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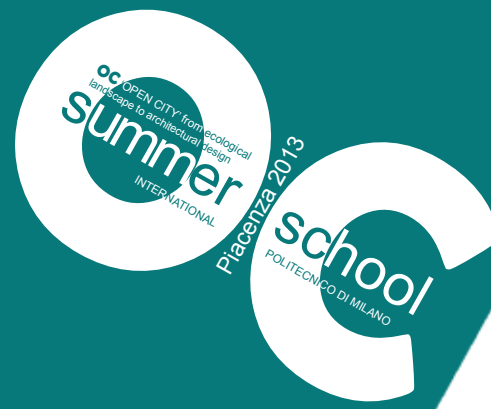
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NATURE IN THE CITY

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Nature in the city.

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Piacenza 2013

*from ecological landscape
to architectural design*

NATURE IN THE CITY

PROJECTS

blue section

METHODOLOGIES
AND STRATEGIES

THE RIGHT DISTANCE: (re)construction of a river landscape

Filippo Orsini



Pò riverbank - photo by Genny Celeghini

Rivers, with their own hierarchical density of minute branches, are able to connect the territory in a net, establishing a thick plot of latent relationships innervating different systems (environmental, built-up, productive). They're magnetized by the river cut, linear and organic, that is structuring the configuration of large geographical areas. River's meta-story is modulating as an endless plan-sequence in which different narrative levels are articulating: collective knowledge transmission, individual ancestral memory, productive installations evolution, landscape staging.

As Simon Scahama is remembering us, rivers are "*arteries, streams of consciousness, of circulation, of imaginary and of life*". And so becoming infrastructural elements is part of their essence. But, in our contemporary age, as Rosario Pavia said, river landscape is presenting itself strongly fragmented, not-ordered, not-articulated: "[...] *Today river landscape is opaque and not-accessible, as its own coasts[...]. This sprawled landscape is going away from the water and it's making us indifferent*".[1]

It's a landscape where narrative sequence continuity seems to be broken, influencing in this way a process of reading able to interpret different levels of complexity and contradiction. To re-build a dynamic and flexible river landscape, which is compatible with updating of social and economic needs, it's necessary to accept "*its multiple identity, its own being at the same time nature and infrastructure*".[2]

So, river natural background can be seen and interpreted as a precarious balance, caused by a forced cohabitation between two landscape typologies: a natural landscape composed by a continuous and slight transformation of relationships and limits between land and water - involved in the cycle of a normal environmental evolution - and the artificial one which is instead linked with the developing of atavic needs oriented to protect the man from the water. This last one is a landscape built as an answer to the river highest level, to overflowing, to floods. Human settlements are a defensive protection for human habitat against these natural phenomena, where infrastructural interventions of hydraulic engineering, as building of embankments and limits, is holding de facto a value of large and territorial scale projects able to impact strongly in landscape configuration of our territories.

In projects at OC workshop these two approaches are clearly generated and these 2 two typologies of landscapes are becoming real, living together in the *unicum* of the river environment: small punctual projects as temporary and reversible micro-architectural systems of holms, able to develop connections, giving new values to some sites, to build plots always available to new transformations and large scale sport-parks where the figure, generated

and pushed up by the defensive infrastructures, as the banks, are acting as linear attractors which are receiving in its own internal space different and heterogeneous functions. These elements are together designing the new Piacenza landscape border line, starting from the relationship with the big river.

So we can argue the necessity to go-in-depth with some primary factors constituting the narrative grammar of this hypertext – the river landscape – inclusive in its own multiple systems of real spatial conditions, carved and modelled by natural and human action, and of not-material contexts, structured by spatial and temporal concepts able to define rhythm and typology of a gestalt fruition of sites.

When you have to explore a sector of landscape related with the river flowing, when it is building a relationship with an extract of fixed urban tissue, located in areas close to its own limits (as in Piacenza case-study), precise figures and categories, with different spatial quality roles, are assuming the main value in river landscape construction.

