

A leap forward and a possible prospect

The “new” foundation of the “model city”

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Abstract: The meeting between Modern Movement and Italian urban culture is, even today, an extraordinary place for reflection on urban space, its transformation and its possibilities, its being a “model city” (*città dimostrativa*). The modern city is above all an idea of the city. The proposed reflection regards the city as a field of re-foundation in which it is essential to have a completely specific refounding principle for Italy on the international scene, which derives from the cultural context and the link between the project and the original dimension of the places.

Key words: Milano verde, Giuseppe Pagano, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Stefano Boeri, Expo Milano 2015.

The encounter between the Modern Movement and Italian urban culture is, to this day, an extraordinary point of reflection on urban space, its transformation and its possibilities. The modern city is, above all, an idea of [the] city, as Giorgio Ciucci and Maristella Casciato write in the book on European rationalism that gathers shows exhibited in the XVI Triennale of Milan and with a particularly effective title: *1930-1940. The model city of European rationalism*.² The modern city is presented in its own ‘demonstrative’ essence; the character, of a demonstration, that invokes a theorem and renders the city an entity beyond the physical and physical dimension that identifies it. It means that the rules of building a rational city respond to a theorematic principle which Italian culture assumes with a specificity that identifies it in the international panorama of modernity. Modern Italian architects assume a new role and responsibility: a political role, an ethical responsibility. In their essay, Ciucci and Casciato write: «the horizontal city represents the refounding of the city itself; so its image seems to re-echo that of the cities newly founded». The reflection I intend to propose concerns the city as domain of a re-foundation by way two modern Italian projects.

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2. CARUZZO-POZZI 1981, refers in particular to the introduction by Guido Canella and the essay Un’idea di città by Giorgio Ciucci and Maristella Casciato.

That is, the consideration that in modern urban projects an absolutely specific refounding principle for Italy in the international landscape is essential and derives from the cultural context and the nexus between the project and the original dimensions of the locations.

Origin

As Manfredo Tafuri wrote, regarding Ludwig Hilberseimer's Grosstadtarchitektur, it is «a machine city, integrated, at the highest-level, in the process of capitalist rationalization. As a motor of economic development, it is configured by him as a bare structure, as a city without any qualities»³, and, always regarding the Grosstadt, as Daniel Köhler⁴ recently wrote, is the “mereological” principle that determines the structure of the modern city in the interpretation of one of its fathers. Hilberseimer's idea of the city is governed by the relationship established between the part and the whole, mainly in their reciprocity by which architecture defines the city and at the same time, without hierarchical and procedural order, the city defines the architecture. Undoubtedly, Italian architects in translating morphological and typological reasons have introduced aspects of mediation which, however, have not reduced their exemplary power. This may be seen in the results of urban projects that have acquired the true appearance of “new cities”, in which one may recognize the possibility of fulfilling the simplest needs, the profoundly human reasons of living and dwelling.

For Italian rational architects, the theme of the city, the relationship between building and urban construction, is crucial. Above all, the theme of origin is a founding element in their thinking of the city. Establishing the origin of the city means building a prospect of the “new”, so important in the historical moment in which they operate, since in establishing the break with the past, the interruption of a “natural” process of urban development is determined. So the criticisms of the past that they carry out, generates apodictic affirmations against it, leading to an inevitable destruction of continuity.

In the two examples I have proposed, a profound difference is evident. It is precisely the reference to what is “preexisting” in the two hypotheses of the city. Both of them start from the negation of the

3. TAFURI 1973.

4. KÖHLER 2016.

existent, from its cancellation and destruction. As I wrote, the direct references of both proposals are obvious and well known, but Giuseppe Pagano, in presenting them, introduces beforehand we can call archaic. He needs to establish a “previous” that is not too near, since this would reduce the revolutionary force to which he aspires, and must also be an unquestionably exact period.

