di Milano 2005; South Project - City of Stone, 10th Venice Biennale 2006; ITALY IS NOW - Tokyo 2011; Skopie Biennial; XVI Venice Biennale 2018.

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