
Abstract

To reconstruct implies an act of courage. To reconstruct the city requires a responsible, patient, conscious and daring act of preserving memory and committing the future. The act of architecture is never neutral, it is also a partisan act. It is the architect's responsibility to move towards concrete actions through the project, which "case by case", refutes hypotheses, verifies ideas and advances theses. Reconstruction is a project.

Keyword

Transformation — Memory — Calamity — Destruction — Project

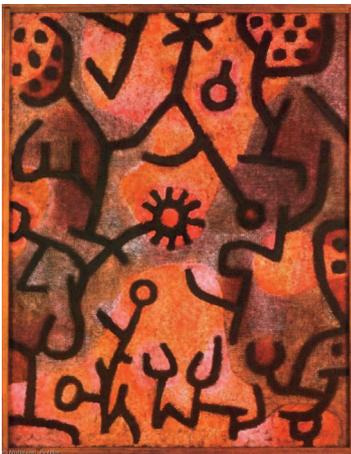


Fig. 1
Paul Klee, Flower on the rock,
1940.

One of the most pressing issues of topical interest and civil commitment for architects and others concerns actions capable of stemming the consequences of deliberate or accidental violence against the city, of the intentional or involuntary cancellation of memory, a unitary collective fact that binds entire communities to the recognition of their places. It is also a fact that the theme of reconstruction, in such a condition, has assumed a significant weight in the development and transformation of the human environment. On the one hand, the rapid obsolescence of some of the elements that would have propped up the modern city refutes the thesis of the failure of reconstruction architecture - although many of the most important figures in modern architectural culture, from Le Corbusier to Perret, from Hilberseimer to Sharoun, from Gropius to Mies, etc., have worked along these lines. The lack of a unified and shared response in reconstruction policies is evident in the traumatic experiences of recent wars in Europe, on the Balkan front for example, which at the end of the last century generated a heated debate on the motive that introduced into the conflict unprecedented ways of deliberately destroying memory through the annihilation of symbolic elements: the bridge of Mostar or the siege of Sarajevo above all. If those events are now relegated to modern and contemporary history, in the present condition other factors intervene to raise awareness of reconstruction as a central theme in the architectural debate. Why reconstruction? It is a physiological action, which occurs naturally after a traumatic event. The actions that cause traumas are of apparently involuntary origin, such as rapid climate change, which some claim has a rather direct relationship with catastrophic events due, for example, to the seismic events that have recently been constantly undermining the human environment in

terms of intensity and frequency; or deliberate actions that, starting with the growing political and economic instability of ever-larger geographical regions in South and Middle East Asia, have generated scenarios where the systematic destruction of architectural heritage has now become a sad reality.

All these are determining factors in creating an unprecedented situation that invites architecture to question itself anew on how to operate within the built environment. This situation is aggravated by the processes of production and appropriation of space that affect the contemporary city. Phenomena such as building speculation and the privatization of land now seem to prevail as the only factors capable of influencing urban development. The very evolution of cities is proving to be less and less susceptible to conscious transformations in the contextual dynamics, but rather to rehashes, self-referential and unshared mutations, with assumptions that are now free and independent from those formal instances moved by the settlement characteristics of the urban structure of long duration. For this reason, there is the need to investigate methodological criteria capable of recovering, in the context of reconstruction processes, those qualities that have conditioned city life as positive factors. We are talking about qualities that are not only aesthetic and formal that the city, and its architecture, can offer, but rather elements of social, economic, productive, civil emancipation, we would say, able to critically transmit that latent identity contained within the elements that make up the urban structure. Thus, in constructing a future vision of the city, it would be the task of architecture to critically recover both the figurative characterizations and the structuring principles of the urban phenomenon. In this sense, reconstruction would mean resonating with the generative principles that have conditioned the construction of the city over time, thus establishing a dialectical relationship with tradition and modernity.

