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THE HOUSE AS A THRESHOLD. LINES, BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES

DOM JAKO PRÓG. LINIE, GRANICE I KRAWĘDZIE

Abstract

A house is not reducible to the rules that guarantee physical well-being. Every dream about living converges in the desire for the individual house and not in an urban vision. The consequences are tantamount, in the long run, to a loss. In this sense, it is necessary to restart from those experiences where nature, not trivially, is used as a key component of urban composition. In particular, the themes of the threshold and the interface between the outside and inside are the space of attention compared to the city. Paths and narratives, what can be mobile and what should be fixed, what can be “blind” and what needs to be related with the outside, the city and its landscape, on which to base an “ecological blueprint” of living, the volumes to internal spatial configurations, which give a sense and attention to the project of the house into the city construction.

Keywords: house, urban composition, landscape

Streszczenie

Domu nie można zredukować do zasad gwarantujących wysoką fizyczną jakość życia. Każde marzenie o zamieszkiwaniu skupia się na pragnieniu własnego domu a nie na wizji miasta. Konsekwencje są na dłuższą metę równoznaczne ze stratą. W tym sensie, konieczny jest powrót do doświadczeń, w których natura, lecz nie w sposób banalny, zostaje użyta jako kluczowy składnik kompozycji urbanistycznej. Szczególnie, zagadnienia progu oraz wspólnej płaszczyzny pomiędzy zewnątrz a wewnątrz mogą stać się przestrzenią uwagi w mieście. Ścieżki i narracje, to co może być ruchome a to co powinno być trwałe, to co może być „ślepe” a to co musi pozostawać w relacji z zewnątrz, miasto i jego krajobraz, na którym można oprzeć „ekologiczny odcisk” życia, formy wewnętrznych konfiguracji, które nadają sens i wagę projektowi domu w strukturze miasta.

Słowa kluczowe: dom, kompozycja urbanistyczna, krajobraz

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1. SPACES TO INHABIT

According to the concepts proposed by Martin Heidegger in *Building Dwelling Thinking* (1971), the act of inhabiting is based on an empathetic relationship between person and space. A house is more than a refuge. According to what is theorized by Christian Norberg-Schulz in *Genius Loci* (1979), a person inhabits when s/he is oriented in a place and identifies itself with it. This implies that the space where our life takes place, find its forms and reasons in a *place-space* – intended as the limit, threshold – a space where something begins to exist.

A house is not reducible to the rules that guarantee the physical well-being.

To answer to human desires, the spaces of the house have to be special *places*, each one with its own meaning, in relation to the movement and in constant dialogue with the outside. The “window rooms” by Luis Kahn are primary elements, the *space-places* that measure a part compared to the whole, the succession of rooms composes a sequence that assigns to each one its character, which is variable in time.

A house is not a pure form or volume. In order to create the conditions of spatial identification, to feel good when we live, a house must be conceived first of all as an *internal space*, which corresponds not only to different functions, but to an articulate sequence of *places* between inside and outside, as recommended by Pliny the Younger in his “*Epistles*” (113 d.C.) for the suburban “*villa*”.

To inhabit the physical space has to do with emotions and feelings. In this sense, a house is a state of mind in which resides the very idea of happiness. Its *beauty* does not comprise only the harmony of its parts, but in the ability of its spaces to *adapt* to emotional situations of our lives, which are changeable. Closing, insecurity, loneliness, openness, security, social relations are reflected in baffles, diaphragms, lines, borders and boundaries.

So, the *narration*, the pleasure of a house, expresses the poetic power of the *wall-section-diaphragm*. Within the *threshold* as a place of passage, where private and public are mixed and the individual and collective concepts become more flexible and open, the domestic space fluctuates in the urban place. It is in the “window rooms” or in the “gate brise-soleil” that the Masters have condensed all the qualities of an elementary space, a built-thickness, which separates and unites, such as in the Esherick House in Philadelphia 1959–61 by Louis Khan, in the Curutchet House in La Plata in 1955, by Le Corbusier.

