

‘Reading places’, a key-method for acting on the existent: the village of Humac in Croatia*

Gennaro Postiglione¹, Eleonora Lupo²

Abstract

The Roland Barthes theory of text assumes the act of reading as interpretation and re-writing of the work meaning operated by the reader. Borrowing this model and applying it to the comprehension of places and architecture contexts, it means to adopt an active process of knowledge enabling the production of new knowledge and new significance.

Acting within a given space, arises also the issue of the attitude of places to give hospitality. Every project that ‘finds its home’ inside an existing realm, measures and challenges the ability of the space to welcome gestures and structures necessary for the new use.

The application of both, the textual reading method and the poetic of hospitality in the Humac context (on Hvar island in Croatia), brought to identify exploration strategy and subjective data interpretation as basic activities for sustainable design process.

¹ Gennaro Postiglione is Associate Professor in Interior Design and Museography at The Politecnico di Milano. His researches are focused mainly on domestic interiors, questioning relations among culture of dwelling, domestic architecture and modernity, with specific attention to Nordic countries and to dwelling culture. He is also interested in museography and in preserving and diffusing collective memory and cultural identity, connecting the museographic issues with the domestic ambit. Museum and Home are the main subjects of his research and teaching activity. Some of his research works are: “One-hundred houses for one-hundred architects of the XX century”, on the architects’ own houses, with the realisation of the first European network of domestic architecture of XX century (www.meamnet.polimi.it), focusing on the value of Interiors as cultural praxis; or “The Atlantic Wall Linear Museum” on the valorisation of the Atlantic coast German bunkers both as Modern Architectural Heritage and European collective memory.

² Eleonora Lupo graduated in Industrial Design at Politecnico di Milano in 2001. After the degree she had Specialisation in Multimedia Design in 2003 and Master in Sculpture and jewellery in 2004. She is actually developing her PhD in Industrial Design with a research on “Design and innovation processes for Cultural Heritage valorisation”. She is tutor in some courses at Design Faculty of Politecnico di Milano where she is involved in many Academic researches, i.e. “Design for the valorisation of Cultural Heritage”, promoted both by Politecnico di Milano and Italian Ministry for University & Research.

Cultural landscape and rural heritage

“place Illustration 1 here”

Fig. 1: Map of the Hvar island.

Landscape can be considered the cultural identity of a territory. In fact, each physical transformation of a territory, caused by new social instances, produces a modification of its identity and of the system of self-representing. The landscape, as cognitive and cultural system of representation of a territory, is the medium to understand and to reveal more quickly the possibilities that are inherent in the characteristics of places.

Moving in a heritage context, this ability becomes even more important: a local community (like the one settled down in the village of Humac) uses the territorial context to settle down languages, common experiences and identity, and to facilitate the knowledge sharing between the people who is building the meaning of the place. In fact, if the man permanent inhabitation builds the significance of a places and establishes his primary belongings defining the name, the language, the alimentary and garments habits, the religious and political context, it is the landscape that makes sense of single portions of world, fixing relations, functions and orientations¹.

This capacity to coherently understand and socialize the cultural values of a place, makes the landscape a privileged place to investigate looking for opportunities of transformations and valorisation of the local identity and history. Placed in a panoramic position in the centre of the island of Hvar, the ancient and small seasonal village of Humac, today semi-abandoned, has been singled out as a typical Croatian rural culture of living and inhabit the territory², and therefore a meaningful form of cultural landscape patrimony, that needs a strategic and synergic system of rediscovering, divulgation and valorisation.

Acting on the existent: reading places as re-writing praxis

“place Illustration 2 here”

Fig. 2: Localization of Humac village.

Corresponding to the theories of the “descriptive geography”³, a metaphorical mediation of the physical and spatial meanings of the places has been adopted, and a descriptive approach has been used as methodology of work. A project is descriptive if is directed to generate models of transformation that represent possibilities inherent a specific context: talking about the territory as heritage, “the concept of vision is tight related to the one of vocation”⁴. In this case in fact, the approach is addressed to facilitate conscious processes of re-discovering and re-appropriation of place by both the local community and tourists, in order to find out the real opportunities to focus on and strengthen to design a reviving action and a sustainable re-use.

“place Illustrations 3-5 here”

Fig. 3: Map of Humac village.

Fig. 4-5_ Views of the village rural architecture.

Consequently, the actions of analysing, describing and representing the site, the architecture typologies and their relations with the natural context, are considered as a powerful experience-led approach, necessary for the

comprehension and definition of the already existing and exploitable intangible and tangible values of the village⁵.

