Course: INFLUENCES, THEORIES & TECHNIQUES IN ARCHITECTURE (ITTA) - 2007 / 2008
Code: ARCT1024
Students: Dip Arch FT1 & PT1
MA/MSc Arch
MA Urban Design (elective)
MA Media Arts Philosophy (School of Humanities - elective)
Term: two/three
Credits: 20
Coordinator: Teresa Stoppani

Option 3: Teresa Stoppani

Seminar title: PARADIGM ISLANDS

Manhattan and Venice have always represented unsolved complexities for modernist discourse in architecture. Difficult and inexplicable within this discourse, their pre-modern (Venice) and anti-modern (Manhattan) spaces become ideal “paradigm islands” for the formulation of specific questions on the nature of contemporary urban space.

The proposed association of Manhattan and Venice goes beyond the suggestions offered in the past by philosophical and architectural thought - from Eco to Cacciari, from Tafuri to Koolhaas - to explore it in terms of possibilities for the construction of the urban space, its architecture and its narratives. Manhattan and Venice become here the sites of an investigation that explores the changes that occurred in architecture and in the making of space in the city with the demise of modernism. Places that reacted to the classical and to the modern without ever fully absorbing them, these metropolises offer clues for an understanding of architectural practices in contemporary urban space.

Beyond the analytical juxtaposition or chronological comparison of Manhattan and Venice, the course proposes the two cities and their architectural history as paradigmatic, i.e. as active generators of ongoing processes rather than established historical conglomerations. The notion of insularity is not the easy tool for a closed physical and temporal delimitation, but it is activated here to read the exceptionality of the two cities as loci of concentration, manifestation and anticipation of phenomena that are still not closed and not yet resolved.

The seminars propose these urban spaces as sources of design strategies for the contemporary city, offering a reading of their making, their rules and their “rationalities” that goes beyond the stylistic and the formal and focuses on the process. Manhattan and Venice are investigated as spatial operations that produce and manage density and complexity by combining measurement and heterogeneity in an ongoing process of change and growth.

1. Framing readings: Grid effects

In the seminal essay Grids (1978) Rosalind Krauss examines the operative role of the grid in the redefinition of pictorial space in the early 20th century. For Krauss the emergence of the grid marks the separation of the visual arts from narrative and discursive structures and establishes a purely relational order that proclaims the autonomy and self-referentiality of space in art. Krauss’ argument is relevant in a reconsideration of the grid in architectural, urban and territorial systems, because it offers a reading of the grid beyond the figurative and the descriptive, proposing it not as a form or as a device for representation but as an agent of the making of space. Beginning with and departing from Krauss’ essay, the lecture concentrates on the complications of the operation of the grid – the ‘grid effect’ - when it is employed as an organizing system in architecture and the urban space. Unlike the modern pictorial grid, the ‘grid effect’ does not produce a separation from the world, but, inseparable from its implementation, it produces a dynamic and evolving space rather than a bi- or three-dimensional form.

2. Framing readings: Delirium (Rem Koolhaas on Manhattan and beyond)

Rem Koolhaas’ early architectural writings and projects, produced in the 1970s between Europe and the United States, address the crisis of an architecture which finds itself still coping with the legacy of Modernism, both in terms of its formal language and in its approach to the design of the city. While architecture on both sides of the Atlantic responds to the crisis with the development of self-referential languages that concentrate on a selected past and that will inaugurate postmodernism, Koolhaas’ work plunges itself in the examination of a non-theorized reality and focuses on those cases of ‘no-signature’ design that respond to forces outside architectural control. The past addressed by his theory of architecture and the city is a different one, and the work with the given of the city is focused on the agency of urban processes rather than on predefined architectural forms. With the "retroactive manifesto of Manhattan" presented in his book Delirious New York (1978), Koolhaas looks at the dynamics of the making of the authorless American city with the eyes of a European fed up with a formalistic architecture of the city oblivious to the ‘multiple techniques of...
3. Framing readings: Historical project (Manfredo Tafuri and the Venice project)

‘From the second half of the 15th century onwards, Venice sees an interaction between centres and peripheries, between innovations and established mentalities, between the use of “new” and the jealous preservation of a sacral identity.’ (Manfredo Tafuri, Interpreting the Renaissance). Manfredo Tafuri’s Venetian works offer a practical (material) answer to his questioning of the role of the theory and history of architecture in the 1960s and 70s. His works on Venice are a re-foundation, an answer per exempla to the question of the redefinition of the historical project. Based on a rigorous architectural and historical specificity, these studies construct at the same time a new theory and a new way of “making” history. Venice is an ideal laboratory for the testing of the historical project, as it offers not a passive object of investigation but an active subject that reacts to the analysis, and Tafuri’s attention focuses on understanding the workings of the complex system of the city in a specific temporal frame. His writings concentrate on the impact of the Roman and Florentine culture of the Renaissance on Venice, and on the reaction of Venice to what it perceives - and resists - as “other” and “new”. Tafuri’s aim here is twofold: the application of a historical method and, at the same time, the construction of a theory of the contemporary, or - better – the acknowledgement that they are both parts of the same endless “project”.

