

## FULL PAPER

### The Heart of the Campus.

### The “European” humanization of University connective public spaces of XX century

Chiara Visentin

University of Parma, Italy, Faculty of Architecture

chiara.visentin@unipr.it

In 1922 Werner Hegemann and Elbert Peets explained us, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of their *The American Vitruvius: an architects handbook of Civic art*<sup>1</sup>, that the expression *Campus* derived from the Architectural composition of European courtyards and plazas, collective voids. Moreover, authors asserted that Old World Urban establishment was originated from formal and figurative organisation of public spaces, and hence that Anglo-Saxon University Campus derived from urban spaces of European cities. In addition they concluded that the term *Campus* originated from *Campo*: open space, representative plaza of the city.

In 1952 the Italian architect and intellectual Ernesto Nathan Rogers, during the CIAM session titled *The Heart of the City*<sup>2</sup>, stated they used the term *heart* inside Urban planning, instead the word *core*, because *heart* has beats and emotions: “I have introduced the word *heart* in the language of Urban planning techniques. We could say - as some have suggested - *core*, which is part of the fruit that contains seeds, the potential energy of a life form organism. But *heart* has more throb and summarizes, as well as physiological and biological values, those of feeling”. *Feeling*, Rogers recommends, therefore proposes new standards for the representation of collective public places.

Finally in 1992, *Villes pour vivre* was the slogan of the European Urban Charter adopted by the Council of Europe’s Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe to find rules for the improvement of physical Urban public environment and for the creation of social and cultural opportunities<sup>3</sup>.

At length, during all the XX century the significance of “connections”, contained by Urban contexts, persistently emerged as main social and Architectural topic.

The value of public space in Europe is closely linked to the high-quality, not merely Urban, of a city, to the participation of citizens inside the *civitas*, to the assembly of people in a specific collective city-place, which magnifies its spatial and human meaning. Privileged places for the staging of a community that pulses, that moves.

The University as a complex Architectural type returns faithfully the image of an Urban organism. Just as a city it’s divided into places of living and public areas, private buildings and public structures. The design planning of a University, especially when it makes reference to typological model of the *campus*, is structured as a system, made of parts those include spaces for life (collective residences for students and teachers), learning spaces (classrooms for teaching, workshops, study rooms), and, jointly to these, an organization of public spaces that defines a completed fragment made of urban spaces, new core plants in an Polycentric area.

University with spaces where a laic culture of meeting emerges, where often the architectures, perhaps even great monumental ones, backdrop to the course of collective congregation. Not only buildings but also *promenades*, not simply rooms but also *plazas*, not just theatres and auditoriums but also *plateaux*, podiums and stairways. For the great metaphor that is University campus, open space is consequently a crucial component: the Ideal city, a living area of youth gratification, not only for scientific training. Italian architect

Giovanni Michelucci, during 50ies, correctly thought, talking about the collective identity of his beloved Tuscan square of Siena: “have you ever wondered why Piazza del Campo in Siena is always so full of people sitting on the fountain or on the ground, on paving bricks, or strolling vagabond? Have you noticed that while the road system of the city is imprinted a sense of transit, it - the square – that’s the break? The sense that is a place where we find both the citizens and the general public, who comes from afar to market or to know the city and the countless masterpieces of art that it retains? A city, a square, where you are welcome, the guest expected. [...] For which it was created a collective work of art, choral, in which every man can recognize”<sup>4</sup>.

This *Architectural reality* is often the shape of European and American University campuses done throughout Modern Movement: a notable example of them is Kahn’s Salk Institute central court at La Jolla, measured on the metric scale of the vastness of the ocean, like a Piero della Francesca’s “perspective” city. The crucial role and social/cultural functions of collective public connections, their importance to guarantee continuous shared participation, using the persistence of original signs of Urban spaces, derived undoubtedly from historic Western cities.

From these assumptions are resultant, during the end of XIX century, the anti-Urban campuses, which arose from the revolutionary vision of “the man of Enlightenment” Thomas Jefferson, who, through the first decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century, provided the congregation between teachers and young human beings and their consequent liberal education, coupled for defense and implementation of Democratic freedom. These “civic meetings” could only give their best outside open spaces, to talk directly in touch with natural environment ordered with Architectural composition. Charlottesville likes Athens. Ideal Renaissance cities like University public spaces.

