Précisions sur un état présent de l’architecture et de l’urbanisme
Éditions Crès, Collection de “L’Esprit Nouveau”, Paris, 1930

Scritto nel 1930, ristampato in anastatica nel 1960, tradotto e pubblicato in italiano nel 1979 a cura di Francesco Tentori, il libro raccoglie le dieci conferenze che Le Corbusier tenne a Buenos Aires tra il 3 e il 19 ottobre 1929 nel corso del suo viaggio in America Latina nell’autunno di quell’anno. Oltre alle dieci conferenze il libro comprende un Prologo americano, un Corollario brasiliano e un’appendice di alcuni scritti minori tra cui spicca quello intitolato Atmosfera moscovita.

Non poco in queste conferenze risulta caduco per il lettore di oggi. Certe teorizzazioni troppo astratte, il tono spesso declamatorio e apertamente propagandistico, uno spirito visionario e palinsesto, un’appendice delle cellule dei monaci e spazio collettivo della città, in prospettiva urbane, di strade, piazze, isolati, prospettive urbane.

Oggi che molti tornano a parlare di città sittiana, cellula-casa-città, macchinismo, taylorismo, stanzialità, il tono spesso declamatorio e apertamente propagandistico, uno spirito visionario e palinsesto è troppo astratto per il lettore di oggi. Certe teorizzazioni troppo astratte.


Enrico Bordogna
Written in 1930, reprinted in anastatic in 1960, translated and published in Italian in 1979 by Enrico Bordogna. The book collects ten lectures held by Le Corbusier in Buenos Aires between 3 and 19 October 1929, during his trip to Latin America in autumn of that year. Besides the ten lectures, the book includes an American prologue, a Brazilian corollary and an appendix of some minor writings among which stands out the one entitled The atmosphere of Moscow.

These conferences may appear fleeting to the contemporary reader. Some too abstract theories, the often declamatory and openly propagandistic tone, a palin- genetic and visionary spirit difficult even to understand nowadays. But there is a distinguishing feature that makes this book very current and fascinating: the deep project sensitivity that animates all pages, omnipresent lyricism, an irresistible will-to-art searching for a modern classicism; same characters which pervade the whole architecture of its author, the many unsurpassed masterpieces that he left.

The main theme of the book is the crisis of the contemporary city, as inherited from history. According to Le Corbusier, mechanization is both the perturbing cause and the possible solution. Hence the diagnosis, formulated with the usual iconoclasty: destroy the corridor street; delete blocks and courtyards; escape from the “vignola” parody made by bricklayers; abolish the order’s slavery ridiculously present even in the indios city of Asuncion in the virgin forest. Along these lines, it appears also the therapy, continually reaffirmed with similar apodictic tones: machine à habiter, machine à travailler, free plan, pilotis, roof garden, liberation of urban soil for green surface and circulation, redents e immemoubles-utias for housing, Cartesian skyscrapers for offices up to 200 meters high, the paquebot as an example of cell-home-town rationality, mechanization, Taylorism, standardization.

Today many return talking about the Sittian city, made of streets, squares, blocks, urban perspectives; compared to this position, the thesis of Le Corbusier more than utopic may seem naive. The magnificent pages in which he describes and draws his ideas for Buenos Aires, Montevideo, San Paulo, Rio de Janeiro outlive. The atmosphere of Moscow, an appendix of some minor writings among which stands out the one entitled The atmosphere of Moscow.

These conferences may appear fleeting to the contemporary reader. Some too abstract theories, the often declamatory and openly propagandistic tone, a palin- genetic and visionary spirit difficult even to understand nowadays. But there is a distinguishing feature that makes this book very current and fascinating: the deep project sensitivity that animates all pages, omnipresent lyricism, an irresistible will-to-art searching for a modern classicism; same characters which pervade the whole architecture of its author, the many unsurpassed masterpieces that he left.

