From Theatrical Action to the Town as a Stage Set: Urban Images from the End of the 1960s to Today

Ilaria Bignotti, IUAV-Venezia (Dottorato in Teorie e Storia delle Arti, XXV Ciclo)
Elisabetta Modena, Dipartimento dei Beni Culturali e dello Spettacolo, Università di Parma
Marco Scotti, Dipartimento dei Beni Culturali e dello Spettacolo, Università di Parma
Francesca Zanella, Dipartimento dei Beni Culturali e dello Spettacolo, Università di Parma

1. Some clarifications of the method

The following paper is the result of a continuing series of theoretical researches, meetings, debates, and exhibitions that we have been undertaking since 2005 as a work group for the department for the cultural heritage and performing arts of Parma university¹: beginning with an analysis of the mechanisms through which the contemporary urban image is constructed, we have moved transversally in order to examine, thanks to the particular expertise each of us has developed over time, the languages of art and architecture, the new media, communications, technologies and technological innovations, the analytical tools, and various design practices with respect to ideologies and theoretical platforms.

In this sense, the opening of this contribution of ours with the description, in a purposely chronicle-like form, of two theatrical activities undertaken in urban spaces at the end of the 1960s, is intended to relate to the present situation a debate that today is becoming historicized; this debate concerns art and performance practices, from the end of the 'sixties and throughout the following decade, that considered urban space as somewhere to "make things happen".

---

¹ ZANELLA F, La torre Agbar a Barcellona: progetto, comunicazione, consenso, Parma, Festival architettura edizioni 2006;
ZANELLA F, Città e luce: fenomenologia del paesaggio illuminato, Parma, Festival Architettura Edizioni 2008;
Architettura & Pubblicità / Pubblicità & architettura, meeting, Parma, November 2010, the minutes are currently being printed.

Two art events in a town space². The case of Paolo Scheggi


In the context of the art event Nuovi Materiali Nuove Tecniche³ (MALLE et. al. 1969) L’Autospettacolo, microfoni amplificatori + registratori + manifesti. (Self-performance, microphones, amplifiers + tape recorders + posters) was performed.

A singular undertaking for the time.

The production was by Raffaele Maiello, the scenes by Paolo Scheggi, and the music by Franca Sacchi. The main interpreters were the artists of the event, the inhabitants of Caorle, and the visitors to the show.

A series of microphones and loudspeakers were placed around the town, in the spaces set aside for exhibiting the works, as well as inside the installations made by the invited artist-actors; dialogues, voices, the sounds of the public, the townspeople, the artists, actors and casual or knowing spectators were amplified and transmitted throughout the town. This was daily life as it occurred - and immediately reproduced. It has been confirmed by reliable sources that some of the artists had even accepted having microphones attached to their body.

Art had abandoned the medium of representation and chosen the method of a survey: "A survey, the voices of the various listening points are transferred to a circuit that represents the only act or aim of the artist's production".

Posters were affixed to the walls along the streets in order to remind everybody, with a certain dose of alarmism, that they were involved.

The originator and designer of the Autospettacolo was the young artist Paolo Scheggi who had for some time stated that he wanted to "fill 'time' as the 'time for theatricality'" and to transform "virtual space into real space" by shifting "real space towards a time that is liveable and visible" and by rejecting "contemplation in the place of action, and stillness in the place of dynamics"⁴. (SCHEGGI 1969, p.17)

² The bibliography is particularly extensive: in this note I can only mention the recent publication, edited by Cristina Casero and Elena Di Raddo, Anni '70: l'arte dell'impegno, which contains a series of articles specifically devoted to interventions and actions in urban spaces and analyzes the cases of Ugo La Pietra, Enzo Mari, and Archizoom (ZANELLA 2009, pp.69-88); furthermore, a show recently opened, FUORI! ARTE E SPAZIO URBANO 1968-1976, curated by Silvia Bignami and Alessandra Pioselli in the temporary spaces of the Museo del Novecento, Milan, on the first floor of the Arengario (BIGNAMI and PIOSELLI, 2011).

³ The event’s main aim, as was underlined by the catalogue essays by Mallé, Marussi, Passoni, and Trucchi, was to exhibit the positive and innovative relationships that can be set in motion between art research and technological research in contemporary art: this is reflected in the event's title which, as was explained by Mallé in the catalogue, is reversible and indicates both the possibility of having for the period “new techniques for new forms of expression” and also “new forms of expression for new techniques”, as Mallé specified while also wishing the show itself could “exhibit a naturalness in the integration of forms and techniques in a climate of complete freedom”. (MALLE L., untitled essay in MALLE et. al. 1969, unnumbered pages).

