Ambrogio Annoni
Considerations for the Building Rebirth of Milan
(1945)

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The Milanese never lose heart, or their stamina. So much the less in these truly and extraordinarily calamitous times the sons of the Roman Saint Ambrose—to say it indeed with the Romans—do not despair of the thing public.

Never like today, when the building fabric of Milan has been so damaged and destroyed, did we hear the people, and indeed everybody, talk of reconstruction, of rearrangement [riassetto], of new and urgent constructions—words and things that reveal certain, careful, and firm desires and wills of rebirth. And never like today do the experts and the competent authorities discuss—with full knowledge of the facts, with watchful passion, calm precision, and wise foresight—of master plans and of urbanistic and building problems.

One would almost say that the destructive fury—after the shock, after the sad and sorrowful estimate of the damages—did not knock down but instead heightened the sense of social and historical responsibility before the enormous problems that the destruction brought on us. One would almost say—and this is already a reality: studies are proceeding fast, proposals are integrated, lacunae are filled in, old disagreements are dropped, and new agreements are made; and the technical demands and desires of the specialist scholars, which likely would have been understood or adopted only slowly or gradually, are now convincingly and concretely accepted.

Urbanistic arguments, which previously were the province of architects and engineers, have now become familiar. I will say even more, and better: there is being intensely prepared, for our Milan, that building expansion which before the bombings was the desire and vision of the competent authorities, and has now become a necessity to satisfy that need for housing which the destruction has augmented astronomically, as it were. But astronomy is a great science; and, with regard to the housing needs, precise scientific calculations have been made, and are being made; and housing are imagined, and desired, well made and hygienically laid out, that is, with those orientations and those large openings [respi] which good city planning has been recommending for a long time.

In this picture, which may seem overly optimistic, only one element is missing: the economic element, which depends from factors unfortunately far from these considerations of mine: the financial means, the needed materials. It is useful to hope in Providence. For the rest, activity and capacity will not be missing, since for that urbanistic problem, which is both economic and social, I see an entire array of architects and engineers ready, by culture (if young) and by experience (if not too young), to confront it head on, united by the concord to which they have been brought back by the common suffering.
There is however a problem or, better, a number of problems which concern the center of our city, so tortured, wounded, maimed—that very center which was precisely in the process of being renewed according to a variety of urbanistic and architectural criteria. Let’s ask ourselves right away, with frank serenity, whether perhaps the destructive havoc has not brutally but indeed effectively called us back to reality, a reality which can be put thus: where, how, and with what criteria should we carry out the renewal of the urban center? Didn’t the destructions, by widening and exasperating the problem, set it up for a more careful, organic, and gradual solution? Doesn’t this seem painfully paradoxical but also providentially considerable?

I have always, and for some time, maintained that our monuments—that is, the buildings important for history and for art—not only are not a hindrance to the modern development of cities, they instead constitute reason and impetus for their building and urbanistic improvement. And it is well known how and how much the modern schemes of city planning take as their starting point and as their cornerstone the monument—the monument as ground for creating piazzas or green spaces, so that its restoration becomes a fresh and useful strengthening [avvaloramento] which avoids sterile conservation and instead offers a new fervor of life.

This principle is today more important and comforting than ever to solve the problem that was once defined, however improperly, as that of the reconstruction of our monumental buildings; even if such a problem is, in both appearance and substance, less urgent and less serious than the one, of a purely building nature and imperiously social, of the construction of housing. And this is so because, if it touches needs that at first seem only of a historical, aesthetic, and sentimental nature, it touches deep into the urban center as a whole, full of historical memories and architectural expressions, but also indispensable nucleus for the very form and constitution of our Milan.

The argument—exquisitely urbanistic, in the innermost sense of the word and the thing—is linked to the desire that the familiar and beloved physiognomy of the city be not entirely lost—the desire to heal as best as possible the wounds and to recover to the city the stigmata impressed on it by the historical development of building themes in the life of buildings and neighborhoods, in addition to the evident and pressing necessity to conserve—if it is genuinely conservable—the actual, live documentation of the architectural work itself, as an artistic fact.

