

The Invention of Athens (Greece) and Rome (Italy)

Wednesday, 11 May 2011

The birth of two new nations, Greece and Italy, corresponds with the invention of two new capital cities: Athens and Rome. Ancient cities that are called upon to play a new role. That both cities become capitals was inevitable due to the power of their symbolic dimension, capable of silencing all opposition. Both cities had to measure themselves with their past, ancient and recent. They also needed to create a new image and a new identity from this relationship. Archaeology, understood here as the conservation and management of the memory of ancient history, contributed to defining the use, the characteristics and the styles of new public spaces.

The birth of two new nations, Greece and Italy, corresponds with the invention of two new capital cities: Athens and Rome. Ancient cities that are called upon to play a new role.

In 1834 Athens was named the capital of independent Greece. In 1816 Rome was designated as the capital by the Italian Parliament and in 1870 it was conquered by the army: the following year it fully assumed the functions of the capital of the unified Italian State, replacing Florence, which had fulfilled this role since 1864.

That both cities become capitals was inevitable due to the power of their symbolic dimension, capable of silencing all opposition. Both cities had to measure themselves with their past, ancient and recent. They also needed to create a new image and a new identity from this relationship. Archaeology, understood here as the conservation and management of the memory of ancient history, contributed to defining the use, the characteristics and the styles of new public spaces.

Athens was a small village of a few thousand inhabitants lying in ruins as a result of a lengthy war for independence and marked by an important Ottoman past. At the time, its principal historical monument, the Parthenon, contained a mosque. The liberation of the Acropolis was seen as an immediate and fundamental act on the part of the new government. It was also necessary to eliminate the numerous small buildings that occupied the level area around the structure. The operation, however, was a lengthy one (the mosque remained until 1843) and only at the end of the 19th-century did the ample restoration of the Parthenon actually begin. What is more, the Acropolis was one of the fulcrums of the first master plans for the city, as much in the version by Kleantes and Schaubert as in the revision by von Klenze that was adopted: both called for a new road network in the form of a trident, aimed at framing the Acropolis with a central axis (Odos Athinias) with a long perspective focused on the Propylea. This urban structure remained unchanged even though the first plans, like those that came later, were largely ignored.

Unlike the Italian capital that made use of the buildings of Renaissance and Baroque Rome to house its public functions, Athens began with nothing. The first construction was that of the royal residence for Otto of Bavaria (F. von Gärtner, 1836-1840, since 1935 the home of the Parliament), followed by the University (H. C. Hansen, 1839-49), the National Academy and Library (Th. Hansen, 1859-85 and 1887-92) and the so-called Athenian Trilogy, the Parliament (Fr. Boulanger, 1858-74), the Polytechnic Institute (L. Kaftantzoglou, 1862-80) and the National Museum of Archaeology (L. Lange, P. Kalkos and E. Ziller, 1866-1889) followed by an Exhibition Hall known as the Zappeion (Fr. Boulanger and Th. Hansen, 1874-88). Many public buildings were constructed using financing provided by rich merchants and Greek capitalists from the Diaspora.

These new buildings, and many private residences, all adopted the Neo-Classical style. This style was imposed by the German, Danish, Greek and French architects working in Athens, some of whom were tied to the school of Schinkel. Schinkel himself, without ever having visited Athens, made reference to the Napoleonic projects for the Campidoglio in Rome when designing a Royal Palace for the Acropolis that contained the Parthenon within its gardens.

Neo-Classicism was chosen as the language of Western modernity to deal with the new Greece, largely due to the artistic mediation of the court appointed architects of Bavaria, the protagonists of the initial phase of the city's transformation. Neo-Classicism, however, is not only the international style of the first decades of the 19th-century: in Athens it assumes the function of mirroring the past and providing a cultural and artistic legitimisation of a privileged relationship with classical antiquity.

Even while being the dominant language, Neo-Classicism must confront the other important cultural option exercised by independent Greece and founded on the relationship with Byzantium and the Byzantine Empire: this tradition, rooted in the Orthodox religion, was one of the inspiring principals of the megalí idéa, the large project for the expansion and re-conquering of the Greek nation at the cost of the Ottoman Empire. It should not surprise us that the same Neo-Classical architects built the new cathedral of Athens in the Neo-Byzantine style (Megáli Mitrópolis: Th. Hansen, D. Zezos, Fr. Boulanger, 1842-60).

