The transformation of the character

The intervention carried out by baron Hausmann in Paris in the 19th Century entailed the destruction of the medieval city with the conservation of its more significant churches that were planned as fixed urban landmarks within the new planning. The place-name of Paris did not disappear with this action, neither its monuments, but its distinguishing character disappeared completely, leading to a new city with a new fully diverse atmosphere. In 20th Century Albania, the communist demolition of the historical centre of Tirana and consequently the demolition of the whole city, only conserving one ancient mosque in the centre of the capital, transformed completely the original character of this settlement.

They are two cases of legal and planned demolition of the city, with different fortune and two aspects in common: the inevitable risk of failure of this type of massive performances and the irreparable loss of character, atmosphere, culture and material history of the previous city. Nevertheless, this type of extreme interventions is not strictly necessary to threaten the atmosphere of a historical centre. The slackness in the protection and conservation of the anonymous architectural framework of a historical centre may also lead indelibly to similar transformations within a few years [Vega-Miletto, 2006].

The contemporary city has a space of action in the urban periphery of these examples, in the form of new landmarks, singular monuments and buildings and, mainly, new urban residential districts that aspire legitimately to the creation of their
The restoration of the residential architecture

In the restoration of the existing architecture, we search not only for a spatial or geometric conservation of the building, but the preservation of its structural function, its constructive substance and the character that confers their finish surfaces. We considered that, whenever possible, the building should keep its original structure which will be object of reinforcement or consolidation if the new function or applicable regulation requires, rather than being replaced. The constructive substance of the building is the testimony of the material culture of the city’s past that represents an important part of its heritage as significant as the monument or singular building.

In addition, the character of a building itself that is expressed predominantly in the finish of its external and internal surfaces, treatments of facades, plasterings, pavements, etc., is completely distorted without a careful attention to preserve materially the singularity of its constructive solutions and the possible aging effects.

Our approach in the historical centre

This concept of the city built leads in our case to a twofold approach: in the first place, it claims the conservation and restoration of its architecture for the sake of the preservation of that distinguishing character [Miletic & Vegas 2005], and, secondly, proposes new projects that can be inserted in the existing planning of the historical centre, re-interpretating thus its character in contemporary architecture.

Our architecture studio works fundamentally on these two lines: the restoration of anonymous residential and monumental architecture, and the accomplishment of new projects within built historical contexts. Both type of actions are part of the same way to conserve the historical city and aim at consolidating the existing urban atmosphere or bridge its gaps through new buildings that can be integrated in harmony with the existing character without need to imitate languages from the past which disturb the historical setting in spite of its contemporary character.

The new architecture within the context of the historical city

In the case of planning new constructions in a consolidated urban context, it is mainly interesting the interpretation the architectonic tradition of this context. But, what do we mean by interpretation in this case?

The new project in a space of the historical centre can assume in essence three different approached: autonomy, mimesis or integration. In our opinion, the complete and deliberate autonomy of a building with respect to its historical surroundings not only impoverishes voluntarily the starting points of the project but makes its absorption within the set difficult. Mimesis as planning...
option, so common in Spain in the linguistic imitation of moldings and cornices or in the conservation of the historical facade as curtain of the new building, betrays our Zeitgeist and aborts any possibility of progression of architecture towards the future.

On the other hand, integration as a planning option offers a wide range of possible options for the contemporary architecture that may choose a conceptual re-elongation, a typological re-elongation or formal re-elongation of the historical pre-existence. The adoption of some or all of these planning strategies can even help the creation of a contemporary architecture project in historical settings that are at the same time easy to assimilate by the built context.

The conceptual re-elongation (Giacconi & Vittorini, 2005) starts from a reflection on the forms of life of the past and present in the historical center and the possible compatibility of these with the design of contemporary housing. The typological re-elongation (Muratori, 1960) can manipulate the configuration of the urban residential groupings for the creation of renewed projects of current architecture. The formal re-elongation (Marconi, 1999) allows to abstract the linguistic and expressive structure of volumes and facades of the historical center to transform it into proposals for a new architecture in consolidated settings.

The ultimate aim of these re-elongation strategies lies in the reproduction of the character of the historical center in contemporary architecture. In fact, all historical centers have a given character as a result of their constructed matter and the sensations of their architecture. The character depends on parameters such as volume, scale, space-proportion, spaces, coatings, color, texture... The careful manipulation of these parameters during the planning of contemporary architecture for the sake of respect of the pre-existing character can generate the same traditional sensations of the historical center using non-traditional languages, elements and materials.

These reflections are illustrated through our contemporary architecture projects in the historical center carried out in different districts, where the mechanisms used in the composition and planning of these new buildings in consolidated settings are presented in a specific way. At the moment, variables of ecology, sustainability, state-of-the-art facilities and fluidity in the common spaces, have been introduced in these buildings on their way to construction which demonstrates the compatibility of these concepts in the new architecture in historical centers.

Bibliography