Banks

"[...] Gli argini fanno venire in mente racconti di barcaiooli, braccianti, ghiaiaroli, segantini, uomini di bosco e uomini di fiume. La strada pensile che li percorre permette di vedere insieme il fiume e i campi, e a volte altri argini interni detti comprensori, che in caso di piena servono ad isolare le zone allagate. Sotto gli argini, dalla parte del fiume o dall'altra, boschetti golenali che un tempo dovevano essere soprattutto di salici. Adesso dovunque pioppeti disposti su linee scalate (da qualunque parte si guardino si vedono linee d'alberi in diagonale), formano assieme agli argini un ordine spaziale che esiste solo da queste parti."

G. Celati, *Verso la foce*, Universale economica Feltrinelli, 1992, p. 59.

"[...] Embankments are remembering us stories of boatmen, labourers, gravel-workers, sawyers, wooden and river men. The hanging road walking permits to see, together, the river and the agricultural fields, and sometimes other internal banks, called "comprensori" (including), that

during overflowing are necessary to isolate flooded areas. Under the banks, by the river side or by the opposite one, flood plain groves, that in ancient times were composed mainly by willows. Now, everywhere, poplars, ordered along proportional lines (from every directions you're looking at them, you can see diagonal lines of trees) are producing, together with the embankments, a spatial order, special and visible just in that sites". G. Celati, *Verso la foce*, Univer-sale economica Feltrinelli, 1992, p. 59.

The embankment is a tectonic element basically able to accomplish different functions and hold a multitude of meanings.

By a technical point of view it has an hydraulic value, as abstract figure which has precise geometrical relationships originated as results of physical and mathematical formulas linked with water discharge, flows and drags; these proportions are becoming vertical in a type section – with different inclination of roofs – protecting and separat-

Luigi Ghirri, *Mirasole*, 1998



ing at the same time.

In its declination of urban and horizontal landmark the bank is having, both in a positive and negative way, a role that is fundamental also as landscape and background. Perspective background of public spaces of the multitude of small villages linked with the river – as in Pomponesco square that was described in a wonderful way by the images of Luigi Ghirri – it receives stairs, ramps, re-climbing elements giving to the river-urban inhabitant possibilities to recover the visual relationship, a fascinating one, made of uses that the bank itself, in its becoming an insurmountable threshold at the bigness scale, denies fatally, more and more.

As an infrastructural element, it has a territorial role. With its own variable rising, becoming thicker, repeating in smaller declinations into the plain that is immediately in the back, the bank is determining in a clear way, with its presence, along the river flowing line, what is an artificial landscape - new border planned by the man - and what instead is a natural limit.

In a landscape approach, it defining, with its own footprint, different uses of the soil, integrating itself with carriageable and cycle-pedestrian roads; the bank is establishing with them hierarchical relationships and it leads in user's fruition new values of gestalt position. Constituting itself as a rising, it can offer a multitude of new views on the river, on the endless horizontal expanse of the agricultural fields, rather than on the sequence made of back roofs.

Holm / Bight

"[...] Quando il Po è in piena allaga per prima cosa i terreni golenali con pioppeti, e qui c'è una barriera di rovi, canne, piante di lampone e romici, oltre la quale vediamo il pioppeto allagato. L'acqua ferma riflette le cime degli alberi, così che sott'acqua si direbbe ci sia tutta una foresta intricatissima dove un uomo su un barchino passa spingendosi con una pertica."

G. Celati, *Verso la foce*, Universale economica Feltrinelli, 1992, p. 65.

"[...] When Po river is in spate, it floods firstly into holm lands with poplar groves, and here there is a barrier of bushes, reeds, raspberry and patience docks, by which we see the poplar groves flooded. The motionless water reflects trees' cymes, as you could say that under the water there is a very tangled forest where a man, in a small boat, can travel pushing himself with a perch."

