



## VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues  
in urban morphology

### **Inhabiting the Italian historical city after COVID**

**Giuseppe Strappa**, Facoltà di Architettura, Sapienza, Università di Roma, Piazza Borghese 9, Roma, Italy. E-mail: [gstrappa@yahoo.com](mailto:gstrappa@yahoo.com) ORCID 000–0002–1054–4189 <https://doi.org/10.51347/UM25.0013>.

The conditions caused by COVID–19 have created a global laboratory of potential urban transformations where, amid many uncertainties, experimentation with new roles is taking place with the spaces of the city and the building aggregates. The growing number of studies produced in recent months on the subject seems, therefore, completely justified. However, many hypotheses advanced in recent months are, in my opinion, affected by the emotional wave that the phenomenon has aroused, confusing the emergency with the structural changes that can be hypothesized for the next few years.

In Italy, the awareness of architects has focused mainly on the urban and territorial scale, providing scenarios related to safety and the dangers of contamination that the density of cities offers, particularly in the historical centres. Under the pressure of a new call for de-urbanization (the favorite issue), a ‘saving’ trust has thus arisen in low-density settlements which, scattered throughout the territory, should correspond to the need for social distancing and safer forms of life. The example of the greatest media success in Italy is the proposal to form an ‘archipelago of villages’, revitalizing the ancient ones and building small new settlements, as an alternative to the city that has been congested for some time and has now also become dangerous to health (Boeri, 2020). In fact, as has often happened in recent centuries, the very idea of the city seems to be called into question. History teaches, however, that pandemic phenomena have only led to temporary crises in the life of large urban

centres. An example is the case of the plague that swept through Italy in the in the first half of the seventeenth century. The ‘Great Plague’ caused the death of a large part of the urban population and, consequently, the actual economic and political decline of the cities. However, urban life quickly rose again in subsequent years, demonstrating the resilience of urban structures and their capacity for renewal.

The resurgences of anti-urban ideologies are, after all, nothing new in Italy, ending with the deurbanization policies in the inter-war period. Yet I believe that the hypotheses to drastically reduce the density of cities and, instead, inhabit surrounding the territory have been and are substantially anti-historical. If we only consider the dizzying increase in the need for food resources, how can we think of further consumption of land? The problem should be posed, more realistically, on a smaller scale.

Even if greater attention will undoubtedly be paid to interior spaces, as shown by studies on the new importance of indoor air quality, nevertheless the real change caused by the pandemic concerns the impact of new forms of work, commerce and communication that are destined to last over time and change the way we live in buildings and urban fabrics.

The very idea of ‘inhabiting’ may be changing, and the pandemic has only accelerated the processes already under way. In fact the lockdown created a pathological condition in the perception of the relationship between domestic space and the

city, temporarily transforming the house into the very centre of the urban universe, an autonomous and self-sufficient microcosm, where domestic activities that seemed to have disappeared have re-emerged. The house, in Italian cities, seems to have become the place in which everything is again integrated and rebalanced: an autonomous space in which sleeping, cooking and eating activities take place; but, at the same time, a place of production and a work environment. The question, ongoing in recent months, should be posed, I believe, in its processual terms, considering the formative phases of the city fabric in their structural terms, which are *economic* and *social*.

To make this statement concrete rather than abstract, I will briefly try to outline these phases in Italian historical cities. First, in most of the Italian urban fabric's *formative phase*, the house and the associated elements (such as shop, workshop, store) constituted an organic whole: morphological, architectural, cadastral. The medieval house was 'inhabited' in the etymological sense of the term (the Latin term *habitare / habere*, from which 'to inhabit' derives, also meant to possess: one 'owns' the house by building and living in it). The unity between the spaces where life took place, those devoted to craftsmanship and exchanges, were expressed, through the architecture of the façades, was continuous and regulated by shared rules (Strappa, 2014).

In a *second phase*, with the formation of the first private capital, types of rental houses (the *in linea* house) caused the Italian city to spread, especially starting from the eighteenth century. The most relevant result in the structure of urban fabrics was the detachment of the house (now designed by architects) from the shop, following a modern process of specialization and division of labour that has affected every aspect of urban culture (Caniggia, 1989). While the new exchange functions assigned to some of these the nodal character of commercial streets, other routes continued to play a role of shared space.

In a *third phase*, between the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, this process of continuous transformation moved to a crisis state by the imposition of parasitic and pervasive consumption of urban fabrics, where the leisure industry was taking on forms and dimensions that were no longer sustainable. As the economic structure of the city changed, so did its social fabric. It was an unprecedented transformation, linked not to cyclical processes of transformation within the urban structure, but to the result

of the phenomena of economic internationalization, whose logics conflicted with the real interests of the inhabitants.

