

# The Endless Foundation

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Abstract: This paper considers the foundation of Rome and the figure of Romulus, the Founder, imagining the latter as a contemporary architect facing the relevant problems of unfounded settlements. Contemporary cities are often unfounded because their public spaces have lost any relations with the architecture of Earth. The act of foundation produces an architectural representation of the geomorphological features of the founded site that is technically developed within the *cartographic space* of the architectural design. Through the studies of Andrea Carandini about the foundation of Rome and the thought of Michel Serres about the idea of foundation in the western world, the paper affirms the necessity of re-thinking the role of foundation as a project that returns many times during the life of settlements (“like a refrain”, writes Serres) and that every time describes the architecture of the Earth. Like the sprawled villages that constituted archaic Rome, our sprawled settlements can be re-designed by the means of *foundation design* able to attribute an identifying value to public spaces. In analogy with the concept of “identity representation” proposed by Alberto Magnaghi, public spaces could become architectural representation of those geomorphological features of places that enhance the identity of communities.

Key words: Carandini, Heidegger, Magnaghi, Serres, deterritorialisation.

## *Foundation and territorialisation*

This paper examines the foundation of Rome, one of the most ancient urban projects of western architecture. The aim is to write about Romulus, the Founder, imagining him as a contemporary architect facing the relevant problems of unfounded cities.

In the essay *Anaximander's Saying*, Martin Heidegger stated that the first known text of western philosophy resonated together with the last one, Nietzsche's works. As *Anaximander's Saying* is somehow the founding stone of western thought, the birth of Rome can represent the foundation of the western city. Heidegger's idea is that the being of Anaximander is the being of Nietzsche; my idea is that the Romulus architecture concerns also our architecture. Obviously this statement negates the historical paradigm. Heidegger, in fact, criticizes

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historicism and affirms that: «If we can manage, just once, to hear the saying it will speak to us no longer as a historically remote opinion. If that happened, then we would not be misled into the vain attempt to reckon historically, that is, psycho-philologically, what was really present in the past, in the man called Anaximander of Miletus, as the condition of his representation of the world».<sup>2</sup> Therefore, for us, the problem is not to understand and/or to reconstruct the conditions of the representation of the world of Romulus but to consider the problems of contemporary architecture as the experience of the foundation of Rome.

Historical proximity or remoteness from Romulus's time are not important for our discourse: on the contrary we are neither near nor far from Romulus; we are, as Heidegger writes, in the "wandering". The more we try to put Romulus within an historical dimension, the more we go away from the understanding of what Romulus could eventually say about the contemporary city. If we suspend the historical perspective, we might be able to describe Romulus as a contemporary architect: «We seek what is Greek neither for the sake of the Greeks nor for the advancement of science. We seek a dearer dialogue not for its own sake but solely for the sake of that which wishes to come to language in such a dialogue, provided it comes of its own accord. This is that same which, in different ways, is destined to concern both the Greeks and us. It is that which brings the dawn of thinking into the destiny of the West. It is as a consequence of this destiny that the Greeks first became, in the historical sense, the Greeks».<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, "Romulus" doesn't mean in our language a historical, psychological and anthropological character: "Romulus" means – as a "Greek" character means for Heidegger – the dawn of dwelling on Earth through architecture, the paradigm of destiny according to which architecture founds places for dwelling. Thus when Romulus founded Rome he faced a problem that also related to the present issues of dwelling and settling: the problem of the indiscernible bind between architecture and Earth's surface. «The question comes up: are places first and only the result and issue of making-room? Or does making-room take its special character from the reign of gathering places? If

2. HEIDEGGER 1946, p. 247.

3. *Ivi*, p. 253.

this proves right, then we would have to search for the special character of clearing-away in the grounding of locality, and we would have to meditate on locality as the interplay of places?»<sup>4</sup> Heidegger's questions describe how foundation produces a process of territorialisation and de-territorialisation. When we build, we do not occupy only the Earth's surface with the new settlements, but we "re-produce" above all the Earth's surface. "Making-room" (that henceforth for us means "design process") does not generate the site but it is the site that leads design (or rather, that gives form to design). On the contrary, can the site exist without "making-room"? Without the representation produced by a the design of a site, can that site become inhabitable? On the other hand, are built or imagined architectures generated by the form of the places? Foundation makes substantially indiscernible the relationships between architecture and site: architecture discovers site and site finds architecture. I shall look at this perpetual oscillation, without ever solving it. My hypothesis in fact is that the architecture of foundation is nothing else than a constructed representation of the founded site: the space "left by the grounding" in Heidegger's words. Foundation territorializes the settlement, putting it in the ground but at the same time it de-territorializes the ground transforming it in architecture.

