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Giancarlo De Carlo. A challenging master

Edited by: *Antonietta Iolanda Lima*

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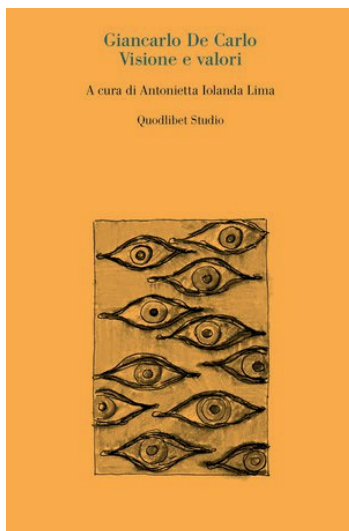
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Giancarlo De Carlo stands out as a singular presence in the Italian architectural scenery. Not by chance his role turns out to be much more defined and easily recognizable within the wider European - if not global - realm than in the Italian one.

Despite De Carlo's position has been properly acknowledged in Italy, his cultural role has been wilfully collateral and critic and, at any rate, uncommon. This peculiarity is certainly an eloquent proof of his high intellectual status. A status which has been definitely autonomous and personal and therefore yet to be cleared.

Quite rightly Antonietta Lima defines him as "uncomfortable" in the title of the conference *Giancarlo De Carlo scomodo e necessario*, which she has organized quite appropriately in Palermo and Catania in 2018. These two cities are not occasional places. They are significantly linked to De Carlo's life, who indeed worked for several years in Palermo at the Urban Plan for the historic city. And later he was in Catania at length attending the project for the conversion of the Benedictines convent. In both places De Carlo undertook intense human relations with significant groups of people, some of which have authored essays in this book.

Sicily, as a whole, has been a special place for him. He had Sicilian grandparents and he had been grown up within the clannish Sicilian community in Tunis. A nostalgic curiosity for his own past and the later complex and somehow troublesome experiences in Palermo and Catania led him to often reflect upon this island to the point of dedicating in 1999 an entire book to the topic, *Io e la Sicilia*. In it he investigates his own uneasy relationship with a land, as well as with a society, both felt intimately as his own. The volume edited by Lima, therefore joins, with an original twist, the numerous other books and essays recently published in connection with the centennial of De Carlo's birth, much as those produced immediately after his death, occurred in 2005.

But in addition to the parts dedicated to Palermo and Catania, the text encompasses also other essays focused both on general aspects of De Carlo and on specific ones: the project for Mazzorbo in the Venetian lagoon, the various interventions within Urbino, the plan for Rimini and the Matteotti Village in Terni are just some of those. The latter is remarkably written by one of the protagonists of that experience, the sociologist Domenico De Masi.

All these studies face mainly the political and cultural dimension of De Carlo, within the realm of architecture. But almost always significantly they extend beyond the edge of the discipline, a too limited precinct for De Carlo's extended approach.

With reference to this I find useful to point out how these various papers do nothing but stress and complete the general aim of the collection, quite clearly stated by the editor in the not less than three essays under her signature. It is set as a focus on the political and cultural independence of De Carlo. This was strongly sought throughout his own life by the idea of «an architecture which does not reflect the power». So Lima writes: «De Carlo, much as few other architects, would persuade us to refuse any enslavement to the power. He would rather drive us to use “morality” both in life and in art. Looking simultaneously to local and global and always confronting with other disciplines».

After all, as is well known, De Carlo was anarchist: the development of his thought from Koproktin, passing through Thoreau and Whitman, but also Geddes and Mumford is successfully treated in the book.

His attitude, simultaneously cosmopolite yet mindful of context and vernacularity, had been certainly influenced by Giuseppe Pagano who led him to reflect upon rural architecture. This awareness will generate projects like the one for Spine Sante public housing in Matera, and, much later, for Mazzorbo in the island of Burano.

In these projects, as well as elsewhere, De Carlo assumes a totally civil spirit and rejects the popular cliché of an architect that is contemporary “by image”. He rather fixes the inhabitants' needs as his primary goal living any urge for authorship in the background if not out of the process. Architectural language, quite clearly, was for him a no-problem.

The urge for participation, therefore, for De Carlo was not a mere pragmatic issue. As this book well clarifies, participation in architecture stood for him as an utmost ideologic issue. It sprang from his very idea of architecture - and, more importantly, of society. As in his own words architecture produces “concrete images of how space could actually be if the structure of society was different”.

His conception of public space as intertwined with the private space of the house is shaped around an undeniable “architecture for people”. His interventions in Urbino, much as the labyrinthic structure of the Matteotti Village in Terni or the city-building of the Benedictines in Catania are therefore thought considering the complex spaces of Islamic - and not only European - cities. The vision of a reversibility between city and house, as well as between public and private cannot surprise us: it comes from the idea of *mat building*, notoriously by Alison Smithson, and widely experimented within the Team X, especially by Candilis, Josic e Woods. To this respect it is important to stress that in De Carlo's view the notion of *mat building*, also successfully defined “casbah + meccano,” was not a mere architectural device: behind it, for De Carlo, stood something even more important than architecture itself. It was the unmissable idea of an urban space as the outcome of the freedom of man within the complexity of society.

To this respect it is far too consistent that the fusion of architecture and urbanism was for De Carlo an amply practised cornerstone, rather than only a concept.

His urban plans were grounded on forms and qualities, as against the quantity bureaucracy of zoning, supported by the circle of Astengo.

De Carlo's notion of “tentative project” was a way of keeping together the

complexity of reality as against the “scomposition” of analytic approach. Yet for De Carlo architecture had to set a limit: it should rigorously refrain from becoming an imposition of power. This was for him an irrevocable rule that made him experience painfully his role in public projects: in Matera, in Palermo, as well as in Terni or Burano architecture could never become a matter of imposition from above.

If the connection between power and architecture became hidden, as in the case of the Urban Plan for Palermo, developed with Giuseppe Samonà, for De Carlo the issue assumed a rather grim overtone.

This is not surprising: the relationship with power for an anarchist like him was the structure around which was shaped his whole life.

He felt uncomfortable in the Italian academia where power overlaps culture on an almost daily basis. This condition was strongly criticised since 1968 in his *La piramide rovesciata*.

This incompatible condition was one of the reasons for the establishment of the ILAUD, a liberal form of teaching and research on architecture. Similarly, he acted with the direction of “Spazio e società” magazine, that tried to contrast the lobby of the two main Italian architectural magazines to which he had no access.

He had his main human relations abroad and not in the Milanese circle where he lived and worked. In Italy he definitely was an outsider, “inconvenient yet necessary” as this book well clarifies.