Visionary Power

Producing the Contemporary City
1. In 2005, more than eight million tourists visited Rome. Tourism means consumption of the major monuments, congestion in the centre, and the transformation of the baroque city into a multifunctional shopping district. Roman tourism tolerates the evils of tourism because of the economic benefits it brings. Yet tourism can be more than a nuisance. It presents an opportunity to rejuvenate the city in a way that will benefit both tourists and residents.

2. Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590) and Domenico Fontana were able to imagine a project for Rome stemming from the needs of contemporary religious tourism. They used a very basic concept: establishing connections among the seven major churches. These links would clarify the structure of the city and reestablish the richness of the Roman ruins inside of a new ideological frame. The success of the extremely empire, triumphant and fast expansion of Sixtus and Domenico is the practical demonstration that tourism does not necessarily destroy the city; on the contrary, tourism can produce the city.

3. There are three main attractions in Rome: the Vatican, the shipping district distributed throughout the baroque city, and the Roman ruins. The Vatican was reorganized for Jubilee 2000: the baroque city evolves through the actions of its many inhabitants; the Roman ruins remain more or less unchanged since the fascist interventions. The realization of the new Centari lines, passing below the Foro, offers a concrete opportunity to rethink the entire area.

4. The area from Piazza Venezia to the Colosseum is slowly developing into an informal, self-organized theme park. Provisional solutions spontaneously grow in response to the tourist demand: food vendors, drinks and souvenirs, gladiators offer family photos, multimedia productions show Ben Hur in Killing Caesar in your language.

5. Compared to Disney's Magic Kingdoms, Rome's central archaeological area - from the Forum to Caracalla baths - is five times larger, four times less attractive in terms of visitors, and 20 times less profitable. Yet Rome is not a theme park, and profit is not the only reason to keep the Rome business going. Rules are more complicated to keep than cardboard castles property is split among multiple owners, both private and public. Management is correspondingly intricate: various administrations are involved in heritage promotion, events promotion, gardening and safety. Customers are diverse as well.

6. Contrary to a theme park or a museum, Rome has no clear borders: as soon moves outward from the centre, the tourist attractions gradually disappear; they do not disappear abruptly. In the countryside there are plenty of minor buildings, amazing landscapes, lonely castles.

7. Rome is not Venice; it is not delimited by an 8-km island. Rome is not the Magic Kingdoms. To think of Rome as such is cynical and unrealistic. In Rome, the business of tourism can grow to involve a broader territory. The reorganization of the touristic city enacts the reorganization of the cities post-urbanocratic city.

8. In a global market of cities competing as providers of space, facilities, environment, it is difficult to recognize Rome's qualities. As the only global city already complete in its collection of spaces, Rome only needs to rediscover its metropolitan assets.

9. Rome is made of projects. Rome has been a project and a refoundation from the beginning. Rome still has a project for Rome. It was an urban and an international center, and it was a re-foundation. It chose to build the city on the Palatine hill, transforming the site heart of the previous settlement. Rome, on the contrary, proposed to start a new city on the deserted site of the Aurelian hill, and his project failed because it was not metropolitan.

All of the projects that followed were, again, re-foundations: it was repeatedly the other arrangement with the city of the past that inspired visions of the new city. The main business of Alberti and Bramante was to show to their clients the impressive beauty of the ancient city. Rome is made of universal projects, one on top of the other. And losing, from the beginning, a universal project translated into urban space (from a civilization project that is mainly enmeshed into laws and urban artifacts, a civilization project whose main tool is the city), it is a universal project in the form of a stage.
10. There is nothing to build in Rome. Architecturally, it is too crowded. The city only needs a framework by which to understand what is already there and (this may accidentally require a bit of architecture). It is only necessary to build the infrastructure that enables the existing spaces to perform within their global context. After all, Rome's most influential architects during the last couple of centuries were painters and writers—Ferrara, Goethe, Neufund—whose production was through which to understand the ancient city. Now the infrastructure with which to decode the ancient city must be built for the contemporary multitude.

11. Roman relics must find their place within a culture that is becoming increasingly visual. Rains should be respected; spaces should be extended. If ruins do not produce spatial experiences, they are lost for an increasing majority of non-necessarily undetermined visitors. And without an initial spatial experience of the ruins, no further intellectual experience is possible. There can be no understanding of ruins, go unnoticed.