In this process, descriptions, using conceptual categories that over pass the traditional ones of the cartography, became maps of the experience of the space, produced by subjective practices, like the exploration⁶.

“place Illustration 6 here”

Fig. 6: Mapping Humac.

These descriptions try to represent routes and relations of the places through the narrative structure typical of a text and may enable a more contemporary and dynamic concept of Cultural Heritage, where the valorisation actions are directed to allow an active culture fruition and experience by individuals.

To take the self-evidence of context as starting point of any design process is the only possibility we have to avoid self-referential shapes and projects: no other discipline more than Interiors develops a sensibility towards to existent read through out its several layers, from the philological (and objective) to the phenomenological (and subjective) one.

It is also the extension of a methodology developed from “human dimension” to “being-things”: the attention devoted to gesture and use can be easily extended to context: to what is on site when/where we are going to work. The design turns into the art of negotiating realities through the built form: everything comes into the account and needs to find a place, that is the project answers, that is the final construction.

In this concern, Roland Barthes theory about text⁷ product and production, can be very helpful lighting the typical process undergoing every well-planned design work.

If we undertake his assertion “Every meaningful activity can generate text” and metaphorically we can transpose it from the field of literature to the one of architecture to gain a possible operative method, we should define the scope in which this model could be useful and valid. Although the equality between the reading and the writing of a text appears a clear and logic fact in literature, it is much more complex to transfer the procedure of decoding/creating to the field of architecture were we immediately encounter the physicality of the matter, the weight of the third-dimension and the oddity of the concept of void. Of course every text contains a specific physical dimension, since it is written (or printed) on ‘physical’ pages, but it establishes a different relation with the user: it is the book, we might say, that enters and inhabits the reader, when by reading fragments of text temporarily move ‘into’ the user. On the other hand, every act of understanding or ‘reading’ an architectural artefact implies the action of entering/inhabiting a physical space. Nevertheless, with all the diversities of the case and with a (necessary) specific knowledge of the discipline, the comprehension of an architectural work is the result of a ‘reading’ that becomes productive through a constant process of separating/rejoining. Reading a building implies ‘deconstruction’ in order to recognize the fundamental elements and seize the design principles to achieve new level of understanding.

In the same way as in the textual practice of language, the point is not to discover the meaning that text/work is supposed to contain, an univocal meaning crystallized into the work/product, but the production of a new ‘significance’ that “emancipates the signification’s statute and makes it plural”.

There's not actual distinction between the identity of the author and the one of the reader, and it is precisely this need to define the two roles that fall-off in the practice of text, refusing a 'metaphysic of the classic subject' sustained by the traditional philology. This way of understanding things doesn't discharge or deny the traditional scientific methods but it rather consider them as a starting point for the production of significance. When dealing with projects that are related to 'the existing' this new approach produces a positive and powerful effect whose consequences overcome the ones of the plain comprehension.

Every act of building, by evidence, deals with an existing condition that must establish a dialogue with, for all the reasons that provoked the act itself. A careful analysis and reading of the existing context enables the architect to recognize and underline the elements characterizing the form and the space that the new structure will be put in relation with. This process of knowledge shouldn't try to discover or 'unveil' hidden meanings but rather remain semantic activity that become, therefore, 'production'. By breaking off the 'mono-logical state' of the architectural work, the comprehension becomes wider and the authenticity as unique/original can start to be dismantled. This idea arises from a profound critical revision of the Kantian aesthetic where the artwork and the spectator are counter-posed and stranger to each other. In the textual practice, and then in the thinking about 'difference', subject and object loose their 'stability' and the same borders that used to mark their ambit become uncertain, as transitory elements, introducing a "practice of representative perception that presupposes the mutual imbrication"⁸ of the one and the other. In a similar way, Bhabha talks about the 'third space' as a new semantic and relational place that originates from the impossibility of defining in an exact and fixed way both the object and the subject as well as their reciprocal boundaries. "[...] This implies an inevitable weakening of every abstract interpretation of the idea of the authentic. The pure and uncontaminated concept of the other (the work) has been crucial for the anti-capitalistic critic of the cultural economy of the western world in modern age. [...] But who can define authenticity then? Once again (someone) stands for the observed assigning him a position"⁹ and a universal value in accordance with the western order of things.

In this way the idea of a 'moving significance', immerse in the circumstances, originates and demolishing the basis of the monolithic authenticity that was traditionally accepted. A fuzzier notion focuses on the productive action of the subject and on the productive condition of the object introducing an intermediate space where subject and object are overlapped and where their meanings become plural. Although it is more difficult to define, this concept is not less reliable of the (counter-posed) idea that used to build a system of power and justify the action through the invention of the authentic and the original. In this way the reader becomes profoundly responsible, the old beliefs provided by the myth of the authentic are left behind and a new relationship with the work is established. The reader is eventually a direct and active author in that productive process of significance he has been always excluded from. By 'discoverer', or even just 'spectator', the designer becomes, as well as the author, 'craftsman' in a continuous confrontation with his work that, as we already stated before, evolves from product into production.