A lot of architects of the Modern Movement acted during all the 20th century to better define the Architectural types<sup>5</sup> and parameters derived from Ancient city. These were for example the use of monumental staircase to connect open spaces but also to increase the value of buildings; the alternation of avenue, malls and fountains, like in the plan of University of California, Berkeley, 1900-24; the analogy with antique amphitheatres like Alvar Aalto Pedagogical Institute outdoor auditorium in Jyväskylä (for which in the concourse project the Finnish architect used the *motto* “Urbs”); the re-interpretation of bridges and porticos like in Craig Ellwood Art Center of Design in Pasadena, 1970; the use of piazzas and courts like Salk Institute plaza (1959-65), as mentioned above; and finally the develop of ramps and walkways like the ramp through the heart of Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (Le Corbusier, 1963), that encourages public circulation into the building.

In Europe (north and south: from Scandinavian Aalto Otaniemi University of Technology - 1946-66-, to Catalan Josè Antonio Coderch and his unrealized School of Architecture in Barcelona) and in America (north and south: from fifties Miesian IIT in Chicago to Salk Institute by Kahn), “Modern” outdoors weren’t only functional connections but collective compositions themselves, following up-to-date statements with historic reminiscences. Persistence of signs from the city, indications for a collective right of use.

Universities settlement values were moving preferably on *space between things* rather than things themselves, on the “interconnections” instead of on buildings, giving a civic *atmosphere* to the public outdoor. Promenades, passages, stairs, plazas, avenue, patios, connected atriums, fences: horizontal/three-dimensional space contrasting and give rhythm to create sequences in which attention should be paid to various places, to distances, to architectures background; empty spaces enriched by their mutual and reciprocal exchange.

There are many examples where the Old city, with its *Urban facts*, as Aldo Rossi wrote in the '66, with its most important elements, become a model for the design of University collective places.

Even more interesting is to verify the transformation, done by the community, of specific open spaces into something else, following the widespread approach used inside European historic cities (like the sitting use of the staircase of Columbia University Law Memorial Library in New York, or the humanly scale of Walter Gropius Harvard Graduate Center buildings in Cambridge, 1948-1950<sup>6</sup>: born as concrete standard blocks with floating brick facades on raised *piloti*, have been transformed by residents a social and community moments of open-air reunion for people.

The Monumental *Triton Pools* by Eiel Saarinen for the main courtyard of Cranbrook Academy of Arts, 1932's, its central position, rectilinear vast pool of water that defines the main axis of the Campus, focalizes the high entrance *pronaos*, through Modern feeling together with autochthon traditional North European motifs. This composition refers the vast architecture of European *promenades*, wide French *boulevards*: Urban expressions Saarinen understood more than ten years before for the city of Helsinki in Haaga district, not completed (his *Greater Helsinki* proposed in Munkkiniemi-Haaga Plan, 1915).

"Our city lacks the sort of scale which gives capitals of the world the stamp of being cities: there is no wide river, high acropolis, or wide thoroughfare. We should like to see in the Helsinki of our dreams a broad principal street of imposing proportions and beauty, to provide Finland's main metropolis with architectural backbone, and to outwardly express the significance of the city as the nation's capital"<sup>7</sup>.

Finally, in the thirties, Saarinen in the wealthier United States could see raised a similar composition at Cranbrook<sup>8</sup>, in a minimum scale, of his 1915-1918's Finnish Avenue Royale Urban organisation.

Planning a city with Cartesian axes using the value of geometry to organize a new Urban design: this was the method employed by Mies van der Rohe in Chicago; the Modern grid plan for IIT campus, where the space between and within buildings was organized around a 7,30 meters net, wants to declare an human behaviour, for the foundation of a newly planned community. An idea of a city, regulated by an ideal net, consequence of Modern man's design. Vitruvius in the sixth book of *De Architectura* told us: the Socratic philosopher Aristippus, after a shipwreck on Rhodi's beach, distinguished geometric figures drawn on the sand and exclaimed, *good hope, as I see human traces!* Also for IIT campus the spatial module provided rhythm and coherence, while ensuring flexibility and architectural unity<sup>9</sup> also for potential projects. The inspiration of innovative theories of Bauhaus are showed especially in the famous building S. R. Crown Hall, address of the College of Architecture, however everywhere, on the broad streets and open plazas, the highlighted metaphor of ideal antique city moreover appears.

Compact, smaller, human dimension more than metropolitan one, Mediterranean traditional scale of project organizes limited spaces, where light, sunshine, shadows play together with people in a continuous chase. Small patios and courtyards seem more rooms than exteriors, corridors seem more streets and *calli* than interior walkways. Interiors and exteriors are sized with same dimensions. A very interesting model of that is Universidad Laboral de Almeria<sup>10</sup>, now utilizes as High School. Planned in 1971 by Julio Cano Lasso, on a desert site in the surroundings of Spanish Almeria, this total white Modern composition, with geometrical volumes and a persist sequence and alternation of patios of many dimensions, reminds of vernacular architecture of Iberian peninsula. Like Mediterranean architecture, the high walls of its structure don't permit the sun to burn the

interior little patios used by students. In analogy with Mediterranean cities, where the exteriors are regulated by the weather, the small community places for meeting are very distant from huge assembly squares.

