Stratified landscapes: the image of conscious memory

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The complex stratigraphy of the contemporary settlement shows simultaneously the beginning and the end, the continuation and conclusion, continuity and fragmentation of urban formations in which the different traces in the underlying layers are updated. These changes, which follow one another in a continuous metamorphosis, are revealed as the result of discontinuous processes of construction and destruction of residual assets, now evident in urban architectural practices like "building over built" and "designing over pre-existences."

The main background on which this operation takes place is the contemporary city, the city that embodies the discontinuity of the process of finding a plural image, which discards a never reached utopian unity, since it has lost contact with its center becoming a generic urban magma, excessively large and overly homogenous.

No history, no references, no identity, the contemporary city is free of restrictions, yet it feels incomplete and awkward. To respond to this feeling of disorientation, the city became a machine that produces all that it is missing beginning with identity.

"Urban magma' is meant as all that is indifferent and homogeneous, in other words, without form. Identity eventually will be found in shape and distinction. The staging of stratification, through a landscape in which the construction process coexist simultaneously in the same place at the same time, takes place through three main operations: overlay, substitution and transcription. These three steps allow us to grasp the meaning of human settlements and, from an early exploration, to trace the footprint of the original and founding urban biography. The layers (maps) become indispensable elements to investigate the embracing process of the fundamental elements of urban development.

The ground is interpreted as a stratified mater, sedimentary deposit of interfering elements, such as diagrams materialized over time by different processes of transformation and as a deeply written territory, marked by the events that have deformed, crossed it. The ground is read as a complex text, marked by an infinite number of signs.

"The city represents a special way to structure a particular mater [...] that seems to have a particular structural and functional complexity; consisting of a huge variety of materials operable architecture, comprehending a particular capacity of recording historical stratification of traces, a particularly high value attributed to them by the community, ie. it
can not be seen merely as a real estate phenomenon, and even more emphatically that the local environment it involves values and meanings”

In a context of relentless change the only distinctive character of a city is collective memory: "the city itself is the collective memory of the people". Memory is the conscience of the city, its qualitative source, the connection between past and future. Layers, rubble, ruins, full of sense of reality emerge from the stratification. It is, therefore, to create a model of a conscious collective memory, where the key word is awareness.

Architecture is not an independent discipline it cannot be completely separated from other disciplines. For its survival it must be tied to the past and looking towards the future and this is not possible without an urban analysis involving archeology, geography and history.

Geography is the description of the earth (from the greek GHE, earth and graphite, from Graphein, writing), it suggests that the Earth is a script to decipher. The signs of transformation on the stratification are the deterministic part of life that is creative evolution, seeking support and reference for its changing journey.

Archaeology studies the interactions between man and his environment, and especially the processes of cultural transformation that is reflected in the story.

These three disciplines provide valuable tools capable of detecting an act of persistence, which generates an action of identification.

The city is growing exponentially and disordered, and today only careful investigation of strata can lead to a primitive differentiation process we can rediscover the answer to current urban state. This will be through geography representing the external identity, which is the codified expression of human settlement, and through archeology, which indicates the visible material trace of evolutionary or retrogressive processes by layers, review in the memory of the place.

In the process of completion or replacement of centers on centers the enduring value of the place is strongly reaffirmed, condensing fundamental urban functions and strategies.

The recognition of the geographical field as a generator of traces and dominant forms, in a field saturated with signs and archeological findings, becoming a syntactic writing operation of soil by the value of the interpretive geographic morphogenetic sign, where the primitive ordering potential in a confused contemporary context.

The transcript from archeology to architectural design is an order of present elements in the field as well as ordering future design elements. Ruins become an active building principle, being a key element of material culture; it finds the ability to generate in the future projection a structuring system of new urban spaces able to outlive their own time.

The layer, in its archeological dimension, is always projected into the future as a bearer of conscious memory, or of wealth and range of meanings in which the new urban space is between today and tomorrow, becoming, if pregnant with meaning, a ruin in the future.