4. Making space: Orders, traces, inclusions (Manhattan the artificial, Venice the impossible)

The grid (1811 Plan) is the rational tool for Manhattan’s oneiric project. Its forms operate between rule and figure, between representation and performance, constructing an order that is at the same time replicated and transgressed in the interiors of Manhattan’s blocks (from Radio City Music Hall to Chelsea Mall). Manhattan operates according to other rationalities, combining a plurality of orders in its making, from topography to topology (the tentacular structure of the lagoon islands), to the inclusion of elements of orthogonal rationality (Roman palimpsests and spine-and-mat morphology), to the morphing of collage (in the curvilinear assemblage of the Grand Canal). On the making of the city, from the grid figure as form of control to the grid effect as flexible ordering system.

5. Function to form: The shortcomings of Modernism (Le Corbusier on Manhattan and Venice)

For Le Corbusier Venice is a guiding tenet in his project for a new architecture but, while his work explores the city in its functional details and partial representations, Venice remains for him essentially an impenetrable and inexplicable whole. Manhattan equally defies European modernist comprehension with the saturated vertical density of its ‘beautiful catastrophe’ (Le Corbusier). In both cities the Modern project is fragmented or reduced to “silence”, remaining confined to the provocations and theorizations of the architectural manifesto. Here Modernism proves ineffectual in trying to apply its categories, and incapable to produce a tabula rasa in territories that are already too dense with built histories and fabricated stories.

6. Form to process: Chorality, exhibitionism, tenderness (other ways of making the city)

From the grid and the zoning regulations to the enactment of the city in cinema and stage metaphors, the artificial chorality performance of Manhattan is produced by both external and internal devices. Its normed but not pre-configured homogeneity becomes the ground for an architecture of exhibitionism (from William Van Alen’s Chrysler Building exuberance to Daniel Libeskind’s Freedom Tower spiel) that offers slogans and strategies rather than fixed forms.

7. Dynamic readings: Grids, mats, tentacles (representations of the city from figure to performance)

The lecture explores representations of Manhattan and of Venice and the different readings of their complexity in fiction, photography, video, performance, painting. Manhattan: from vertical (Horst Hamman to horizontal (William Hassler) to round (Steve McQueen), and the dynamic possibilities of the grid (Paul Auster, Don De Lillo); from the measuring of the grid’s voids as spaces of non control (Dennis Oppenheim) and the domestication of the grid’s exteriors (Sophie Calle), to the reading of the grid as a dynamic elastic whole (Pet Mondrian). Venice: from horizontal (Claus Carstensen) to vertical (Dionisio Moretti), and the measuring of the space of the city with somebody else’s story (Sophie Calle); from the reading of the many islands as a dynamic elastic whole (Jacopo de’ Barbari), to entering and inhabiting the labyrinth (Joseph Brodsky, Paolo Barbaro, Tiziano Scarpa).

8. Making space: Contemporary architectures (Manhattan and Venice)

Manhattan and the city as event. Venice and the city as diagram. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s architectural research returns to these two “impossible” cities, in its attempts to redefine languages and techniques after the modern project. In Manhattan Bernard Tschumi transcribes and explodes the city as event. In Venice Peter Eisenman reads the city as a generative topological diagram in the making, while Gianugo Polesello reinvents the modern project by reactivating its impossible figure as a diagram. The lecture analyses these shifts in architecture culture and their implications and developments in more recent architectural production (Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas).
READIMG LIST

1. Framing readings: Grid effects
Rem Koolhaas (ed.), Mutations (Barcelona: Actar 2000).
Albert Pope, Paddes (Houston: Rice University Press 1996).

2. Framing readings: Delirium (Rem Koolhaas on Manhattan and beyond)

3. Framing readings: Historical project (Manfredo Tafuri and the Venice project)

4. Making space: Orders, traces, inclusions (Manhattan the artificial, Venice the impossible)
Albert Fein (ed.), Landscape into Cityscape: Frederick Law Olmsted's Plans for a Greater New York City [1967] (New York and


5. Function to form: The shortcomings of Modernism (Le Corbusier on Manhattan and Venice)


Le Corbusier, The Radiant City: elements of a doctrine of urbanism to be used as the basis of our machine-age civilization [La Ville Radieuse, 1933] (London: Faber 1967).


Hashim Sarkis et al. (eds.), Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital and the Mat Building Revival (Munich: Prestel 2001).


6. Form to process: Chorality, exhibitionism, tenderness (other ways of making the city)


7. Dynamic readings: Grids, mats, tentacles (representations of the city from figure to performance)

Steve McQueen (London: ICA Institute of Contemporary Arts and Zurich: Kunsthalte 1999).


8. Making space: Contemporary architectures (Manhattan and Venice)
Cynthia Davidson (ed.) Tracing Eisenman: Peter Eisenman complete works (London Thames and Hudson 2006).
Peter Eisenman, Diagram Diaries, (London Thames and Hudson 1999).

Last Updated ( Oct 01, 2007 at 09:36 PM )