⁴ Paolo Scheggi began to become interested in theatre in 1968, a sphere of activity which at first he considered as a field for testing and applying his researches into plastic architectonic language, then as a means for social and behavioural action, not without ideological and political implications and analyzed in a mythical-symbolic manner. In order to investigate the artist's researches better, I would refer you to the critical biography and the recent catalogue of the show devoted to him in Parma curated by Giuseppe Niccoli and Franca Scheggi (BIGNOTTI I, Paolo Scheggi, tracce per una biografia critica, in NICCOLI e SCHEGGI 2010).
The town became both a tool and an object for analysis. "With the Autospettacolo we are both the actors and the public - which is already important in itself - but we are so in an anonymous form (rather like spies) - which is even more important. Total theatre for a system of total power". (TRINI 1969, no page number). An urban big brother, as we would say today. But not all the inhabitants of Caorle understood that. "The Autspettacolo never began and never ended because it was 'a total event', or perhaps the public refused to understand it 'because the artists' interventions modified their natural or artificial environment just for a few days, upsetting their lazy habits but without sufficiently stimulating their tired anxiety about new ecology" as one journalist pointed out (RUSCONI 1969, p.3).

2.2. Como, Piazza del Duomo, 21 September 1969 at 9.15 p.m. circa.

The start of Marcia funebre o della geometria. Processione secondo Franca Sacchi e Paolo Scheggi (The funeral march or the march of geometry. A procession with Franca Sacchi and Paolo Scheggi).

An urban theatre-action in 4 moments and 6 movements.

Floodlights are alternately turned on from four corners of the completely dark square; the volume of the funeral march increases and decreases leaving for the six masked actors the necessary space for carrying in procession large geometric solids: a red cube; a white sphere; a blue pyramid; a black cone; a yellow cylinder; a violet parallelepiped.

From four loudspeakers voices peremptorily declaim, through quotations from the bible or poetry, the forms of urban time: as a condition, as catharsis, as an absence of condition.

The onlookers, those taking part in the procession, those listening or simply tagging along, react differently: most do not understand, but they are involved all the same.

On the other hand, during the day the inhabitants of Como had also watched Bruno Munari’s visualization of air, obtained by flying myriads of strips of paper; in front of the cathedral Gianni Pettena had hung out laundry; a little further on Valentina Berardinone had created an anti-monument to victory, racked by commiseration; Enrico Baj proclaimed there had been a coup d'état and then he began to paint nationalistic horizontal signs; Luciano Fabro solemnly asked for the concession of communal land; Grazia Varisco outlined an itinerary with recuperated cardboard boxes; Ugo La Pietra covered a road in order to make another one; there had been created/experienced an artificial storm in a cloudless sky; and that evening the funeral march solemnly rounded off a day in which the town of Como had been transformed into a Campo Urbano (an Urban Field):

 Campo Urbano was an attempt to reflect on the meaning of artistic research and its possibilities for intervention on urban areas rather than the usual places for its divulgation and circulation such as museums and galleries. Because it was concerned with temporary events that took place on just one day, the role of Ugo Mulas was fundamental: he had made a photographic record of the various events. On the occasion of the previously mentioned FUORI! ARTE E SPAZIO URBANO 1968-1976, (BIGNAMI and PIOSELLI 2011), and thanks to the complex and rigorous activity of the Mulas archive, Mulas’s photos were mounted sequentially in a video - enriched with a reconstruction and reproduction of the speakers and music, the sounds and noises which characterized that particular day - which was screened on three walls of a specifically constructed and separate room. Ugo Mulas’s sequence of photos recording Paolo Scheggi's Marcia funebre was exhibited, on the insistence of Scheggi himself, as a work in itself.
"a test for a 'live' check-up of ideas and proposals for the possibilities and ways today for a concrete relationship between artists and urban communities and the spaces and structures in which they live out their daily life". (CARAMEL 1970, no page number).

