UNSUSTAINABLE 'SUSTAINABLE' vs INHERITABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. Since the early 20th Century, the abuse of terminology in architecture was the key to manipulate reality. Following the 1933 Athens Charter, 20th Century urban theory promoted the "*functional city*" as a solution to the "*problems*" of historical cities, which were considered dysfunctional. Today we can honestly recognize that all the dysfunctions of current cities derive from that theory, still presented as "*positive*". The consequence of the failure of the so-called "*functional city*" is that today people are looking for a "*more sustainable*" approach in urbanism, architecture, farming, etc. Of course, this is positive news, but even in this case, industry, the banks, and building speculators often abuse the term "*sustainable*" to promote the worst unsustainable architecture and urbanism. Furthermore, architects, engineers and professors, forgetting the ethical approach of their profession, offer themselves to make theories and propose interventions far away from the real sense of sustainability. This way of behaving uses different positive and hypnotic keywords to 'convince' the non-experts, who believe in the "*experts*". Those words are "*urban renewal*", "*urban regeneration*", "*retrofitting*", "*bio*", "*eco*", "*resilience*", "*requalification*", etc. These words hardly ever correspond to the truth.

1.   The 'horizontal' Rome versus the 'vertical' Milan (or London) model for cities

Last year, during a conference I 'bumped' into a notable documentarian and art historian, Costantino D'Orazio. Notwithstanding my admiration for his appreciation of antiquity, he deeply disappointed me when speaking of the 'urban treatment' necessary to relaunch Rome. He praised the 'Milanese model' with the interventions of Boeri, Fuksas, Isozaki, Libeskind and the like, maintaining that Rome necessitated similar treatment!

I attempted to reflect on the absurdities of this 'treatment', but I understood from his words that this wrongful thinking was by now an irreversible process. We had, in any case, already understood this since Rome's candidacy for the Olympics, when Mayor Alemanno was invited by Ricky Burdett (great grandson of the great Nathan, and advisor to the mayor of London Livingstone for the Olympics of 2012) to propose the ruinous '*London Model*' for Rome.

Apparently for certain politicians, victims of an unjustifiable cultural inferiority complex, Rome is always in need of an external model rather than being one itself. Later we then saw those gentlemen (who had set their table and were feasting away even before lifting a finger for the transformation of Rome for the 2024 Olympics) looking lost when Rome's candidacy was revoked. Because as hypothesized, it would

have caused Rome and all of Italy to precipitate from the economic equilibrium it still precariously maintains.

In spite of this, however, thanks to political administrations that serve building speculators, the city is under attack, making it ever more difficult to avoid a final disaster. The task at hand for these cement speculators — in addition to playing the most important daily newspapers like puppets — is to find new entrances for their tentacles, the first of which is the manipulation of reality. In all of this, the use of well-known testimonials plays an important role. It is a shame that certain public figures, whether out of ignorance of the subject or to please narrow-minded soccer fans, defend such indecent urban proposals without reflecting on the collateral effects of their mere presence.

Figure 1. A marvelous view of Rome from the dome of Saint Peter's … a 'horizontal' city, an identity built over millennia, light years away from the 'verticality' of Milano, which lacks local identity (Photo from the web)

Figure 2. Milano–Porta Nuova towers over the rest of the city (Photo from the web)

The famous Roman actor and director Carlo Verdone had taken up the defense of the impossible project for the 'business center with annexed soccer stadium for AS Roma at *Tor di Valle'*, on the occasion that he was awarded the '*Dottorato honoris causa in Beni Culturali e Territoriali'* from the *University of Tor Vergata*. He declared, "Rome must start again, and the model to follow is the one in Milan that has changed its

face and projected the city into the contemporary world!" (Verdone, 2017). A declaration that should merit exile rather than honor! Verdone probably does not know what really happened in Milan. He can only imagine as much, as that model is unsustainable and light-years away from the history and identity of Rome.

