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KEYWORDS

Time; Space; Urban Narratives; Paratopia; Cities' Identity

ABSTRACT

The essay theorises the relationship between narratives and the city by referring to the dimension of time and its relation with space, searching for the relevance of urban narratives within the contemporary architectural debate.

As crucial and founding elements of the urban space, narratives are able to underline a complex notion of time, characterized by the overlap of fictional and historical facts, collective and individual perceptions. Thus, from the interplay between the singular identity of the city and the multiple subjectivisations produced by their inhabitants, to the co-existence of myth and history, narratives settle an immaterial place, perceivable through the tangible entity of architecture. By adopting the term paratopia (literally from the ancient greek 'a place beyond'), the paper objectifies the identity of the city, addressing it as a complementary context shaped both in the spatial and time dimension: the space through which cities come to life. While contemporary cities' narratives seem distrusting the immaterial place of narratives in favour of a more scientific and performative perspective, the relevance of paratopia must be reconsidered. Since the most important cities of history adopted myths for shaping the history behind the foundations of the urban space, this imaginary spatio-temporal intersection might come back at the center of urban debates, becoming a chance to reconsider the role of 'epic' within the urban identity.

Metadati in italiano in fondo

Here-after City



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The relationship between the city and narrative seems to place itself within one of the great theoretical obsessions of modernity, contributing to a by-now classic debate that has been involving an ever-growing multitude of thinkers: the intersection of space and time. However, it should be noted that the notion of “narrative” is characterized by a specific, but ambiguous, notion of time: an interweaving of history, fiction and, in some cases, myth.

On its part, the term city designates the space where we live. It is the place where we cross streets and squares; enter buildings, malls and galleries; admire monuments, palaces and temples. Historically defined to protect a community from external enemies, the city is intimately connected with the identity of those who live there. The city's and the communities' identities constantly influence each-other, changing over time. So, to give an example, the identity of a Viennese is defined by the city of Vienna, obviously. At the same time, Vienna is itself defined by the imperial family's history, by the intellectual milieu of the early 20th century and – if you are an architect – it may also be defined by Adolf Loos' architecture and the work of an architect like Hans Hollein. These, all together, create an identity which is the mixture of space (the actual city) and time (its history, narratives and myths). Furthermore, such an identity is just one of the many possible. Each person may indeed define the identity of his city, depending on his own culture. Surely, a city is objective to the extent that it is in a precise geographical place, it contains certain buildings and it has been shaped as it is by a series of historical facts. And yet, we must account for the fact that anyone can bring different perceptions and obsessions into play. For me, Vienna's identity is defined by the ghosts of Karl Kraus and Fisher von Erlach, both providing a sort of aura to this city. For someone-else, maybe uninterested in architecture, Vienna may be the city of music: the place where almost all classical composers worked and where Gustav Mahler's music was rejected by an overly conservative bourgeoisie.

If you forgive the banality of such example, it should be clear that any city has more than one identity, and each one of these is defined by different clusters of narratives that may overlap, connect and diverge. But still: how does a narrative actually create an identity of a city? A possible answer to this question may be found in a well-known passage from Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*:

Now let us, by a flight of the imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past an entity, that is to say, in which nothing which has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one. This would mean that in Rome the palaces of the Caesars and the Septizonium of Septimius Severus would still be rising to their old height on the Palatine and that castle of S. Angelo would still be carrying on its battlements the beautiful statues which graced it until the siege of the goths, and so on.¹