This issue of FAM is dedicated to this theme. The construction of this theme has taken place through a slow and patient search for current issues revolving around reconstruction. Episodes and facts that lie within the recent events of the tragic earthquake in the Irpinia region in 1980, where some evidence of concreteness and scientific consistency still persists, starting from the comparison between the village and the city, Castelnuovo di Conza and Naples, placed at the centre of the research on reconstruction that has mobilised most of the best resources on the engineering and architectural front: historians of architecture and the city, structural and plant designers, town planners, landscape architects and architects. Lucio Barbera recounts this extraordinary experience of life and not only of operational research: reconstruction as a concrete act and timely response in the operational emergency phases, between consolidation and restoration, transformation and new construction, where the expectations of users do not always coincide with the aspirations of designers. And yet the two different perspectives of work between “Borgo and Città”, between the urban centre and rural village, show how in the scalar polarity of the two different interventions it is still possible to go back, not always in a linear way, from operational experimentation to certain principles and methodological assumptions of a problematic approach to the theme of reconstruction starting from concrete working hypotheses, admitted to the test of the project and its realisation and not so much from an alleged theory that imposes settlement models, behaviours and rules only abstractly theorised and occasionally put to the test of realisation.

Within the theme of reconstruction moves the work of Enrico Bordogna, on case studies around the problematic issue of the very recent earthquake in Central Italy in 2016. The controversy over the new provisional equipment, given to the local population in an illusory attempt to alleviate the drama of loss, has shown the contradiction of a model of intervention that bases on paternalism (public and private) a propensity to seek consensus rather than the will (or ability) to manage and govern the effects of the seismic event, not only in the emergency phase but also in the much more dramatic loss of identity of the community affected by the earthquake. In examining the question of reconstruction, this testimony points straight to the heart of the architectural issue, which poses the problem that has often been debated on both a theoretical and operational level in the conflict between the attitude of “where it was, how it was” and the latent risk of “false history”. This issue is addressed scientifically starting from the analysis of cases and concrete experiences in the field through the operational verification of the outcomes of the architectural project. An attempt to put in order an autochthonous experience of reconstruction (which would deserve much more space than that reserved here for this occasion) that tackles the problem with all the trappings of scientificity starting with a critical and dialectical comparison of the attempts made in the reconstruction of the Messina earthquake of 1908, and subsequently the emblematic case of Belice in 1968, to the devastation of Friuli in 1976, Irpinia in 1980, up to the recent cases of L’Aquila in 2009, Emilia Romagna in 2012 and the most recent one, a few years ago in 2016, which concerned central Italy, between Marche, Lazio, Umbria and Abruzzo. Here the problematic approach places the obligation of experimental architectural verification, case by case, before the theoretical assumption of abstract precepts, measuring point by point the susceptibility of the architectural project, the adequacy of the conditions that the context offers to the ductility of the design and the peremptoriness of the creative architectural act, without any abstract preclusion, refuting, on the other hand, in the making of architecture the theoretical and operational questions that the theme of reconstruction poses to the practice of design. It is along these lines that the tests carried out for Amatrice should be understood, moving from even subtle questions of type-morphological relations to attempts at linguistic experimentation in the adoption of particular expedients in the figurative treatment of the elevations and the size of the buildings.

Along these lines, Tommaso Brighenti’s work also calls for a unified reflection on the act of reconstruction and community identity through the dislocation of strategic functions capable of revitalising a social fabric weakened by the consequences of the earthquake, both in the case of Amatrice and that of Norcia and Camerino. This fabric was rebuilt through the recomposition of revised and updated specific functional programmes able to support not only the weak local economy through innovative models of productive, commercial and tertiary settlements but also to shore up education, exhibition, sport and free time as a driving force for economic and cultural emancipation.

If in the European tradition the cases of Berlin, Dresden, Warsaw, and others, have placed a well-known and well-documented experience of work, there are other cases that on the theme of reconstruction have generated singular experiences that are by no means secondary to those conventionally documented by the literature in the post-war period. This is the Lusitanian case of Alvaro Siza’s reconstruction of Chiado, following the fire

that destroyed parts of the city between Baixa and Bairro Alto in August 1988. Siza's experience demonstrates how a critical reconstruction takes on the city's most subtle contextual incentives, rediscovering the richness of the historical stratification of the urban fabric and transforming this endowment into the re-discovery of a memory almost dissolved in the geometric rigour of the 1775 reconstruction. The selection of unpublished layers of the city is explored in its richness, also formal, in the articulation of the urban palimpsest, as if to decipher and revive through the project the peremptory and essential features of a complexity that would otherwise be lost.