Faced, however, with the ruin of historically important, artistically noble, or even only traditionally representative buildings, is such a work of renewed conservation, of veritable rebirth, possible?

The very variables that I use to define the work and the problem reveal all its gravity and delicacy.

The formula which we recalled earlier (and which I discussed more than a year ago)—the formula adopted for the campanile of San Marco: “dov’era, com’era” [where it was, the way it was]—if it proved useful in that case, could it be generally applied and approved to restore the face [volto] of Milan or other cities whose historical beauty has been torn to pieces?

I remember that even for the reconstruction of the campanile in Venice there were, however few, very lively contrasts, which today can be brought back, in a more just and precise form, for the reconstruction of buildings less architecturally, historically, and urbanistically defined.

This should especially be the case in buildings where—characteristic case and not infrequent in our monuments—several artistic forms overlap, merge, and mingle in their historical harmony, and whose reconstruction would constitute a false for art and a dishonesty
for history. And this—it should be noted—so much the more, the more meticulous and virtuous would be the reconstruction carried out by directors and executors.

Instead of cold, insincere, and anti-historical reconstructions, better would be the remain, the relic—one may even say, without fear, the ruin, everlasting witness, among pauses of green, plants and flowers, of a laceration, an urbanistic mutilation which in itself is and will be sign and reason of history.

It is nevertheless, and luckily, to be acknowledged that several monuments—and even minor buildings which are however expressive for their organism, their architectural formula, or their artistic consistency—can be rebuilt or, to say it better and with greater precision, can be restored, provided that they have not been completely destroyed and are capable of rising again.

What will be extremely useful, not to say exclusively profitable, is the rule of the “case by case,” provided that it is applied with reason and experience [maturazione]. It is a rule that, to be well applied, calls for a complex sense of sincerity, study, and harmony. It is, however, an eminently constructive [realizzatrice] theory, which proceeds from this criterion: the building itself will indicate the possibility of its own rebirth.

But if a building which is important for history, art, or tradition has been totally destroyed, I do not think it possible its rebirth as it was, its integral reconstruction. I already touched upon this problem, with words perhaps a bit too harsh. And yet, if we reflect on this question, in such a case the reconstruction (the false, as I called it) would end up weighting down and obfuscating taste, sentiment, and passion. There remains to be solved, with respect to sentiment, aesthetics, and urbanism, the problem which I called of the face—the physiognomy of the city or of parts of it, parts which would remain mutilated and torn off from the traditional urban picture. And at this point another important question appears, the one commonly called of the environment.

One could think, therefore, to the remaking of the many facades which, miraculously as much as frightfully, remained standing; and to the reconstruction of houses and apartment buildings in central and representative streets, buildings only partially destroyed and which, even if not monumentally important, were certainly familiarly characteristic. This is a criterion which can constitute a precaution against improvident speculations or too strong dissonances.

Even in this respect, however, the distinctions and the reasonable precautions which I expressed earlier about the rebirth of monuments should apply. This is so since more and better than to artificially rebuild buildings which are in great part ruined, it will be perhaps daring, but certainly more honest, to make an entirely new building complex, which may truly give life to that part of the city where death passed.

I neither deny nor put in question, rather I affirm, that even for the application of this concept it will be necessary to employ much reasonableness, much wisdom, great harmony and seriousness of study; from these there will arise the opportunity, or at least the necessity will impose itself, to resume [riprendere]—by assonance, by lineatura, by volume, by the play of lights and shadows, of fulls and voids—that overall architectural character which was taken away or destroyed.

These are new tasks—tasks which we already pondered and to which we now set about with ardent passion and conscious study.

The Madonnina del Duomo protects us.

Saint Ambrose—strong in action and fearless in will, builder of churches, constructor of souls—incites us.