Figure 3. Milan: dramatic contrast between the Fountain set among the historic buildings of Piazza Giulio Cesare, and the skyscrapers of Isozaki and Libeskind for CityLife (Photo from the web)

As proof of pressures of the speculation world on the political one, note the interview given by Federico Orianna di Aspesi (*President of the National Association of Real Estate)* to the *Corriere della Sera*: (Salvatori, 2017)

"*The recipe for reviving Rome? It could be the Milan model. Sunday afternoon, after having read of the idea of 'the board for the reviving the Capital' I wrote an email to Minister Calenda in which I presented our work and proposing our collaboration, and I explained how we had changed the face of Milan. Monday morning I received a phone call inviting me to the 'board' ... in 40 years of practice something of that nature had never happened to me.*"

Shall we try to understand then what the Milan model is? Shall we try to understand it independently of those who have vested interests? Prof. Sergio Brenna, professor at the Milan Politechnic, in explaining that "*things do not add up in the case of milanese urbanism in recent decades*", affirmed the following:

"*At the Ex Fiera, [...] the building index of 1.15 m^2/m^2 was established by current market values of land rent in Milan of €800-900/m^2 of sellable floorspace; to cover the unexpected 250 million debt provoked by the Fuksas project at Rho-Pero.*"

Figure 4. Page from the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera of 13 January 2012 that criticized the "Chinese frenzy for skyscrapers", which foresaw the financial crisis (Photo by E.M. Mazzola)
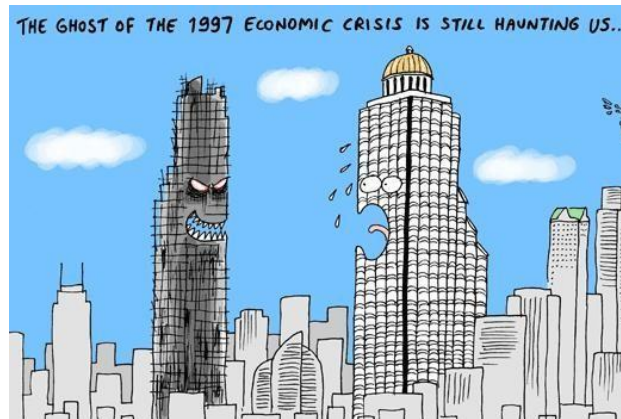
Figure 5. Thai cartoon published on the occasion of the proposal for the realization of more skyscrapers, in spite of the previous failure of the Sathorn Unique Tower. The cartoon is a caricature of the skyscraper's modernity recalling that: "The Ghost of the 1997 economic crisis is still haunting us" (Image from the web)

For the good of Rome and the whole country, we can only hope that city administrators and Italian ministers don't allow themselves to be taken for a ride by those who would serve their own interests.

2.   Correct urban laws and regulations already exist

The future for Rome lies in the rediscovery of the laws and regulations that were shelved. If such laws were to be brought back into consideration, they could help us to reassemble the formless urban fabric of the last 60 years; helping us to endow the entire city with an architecture worthy of its name and, most of all, to provide the city with spaces for socialization, where people from all walks of life can live peacefully. Above all, the rediscovery of those laws and design instruments that define the 'Roman urban model' could bring public gains instead of enormous public spending. That model dates back to the age of Ernesto Nathan and Giolitti, and after 100 years it demonstrates that it has worked and thus does not require new inventions or experimentation.

It is necessary to simply have the courage to re-do the things that (in a not too distant past) the city had done (with great success) to lift itself out of the financial crisis (and socio-environmental disaster).

Nevertheless, if they are not an expert, who is capable of questioning the theories of the experts? And thus the propaganda continues, to the advancement of the construction industry, which is lacking in any kind of real quality but is passed off as sustainable. This type of construction, which is by now quite rampant, is all the same: all the same kind of big box construction, whose facades are all made of vertical panels, hung vertically, in bulk.

Figure 6. "Europarco" Tower in the EUR district of Rome (Photo by E.M. Mazzola)

3. The problem with 'green' cities

Following his highly celebrated and overrated project '*Vertical Forest',* Stefano Boeri has become the undisputed leader of 'green architecture', so that his opinion is seen as universally valid for any project, in any location on the face of the earth.

