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Designing the uninhabitable. Reflections on the space of relationships

Abstract

Thinking about the post-Covid city represents an opportunity for a reflection that, starting from the differences inherent in each city, from the knowledge of its history, of its past, critically analyses the conceptual fracture operated by the globalization. When asking about the way of inhabiting a space whether private or public, is necessary to read the opposing levels that the city is built on. The “ability to inhabit” is therefore constituted as an immanent quality of places, proposing solutions that establish degrees of “collaboration” between building and urban space and forms of relationship that the contemporary city seems no longer able of producing: therefore only by developing a “prescient” environmental vision and recovering the ethical need to imagine the city beyond contingency.

Keywords

Inhabit — Urban space — City

When asking ourselves how the way of inhabiting a space whether private or public has changed, we need to know how to read the opposing levels that the city is built on; this is to be found within the relationship between volumes and voids, the latter being the place of relationships, where a collective organization becomes aware of itself and which is «the setting for the simultaneity of urban facts» (Espuelas 2004, p. 13). Indeed, the aggregation of individuals (synechism) has led to the creation of many cities where the idea of community preceded and formed the basis of the inhabitants' identity¹. At a time when we have found ourselves living “imprisoned” the public space has been removed and with it the failure of the very idea of a city founded on social interaction. The virus has heightened and exacerbated social disparities between the protected and the unprotected, reinforcing existing contradictions and questioning the very “relational matrix” between us and our surroundings which only recognizes in alterity the essential condition which can determine the move from “the individual subject” to the collective (Tagliagambe 2008, p. 121).

Moved by an «immune drive, by a stubborn will to remain intact, entire, and unharmed» (Di Cesare 2020, p. 23), the individual has thus found himself forced into his own isolation, deprived of the freedom that derives exclusively from the “infra space” (Arendt 1994): the historical-political dimension which ensures plurality, the existence of individuals not squeezed in one on top of one another, not deprived of their individual boundaries but where, rather, public space has a representative role that «associates a collective ideal with that of the individual» (Tagliagambe 2008, p. 208).

What happens when this distance increases to the point of becoming separated when the citizen puts their own protection before participation in pub-