This passage, I believe, clarifies the relationship between the narrative and the city, describing some sort of spatial embodiment of temporal intersections. We may all have different perceptions of a city, but all of these are simultaneously showcased by the same architectural objects. The city, then, can be read as an allegorical, or even *tautegorical*² space: it speaks of itself by showing the temporal and narrative stratifications that have formed it. In other words, any city showcases an intimate connection between myths, narratives or symbols and the experiences giving rise to them. By reading in such a way, it becomes clear that an urban space is not the mere empty place we fill by carrying out our daily activities. There is a reality beyond the built environment, and yet only visible through it. It is the space of narrative and time. There is a potentially invisible city that parasitizes the real one, being seemingly beyond and part of the urban space. For convenience, such a space may be defined as a sort of *paratopia*: a place [topos: τόπος] beyond [para: παρά].³ As in some ancient Greek theatres the *parascenium* would have had openings towards what was beyond the scene, so it is for a *paratopia*: it shows what is beyond the place of our daily activities. For better understanding, such a reality may be compared to the image of the ghost, or of the phantom. A ghost comes from a *paranormal* world and multiplies our perceptions of reality by appearing in our space-time. In doing so, it shows a parallel world that overlays with ours, apparently breaking the laws of physics. It opens the doors to an alternative reality that, nonetheless, is juxtaposed to our immanent and material actuality.

As abstract as this description may seem, this kind of place is quite immanent. It is the space through which cities come to life: the intersection of narratives and spaces. Like an alive entity, a city speaks about its beyond through its spaces and monuments. Every city has such a quality: they all speak about their stories, myths and narratives through their buildings and spaces – and, theoretically, each place has infinite narratives, possibly one for each subject who lives in it, visits it or even just studies it. Maybe, the best examples of such quality can be found in the foundational myths of cities, for which narratives and legends are mixed with facts and history, creating a spatio-temporal amalgam within which it is impossible to distinguish reality from fiction. A classic example: according to ancient myths, Rome was founded by Romulus and Remus. Destined to die, the two brothers were at first saved by a she-wolf. According to some archaeologists, we can visit the place where Romulus and Remus were found by the she-wolf; the *Lupercal*: a cave on the Palatine Hill, in front of the circus Maximus.⁴ And yet, we may wonder: is the foundation of Rome a true story? No-one knows. Myth and history are mixed and their distinction is fuzzy. Ancient authors actually report traditions; they do not have any scientific claim. “Do we know, after two millennia of study?”⁵ asks us Michel Serres. We do and we don't. We are lost in the juxtaposition of myth and history, possibly embodied by a space.

Another example, amongst the many, is the foundational myth of Sforzinda as recounted by his author Filarete.⁶ During excavations, a “Golden Book” written centuries before by the

king Zogalia is discovered. It is a book written for the future, in order to save the ancient culture from barbarisms and its inevitable decadence. In here, it is described the city of Plusiapolis, built by the architect Onitoan Nolivera (anagram of Antonio Averlino, Filarete's birthname).⁷ Needless to say, Sforzinda's design is based on this imaginary city. Filarete creates a fictional city as a declaration of the superiority of ancient architecture, interpreted as the model for the new city; and he does so in order to sell his agenda to his possible client: Francesco Sforza, then Duke of Milan. Here, we see the invention of a myth, of a narrative, in order to justify a project. Filarete talks about the ancient, reinventing it in the present, and he does so by representing an idealized past through his own drawings and texts. Sforzinda is Plusiapolis to the extent that it is what it symbolises.

It will be said that, nowadays, these kinds of immaterial spaces may no longer exist. Science, by offering methods for a truthful and systematic analysis of reality, has made these kinds of *paratopia(s)* implausible, just as it has proven that ghosts do not exist. Nowadays, no-one in their right mind would believe that Romulus and Remus were suckled by a she-wolf. Also, it might be said that the design – or even just the understanding – of a city does not need any myth, not even any narrative of the kind used by Filarete. A modern or contemporary city should be designed by focusing on performative needs. Contemporary architects define rules to be followed, and they do so by carefully carrying sociological and scientific analyses. As a result, the city will be functional and efficient, or as we like to say today: smart.

