Ave Maria. Ideal as Devotion, Participation as Exclusion

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«Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth”» \(^1\)

The history of the town of Ave Maria, Collier County, Florida, is closely intertwined with the life of its founder, Thomas Stephen Monaghan, who was known, between 1960 and 1998, in association with the *Domino’s Pizza* chain (sold for $1 billion – currently Monaghan holds only 7% of the company), a brand that in 2010, 50 years after its foundation, controls over 9,000 stores across the world. It appears that before 1960 Monaghan pursued two different callings: he entered the seminary to become a priest and later on enrolled in the architecture program of the University of Michigan. These two callings remained latent during his entrepreneurial life, even though they did find some outlet, and he finally responded to them only after selling the business he had been engaged in for nearly 40 years. During his *Domino’s Pizza* years, Monaghan’s second calling soon became a passion for Frank Lloyd Wright: the *Domino’s Pizza* headquarters in Ann Arbor Township, Michigan, were built after the Prairie School architecture; and so was a private resort in Drummond Island, Michigan, and subsequently his own house. Moreover, he is still one of the greatest collectors of design objects by Wright. At the same time, he consecrated to his first calling a significant philanthropic commitment, as well as building a mission in Honduras, a cathedral in Nicaragua and, in 1983, establishing the Ave Maria Foundation. Directly and entirely controlled by Monaghan, this private foundation was established to promote the ideals of the Catholic Church in American society through education, the media, and political activism. Along the same lines, he later founded Ave Maria Radio, Ave Maria List (a pro-life advocacy group) and the Spiritus Sanctus Academies (70 primary schools). In 1998, Monaghan definitively left the lead of *Domino’s Pizza* and totally committed himself to his dual calling. In 2000, he opened the Ave Maria School of Law in Ann Arbor and the Ave Maria College in Ypsilanti, both in Michigan. In the meantime, the idea of a city entirely devoted to Catholic precepts and gravitating around a university started to take shape.

Originally intended to use some land of his own in Ann Arbor, Monaghan was faced with the impossibility to change its use, and started to seek an alternative location. Collier County offered him a large non-built up area 30 miles from the city of Naples, Florida. In 2002, Barron Collier Companies, Pulte Homes Inc., and the Ave Maria Foundation formalized an agreement for the purchase of over 5,000 acres. In 2003, the Collier County Rural Lands Stewardship Area Overlay was undersigned with the County’s administration: a management plan for the protection of the area’s natural resources and the enhancement of its growth potential through the conversion of farmland to other purposes. In the same year, the

building process of the Ave Maria town was initiated. Since the very beginning, the development plan included two stages. The first stage, initiated in 2004, will be finished by the end of 2011 with the completion of the town centre (La piazza, developed around the Cathedral), as well as the university and its campus. The second stage will define the remaining services and residential units.

«The Town of Ave Maria is the first modern town developed in conjunction with a University. Located just east of Naples, it has been designed from the ground up to be a compact, walkable, self-sustaining town that reflects the community’s rural roots while offering a full range of residential options and commercial services to its residents. Much more than just a development, Ave Maria is a real hometown. Importantly, Ave Maria has been designed to human scale. Street networks, distinctive character, and environmental sustainability are integral to its planning. It is a true community, a place where residents of all ages, backgrounds, ethnicities and religions live, work and play – where neighbors care about neighbors, friendships span generations, and a sense of pride is felt by every resident, student, business owner and employee.»

The town is built, in principle, around a religious ideal, while its morphology reflects its Cathedral which is the landmark of an identity that will eventually gather or form there. Consequently, the town is programmatically, if not expressly, reserved or at least directed to a specified user: it is an explicitly Catholic town even in name. Ave Maria is a place designed on the basis of, and projected towards, an ideal. It is the edification of the community that Monaghan has always longed for and whose realization is possible only thanks to the finite determination of a physical, enclosed space (following the previous attempts represented by the Ave Maria Foundation, the Ave Maria Radio, and the Spiritus Sanctus Academies). It is a perfect colony, fully resolved in the invariability of its characteristics, which are immanent and present, yet aimed at reflecting the anticipation of an infinite domain, both transcendent and eventual: Heaven.

Ave Maria has been conceived of as a self-sustaining town, almost invulnerable to all that is other to it. However, at least at the beginning, it still needs to turn to the outside: before generating residents internally, it needs to look for them by proposing itself in the market as a “product”, strengthened by its distinctive characteristics. It is a space that does not await the coming of the Messiah, but rather the arrival of a community that promises to form an anticipation of the Kingdom of Heaven.

«The Ave Maria community totals 5,000 acres, of which nearly 20% has been set aside for the University and its future growth. Connecting the University and the Town is La Piazza, anchored by the landmark Oratory and incorporating retail and commercial space as well as residential condominiums. Two additional commercial centers are included to provide essential goods and services, entertainment and dining, enabling residents and students alike to live, work and play within the community, often traveling by foot or bicycle. When completed, the Town will contain some 11,000 residential dwellings in a wide variety of price ranges and neighborhoods. From condominiums to villas, and from starter to estate homes, Ave Maria will offer something for nearly everyone. Community resources include an on-site fire/sheriff/EMS building, as well as medical facilities provided by Emergency Physicians Network and Consolident Dental. A significant network of parks and recreational areas has been included; in fact, about 45% of the town area is devoted to lakes and open space.»

