

PARTICIPATORY RESILIENCE ARCHITECTURE

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Applying the concept of resilience - of metallurgical origin - to architecture is no longer new following the essay *Toward Resilient Architecture* by Mehaffy and Saligaros. However, as often happens with terms that take on an exotic character, there is an abuse of the metaphor they underlie. Likewise, the concept of participation and the practices that it would imply in designing has been and still is used and abused. Today, architecture should perhaps resist the rhetorical representations of certain concepts that claim to update it. Architecture, however, if the end is clear, has no need to represent itself with metaphors that justify its existence. The direct experience of two works on the borderlines between planning and participation wants to prove that *participatory resilience architecture* is not yet another rhetorical figure but one of the many answers that it can still give to the society of the "endless means" described by Agamben.

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Participatory Resilience Architecture

An Architecture of Participation is the essay by Giancarlo De Carlo that, almost 50 years ago, put into motion a new way of approaching design (De Carlo, 2013). The user was to participate in the whole design process. Only in this way was it believed that architecture could really be at the service of the community. However, De Carlo himself recognized the risks involved in what he called "a realistic utopia": participation lends itself to mystification and exploitation. Time has shown that De Carlo's reserves were well founded. He was the first to see how participation is a very difficult process to implement. The failure to implement the plan for the new center of Rimini as well as the partial success of Villaggio Matteotti in Terni are emblematic of how participation is a path full of pitfalls. Nevertheless, the fascination of participation has been present throughout the second half of the last century up to the present day. Today, in the age of the digital network, of increasingly fast and widespread connections and new mass media, the paradigm of participation seems to want to be renewed and open to the cybernetic user. *Open Source Architecture (OSArc)*, in addition to being the umpteenth essay-manifesto that intends to revolutionize the way architecture is done, it records the current condition of a part of contemporary society. The remaining part of the society that does not have access to the internet or that does not have the know-how to contribute actively to the design remains excluded from the long-awaited "open design" (Ratti, 2014).

The information metaphor of OSArc attributes, to architecture, the task of being the software of the built reality, which is the hardware. Carlo Ratti himself, however, writes that this is not such an innovative theory, but rather it is only the actualization of the vernacular architecture conducted with IT tools. Is it therefore only a change of instruments and not a paradigm? The means change but the aim of architecture should remain the same: to be that art at the service of society. But the problem is perhaps to be found in the society that in general - as Giorgio Agamben and others have shown - has more and more means at its disposal but seems to have forgotten what they were to serve (Agamben, 2016). If we consider architecture an instrument, as for the rest of the instruments that man has, the problem is not of an architectural, or instrumental nature, but of purpose. Scholars and architects complain, not unjustly, of a growing disinterest in architecture. They ask themselves why this is happening. They look for the problem inside the instrument that for some turns out to be excessively specialized (elitist), for others it is inadequate to the times or inappropriate to the problems to be faced. A tool like any tool, whether it be manual analogical or digital, always depends on how you use it and especially why you use it. The same is true for architecture. Before using it, it is important to understand why, for what purpose. In the age of modernity, what seems to have been lost is precisely the purpose of architecture. Thus, it entailed periodic reinterpretations of the instrument: from participatory architecture to choral architecture, from bio-architecture to resilient architecture, and so on. While each of these attributes has only served to make the promoters of the new version of architecture famous, the latter has increasingly turned into a potential. However, it resists attributes and labels and when it is used as an instrument, it is very effective.

Below, two cases are taken into account in which architecture and art have been used as tools with a specific purpose: to solve some problems of contemporary society. Both cases could be described or recounted as emblematic of a participatory approach while they are the demonstration that when an instrument is used well, potentiality becomes concreteness and action becomes doing, in the Aristotelian distinction of *praxis* and *poiesis*.

Door of Beauty in Librino

Librino in Catania is, like Scampia in Naples or Zen in Palermo, one of those satellite neighborhoods of the city, a place of alienation and social exclusion. Designed by Kenzo Tange in 1970 with the aim to be the new Catania, it instead has become the district where the inhabitants live like outcasts. This condition, in addition to causing a strong social malaise, influences the opinion of those who are outside. Judgment often becomes prejudice and therefore does not easily enable the processes of emancipation from that condition. Librino is therefore ugly, dangerous, inhospitable, disorientating, anonymous, desolate and peripheral. In the buildings of Librino, the malfeasance of the mafia and local delinquency lurks.

