

# CITY MODEL AND SOCIETY IN THE THEORY OF ARCHITECTURE OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

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“The political concepts of the  
Quattrocento cannot be comprehend-  
ed leaving aside the role of urbanists”  
Eugenio Garin<sup>1</sup>

While studying the urbanistic and social views manifest in the theory of architecture of the Renaissance we examine, as a matter of fact, certain aspects of the treatises written at that time about cities to be built in the future. Thus we deal with texts which have the common feature that they “speak about an object that does not exist, but is still to be built, about an urban space of which they would like to lay the fundamentals”.<sup>2</sup> These treatises are not urbanistical essays in the strict sense of the word, but products of a special “literary” genre developed in the second half of the 15th century in Italy by theoreticians of architecture: Alberti, Filarete and Francesco di Giorgio Martini. Their treatises have, despite contradictions and differences, two things in common: on the one hand the world concept serving as their scientific basis, on the other hand their endeavor to create the rational though idealized world of a new architecture succeeding the medieval one. As a result, the treatises written at different times show a certain homogeneity of contents and form and there are some common tendencies deriving from them, which concern the period as a whole.

Rather than the origins of treatises or their relation to real constructions, we shall concentrate on pointing out their common or particular concepts on the ideal town and society.

As to this question three preliminary remarks must be made:

1. These treatises ought to be considered as integer historical totalities, rather than as comments or interpretations.

2. It must be understood that the texts analyzed here are limited by origin in time and in space; the period of interest is from mid-15th century to the end of the 16th century, involving only treatises written in Italy.

<sup>1</sup> GARIN, E.: *Scienza e vita civile nel Rinascimento italiano*. Laterza, Bari, 1972. p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> The following study will often refer to definitions by Françoise Choay, of much help in clearing certain fundamental notions. Choay, F.: *Figures d'un discours méconnu*. Critique, avril 1973. 311. 99. 293—317.

3. Only a limited group of texts chosen according to their importance is studied here, assuming that our relevant statements hold true for all the others within the same range of time and space.

As for the structure of the texts there are no alternatives. There are no purely urbanistical or purely architectural texts, since the treatises are written in the spirit of reciprocal and permanent transition between the dimensions of city and single houses. This is not merely a matter of structure, but the manifestation of a certain conception as well. Alberti and others after him consider the city as a large house, and the house as a small city. The inseparability of urbanism and architecture has, at the same time, a paradigmatic aspect. Renaissance treatises go after the model of Vitruvius' ten books *De Architectura* (well-known in the Middle Ages and rediscovered in 1416), ranging city planning with architecture, in the same way as construction of war machines and bridge-building. Vitruvius connects this axiom to the person of the architect, a version revived later in the Renaissance. He describes an episode where the Macedonian architect Dinocrates presents a new plan of a city to Alexander the Great. The new city should be built on top of the mountain Athos represented as a huge human figure, holding the city in one hand and a water-basin in the other. To Alexander the Great's question whether there were arable fields on the mountain, the architect answered that the city would be supplied from the sea. The king, though praising the plan, remarked that a city which was not self-dependent for supply was like a child deprived of mother's milk.<sup>3</sup> Dinocrates is the forerunner of the Renaissance architect characterized by an irreal wide range of activities as stated by Alberti.<sup>4</sup> This "Dinocratesian paradigm" of the architect created the traditional unity of architect and town planner hence of architecture and urbanism, also valid for the relevant treatises.

What is the connection between the planned city and the society? The texts have in common that they handle the development and layout of the city not only as a matter of formation and proportion but as a sociological problem as well. The arrangement of the town corresponds to an imaginary social structure with a strict hierarchy. The elite lives in the exclusive town centre, while those of lower ranks have their homes in less distinguished parts far from the centre. This city model and this society are *ideal*, but not *utopistic*. We agree with Françoise Choay, who summarizes the essentials of the treatise describing the ideal model (called by her semiogenic) in the following fancy-title: "How to code spatially any system of needs and

<sup>3</sup> De Fusco describes and comments this famous episode in Vitruvius' treatise. De Fusco, R.: *Il codice dell'architettura. Antologia di trattati*. Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> The Dinocrates legend had several interpretations in the Renaissance, among others by Machiavelli (*Discorsi sulla prima deca di Tito Livio. Lib. I. Cap. I*).

