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The cities of art at the time of their aesthetic and social destructibility
Giovanni Semi

Western cities are going through a new Golden Age. For a long time dominated during the twentieth century by industrial development which had debased their representational, commercial and, in part, their cultural function, they now appear in all their splendour, re-launched by international tourism, the frenetic occurrence of events and by the clear *embarras de richesse* which characterises historical centres in particular.

Released from the burden of productive zoning, the rigid divisions between tasks and the idea of rational and lasting planning - the General Regulatory Plan - abandoned, the cities are developing locally. Infinite projects are under way like needles in some social acupuncture, touching nerves, releasing energies, unleashing transformations on a small scale which, if looked at as a whole, are no less incisive than a complex operation on the urban body.

Most of these needles now have very recognisable forms. There are those which were called *flagship projects*, where a flag was hoisted on the needle on which we could read the name of a *celebrity architect*, a construction company, a public-private partnership and a foreign finance fund (a Norwegian pension fund, the sovereign fund of some Saudi notable, a global *equity company* with its head office in Luxembourg).

Alongside the pin, which is sometimes a museum designed by Gehry, other times a multi-functional centre by Ando, or an infrastructure by Calatrava, rises a skyscraper or a smaller block of flats aimed at a local, perhaps global, market, but private all the same. In historical cities, where it is more difficult to build ex-novo, the functions of places are changed and so buildings which were diplomatic representations in the sixteenth century, stately buildings in subsequent centuries and public buildings during the twentieth century, become deluxe shopping centres or 5-star hotels.

When the needle sticks in the flesh of the city, the expected outcome is for there to be reddening all around which has the effect of sensitising a tissue which otherwise is considered defenceless. It is a valuation effect which allows the surrounding area to grow economically and generate profits for whoever has invested before the acupuncture and, partially, for whoever makes a move immediately afterwards. The energy running about under the body of the city belongs to financial capitalism, ever in search of *spatialfix*, as David Harvey (2011) said, and emerging temporarily at the surface to decree the development or death of some territories, extract the potential income from them and then drop back into the abyss to reappear elsewhere on the planet some years or decades later.

The metaphor of capitalism as an underground current that emerges thanks to the infinite intervention of urban acupuncture and allows temporary discharges of energy is not completely correct, however. We may also think of this model in terms of entropy, where the energy produced by the interventions is dissolved in the air, *melts into air*, in order to resume the reading of the modernity that Marshall Berman gave based on the famous metaphor contained in The Manifesto of Marx and Engels (2012). The dissipation which we see has at least two levels.

Aesthetic dissipation

First we have aesthetic dissipation. Perhaps this is the most paradigmatic and also paradoxical case of contemporary urban development. If, in fact, we look on a global scale at the thousands of needles which hit the body of the planet we realise that they are all very similar, notwithstanding the shape of the one which hits a corner in Shanghai possibly seeming opposite to the shape of one which has just discharged energy on the coast of Dubai.

Also the urban effects are the same. Aesthetically, after having visited infinite convention centres, opera houses and university campuses, we are struck more by the homogenous nature, the MacDonaldisation of aesthetics which we want to be unique but which produces clones of futuristic projects in series which replicate ad infinitum the urban dystopias which Rem Koolhaas (2006) likes so much. This is what has already been described by several writers as the Disneyisation of the contemporary panorama (Hannigan, 1998; Zukin, 1993). It is worth remembering that in the planned urban utopias, supported but fortunately not realised by Walt Disney, like the famous EPCOT, the idea of producing radial cities based on a nucleus of amusement parks, there was at least a probably irrational and absurd idea of an urban future, but nevertheless thought out as such.

In the case of the contemporary city produced by fragments, all equal in mechanism and only partially different from a graphical point of view, i.e. in the signature of the artist on duty, we have, instead, a fractal vision with no clear idea of a city, of a future civilisation. The present-day tourist, be he a son of the new Chinese or Indian middle class or an English pensioner, an Italian Erasmus student or a group of girls going off for a hen party, are found living in Barcelona, Florence or Stockholm, moving from one authentic place to another, passing through atmospheres deliberately constructed from a design, experiential marketing and global tourist guides. In two days, three at the most, the experience of the place has been savoured and the vain hope of one day being able to live on the bank of a canal in a beautiful colourful barge like the one you hired for an exorbitant price on an international short-term rentals site, nourished. The serial nature of the experience as well as the serial nature of places is the result of that "inter-cultural shock prevention" machine as international tourism has been defined by the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1998).

Not too bad if, in the end, Lisbon is not so different to Marseilles or Naples. Are we sure about this? From a strictly cultural and aesthetic point of view, as already hinted, it is the triumph of a small elite of global artists who share a growing slice of international commissions by spreading the infinite tesserae of a mosaic of which nobody has any idea of the final pattern. The notion of authenticity, already widely questioned by Benjamin a century ago (2014), becomes an instrument of economic evaluation with no pieces of art, pulverised as in “typically Madrid, Paris or Berlin” atmospheres. If this is the problem, it could be disputed, it would be enough to equip oneself with a more organic urban vision, to think again of architecture, design and art in a humanistic way, with Man and for Man. When all that that is solid dissolves in the air, however, it generates forms of entropy that not only have aesthetic and cultural repercussions but also, on the contrary, deep social ones.