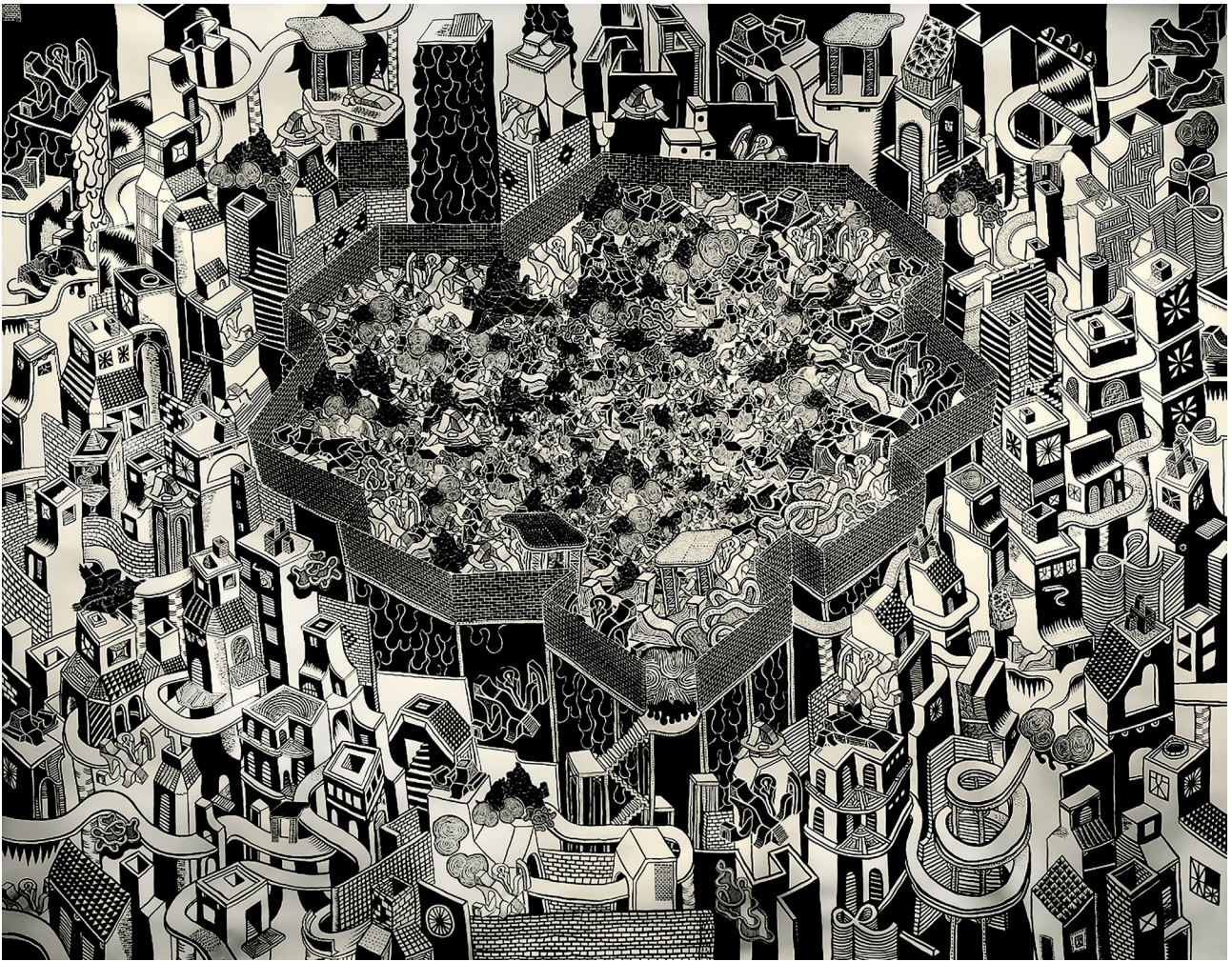


Fig. 1
Jay Crum, *Second Nature*, ink
and collage, 2010, © Jay Crum

lic life? That's when the feeling of immunity prevails, thereby creating a sense of identity crisis, replaced by the singularity².

It is therefore necessary to avoid the mistake of thinking about space, private or public, without thinking about the city; indeed architecture is the art of building to the extent that it is also art of living³ understood as the way men act, relate to one another and give a real sense i.e. not alienated and abstract, to their being in a given place. Freed from any finalistic conception of space, "the ability to inhabit" must therefore, be constituted, today perhaps more than ever before, in so far as it is a quality inherent to the places offering solutions that establish levels of "collaboration" between building and urban space, recovering in other words those forms of relationship that the contemporary city no longer seems capable of producing.

The pandemic appears to be the result of too much time in the past spent underestimating the problems related to the expansion of the city as if environmental and social phenomena associated with it could be easily controlled and managed. The "state of exception" has shown an unwillingness to address the crisis with a long-term view, although only by developing a "prescient" environmental vision is it truly possible to take care of the city, give it an ethical foundation, an ensemble consisting of the individual and the community (Emery 2011, p. 113).

The risk is that the city shows itself once more to be incapable of designing urban spaces and instead falls back on existing rules (for economic reasons) tending towards private use⁴.

If in its first and most acute stage the pandemic intensified the sense of confinement, now the role that open space has come to play, being a place of

