FOREWORD

Speaking about emptiness

Giandomenico Amendola

Cities contain many empty spaces, both in the centre and on the outskirts. There are many noticeable ones in historic centres or in their immediate vicinity, while they go unnoticed in areas of large-scale urbanisation. Some have a significant capacity for narration to the point of being considered unintentional monuments that have become such without any intention of doing so – as Alois Riegl would say – while others are mute and apparently meaningless. Some empty spaces are overtly temporary but nevertheless have the status and narrative capacity of monuments, revealing the meaning of what will occupy them. This is the case of the empty space left in New York by the destruction of the World Trade Center: a symbolic crater which was commemorated and visited even before it was occupied by the main skyscraper, the One World Trade Center, more commonly known as the Freedom Tower, which at 541 metres is the tallest monument in history.

At times empty space can be anxiety-inducing and terrifying as it is considered to be abandoned, a no man's land where anything can happen, crime first and foremost. And where, should danger arise, no one will rush to assist. In run-down suburbs, of little interest to the real estate capital and forgotten by public administrators, there are many empty spaces and they are multiplying. They are the very symbol of degradation, chronicling both desperation and danger.

The problem of empty space arises with the city of industrial modernity, unsurprisingly addressed by Haussmann who in his memoirs speaks explicitly about the problem, which he set himself in 1853 at the very start of his mandate, of empty and unused spaces on the edges of the city and the need to enhance their value by connecting them to the centre. In the same period that witnessed the transformation of the Paris of the Second Empire, medical journals reflected on the issue of agoraphobia, for which the Germans even coined the new term: "Platzangst".

Since the birth of the modern industrial city, the result of large-scale processes of population growth and urbanisation, empty spaces have been described – by city planners, public administrators and economic operators – as an irreplaceable resource. The

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growth of the city seems to be unstoppable thanks to immigration attracted by industry and commerce. The space – each space – is therefore essential for the modern city to be alive and develop.

Empty space is an irreplaceable resource thanks to which the city – by definition never complete – can grow. Restless because its status is uncertain yet, paradoxically, there is nothing in the city more dense and full of meanings, even conflicting ones, than empty space. The many names that have been assigned to it show how empty space can mean a wasteland or even urban dross to some, while for others it represents an area with transgressive potential. Some even consider it a *non-existent* or *zero* landscape, or even a *dead* space. For the more observant followers of the modern movement empty space is none other than an *in-between space* for Americans, or *Zwischennutzung* for Germans, made up of the words "nutzung" (use) and "zwischen" (between). *Dead lands, waste lands, terrain vague, vacant lands, derelict lands, superfluous landscapes, loose spaces, blank areas, dross, no man's lands, tiers paysage, transgressive zones* and *zero landscapes* are some of the most common labels in urban lexicon. The authors of this book add many others to these, including perhaps the most significant, *wasteland*. The anodyne *empty space* is more usual in common language, with Pink Floyd dedicating a hit song to it: Empty Spaces (which starts off «What shall we use to fill the empty spaces»).

An urban void that has risen to the rank of monument is generally a construction demoted to ruin status. Empty spaces are – as Solà Morales wrote – indeterminate spaces «internal to the city yet external to its everyday use. In apparently forgotten places, the memory of the past seems to predominate over the present.» Also indeterminate but with no memories, except personal ones, is the bare and abandoned land seen and classified as a "not yet" to be filled physically and functionally. This is the most polysemic void as these empty spaces are to be transformed and are therefore inevitably loaded with proposals and meanings, even conflicting ones. The urban void can be a space where expectations come to the full, a space to be linked to the future.

They can be indeterminate spaces to be returned to life ("How to bring life to vacant lots" is the title of many courses in US schools of architecture) or the subject of the usual urban regeneration actions or bottom-up subversive and creative practices such as temporary parks, rich in vegetables, greenery and flowers. These are not merely elements to enrich an urban landscape that is often grey and commonplace or opportunities to stand out at particular commercial and cultural events. Above all in the last two decades temporary parks have been used in the United States as an effective tool to combat the degradation of ghettos and suburbs. The orchard, created in the space freed up by car carcasses and waste, serves to engage the community – above all the elderly – in order to give the neighbourhood a new and more acceptable face, thereby interrupting the vicious circles of degradation. This is why in many large cities, from Chicago to Atlanta, temporary gardens have been financed by Philip Morris as the residents of the most difficult neighbourhoods are among the greatest consumers of these cigarettes.

Nowadays, the new widespread city, which has made its traditional boundaries permeable and often even unrecognisable, contains within it, simultaneously, empty spaces and empty belts. These latter are spaces which, at times intensely urbanized, join up the cities, villages and towns. At first sight it therefore seemed that the traditional empty lots of the city had become less important to real estate operators and urban planners. Instead they are once again in the sights of speculators and scholars with the upswing in gentrification processes through which old and neglected neighbourhoods regain life and real estate value. Properties are redeveloped, the urban furniture is made attractive, infrastructures are renewed and every free square metre is reused to increase

the project return. The empty spaces, refurnished and enhanced, become distinctive elements of the new neighbourhood and its affluent new population.

These are the topics covered in the research by Antonio Laurìa and Luigi Vessella, whose title alone – "Small Forgotten Places in the Heart of Cities. On the residuality of public spaces in historical contexts: Florence as a case study" – gives an account of the content. The three key words to understand the approach, which is both analytical and design-based, are "small," "forgotten" and "residual." The study focuses on the spaces, neglected but valuable, of which there are many and which often go unobserved in the public space of Florence. An extraordinary and fragile city, too often inattentive to how it is growing and damaging itself to meet the demands and desires of growing and large-scale mass tourism. A Florence in which the city of tourists is oppressing the city of the residents.

The authors have come up with many proposals to counteract this trend, at least in the Small Forgotten Places, making it impossible for me to examine them in a short introduction.

Particular attention should be paid to the Residuality Assessment Process (RAP) – a cognitive and emotional analysis of the residuality of the public spaces – which the authors, with an acute multidisciplinary approach, use to describe the processes which – leaving political or urban actions aside – have driven many public spaces into the world of residuality. For this reason, Laurìa and Vessella – even without explicitly referring to it – draw on experience, namely the city that is lived and experienced.

The reading of the city hangs in the balance between system and experience. On the one hand there is the idea that the city should be considered as a system equipped with boundaries and precise laws of operation and that, therefore, each action that tends to improve it must take its successful operation as an assessment parameter. Citizens are actors in a system that overlooks them and that to a large extent historically dominates them. The other prospective focuses on the analysis of the subject and their experience in which the city and its spaces are a central element. In this logic, space is reread as lived space where the inhabitants' experiences, their interactions and their representations are condensed. The city, above all the historical city of Florence, is a labyrinth unveiled as a challenge but, primarily, as a rich and limitless experience. Therefore – as de Certeau stated – «Il faut réveiller les histoires qui dorment dans les rues et qui gisent quelques fois dans un simple nom.»

With this aim in mind, the authors propose the science of the stroll, or Strollology, a slow environmental exploration – new name for the ancient *flânerie* of Baudelaire and Benjamin – capable of restoring narrative to these small and forgotten spaces. Bringing them back to life as important and stimulating pages of the extraordinary "Book of Stone" that is Florence.

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