### *Foundation and description*

«The ancient bed of the Tiber, the elevations of tuff with vertical slopes, on whose tops were set small plateaus, and the areas of level ground that crept between these heights before opening out in to the Campo Marzio were revealed to be elements of a landscape that, notwithstanding its transformations, persisted with all its telluric force in the constructed city that I was discovering. [...] Alongside the visible city stood a natural pre-city, now almost completely invisible except with the imagination».<sup>5</sup> It is easy to observe, as Alberto Magnaghi states, that the architecture of the contemporary city and territory is very far from the idea that foundation is an action related to geography: «The increasing liberation from territorial constraints ("deterritorialisation") has led in time to a loss of awareness about the relations between the human

4. HEIDEGGER 1969, p. 306.

5. PURINI 2015.

settlement and the environment [...]. The destruction of the memory and biography of the territory forces us to live in anonymous sites, reduced to supporting the functions of an instant society, which has brusquely interrupted relations with the history and the memory of a place».<sup>6</sup>

The disjunction of settlements from the Earth's surface implies lack of spatial identity, as the impossibility of identifying collective spaces within contemporary unfounded settlements and the denial of geographical features as elements of cultural identity. All these phenomena mark an era in which the separation between architecture and Earth has been defined the "generic city". This definition, coined by Rem Koolhaas, represents the idea of a generic settlement produced in the global age, uninterested in the specificity of places: stratas uniformly built and superposed on an abstract surface. Therefore, our planet seems to be reduced to a geometrically perfect and smooth sphere instead of the combination of different geographies.

In this perspective, the act of "grounding" no longer has its traditional meaning because what we lost is exactly the "ground", i.e. the geological and imaginary stratification that distinguishes each inhabited space from the others. Despite these ideological considerations, places continue to be thoughtlessly built and therefore they became scenarios for frequent natural disasters because of the "opposition" of their original territories. When people build inside alluvial areas or omit the maintenance of the hillsides, deny the understanding of the identity of a place, replicating an unconscious need to build the scheme of a "generic city" and despite the potential tragic destiny of destruction. Thus, when today we study the processes of foundation, we affirm the necessity of reinventing places in order to return to inhabit Earth. This necessity does not concern, as it is evident, only on the safety condition of settlements, but on their meaning, on the relation between geography and dwelling. And, it would be ingenuous to face this problem through an idea of place generated by simple spacial fixed rules.

Therefore, André Corboz has argued the need for architects of taking in account the constitutive multiplicity of spaces: «apart from a few rare exceptions (more impressions or hypothesis than certainties), everything continues, for architects and urban planners, to take place

6. MAGNAGHI 2005, p. 11.

with the trap of sacrosanct perspective, the first matrix of absolute space, because it too presupposes a homogeneity of space».<sup>7</sup> Indeed, places are the result of the stratification of as different spaces as they can be represented. So, I suggest the hypothesis that, first of all, foundation is that particular representation of a place whose collective nature ensures effectiveness to the settlements.

Alberto Magnaghi's proposal concerning the "urban village" is based on the role which the foundation of places implies today. Magnaghi describes how the problem of dwelling in contemporary territories has to deal also with the mythical and symbolic dimension of foundation. Magnaghi, infact, has elaborated the concept of "identity representation" based on the role of representation of places: «The most recent 'statutes of places' need to describe and represent the identifying features of a territory and the construction of a system of rules for their transformation, ensuring their specific values are enhanced».<sup>8</sup> Magnaghi points out the substantial indiscernibility between representation and production of place: «The "identity representation" is a cultural document accompanied by specific iconographic apparatuses identifying the long-term structure and character of the place beyond its current and future uses [...]».<sup>9</sup> In this perspective *foundation* can be seen as a *new representation* that unveils some hidden or removed characters of place. As a matter of fact, the meaning of *condere* – the roman verb that means both "to found" and "to hide" – brings an unsolvable paradox: the enigma of the continuous and unrestrainable oscillation between the architecture that territorializes itself by representing the places and the Earth that becomes architecture being invented by foundation.

