

Dialogues Pandemic, Utopia and Dystopia

Franco Raggi
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BF

Wednesday, November 9, 2020. It has been raining intermittently for a week in Milan. It's 3:14 pm and I've just entered Franco Raggi's studio, a space he shares with Daniela Puppa and where they store (almost) all of their archive of books and design objects.

Franco, last month I met Piero Frassinelli. He told me that, during the quarantine period, many people wrote him saying that it felt like living inside the *Continuous Monument*, some even mentioned the *12 Ideal Cities*. According to him this was the result of a deprivation of freedom (how can you blame him). In your opinion is it reasonable to rethink utopias and dystopias after the pandemic?

FR

Yes, even if in the Continuous Monument there is no contact with reality. It's a titanic and hypertrophic architecture and the result of a pessimistic vision with no relationship with reality and this lethal contrast was the most fascinating part of all Superstudio's work. It represented the desire for power translated into an architectural image that challenged the banality of reality through a violent but not catastrophic imaginative act. It was just the apotheosis of the power of design. The pandemic didn't feel like living in an utopia or dystopia, I felt I was living in a surreal situation in which the city had been completely "cancelled".

In fact the most important function of the built environment —connecting people — had disappeared. For a period every economic and social activity was zeroed out so in a way the city no longer existed. Matter fact the motive behind the urban need for proximity no longer existed. It was not an utopian city, it was just an empty city and it was a deserted and surreal place in which you perceived its geologic structure even more, its weight and its rigidity. I have lived this moment as an architect and I have looked at the empty squares and

streets with amazement. I experienced and lived the pandemic as an immediate and unforeseen event, which has highlighted the fragility of the world's economic and political system.

BF

Do you think that this pandemic has changed and/or will change the society we live in?

FR

Not so much. The most interesting thing has been to see how this microscopic element (the virus) has reset classes and class levels: it could (and can) affect anyone. It affected planetary economies and made me think about how much an unpredictable factor can hit an apparently solid system. Probably memory will allow us to hide the suffering of this year because the desire to think of humans as we were before the pandemic will be stronger. But we must be careful not to forget in order to obtain a radically different attitude for the future. There have been pandemics even worse than this one which have not changed society but have often generated explosions of vitality in the immediate aftermath. It could happen to us too.

BF

In your opinion how will this period affect individual and collective consciousness in the short term?

FR

There will be a greater awareness especially on some urgent themes such as sustainability and the problem of globalization that has destroyed the governability of the territory because it's hostage to the



Via dei Condotti,
Roma, 2020
Photograph by Marina Ciampi



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global system. This system has no interest in collective memory. Let's think about San Siro stadium for example. If an architectural symbol of the city's community like San Siro — Milanese call it "the Scala of soccer" — disappears, nobody from the "high system" will care because they just follow their commercial interests and this example is just a demonstration of how the pandemic will never change the mentality of the supranational financial realities, the first ones who can't wait to return to normality.

BF

Is it possible to imagine a new way of inhabiting the city after the pandemic? Can we think about moving away from the city as a new way of living?

FR

Yes but as I said before it's far from utopian. We can't speak about utopia related to a health catastrophe because we didn't think about different visions of the world. It's a chemical and molecular virus that has temporarily jammed a mechanism, highlighting the weaknesses and inabilities to design a more equitable future. Those who say that everything will change do not take into account the great capacity of forgetting that societies have. Financial energies push towards a tendency of condensation and densification and they introduce green as a panacea by planting 3 million trees to rethink the city with the introduction of green while remaining within the urban context. Moving away from the city is complex in economic and social terms. What economic and productive activity is implied by such a system? What about the service sector? It would be necessary to analyze if this solution is actually sustainable. In my opinion, abandonment of the city is not possible. The city is a condition both sought and suffered. We should rethink the city starting from current issues such as public mobility - with less folkloristic solutions than the invasion of scooters - and sustainability in architecture.

BF

Where would you start to rethink the city?

FR

From the quality of urban life. I think as an architect and as Enzo Mari says "if you like everything, you don't have to design anything". If I look at the center of the city I don't think it needs more services but before I go as far as to talk about abandoning the city and returning to the countryside I would think about the suburbs. We should think about redeveloping these areas starting from an analysis of the needs of those who live there: it's a project that must start from the community. What is missing? Private capital doesn't give a damn about the suburbs, we should invest having made political choices through public capital. We can't talk about urban quality of life if we don't affect the places where the quality of life is lower.

BF

What is the role of humankind and the architect in the future? What are your responsibilities in defining a more positive model of society and life?

FR

Every single citizen in the world must have greater self-awareness and acquire critical knowledge. Today with the amount of information circulating (especially on the web) it's difficult to have an objective opinion about things and to understand which information is true and which is false. It's necessary to form an opinion clear of false information and act accordingly; in short it's necessary to be able to design one's own knowledge.

BF

Going back to the Sixties, do you feel that today it is possible to think of Italian radical architecture as a model to be followed in the present, a time in which a reinterpretation of the architect's role in society seems necessary?

FR

Yes but unlike the 1960s there is no identification with a political orientation and the strong (and even excessive) idea behind a single figure or movement that we had. The problem is that today politics no longer channel tensions in a civil manner. I see the unnecessary violence from those who have to destroy something in order to make their presence felt. So when there is a demonstration that has its own legitimacy, the levels between the activity of the individual and the political ability to channel the needs of the individual into political projects are irreconcilable. Even within the most radical, or at least, with a direction. Crises must be mediated by creative political activity. The radical movement had a strong scientific and philosophical base, a certain intellectuality and an ideology. In addition to the architectural neo-avant-garde we can think for example about the program for social housing which despite its criticalities was an important moment for architecture and a phenomenon of public policy born to provide low-cost housing within chaotically growing urban models, which has been completely lost. Today it's all about managing the building stock. Due to a lack of means, it has been delegated to private capital, which generates environments with little connection to the theme of living, but rather to the tertiary sector or to an "exclusive" residential architecture (if we want to use a horrendous term). This model has been put into crisis by the pandemic.

BF

Why do you think there is so much interest today in the Italian radical season?

FR

Because radical architecture has released existential, creative and philosophical energies that have challenged a way of thinking that at that time was positive but uncritical. Radical architecture identified and interpreted the limits of development and questioned (in a free and anarchic way) the system placing creativity and the physical relationship with the context at the center of the architectural discourse. It was a process of de-construction of reality that influenced the world of architecture as much as that of art and literature. For the new generations, radical architecture can be a cult from which to start again in the search for meaning in our construction.