

Archetypes of Architectural Rewriting Technique

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Abstract

When the architecture of the city requires a design action which aims at transforming its physical structure, it is fundamental not only the development of a critical reflection on the morphological characters of the context, trying to identify those recurrent typological and formal elements in the pre-existence environment, but also the recognition of some methodological principles suitable for a modification process of the urban fabric. This short essay intends to deal with the relationship between pre-existence and new intervention from the point of view of the architectural project and, more specifically, of architectural composition techniques. The study of some experimental practices adopted in the rewriting modalities of a written text, called transtextuality techniques, suggests a possible methodological direction in dealing with the problem of how to operate and build in the historical city. Here is the hypothesis that architecture, like a literary text, can be rewritten from a textual reorganization of its constitutive elements. This happens when the project is the result of a generative process aimed at transforming, displacing and reallocating the elements of an earlier architecture into a new narrative system, building a second architecture through their synthesis. Therefore, one would wonder whether it is possible to identify, even in the architectural field, a series of recurrent operations in those cases in which the project tends to transform and, thus, rewrite the physical structure of a previous building or urban system. On the other hand, when the structural and figurative characters of architecture are the outcome of an act of transformation extended over time, the city can be conceived as a stratification process, similar to the idea of a palimpsest, in which a heterogeneous set of architectures, belonging to different historical moments, coexist in the same frame of space and time. In these cases, the rewriting process of the urban form depends on a superimposition and integration of new elements within the pre-existing structure. Specifically, the research here displayed aims at defining an overall picture of the phenomenon of rewriting through the analysis of the compositional procedures adopted by some archetypal cases of this generative technique, where the design process assumes its creative factors from a dialectical relationship between invention and memory, tradition and innovation.

Keywords: Architectural Rewriting, Critical Urban Transformation, Urban Palimpsest.

Introduction

In the discipline of architecture, when the project insists on the urban fabric, not as an act of conservation but as a process of modification of the physical environment, it assumes value and meaning through the relationship established with the evolution of the city and the territory, identifying its own creative essence in the history of the place. That means accepting that the city, when maintains its historical character, still hosts some architectural qualities that the succession of historical events has handed down to us as testimonies

still valid for artistic creation. Such qualities reside both in the characters of the urban morphology and in the symbolic value of the city's places, such as those figures or tropes that, as Alan Colquhoun would say, represent a synthesis, an immediate effect that suggests "*the richness and complexity of reality*" (Colquhoun 1977; 30).

The process of architectural rewriting, as a generative technique aimed at promoting an operative transformation of an architectural system into a new set of syntagmatic elements, critically accepts thus the factors that regulate both the apparent and hidden structurality of the city, acquiring in the creative process its main urban facts in their physical and conceptual consistency. So that, the act of rewriting consists, on one hand, in recognizing both the permanent elements in the urban structure and the emblems, images, and figures that stand behind the forms of the city, on the other, in reorganizing them in to a new narrative system, building an architecture through their synthesis. Now, conceiving the design process as a transformation of figure and forms coming from the deep structure of the place would demand a non-linear conception of the notion of time and space in the design process, that is, accepting that the architectural object can be brought out of time, decoded into its parts and its aggregative logic.

On the other hand, Colin Rowe already exposed the possibility of a textual approach, of a non-linear process in architectural composition, in the essays of *Collage City* or *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa*. According to Luciano Semerani, "*The 'modernity' and 'complexity' of the 'plot', identified by Rowe, of the textus, understood as a fabric that becomes a tangle, in other words a jumble of signs, leads to a new interpretation of the composition intended not as an academic inventory of regulatory norms, but as a need for a high capacity of narrative direction able to control the effects of perceptual simultaneity, of interpretation and of rational and emotional feed-back that the mind of man is able to develop both by visiting a building or a city as well as in the presence of a picture, reading a book, at a concert, at a theatre*" (Semerani 2010; 13). With his theoretical work Rowe proves indeed that "*The urban imaginary is a universe of signs, rich in suggestions and possible inspirations for analogies, metaphors, etc., operated on devices of memory and even dreams, figures and forms ambiguous and non-existent, that the project takes up again through a transcription when it maintains the distance between the image and the thing, but that becomes a quotation when the copy and the principle of authority connected with the use of the quotation are employed*" (Semerani 2010; 19-20).