desires", while she says that "the spatial description of the utopia is simply an incoherent series of images of objects promoted to types or *models*. In the utopias the text always speaks of a particular city that is given a proper name (*Utopia, Christianopolis, Icara, Nowhere*) or that is designated with a capitalized neologism utilized as a proper name: *Phalanster, Cité-jardin (Garden-city), Functional city, Green city*. On the other hand, the city appears in the semiogenies as a concept, result of an instant in a process, whose mechanism is to be disarticulated."<sup>5</sup> In this connection Filarete's Sforzinda cannot be regarded as a utopia. Thus we cannot agree with the views attributing an utopian character to Filarete's model as motivation of an even "half-conscious" crisis of Quattrocento intellectuals.<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, these city plans are essentially rational, reducible, on the one hand, to the indisputably fundamental influence of the Vitruvian pragmatism, on the other hand, to the rationalism of Plato's *Republic*. These two impulses must not be confronted, but rather integrated. Vitruvius' treatise contains practical instructions on town planning, incorporated, although with modifications, in all Renaissance treatises. An ideal model for a social hierarchy of rational structure is due to Plato's influence. As it is pointed out by Garin,<sup>7</sup> the theoreticians of architecture — attracted by the rationality of order, which seems suitable to reconcile controversies and to create a society based on justice and truth — derive from the *Republic* the idea of a hierarchic society divided into defined classes.

The texts contain, however, not only social aspects but also military aspects of the city. There are two parallel conceptions: the city as the dwelling place of the community built like a large house and as a fortress defending the population against enemy attacks. As it was pointed out recently by Muratore,<sup>8</sup> this conception, universal in Renaissance, is also a heritage, the survival of an idea of Plato. A passage in the *Laws* contains this conception,<sup>9</sup> actualized later by the theory of, and practically realized by Renaissance architecture. Of course, Plato's influence is felt in discussing the morphology of town planning as well, but this is outside the scope of this paper.

Thus the treatises outline the picture of a suggested ideal city rather than a counter-example to actual cities subject to criticism, a utopian "anti-town" with absolutely positive qualities, as well as of an ideal society based on justice rather than a utopian "un-society". All of the treatises share the implicit belief in the realizability of such a city.

What is the optimism of these theoreticians of architecture based upon? First, on the world concept and the whole spirit of that age, second, on the

<sup>5</sup> See [1] p. 301.

<sup>6</sup> TAFURI, M.: *L'architettura dell'umanesimo*. Laterza, Bari, 1969. p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> See [1] p. 47 and hereafter.

<sup>8</sup> MURATORE, G.: *La città rinascimentale. Tipi e modelli attraverso i trattati*. Mazzotta, Milano, 1975. pp. 73—74.

<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 779.

architect's changed role in society. In the 15th century the architect won authority, the almost anonymous medieval craftsman had become a highly estimated intellectual. By his humanist culture and his status as an artist he had reached the social level of the princely court and become member of the intellectual elite with whom the prince "entered into alliance" — in opposition to other antagonistic social layers.<sup>10</sup> The executor of the gigantic architectural projects was, in this way, a politically loyal intellectual not disposed towards social criticism. From Alberti to Palladio the treatises will never give voice to criticism and they agree with the prevailing social-political and urbanistic system. We know of Filarete's anthropomorphic conception about the relation between commissioner and architect: he represents architecture as a love affair where the commissioner takes the part of man, the architect that of woman. Even if symbolically as usual in the Renaissance, a true relation is reflected, the atmosphere of confidence suggested by the treatises.

Thus it seems to be reasonable to say that the treatises contain varieties of *the same model*, i.e. variants of the same urbanistical and sociological hypothesis, developed by different logical methods. The model undergoes a remarkable dynamic evolution during the period of one century and a half. The implicit dynamism of the model is provided by the logic of the described architectural creative process while its explicit dynamism is due, first of all, to the necessary reaction to real needs and experiences. Thus the model keeps throughout identical in itself in spite of continuous changes. There is a perfection of thought and strengthening of certain tendencies (e.g. formal or anthropomorph) to be observed, on the other hand, the relation of urbanism to society is altered.

That is the reason why no definite types of urbanistical and social conceptions can be distinguished but this is true, of course, merely in relation to our own subject rather than to the formal, iconological and other analyses, fields where the typological method is very useful.<sup>11</sup>

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In the following study we are going to outline the general characteristics and the inner development of this model through the different varieties. A study will be made here of the treatises of Alberti, Filarete, Francesco di Giorgio Martini, Serlio and Palladio.

The theoretical treatise of architecture of the Renaissance is first established by Alberti both as to contents and form. His work becomes as impor-

<sup>10</sup> See comments in Bruckhardt, J.: *La civiltà del Rinascimento in Italia*. Sansoni, Firenze, 1961.

