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STATEMENTS

A European way to sustainability.

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Even as we seek to sediment a set of principles for *Sustainability Sensitive Urban Design*, experimental projects are multiplying in numerous cities, above all in those which traditionally have a higher degree of environmental awareness. A robust group of rapidly evolving, field experiences is coming into existence. Consequently opportunities are presenting themselves where together we can learn the potentialities and the limits of this new culture, the results of which will probably lead to a redefinition not only in the field of operability of the notion of sustainability, but even of its own theoretic meaning.

On the other hand, as Bidou says, “sustainable development is not a rigid, well defined concept, but a way of thinking with which it is appropriate to collectively imagine the world of tomorrow. This is a movement, comparable to the Enlightenment of the 18th century, to which each participant can bring their own contribution”. What matters in this movement is technical elaboration, technical knowledge, but equally important are the social practices founded on real behaviours and on a willingness to interiorize individually the values of sustainability.

So, taken as a given that sustainable development will not be the result of an approach dictated by sectorial techniques or reasons based on energy savings, rather than on the substitution of energy sources or the recycling of used water, ours is still the problem of understanding the sense of the ongoing changes in the design culture which is taking the theme of sustainability seriously.

Having given an account of the experiences of London, which, on the occasion of the upcoming Olympics, has set itself up as a candidate for Europe’s capital of sustainability, in this issue, EWT will present some experiences in the USA. In particular Mosè Ricci has described the innovative strategies adopted to raise up the company industrial town of Detroit, bringing it back from the abyss of degradation into which it had sunk because of the very serious crisis in American car manufacturing.

Documenting and comparing the experiences of different countries is a fundamental part of the EWT program, which intends to critically examine the possibility of recognizing the differences in the paths being currently travelled toward the “invention of traditions” of sustainability. In particular we ask if – and when – one can start recognizing a *European path to sustainability*, a common denominator of the experiences found in advanced countries like Sweden, Denmark and Finland, with equally significant ones of Germany, France, Great Britain and – slightly less – those of Spain, a European way which Italy can use as a benchmark. As it has no national plan to give it direction, our country is lagging, but it is enlivened by a multitude of local experiences that are attempting to translate themselves into an overall and organic policy.

And precisely Italy, with its strong tradition of protecting the landscape, could contribute effectively to a new thematization of sustainability, centered on the importance of the cultural and historical heritage and avoiding absolutely that it be compromised in the development processes toward modernity.

Instead the state of the art seems to point toward uncertainty in the *landscape sensitive design* culture that is not widespread, perhaps because it is suffocated by over-riding regulation approach which for centuries has been a characteristic of our country.

The initiative “EcoLuoghi 2011” has been significant from this point of view. It was promoted by Associazione Mecenate '90 and sponsored by the Ministry for the Environment. The notice announcing this project consultation for living spaces with a minimum of 45 square meters was well formulated. It was to be carried out together between designers and their relative building firms. Ample space in this issue has been dedicated to it, publishing the materials of the competition and the reflections of Ledo Prato, coordinator for Mecenate '90 and of Lucina Caravaggi, member of the judging commission. With the objective of the Ministry assigning the “ecobollo (eco stamp)”, both the effectiveness of the real sustainability of the building and its correct insertion in the surrounding landscape, were considered as determining prerequisites of the project. These are at any rate required by the Code of the Cultural and Landscape Heritage.

Well, the vast majority of the projects which were presented show that still today sustainability is perceived as a product of environmental technologies that act on the building as an object, rarely becoming an occasion to innovate the architectonic concept (as occurred instead with the advent of modern architecture and of the “ville radieuse”), and still less to have put in place a qualifying relation with the surrounding landscape.

In Italy, as elsewhere, sustainability seems to be an appendix of the specialized approaches of design, engineering and building technology, rather than the expression of a new design culture capable of reinterpreting the architecture and urbanism, moving from the capture of the relations to what surrounds them. A culture that considers the work as an organism that breathes together with its context, seeking a better equilibrium in its metabolic flows, both with the surrounding ecosystem and with the historical values of the relative landscape.

More in general, it seems that the environmental and landscape perspectives, both too weighed down by their respective traditions, the scientific values of ecology and the humanistic ones of history, have yet to merge into a new and convincing synthesis.

So, obviously, one cannot be too surprised if this diversity of interpretation then produces a gap between the two approaches: the emphasizing of the *quantitative measures* to assess sustainability, well fitted to the scientific pretexts of the concept; or an assessment based instead on a *qualitative argumentation* and on the possible convergences between intersubjectively shared opinions, reflecting the complexity of the relationships in play in the transformation of the existent, which goes well beyond the reductionism of the environmental parameters used by today's accrediting systems.

So we discover that the imbalance between technology and landscape brought out by the competition “EcoLuoghi 2011” conceals deeper questions, belonging to the different philosophies in play and to the interests which they can mobilize. The one of quantitative control of the environmental functioning of the building object and of the residential complex, which appears rather more powerful, as it is an expression of well identified objectives (e.g. the fortunate “20-20-20” formula advocated by the EU to quantify the objectives of reducing pollution, improving energy efficiency and increasing energy production from renewable sources) commensurate with the logics of the building industry and the real estate sector, and in

particular with the possibility of making the market appreciate the added value of buildings constructed using sustainability principles. The other which instead refers to a way of living the landscape and of sharing its cultural values, bringing sustainability to a “real world measure”, in other words, to thinking of the use of natural resources and of the compatibility of this use within a more complex framework of life that gives meaning to our condition in the world (precisely, the way of thinking totally as they did in the above mentioned Enlightenment).

By following this second path, a *sustainability sensitive design* may then run into, among other things, the reflections that are popping up around the concept of recycling. This is an emerging phenomenon, like the convergence among several strategies of intervention relative to the sense rather than the figuration of the object, which for this reason Ciorra considers “one of the most sophisticated and up-to-date forms of expressive research of contemporary architects”.

So the urban projects that “work with techniques comparable to those of architectonic recycling” tend to embody the answers of the design culture to the problem of sustainability: “re-constructing instead of constructing; construct below, above, around, inside and on with discarded material, instead of constructing, inhabiting the ruin instead of constructing, re-naturalize instead of re-urbanize”. It is above all those projects which include a re-elaboration of discarded urban material, material already gone through its life cycle, but which can still be transformed into a strategic resource, and projects which induce new life styles more sensitive to the environment and even able valorize surrounding areas and contribute significantly to the regeneration of existent cities, that are the real expressions of an advanced culture of sustainability.

This is the case of High Line of New York analyzed by Gasparrini and Sassanelli in this issue of EWT. But this is also the case of numerous projects presented at the exhibition *Recycle* at the MAXXI, the Museum of Contemporary Art and Architecture in Rome, which closed recently. This exhibition has been reviewed for EWT by Mosco.

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