Now, on the one hand, we can see the proliferation of the *gates gated?* – *communities*, set within the “indigenous” city, intermediate communities in which we live “surrounded by “dogs and gates”. On the other hand, we can observe the phenomenon of “villettropoli” and *urban sprawl*, where the relationship with the context is the summation of various individualities in conflict, that have ensured their security through a garden-fence.

About the issue of housing, it seems necessary to deepen the elements with which to trigger again a process of identification between inside and outside, home and city. Faced with the profound changes that have affected the structure of the society and city, it seems useful to retrace those experiences and lines of thought that have attempted to define a *domestic-urban* horizon inspired by anti-urban models, not only for environmental choice, in order to make clear the comparison between nature and artifice, where nature is a fundamental element of the urban composition.

2. NEW DIMENSIONS AND EMPTY FLOOR

Especially on the theme of social housing the issues of the small and beautiful, the social sites, the need to show as much as possible, to establish a relationship with the landscape and simultaneously to have flexible spaces in their different conformations requires special consideration.

In the Gifu Kitagata apartments in Tokyo (1994–2000) by Sejima+Nishizawa, the day-living spaces – oversized and accentuated with ventilation and lighting relations – are the means to bring the city landscape into the house and show the life outside of it. There are no repeated types, but houses with different dimensions. This is done by using a square grid, where each “room” corresponds to a schema module, generating a section where several houses are combined with each other. In the same building is thus guaranteed a complex mix of different spaces for students, seniors, artists in atelier-house, professionals who live together in houses-office-lab.

In “*The Rational Architecture*” (1975), Aldo Rossi invites to shift the attention to the free plan, from the internal distribution of the house, that everyone can have at will, to the place where to watch, since even a single big room is able to establish a relationship with the city and the landscape.

The house question is not only to find positive answers to the place, interpreting the culture, needs, resources and ways to build, but reach high levels of quality even in small spaces. This is what happened in the Italian architecture of the twentieth century, in the projects of Gio Ponti or Figini and Pollini, who by combining proportions, harmony of space, use of light, fixed furniture, demonstrate how the individual dimension of living can live with the collective dimension in the construction of quality spaces.

Movable walls are always changeable depending on the needs that open or close spaces of the house from time to time, such as in the apartments in Fukuoka (1998) by Steven Holl.

By working on the individuality of *emptiness* without internal partitions, the traditional distribution and spatial principles of the houses is denied. The concept of “fixed” is supplanted by the culture of work and mobile home, in time and space, where lifestyles change with the same speed at which you move home. To define spaces through the walls and the fixed screens lends little to functionality and flexibility that are essential to living. It is necessary to recover the principle that, from the Katsura imperial villa in Kyoto (1617), passes through Schroder House in Utrecht (1924) by Gerrit Rietveld and meets in the Curtain Wall House in Tokyo (1995) by Shigeru Ban. In the empty space the plan and section, the horizontal and vertical surfaces, the net light cuts become fundamental.

In one open space, in the empty space live more living spaces that expand and modify the everyday and over time. Thanks to the *emptiness*, with no fixed walls, the possible uses are multiplying, even within limited housing spaces.

3. HOME AND CITY

Every dream about living converges in the desire for the individual house and not in an urban vision. The consequences are tantamount, in the long run, to a loss.

To build a house means to build the city. According to Aldo Rossi in “*The architecture of the city*” (1966), the house is an “urban fact” that is relevant in itself within the city



III.1. Unité d'Habitation, Interiors

composition and the form of which is closely linked to the urban “shape”. In spite of the mutation of forms and uses the house is proposed as an element of city “permanence”, the house is a “method” for the study of the city and vice versa.

If we consider the transformation of living space, it appears that the house, although influenced by the contemporary living, is less subject to rapid and macroscopic changes that have affected the cities and urbanized territories. In the house there are still some forms and methods of building. This is why the design of the house is so important, because it must possess the qualities of the domestic space, both real and ideal, and it participates, as a single unit for living, in the design of city shape, between urban and architectural project.