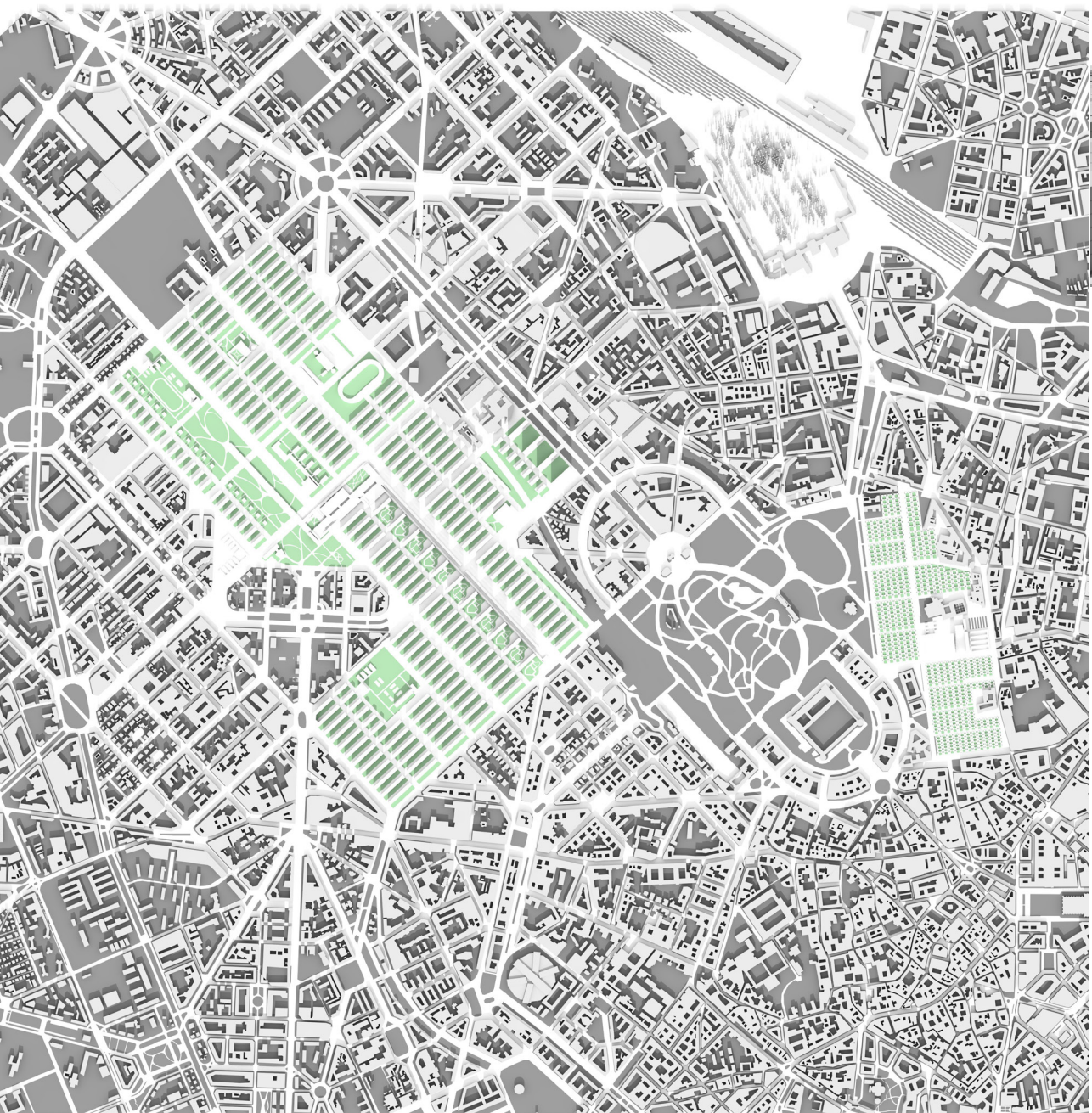
He, therefore, constructs two mythologies, differing widely, since the two projects and their possible developments and applications are widely different. In the case of Milano verde (green Milan), the myth adopted is the “order”, an order which opposes the disorder of urban reality. For this, Pagano creates a completely unexpected reference: the origin of the project lies, according to an analogous process, in the action of the man who plows the furrows of agricultural crops. The tracing of cultivated fields, characterized by “parallels cut through by rare orthogonals” and which recalls a distant past in which man lived harmoniously with nature, is the structural principle of the new urban system.