This *mutual becoming* is both an occultation and an unveiling: the ancestral marsh of Velabro is hidden under the first pavement of Foro Romano but, at the same time, the stone surface reproduces the flat and immobile surface of the water. Similarly the slopes of the hills are hidden but also remembered by the substruction walls, while Murcia Valley is substituted but also exalted by Circo Massimo: «Foundation, then, is the passage from the water to stone, the transition of phases;

7. CORBOZ 1993.

8. MAGNAGHI 2005, p. 89.

9. *Ivi*, p. 93.

let's us not forget the first waters»,<sup>10</sup> writes Michel Serres in his book about the meaning of the foundation of Rome for the contemporary societies. Hence, the foundation project aims to architectonically represent the ancestral enigma of indiscernibility between architecture and Earth's surface. Paraphrasing Heidegger's words, this enigma brings the dawn of design into proximity to that which is to be designed.<sup>11</sup>

### *Foundation and architectural design*

«The foundation of Rome was not one event. It was an event, assuredly, but one that was only the first variation on a theme to be taken up again and again. Foundation is recurrent. It returns like a refrain. Rome does not cease to be founded; the act of origin or rooting continues indefinitely. To that Rome owes its long survival».<sup>12</sup>

How many times is it possible to re-found a settlement? This question sounds odd because foundation is often associated to the unrepeatable instant of the origin. According to the common sense, after its foundation, a settlement grows along the uninterrupted line of a continuous time without ever coming back. The model is biological: settlement is founded, it grows, it lives, and it dies. But, if we try to distinguish "origin" from "foundation", only the first term holds the idea of a continuous time containing only unrepeatable events: on the contrary, "foundation" can be understood as an act, or better, a technique that is for definition repeatable. The debate about the birth of Rome has been for long time represented by two position: according to the first, Rome would grow through a slow becoming of an unique settlement (this position is due principally to Müller-Karpe's studies);<sup>13</sup> according to the second one, stated by Einar Gjerstad,<sup>14</sup> Rome would be originated from a sinecism between the communities of the several villages which occupied the site, until then independent and sovereign.

However in the half of '90 of the last century a new thesis has arisen. Andrea Carandini argued that Rome would be founded by means

10. SERRES 1991, p. 241.

11. "Then thinking must poeticize on the enigma of being. It brings the dawn of thought into proximity to that which is to be thought" in HEIDEGGER 1946, p. 281.

12. SERRES 1991, p. 263.

13. MÜLLER-KARPE 1962.

14. GJERSTAD 1953-1973.

of a project, on the basis of the excavations that he carried out at the north slope of the Palatine from the Vesta temple to the Arch of Titus. Personified by the figure of Romulus, a deliberate act would have given a political, sacral and architectural unity to the federated system of the previous settlements. So, despite the legend, Rome had been already formed when it was founded: «Romulus's first achievement, – writes Carandini – involving the blessing and walling of the Palatine, dates from the second quarter of the eighth century BC, and a fundamental part of the second achievement, involving the Sanctuary of Vesta in the Forum, also dates from the same part of the century, which would make it part of the same project of Romulus. We therefore have not only the *urbs* on the Palatine but also the sacred and political center of the *regnum* [...] we have, from its very beginnings, the city but also the state».<sup>15</sup>

This thesis attributes a very important role to a design *punctum*, in other words, to the time when a subject provided of will (not only the obscure and brute forces that dominate archaic history) performed a series of sacral and political acts accompanying them with some, accurate, architectural interventions on the site of Rome. The main demonstration of the existence of this *punctum* is the discovery of the remains of a defensive wall datable to the mid-eighth century BC, when the legend fixes the foundation of Rome. For Carandini this wall, and its urban and sacral meanings, demonstrates that the foundation of Rome was achieved by an architectural project and that it wasn't an *ex novo* creation or, on the contrary, a myth that symbolically represents the slow and progressive forming of the urban community. In Carandini's studies Romulus assumes the role of the Founder-Architect who acts in the dimension of space-design and not only in the temporal dimension of history: thus this *punctum* can be studied not only in view of its value for the understanding of the birth of Rome but also for its possible implication with the architectural design of the contemporary cities. Romulus foundation can be seen as the surgical insertion of some specific architectures within an existent settlement: the wall around Palatine, the public platform of the Forum, the Sanctuary of Vesta.