With compressed lead times, from a formal point of view the project and its translation into the buildings that form La

\(^2\) From www.avemaria.com.
\(^3\) Ivi.
piazza already show the characteristics that will define the entire town’s space. The references to Siena, Lucca, Florence, and Assisi in the names chosen to identify single sections of the project are simply “baptismal” distinctions (I apologize in advance, but – just for the fun of argument – at least I want to contextualize myself). It is a space that, through the use of determined forms drawn from an indefinite imagery, attempts to represent other open and timeless forms.

The (architectural) language employed in the town fulfills Koolhaas’s words: we can positively state that in this “Potemkin village” we are witnessing «weasel terminologies»; still, to avoid being sacrilegious, I will restrain from addressing the whole with the words he uses in his conclusion («a Satanic orchestration of the meaningless»).4

Siena, Lucca, Florence and Assisi are “real places” that are evoked to benefit marketing more than architectural design or urban planning. In Ave Maria there exist no actual reference to those contexts, let alone expressive forms of community. Siena, Lucca, Firenze, and Assisi (the buildings of La piazza) comply not so much with somewhere else’s spatial laws – which would be in any case impossible to extract and synthesize from “Catholic Italy”. Rather, they abide by their own abstractions, projections of themselves which are unaltered in the becoming; it is Ave Maria (its founder) that projects its (his) forms into time.

However, we need not look at this replica across the Atlantic to find instances of this phenomenon: even in “original” Italy there are examples that move in the same direction. The hypostatization of certain Italian historic centres within an “absolute time” that is absolutely nonexistent – a trend that has characterized and still arouses enthusiasm in certain parts of our national urban planning – is nothing but the projection of static images implemented as laws of space organization; projects that are by no means projective.

But in Ave Maria, I believe, there is something even more interesting that hides and shows itself; or, to recall the concept of «mask» proposed by Tschumi,5 that veils and unveils itself. In Ave Maria, the “Potemkin” dual nature is fully manifested, well beyond its simply being a “double” in the sense of a “replica”. There, “the image of the self” corresponds to “the law of the Other”, or at least to a simulacrum of it. At the same time, however, that self does not become the Other, and certainly not in the (banal) sense of a failed correspondence between an original and its copy. In Ave Maria – a town and at the same time a founding community – everything is controlled; everything appears to be determined even in its becoming.

«What differentiates the culture of the planned community from other cultures of urbanism is its exclusive focus on the complete, well-designed, and self-contained unit of human settlement. Planned communities of all sorts (...) are united by a common, optimistic purpose. All are asking, and attempting to answer, the same question: can the ideal human settlement be planned coherently and all at once, as a separate, distinct entity? (...) Many believed that planning for complete communities was necessary to ensure the quality of the environment. It was the only way to control the whole

4 «Globalization turns language into Junkspace. We are stuck in a speech-doldrums. The ubiquity of English is Pyrrhic: now that we all speak it, nobody remembers its use. The collective bastardization of English is our most impressive achievement; we have broken its back with ignorance, accent, slang, jargon, tourism, outsourcing, and multitasking... we can make it say anything we want, like a speech dummy... Throught the retrofitting of language, there are too few plausible words left; our most creative hypotheses will never be formulated; discoveries will remain unmade, concepts unlaunched, philosophies muffled, nuances miscarried... We inhabit sumptuous Potemkin suburbs of weasel terminologies. Aberrant linguistic ecologies sustain virtual subjects in their claim to legitimacy, help them survive... Language is no longer used to explore, define, express, or to confront but to fudge, blur, obfuscate, apologize, and comfort... It stakes claims, assigns victimhood, preempt debate, admits guilt, fosters consensus. Entire organizations and/or professions impose a descent into the linguistic equivalent of hell: condemned to a world-limbo, inmates wrestle with words in ever-descending spirals of pleading, lying, bargaining, flattening... a Satanic orchestration of the meaningless...» Rem Koolhaas, Junkspace, in «October» Vol. 100, Obsolescence, Spring, 2002.

range of factors influencing planning outcomes.”

This is the aim that was pursued. In Ave Maria everything is designed: from the space to the way you experience it; however perhaps nothing in this project is projected: i.e., really inscribed in the becoming. This enclave is provided with finite physical boundaries and development programs that will end upon completing the last building and selling the last store. An environmental protection strip has already been regulated. The 11,000 residents will inhabit living solutions that are diversified, even though, being all pre-arranged, certainly not customized. Economic independence will be ensured, it is said, by the presence of the private university which will see to “supplying”, among other things, control over the religious education of students (i.e., at least this is the hypothesis, the future residents) who, in this regard, will be rigorously selected.