In the profitable supermarket of the historic city (such as Rome, Venice, Florence) everything was made banal, all homologated by the disappearance of the links between things: monuments and fast food, picturesque views, museums and typical restaurants.

The very longevity of its plastic and masonry urban fabrics was challenged by sudden and radical changes caused by the incessant replacement of the walls of the houses transformed into accommodation facilities. One of the foundations of architectural form was therefore challenged: the coincidence of the terms 'build' and 'dwell'. If living, according to a recent definition by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, 'means creating, preserving and intensifying habits and behaviours, that is ways of being' (Agamben, 2020), the historical part of the cities, a metaphor for the more general urban condition, is no longer inhabited, nor habitable. It is the consequence of a more general phenomenon within which architecture has become one of the 'disabling professions' that separate man from the direct relationship with things. From a political point of view, this condition is the result of a savage liberalism allowed by the municipal administrations which justified it as an inevitable result of the contemporary condition, which should have permitted the renewal of historical fabrics.

In this perspective, the current phase could be defined as the *fourth phase* that concludes a cycle with the resurgence of traditional fabrics in a new context. In this 'experimental' condition, the space of the house seems to have become a 'place' again, a limited and circumscribed area, identified by specific characteristics, proposing suggestive (and dangerous) affinities with the artisan or shop house that has been in use for centuries, from the type of the medieval house (the *domus solarata* in Rome, the original courtyard house in Venice and so on) to the mature seventeenth-century row, or pseudo-row, house.

This new awareness of limits as a tool that identifies space and builds its identity is the real innovation (Strappa, 2020). To understand its extent, it should be noted that this is a diametrically opposite notion to that pursued, in the wake of the informal visual arts, by so much modern and contemporary architecture. In ontological terms, we would say the cyclical return to the conception of the Aristotelian τόπος as an 'immobile limit that

embraces the body' against the Cartesian, modern and dynamic meaning of place as the relationship of a body with others, of association with the context.

It is, in fact, a more complex phenomenon, as the lockdown condition seems to make a core aspect of the metropolitan dream close and achievable, that of the fully connected world, of the universal network that makes everything synchronous over time, all coexistent in space (Allen, 2020). Although there are not real qualitative innovations in the media, the quantitative problem affects such a vast scale as to propose radically new scenarios (the transfer of work at home involved up to 94 per cent of employees of Italian public administrations). Virtual communities, intangible aggregations formed through IT platforms, are multiplying. One can still work with colleagues, sometimes in better conditions, even if one does not go to the workplace every day. Computer-based tools that, until February 2020, involved specialist networks have suddenly become the norm in millions of houses. In universities, we give lessons to students segregated in their own homes in China, Turkey, South America and many other distant countries. The relationship between house and commercial spaces is also changing, perhaps irreversibly. It is not foreseeable where the uncontrolled acceleration of e-commerce that is emptying the roads of traditional commerce will lead. Relationships and exchanges between individuals also become more and more immaterial but not *inhumane*, as has been suggested.

The idea of *humanity* itself is changing. This new condition has its own physical response that is not necessarily harmful. The innovative forms of communication can collaborate with the existing city by integrating (not replacing) physical

relationships, also giving the existing fabric a new meaning and future.

I believe that, within the framework of this general situation, as architects it is necessary to rethink urban fabrics according to an 'ethical' model, where the house acquires a new role in the urban context and becomes a new place where the inhabitants live, but also a productive asset, considering that smart working will also be the choice of many tertiary activities, which Covid has only accelerated. This is a model that could, by reducing travel time for work and offering an alternative to the city economy, civilize the public spaces of the historical city by transforming them from places reserved for wild tourist consumption into new shared nodes where life flowing into the city converges.

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## Alnwick: conservation or transformation?

**Cláudia Monteiro**, Centro de Investigação do Território, Transportes e Ambiente, Faculdade de Engenharia, Universidade do Porto, Rua Roberto Frias 4200–465 Porto, Portugal. E-mail: [anaclaudiapmonteiro@gmail.com](mailto:anaclaudiapmonteiro@gmail.com) ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1587-2357>  
<https://doi.org/10.51347/UM25.0014>.

This Viewpoint identifies an example in which M. R. G. Conzen's research experience and professional planning training were combined in

a successful campaign against an inappropriate redevelopment proposal. It illustrates and reinforces the link between morphologically-