The main theme of the book is the crisis of the contemporary city, as inherited from history. According to Le Corbusier, mechanization is both the perturbing cause and the possible solution. Hence the diagnosis, formulated with the usual iconoclasty: destroy the corridor street; delete blocks and courtyards; escape from the “vignola” parody made by bricklayers; abolish the order’s slavery ridiculously present even in the indios city of Asuncion in the virgin forest. Along these lines, it appears also the therapy, continually reaffirmed with similar apodictic tones: machine à habiter, machine à travailler, free plan, pilotis, roof garden, liberation of urban soil for green surface and circulation, redents e immemoubles-utias for housing, Cartesian skyscrapers for offices up to 200 meters high, the paquebot as an example of cell-home-town rationality, mechanization, Taylorism, standardization.

Today many return talking about the Sittian city, made of streets, squares, blocks, urban perspectives; compared to this position, the thesis of Le Corbusier more than utopic may seem naive. The magnificent pages in which he describes and draws his ideas for Buenos Aires, Montevideo, San Paulo, Rio de Janeiro outlive.

More than its unrealistic radicalism, it is the strength of these drawings which impresses the most. In Buenos Aires, silhouetted on the flat line of the Argentine pampas, five 200 meters high skyscrapers aligned in the immense estuary of Rio de la Plata are the first images that appear to immigrants and tourists arriving by steamboat, by day or by night: «a grandiose architectural spectacle, pure human creation» he says, magnificent and seductive for «rhythm and cadence». The same could be said for urban elevated highways, supported by viaducts of residential buildings and offices, that run at a constant height in the irregular orography of Montevideo, San Paulo, or in the unique natural site of Rio. Contemporary monuments reminiscent of the Roman aqueduct of Segovia or the Pont du Gard in Provence, says Le Corbusier, who even if despises academicism orders, remains delighted by the great historical architectures.

Similarly, the pages where he talks about homes of corrugated iron sheets of the endless suburbs of Buenos Aires are touching, or those of the Indios in Asuncion, or of Negroes (so Le Corbusier) of the favelas of Rio; real houses, authentic houses of people, not architects houses, from whose miserable order dictated by the need he draws valuable suggestions for the problem of economic housing in the European cities, for the cell in the human scale, for its distribution and even for its furniture, necessary and sufficient, beyond which «every centimetre is too much». So for the eyes of Le Corbusier, free from convention and so much filled with rationality and poetry, the houses of the favelas of Rio or Buenos Aires are worth the aulic example of the Certosa of Ema, near Florence, with its bright order between individual sequence of the cells of monks and collective space of the cloister.

There is a connection between the conferences: the reiterated petition of the bond between architecture and urbanism, between architecture and the city. Architecture in everything. Urban planning in everything is the title of the third conference, and is an affirmation of great relevance, in claiming an essential urban rationality of single architectural pieces, that should always be assessed in itself and related to the environment; and on the other hand by claiming the artistic coefficient of urbanism, that, as the building, must respond to the characters of the hierarchy, rhythm, proportion, cadence, harmony. «Reason and passion» he writes, generating the «inspired work»; and just before «the great art is made of simple means, it tends to simplicity».

But there are many other memorable pages, such as those in which he speaks of the «law of the meander», signifying the long way, the struggle and the slowness of the research, but also the sudden gap that sometimes generates idea, theoretical lighting, architectural invention. Or like those, passionate pages, subject of the Eight Conference dedicated to teaching architecture.

This book is a milestone in the biography of Le Corbusier, a book, as Bordogna says in the introduction, that represents a real report of the two decades of the intense founding season of his poetry and his thought– from the period of L’Esprit Nouveau to Vers un’architecture and Urbanisme to the projects of Contemporary city of three million inhabitants and the Plan Voisin – and at the same time of anticipa- tion and openness to new themes, new theoretical research and design, – from the Ville Radieuse to Manière de penser l’urbanisme and Les trois Etablissements Humains. An indispensable book, capable, moreover to ensure even now days an extraordinarily addictive reading.

Enrico Bordogna

translation by Arba Baxhaku