So that, the techniques of rewriting recognizes the evolution of the urban structure as a memory device in which nothing of what exists can somehow disappear, but on the contrary, everything is preserved and, in certain circumstances, it can re-emerge influencing the actions of the present. Remembering what Sigmund Freud was saying in his essay *Civilization and its Discontents*, the city can be compared to a psychic entity in which "*nothing of what has been created has been lost, in which next to the last evolutionary phase all the previous ones continue to exist... And perhaps it would be enough for the observer to change the direction of the gaze or visual point of view to recognize one perspective rather than the other one*" (Freud 2010; 9-10).

Conceptual Approach in Architectural Rewriting

As a paradigmatic example of the architectural rewriting technique, we could take into consideration the design procedures adopted by Giovan Battista Piranesi in the production of the drawings of Campo Marzio (fig.1), in which it is possible to recognize an attitude in the composition aimed at a textual experimentation of forms, figures, and typological structures.

In architectural criticism it is admissible to define the design investigations of Piranesi as an attempt to deconstruct the *“framework of the Renaissance architectural theory, undermining its semantics, syntax and hierarchical organization”* (Panza 1998; 8). Piranesian creative phenomenology acts indeed on the plane of the deconstruction of the semantic and syntactic field of Renaissance architectural principles, generating a free iconographic interpretation of the formal components of classical architecture. Linking the perspective drawings of the Carceri (fig.2) with the geometric compositions of Campo Marzio, it appears indeed evident that *“the shattering of organisms, the violence carried out over the laws of perspective, the intuition of the possibilities offered by an indefinite ‘opening of the form’ - the continuous metamorphosis of the spaces, in the Carceri, the theoretically continuing gemmation of the geometric bodies, in the Campo Marzio - mark, without any possibility of equivocation, the end of the Alberti’s theoretical precepts of concinnitas and finite. But they also ratify the definitive divorce of architectural signs from their meanings”* (Tafuri 1980; 54-55).

On the other hand, as expressed by Peter Eisenman, in the drawings of Campo Marzio, *“Piranesi uses Rome as it was in the eighteenth century as a starting point, without recognizing any original value; it is simply a being in the present. From this essential moment of being, he takes the buildings that existed in the first and second centuries, in imperial Rome, and places them in the same frame of space and time as the eighteenth-century city. Later Piranesi moved the monuments of the first century from their current location to another location as if they were their current location in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, Piranesi adds buildings that have never existed”* (Eisenman 2005; 40).

Piranesi builds this urban utopia through three textual transformations operating on the map of Rome in 1784 by Giovan Battista Nolli. The first produces a superimposition of architectural figures belonging to imperial city within the urban structure of the Rome of the eighteenth century, causing the override of the temporal distance that distinguishes these two historical periods of the city. The second causes a dislocation of the monuments of the imperial age concerning their place of origin. For example, we can observe how the Colosseum takes a different position from the one that still occupies within the Nolli’s map. The same can be said for the architectural structure of the Circus, with the difference that the last one does not change its original location but is repeated several times in the Piranesian drawings. The figure of the Circus becomes, therefore, a constant of the composition. Finally, the third transformation introduces new architectural organisms within the eighteenth-century urban structure through processes of integration of forms and functions. The outcome of these transformations produces a new urban reality, built through a textual reorganization of a set of architectural elements distant in time.

In addition to this process of dislocation, the architecture of the Rome of the eighteenth is flanked, replaced, integrated by other architectures, coming from two different historical moments: one is confined in the past, to the Rome of the second century; while the other corresponds with the Piranesi’s vision of a hypothetical Rome, an alternative to the eighteenth-century city. In the Campo Marzio maps, therefore, architectures of the past, of the present, and a hypothetical future coexist in the same frame of space. In a certain sense, the Piranesi’s maps of Campo Marzio reflect a design process by analogy. *“The time of analogy, the bifocal lens of history and memory, absorbs and contracts the chronological time - the time of the events - and the atmospheric time - the time of the place: place and event, locus solus more time-place. The place of analogy is therefore abstract from the real city. Linking type-forms and specific places, it dispossesses, re-associates and in this way transforms real places and times”* (Eisenman 2014; 231).