On the other hand, the idea of the Greek nation has always been tied to the conviction that classical Greece was the cradle of Western civilization: and this is, above all, the idea that dominated the foreign point of view. The symbol and emblem of classical Greece, the Parthenon, gradually assumed the two-fold role of being both a national and a universal

monument. This result was achieved through two parallel operations. On the one hand the lengthy and systematic restoration aimed at restoring the Acropolis as it was during the 5th-century B.C., the era of Pericles, cancelling not only the traces of Turkish rule, but also those from the period of the crusades (the Duchy of Athens: 1205-1461), including the demolition of the Frankish tower located alongside the Propylea; on the other hand, through the use of the acropolis and the space behind the Parthenon as a space of political ceremony and celebration. The first opportunity was presented by the party organised by Leo von Klenze on August 28, 1834 in honour of the young King: Otto was seated on a throne inside the Parthenon, adorned with laurel wreaths and olive and myrtle branches and surrounded by important local figures and the military garrison as he listened to the speech by Klenze, who launched the programme for the restoration of the Acropolis: «All the remains of barbarity will be removed, here as in all of Greece, and the remains of the glorious past will be brought in new light, as the solid foundation of a glorious present and future» (Bastéa, 102). In 1933, the centenary anniversary of the liberation of Athens and of the Greek Renaissance («Palingenesia») was celebrated on the Acropolis on Easter, the day of the Resurrection and the primary religious holiday in Greece.

The National Flag of Greece has flown atop the Acropolis since 1833: it was thus seen as a serious affront to national pride when it was substituted by the German flag during the occupation, from 1941-1944. The evzone, the soldier from the Greek National Guard who was ordered to lower the flag, wrapped himself in it and then threw himself down from the Acropolis. A short time later, two eighteen-year-old boys managed to substitute the Nazi flag with its Greek counterpart, offering a strong patriotic symbol for the Resistance. During the post-war years, liberation from the Germans was celebrated with a flag raising ceremony on the Acropolis. Today the flag is still raised on top of the sacred rock, the monumental podium of the Greek Nation.

The other great public event that indissolubly ties ancient history and the sites of classicism to the image of modern Greece was the 1896 Olympic Games that were held in the ancient Panathenaic stadium, rebuilt and renovated for the occasion. That event projected Greece into the world of international modernity, as the legitimate heir of the classical world: an image that Greece sought to renew and confirm during the 2004 Olympics. The invention of the capital of Rome follows a completely different path: above all because the city had to deal with the existing capital of the ecclesiastic State. The Parliament, the Royal Palace, the ministries, the law courts and all public offices were installed in existing buildings that once belonged to the ecclesiastical power: the Royal Palace in the summer residence of the Pope, the Chamber of Deputies in the law courts, the ministries and the military barracks in expropriated convents.

Rome was characterised by an evident symbolic weakness of the representative institutions. While Europe was building the parliaments of the liberal era, the Chamber of Deputies and the Italian Senate remained inside renaissance and baroque palaces. Aware of this handicap, the authoritarian Prime Minister Francesco Crispi (a follower of Garibaldi) proposed, in 1888, to build a new Parliament House on the hills overlooking the Roman Forum. Convinced that it would be «truly abnormal that in Rome the most important building in the nation was constructed without creating a contrast with the remains of past grandeurs». However, Crispi's political defeat in 1896 meant that the project was never realised.

The new Rome had a problem of visibility, accentuated by the comparison with the imposing cupola of St. Peter's and the Vatican palaces, far from the inhabited centre, though dominating the urban panorama. The capital also lacked a national monument.

What geography and history gave to new Athens, the Acropolis and the Parthenon, had no equivalent in Rome, which lacked an ancient monument that could simultaneously resolve both issues.

The Pantheon, located inside one of the lowest areas in the city is hidden by the dense surrounding urban fabric and is dedicated to the memory of the reigning dynasty as the place of burial of the King of Italy: Vittorio Emanuele II in 1878 and his son Umberto I, killed by an anarchist in 1900. It is more a monument to mourning than one of celebration.

The Campidoglio, the Acropolis of Rome, for centuries the symbol of civic power, would have been too difficult to convert into a national symbol, in addition to not being very visible from below and, furthermore lying in the shadows of the medieval church of S. Maria d'Aracoeli.