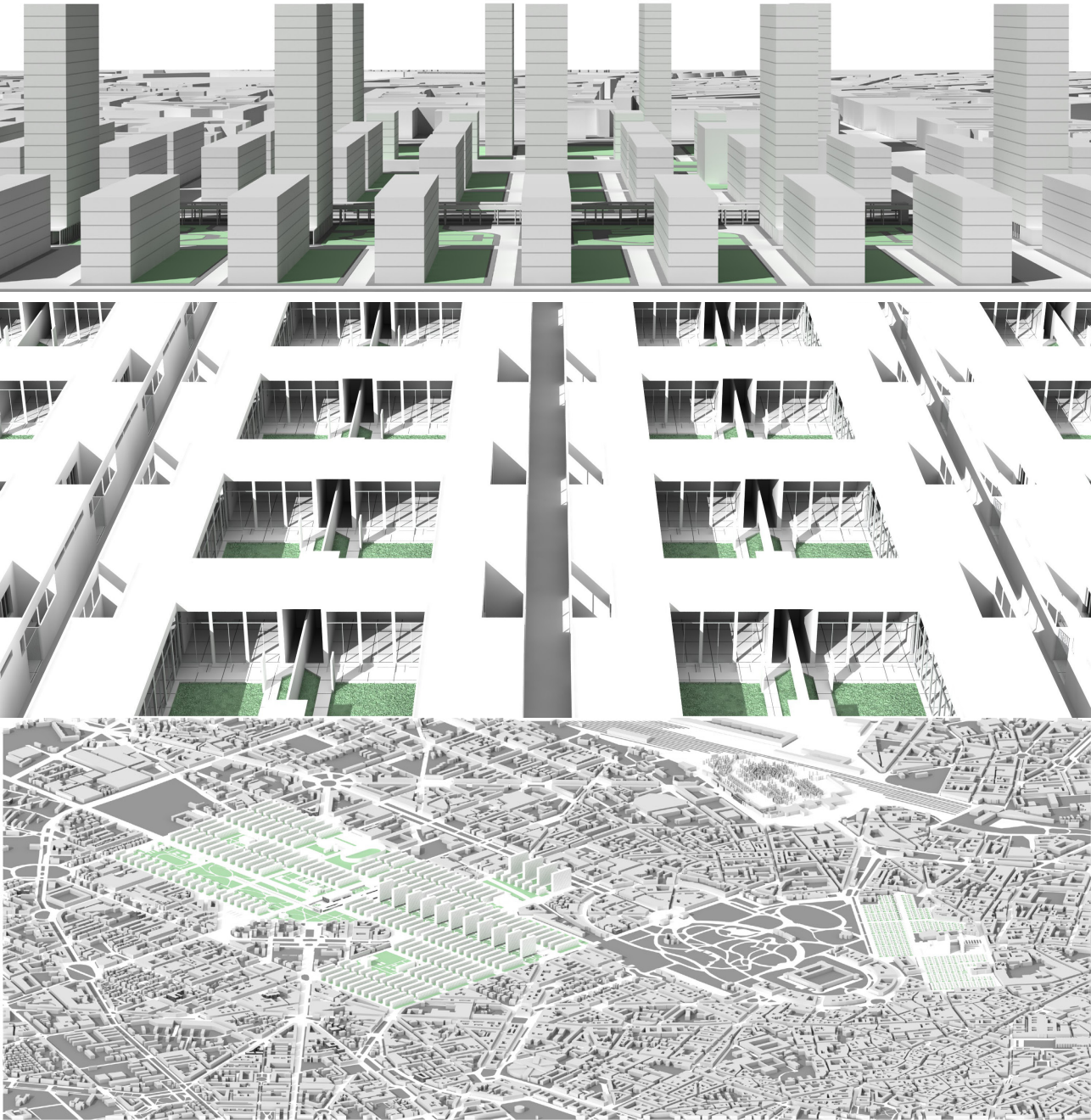
The same goes for the horizontal city Neighborhood, in which the settlement principle is ideologically related to the ancient cities of Hellenic civilizations of the Mediterranean basin. The two representations are such that they are immediately comprehensible, but above all irrefutable in the exactness they represent: the first expresses the harmony between man and nature, the second is the happy condition of the peoples settling in settings of a mythical past.

Therefore, for rational architects to break the continuity with the pre-existing city means introducing a new order, a new formal principle, but, above all, establishing and locating a precise moment in which the city is translated into an image of harmony and “happiness”.

It is not simply a question of selecting a specific range in the construction and transformation of the urban form, wherein one recognizes the worth. It means, rather, building a new narration, a pictorial narrative, understandable and immediate. If, at the time preceding the project, architects had adopted a precise choice of “a” time and “a” specific form of the site, establishing “the before” which to refer to, it is itself undoubtedly the outcome of a construction.