Le Corbusier laying the fundamentals of living each “at home” and simultaneously in the city, in the *Ville Radieuse* (1922–35) imagines artificial soils, vertical garden cities, with a view, space, sun, instant communications, both vertically and horizontally. The architectural aspect concerns the absolute diversity in unity. Each architect can build his house in the way that he likes and import it in the collection. We have here all the charm of the historical city with its multifaceted spatiality, resulting in a new concept of the designed city.

The main idea is to expand the concept of living, by knitting together the relationship between individual and collective domains. We have to think of outdoor environments, in contact with nature, able to extend the living space. In the project for la *Ville Contemporaine*, *Le immeubles villas* (1922) are a new form of house in a big city where each apartment is actually a small house with a garden, in which the double height increases exponentially, the livability and the possibilities of private spaces. In the *Unité d’Abitation* (1947), with this double-height space the apartments embrace the landscape and the exterior is constantly updated inside the house.

The main effect was that the spatial integration of living in the city was abandoned, in favor of segregation of duties enshrined in the Charter of Athens. Urban reform, both in terms of architectural spatiality, which safeguarded the qualities of a free, open and flexible ground, lost its battle against the private model of land consisting of the single family house, a model that does not often reach even the necessary spatial qualities.

4. INFRASTRUCTURES TO INHABIT

It is necessary to restart from those experiences where nature, not trivially, is used as a key component of urban composition.

The understanding the “*Forest City*” (1755) by Marc Antoine Laugier and the “*Garden City*” (1902) by Ebenezer Howard as an urban system able to run the city, means following innovative typologies and precise rules, able to build an order and a rhythm.

The issue of housing can no longer be separated from the construction of the city’s spaces that are really meaningful, such as squares and parks.

On the issue of the city as a collective work, the formal constraint determined on the basis of established standards, switches from a single house to a group of houses and expands to the shape of the city. We could even say that every building is like a character who recites the text together with other actors of a new part of town, that is, an attempt to convey the relationship between the part and the whole.

Living in a vertical green building as a synthesis of the dream of the country house and the House in town, has recently inspired a new enthusiasm for living in the city: the use of green vertical type in Milan (2012) by Stefano Boeri, is somehow an evolution of the concept of Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse*, or Ebenezer Howard's *Garden City*, but it could really transform the urban order only when used to construct collective sites a city transformed into a park. And for this an infrastructure of the city, an idea of the plan would be needed.

5. URBAN HOUSES

Urban houses are essentially located in the relationship between the internal spatial organization and shape of the city. In the Molitor house in Paris (1933) Le Corbusier carries his thesis of *ville radieuse*. The house occupies a very small area, the long sides of the building, placed in contact with the walls close together, are closed. Inside the building is excavated so as to obtain a better internal lighting. The plant is free, as well as the facade, there are only five pillars between one facade. Each of the eight levels is different, and it builds on the needs of the inhabitants and according to a path.

The short sides, where the glass panels are placed in front of the concrete pillars, constitute the interface with the outside and guarantee wonderful views of the surrounding areas.

The Currutchet house in La Plata, Argentina (1949), is made instead of two separate blocks, the study and the real house, connected through a space-terrace, which is a sort of extension of the outdoor living space. The house, which respects the Spanish-American urban network, has three blind walls, but it is completely open to the outside only through the main façade, which is completely detached, and represents a sort of "relational" diagram between interior, street and city. The house, compared to traditional houses, creates a different relationship with the city and for Le Corbusier the internal organization is not very important, but essential are the paths of the house. The paths, together with the different distribution of different levels, are the "connective" system, the "continuous movement" between above and below and between the inside and the outside.

The settlement mode of collective housing are key elements of a recognizable urban design, because living needs creative options.