"place Illustration 7 here"

Fig. 7: Sketch of the village.

“Considering the territory as a text, it means, before all, to look for its *oppositions*. Texts are complex structures carrying excesses of sense and they can produce memory only through difference, using their skill of combining systems of expressive opposition to create contents”¹⁰.

A text has a meaning because some of its characteristics are agreed as different. In fact, the “indistinct” reduce a text as object without sense. The textual reading instead, as observation praxis able to interpret and signify different elements, allows to represent specific aspects of a place in a model suitable of interventions.

The application of the textual reading method and the poetic of hospitality in the Humac context has led to develop exploration and survey exercises like walks, sketches, photo reports, and to many activities of data interpretation in order to rebuild sequences, rhythms, repetitions and to re-draw a territorial syntax.

“place Illustrations 8-9 here”

Fig. 8-9: Mapping the landscape.

According to Giuseppe Dematteis¹¹, the territorial syntax can be usually explained by conceptual metaphors, useful to express the complex situations in which the territorial elements are located in the reality. One of the metaphors is the use of the concept of *layers*, to distinguish the stratifications that lay down in a territory and are melted by the time: for instance the landscape and the territory inhabited by men. Others rules of a spatial syntax that refers to aggregative systems can be adopted, according to Paola Viganò¹² like the *puzzle* system, that organises elements corresponding to a stated plan, and to a project, or the *dominoes*, that like the game, works with the approach of the elements margins with the others.

“place Illustration 10 here”

Fig. 10: Different studio-maquettes.

A spontaneous process of shaping of the territory by continuous modifications, can be described, with this system, according to Paola Berenstein Jaques¹³, starting from *fragments* that aggregate with others in form of *labyrinth* and *rhizome*, developing a specific and particular structure. In this sense the ancient rural village of Humac responds to a cultural complexity different from the one of a formal and planned city, but owns a specific aesthetic.

Syntactic maps represents this information as the cultural elements of the process of rediscovering and valorisation of the site, providing two different forms of communication: a descriptive form, textual and iconic, of the context features, and a narrative one, more focused on the production of new significance of those characteristics, like the creation and the staging of the imaginary of the place in a tourist perspective¹⁴.

“place Illustration 11 here”

Fig. 11: Mapping typologies.

The process of exploration and reading of Humac produced various analytic representations of the place, and clarified the cultural and social values of architecture and manufactured elements of the village in relation with the surrounding landscape that would have been considered as the essential

factors of the *genius loci*¹⁵ and basic bonds for the exploitation projects. The significance produced by these representations is basically direct (physical and spatial) or mediate (relations), depending on the kind of information included.
“place Illustration 12 here”

Fig. 12: Re-presenting the territory.

The poetic of hospitality

Moving the discussion onto the specific field of architecture, it is necessary to remark that working on ‘what is built’, acting within a given space, arises the issue of the attitude of place to give hospitality¹⁶.

Both for Edmond Jabés and Jaques Derrida, the language is Mother, Home, Identity but, at the same moment, is also Host, because it is always ready to welcome the Other: the Unknown dwells within it. The language is, maybe, the first Hosting “place” but also the first where to Dwell, the first inhabited space. For the Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the first place a man dwells is the language, does not matter whether it is his own or a foreigner’s one: only when you are able to speak the language of the Other, you finally inhabit the place where you stay. Before that, you are a foreigner, without any relation to the place you live: no matter how big or small is your house.

In the same way, every project that ‘finds its home’ inside an existing realm, measures and challenges the ability of the space to welcome the gestures and the structures that are necessary acts to give new use to the same space. Researching to what extent a place is able to host is a fundamental passage in a design process that is not willing to be ‘colony’ of space, but guest¹⁷. This way of designing could – ultimately – happen as the mere, simple insertion of furniture and objects into a space and this might be the perfect challenge for designer’s ability to understand the hospitality of the built matter and to perform in a built environment¹⁸. There’s no dwelling (inhabiting) without hospitality and dwelling is – to say it with Christian Norberg-Schulz¹⁹ – an existential phenomenon more/before than a physical need.