The two actions with a theatrical and production character, the Autospettacolo and Marcia funebre o della geometria for the Campo Urbano, took place in small urban centres where the town's public was particularly deprived of, and distant from, experimental languages which were easily understood and were more frequently seen in large urban centres and in exhibition spaces: so the contrast became more tense and thus more likely to stimulate further thoughts and debate about the relationship between citizens and the urban space, between the individual and habitable and liveable spaces. In those very months between July and September 1969 there took place (or was enacted?) the first moon landing, the human conquest of another space, of a new ideal place for the creation of various urban images. What has remained of these experiences of theoretical debate and of planning and creative practices in the following thirty years, from the 1980s until today?

and not simply as a photographic record in the show Amore mio held the following year in 1970 in Palazzo Ricci, Montepulciano; this was a fascinating and revolutionary group show originated by the artists themselves and coordinated by Achille Bonito Oliva (AMORE MIO, 1970). Together with the series of photos by Ugo Mulas, Scheggi also exhibited his Tomba di Geometria which consisted of a black wall and mirrors with lapidary writing; the Tomba di Geometria was, by representing them only nominally, an environment destined to show the solid elements of the basis of Euclidean geometry, some of which had been carried in procession during the funeral march: PYRAMIDS, SQUARES, CYLINDERS, CONES, PARALLELEPIPEDS, and RECTANGLES.

Figure 2. Paolo Scheggi, note registiche per la Marcia Funebre o della geometria. Processione secondo Franca Sacchi e Paolo Scheggi, Como, Campo Urbano, 21 settembre 1969. Courtesy Collezione Franca e Cosima Scheggi, Milano.
3. Ideas and Images of Post- and Hyper-modern Cities

From street theatre, the venue for performances and for re-appropriating town spaces, to the street theatre-set inside the Corderie in the Venice arsenal; this was what had been originated by Paolo Portoghesi in 1980 in order to re-launch history through an "artificial" city representing the hypermodern and hyper-signifying metropolises of the image system of the past decades. Schematically, this is the itinerary we are tracing out with our researches into urban imaginary within which "brand stories" have also been analyzed in the search for possible relationships between ideas of a city as discussed by planners, and metropolitans images and stories constructed in order to promote products.

Around the corpus of adverts we have so far grouped together and analyzed, it is possible to pinpoint meaningful correspondences with certain key words of the past decades listed by Winy Maas when he was asked by Aaron Betsky to take part in one of the architecture Saturdays in the autumn of 2010.

With respect to thoughts about utopias, deconstruction, what is virtual, icons, sustainability, and conservation, which undoubtedly have an equivalent in the value-system proposed by advertising communications, here we can pay attention to the construction of two "spaces" in which there are strong relationships between the system of representation and that of inventing.

The former is one where towns are challenging places in which the narration moves through the interstices of outskirts disseminated with barriers; these become an antagonist against which the protagonist are opposed in a Parkour action which can be understood as an act of "re-appropriation" through the attribution of new meanings. We can flank this aspect, which has a correspondence in the researches of the Dane Kaspar Astrup Schröder with his My Playground programme, with the reinterpretation of the metropolis which is a certain sense is represented by the Nike advert Write the Future. In the video the story is told through contemporary "locations": piazzas, stadiums, the web, with a continual passage from one representational code to another, from one visual genre to another. Virtual space is superimposed and confused by challenging physical territories and fictional and cartoon imagery.

So urban imagery is built up by starting from a self-reflective act about forms of representation, as is evident in the Pesce Rosso agency's advert for Nike, Corri senza freni, which shows a sequential obstacle course through a dark and deserted city, narrated through fragments of marks and contexts where an athlete, thanks to the magical object, creates a series of images that belong to metropolitan culture. This is a subtle game of rewriting in which the creation of the moving body's "double" creates a further level of signs according to metropolitan culture. There is created in this way a sequence which is an obvious quotation of Muybridge's series in which the figure is recomposed as a result of the acceleration of the individual images seen one after the other. The image of a contemporary nocturnal town is thus brought back to its origins by being transformed into theatre as a result of a Victorian device. This advert confirms what Cadeluppi has indicated with reference

---

6 Wieden + Kennedy, 2010.
to the 1990s, i.e. the affirmation of a self-referential discourse. There is a short-circuit between the message and the analysis of perceptive mechanisms that is the same one that has led certain architectural researches, such as those of Toyo Ito with his Wind Tower, to consider architecture as a message-broadcaster.

But with Cori senza freni we find an unusual component: the magical object is a visual device which unifies, not only the photo-frames, but also the metropolitan labyrinth and, in a certain sense, reconciles our thoughts about representation with those of the possibilities of a project.

So this is a contribution to an organized debate characterized by a sharp confrontation between art practices, as has been seen in the past two editions of the biennale of architecture, and certain exhibitions such as Beyond Architecture. Imaginative Buildings and Fictional Cities, and Dreamlands, 2010. These and other events reveal to us another way of looking at architecture and towns based on thoughts about ways of representation. In the context of art research there is criticism of the manifestos of the modern movement, of architecture expressing the global economy, undertaken by altering the tools traditionally tied to projects such as models or diagrams. A significant case is that of Anarkitekton, Colomer's project in which the circuit generated by sculpture, happenings, and installation goes beyond the conceptual nature of certain examples of Land art.

