News from the Italian Interior

Italy 2004 and its hidden pollen of vitality

Mirko Zardini, curator of the Italian exhibition at this year’s Venice Biennale, describes what’s taking place behind closed doors.

A constant, light background noise can be detected behind the apparently unchanged facades of our cities. It corresponds to a continuous change inside our houses, offices, factories, schools and theatres. An incessant bustle is transforming our inhabited spaces, our places of work, study, social life and entertainment from within. It is a reflection of a profound change in our way of life.

This is mostly taking place behind closed doors. Protective masks hide today’s faces, which are so different from those of a few decades ago. Over the threshold, and behind apparently unchanged facades, new and constantly changing Italian interiors reflect a profoundly different society. The face of Italy is now composed of these numerous facets. They correspond to different stories and aspirations, but are only covertly expressed or directly perceptible on the outside.

The phenomenon is not only affecting private spaces, houses or offices. These temporary transformations very often produce new community spaces in the city. Abandoned factories, churches, stations or ancient buildings host the new rituals of community life for longer or shorter periods. Art, fashion, design and architecture are the pretexts for settings that are suddenly available as extensions of the traditional public space. They are an amplification of the gains we are used to directing toward shop windows. For longer or shorter periods—a few hours, days, months—buildings and spaces that have lost their original vocation become the backgrounds for new settings, installations and designs. At times traces of these new uses also make their appearance outside in the form of minimal signs of occupation (a curtain, a carpet, a lawn) that betray the presence of a hidden pollen of vitality.

It is not a question of cosmetic surgery—a of nose jobs, lip modifications or breast implants. It is a profound change in our way of life. Construction is no longer the order of the day, but renovation, the transformation of the spaces we inhabit. This is a phenomenon of gentle transformation: a constant redesign of the internal atmospheres and external spaces of the urban world. This is surprising in quantitative terms. It is much more significant than the big urban projects that remain on paper for years or even decades, mere “works” of heavy industry in an era of continuous change, growth and readjustment of spaces, services and identities. Indeed, we can thus make use of a double identity. On one hand that of the apparently unchanged, stable facades of the building; on the other the ever-changing identity of their interiors. It is precisely the permanence of these walls that guarantees the possibility of these continuous internal transformations.

A different relationship is thus defined between space, time and architecture. The concept of design, with its particular idea of duration, describes this strategy well. The city consists not only of its external spaces, but primarily of the endless totality of its interiors. It is an assembly of stages ready for continuous rebirths, for courtyards, small, short-lived metempsychoses. At times these are depicted, like all temporary things, to last a long time. But durability is not their promise.

The use of these spaces is also different. It is no longer based on the cycles of work and leisure (the canonical eight hours) and rhythms of the ‘modern’ day, but is guided by an articulated, flexible time in which activities are mixed and overlapped. This overlapping of activities and the fragmentation and recomposition of time (for work, rest, entertainment, leisure, study) also entail a transformation in the nature of the spaces. Furthermore, an analysis of a typical Italian day shows that things no longer happen in their appointed places. The idea of the domestic has been overturned by the home’s absorption of many previously extraneous activities. At the same time, traditional leisure and work places tend to take on domestic features. Public and domestic, home and office, home and cinema, museum and factory: uses, places and natures merge and mix.

This results in combinations that are unexpected, so much so from a spatial or formal point of view that they seem to have taken us back in time. The striking thing in these places is the merging of different worlds with their new designs, uses and inhabitants, tied to the old walls and the memory of old uses. There is a combination of different characters that at times plays on similarity, at times on contrast, atmospheres or repetition. Our attention is skillfully directed, not to what these reduced and constant metamorphoses represent, but as if in a theatre, to the ways and means used: sights and smoke, sound and materials communicate a new environmental condition, consisting not only of technical, climatic or spatial adjustments, but mainly of new atmospheres. Atmospheric metamorphoses hidden between the fields of the existing, but that do not make them any less significant to our daily lives. 4