And yet, myths and narratives still exist, even though they might be different. An easy example: even the so-called "smart city" is quite often treated like a myth. When architects and urban planners talk about the sustainability, performativity and smartness of their cities, they recount an epic struggle to save the world. It is the epic story of a practice that is in fact stubbornly unepic. This way, they create a narrative useful for the promotion of their work. If this is true, it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of a need for narratives that is irreducible to pragmatic needs and demands.

A proper discussion of this topic would surely need further studies, or at least more examples, but it seems anyway important to bring forth a hypothesis, however premature it may be. Far from being anachronistic, the narrative dimension of a city - and therefore the creation and identification of that type of space previously defined as *paratopia* is an essential feature for understanding, or thinking about the city (as well as architecture). To put it simply: it is through the interaction between its places and narratives that a city comes to life. Or, to conclude on a lighter note: who aware of steampunk wouldn't think of contemporary Tokyo as Tetsuo's city?

Postscriptum

I would like to thank Riccardo M. Villa for drawing my attention to Filarete's work.

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), trans. by James Strachey, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 17.

² Opposed to an Allegorical speech, which talks about something by means of fictional figures, a Tautegorical [ταυτό - "tauto"; ἀγορεύω - "to speak"] speech - or image - talks about itself by means of itself. For a general introduction to the topic, see: Devin Zane Shaw, "Tautegory", in *The Nancy Dictionary*, edited by Peter Gratton and Marie-Eve Morin, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 227-229.

³ The term *paratopia* has also been defined by Dominique Maingueneau as follows: "négociation entre le lieu et le non-lieu, une appartenance parasitaire qui se nourrit de son impossible inclusion." Dominique Maingueneau, *Le Discours littéraire. Paratopie et scène d'énonciation*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 2004), 72.

⁴ On the topic, see: Andrea Carandini and Daniela Bruno, *La Casa di Augusto, dai "Lupercalia" al Natale*, (Roma-Bari: Edizioni Laterza, 2008).

⁵ Michel Serres, *Rome, the First Book of Foundations*, translated by Randolph Burks, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 10.

⁶ I would like to thank Riccardo M. Villa for drawing my attention to this project.

⁷ On the topic, see: Hanno-Walter Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory from Vitruvius to the Present*, translated by Ronald Taylor, Elsie Callander and Antony Wood, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), 51-55. Tess Morrison, *Unbuilt Utopian Cities 1460 to 1900: Reconstructing their Architecture and Political Philosophy*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 11-29.

Here-after City

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tempo; spazio; narrazioni urbane; paratopia; identità delle città

ABSTRACT

Il saggio teorizza il rapporto tra la narrativa e la città facendo riferimento alla dimensione del tempo e al suo rapporto con lo spazio, cercando la pertinenza delle narrazioni urbane nel dibattito architettonico contemporaneo.

Come elementi cruciali e fondanti dello spazio urbano, le narrazioni sono in grado di sottolineare una nozione complessa di tempo, caratterizzata dalla sovrapposizione di fatti immaginari e storici, di percezioni collettive e individuali. Così, dall'interazione tra l'identità singolare della città e le molteplici soggettivizzazioni prodotte dai loro abitanti, alla coesistenza di miti e storia, le narrazioni regolano un luogo immateriale, percettibile attraverso l'entità tangibile dell'architettura. Adottando il termine 'paratopia' (letteralmente dall'antico greco 'un luogo oltre'), il documento sottolinea l'identità della città considerandola come un contesto complementare a quello fisico, caratterizzato sia dalla dimensione spaziale che temporale: il luogo attraverso il quale la città esplicita la sua identità. Mentre le narrazioni delle città contemporanee sembrano sfidare il luogo immateriale delle narrazioni a favore di una prospettiva più scientifica e performativa, la rilevanza della "paratopia" deve essere riconsiderata. Se si riflette sulla rilevanza del mito nella fondazione delle città più importanti della storia, questa intersezione spazio-temporale potrebbe tornare al centro dei dibattiti urbani, diventando un'occasione per riconsiderare il ruolo dell' 'epico' all'interno dell'identità urbana.

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