<sup>11</sup> See [8], very useful for iconologic analyses.

tant and valuable for later theoreticians of architecture as Vitruvius'. The method of exposing his theories results in an exemplary composed system of ideas. His point of departure — complying with the Vitruvian model — is the definition of the concepts of architecture and architect. Though transferring the emphasis from building and, generally speaking, from practice to design, to meditation, his definition stresses the social value and rational sense of architecture.

In his view the city is both concrete and imaginary. The environmental conditions, like the climate, the winds, waters etc. are real requirements: in this he follows the instructions of Vitruvius. As a dwelling place of the community the city is to be examined in the relation of use and user. Concerning the relation of the individual and the community and that of the house and the city the fundamental idea lies in Plato's above mentioned statement: "Thus, if the town is, according to the views of the philosophers, a certain large house, this house is, on the other hand, a small town . . .".<sup>12</sup> Here the town is still considered as a system of homogeneous elements, he does not introduce as yet the counterpoles of collective, sacral and lay as regularizing categories. The division of the city is based on social hierarchy, constructed by Alberti from strictly separated social strata. It is important in itself that he begins the chapter on the division of the city by passages dealing with social division. The simultaneous treatment of these two problems is a new element in this genre, since Vitruvius pointed to social aspects only in connection with the single buildings: "The form of the house should follow the social standing of the inhabitants" (VI. 8). Moreover, Alberti dedicates an entire chapter to the city, while Vitruvius spends only a few pages on this question.

For Alberti it is evident that the houses necessarily differ from each other, the same as people are different. The difference essentially resides in wealth, the society is headed by the wealthiest and, obviously, the most distinguished people. The soldiers, who are wealthy, too, stand on a somewhat lower level. They are followed by the simple citizens and the "popolo minuto" in social hierarchy. There is neither opposition, nor relation of defenceless servitude between these groups, because the "lower ones" help the two "upper" strata. The state is based upon *justice*, resulting in balance and *harmony*. This harmony is the "mediocritas", i.e. the golden mean, in the positive sense of the word, the reconciliation of contradictions.

The dichotomy of the above mentioned spheres of collective and private, of sacral and lay appears in the division of the city. The city centre has a political importance because of the buildings owned by those in power. Within the opposites the epithets: *sacral* or *collective* indicate more valuable and greater

<sup>12</sup> De re aedificatoria. I. 9.

buildings than their antonyms. Though not strictly relevant to our subject, it ought to be remarked here that the church is on top of the hierarchy of values. In the spirit of social justice Alberti feels the state should be led by the worthiest.

The opposite concepts of collective and private allow him to solve both the problem of the scale of values of city buildings and that of social hierarchy: the most distinguished citizens hold the majority of official posts, whose prerogatives extend to the public buildings, while the unprivileged live within the dimensions of their houses.

As to their political system Alberti settles cities of "people living in freedom", i.e. city-republics, on the plain, while he advises to settle the cities of recent rulers in the mountains, because they may have outside and inside enemies. He seems to sympathize with the city-republic built on the plain, but this does not mean a definite political commitment on his part. However, Alberti does not want to bypass a definite political position, but rather to reconcile social oppositions: "Alberti's city is built to articulate class differences, to have walls and buildings corresponding to a precise political structure. Thus the word "architect" becomes the synonym of regulator and co-ordinator of all urban activities" — as Garin justly remarks.<sup>13</sup>

Filarete's work is, in all its aspects, opposite to Alberti's strive to logic and system. What hits the eye at once is its rich illustration. As the graphic part of Vitruvius' study got lost and illustrations are missing even from Alberti's treatise, those presented by Filarete are the first visual formulations of the urbanistic views of the Renaissance. The sketch-plan of Sforzinda, his imaginary city, is a circle, or a polygon. Since, however, no drawing is given of the plan of the city, no form, it is merely a scheme. Still this first graphic illustration had a large influence as a starting point for the iconography of the later treatises.

This treatise, contemporary to Alberti's, is not a late paraphrase of the Vitruvian model but a description of a rather heterogeneous genre, containing a lot of literary and phantastic elements.

As already mentioned, Filarete's conception is, first of all, of an iconographic importance, being the first attempt since the Middle-Ages to give a geometrical form to a whole city. In the description of Sforzinda the theoretician provides for a proper housing, a city layout to reflect social differences, though without the economism and strict social categories present in Alberti's work.