Post-war European experiences on the theme of reconstruction have had different fates. The case of Vienna explored by Gundula Rakowitz is emblematic in recognising how the Planungskonzept Wien drawn up in the years 1958-1961 by Roland Rainer was a precursor of initiatives that virtually took on some of the fundamental features of the city's paradigms. Reconstruction along the course of a narrative capable of symbolically deciphering substantial traits of the urban fabric, by fragments, episodes, remnants of destruction that finds a possible narrative not in a chronological sense but in a qualitative one, by a critical and conceptual selection of the value, even iconological, of the architectural datum. A value in itself recognised in the planning of the Stadtentwicklungsplan Wien STEP 2025, which not only insists on the areas examined by Rainer, the area to the north-east of the city centre and the south-west but also assumes architectural determination and conceptual approach in the operation of the project as an instrument for implementing a design where form and structure still intervene to define the essential features of the city's future.

If we wanted to extend this trajectory from the Italian experience to Europe, Asia and America, the cases of Aleppo in Syria and Mosul in Iraq - very different cities that share a tragic destiny in the epilogue of the well-known "Syrian Crisis", which began in March 2011 - would become paradigmatic of what the theme of reconstruction and human dignity, represents in concrete planning action today, in the protection of a huge heritage torn apart by a deliberate act of violence. The cities of Aleppo and Mosul take on this ethical, rather than aesthetic, the frontier of making architecture, of recomposing the meaning of human things: houses, prayer, ritual, culture, life. And in this process, the form of life, like the form of people's things, takes on a significant value, because it becomes the act that helps the community to revive itself and reconsider the meaning of its existence following a deliberate and violent annihilation.

But in the current reconstruction process, there are natural events that cyclically, and recently more frequently, affect certain places most exposed to the effects of climate change. For example, these episodes in Central and South America have prompted architectural culture to tackle problems and issues that until recently were the exclusive preserve of other disciplines. Anna Irene Del Monaco gives an account of this interesting frontier of research on the relationship between design and reconstruction, where recursiveness becomes a variable that is not secondary in the problematic approach to this specific aspect of architectural design, grafting a greater degree of complexity than the models established in the literature and in the practices most accredited by the scientific community, regarding, for example, the issue of planning, prevention and maintenance of the entire settlement system, natural and artificial. Starting from the experience of the environmental and economic disaster caused by two successive hurricanes that struck the island of Puerto Rico in 2017, Hurricane Irma and

Hurricane Maria, this testimony documents a different frontier of work on reconstruction, with the commitment of Martha Kohen of the University of Florida and local research centres, which in recent years have shown how the question of reconstruction is susceptible to a much broader vision and how it is possible to explore some unprecedented aspects of the ordinary paradigm on the approach to the “reconstruction theme”.

As a conclusion to this perhaps bumpy itinerary, we should pause for a moment and rethink the role and meaning of our approach to this specific aspect of our work.

If there is still a faint trace of artistic value on this extraordinary theme, Bruno Barla Hidalgo’s essay turns the point of view upside down, from an extraordinary observatory such as the Valparaiso school in Chile, which “literally” looks at this world upside down. Sign and light as a creative act from the centre of the earth to its surface, in a process of “poiesis” where the object of the creative act is experienced in its deepest etymological meaning and adherent to doing, to the Greek “poieo”: inventing, composing, creating, even in verse. A poetic act that has not only the value of creation, it manages to go beyond it, intrinsically linked to generating, to generativity; by its very nature, it presupposes a meeting between at least two entities, which give life to a third: the project, a world project for Barla, on the margins, on the edge overlooking the Pacific of an entire continent. So poiesis also takes on the meaning of “poetising”, transforming suffering - where things are devitalised and unchangeable - into new stories, new contexts, new worlds composed of poetic acts capable of vibrating the senses, restoring vitality to things, opening up to other worlds. In this way, it is possible to grasp the vital impulse, towards others and towards the world, that the poet, or the architect, preserves and keeps alive alongside the suffering and the wounds of a destructive natural event, which is revealed in its beauty, leaving in the beholder that sense of fascination, emotion and wonder that one feels when looking at the flower that grows and blossoms on the rocky edges of the ocean.

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