The situation of Librino is not to be attributed to Tange's project but to its realization, only partial and distorted with respect to the original idea. In fact, only residential buildings were built in Librino and little more. In this state of affairs, which has lasted for years now, every action of improvement proposed and implemented by the municipal administration, which is in reality responsible for the current situation, is rejected and vandalized. This is also because local politics have always used the needs of the inhabitants of the neighborhood as a bargaining chip for voting. The rights to Librino are concessions granted in exchange for the political vote. The inhabitants

seem to have accepted their condition as exploited and marginalized while in the rest of the city the prejudices are rooted.

This situation is a problem for the whole city. The problem, created in part by a certain vision of functionalist urban planning and largely by politics, has been addressed with the instrument of landscape art and architecture. The aim is to deliver a place with which the inhabitants could be proud of identifying. The *Door of Beauty* (fig.1), conceived by Antonio Presti, is not only a work of art or architecture of the infrastructure landscape but is above all a project with a social purpose (Presti, 2015). The process of realization of the work involved more than two thousand children from the schools of Librino, their respective families and teachers of the schools. The project was attended by internationally renowned artists who shared their ideas with the inhabitants. The work, placed on one of the many overpasses in the district, is composed of a succession of poems and terracotta installations that stand out against a blue kleen background (fig. 2). The message it wants to convey is: Librino and its inhabitants are beautiful. Today, the *Door of Beauty*, almost ten years after its creation, has not undergone any vandalism and is one of the few places in Librino of which the inhabitants are proud.



Fig.1. The Door of Beauty in Librino, created by Antonio Presti, 2009.



Fig.2. Detail of the Door of Beauty.

Kaira Loro/Architecture for Peace in Senegal

One of the most current problems is that of the condition of the sub-Saharan African populations and of the consequent wave of migration that is affecting Europe and beyond. In this case as well, demagogy and exploitation of the problem are at the service of politics but not of real solutions. The sensitivity of the young designer Raoul Vecchio has looked beyond the tip of the iceberg. The real problem is indeed the strong gap between Western society and the rest of the world. With the instrument of the architectural project, he then put himself at the service of the real problem: how to make life better for the people of Africa who want to stay in their land. It all stems from the need to make the Tanaf Valley fertile in Senegal. The lands of the valley, following a prolonged drought, are regularly affected by the phenomenon of intrusion of the sea waters that make them dry and salty (fig. 3). The phenomenon of saline intrusion has become a humanitarian emergency affecting

about 80,000 people in the villages and 10,000 hectares of rice fields in the valley. The project idea is as simple as it is effective: to build a dam bridge (fig. 4). Once the project had been defined in all its aspects (hydraulic, geotechnical, architectural-landscape), the funds were collected for the realization of the work in self-construction assisted with the inhabitants of the villages involved. To collect the necessary resources, many people were sensitized and numerous events were organized. Among these, the most significant were those who saw architecture as an instrument of sensitization and involvement: an international workshop and two international architecture competitions entitled Kaira Looro (which in the Mandinga language means “architecture for peace”) that saw the participation of more than a thousand design groups. The necessary resources have been so collected and today we are proceeding to the bureaucratic procedures for the issue of authorizations for its realization. The dam bridge will be made thanks to both the tenacity of those who wanted it and how it was able to use the architectural instrument in all its facets.



Fig.3. The salty lands of Tanaf Valley.



Fig.4. The dam bridge by Raoul Vecchio.

Closing remarks

The direct participation in these two experiences on the borderlines between design and participation wants to be the testimony that *participatory resilience architecture* is not easy to define. There are many unanswered questions: was it participatory planning? Was it of a choral art form? Or is it simply a way of properly using the tools of art and architecture? Did the "designers" feel diminished in their authorial value or strengthened by the involvement of more people? And finally, why does this new definition of architecture give the title to these short testimonial notes? Is it perhaps the invention of a new exotic label that wants to provoke a rejection reaction and to say that, ultimately, whatever attribute one chooses alone would not make any sense? On the other hand, without architecture, which is a powerful tool even of contemporary society, to whom would we refer the many and varied attributes?

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