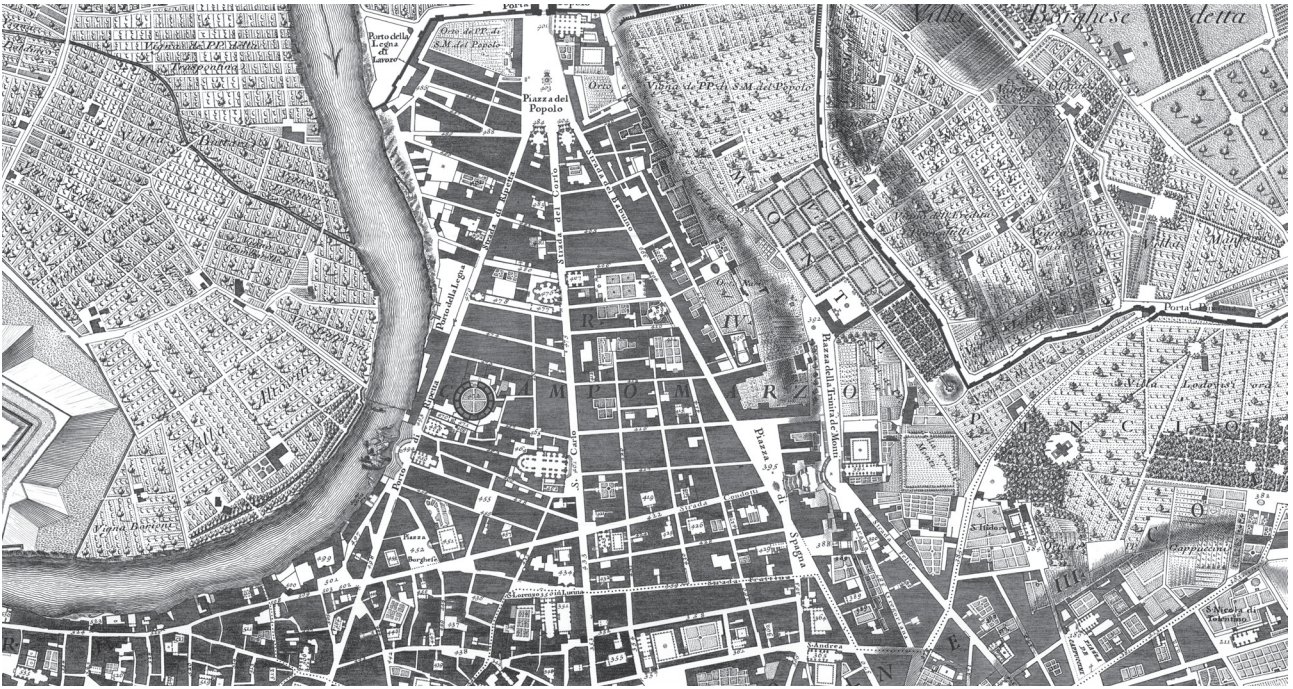


Fig. 2
Giambattista Nolli, Nuova Pianta
di Roma, 1748, (detail)

movement and coming together, lends itself to considerations about the shape and the use of those unresolved intermediate spaces, a *zwischenraum* between the building and the street. In such circumstances the design of the buildings' take on the ground is seen as a conformational structure with the aim of achieving a spatial continuity of relationships similar to what happened in the past thanks to architectural elements such as the threshold, the porch, the roof cover – interpreters of a mutual sense of belonging between public and private – an expression of a way of thinking about the urban project that seems to have been almost completely removed in the contemporary city.

The city of globalization that destroys its own limits and engulfs the surrounding landscape by extending its shadow over the countryside, at the same time creates many internal borders which define a succession of “inside” and “outside” but without being able to give shape to these places. Koolhaas calls it *Intermediate-stan* – “middle ground” – the border that from caesura becomes threshold and recaptures the etymological sense of *limes* as an essential condition of urban space: the city is such precisely because it has a beginning in time, and a limit in space⁵. Nolli's *New Plan*, which was then made a “pretext” for the laboratory that was *Rome Interrupted*, is emblematic because it shows a dialectic relationship between volumes and voids where space is genuinely moulded into an integrated system in which the densification is the result of a design of the city through its architecture. While destruction and transformation are intrinsic to architecture, it is important that this leads to a consequent “production” not only/no longer of economic capital according to the rules of speculation but rather of “civic capital” (Settis 2014, pp. 57-58). To date however it seems that the ideas and proposed solutions in the face of danger and urgency are addressed by reasons more economic than ecological.

Conversely the pandemic phenomenon has made even more evident the need for reflection, too often rejected, on those architectures which, given their very function, construct “uninhabitable” spaces because they are designed with the clear purpose of limiting/denying the very meaning of habitation. In a pandemic, places which more than others question the architecture as to its direction and, in particular, on the rigour with which the architecture itself assumes the responsibility of “building” before “inhabiting”, aware that

**Fig. 3**

Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, 1929 (Plan FLC 32091)

only by overthrowing the usual consequentiality does coexistence become plausible and, perhaps even survival: to design you need to know to how to inhabit, and indeed we must learn to inhabit.

How to design situations in which the cohabiting is forced, where being confined is the rule and not the exception? «What architecture is it that is based on the impossibility of inhabiting» (Agamben 2018)? An architecture that no longer recognizes that its starting point and its rule is habitation, will be hostile to those whose needs, transforms into an “alien dwelling”, so that the *heimlich* is transfigured into *unheimlich*. A feeling of “disturbing” that showed how much “habitable” and “uninhabitable” are in fact contiguous, next door neighbours, separated by a fine line. The “uninhabitable”, the negation of architecture, constructed before or without being inhabited i.e. without being thought out, until that moment removed from the architecture, has resurfaced with the experience of the pandemic⁶. No longer a split so much as in conflict with the inhabitable space, which can enrich the architectural thinking and generate a creative tension which would otherwise be unattainable. Places for which you need to re-establish a re-composition of urban relationships so that these structures no longer present themselves as a separate body in the fabric of the city. In Michelucci’s plans for the *Garden of Meetings* in the Sollicciano Prison we can recognize the desire to address the issue of the uninhabitable by constructing a space that appears to cancel the separation between inside and outside which evoke one another in their use of materials and the figurative choices; in which structural clarity is not simply displayed but is at the service of the invention of a new spatiality whose intrusion provokes a somewhat complicated semantic crisis compared to the very idea of prison.