Studying the views of Francesco di Giorgio Martini, the follower of the traditions of Alberti—Filarete, we can't help noticing three peculiarities. First of all, the social value of the city is kept on while her division is less by social

<sup>13</sup> See [1] pp. 48—49.

differences, than by the law of anthropomorphic proportion. Second, the different social groups have their counterparts in types of houses differing architecturally *instead of urbanistically*. Third, the social model is still hierarchic but the theoretical foundation is a typical humanistic principle considering the earthly microcosmos as a reflection of the divine macrocosmos.

Martini defines the city, whether fortified (*castello*) or not (*città*), as the union of her population, where everyone's comfort is of importance: "the city does not exist if not consisting of united citizens".<sup>14</sup> However, he does not divide the city according to social hierarchy like Alberti, as the city is in his eyes not only an architectural and political formation, but a symbol as well. In the Vitruvian Dinocrates-episode he emphasizes the tendency of anthropomorphism and extends the analogy with the human figure to the division of the town: "because this city must be similar not to one member but to the whole body, because as one part with the other, so the whole must be integrated with the whole".<sup>15</sup> "We are far from the sociological pragmatism of Alberti's urbanism" — says Renato de Fusco commenting the above statement of Martini. Indeed, anthropomorphism becomes an allround principle of proportion seen to assume the role of sociological view in urbanism.

Martini's treatise contains, like Filarete's, also formal suggestions for planning the city. The suggested versions are not the plans of one specific city, but sketch-plans taking features of the different sites into consideration.

Social hierarchy is no longer reflected urbanistically but architecturally, a return to the Vitruvian idea. Similarly to the configurational typology of city-plans, Martini co-ordinates the typology of different kinds of buildings with the social groups he defined. He keeps Alberti's oppositional order of community buildings and private houses but he cannot develop this system to a "logical operator", by which to solve the problems of hierarchy of the buildings or, for that matter, of society. He distinguishes five social categories: the peasants, the craftsmen, the scientists (lawyers, procurators, physicians), the merchants, and finally the noblemen.

As for his hieratic social system he considers the differences between people as a matter of course. He attributes the differences to causes not inside of society — as did Alberti (wealth: there are the wealthy and the poor) — but outside of society. Martini justifies the existence of princes and subjects exclusively with metaphysical causes. God's universe depending on one eternal prince is the model for the universe of mankind. Moreover, he justifies this state of affairs by the necessity of order and the analogy to nature. His conception contains even less political elements than Alberti's.

<sup>14</sup> Prologue of Book III.

<sup>15</sup> See [14].

The treatises of the 16th century show two new features as compared to those of the 15th century: on the one hand, the pragmatism prevails over the theoretical (and phantastic) one, on the other hand, the importance of the city decreases. Instead of imaginary schemes or logically developed typologies, these treatises exhibit the idealized varieties of existing buildings. As to classical forms, the archeological exactitude of this period increasingly raises the criticism of those studying Vitruvius.

The cityscape is composed of different types of buildings, with practical instructions. Rather than a utopian, ideal city fabric, the urbanistic views of this period concern the proper layout of streets, squares and buildings in an existing town. In the meantime the social position of the architect has changed, too: he does not work any more as political ally of a prince, but realizes the architectural programme of a certain social class.

The above statements refer to Serlio and, above all, to Palladio, and their truth is revealed in the illustrations of the two treatises, the great many practical examples and the total lack of schematic configurations.

Serlio's logic can be followed by examining methodically the houses of those on different degrees of hierarchy, from the simple house up to the complex building. Also Serlio's treatise reflects the social categories directly, by architectural rather than by urbanistic means. The spectrum of houses embraces all classes of society, Serlio basing his system on social totality ("About the dwellings of all grades of people").<sup>16</sup> The differences between people are of peculiar nature balanced by justice between people living in different financial and social conditions. Justice is the main virtue of noblemen because they possess power: "The nobleman is peaceful and just, always fulfilling his duty to all . . .".<sup>17</sup>

Based on the above logic the building types become more complex, the treatment and form more abstract. Higher social rank involves a stronger system of defence, while the plan of the building assumes increasingly complicated geometrical formations.

By referring his social hierarchy to the city, Serlio gets nearly the same division as Alberti. A man's financial and social standing is reflected by his living near the centre or far from it. The poorest live round the city-gates. This division is, of course, not quite fictitious but corresponds to the actual situation.

There is a certain affinity between Palladio and Serlio, though they represent different theoretical conceptions. As opposed to De Fusco<sup>18</sup>, we consider Palladio and not Serlio as the synthetizer of the theoretical tradition. This is true from many points of view. First of all, Palladio represents also the philological tradition of Alberti, deeply knows Vitruvius, on the other hand he

<sup>16</sup> Book VI.