The two-fold problem of visibility and the absence of a national monument was resolved beginning in 1885 with the construction, on the north side of the Campidoglio, of the large monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, designed by Sacconi in the Greco-Roman style. Inaugurated in 1911, the 50th-anniversary of the Unification of Italy, the building was completed only in 1925. The Vittoriano (the name was assumed following the Italian victory in the First World War) is both a national monument and the new Campidoglio [Capitol Hill] of unified Italy: a statute that was defined in 1921, following the burial of the Unknown Soldier at the feet of the Altare della Patria. With a width of 135 metres and a height of 70 metres, (81 with its quadrigae and winged victories) the Vittoriano overshadows the ancient Campidoglio, hides the church of Aracoeli and, above all, with its high colonnade, constitutes the backdrop of the central axis of the trident created by Sixtus V at the end of the 16th-century. Its central visibility, limited from afar by the narrow width of via del Corso, is accompanied by the more inviting perspective from piazza dell'Esedra down the via Nazionale, the new axis of 19th-century Rome, framing the side colonnade of the Vittoriano and restoring the illusion that one is looking at an ancient, monumental scene.

In effect the Vittoriano represents the scenic backdrop that defines the relationship with the Roman forum and the Coliseum. This result was obtained only after the demolitions called for by Mussolini and the construction of the wide boulevard (via dell'Impero, now via dei Fori Imperiali) that crosses the Roman Forum in the direction of the Coliseum. Via dell'Impero (1932) and the successive via dei Trionfi (1934), the reorganisation of the Circus Maximus, the via del Mare and the isolation of the Campidoglio from the surrounding constructions all define a large quadrilateral whose nodal points, on one side, are the Vittoriano and the Palazzo Venezia (home of the 'Duce') and on the other side the Coliseum and the Arch of Constantine.

This new monumental landscape became the site of demonstrations held by the regime and was called upon to legitimise the successes of the present through a direct comparison with the remnants of a glorious past. The invention of this new monumental landscape represents the principal legacy of Fascism: an intervention founded upon the revisitation of history, that shapes ancient history for new public use, the foundation of a continuous history, entirely justified in its political dimensions. The collaboration and consensus of archaeologists testifies to the incredibly strong nexus between archaeology and politics and confirms the widespread idea that operations of this type restored vitality and actuality to the ancient ruins.

If we return to a comparison between the two Capitals, we must underline once again a difference and an analogy. While Athens developed a unitary monumental language for public buildings – Neo-Classicism – in Rome the Vittoriano is an exception and the main intervention, above all in the historical city, is that of the creation of new monumental landscapes, while the majority of the new monumental buildings from the Fascist period, those of the Forum of Mussolini and the incomplete E42, are located at the edges of the city.

For both cities the Olympic Games represented a decisive step towards international legitimisation. For Rome in particular, the 1960 Olympic Games provided an opportunity for the monumental spaces of ancient Rome to break their ties with Fascism, giving them a new fruition: a landscape that was reinforced by the spectacular victory in the marathon by the former subject of the Italian colonial empire, the Ethiopian Abebe Bikila, who passed in triumph beneath the arch of Constantine.

Currently in both cities the monumental public spaces and examples of archaeology are entrusted to the dominant fruition of cosmopolitan tourism, placing their original national and nationalistic functions on a secondary level.

Bibliography:

- Architecture néoclassique en Grèce, Edition de la Banque commerciale de Grèce, Athènes 1967;
 Bastéa E., The Creation of Modern Athens. Planning the Myth, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000;
 Beard M., Il Partenone, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2004;
 Papageorgiou-Venetas, A., Hauptstadt Athen: ein Stadtgedanke des Klassizismus, Deutsche Kunstverlag, München 1994;
 Papageorgiou-Venetas, A., Athens: the Ancient Heritage and the Historic Cityscape in a Modern Metropolis, The Archaeological Society at Athens, Athens 1994;
 Philippides D., The Parthenon as appreciated by Greek Society, in P. Tournikiotis (ed.), The Parthenon..., pp. 278-309;
 Sica P., Storia dell'urbanistica. Il Settecento, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1992;
 Tobia, B., 'Altare della Patria, il Mulino, Bologna 1998;
 Tournikiotis P. (ed.), The Parthenon and its Impact in Modern Times, Melissa, Athens 1994;
 Vidotto, V., Roma contemporanea, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2001;
 Vidotto, V., La capitale del fascismo, in Roma capitale, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2002, pp. 379-413;