If the answer to the Covid-19 emergency was addressed by adopting a common strategy – the lockdown – thoughts on the post-Covid city must rather be an exercise in specification which, starting from the inherent differences in each city, from the knowledge of its history, its past, is capable of pro-

ducing a glimpse of the future: a trivialization of the answer would only surrender the city to the same problems to which the aestheticization of architecture has condemned it until today. Vittorio Gregotti's conclusions on the self-referencing nature of *bigness* are useful for distinguishing the current disaffection with the past that feeds contemporary architecture by the rejection for the past of some avant-garde movements from the beginning of the 20th century represented a distinctly utopian interpretation of the architectural project as an alternative.

The *poietic* vision that animated the work of architects such as Le Corbusier, and which now appears to have been completely replaced by a pure aesthetic emotion, was actually the result of a deep reflection on materials, a profound look at the historical and geographical connections of the location of the project. What turns out to no longer postponable is precisely the need to recover this ability to imagine the city and not just to design it, or deal with an extended and ample period of time which does not think in terms of the contingent but rather reflects on the future so to be able to give back to city its own memory, going beyond the *Generic City*⁷ and proposing a radical rethinking of urban space. In other words to analyse the conceptual fracture resulting from globalization in a more current perspective that, without the illusion of producing a viable urban structure anywhere, embraces the specific condition and has as its prospect the city understood as a complex artefact, rich, differentiated⁸; a process that moves from the constant interpretation of the city before the project and the transformation brought about by the project.

Notes

¹ «[...] L'Aquila's medieval statutes ordered the inhabitants to produce collectively (*uti socii*) public spaces (squares, fountains, churches) before settling individually (*uti singuli*) in the home» (Settis 2014, p. 91).

² Singularity, what not supported by alterity, is fragile and exposed to fragmentation unlike identity which is supported by the principle of community. We can thus delineate a paradoxical "immune democracy" summarized by Di Cesare as *Noli me Tangere*. At the centre there has to be your safety – today in relation to the virus, more generally toward what is different – based on the separation between the condition reserved for the protected as compared to the excluded "others".

³ Etymologically the Latin verb *habitare*, the frequentative form of *habere* has the meaning of "continue to have" in the sense of "have a habit" of being in a particular place as a result of the action of the person who owns and thus retains the place they inhabit, by transforming the space from natural to artificial.

⁴ «In some places, both rural and urban, the privatization of space has made it difficult for citizens to access areas of outstanding beauty; elsewhere "ecological" residential areas only available to a few have been created, where they make sure people are not allowed in who might disturb an artificial peace». (Pope Francis 2015, pages 44-45)

⁵ Argan's words in the introduction to *Rome Interrupted* ring truer than ever today for many cities: «There being no longer any relationship between history and nature or architecture and countryside, Rome has begun to swell and deform like a bladder, no longer having either architecture or countryside [...]. It is no longer a city, but a desert packed full of people, disrupted by the same speculation that has allowed it to grow out of control» (Argan 1978, p. 12).

⁶ The debate surrounding the "uninhabitable" has deep roots (in the philosophical and the psychological sense) and is already recognized by Adorno when he affirms that «to inhabit, in the true sense of the term, is now impossible» and Heidegger's attitude to the shape of the "modern" house that despite it being a response to unhealthy conditions appeared to be entirely focused on the pure functionalism of the technique, making its inhabitants like guests separated from their fate.

⁷ «The generic city is the city liberated from the bondage of the centre, from the strait-jacket of identity. The Generic City breaks this vicious cycle of dependency: it is simply

a reflection on today's needs and capacities. It is the city without history. It's big enough for everyone. It's convenient. It does not require maintenance. If it becomes too small it simply expands. If it gets old it simply self-destructs and renews itself. It is equally interesting and uninteresting in all its parts. It is "superficial" like the boundary wall of a Hollywood film studio, which produces a new identity every Monday morning» (Koolhaas 2006, p. 31).

⁸ «Urban design means taking as a starting point the geography of a given city, its needs and suggestions and introducing the architectural elements of language to shape the site. Urban design means keeping in mind the complexity of the work to be done rather than rational simplification of the urban structure. It also means working inductively, generalizing what is particular, strategic, local, generative» (Solà Morales 1989, p. 8).

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