Moreover, Eisenman affirms *“the process of designing the analogy displaces the specifics of time and place*

of the city in favour of another reality, a psychological reality based on memory" (Eisenman 2014; 231). The transformations adopted by Piranesi build an imaginary place, where the stratification of different events, far away in time and space, generates a new urban reality, no longer based on the concept of history, but on the memory, which introduces a new temporal dimension, that of textual time. In this urban reality the concepts of time, space, form and figure "*collapse as interdependent entities, space becomes independent of time (current and historical) and space (more precisely, place and locus) becomes independent of form*" (Eisenman 2014; 327). The Campo Marzio maps are therefore the expression of a textual architecture through which Piranesi lays the theoretical foundations "*for urbanism understood as a fabric of memory rather than a nostalgia for static icons*" (Eisenman 2005; 40).

This way of conceiving the practice of architectural composition finds its archetypal model in Villa Adriana. Wanted by the emperor Hadrian in the second century after Christ, the Villa depicts a miniature version of Rome, a sort of architectural manifesto of the ideal city during the Empire composed through the juxtaposition of architectural references collected by Adriano during his journeys.

This juxtaposition of forms, figures and typological structures belonging to different spatial and temporal coordinates is made possible thanks to two types of textual transformations: the first is a dislocation of the place (the architectures are transposed inside a different place from the original one); the second is a dissolution of the scale (it is assumed that the architectural figures that compose the structure of the villa have a different dimension than the models chosen by Adriano).

This is evident in the building of the Maritime Theatre, also known as the Island for its introverted character, whose typological structure evokes the circular conformation that characterizes the wall perimeter of the Herodion, built for Erode the Great between 23 and 15 BC, located about 12 kilometres south of Jerusalem, of which some fragments still survive today (MacDonald 1997).

These compositional procedures allow Adriano to build a miniature city through a reorganization of multiple architectural elements and figures; a city composed of individual architectural units whose composite character prevents the evolution of the urban structure from a serialized reiteration of pre-established architectural models. According to Colin Rowe, Villa Adriana indeed represents a model of urban development, a kind of ideal city, that promotes a free association of elements coming from the catalogue of history rather than a systematic organization of urban space according to rigid hierarchical structures.

"Remember of former function and value [...]; shifting context; an attitude which encourage the composite; an exploitation and re-cycling of meaning [...]; desuetude of function with corresponding agglomeration of reference; memory; anticipation; the connectedness of memory and wit; the integratory of wit [...]; in terms of pleasures remembered and desired, of a dialectic between past and future, of an impacting of iconographic content, of a temporal as well as spatial collision, that resuming an earlier argument, one might proceed to specify and ideal city of the mind" (Rowe 1978; 138).

Now, we could, therefore, describe the act of rewriting as a way of reading, perceiving and designing the city based on memory, on the dialectical relationship between past and present, on the re-use of the elements present in the urban structure as the main vector for its transformation.

The Phenomenon of Rewriting in its Physical Consistency

The concept of rewriting in architecture is closely related to that of a city as a palimpsest. Originally the term palimpsest was used to describe an ancient manuscript, more frequently a tablet of clay or papyrus in which

the original text was erased by scraping and replaced with a new text. By extension, in the field of architecture, the palimpsest recalls the idea of a building or an urban structure whose physical features are the outcome of a transformation process that occurred through the superimposition of different architectural elements and figures over time.

