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A season between new architecture and recovery

Simona Gabrielli

It is quite revealing that 2004, the year of Genoa as the European Capital of Culture, closed with the exhibit/show *Arti e architettura 1900-2000* conceived by Germano Celant. Parallel to the main body of the exhibition held in the Palazzo Ducale, a series of installations by different artists and architects were set up spreading through the city center to create a map, a path through the dense fabric of the old town made up of a sequence of thirteen stops. Apart from the criteria of choice for the individual objects and their placement in relation to the different types of space, it is interesting to note how they have straightaway become goals, opportunities to discover the buildings and the open spaces within an itinerary which starts from and leads back to the waterfront, from Caricamento to the front of Palazzo Reale towards the old docks area, the Darsena, past the overpass. The rationale behind it is the super-imposition on the context of a further level of reading of the urban space, of a fabric woven into a path which systematizes a constellation of pre-existing objects by introducing a new reacting element. The installations become a useful means to lead the visitor to the discovery of values already present in this city, so rich in hidden places. However, a reverse view is also possible. The renewal process of the urban underlying structure has been able to create an arrangement plan which can accommodate the insertion of any element, as it is the structure itself which is strong enough to support the whole. This means that it is not the individual objects that guide the visitor to the discovery of places,

rather it is the revived urban fabric that has the power to arrange the single pieces according to a system. This is the deep sense of the urban regeneration process which has been building up in Genoa and has been phased by big events from the '90s until today. The city has been able to build within itself a system where what is 'empty' can revive what is 'full' and therefore bring new life to it. The places affected by urban regeneration are in fact the old port area and the old town: two vital entities that are different in terms of their establishment, use and purpose, which, however, are physically adjacent and complementary from time immemorial. The conception of the new waterfront, created for the Columbus celebrations, follows the existing port structure through a cross-reference of unique elements, jetties, wharves, warehouses, loading areas. It is a system of juxtaposed, independent and sequential single elements which originated in response to a logic of use, as did the quays on which they rise. The area was designed by Piano for the Expo '92, together with the cotton warehouses (Magazzini del Cotone) and later the Aquarium, and it constitutes the first part of a system which today reaches the Maritime Station, through the old marina (Marina Porto Antico) and the historical docks quarters (Darsena) with the Museum of the Sea by Vázquez Consuegra. A constellation of new or restored buildings of different architectural quality, whose strength lies in the complementary arrangement of discrete elements which are able to establish a dialectical relationship and, at the same time, to be absorbed by the existing fabric. This is an interpretation of an architectural and urban renewal, which is very far from a new self-referential

iconic monumentalism linked to the culture of the image as an end to itself. However, this topic will be the focus, in a not too distant future, of the challenge represented by the carrying out of the Un Studio's project for Ponte Parodi.

If, on the one hand, the waterfront's features can be described through concepts which can be reduced to rarefaction, exactness and distance, on the other hand, in complete antithesis to this, the old town looking over it, is characterized by density, compactness, contact. It is a unique, layered, adjacent fabric where the physical form of architectural features finds its direct correspondence in a complex social and functional superimposition which has always represented the treasure and peculiarity of this urban reality.

Also in the old fabric, the restoration of what is 'empty' allows what is already there to be brought again to the surface, enabling it to react and reverberate with all of its parts. The restored old painted facades find a natural scenario to turn to and the buildings open up their main doors which hide vaulted grand staircases and gardens, unexpected treasures and disguised marvels.

Heterogeneous spaces, different however close, such as the port and the old town are, in this way, both interwoven following a pattern which is superimposed on the already existing one, where the open space acts as binder and reactant onto which the built-up space is grafted. After all Genoa is made of a complex matter, composed of parts which are strictly linked and that can hardly be separated by the urban form. This is the result of the same settling logic observed by the old palaces of the historical center, as well as by the

series of restoration works on the waterfront.

It can be stated that the regeneration process occurred in Genoa has become an expression of a concept of architectural quality, as a result of a search for continuity of the urban identity, which goes through a spirit of transformation inherent in its own genetic code, where the context prevails over the conception of its single parts.

And it is exactly for the same reasons that it can be stated that the new contemporary architectural season has found in this city a continuity also with its own specific interpretation of the tradition of the modern. The 1900s, as everyone knows, offered a comprehensive picture of eminent personalities, from the local figures such as Mario Labò, Luigi Carlo Daneri, Robaldo Morozzo della Rocca and Marcello Piacentini in the '30s, to Franco Albini, Ignazio Gardella and Ludovico Quaroni after the second world war; then Luigi Caccia Dominioni, Angelo Mangiarotti, Aldo Rossi, S.O.M., Giancarlo De Carlo, Renzo Piano, Gino Valle, and finally in the last decade the contributions for the port design by Manuel de Solà Morales and Rem Koolhaas. The new century has seen the opening of the Museum of the Sea by Guillermo Vázquez Consuegra and will be marked by the realisation of Ben van Berkel-Un Studio's project for Ponte Parodi, which are both the result of international competitions. The city of Genoa grew beyond its walls following subsequent additions of homogeneous parts until the first half of the 1900s. This growth followed the plans of the central areas after an unprecedented increase in building activities, completely ignoring the urban morphology typical of the two decades between the '60s and '70s. Since the

'80s Genoa has started again to work on its own body inserting and adding layers to its pre-existing fabric. The reading of a line of continuity through time is necessarily linked to the interpretation of a concept of identity which is the result of an ongoing evolutionary process. It is a process that, despite going through the renewal of its forms of expression, can still always be recognized as derivation from some fundamental urban features such as artificiality, secrecy, stratification, steepness, scale jumps...

Among some meaningful examples are: the work of Daneri, a very capable interpreter of the Ligurian peculiarities through rationalistic needs; the work of Albini who, besides museum projects resulted from the co-operation with Caterina Marcenaro, is the author of the new City Council's office building annexed to Palazzo Tursi: this is an interesting interpretation of the issue concerning the difference in levels, to which the Genoa built-up space has been necessarily reduced; the matitone by Skidmore Owings Merrill, an office tower rising in the urban skyline which, with its out-of-scale design, seems to reabsorb the emptiness left by the excavation of the hill of S. Benigno. Lastly, there is the Museum of the Sea and Navigation by Vázquez Consuegra, where a sober glass skin conceals the bowels of the old building. This is how architecture in Genoa has been able to become an expression of a wise transformation process, by pursuing the new and deepening its roots in the past.