The archaeological park has to be spectacular enough to attract the masses; it has to be unforgettable without compromising its richness; it has to allow the experience of organized, fast, plebeian visits and refined, slow, random prowling. It has to communicate with both Goethe and Goethe's mind, and to accommodate visits of two years or two days.

12. To restore clarity to the Roman spaces, the most important step is to reduce the crowds for which they were conceived. Mass tourism, in this respect, could be a tool with which to re-establish the urban organization of the ancient city. The opening of the Via Sacra in the Roman Forum gave back clarity to the organization of the forum by re-establishing an easy and logical path and establishing the proper hierarchy between main roads and the related spaces. Tourism can be the unexpected promoter of urbanity, colonizing the ruins and thereby expanding the collection of spaces at the tourists' disposal.

The Emporium Forum at the entrance of Via dei Fori Imperiali

The entrance to the Forum at the Via Sacra

The Forum of Augustus as the foundation of the ancient city

The forum center as the foundation of the ancient city

New residential areas are constructed at the Ambelieus and the Faunus Temp loose buildings.
13. The renovation of the ruins is a rediscovery of the urban potential of the ancient plan. In order to perform, the city needs a pavement on which to move without excessive preoccupations (according to Raymond Hood’s formula: the plan is of primary importance, because on the floor are performed all the activities of the human occupants.)

Ruins can be part of the contemporary city only if the pavement of the contemporary city is at the level of the Roman city. Europeans have to happen in the Roman scene. The present (fascist) organization of the Forum only allows one to pass by the buildings and look without entering. Ancient buildings are pure background. Everything is distant, flat, impossible to touch. The city is empty; citizens do not deserve the city.

14. In a 1994 advertisement of the Barilla company, some of the main Italian public spaces appear to have been invaded by large corn fields. The Barilla commercial describes a site-city, one that is able to couple history and quality of life, moderate urbanity and pastoral isolation, nature and spectacle.

It is easy to dismiss Barilla urbanism as cheap, populist and philistine, yet the Barilla campaign not only recognizes desires that are part of the contemporary city, but also discovers tools for its transformation. Surrendering to nature seems to be the last resource of urbanity; green matter, the ultimate tool with which to build the city.

Green matter can make ruins understandable and usable. Green matter is tolerant and precedes, robust and comfortable. It can evolve, allowing spaces to be experienced and allowing architectural areas to mutate according to changing interpretation paradigms. Green matter defines a group of recognizable activities for the places where it appears and immediately provides a name – park – for whatever it touches. Green matter projects architecture with its intimate moral legitimation. It gives the system a touch of realistic unreality; the ancient city is gone, and the first reason not to rebuild it, is not to erase the fact that Rome was really there.

15. Be more confident. The contemporary city must be nothing less than the best possible city. Reject the obsession with layering back as desire for protagonism (the stupid idea: we have to invent something just because we are here) and as complete lack of responsibility (the cowardly idea: nothing is the history of the city is worth a decision). Think of the city in terms of spaces and rediscover their differences. Remove the nineteenth-century cellars in the middle of Trajan’s Forum because they camouflage the space of the Forum; remove them because Imperial spaces are better, not because Imperial times were better. Architecture is a judgment of urban resources, a commitment not to waste. A project is just something for the city to gain or to lose in terms of space, excavations in the Imperial Forum will be sheer gain, yet excavations in the Circus Maximus will be pure loss for the city. To excavate in the Forum will add an extraordinary system of spaces to the city. To excavate in the Circus Maximus will eliminate from the city a performing urban tool, leaving an entire category of events without a place in which to happen. Solve problems the Roman way; be confident. Use the tremendous openness of architecture to find a possibility for the confluence of tourism, heritage and the contemporary city. Rely on a given, shared architectural knowledge. Beauty can be easy. Erase traces. When asked to restore Diocletian baths and to transform the building into a church, Michelangelo decided not to do anything. He simply determined where to put the door, and thus how to move within the Roman spaces. Then he suggested painting the vaults white. Erase traces. The city does not need authors.