The origin to which architecture in its own manifestation of the project refers to is, therefore, itself a construction. An analytic and selective construction first, and synthetic successively, expressed in the





"Milano verde". Drawing by Francesco Menegatti, 2016.

images of the “new cities”. What I would like to emphasize is how much such a construction of a new beginning that seeks space by way of the *tabula rasa* and, at the same time, uses a narrative temporality that can reconnect the “stories” of the city, strongly characterizes our urban culture at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Italian rational architects work within a praxis of design in which, time and again, the project, even the one with the highest degree of modeling, dialogues with “one” complex pre-existence, made of locations and histories, and simultaneously represents a new beginning and the “distance” from the instances of the modern international movement.

Two emblematic examples

Attention to the human dimension of living clearly emerges in the editorials by Giuseppe Pagano in the magazine “Casabella”, where he promotes the proposals that he, together with others, draws up for Milan, “Milano verde” and the Neighborhood of the horizontal city but which may be traced back to the writings and influence from his acquaintance with Edoardo Persico. Both proposals are backed up by an unshakable logical principle: “an act of the will for an idea that is not interested in scenographies but in real social needs”, writes Pagano, of the two projects.⁵ Undoubtedly in Italy the theme of “rurality” has particular and specific meanings, both in relation to the physical context of Italy, but also related to those aspects of political propaganda that had to appeal to the character of the majority of the population, still largely agricultural. On the one hand, Italian architects projected their imagination onto a progressive and technologically advanced future; on the other hand, they had to contend with a country still immersed in a strongly backward social and economic situation. However, they sought solutions that could represent new lifestyles, but that could also manage to maintain a tie with reality and with the problems that connote it. In the horizontal city Neighborhood, whose explicit reference is the *Moderne Bauformen* by Ludwig Hilberseimer, the architects identify as the principle of settlements the repetition of the unity of the home. This principle is determined in the possible applications, by solid reasons

5. PAGANO-DANIEL 1936.

such as the ability to meet an average density of 250 inhabitants per hectare, through an extensive model called “semi-rural”, of single-family houses with garden but is opposed to any speculative logic of intensive interventions. The whole is structured according to a *cardus* and *decumanus* system, along which the services are aligned, from around a square a system of distinct roads branch off following a hierarchical principle. The hypothesis is the realization of an innovative urban system but also of housing that corresponds to new possibilities of human life: the unit house, which varies in size according to the number of family members and which together form the space of the *civitas*, of the community. The horizontal city Neighborhood is the representation of an urban space alternative to that defined by, figuratively and ideologically, intensive constructions, and Pagano mentions a direct reference to “the Italic centers of the greater flourishing Hellenic civilization”. If with Milano verde the analogical-iconographic reference is an “innovative” rurality that arises from the hypotheses of the *Ville radieuse* and is contaminated by images of agricultural spaces in the Lombard countryside, in the horizontal city Neighborhood, the European solutions to the garden cities combine with the domestic and family dimension of the Italian agricultural tradition, recalling the image of the courtyards and the farmyards of the rural houses. Both for the Milano verde and the horizontal city Neighborhood, the morphological assumption is the *tabula rasa*, the wiping out what is preexisting. In this sense, it is a re-foundation, an elimination and subsequent establishing of a new order. In fact, there are two proposals that, also as a result of the fact that they will not be realized, will assume the characteristics of a model.

Still, there is a mediation to the ideological and innovative vocation concerning the partial and progressive elimination of the pre-existing constructs and the maintenance of much of the road system, to the point of being able to claim that the Milano verde project does not forego, even if only in part, a direct comparison with the city, modulating the transition clearly the passage between the two urban systems, having them coexist on the common settlement matrix. The city that Milano verde presupposes is the city founded on the principle of separation and distinction between the buildings and their functions. Whereas the Neighborhood horizontal city is a town of houses, a

relatively continuous tapestry of plenums and voids. A city in which green and open space predominate, which is also contributes to this separation. The paradoxical dimension of emptiness, understood as the space between things, in Milano verde translates into the great device at the level of the square, to affirm that this separation requires remedy, a reunion. In the Horizontal City, the void is represented by the courtyard, the patio of the unit house, the place of domestic quiet, family time, of equals recognized as *cives*, citizens.

Rurality. A leap forward and a possible prospect

If we focus on the territory of the Milanese hinterland and identify the most recent transformations, we will realize that the logic that governed urban interventions until the 1990s no longer exists. Some of the premises have changed as well as the conditions, especially financial. This went along with a high degree of complexity of factors present in the territory. The city is now incomprehensible, indecipherable, non-decodable except through systems of decomposition equally complex. In addition to the many levels that must be taken into account in reading the territory, such as the geological-morphological conditions, the fundamental topic of the infrastructure, so historically underevaluated, is added to policy-management, regulatory and enforcement ever more complicated.