Following the idea of preserving the urban fabric, in Rue de Suisse in Paris (1999–2000) Herzog & de Meuron operate a dialectical comparison with the existing city, through typological innovation. By focusing on the project relationships that a contemporary person establishes with the living space, and trying to recognize the elements that represent and identify the culture of our time, these multi-storey models represent the idea of a living which is protected and hospitable.

The apartments are detached from the place, composed of different homes in size, distribution and location, designed in such a way to take the natural light and interesting views of the inner courtyard. The highest parts of the building, located on the main roads, establish a relationship of continuity with the neighboring buildings, but diversified in the movement given to the facades and the used material.

Within the idea of a multilevel-model, the "skin" of wood gives to the whole protection and the appearance of a furniture piece, a closet of the city.

6. SPECIAL CONFIGURATIONS

What are the conditions for happy living?

Reasoning on the house project in order to reinterpret the existing city in terms of quality and complexity must deepen the elements of transition, from the semi-private to the semi-public space. In particular, the themes of the threshold and the interface between the outside and inside are the space of attention compared to the city.

In the project of the collective house – the centre piece of a research project by Claudia Battaino that involved the neighborhoods of public housing in Trento within the PRIN 2013–2016 “*Re-cycle Italy. New life-cycles or architectures and infrastructures of the city and landscape*”, the case study of the social housing in Trentino – the distinction between the public and the private car parks, between the useful and ancillary surfaces, the contiguity and integration between the public and private green and built, the issues that hinder relations and integrations among the inhabitants are the subject of a severe design criticism.

In the study for the spatial requalification, the multiplication of levels, the green and the streets, the houses and parking areas, the work and sports spaces, the public and private urban standards, the services and main uses may be above and below one another, reconnecting the architecture to the landscape. Overlay surfaces, spaces, users at different times, means making system, giving the possibility of different uses, private and public, establish diachronically and synchronously independent activities, distant and perfectly compatible.

The same spaces for different uses and different uses for the same space, overlapping and variations of combinations, constitute an offer of options, instead of existing use-types. Fixed or temporary uses and size, spaces of the individual or in team work (lab, office study, etc.), services (laundry, conference, etc.), spaces for physical activities and games (gyms, theatres to exhibition galleries, etc.) entrances and common areas, various possibilities for horizontal and vertical communications, fixed and movable blocks, can record different needs and opportunities, including structural and engineering, or risk losing the match to the needs and desires of the inhabitants.

The inner space of the house can not only meet the criteria for lighting or ventilation. The house is a container, a “*home cases*”.

According to the considerations by Smithson in *Three Generations* (ILA & UD Annual Report, Urbino 1981) a home can be a closet, a closet necessary for the city.

A closet facilitates the retrieval and manipulation of heterogeneous content, its doors are indispensable to collect heterogeneous content to a precise level of attention, the endless things that are outside and inside a house. Depending on the location, our gaze can cross the open door of a closet. Behind the doors may be hiding secrets, more or less intense spaces, hidden spaces or objects to be hidden. For this reason a closet is a house and, at the same way, a house can be a closet for the city. The house, like the doors of the closet, directs its facade on the road, showing its heterogeneous content. This brings a clear focus on the city level, because everything is related to the individual and the concrete demands, which are heterogeneous content of a closet house. These are not innovative principles, but which have never been exploited fully developed.

The project of the house cannot be determined with manual and regulatory codes that lead to the formal and functional simplification and the absence of meaning.

It seems necessary to re-establish the conditions for interaction between house and city, because a house does not end in itself, but becomes part of a larger civic event which is the

city. A house is a special spatial configuration, an infrastructure-closet of/in the city that works with its urban plan only if it preserves an interior special configuration, open to the changing needs of contemporary life.

Paths and narratives, what can be mobile and what should be fixed, what can be “blind” and what needs to be related with the outside, the city and its landscape, on which to base an “ecological blueprint” of living, the volumes to internal spatial configurations, which give a sense and attention to the project of the house into the city construction.