For Boeri then, it is rather easy to convince the 'masses' of the sustainability of his projects: just put a few plants where they will have no effect on the water table. There is no reason to worry either about keeping the plants alive and healthy looking, as they appear in computer renderings, they will just need an enormous amount fertilizer.

Figure 7. Rendering of the new Milano Polyclinic designed by Stefano Boeri (Images from the web)

For the professional proponents of '*sustainability*' and '*renewability*' of our cities, it does not matter whether the totality of buildings are of industrial origin and thus

present a life cycle and energy consumption (in its production, transport and use) that is unsustainable. It is enough to use the magical words '*sustainable*' and '*urban renewal*' and no one will ever judge. Nor is it important that a new project consider the economy of local artisans. It is far more important to consider the giant companies and construction conglomerates.

Boeri has begun a project, obviously already praised, to realize the new *Policlinico di Milano*; but be we should not be surprised that no one has noticed (apart from the undersigned) that the '*hospital*' project includes a mega shopping center, to take care of the financial backers of the project, rather than the ill. To whom does it matter that the unsustainability of yet another shopping mall will force the closure of yet more neighborhood shops?

The subservient press and the new *gurus* will continue to speak of '*sustainability*', praising architectural absurdities where free-climbers will be required to prune its impossible foliage. It is truly sad to have to surrender to the thought that many architects, despite knowing how to construct a building or design a garden without having to resort to chemistry, praise these absurdities instead of openly condemning them.

As for my part, due to the abuse of terminology, using "*sustainability*" is no longer appropriate when talking about proper developments. Many people think that when a building is equipped with the most advanced eco-energetic devices it should be considered sustainable, even though it stands in an unsustainable urban context; even if such technology is produced 3,000 kilometers away from the construction site; and even though the life-cycle assessment of the materials used does not respond to international environmental requirements.

The European Community subsidizes the use of solar panels, photovoltaic devices on buildings, and lands once cultivated; but no country has a precise program for the stocking and disposal of panels once they need to be replaced (15 to 20 years) … thus we leave a bad legacy to our children, without producing enough "*clean*" energy to justify the costs!

Figure 8. Stefano Boeri's Vertical Forest in Milan: L in the project's rendering, and R in reality (Images from the web)

The industrial materials lobbyists are those who make these kinds of subsidized "*ecological*" policies. We should ask ourselves: are these policies worthy of being considered *sustainable*? Everybody who understands that this notion is a falsehood can say: NO!

Recently, we have seen absurd projects for skyscrapers (the most unsustainable and "*energy-starved*" type of buildings) being awarded prizes as "sustainable projects". In addition, architectural magazines — which are sponsored by the building industry — are filled with strange projects presented as sustainable, green, LEED, bio, etc. But the point of all of these is to deceive people, rather than making real sustainable places for living.

Figure 9. Shijiazhuang, China, Project for the City-Forest by Stefano Boeri, a "sustainable" city for 100,000 inhabitants (Image from the web)

Figure 10. Left: "pseudo-gardener" at work … spraying green paint on the dead vertical lawn of the new "sustainable" Santa Emerenziana underground station in Rome (Photo from the web)

Right: "pseudo-gardener" at work … spraying green paint on the dead lawn of an American Shopping Mall (Photo from the web)

One of the strangest attitudes of many architects, especially the '*star-architects*', is the belief that, if their renderings on the computer screen show a '*vertical meadow*' or a '*vertical forest*' (like the super-celebrated skyscrapers in Milan, whose trees have already dried out) on their buildings, then plants don't need roots. How can nature be so inconsiderate as to prevent certain projects from working? If grass and trees die, it is certainly not the architects' fault; it is Mother Nature that does not respond to the *zeitgeist*.

4. We need a new durability

Isn't it time to revise our terminology? To list the parameters that a project must follow in order to be genuinely *sustainable*? Once upon a time, architecture was built for forever. Indeed, before architecture was transformed into one of the many silly aspects of consumerism, buildings were built using durable materials. This happened when countries were sovereign and did not depend on globalization. In those days, politicians were wise enough to behave — as still reported in the *Italian Civil Procedure Code* — as a "*good head of family*", that is, by managing the money of others, striving to reduce superfluous expenses.