The transformation of Diocletian's Palace in Spalato into a piece of the city is undoubtedly an emblematic case of this urban phenomenon (fig.7-8). To quote directly the words of Aldo Rossi, Spalato is the paradigmatic example *"of a large building, a palace, which becomes a city and transforms its internal characters into urban characters demonstrating the infinite richness of analogical transformations in architecture when this work on precise forms"* (Rossi 1972; 471). The current urban form of the historic core of Spalato is indeed the result of several transformations that took place over time on the architecture of the Diocletian's Palace: its typological structure represents thus that invariant element which has influenced the evolution of the city, that is such stable factor that remains unchanged in the physiological transformation of the architectural organism. Therefore, the typological layout of the Palace can be conceived as the first stage of writing of the urban palimpsest which, by successive operations of superimposition, integration and replacement of the elements of the architectural text, is transformed (rewritten) up to assume the morphological and typological characteristics of the current historic centre of Spalato.

Obviously, it is not difficult to find other examples of urban palimpsest. Consider, for example, the Roman amphitheatre of Nimes and Arles (fig.4), that of Lucca (fig.5), the case of Teatro Marcello in Rome (fig.6) or the Palazzo della Ragione in Padova, where the physiological evolution of the social, political, and economic dynamics of the city has determined, over the centuries, a considerable transformation of their physical structure, making the original function unrecognizable (Rossi 1966). According to Aldo Rossi the individuality of these types of monuments depends on being *"complicated and organized form in space and time"* (Rossi 1966; 24). In other words, their physical structure is the outcome of a process of integration of forms and functions that took place over time, which has given to the architectural layout a greater degree of complexity in the organization of spaces.

This way of operating in continuity with the physical structure of the city can be recognized in some emblematic examples belonging to the architecture of the Renaissance period, such as, for example, in certain architectural experiments of Alberti, no longer limited to a mythical historicism, but the result of a rational exploration of the structure of the classical code in its syntactic values as in the emblematic ones.

Specifically, the project of the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini represents an archetypal essay of rewriting, an attempt to create a new building through the recovery of the ancient thirteenth-century church of San Francesco (fig.9). Made by order of Sigismondo Malatesta from 1450 and never finished, the work included the complete renovation of the exterior of the medieval church and part of the interior. According to this request, Alberti conceived a perimeter structure that, as a sort of mask, would have been able to give to the pre-existence building a new symbolic value; no longer a church but a personal funerary monument of Sigismondo.

The stylistic choices of Alberti consisted mainly of the application of a classical code that differed from the original architectural language. This attitude, if not a rejection at least a critical opposition to medieval architecture, reflects more generally the will of Alberti to *"cover the disappointments caused by reality, to recall in their concreteness the structures of a heroic past to be contrasted with contemporary hypocrisies"* (Tafuri 1968; 19).

As Rudolf Wittkower suggests, the design for the facade of the Tempio Malatestiano grasps from the Roman architecture the motif of the triumphal arch that, in the Alberti's work, becomes an allegorical expression of the triumph over death (Wittkower 1964). The grafting of the triumphal arch motif in the wall context of the pre-existence structure represents both a synthesis that brought together the holy symbol (the church) with that of human power (the triumphal arch), as well as an attempt at a logical and coherent solution with the figurative problem of the facade of the Renaissance church. These linguistic choices inevitably generate a figurative collision with the original structure, causing a semantic estrangement between the characters of the new elements and the one of the ancient building.

Although with different ideological assumptions, the operation carried out by Alberti in Rimini can be compared, in some respects, to the restoration of the Palazzo della Ragione in Vicenza by Andrea Palladio (fig.10). As in the Tempio Malatestiano, even in the Basilica Palladiana we can trace a similar attitude in the design practice aimed at conceiving the urban phenomenon in its historical progression.

It is well recognized how the problem raised by the environmental conditions, from the natural and historical context, represents a fundamental design factor in the genesis of Palladian architectures. On the other hand, as suggested by Lionello Puppi, the attitude of Palladio in working within the physical environment acts not through a discontinuity with the recent past but through its functional and formal renewal. This renewal derives in large part from the need to transform the city and the territory due to the demands of the operational practice, in particular to those requests of the client aimed at promoting a celebratory renewal of the city, centre of the political power, and a structural development of the territory, centre of the economic power (Puppi 1973). Palladio sees these operational requests as a range of possible opportunities for figurative and typological experimentation that moves towards a hybridization of the model of the Renaissance palace with elements of Roman architecture.