Stratification is implemented by superimposing in chronological order the key instrument of representation, in other words the map. The term map includes all the plan metric representations of previous historical periods, generally defined as historical thresholds. The term plan refers to current plan metric representations, including representations that identify infrastructure and networks in general. By overlaying the maps, you achieve stratification and the meaning of this operation is to make visible what we commonly walk but never really see. The abstraction has therefore made the

ability to bring to the surface changes that have taken place. It is putting on the same plane different moments in time that we can summarize the process of urban development including all its components.

As in a text written repeatedly, the city reveals interfering levels corresponding to different types of landscapes, images, man made places, memories and signs, evidence of the multiple stages of development. Not a simple inhabited surface but a ground built up over time in complex stratification, the city is the result of a process of assimilation in the transformation and sedimentation in change.

A text consisting of several overlapping grounds, stratified, interfering for which excavating becomes a gesture of prior knowledge. Throughout this process ruins are discovered, their recovery is not only a historical testimony, but it assumes the value of understanding modifying attitude and the principle by which to base the new settlement because ruins are where past and future meet. The Ruin introduces a time dimension hierarchy in which each vanishes. Through the transcription of signs, deeply inscribed in the traces of soil, one can understand the permanence and variability, what remains and what has been lost forever.

Due to a simultaneous reading of layers and periods it becomes possible to see which elements are maintained over time and what kind of transformation takes place on the same open space, such as change in building’s shape, use and meaning.

"The city grows on itself, acquiring consciousness and memory of itself. In its construction the originating reasons remain meanwhile the city states and modifies the reasons for their development [...]")³.

The essential stratification of coexisting layers of infrastructural networks defines the character as a meeting point between different types and velocity of commuting and use of the landscape / environment.

The layered landscapes show the image of conscious memory and the various layers making up a city can only be read simultaneously. This simultaneous reading of the landscape is the layered image of conscious memory.

The city and its spaces are called to guide the transformation process of the history they embody is the scenario on which we reveal the tangible results.

"The city in its vastness and its beauty is a creation born from many different stages, the unity of these moments is the urban unit as a whole, the ability to read the city lies in continuity with its pre-eminent formal and spatial character."⁴

In a simultaneous reading of a settlement’s layers and different periods it is possible to check which elements are preserved in the change of use, which guidelines are reused in the change of trails and paths, what transformation takes place on the same open space to move from one enclosure to a square. What elements change shape, meaning and use, but above all, it becomes possible to see what survives the radical change because "The city is not only an object of perception [...], but it is also the product of many operators that for specific reasons are constantly changing structure"⁵.

A simultaneous look allows us to retrace survival as a "indecomposable urban matter 'or revelation of deep primitive traces, to draw not only a valid criteria of knowledge, but also an area of design methodologies for the city of the future" to design amongst preexistences. " The resulting image is clear and that is generally applicable to groups of local identity.

³ Ivi, p. 3.
⁴ Ivi, p. 65.
This is a clear picture because, despite evolutionary complexity, the original form and guidelines are progressively tracable. Knowing how to apply a historical multiple image in some cases produces the multicultural reconstruction of a conscious memory. It means being able to see and anticipate the evolutionary characters of a system and provide sound proposals for contemporary design.

Often in environmental and urban planning, the sign of memory in a secularized territory is so thin as to become a quiet reference, or too faint to be recognized. Memory, however, is physically reconstituted in its geometric matrix, organically anchored to a centre established by a mesh (the plot) physically visible and accessible. The design is manifested as a conscious and permanent gesture, respectful of a both multiform and millennial order.

The contemporaneity of proposed spaces of new design vertebrate structures emerge, not alienated or supine to an amorphous expansion of an uncontrollable organism, as has sometimes been erroneously claimed.

The space that emerges is a responsible place, present in its own memory, as only truly contemporary architecture is able to demonstrate when it manages to outlive its own time.