Until the advent of modernism/consumerism, architects were never so quick to promote the death of their buildings before themselves. In 1911, for instance, Quadrio Pirani, architect of the *Istituto Case Popolari* (Social Housing Institute) of Rome, cared for the dignity and respect for human beings, but he also championed keeping maintenance costs down:

"*Not only do homes "beautiful on the outside and clean inside" contribute to improving the condition of the classes who live in it, but also, the proper use of durable materials, such as bricks and tiles, eventually leads to a reduction of maintenance costs for the buildings, especially when the edifice has several floors assembled in a block or city quarter*" (Pirani, 1911).

Today, we have proof of this truth, since his buildings, built as social housing, have never required any expensive maintenance work in more than 100 years. The district of *San Saba* in Rome is one of the most livable places in the City, where the former social apartments are among the most sought after (and expensive) in the real estate market, despite having been built at extremely low costs and in short time.

Figure 11. Social Housing District of San Saba in Rome, Quadrio Pirani, architect. Corner Building on Viale Giotto built in 1923 (Photos by E. M. Mazzola)

5. Building throw-away buildings

In contrast, in 1914, Antonio Sant'Elia's approach, in his *Manifesto of Futurist Architecture,* was quite different:

"*No plastic or linear experience can arise from an Architecture so conceived, because the basic characteristic of Futurist Architecture is its 'transitoriness'. "Buildings will not last as long as we do. Every generation will have to build its own city"; this constant renewal of the architectural environment will contribute to the victory of 'Futurism', which has already asserted itself with the "Words in Freedom", the "Plastic Dynamism", the "Unbridled Music" and the "Art of Noisemaking", for which we struggle incessantly against the cowardly retreat into the past*". (Mazzola, 2004)

Some years later, thanks to his car producer sponsor, Le Corbusier went forward first with his *Plan Voisin*, then with his visionary *Ville Radieuse*, where he claimed (or rather dictated):

"*Cities will become part of the countryside; I will live 30 miles from my office, in one direction, under pine trees; my secretary will also live 30 miles from the office, but in the opposite direction, and under other pine trees. We will have our cars. We must use them until they are worn out, grinding down roads, surfaces and gears, burning up oil and gasoline. Everything that is needed for a huge amount of work ... enough for everyone*". (Le Corbusier, 1935)

Such strange ideas, based on the abuse of terminology and positive presentation (in the name of consumerism), have brought us to the present *point of no return*. The whole Congress IV CIAM of 1933 was based on the idea of abandoning the "*wrong*" *traditional cities* (blamed as *dysfunctional*) and promoting the "*functional city*". Today, however, after 80 years of ideological dictatorship of that kind of "*functional*" vision, we can — or we should — affirm that we were wrong; because whatever we consider today as dysfunctional in terms of urbanism is exactly what was promoted as functional!

It is a shame that the "mayday signal" launched by Fernand Léger during the 1933 CIAM's Congress cruise on the cruise ship *Patris* was ignored by the élite of architecture thinkers led by Le Corbusier:

"*I think that your heroic epoch has ended* […]. *The clearing up effort is over. Stop, because you are going over the limit* [...] *An élite (group) has followed your heroic epoch. That is normal. You have built state-of-the-art houses for people instead you want your ideas to spread... the term "urban planning" to overshadow the aesthetic problem". [...] "Town planning is social. You have entered a brand new field, where your pure and radical solutions will have to fight [...] Abandon this elegant and condescending minority [...] The small average man, the "city dweller" in other words, is dizzy [...] you have created an absolutely new architectural concept. However, from an urban and social viewpoint, you have gone too fast. If you want to do urban planning, I believe you must forget that you are artists. Become "social" [...] there is a schism between your aesthetic conception accepted by a minority and your urban vision that is in trouble everywhere because the masses do not understand it, [...] you should have looked behind you: you would have seen that you have no followers [...] It is necessary that men like you carefully observe the men behind you and those at your side and who expect something, [...]. Put your maps/plans back in your pockets, walk down the street, listen to them breathe, make contact, lose yourself in the raw material, and walk in their dirt and dust*" (Léger, 1933).