Interestingly now, the educational value of collective places, established in various campuses built in the past century, demonstrates, through architecture, still innovative social and universal solutions at the same time: participation, individual-community simultaneous contributions, teacher-student *correspondances*, significance of *outdoors* designed as *house of all*, didactic role of environmental space in all its meanings: historical, natural or artificial.

The fact is that there are certain rules, characters, urban events (*fatti urbani*<sup>11</sup>) those indicate more clearly what a city, or a collective place, is or not. One of them is the *identity*: a “relational” space loaded with characteristic qualities has both the individual and the community to be part of itself, whether city or University. The *interactivity* that meets the needs of integration and communication; the *rituality* that is at all times performed by humans in the same way. Collective spaces, places for the community that meets to create the true idea of the *polis* with recognizable public voids. This is the heart of the Campus, and most of the “men of the Modern movement” understood it, recovering in their projects what historic city taught them.

## CAPTIONS FOR ILLUSTRATIONS

VISENTINCHIARA\_1.JPG

Law Memorial Library Staircase, Columbia Univ., NY, 1895-97, from Hertzberger, H., *Lezioni di architettura*, Roma-Bari 1996.

VISENTINCHIARA\_2.JPG

Pedagogical Institute outdoor Auditorium, Jyväskylä, Finland, 1959 by Alvar Aalto, credits Alvar Aalto Foundation.

VISENTINCHIARA\_3.JPG

Salk Institute Plaza, La Jolla, San Diego, California, 1959-65 by Louis Kahn, credits Michela Montenero.

VISENTINCHIARA\_4.JPG

Universidad Laboral de Almeria central Patio, Almeria, 1971, by J. Cano Lasso et oth., credits Archive Alberto Campo Baeza.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hegemann W., Peets E, 1922, *The American Vitruvius: an architect's handbook of civic art*, The Architectural Book Publishing Co., New York. Essential compendium where all the historic buildings were grouped together in their historical course.

<sup>2</sup> Ernesto Nathan Rogers, introduction essay for *The Heart of the City*, 1952, Tyrwhitt, J. and Sert, J. L., (eds.), CIAM Congress Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne, Pellegrini and Cudahy, New York.

<sup>3</sup> The *European Urban Charter* is built upon the work of the Council of Europe on urban policies - work inspired by the European Campaign for Urban Renaissance, organised by the Council of Europe from 1980 to 1982. This Campaign, a Europe-wide focus by public authorities and the public, on some key approaches to the improvement of life in our cities, concentrated on four main general areas: - improvement of the physical urban environment; - rehabilitation of existing housing stock; - the creation of social and cultural opportunities in towns; - community development and public participation. In line with the human rights vocation of the work of the Council of Europe, the Campaign was dominated by qualitative rather than quantitative aspects of urban development; the slogan of the Campaign was *A better life in towns (des villes pour vivre; Städte zum Leben)*.

<sup>4</sup> In Visentin, C., 2008, *L'architettura dei luoghi*, Il Poligrafo, Padova.

<sup>5</sup> Venable Turner, P., 1987, *Campus: an American Planning Tradition*, The Mit Press, Cambridge; Hertzberger, H., 1996, *Lezioni di architettura*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, orig. ed. 1991, Rotterdam.

---

<sup>6</sup> Harvard Graduate Center (. The group of eight buildings arranged round small and large courtyards on the Oxbridge pattern) was commissioned of *The Architects Collaborative*, a modernist firm headed by Walter Gropius. The members of The Architects Collaborative were: Jean Bodman-Fletcher, Norman C. Fletcher, John C. Harkness, Sarah Harkness, Robert S. McMillan, Louis A. McMillen and Benjamin Thompson.

<sup>7</sup> Jung, B., 1918, *Pro Helsingfors*, Helsinki.

<sup>8</sup> Saarinen, E., 1915, *Munkkiniemi-Haaga*, Helsinki.

<sup>9</sup> As Greek city Miletus, designed by Hippodamos, called the "perfect city", as in Roman *centuriatio*: an ideal mesh to build the city.

<sup>10</sup> Valero Ramos, E., 2008, *Universidad Laboral de Almería, 1971-1974*. J. Cano, A. Campo, M. Martin, A. Màs, Archivos de Arquitectura, Colegio de Arquitectos de Almería, Medusa, Almería.

<sup>11</sup> Rossi, A., 1966, *L'architettura della città*, Marsilio, Padova.