Hence foundation means both a difference, a series of spatial transformations, and a repetition, the re-description and the re-

15. CARANDINI 2011, p. 88.

signification of a settlement. The consciousness of this double character of foundation is especially important today, when it seems that there are no more places to found (build). In our time the origin appears lost in time and the idea of founding a new settlement looks ingenuous. Despite this appearance, nowadays, more than ever, the foundation of Rome is current. Rome already existed and nevertheless Romulus founded it. Romulus founded Rome and nevertheless Rome was founded many times yet: by Augustus, Nero or abroad in the colonies. Rome, like our settlements, continues to be founded.

From this position, foundation assumes an anthropological dimension that constantly recurs despite the historical differences and despite the long duration of the processes which the transformations of the settlements imply. This dimension affirms a role of design that is, if not sacral, at least symbolic: *foundational design* represents a cyclic pattern that cannot be confused with the incessant process of transformation of the settlements. From this point of view the contraposition between foundation and formation, between fragmented or continuous spatial development disappears, so that the two processes seem integrated.

Finally, the usefulness of the study of what happened in the site of Rome towards the second half of the VIII century BC lies in the structural analogy between archaic Rome and contemporary settlements and in the role that design could still play in their architectural re-thinking.<sup>16</sup> Also several contemporary settlements look like dispersed places waiting for being re-founded. We can learn from Rome that founding doesn't mean creating from nothing. We can think that the foundation is a design technique whose aims are oriented to the construction of a rediscovered identity for existent settlements. Abandoning the sacral and political meanings, nowadays *foundational design* aims to the identity of dwelling, to the consciousness of the geographical features of the inhabited space, to the role of public space as a space able to architectonically represent the Earth's surface.

### *Foundation and cartography*

«[...] Rome is a multiplicity. It resembles those paintings that, seen from here, look like an ocean scene; seen from there, make us

16. About the political aspects of this analogy see QUARONI 1969.



see a naked figure; seen from elsewhere, represent another scene. [...] Rome is a fabric of others; it does not strictly exist as a subject; it is an ichnography. Divide it and it is still Rome; a mixture can be divided without ceasing to be a mixture, and it can grow for the same reason».<sup>17</sup> According to Serres, Alba, the city of origin of the two founding twins, looks as many contemporary settlements: «Alba precedes Rome; indetermination precedes the determinate. [...] Alba precedes Rome, as the possible precedes the realized [...]. Alba is in Rome as the potential is in power».<sup>18</sup>

Alba stretches along the Earth but is indistinct, without form and, for consequence, without relationships between its architecture and Earth's surface. Alba is a “platform of origin”, the primordial condition of Rome, its predecesso made of water and stone. The multiplicity of spaces that constitutes Alba – the chaos isn't the absence of order but rather the superimposition of many orders – still does not represent a richness or a variety in act but rather her multiplicity is confused in an undetermined white space. As integrated of all the spaces, Alba is indeed a “landscape”: «There is not a single space, but a landscape. A landscape is a mosaic of spaces, not an ensemble of objects put in a common space».<sup>19</sup> Like our contemporary territories, made of several and superimposed strata, Alba belongs to the category of landscape because she isn't able to cut her multiplicity by means of a foundational design.

On the contrary, “Rome is a ichnography”: according to Michel Serres, the foundation of Rome can be literally thought as a cartographic operation. Its result, Rome, is a map that reduces the indetermination of Alba to a determination. This is the crucial point: Romulus founded Rome by means a *cartographic device* able to engrave within the ground one of the strata that constitute Alba. Following the Etruscan rite, Romulus firstly traced the *templum in terra* on top of the Palatino, a rectangular area from which the *auguri* scanned the bird's fly in order to determinate the right place to found the city.

As Carandini explains, Romulus repeated this square diagram at three scales producing a series of “propagations”: at first he traced the *templum* itself, then he superposed the scheme to the morphology of the

17. SERRES 1991, p. 151.

18. *Ivi*, pp. 45-47.