This experimentation is particularly evident in the Basilica Palladiana. In Vicenza, the intent of Palladio was indeed to create a building *“as an adaptation of the ancient basilica type to modern uses and the instruments, to reach this result, were the classical forms in the Bramante interpretation”* (Wittkower 1964; 78). That is particularly evident in the external support structure designed by Palladio, composed by an uninterrupted two-storey sequence of the so-called *“motivo palladiano”*, a system of arches and columns whose composition closely recalls the models of Sanmicheli, Bramante in Rome and Raffaello, which, in the hands of the Palladio, acquire *“a more opulent and ingenious appearance with the introduction of figures silhouetted against the sky, of statues and festoons with window decorations, of masks as keystones on the ground floor”* (Wittkower 1964; 78).

The transformation of the figurative and typological apparatus of the Palazzo della Ragione in Vicenza, therefore, follows Palladio's desire to confer the building, as the main place of representation of the urban community, that civil and moral value of which the Roman basilica is one of the maximum architectural expressions.

At this point, the rewriting process should be also defined when it is no longer involved in the single building, but a significant part of the urban structure as happens for the extension of the Bank of London by John Soane (fig.11). Here the issue of rewriting embraces a broader dimension; it does not end with the superimposition of a new formal system to the original architecture, but rather addresses the transformation of a city's fragment.

Soane's building, during its long design process, gradually takes the place of the surrounding urban fabric grafting a body of heterogeneous architectures according to the romantic idea of ruin. In other words, Soane composes the architectural elements responding to that late eighteenth-century instance of the fragmentation of ancient things and the consequent need for their re-configuration. This archaeological conception that characterizes the Bank of London "*represents the shattering of the classical language of architecture; consolidates the transfiguration, already in place, of the compositional logic linked to the concept of Alberti's variety; represents the "hope" of finding the formal compactness of an archipelago-building grouped by concatenation of different architectural figures*" (Piva 2007; 108).

As noted above in the Piranesian drawings of Campo Marzio and in Villa Adriana finds in Soane's architecture its concrete manifestation: the overcoming of the historicist conception of the discipline of composition in favour of a renewed relationship with memory; the logic of fragmentation as a possible alternative to a hierarchical conception of space; the textual experimentation of architectural units originated by a transposition of forms and figures coming from the catalogue of history, etc.

Conclusions

This study does not aim to exhaust the archetypal cases of rewriting that can be found within the historical panorama of architecture, nor to address all the methodological questions promoted by this generative technique. The intent is here to depict an overall picture of the procedures adopted by the act of rewriting, starting from an analysis of the phenomenon at the conceptual level up to the point of dealing with its physical manifestation within the urban structure.

We have observed how the rewriting process consists theoretically in a transposition of the physical elements and absences that characterize the urban structure into a new set of syntagmatic elements; transposition that can occur through textual dislocations of forms and figures operating on the memory device. On the other hand, the analysis of this phenomenon from the physical point of view has shown how this transposition takes place operationally through the grafting of architectural systems aimed at giving a new typological and figurative aspect to the monumental persistence.

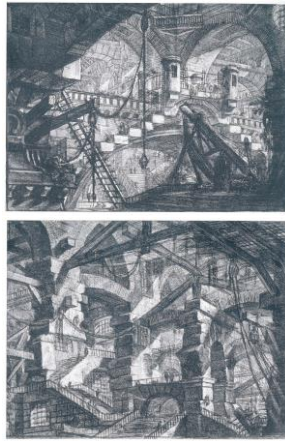
These critical observations may suggest a possible methodological direction in depicting the phenomenon of rewriting in the contemporary practice of architecture. That would be able to identify some conceptual modalities with which to address the problem of how to work and operate in the urban context from a formal point of view. On the other hand, if the transformation of the urban structure is indeed a complex phenomenon that, as a whole, cannot be linked only to iconographic, typological and formal questions, however fundamental for the development of architectural language, it is also true that critically addressing these issues in the architectural project is an essential factor in safeguarding the social and cultural identity of the city.