<sup>17</sup> See [16].

<sup>18</sup> See [3] p. 505.



bases his statements — like Serlio — on his wealth of practical examples. His work is a synthesis in the methodical and formal sense as well, because he treats the subject taken from Vitruvius with the theoretical abstraction of Alberti, while his text is completed with many graphic matter integer with, rather than mere illustrations of, the text.

Palladio's treatise displays relatively few reference to town planning. It contains general statements encountered in all city descriptions since Vitruvius, such as to consider the wind direction, climatic conditions, etc. Palladio repeats the general principles of Renaissance city-planning i.e. the social and political importance of the central square where the main public buildings must be erected, etc. At the same time he does not say a word about the actual town division, the social grouping or political arrangements. Still, the conceptions of earlier theories (mainly Alberti's) and statements can be discovered, like the Platonian axiom adopted by Alberti, that the city is a large house and the house is a small city. However, Palladio inverts the meaning of this axiom to conceive single houses rather than his urbanistic views, that are missing from his treatise as are the related social and political conceptions, though present in his theoretical conception. He has namely an ideal city compiled of "inventions", the idealized varieties of erected or planned buildings. Projected to the social sphere they represent the clients whose names appear in the treatise one after the other and whose rank, wealth and culture represent a particular social cross section.

Palladio's city-model is developed on different planes of imagination and reality; the imaginary always contains some real elements while the really existing shows many ideal features. Palladio's treatise publishes mostly existing buildings, or buildings that have been designed and started, palaces and villas in their ideal form without modifications imposed by real life but as they were imagined by the architect for his ideal city — the ideal Vicenza — and its surroundings. However paradoxical it seems, Palladio's city-model is the "ideal" Vicenza, which must be considered in our case as half real (as she existed), half imaginary (as conceived by Palladio). As Argan says, "Vicenza was a city of Roman origin, and it is clear that Palladio intended to give the city an imaginary classical appearance. He transformed the old municipal palace into a Roman public basilica, and by adding superb façades, improved the palaces on both sides of the main street which followed the line of the ancient *decumanus*".<sup>19</sup> The image of this ideal street, of the streets of the ideal city can be discovered in the scenographies of the Teatro Olimpico as well. There was always some connection between city and stage in the Renaissance. The stage reconciled the contradiction between the formalistic and idealistic

<sup>19</sup> ARGAN, G. C.: *The Renaissance City*. Braziller, New York, 1969, p. 102.

character of the plans and the practical conditions.<sup>20</sup> By all means, Palladio let an insight into the streets of a city which reflected his own conceptions and those of his clients.

Also the "society" outlined in the treatise is on the borderline between real and ideal. It does not span the whole system, only noblemen, wealthy merchants, lawyers appear in it, never people below a certain financial and social level. The really existing people become ideal ones in the Palladian text by representing, according to the rules of the theory, a given demand, i.e. an elegant, superb palace, or a villa, in accordance with their social status. They become ideal, too, because they possess only excellent qualities owing to their financial and social prestige; justice is an indispensable trait of their character as well as education and good taste. Though Palladio does not make a catalogue, like Serlio, of the different types of buildings in accordance with the owners' financial and social position, not the basic idea is lacking of his conception but the strive to represent the totality of society. The Renaissance idea of correlation of architecture, town planning and society is displayed in a peculiar form typically without any political actualization or social criticism.

### Summary

This paper describes and analyzes the imaginary city-model and the image of society connected with it, that was formulated in the Renaissance treatises on the theory of architecture. The survival of the spiritual tradition of antiquity is manifest also in views on the ideal city and society. Since the treatises are the spiritual products of one period, they contain no different types of city-model. Though dealing with theories conceived at different depths, with different conceptions and various treatment, they contain varieties of the same ideal, rather than utopian, model. The image of society is, like the city-model, an ideal one, projected by the theoreticians in the future, without never being polemical to the political system of that time.

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<sup>20</sup> "The formalistic appeal of these designs is coupled with the skill and inventiveness in engineering, the practical and the aesthetic thus being correlated in a contradictory manner, different from and opposed to the powerful integration found in the earlier phase of Renaissance planners. This dichotomy is perhaps the most characteristic feature of the later period. But the influence of ideal planning went further: the aristocratic society possessed patrons who appreciated the subtle relationship of the staged play and its architectural background, as seen in its most famous example, in Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza." Rosenau, H.: *The Ideal City*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1959. p. 50.