There is no gesture without a place willing and available to receive it and the place has always welcomed the gesture, and the life. Some places – either natural or artificial – have been destroyed by intense exploitation or abandoned in decay for the ineptitude of someone to inhabit them; some places are ‘colonized’ by the aggressive violence of univocal gestures. Many places have been built with no care for their distinctive characters, with no interest for their specific fundamental elements, with no concern for their form, but only with the stubborn superimposition of an alien, foolish design act²⁰. This has been very true every time the architectural process was carried on ‘running after’ the myth of the authentic as an ontological legitimation of the design through a continuous search for the origin and the primitive state.

It is not possible to ‘get back home’ since we must now deal with progressively complex negotiations and interactions that are dissolving and hybridising the original state of the work that survive only in the movement, in the transit and in the incapacity to stand still.

“place Illustration 13 here”

Fig. 13: Humac Education Centre masterplan.

The praxis of listening to places' wills, characters, hospitality, etc., was used in the Humac context through direct investigation of site, aiming to produce different types of representations seen as productive actions: mapping, naming, sketching, making interpretative drawings, writing stories, etc., crossing objective and philological knowledge with a more subjective and phenomenological one.

A functional typology according to the identity of the place

Humac Village, like many others rural villages, was planned only as seasonally, during the time connected with the cultivating activities: olive trees, and more recently, lavender. For this reason the building typologies and the structure of the village present characteristics that are more simple than the ones typical of a permanent inhabited rural architecture. It is missing an idea of urban shape and the village is more or less the "petrifying" of a nomadic camp: the settling choices are guided by contingent opportunities and correspond to the character of temporary inhabitation of these places²¹.

"place Illustration 14 here"

Fig. 14: New dwellings for tutors.

The village in fact derives its historical and cultural identity from these peculiarities, and the research of a new functional typology has been developed according to the same elements, in order to guarantee an ideal continuity between past heritage and future uses.

This precise introductory statement of the project specifies our cultural and methodological approach directed to the sustainable recovery and transformation of the Rural Heritage (dismissed, abandoned or not fully active).

Refusing the theory and the technique aimed exclusively to stylistic questions (the maintenance of the *status quo*) or economic ones (the maximum commercial exploitation), the project developed for the village of Humac is based on the awareness that knowledge of the place, its history and manufactured elements (a knowledge - as stated before - not only philological but also phenomenological), should lead to a project able to interpret the place-identity and interrogate the memory of the site. That is a design capable to propose new uses respecting the cultural continuity²².

"place Illustration 15 here"

Fig. 15: Common room for meetings.

Corresponding to this approach, the possibilities of reuse have been selected within activities characterised by temporary presences, substituting the seasonal use with another one. The village is imagined to be transformed in an International Information and Education Centre; a place where private companies, public institutions can arrange intensive meetings or workshops, for short times, far away from the stress of the contemporary city. This kind of reuse will fulfil the calendar of the activities for the whole year, but with different groups of individuals for each period, allowing people to experience the seasonal memory of the place.

"place Illustration 16 here"

Fig. 16: Café in the wood.

A cultural project of sustainable tourism

The morphological fragmentation of the village, arranged in independent units in different state of maintenance (there are preserved building as well as ruins), the presence in the site of a system of dry-stone walls (that suggests a sort of matrix of the settling down), and the availability of further enlargements (as in the history of the village), constituted the elements of negotiation of the project and delimited four areas in the site.

“place Illustration 17 here”

Fig. 17: Resting rooms.

Expecting a maximum amount of 100 contemporary presences (that correspond with the measurement of the disposability offered by the existent buildings), the project was developed undergoing different guidelines delivered. But, as stated before, the design had to be based upon simple remarks derived by the context knowledge gained by the reading practice while any intervention on the existent had to be developed through the poetic of hospitality, always negotiating functional needs with place identity.

Always more frequently, small and big enterprises, educational institution like schools and Universities, organise moments of training that last from few days to weeks, that is a time never too much long in order to make them not difficult. Whether they would be training courses or intense workshops or international and national meetings, the organisers, following the indications of psychologists or sociologists and experts of educations, have preferred places far away from the quotidian life of the guests.

The increasing of the communication and transportation systems, especially by water or by plane, helped those places to free themselves from other heavy systems like the roads and the railways. Secluded and wild localities have suddenly become little but essential knots of the global system that involves the whole world. In ha same way, the very small village of Humac, located in as isolated place on the island of Hvar, will lose its marginal condition and become one of the possible destination of this cultural tourism.

The process will get the points of improving cultural heritage fruition providing the tools, infrastructures and services, and increasing an innovative competitiveness in the global system based on relations and cultural differences preservation²³.

“place Illustration 18 here”

Fig. 18: Humac Info-centre.

