

Presentation
by
LUCIO VALERIO BARBERA

The City of Public Spaces

“Every landscape appears at first as a vast chaos, leaving one free to choose the meaning one wants to give it”; is thus how Claude Levi-Strauss, last mid-century, seems to be speaking of nature but, instead, he is speaking of the nature of cities. Modern cities. And with no uncertainty he sets his reasoning along the line of those schools of thought and poetry that, for at least two centuries before him, have observed and interpreted the change of the form and function of the city and swept away ancient meanings, devoted to the search for new ones with the greatest clarity. Abbot Laugier was born in 1713, exactly at the time of the triumph of absolutism, when the process of devastation of public and collective functions of medieval urban democracy had ended, whose death bells had already rung during the Renaissance. The integration, even symbolic, of public spaces – religious, assembly and commercial – represented by the often adjacent squares of the cathedral, the civil functions and the market, had been broken up by the emergence of central – what we would call state-powers – to which all citizens had become subjected – excepting the few, very rare, Peers, who were lavishly maintained by the same central power. As always in the history of human settlements, once meanings are dissolved, functions reduced or eliminated, in the city that expands or contracts – in any case, transformed – the ancient spaces and forms remain. They, the precise moment of the definitive defeat of those reasons that had generated them, seem to reveal the autonomous personality of their tectonic language and the permanent emotional force of their space as if they were not the end point of the special courses of history, but proto-types emerging from the deepest layers of the human condition: that is, as if they were *urban types* – as we architects say – contemplated *ab origine* in the vast tables of the “typologies” of the city and architecture, a true “a priori synthesis”, as some fatal teachers of the School of Rome tried to teach us. Thus, their original weight of meanings, forms and functions, lost, the typologies (codification) of public places immediately lent themselves to constituting an archive of systems in the composition of the great scenery of the modern city, now so vast and so devoid of clear

messages to induce Laugier, in fact, to call to us: “*il faut regarder une ville comme une forêt*”. And later, Francesco Milizia took up that call completing it: “*A city is like a forest, where the distribution of a city is like that of a park. It requires squares, crossings, streets in large numbers, spacious and straight. But this is not enough; the plan must be designed with taste and with variety so that order and transgression, eurythmy and variety may be found together; here the streets fan out in a star pattern, there a trident, another a spiral, others fan out, parallel further out, everywhere trivi and quadrivi in different locations with a multitude of piazzas of all different forms, sizes and styles. The greater choice, abundance, contrast and even some disorder reigns in this composition, the more it will be picturesque and will contain lively and delicious beauties.* (Principj di Architettura Civile, 1781)”. Pierre Patte, a few years later, would be able to punctuate with Royal Squares of every kind – *con gusto e con brio* – the design of the already immense space of the capital of the Ancient Régime: real or imaginary piazzas, places destined, however, varied in meaning, function and name in the flow of modernity as vague and yet indispensable public spaces, where to place a throne or gather crowds, take down statues or erect guillotines, plant gardens, gather elegance and above all open hotels and cafes in which more intimate spaces, the *flâneurs*, citizens with no public interest if not the defense of their own individuality in the labyrinth of the infinite mass, can from time to time perch, aimlessly like birds, on the branches: “*The crowd is its element, as the air is that of birds*” says Walter Benjamin of the *flâneur*, the modern citizen without public hope, modeled upon himself by Baudelaire. Charles Baudelaire was born in 1821; little more than a century has passed since the birth of Abbot Laugier: is everything finished? During those hundred years, other spaces have been added to the category of urban places with no political function left; the greens, the woods, the meadows that stretched beyond the city walls, always considered rightfully used by the crowd on holidays, enter the new and larger urban boundaries; next to the piazzas, among the functions with which to shape the metropolis are now also public parks. Alongside or within which the growing concern for the wellbeing of the restless masses, will give rise to the idea of organized sports, of walks, formally controlled, of the Music pavilion, of that of natural wonders, soon followed by a Science or Cultural Museum. Even the ancient idea of the Opera Theater, once of the Royal

Palace, rushes to take its place along the Elysian Fields as an integral part of a possible formal order of urbanized nature. And as the city becomes a vast and less familiar forest, as the enclosed places multiply, the covered plazas of education and of mass entertainment, the palace-piazza; markets are formalized. The activities to be safeguarded are isolated from the dense forest of the city in specialized clearings and multiply. Social rationalism will try to organize the new sectors of the city – or the new cities – around them; around schools, neighborhood centers, libraries and children play areas, all democratically communal services; *public services*, therefore, where citizenship is expressed as a right, no longer *ancient public places* where it would take the form of power. And in so many rational and social labors Laugier's and Milizia's forest does not grow from rationality, but from a myriad of other places "of all different forms, sizes and styles" so numerous and diverse that it will be impossible that in the urban forest "the choice, the abundance, the contrast and even some disorder" would reign of that new natural harmony of the modern city that the masters dreamed of imparting to us. Claude Claude Levi-Strauss was born in 1908, almost a hundred years after the birth of Baudelaire and almost exactly two centuries after the birth of Laugier; in the middle of his century, the 20th, Levi-Strauss, then, writing about his visit to New York and São Paulo, may still – more forcefully than in any other era – affirm that the modern metropolis cannot be understood with the criteria of architecture, but with those of the landscape. Landscape, *paesaggio*, an ambiguous word in neo-Latin languages, which contains in itself the idea of nature understood, however, as an inhabited place par excellence (*paese = town*). For Levi-Strauss's generation, the generation of our teachers (Ludovico Quaroni was born in 1911, a few years after Claude Levi-Strauss) the value of the metropolis, therefore, is not its buildings, but its settings, all definable as public places each with a different degree of access and freedom of use, from the least to the greatest, but all always linked to each other. This is the natural landscape of the city in its most mysterious form, open to emotional exploration, has become – since two centuries previous – the ideal of the architect, the philosopher and the poet; a landscape dense with surprising places, all which can be variously united according to the form of our variable existential experience. But this city, this arduous forest that demands abandoning our fixed habits, converting our *inactivity* into *exploration* – ("not

knowing how to orientate oneself in a city is not significant, but getting lost in it as you would in a forest is something that requires learning" Benjamin says) – this city that we love, but which can also frighten us with the many degrees of freedom it seems to offer everyone, is it perhaps not already present – secretly – in that Rome “scientifically” designed by Giovanni Battista Nolli right in the middle of Abbot Laugier’s century, at the beginning of modernity? A Rome in which all the spaces excavated in architecture seem to form a continuous public fabric – piazzas, churches, androns, arcades, courtyards, major and minor halls – almost as if it were an unwittingly offered map to an imaginary revolutionary crowd that wanted to make the papal city into an extraordinary, permeable public space, an instrument and opportunity of unimaginable freedom?

For all the above and in this spirit, our magazine wants to begin talking about the public places in the city. And we thank Ettore Vadini for the commitment – we hope the (his) first – in the undertaking to open the immense catalog of urban functions that make up our individual and collective life.