Expo Milano 2015 has evidenced how the central theme of transformation in relation to the duration of the architecture. But above all, it made urgency into an imperative, thus adding logics of precedence indifferent, if not antagonistic, to the logic of building. The timetable of the project and the timetable of the economy conflicted various times. Even after the Expo ended, urgency was the leverage of “reuse”. In this context, accessibility, connectivity and the issue of infrastructure upgrade, in the hinterland, are central. In fact, among the motivations in the creation of Expo was precisely the endowment of a system of connections between this area of the territory and Milan. Among the unresolved issues, however, remains the relationship with the surroundings, with the urban context that does not derive from new destinations a direct benefit. The view from above with Google maps evidences a new type of “enclave: the one determined by the infrastructure. The first responses and requests of the post Expo have

produced many hypotheses: from the center, for innovative research, to recreational, cultural, and sports areas... in all cases the emerging issue concerns the potentials of the connections to Milan, with the A8 highway and west bypass (tangenziale), subway line 5, the viability of Cascina Merlata, area subject to real estate transformation.

The long-distance views show a territory that is completely filled up, with no hierarchy among plenums of the same weight, and there is not even any difference between what is built and what is not. Despite this bulimia of constructing and filling up, it is possible to see an order due to the original matrix of the Lombard landscape, the order that made it habitable, the hydrological infrastructure of the territory.

In 2011 Stefano Boeri elaborated a series of projects for Milan under the name “Biomilano”. He developed an urban model of a new city where innovation does not directly concern architecture, but where architecture is the backdrop to an anthropic nature. He hypothesizes a society capable of addressing the new challenges of “environmental sustainability”, in which the target that defines the inhabitants is identified by those who correspond to the definition coined by Richard Florida, the creative class. These are citizens who correspond to the three Ts: adopt Technology, use their Talent and are Tolerant. The creative class is one that today can afford to live in the Vertical Woods. Even Boeri, like Pagano in the Milano verde, projects the present into a hypothetical original landscape in which agriculture is decisive for the territory’s structure and innovation maintains its progress. However, if for Pagano architecture assumes a dominant role in ordering and delineating urban space, thus defining the new vision of the city, for Boeri architecture is a renouncing its artificial rigidity to show the reality of a captivating and friendly “nature”. This is a vision related to the concept of Generic City, developed by Rem Koolhaas, in which architecture is to be a generic container, indeed, to which the idea of a bucolic, but artificially modeled and conditioned, nature is added.

In Milano verde, architecture dominates the urban landscape, it does not confuse the natural with the artifice, expressing a principle of permanence that is not present in contemporary urban visions in which the interchangeability of objects-artefacts is evidenced, rather than their duration over time. Pagano’s horizontal city is defined by the

typological study, the minimal measure of rooms, the best irradiation, the best distribution; that is, there is reflection structuring the architectural construction even within its proper disciplinary essence. Houses are not generic containers, the city is not “generic”.

Milano verde, the Horizontal City Neighborhood, unlike Biomilano, poses the question concerning architecture and the city as something regarding the duration, the permanence over time of architecture and city, and therefore with the possibility of transformation and modification or even replacement. To say that the city is generic means maintaining its instantaneity, flatten it onto the present, since the absence of connotation, of character, prevents the transformation, the elaboration of an alternative, the criticism that projects it into the future. Biomilano is represented through the language of the comics, through the levity of pop art, masquerading in its ideological essence, absolutely present. Boeri conveys an image of the city which contains an immediately understandable, shareable meaning, “pop” exactly. However, he cannot escape a theoretical formulation, although a minimum condition, he assumes the hypothesis of the “new realism” by adopting the least degree of visionary view possible for the project, in which there are no plans, sections, typological studies, but rather images of houses drawn as if for advertising brochures, shifting the meaning of the project, but above all of the architecture, which, as Marco Biraghi wrote: «Lost the most raw and speculative appearance, the intensive neighborhood and the skyscraper are now shown in unedited guise, as announcers of “happy news [...]” all in the very heart of the metropolis, but a metropolis that within them is completely transfigured, almost as if it concerned a permanent vacation spot».⁶

6. BIRAGHI 2015.

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