Conclusion

Freed from the obsession for authenticity, and from the utopia of ‘return to the roots’, driven by a healthy will to investigate, read and understand an existing space as it is (with its imperfection, with its history of transformations and transitions), like some architects of the second generation of Modern Movement who managed to combine the attention for the context without giving up the necessary productive attitude, we tried to sustain the design process thorough an “ethic” approach. Our method was rooted in the textual theory, opening towards a subjective/productive understanding of existent; in the necessity for a

poetic of hospitality, lightening the need for a new praxis of listening to places; in the consciousness for the relevance of gesture, making architecture concentrate on the crucial question of dwelling through actions, that transform abstract space into “place-to-be”.

Place as text, space as *locus* of gesture, design process as re-writing and as research for hospitality are the main elements of a praxis that express itself through a conscious manipulation of the existent, continuously under transformation, braking ever its authenticity.

“place Illustration 19 here”

Fig. 19: Resting area.

Endnotes

^{*} This paper presents some results produced during the Architecture Design course at the Third year of the Faculty of Architecture & Society - Milano Politecnico, in 2005. The course coordinator was the prof. Gennaro Postiglione with the collaboration of arch. Lorenzo Bini and arch. Francesca Murialdo.

¹ See: Eugenio Turri, *Semiologia del paesaggio* (Milano: Longanesi, 1990).

² Bojanic Obad Scitaroci, *Tradicijsko graditeljstvo otoka Hvara* (Zagreb: Eporha, 1997).

³ See: Dematteis, Giuseppe, *Progetto implicito* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1995).

⁴ See: Mollica Stefano (ed.), *2004-2013: dieci anni, un programma possibile per lo sviluppo locale* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2005).

⁵ See: Eugenio Turri, *Il paesaggio come teatro: dal territorio vissuto al territorio rappresentato* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1998).

⁶ Hodology (from the greek word *hodos*, way, route) is the word used by J. B. Jackson to define the ‘lived space’ of the environment where man is located, in opposition with the geometric one rationally measurable. In John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Places, a Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994): 64; see also: Franco Farinelli, *Geografia*. (Einaudi: Torino, 2003): 16-21.

⁷ “Every meaningful activity can generate text: painting, composing music, filming, etc.[...] If the theory of the text tends to abolish the separation between the different art disciplines it is because their artworks are not anymore considered as simple ‘messages’ [...] but as perpetual products, statements, which the subject keep on debating on: this subject is certainly the one of the author, but also the one of the reader”. Excerpt from: Roland Barthes, “Teoria del testo”, in Roland Barthes (ed.) *Scritti* (Einaudi: Torino 1998): 240-241.

⁸ Homi K. Bhabha “The Third Space”, in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence& Wishart, 2003): 234.

⁹ Iain Chambers, *Paesaggi migratori* (Genova: Costa&Nolan, 1996): 16-19.

¹⁰ See: Ugo Volli, “La schiuma metropolitana o il senso dell’indistinzione”, in Aldo Bonomi, Alberto Abruzzese (ed.s), *La città infinita* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2004).

¹¹ Dematteis, *Progetto implicito*, p. 56.

¹² See: Viganò Paola, *La città elementare* (Milano: Skirà, 1999).

¹³ See: Jaques Berenstein Paola, *Estetica da ginga* (Rio de Janeiro: Casa da palavra, 2003).

¹⁴ See: Francesco, Careri, *Walkscapes* (Torino: Einaudi, 2006).

¹⁵ See: Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci* (Milano: Electa, 1979).

¹⁶ See: Jaques Derrida, *Il Libro dell’ospitalità* (Milano: Baldini&Castoldi, 2000), and Edmond Jabés, *Il libro dell’ospitalità* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 1991).

¹⁷ Gennaro Postiglione, “Legittimità degli interni”, *Area*, 50(2000): 2-3.

¹⁸ See: Praz, M. *La Filosofia dell’arredamento*. (Longanesi, Milano, 1981).

¹⁹ See: Christian Norberg-Schulz, *L’Abitare*, Electa, Milano 1986.

²⁰ De Certeau, M. *L’invention du quotidien*. (Gullimard, Paris, 1990).

²¹ Scitaroci, *Tradicijsko graditeljstvo otoka Hvara*.

²² See: Stella Agostini, Silvana Garufi, *Strategie di valorizzazione del territorio rurale* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2000).

²³ Paolo Leon, Michele Trimarchi, "Economia della cultura: l'anello mancante", in *Reset*, 87(2005): 16-19.
Semprini A., Azioni su due piani, per il breve e lungo periodo in *Reset*, 87, (Gennaio-Febbraio 2005) pp. 9-11.