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Fausto Curti

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edited by Carlo Gasparrini

Carlo Gasparrini

Ariella Masbouni

Pier Carlo Palermo

Paolo Ceccarelli

Cesare Macchi Cassia

Paolo Avarello

Federico Oliva

Paolo Fareri

Carlo Alberto Barbieri

Patrizia Ingallina

Maurizio Marcelloni

Daniel Modigliani

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Simona Gabrielli

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Roberto Bobbio

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Meaning and methods in the contemporary urban project

Cesare Macchi Cassia

The urban project is a tradition in Italian architecture. This tradition, whose architectural aim is the construction of the city, achieves the project's greatest objective: the ability of the citizens to recognise themselves anew in the urban form. All planning epochs relate contemporaneity to the existing form, re-symbolising it with new meaning. To what extent this is still valid in contemporary urban territories is a central question regarding the city's quality, the entire environment of our lives, or better the meaning we continue to give it. It is also a central question in the defence of planning as the classic vision of the city as a manufacture able to represent its constructors by using innovative forms and radical different uses. In any case, the basis of form is a planning will whose conscience is to be investigated rather than aprioristically excluded. The reply to this question is given meaning by project planning ability going beyond disciplinary themes: rethinking the contemporary city's construction from the architectural point of view in fact means getting closer to understanding it. This is an objective that other observers have aspired to well before architects and town planners. The latter view the urban landscape as consolidated suburbs in the city and not as a radically different city whose forms derive from a diffusion of the role of centrality that is no longer recognised as a specific space.

Rethinking the contemporary city's construction from the architectural point of view, that is, speaking of an

architectural landscape, means responsibility for the process of modifying the existing being shouldered by autonomous components. It means reflecting on the relationship between architectural autonomy and the reality of urban construction. The geographical dimension in urban landscapes intersects with the dimension of manufactured construction without graduations and hierarchies. Ground used to build architectural environments, which make up urban environments, needs to be organised: the responsibility for making a visible choice is assigned to these two environments, to create a skyline able to dialogue with both the historic and modern city. Configurations which differentiate themselves from the urban continuum, and so offer new meaning to the widespread construction, are indispensable, contained within projected residences built as minimally sized and repeating pieces but which are capable of re-appropriating a composite capacity which endows them with individuality. The instrument of these planning methods is form on a vast scale. The composite approach required for this instrument is characterised by thorough investigation of superimposed planned levels and the integrated interweaving of scale. It brings about the absence of hierarchies present in constructing the contemporary environment that specify the relationship between both means and moments, and between actors and decisions. More than ever in the past, the urban project must work as a revealer in this situation, able to draw more out of the processes acting in the situation. Understanding the reasons for contemporaneity in planning terms so as to contribute to the truth of its forms therefore means putting

forward proposals in a new cultural and interpretative dimension, and doing so well before the physical. The fundamental attitude of planning must be to allow the universe of forms composing the urban landscape to express their potential centrality, to collaborate in affirming a structure. This vision of the potential inherent in the new conceptual dimension of urban landscape, supported by methods which can be applied to contemporaneity in planning terms, provides an opportunity to see the urban project as the town planning project which the contemporary city so dramatically needs.