19. *Ivi*, p. 185.

Palatino hill (since then it was also named Roma Quadrata) and at as a third step Romulus extended the diagram to the entire settlement. In this way the *templum* became the map of the site but also the *diagram* recalling the city walls and the all the other walls defending the other hills of the city. Romulus *cartographically* created what Antonia Pizzigoni calls a “coupling plane” between geography and architecture: «The map isolates and extracts single themes, it shows how architecture, or better, some its components, characterize the points of passage between different geographic elements. Every cartographic plane, every strata is, as argue Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, a “coupling plane” between two facts of which one is a geographical element and belongs to nature and the Earth, the other is an element of the built, a architecture or a part of it».<sup>20</sup>

In a similar way, in the sight of Romulus (The Architect), the cruciform diagram of the *templum* reproduces the cruciform shape formed by the bights of the Tiber and their extension in the linear marshes of Velabro and Murcia Valley. The *cardo-decumanic* layout is not an abstract representation but is exactly the cartographic diagram of the site of Rome. Evidently Romulus *foundational design* performed the first “coupling plane” between the architecture of the city and its site. But it also provided the *cartographic device* that allowed the *propagation* of the principle of Rome foundation as a *diagram* distributed in the Roman Empire, the layout of all the Roman foundation cities. The sinking of this scheme in the ground is indeed the condition according to which Rome is an “*ichnography*”: Rome transforms the indetermination of Alba into a cartographic representation that impresses the architectures within the surface of the Earth. In this way the map founds the Earth and the Earth doesn't preexist to its cartographic foundation.

The secret of the repeatability and actuality of the foundation is hidden within the technical and operational features of the map: “Rome

20. PIZZIGONI 2011, pp. 223-266. The original text is: “La carta isola ed estrae singoli temi, mostra come l'architettura o meglio alcune sue parti caratterizzano i punti di passaggio tra elementi geografici diversi. Ogni piano cartografico, ogni strato, è come dicono Gilles Deleuze e Felix Guattari un piano di «aggancio» tra due fatti di cui uno è un elemento geografico e appartiene alla natura e alla Terra, l'altro è un elemento del costruito, un'architettura o una sua parte”. (The paper isolates and extracts single themes, shows how the architecture or rather some of its parts characterize the points of passage between different geographical elements. Each cartographic plane, each layer, is as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari say, a plan of «coupling» between two facts of which one is a geographical element and belongs to nature and the Earth, the other is an element of the built, a architecture or a part of it).

does not cease to be founded; its history and its time are simply the pass between two occurrences of the founding action”,<sup>21</sup> writes Serres. Rome never leaves the time of dawn. In fact the foundation of Rome comes back again with Augustus, Nero, and Constantinus. Every time Rome encounters a determinate political and social project; the city renovates the need to found itself in the Earth: while the Augustus Imperial Palace architectonically reproduces the features of the primitive site of Rome,<sup>22</sup> the Neronian Domus Aurea designs in the middle of the city a water-based landscape reproducing the coast between Rome and Naples.<sup>23</sup>

But, if every foundation is different from its precedents, if the projects change, we have to consider that every time Rome is founded, asks for a *cartographic* and *geometric device* (the “Anaximander’s Table”, as Franco Farinelli writes):<sup>24</sup> the cadastral order able to organize the space and to subdue the city by means to a new law. But, at the same time, through the act of building, through the obstinacy to build, this organization expresses that the Earth remains there as an essential sinking, that the foundation belongs to the night, that the order grows only upon this indetermination, that the bright reason wouldn’t win without considering the obscurity. The venerated holes in the pavement of Foro Romano, like the Lacus Curtius, celebrate both the disappearance and the presence of the ancestral marsh. One of the most symbolic public spaces of the western civilization is also the monument in memory of the substitution of the water with the stone.

So, in every foundation, in the folding strata of its obscure depth, the relation between settlement, public spaces and Earth’s surface generate a new form. Foundation architectonically represents the identifying *geographic* features of the *inhabited* place. For this reason it is endless.

21. SERRES 1991, p. 115.

22. CARANDINI, 2008.

23. See for instance CHAMPLIN 1998.

24. On the “cartographic reason” as matrix of the western thought see FARINELLI, 1994, FARINELLI, 1998, FARINELLI, 2011.

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