The contaminations between the traditional genres for constructing an image seem tourst into the narratives of the places of modernity and post-modernity par excellence. One of the components that characterize contemporary research is the representation of an "artificial" reality dislocated in time and space (from Disneyland to Las Vegas and Dubai), or recreated in ways that purposely underline the reproduction technique, the opposition between reality and what is represented.

With regard to architecture the best-known example is Celebration designed for Disney in Florida in 1996, while in the sphere of visual research we might well mention certain works that document the use of the studio as a set or as scenery, or other such dislocations as Las Vegas.

These are iconographic and visual models shared by advertising. Just think of the Ford Kuga advert in which breaking through the scenery, as a symbol of the passage from one situation to another, recalls the escape from Celebration on the Truman Show; in the advert the white canvas proposes a theatrical scenery as something to be recreated and that can remind us of such artistic actions as Christo's packaging but which, however, negates the architectural sign, even if it underlines its presence. But they also remind us of the works by Rachel Whiteread, which make use of the tools for representing urban and architectural design by playing with shifts in scale and the absolute contamination of art genres in order to call our attention to the symbolic meaning of architecture and of towns.

---

7 From the Nike The Wall advert, 1994, in which the wall-poster frees itself from the two-dimensionality of the wall, to that produced by Michel Gondry for Lancia Y10, 1995, which can be seen as a discourse about the forms of urban advertising.
8 In particular the one curated by Aaron Betsky and that by Kazuo Sejima.
4. Contemporary city as a set for urban scenarios

One of the most significant aspects in the study of the contemporary city, of its representations and its complexity is linked to the eventual consequences that the so-called “urban scenarios” — either recreational, commercial or cinematographic — could have on the real city.

Four years ago on the occasion of Festival dell’Architettura 2007-2008 titled “Public landscape”, we suggested a tight link between a urban scenario based on digital aesthetics and the planning of the real landscape: quoting Benjamin (BENJAMIN 1936) we could suggest the existence of a landscape “in the age of its mechanical reproducibility” (MODENA 2008). The focus of our interdisciplinary approach12 were urban context places in which the imagines of the urban landscape have origin and then are virtually reproduced in several contests such as videogames, virtual community, architectural rendering and contemporary digital mapping.

Then we found out the consequences on the planning of real city in terms of the creation of a common aesthetic and so the transfer of these aesthetics in the real city, and in terms of perception; we recognized the crisis of the liaison between identity and place as one of the most relevant aspects; in the end we stated the tendency toward a “cut and paste” type of planning beside the contest as on of the result of this premises.

The city in the digital world becomes a set more or less similar to the original (SCOTTI 2008) in which a story takes place or things happen: our research was based on a assumption of the gnoseological value of the visual experience as stated by Tomas Maldonado13 (MALDONADO 1992).

We recognized in the so-called “virtual aesthetics” some elements: the high definition, the kitsch, the hyperrealism, proper of the videogame and cartoon graphic, together with a certain surrealism as well as a widespread citing of postmodern matrices. Is it possible therefore that the permeability of this pop language could influence the real urban planning? It could be as we can see in “cut and paste” architecture, the architecture of the super-surreality14 (such as in Dubai or Macao15). It is largely accepted that the massmediatic culture16, even the one that Gillo Dorfles defines the para-artistic aesthetic, plays today a fundamental role, but it is also evident that it implies a symbiotic exchange: the city phagocytize the scenarios that are produced or influenced by the city itself.

One more evidence of this permeability can be found in the advertising context that is the transposition in the city of imagines and stories proper of the advertising scene of the last decades. Things that were prefigured in advertising becomes real today through the commercial set up of the real city. The graphic solutions and the linguistic escamotage (the use of rhetorical figures) typical of the advertising dimension takes place today in the ephemeral planning.

12 The research theme was interdisciplinary and composed by J. Gervasi, A. Mascio, A. Meneghelli, E. Modena, A. Salarelli, M. Scotti.
13 For a deep analysis see also DELEUZE 1968 e LEVY 1995.
14 DORFLES 2007.
15 The case study is different from the one of Las Vegas, but the model is once again the Luna park and to a certain point the American Mall. See the critical debate from Robert Venturi to Rem Koolhaas.
16 More recently in a study concerning Architecture-Project-Media, we focused on the connection between architecture and advertising.
The necessity of catching the attention and shocking the audience pushes advertisers to find typologies of urban intervention similar to artistic practices not only urban but also models of interaction and of urban furniture, of conventions and imagines taking inspiration from the languages of the visual art.

