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Rock 'n' Wall: designing the absence

How to question the role of the urban monument in the contemporary European city today? Challenging the generic concept of a city as a set of fundamental structures/infrastructures might lead to question urban identity beyond the evidence of stable urban form over time.

“The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.”

Italo Calvino¹

Museification vs. Social Condenser

The value of the historic city of Rome, still today, is often identified with the historic and artistic value of its monuments in a very abstract sense, which sometimes represses the capacity of those monument to act as social and urban condensers, as real artifacts that embody their important past as a contemporary condition of their existence.

A rigid interpretation of historic context suggests the historic city as a museum of itself, one in which the historic monument cannot be part of daily life or make a real contribution to the identity of the current city.

Which Wall?

In this respect the Walls of Rome – the Aurelian Wall, the Leonine Wall, the Vatican Wall and the Baroque Wall – offer a great opportunity to rethink the relationship between monument and city. Many parts of the urban landscape of Rome have been lost or substantially transformed over the centuries, losing their original consistency and substance. This did not physically occur to the most massive boundary wall of Rome, which was initially built by the emperor Aurelian in five years (270-275 BCE) as a 19km-long ribbon of bricks to defend the city from barbarian invasions. While the older Servian Wall was physically erased, the Aurelian Wall has survived over centuries after losing its defensive function, becoming a linear tape that has registered many historical events along its perimeter, events that are made visible by the historic process of transformations, repairs and adaptation to contingent urban conditions of the city.

From the Metaphor of Absence to the Project of Absence

Despite its permanence over time, though, the Aurelian Wall with its transformations also speaks of a twofold history of the city of Rome, both physically and metaphorically: a history of Presence - what remained as permanence over time - and a history of Absence – what was lost or was never accomplished. A twofold history that calls for further investigations, if one wants to propose an alternate identity for the wall, complementary and not mutually exclusive with its original one and with the identity of contemporary Rome.

As a presence, the wall is undeniably there, but it is certainly perceived more as an obstacle to the continuity of the city than as a sign of that continuity. As a sign of absence, the wall can be considered from a different point of view: it certainly embodies the visible trace of the unaccomplished development of Rome as the capital of the modern Italian

state, since it contains the persistence of a contradictory series of decisions that took place and, at the same time, never happened. In this context the wall demolition is certainly the most meaningful one.

While in Paris (the “Grands Travaux - Haussmann, 1869) and in Vienna (the Ringstrasse – M. von Lohr, 1872) the boundary wall is replaced by urban spaces and large corridors, with the clear intention to ensure power preservation by means of a new urban strategy, in Rome the void of real power allows the wall to remain and to produce the clearest effect of the subsequent undecided planning of the new Rome: the division between the center and the newborn bourgeoisie periphery.

The wall is left almost intact, but since now on it will be almost ignored for a century. Paradoxically, as if the wall was not longer there, in the following years it is cut, perforated, supported by clamps, kept in life by parasitic interventions while, at the same time, its own essence is murdered and murdered again, for the wall is more and more perceived as an intruder in its own city.

The wall segment at Porta Salaria is the most destroyed and the most preserved. The wall segment at Porta Metronia is the most preserved and the most unknown. The wall segment along the Tiber and the Janiculum hill is the most absent and perhaps the most regretted. The wall segment at Villa Medici and Villa Borghese is the most exhibited and the most subdued.

From this perspective the lack of any clear destiny is for the wall, as for Rome itself, the most truly terrifying future that one might imagine. This void of meaning is the condition to change; we must consider the wall once more as a single urban infrastructure, with as many identities as its fragmentary segments. Positioned in between the historic and the contemporary city, the wall has always been capable of absorbing memories from the past, including even its negation as a whole. For this reason it is now time to allow the wall to speak about its differences and complexities, standing as a metaphor for the identity of the multicultural contemporary city in which it is located. The aim of such a design could consequently focus on giving breath to the wall’s voice as one of the many voices of the city, designing the space around it in order to listen and not to speak.

Designing the absence.

Francesco M. Mancini



Figure: Porta San Sebastiano, Museum of the Aurelian Wall: composite photograph by the Author

¹ *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978