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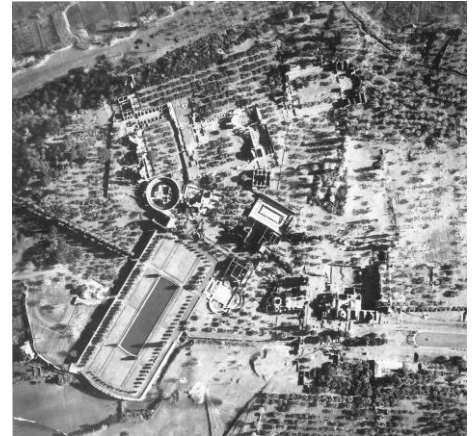
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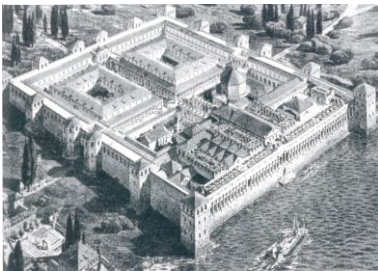
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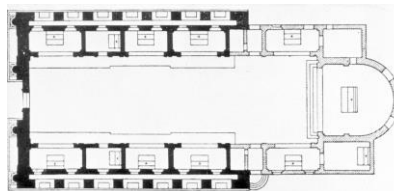
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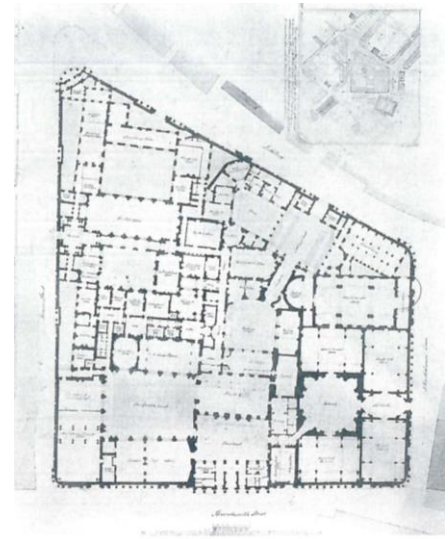
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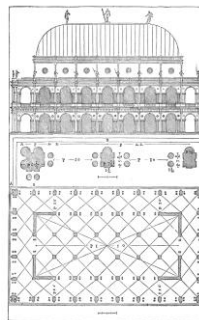
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- Fig1.** Giovan Battista Piranesi, Campo Marzio, 1762, published in Eisenman, Peter. 2005. "A Critical Analysis: Giovan Battista Piranesi" in S. Cassarà, (ed.), *Peter Eisenman Contropiede*, pp. 40-41, Skira: Milano, which is an excerpt from P. Eisenman, "Notation of Affect", in K. Herding and B. Stumpfhaus, (eds.), *Pathos, Affekt, Gefühl: Die Emotionen in den Künsten*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, pag.41.
- Fig2.** Giovan Battista Piranesi, Carceri, 1745-1761.
- Fig3.** Aerial view of Villa Adriana, published in MacDonald, L. W. and Pinto, A. J. 1997, *Villa Adriana. La costruzione e il mito da Adriano a Louis Kahn*, Milano: Electa, pag.8.
- Fig4.** Arles' amphitheatre in an engraving dated 1686, published in Rossi, Aldo. 1966. *L'architettura della città*, Padova: Marsilio Editore, pag. 106.
- Fig5.** The amphitheatre square of Lucca.
- Fig6.** Teatro Marcello in Rome from *Vedute di Roma* by Giovan Battista Piranesi.
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- Fig9.** Leon Battista Alberti, plan of the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini, published in Wittkower, Rudolf. 1964, *Principi architettonici nell'età dell'Umanesimo*, Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore.
- Fig10.** Andrea Palladio, plan and elevation of Basilica Palladiana published in *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*, I. III, cap.20, p.43.
- Fig11.** John Soane, 1833, Bank of England, general plan, published in Piva, Cesare. 2007. *John Soane: la problematica della frammentazione*, Firenze: Aion, pag. 138.