Townscape: The Art of City Planning In Italy, Rome

“A city should be built to give its inhabitants security and happiness” (Aristotle). It is only in our mathematical century that the construction and extension of cities has become a purely technical matter.” (LeGates and Stout, 1999).

Hellenistic architecture has been around since 323 BC, with a focus on public spaces and temples, designed with its people in mind. An ideology agreed by many architects like Sitte, expressing his views that architecture should be built to “human scale”. However, between the period of 1890-1930, the crucial era for a new modernist architecture, the idea of city planning started to change and evolve. Le Corbusier like many other architects wrote about a modern city. During this “Sitte fell out of favour in the interwar period when Le Corbusier and the insurgent young architects of the (CIAM) developed plans to raze and rebuild what they saw as obsolete cities using modern materials, monumental scale, and designs inspired by industrial society” (LeGates and Stout, 1999). Today modern architecture continues to develop, while ‘classic’ architecture is being preserved. Evidence of this is seen all around Europe, especially Italy, Rome.

Rome was once the epicentre of classical architecture, now adapting to new changes. The townscape of Rome is influenced by neo-classical architecture, with the use of its high-rise columns and dramatic roman detailing. Nevertheless, Rome as a city is starting to fuse together modern designs also.

Santa Maria della Pace strongly represents traditional roman, neo-classical architecture. This is because at the entrance you are welcomed with a baroque façade featuring elongated Tuscan columns, this is often seen on churches and historical buildings in Rome. The entrance invites us into a holy interior, walking inside I was astonished to look up and see a high dome ceiling with what seemed to be a picture of God looking down on me, automatically made me more respective of my surrounding space. The interior was highly influenced by power and religion with classical paintings on the walls, with this I felt the heavenly atmosphere. One feature that struck out for me was the use of high windows illuminating natural light onto the paintings, creating a contrast between the walls and the art pieces, enhancing the objective and meaning of the paintings. Walking to the rear of Santa Maria della pace I was stunned to see a public square consisting of a large cloister, something which isn’t enormously seen in UK churches, unless associated with cathedrals. The public square was hosting an exhibition, which to my view explored modern and traditional styles in one square, this I found very fascinating.

Although Rome is primarily a traditional city, there is however a juxtaposition between traditional and modern architecture. The MAXXI in Rome by Zaha Hadid is the national museum of the 21st century, the museum “is an architectural icon that is representative of our time, but is, in particular, a work that is the fruit of a technical-constructive complexity” (Versaci and Cardaci, 2017). The MAXXI museum is favourable when representing the modernity in a city like Rome, this is because of its location, it’s been cautiously placed to keep a distance from the historic centre of Rome but is still central. Due to the nature of its L shaped footprint the building can intergrade and flow well with the townscape which “aligns itself with the two urban grid that regulate the town planning structure of the area” (Schubert and Serrazanetti, 2017). In my

opinion the composition between the MAXXI museum and the neo-classic city of Rome merge smoothly despite its modern design, this is because of its front façade, which was kept as the same neo-classical architecture, Hadid wanted to not disturb the neighbourhood. Hadid did however explore the possibilities of fluidity that could occur behind the front façade.

Similarly walking inside the MAXXI museum I became appreciative of how the same fluidity followed me inside, offering little difference between the interior and exterior space, this was due to the high glass ceiling, which allowed vast amount of natural light in, despite its dense concrete building frame. Hadid undoubtedly took the theme of fluidity and integrated it with the interior stairs, as in my opinion the transition of the stairs leading from one platform to another enhanced this notion. But also, the contrast of the dark bold stairs directs your eyes around the building from one floor to another creating a pathway like a maze.

Today modern architecture is seen all around us, a type of architecture “conscious of its own modernity and striving for change.” (Colquhoun, 2002). Le Corbusier, a crucial name during this era, oversaw the movement during the 20th century, embracing a new minimalistic design, with the use of; cubes and cylinders. Le Corbusier saw buildings as more than just empty containers prepared to be occupied, he designed every building with a purpose for living in, a machine, arguing that “architecture goes beyond utilitarian needs.” (Le Corbusier, 1986).

Many architects use Le Corbusier as precedent, and I believe Zaha Hadid was inspired by Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye for her MAXXI museum, because of the uncanny resemblance between the two. First being the use of reinforced concrete for the building frame, but also in Villa Savoye the use of exterior columns supporting the building giving it the illusion of a floating ship, something that Hadid has also incorporated in her design, as though her building is also floating, creating a smooth flow between the space. Inside the MAXXI there was also similarities between the two buildings, because of the ramps in Villa Savoye, which were intended to create a gradual transition between the floors, and as I stated previously, I experienced the same gradual movement in the MAXXI museum.

I think as an architect you must learn from and use the knowledge and experience of those who came before you, as each building, each architect has discovered something when designing. Le Corbusier himself “combines the principles of Egyptian And Greek architecture” (Etlin, 1987) in his Villa Savoye, and Villa Stein.

Le Corbusier dreamed of a utopia city. A place which differs from traditional cities such as Rome, a city where the utilities are offered to you without the need of travelling long distances. In the 1930s Le Corbusier designed the blueprint of an ideal city, Ville Radieuse, a radiant city.

Ville Radieuse drew from its predecessor, Ville Contemporaine, but adjusted to suit the changes in that time and the current situation. Ville Radieuse as a city would be ‘raised off the ground on pilotis’ (Le Corbusier., Raeburn and Wilson, 1987) something that was derived from the designs of Ville Contemporaine, however unlike Ville Contemporaine, the new design was pragmatically designed for limitless expansion, this was done by setting out “blocks in varying configuration, which, counterpointed by the modular street grid, would allow infinitely varying vistas “ (Le Corbusier., Raeburn and Wilson, 1987) while still geometrical aligning to its ‘heliocentric’ plan to offer every building maximum sun light exposure.

The apartments in Ville Radieuse had no hierarchy or class, the sizing was equal on all floors,

for each occupants offering per person “14 square meters” (Le Corbusier., Raeburn and Wilson, 1987), I like the idea of a building with no class or hierarchy, because I think that would show an equality, that wealth doesn’t offer much.

I think in every city expansion has always been taken into consideration, because the rise in population is a major issue for every architect when planning a city.

Regardless of Ville Radieuse being unrealised, it has left a mark on the 21st century. The evidence of that is seen around us with the social/ public housing. The rise of public housing occurred after the war, because there was a major housing crisis, the solution was to create a housing unit which wasn’t time consuming, but at the same time could accommodate a substantial amount of people, without constraining too much land.

Due to historical moments, architects have had to examine pre-existing cities and architects, to be able to alter the plan of a city in order to develop and learn.

“Architecture can be classified as dead or living by the degree to which the rule sequential movement has been ignored or, instead, brilliantly observed.” (Etlin, 1987)

Rome still the epicentre for townscape. To conclude, despite the change in architectural history, previous architecture will always be studied with high regards, because to this day we draw knowledge from historical buildings, historical methodologies, not only in Rome, but around the world. Without the knowledge of previous successors, we wouldn’t be able to achieve what was unachievable for them, adapting it to our society and ever-growing population. Contributing to the townscape creating landmarks only to be studied by those after us, like we have of those before us.

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