The ambient advertising enters the city as a type of urban set up: the exhibit design in fact - considered here as a project tout court even if ephemeral and taken as a good practice of exhibition and organisation of commercial and artistic collections - developed a significant adaptation taking advance of its ephemeral nature, key element of modernity. The critical debate on exhibit design in the last two decades focused on this aspects recognising a thigh relationship between the communication of the message and the promotional aspect. From communication to advertising therefore, and advertising enters the city as a type of entertainment and urban set up at the same time and it changes the city in terms on ephemeral as well as rich of consequences from the point of view of perception of the city itself, in terms of aesthetics and of planning at last.

The city and urban space therefore as a big set, a white cube, stage of communities in which parts of the city and ways to live it are discussed and, most of all, invented thanks to the permeability of creative contexts apparently indifferent, thanks to a fluid membrane between real and imagined reality, not always deeply studied and analysed.

5. The videogame cities between utopia and models

The videogame city is a set. Just like the cities built for a film inside a studio, a game environment must translate narrative needs, references, quotations, to set up a functional space after the programmers and screenwriters’ requirements and goals.

But the videogame experience has in its own nature the continuous interaction with the graphic environment you play into, and most of the times also the possibility to modify and also realise it following the precise rules of the simulation, rules that have become more and more complex till today: we can just mention the Sim City series, one of the examples more linked with the architectural and urban project.

Obviously looking through videogame history we can found plenty of ambients which played a role similar to that of theatrical wings, often because of the limited power and capacity offered by the engines: those could be a schematic and symbolic representation of an American city created from an imaginary made of skyscrapers and smoking manholes, designed to support the player action with just a few active and spatial elements.

Many genres have however always researched for a particular relationship with the playable space: an adventure like The Secret of Monkey Island is an example, presenting a model based on fixed-scene locations

---

(following codes and conventions established inside this particular kind of adventures and inside this precise software house) but building up a complex interactivity between a rigid interface and a cinematic narrativity.

Focusing on many precise videogame genres which in recent years researched on urban environments, such as racing games, first person shooter or adventure games, we can understand how the three-dimensional modelling brought us to complex city models, perfectly reproducing existing spaces; with general graphic trends in the translation and reproduction of real world ambients pointing towards a more and more marked chase to a photorealistic style as an aesthetic reference, side by side with bigger and bigger investments from the studios and a continuous update of the technological supports.

Today, as we look to the cities represented in videogames, it's clear that they aren't just a scenography anymore, their spatial qualities are exhibited and displayed, their urban characters are often used to involve the player into the environment, and to invite him to explore this closed world, even independently from the game main goals.

Behind the surfaces, reconstructed from long and accurate photographic campaigns and researches, the polygons that creates the structures remain invisibles, but the space is open and walkable (until you do not reach the last border) and the city is a complex place, a simulation precise even in the graphic details and well-regulated by physics laws and a set of rules that applies also to the architecture. And the graphic representation could choose to set up historical reconstructions such as utopias or dystopias inspired by literature or cinematographic models, side by side with impressive, highly detailed reproductions of actual cities.

The city of New York in Crysis 2 represents a state of the art example, designed with an engine also used by many professional companies outside the videogame world, and an interesting overlapping of a dystopic sci-fi imaginary upon the perfectly recognizable model of the city. Also the sandbox reconstruction of many postmodern American cities in the Grand Theft Auto Series, from the eighties Miami full of quotations from Scarface or Carlito’s Way to the contemporary New York, contributed to build up the game upon a controlled image.

The videogame influences are however so wide and diffused that they are creeping outside the ludic context and the technologies here applied find their way into many different areas and languages, creating links and one-to-one references, putting these cities into the different paths of the contemporary collective imagination.
References

AMENDOLA G., La città postmoderna. Magie e paure della metropoli contemporanea, Bari ; Roma, Laterza 1997.
BIGNONOTTI I., Paolo Scheggi, tracce per una biografia critica, in NICCOLI G., SCHEGGI F., Paolo Scheggi, Bologna, Damiani 2010.
CODELUPPI V., Che cos’è la pubblicità, Roma, Carocci 2001.
KENT S. L., The Ultimate History of Video Games: From pong to Pokemon and beyond the story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world, New York, Three rivers press 2001.