G. Celati, *Verso la foce*, Universale economica Feltrinelli, 1992, p. 65.

Holms and bights are measuring big river's breath. The vertical altimetrical variation of the water body modifies the river landscape revealing or hiding, in a sequence of cycles, with their own vegetation composed of poplars, ashes and willows, portions of islands, edges and terracing, between the bank and the engraved riverbed. The flood plain, site of doubt and threshold of the unreliability – as the etymology of its noun – pushes architecture to solutions which need to be temporary and flex-

Luigi Ghirri,
Pò riverbank near Pomponesco



PROJECTS

The right distance: (re)construction of a river landscape

blue section



Luigi Ghirri, Pò riverbank near Pomponesco (Mantova), 1985

ible, able to adapt themselves according to changing flows and levels through tectonic structures, mainly made of wooden, as hanging on the surface of the water with a series of supports, with a structure point by point, rather than floating platforms.

Horizontal movement flow intensity is determining, together with its hydrographical profile, rhythm and largeness of river's bends. The water, with its centrifugal force of inertia, when is losing its energy, is modelling the succession of bights with concave eroded profiles or made of convex bank sides, which are originated with the accumulation of alluviums. Here, where the human impact is fewer, rare vegetable shapes, as the water plants, appear with leaves and floating flowers (water-lilies) on the free surface of the water.

**METHODOLOGIES
AND STRATEGIES**



Pò riverbank and infrastructure - photo by Filippo Orsini

Void

"[...] Campagne vuote. Se guardo in distanza, prima di tutto c'è una grande apertura nello spazio là fuori, il vuoto accoglie tutte le cose: soli in un secondo tempo l'apertura si restringe per fissarmi su qualcosa che manda un richiamo, come quando in un fil di John Ford spunta un indiano all'orizzonte[...] Noi siamo guidati da ciò che ci chiama e capiamo solo quello; lo spazio che accoglie le cose non possiamo capirlo se non confusamente.[...] idee ricavate da un pensiero di Leopardi (agosto 1821)."

G. Celati, *Verso la foce*, Universale economica Feltrinelli, 1992, p. 55.

"[...] Void countryside. If I look far, there is firstly a large opening in the space, out there, the void receives everything: just in a second moment the opening is becoming thinner to focus on something that is calling again, as when in a John Ford movie in the horizon"

an American India is appearing[...] We're guided by what is calling for us and we can understand just this; we cannot understand, even if in a confuse way, the space receiving the things.[...] ideas extracted by a Giacomo Leopardi thought (August 1821)."

G. Celati, *Verso la foce*, Universale economica Feltrinelli, 1992, p. 55.

The void, as spatial category and sensorial experience, is the factor unifying in a indissoluble manner the sequence "flat land / countryside – urban tissue / natural limit / embankment – river" in its possible combinations.

The absence of the void - its progressive loosing because of the endless enlarging of volumetric fragments in the territory - provoked a transformation of the sensitive fruition of this typical sequence/section of the river landscape; it's necessary to take this issue into account, trying to focus new project topics for a necessary void's reconstruction, into a complex and innovative background.

So there, a capillary system of sites that are interpreted and expressed as a waiting, of wise project with a low cubage that are able to recover relationships and to defend, and maybe to improve it, the slow movement of men, waters and shapes from which this territory is having its energy and life. Or through projects of new soils for linear parks to investigate possibilities working along a dynamic and spatial *continuum* where ability means to determinate and to represent rhythms and fruition of the delicate landscape between the bank and the river, in other words between what is secret, inside the riverbed, and the remainder of the external world. To fix the sequence of pauses, the right intervals and the natural distances among the things: in other words to interpret the art of MA.[3]

Another issues is related with the spatial definition of the walkways. Through stratifications, slight direction changes and altimetrical modifications, paths are articulating, enhancing the role of the main element of the void which is "[...] *inside the things*[...] a brook without a beginning and without an end that wears away two coasts and becomes faster in

its middle part".[4]

As in the sculptural work of Jorge Oteiza, the main point is the creation of "[...] *an empty solitude, an open spatial silence, that the man can fill in a spiritual way*"[5]. A void that is active and permeated of mystery in front of which a user can place himself with an attitude of ineluctable waiting.