Architecture and urbanism cannot be approached with the fundamentalism of an obscure religious sect; we need to abandon the ideological approach that led the way of making, and especially teaching, architecture in the last century. We need to find the courage to question the divinity of such architects whom we have been taught to

believe. We need to question the new gurus that want to reinvent the wheel every day and claim to derive their knowledge from themselves. We need to humble ourselves and look back, looking for the greatest lessons of our glorious past, which is not necessarily so old.

6.   Building 'inheritable' cities

Indeed, just before the IV CIAM Congress, many great achievements had been reached in terms of urbanism, social equity, integration, economy, environment, etc. (Mazzola, n.d.) During those days — a period of great development and philanthropy — thanks to the collaboration of experts of many disciplines, our cities grew with respect for human being and places, without excluding private interests. When we lost this balance, by giving too much (or unique) importance to private interests, our world was turned upside-down.

If we really want to generate livable places and respect the ecosystem, we need to reset the system (Downton, 2009). We do not need *new gurus*, *inventors of new solutions for non-existent problems*, we need only to address existing problems, and solve them with the criteria that have already proved their worth. Putting man and respect for nature and the planet at the center of the solution process, however, is a necessity.

We cannot exclude any parameter when aiming for a *sustainable urban development*, i.e. every urban place must be recognizable as "*pedestrian friendly*", "p*ublic transportation friendly*", "*bicycle friendly*", "*children friendly*", "*elderly friendly*", "*disabled friendly*", "*income friendly*", "*environmental friendly*", "*local economies friendly*", "local craftsmanship friendly" "*local traditions friendly*", "*local characters friendly*", "*local history friendly*", "*local materials friendly*", "*minorities friendly*" … "*NEXT GENERATIONS friendly*".
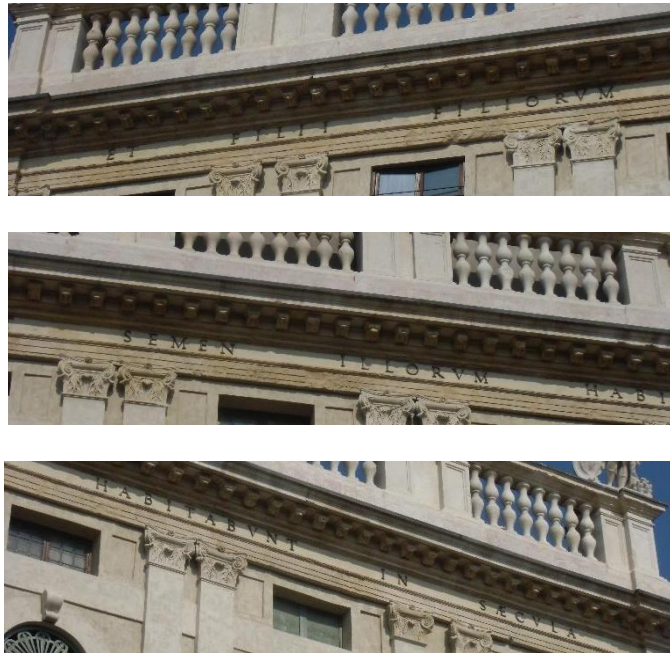
Figure 12. Verona – frieze inscription of Palazzo Canossa, 1527, Michele Sanmicheli, architect. Et filii filiorum semen illorum habitabunt in secula – (Built) in order to allow their children and their progeny of times to come to live here (Photos by E.M. Mazzola)

If this is true, we need to change the most abused word of the last decades and, instead of talking about "*sustainable cities*", we need to talk about "*INHERITABLE CITIES*". Human generations come and go; the world does not belong to any one of them, because it belongs to future generations. As a good tenant, man must leave the world he has borrowed from future generations in better condition than he found it, so that successors can put it to good use.

As reported in the inscription of *Palazzo Canossa* in Verona, every place must be "*Built in order to allow our children and their progeny of times to come to live here*".

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