

BETWEEN LAND AND WATER

ELEMENTS FOR A CITY CENTER

In Venice water is the first resource of the territory in which the city lies. The water of the lagoon of Venice, at the same time, protects the city, setting her boundaries, and connects her to the sea, therefore to other countries and cities of the Mediterranean basin. The same importance given to water can be found in many urban cultures around Africa.

Water is the starting point to discuss the importance of the connective space, the non built one, in making the city.

Having observed several places around South Africa and Mali it is clear that the city centres are strongly related to the surrounding land and the way inhabitants use it. In terms of sustainability, the centre of the city can be understood through the link between built settlement and the territory around, the former being often as scattered as an archipelagous of villages, or islands, the latter spreading from the confined spaces of farm land, or of fishing waters, to the vastness of trading routes such as the salt caravans, the gold trade, those of the Dutch East Indian Company, or of the Mediterranean traders.

In the Venetian lagoon, the restraints posed by the water as a physical limit, that force the densification of the built space into a few islands, on the one hand results in an almost abstract city centre, represented by the water square of St Mark's basin, by the former port-canal of the Grand Canal, by the maritime Gateway from the sea between the mouth of the Lagoon and the entrance of the Arsenal, on the other hand they provide the elements for Venice's city centre:

- 1- pedestrian movement,
- 2- complexity of functions of the public space,
- 3- cohabitation of locals and foreigners .

Long distances, connections to many places, have never been in contrast with the human capability of walking (or cycling, or moving on a small boat like the gondola or the pinasse), determined distances with specific loads. Slow pedestrian movement, supported by public transportation, is of primary importance in making a city centre, on condition that it is chosen as model for the whole city: this allows egalitarian use of the means of transportation, and occasions for encounters and exchanges. It also permits a great saving in energy.

Allowing spaces and functions to be at walking distance from each other means that residential quarters, houses, flats, must be integrated as much as possible with the city centre. As found in Venice, as well as in Djenne or Tombouctou, public spaces are not separated from the private life of citizens, resulting in a very sophisticated pattern of hidden entrances to ordinary residential buildings, to which narrow alleys are dedicated, and larger open areas where public activities take place, punctuated by wealthy houses (palazzi).

At the same time water in Venice allowed traders (now tourists) to bring their goods to the very centre of the city. Special places (fondaci) were provided to house foreigners and store their merchandise very near the market place of Rialto, so allowing the cohabitation of local and foreigners, preserving the differences but permitting proximity and exchange.

Conclusions

How can we look at African city centers?

Through a comparison between some African settlements, both pre and post-colonial, and an example of a historical Italian town such as Venice, many similar qualities can be found and can be used to define the centre. Among them the ability of the built space to relate to the broader territory as a communal resource to be shared; and the possibility to live using little energy, walking and sharing means of transportation.

Designing new city centers with these elements is the challenge given to the students of my course of urban design of the Faculty of Architecture IUAV in Venice whose works are presented here in a small selection.

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