Even though the town is ultimately directed towards the maximum possible extroflection – i.e., the other-wordly – everything in it will be absolutely introspective: no external “compromising” influence, no unexpected occurrence. At least, of course, when the system is fully operational and regimented (I apologize again: I prefer the accidental and, therefore, the “regime” implication in this last word, in reference to such a context, is decidedly intentional). Even the products sold in stores will be subject to verification: no condoms in Ave Maria.

It is a community that draws strength from a precise identity, which is protected against anything that might imperil it. The determination of both its being and its becoming. However, this extreme determination, as is manifested in Siena, Lucca, Firenze, and Assisi, might be more than a façade where someone else’s image is painted in order to create one’s own; i.e., reproducing Italy in order to absorb its Catholic essence. It might be more than a veil that covers a stronger identity (after all, the calling that Monaghan still feels is more likely directed towards business than architecture or priesthood: he is the owner of all of the stores in La piazza). What is painted on those façades is perhaps no longer what it is, as that shared ideal belongs to someone else. «The actual is not what we are but, rather, what we become, what we are in the process of becoming – that is to say, the Other, our becoming-other. The present, on the contrary, is what we are and, thereby, what already we are ceasing to be.»

That ideal was owned, indeed (by Monaghan, by his fellow residents), but the owner was a self in the past, at the time when that ideal was formulated. Perhaps the fixedness of a Law that over time is engraved in stone causes that thing – that community – to be already something other than what its forms express. If you crystalize an imagery into urban and architectural forms that are so apparently absolute, if you fix an ideal defined by a culture which is necessarily the expression of a space and time that have already elapsed, that have already gone by, you actually render that same

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7 If Ave Maria, at least officially, «It is a true community, a place where residents of all (...) religions live, work and play». Ave Maria University is declaredly “monotheistic” («Founded in fidelity to Christ and His Church in response to the call of Vatican II for greater lay witness in contemporary society, Ave Maria University exists to further teaching, research, and learning at the undergraduate and graduate levels in the abiding tradition of Catholic thought in both national and international settings. (...) As an institution committed to Catholic principles, the University recognizes the importance of creating and maintaining an environment in which faith informs the life of the community and takes expression in all its programs.», from www.avemaria.edu/aboutus/).

8 The «Naples Daily News» of June 19, 2009, reports the news of a free distribution of condoms from Planned Parenthood Association of Collier County as a protest by their absence in shops and pharmacies in Ave Maria (www.naplesnews.com; www.floridaplanedparenthood.org). «Tom Monaghan, the founder of the Domino’s Pizza chain, has stirred protests from civil rights activists by declaring that Ave Maria’s pharmacies will not be allowed to sell condoms or birth control pills (...) Abortions, pornography and contraceptives will be banned in the new Florida town of Ave Maria (...) The town’s cable television network will carry no X-rated channels», Tony Allen-Mills, “Pizza pope” builds a Catholic heaven, «The Sunday Times» February 26, 2006.


imagery and ideal precarious in their future dimension, regardless of the extent of your planning. Here lies the dual nature of this Potemkin, this ideal city. As the elevations of the buildings are erected by making them a replica of something else, so this community is being edified not around an ideal of its own, but in order to realize someone else's dream.

I do not mean to insist on the fact that it is Monaghan's dream that defines those forms and that community, as it is possibly a dream shared and felt as their own by the “Marians” themselves (will this be the name of the residents?). The problem at issue is different, and a potentially universal one.

If what determines a community is culture, no matter which one, then in Ave Maria – wherever one looks for a direct translation of the participation “here and now present” in the production of “steady” forms – culture is immobile, univocally determined like in the Tablets of the Law.

A landscape exists when a culture insists on ceaselessly reinterpreting it and repeatedly connoting it, and not so much on forming it. In Ave Maria, lacking a projection, absolutizing a principle into a form, and indissolubly binding them to each other over time, causes the entire initiative to be only partial.

It is not the partiality of the values (Catholic) that makes Ave Maria's situation problematic. What prevents the projection from being effective is imagining that an ideal (which is necessarily becoming) can be directly transmitted to space and volume (which are in fact “static”).

Participation turns into exclusion not for the banal reason that if a community is “too” cohesively built around a principle, thus featuring too strong an identity, it necessarily excludes others. The issue is, rather, that if a community participates in such a “presupposition,” it necessarily excludes itself from its own evolution within those same premises.

In order to become-other, become a community, participate in the ongoing edification of an ideal city, it is necessary to let go of the ideal. To conceive an ideal city, it is necessary to be without an ideal.

«I now go alone, my disciples! Ye also now go away, and alone! So will I have it. Verily, I advise you: depart from me, and guard yourselves against Zarathustra! And better still: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he hath deceived you. (...) Ye venerate me; but what if your veneration should some day collapse? Take heed lest a statue crush you! Ye say, ye believe in Zarathustra? But of what account is Zarathustra! Ye are my believers: but of what account are all believers! Ye had not yet sought yourselves: then did ye find me. So do all believers; therefore all belief is of so little account.»¹¹

«“Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.»¹²