Social dissipation

Social dissipation is therefore the second effect intended to be illustrated here.

The energy which the needle discharges is not necessarily to everybody's benefit. Economic development is not necessarily reflected in social and cultural development, admitted that there is agreement as to how this type of development may be defined. If we take into consideration the first of the economic effects sought by spreading flagship projects, this is the increase in the value of real estate in the area surrounding the project. Who gets this increase? As already stated, it is essentially distributed among the initial financers and the first people to risk investing in the area in question. Very rarely, therefore, do we talk about residents, whether they be simple inhabitants or even small economic players.

The increase in prices per square metre is almost automatically reflected in an increase in the costs of services and in pincers which affect the weakest first of all - tenants. Whether it be these tenants of houses or people who rent businesses, these citizens rarely succeed in being in step with rent increases. When they do, they often feel that the change in their

neighbourhood has not been thought out for them and the type of attachment to the place which they have. 'It's the change!' you often hear said, with the suggestion even that they are 'not conservative' and therefore that they look to the future 'without distrust'. But it is true that for someone who was born in a Mediterranean city, for example, and is therefore used to that 'porous' reality as Benjamin had already defined it, where public and private space often intersects with a private space which comes out of the walls and becomes public (2007). When old people were used to putting the chairs outside the door and cleaning the vegetables or drinking coffee together, being forced to go back inside because the swarms of tourists made it impossible to sit out in the street, may be a real cultural shock for these people. In the same way, a commercial panorama of international trademarks which use the international language of trade - English - often in an ironic and amusing way in order to sell food, underwear or accessories for the home, has in a short time supplanted the whole network of close business activity. Small shops were, however, the fulcrum of authentic local life because it had not been thought of as such, real because it was pragmatic, dignified because it had been achieved through hard work generation after generation.

Owners are also affected by these needles. Less disastrously, definitely, because they can profit from the sudden increase in amounts to take the money and move. Cash and flow. Well knowing, however, or even sometimes not, that returning to the centre will no longer be possible. When areas with an intense international tourist presence are assessed, the increase can be breath-taking, exceeding 200-300% in a few years and rendering the return of subsequent generations impossible.

This process, in the two dissipations described here, is known as *gentrification* (, 2015). It has been happening in most cities on the planet at least since the fifties of the previous century and is spreading like an oil slick wherever there are margins of exploitation.

It goes on following a hierarchical logic, extracting where the margin is greater, thus following a thread among urban nobility geographies. Global cities and cities of art are the most affected and it is no coincidence that their real estate markets are closely linked and integrated. However, it then affects all other cities, certainly to differing degrees and therefore with more extended dynamics in time and space.

Expulsion to Venice

Cases in Venice therefore come under this mechanism. Too 'beautiful' to pass unnoticed, too 'profitable' not to whet local and global appetites, it is a city morphologically perfect for trapping all this value in a finite space. The waters encircle a finite number of dwellings, buildings and places. All around is a close network of islands, often far removed and of little interest to the periods of international tourism. The flow of capital that runs under the crust of the earth makes Venice a veritable volcano, emerging at the surface and swamping everything. It is certainly a much desired and built up volcano with local administrations which have consciously worked to allow it to emerge, but then complained that the lava had destroyed all in its path.

In a recent work, Saskia Sassen included this type of urban dynamic in a model of exploitation which, according to her, takes place through successive expulsions (2015). Total capitalism would avail itself of "predatory formations" which extract resources from every possible area of the planet. We are aware of the extraction of natural resources and we are aware of how much this is threatening our very presence as a species on planet Earth. Unfortunately, we still have insufficient knowledge of how the extraction of economic, social and cultural resources is threatening the expulsion of millions of city dwellers, guilty only of having been born in places conventionally reputed to be "beautiful", "authentic" or "unique".

European tourist cities all tell the same story, with the movement from cities chock-a-block with people to cities worn out by millions of tourists. Venice is a city of the expelled, by definition: it had 175 thousand residents at the end of the Second World War, now it has nearly 50 thousand. Nevertheless, it is filthy rich and still considered "authentic" by everybody.

As with other territories whose authenticity was forged by centuries of stubborn resistance and adaptation to every type of influence, conquest and change, Venice has seen its own everyday life reeling under the blows from bed & breakfasts and big events.

The food when going for a walk, the *paccottiglia* produced and sold as local, or the tides of human beings transported on an industrial scale from place to place, are just the visible part of this change and thus only partly responsible.

Under the skin of the city that we cross runs a river of capital ready to come up to the surface when a needle pricks it with the excuse of upgrading, regenerating and developing somewhere. You can't see this river but it's there. It's our job to reveal it because we can at least discuss whether it is what we really need to live better in Venice as elsewhere.

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