Silence

"[...] *In questi viali d'ingresso secondario ai paesi viene l'impressione di poter recepire, grazie al silenzio diffuso, una simultaneità di gesti abituali ripetuti dagli abitanti di un luogo; come entrare in casa d'altri e sentire un andamento benefico delle abitudini.*"

G. Celati, *Verso la foce*, Universale economica Feltrinelli, 1992, p. 56.

"[...] *In these secondary entrance avenues to the villages you can have the feeling that you can receive, thanks to the widespread silence, a simultaneity of habitual acts, repeated by the inhabitants of a site; as entering in an another home and feeling a benefic proceeding of the customs.*"

G. Celati, *Verso la foce*, Universale economica Feltrinelli, 1992, p. 56.

If we think to the silence as the whole of a multitude of different wavelengths, that, summed up, are confluencing in a unique sonorous carpet, where the not-homogeneous plots envelope the millenarian story of the big river. So, in this meaning, the silence is still a gestalt category which is structuring landscape river spatiality.

It's a sonorous connection in which the extension is giving back the only real measure of the physical largeness of this special scenario.

The motionless silence designing the atmospheres, that are shady because of its geometry, of poplar groves. The mute flowing of boats with a flat keel quickly disappearing in the night and creaking of strand boats that are consuming themselves on sand and gravel cracks.

The screeching of rusty abandoned metal rings of sluices and clangs and roars of the water in the level jumps of unforeseen dikes.

Natural buzzing of insects which swarm in holms and in bights and the artificial one of "bees" with mufflers and three wheels which run about along the embankments.

Volatile sounds, almost extinct and silenced by a shouted development. Endless tales for endless shapes of silence. In Piacenza case, the silence is the thunderous noise of an in-

errupted dialogue with the river. The dense multitude of pitched roofs in the urban tissue is visually confronting with the hieratic figure of the banks that is inevitably denying any facing to them. Here, with very few materials, quite materials, it was decided to re-design relationship with the river in order to keep its own character of locus and to rescue its own iconographical value.

It's in this staging of a small passage with a strong spiritual footprints, in a wise balance, material and spatial, that are established the reasons of an architectural research linked with a strong sensorial experience, able to bypass the rational logic to try to reach G. Deleuze's "creative emotion". Where echoes of sounds of riverbed and of old men tales, there, maybe, the river, with its specific whole of spatial and environmental values is finishing and another tale is starting.

So there isn't incompatibility, inescapable separation, among the elements of a natural / infrastructural landscape and the immaterial one of the river, rather than, as written in the first part of this essay, a latent plot of relationships to make visible or to re-define. Through the design research, you can try to reconstruct a river landscape – creator in its own slow flowing of a multitude of complex values – as a univocal synthesis of "living materials", able to permit di establish a new position value through the definition of their reciprocal right distance.

Notes

[1] Pavia R., "Paesaggi fluviali", in *Babele*, Meltemi Editore, 2002, p. 77.

[2] ibidem

[3] A. Isozaki, "Ma: Japanese time Space", in *The Japan Architect*, 7902, p. 70.

[4] G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Mille piani (Mille Plateaux) capitalismo e schizofrenia*, edited by M.Guareschi, Castelvecchio editore, 2003.

[5] J. Oteiza, intervista in "Yakin", december 1960, in *Quosque tandem...!*, 1963, n.150

[6] Pavia R., "Paesaggi fluviali", in *Babele*, Meltemi Editore, 2002, p. 78.

Luigi Ghirri, Towards the delta of the Po'river (Ferrara), 1991