

Strangers at home. Strategies for a non-habitual inhabitation in Rome

"Sir: You are desired to proceed to Georgetown where you will find Mr. Ellicott employed in making a survey and Map of the Federal Territory. T/ll' special object of asking your aid is to have a drawing of the particular grounds most likely to be approved for the site of the Federal town and buildings. You will therefore be pleased to begin on the Eastern branch and proceed from thence upwards, laying down the hills, va/leys, morasses and waters between that and the Potomac, the Tiber, and the road leading from Georgetown to the Eastern branch and connecting the whole with certain fixed points on the map Mr. Ellicott is preparing. Some idea of the height of the lands above the base on which they stand would be desirable. I wil/ beg the favour of you to mark to me your progress about twice a week, say every Wednesday and Saturday evening, that I may be able in proper time to draw your a ttention to some other objects which I have not at this moment sufficient information to define."

Thomas Jefferson, letter to Pierre Charles L'Enfant, French architect, author of the master plan for Washington D.C., 1791

BEFORE ANY CITY OR ARCHITECTURE exists, there is a geography, a topography, a climate, a possibility. In Rome as in Washington, someone saw a place rich in plains, hills and water, studied its features and position, recognised its potential, and thus opened the way for a history. In particular Rome, unlike its city colonies, accepted the weight of its natural territory as its given foundation, structuring itself according to a topological discourse.

What applies to the act of foundation, also applies to the evolution which followed. Migration, always a cultural event, plays a fundamental role in the redefinition of an acknowledged urban meaning.

Each new citizenship, even a temporary one, proposes another system of settlement, a multiplication of the space-city, a new mental sky/ine. Only the Piedmontese, with the building of the Esquilino quarter, will bring to the Rome city plan a regular grid structure, in accordance to their military Turinese Romaness.

The inhabitant of a place often has routines, habits, conventions that prevent aware vision. One takes for granted what is only a custom, a way of being-in-the-world. An external, foreign point of view often seizes on the structures of urban rea/ity better than a city's own inhabitants are able to. This depends on the traveller not having a Baedeker, not having prejudice, nor the will to state that what they are seeing corresponds to what the tourist brochures anticipated and promised.

Those who come from elsewhere may also misinterpret, willingly or through ignorance. It is a potentially fruitful unawareness, because it allows one to pose all the questions and therefore the answers without taking anything for granted or established. What is this city? What are the structural elements of the place? How do we choose them in our daily inhabitation?

Those who come from elsewhere have always been here. The oh so Roman obelisks are Egyptian; the Caestian Pyramid is but an imitation of much grander ones; the domes were born elsewhere; Hadrian's Villa celebrates the nostalgia of the faraway, witnessed and dreamed. The construction of the city took place through the appropriation and re-interpretation of parts or things belonging to others, in the projection of images that were foreign.

Those who come from elsewhere can continue to speculate on the presence of the past as a point of view and rediscover the persistence of a geography and its possibilities, underneath deposits of habits. This contribution to an urban consciousness-raising, beyond any self-congratulation, is very apparent in both the work and the thinking of the two resident architects at the British school.

Jaco Booyens turns his attention away from the mythical and museum role of the city and he sees it as a purely natural place. In this he instinctively belongs to the above mentioned unawareness. In his description of the urban site for his Self-Sustainable Vertical Village on the Tiber, Rome becomes a river inlet, with specific features of exposure and position. Rome is beyond Romaness, and one can speculate on the 'here and now' and on the 'here and then' in equal terms. This is something that has already happened in other historical epochs. Booyens researches the geographical context hidden in the rolds of the city, proposes architecture as a synergy between piace, building and inhabitant: a building which influences the life of those who live in it and adapts these lives to this Rome-before Rome. Architecture is the result of a series or carerul considerations regarding a self-sustainable use of energy, the efficient functioning of the

natural systems of energy supply, the implications of low impact technology on the environment. Involuntarily and paradoxically, this creates an object with a powerful visual impact. A new totem, a fantastic, unconscious, primitive monument rises from the Tiber. The contemporary inhabitation questions the consolidated system of persistence, warping its context, mixing it up with other types of mental space. It reworks the public/private relationship and its perception according to continually evolving structures. Whoever comes from outside is able to point out the autonomy of vision, beyond the social and historical meanings of a place.

Megan Williams's project is to interrogate the city as a place of communal life. In her questionnaire she asks her interviewees to take a stand: "Do you live in Rome now? What does it mean to be a Roman today? Why is Rome special, if it is so? Has Rome changed your life? What is your favourite place in Rome? Who do Rome's monuments belong to? What would Rome be without monuments? When you think of Rome, what do you see?" These questions refer us to the need to put ourselves in the position of an inhabitant and to think of the city as a place of affects, as an inherited place, as a property simultaneously collective and personal. Who does the city belong to, how much it belongs to me, what grabs my attention, how do I possess it? Unlike Booyens's natural geography, here we are dealing with an inquiry into the collective and individual phenomenology of each citizen. To ask and ask oneself questions, to provide oneself with working tools. In her work on the Via del Portico d'Ottavia, Williams is looking for a topological and geometric rule that forces vision to expose itself, in its paradoxical transformation into blindness: at first she walks down the road, and every ten steps she takes a photograph looking ahead of herself; then in the studio she projects the sequence of photographs on to a wall, each image remains visible for a few seconds during which time she makes a sketch on a piece of paper. The result is a series of syntheses, images which make a record of the fundamental elements that structure the vision of the urban space in which we move. A grid is then laid over these sketches, and the 'random' points of superimposition are highlighted on sheets of tracing paper, which eventually placed side by side reconstruct a virtual vision -'never willed, never sought, never seen'- of the space of the street she walked along. Williams writes, "When I look at this world around me through the conduit of my sensual perceptibility, am I free to look without judging it? Can I separate myself from my cultural and experiential biases? Am I bound to be a tourist making superficial commentary? Can I see without being influenced by the memory of what came before and my anticipation of what will happen next? Do I suffer from a type of blindness? Is it 'things' I see? Or is it a series of shapes, patterns, edges, areas of relief and tension?"

What we think we see in a place is always influenced by what we expect to see in it, what we know of it, what we hope to find there. The permeable vision of the city by those who come from outside allows one to look with a heightened awareness and unmask the continuous victory of the ideal over the real. Because to live in Rome is a question of points of view.

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