

Leonardo Ricci

Exploratory Research in Urban Form and the Future of Florence (1967)

This lecture was given by Leonardo Ricci, at the time Director of the Institute of Architectural Design and of the Institute of Town Planning of the University of Florence, on January 17, 1967, in Los Angeles in California as a benefit for the Committee to Rescue Italian Art. It was co-sponsored by the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the Architectural Panel of Los Angeles.

Leonardo Ricci thought that the decentralization of powers in megastructures or in public life was the right tool to regulate collectivity in all its parts: modern men as citizens of the future city, administration, university and the existing institutions, environment, all the different activities and systems of the modern society. He saw in the university and especially in the educational offer the concrete possibility to solve the problems of the society, because, in the university rooms the social debate could have been switched on and the generation of those who lived the uncertainties and the crisis of values caused by World War II, belonging to the bourgeois class, could have faced the problems of the mass society as well as the architectural and urban problems concerning that matter.

In 1967, immediately after Florence flood of 1966 and one year before the revolt of 1968, Leonardo Ricci strengthened his theories about the City of the Earth and saw the concrete possibility to realize it on new damages caused by the flood, as, in the postwar period, his master Giovanni Michelucci saw the opportunity to build a New Town by looking at people walking on the ruins of the same city. Ricci wrote about the disaster of the flood in 1967 in the text republished here-below titled "Exploratory Research in Urban Form and the Future of Florence". The text, also published in Arts and Architecture (no. 2 (February 1967): 25, 32-34), reports Ricci's lecture given on January 17, 1967 in Los Angeles California as a benefit for the Committee to Rescue Italian Art. It was co-sponsored by the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at UCLA and the Architectural Panel of Los Angeles. The typescript of the conference is kept in Casa Studio Ricci. 1967 was the year of the Montréal Expo and the exhibition Ten Italian Architects by Esther McCoy, which was advertised next to Ricci's article columns on the pages of Arts and Architecture.

The damages left by the flood could have been the right chance for building the desired Earth City. Leonardo Ricci indicated three main aspects that should have been considered to solve the disaster: rebuilding the artisan workshops and workplaces of the Florentines, focusing on the restoration of ancient artifacts, reconsidering in the reconstruction all the territory of the Arno Valley which included other important cities such as Pisa and Arezzo. The whole area should have been reconsidered to design a new city, a new megalopolis, in which the contradiction between man and nature no longer existed, where man and nature could have become a single entity, a city open to all men and all possible experiences.

Ricci suggested this project theme to the students of the courses of Urban Planning II and Architectural Composition in 1969 with the aim of designing the Arno Valley as a megalopolis for two million inhabitants.

The notion of "territory" and its complexity if seen as an organic whole composed of related property funds, the knowledge of the territory in its multilayered structure, fundamental to revise urban rules and laws, was an issue discussed during the INU conference in May of 1965 Ricci took part in. He was hoping to find new possible applications and solutions to the urban problem, even though it was not possible to realize his project. Ricci planned to build the new Earth City in the whole Arno Valley and to see the center of Florence as one of the greatest infrastructures of all humanity, not only as the home of the most famous works of art, since Florence represented the past of all mankind, its roots, and the tangible proof of the evolution of man.



<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/17723> | ISSN 2611-0075
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Ladies and Gentlemen:

Perhaps the audience will feel deceived about the subject of my lecture.

Probably most of you would like to have an eye witness impression of the terrible flood which hit Florence; you would like to know of the loss of masterpieces, of paintings and sculptures, of the damage to the doors of the Baptistry, of the thousands and thousands of precious manuscripts completely gone, or to be restored with great difficulty and with improbable success, of the many masterpieces of architecture encrusted with mud, silt, and oil, and of hundreds of shops completely destroyed.

It is a fact that the flood was terrible. It is a fact that only those who were present during those days can imagine what really took place. No one who was not present could measure the totality of the destruction. No photograph, no movie could represent sufficiently the situation of a town suddenly hit so violently in a moment of economic expansion in our civilization of producer and consumer; a town suddenly reduced to a more depressed condition than after the War.

It is true. It is difficult to imagine a river 9, 10, 12 feet deep, moving at the speed of 40 to 50 miles per hour, through the squares, the streets, and the buildings of a city which was getting ready for the Christmas holidays.

It is hard to imagine cars hanging from trees, looking like strange fruits of a mechanical civilization, to imagine most beautiful objects of art, pieces of furniture, jewellery in their ornate cases, and fashionable dresses floating through the streets and the square. It is difficult to visualize the night in a totally dark town where you can only hear the shouting of isolated people calling for help.

But these facts, although very impressive and almost unbelievable, are not the facts which interest me as an architect, as a town-designer.

As an architect, as a town-planner, I am much more impressed to note that in the year 1966 a town, an old town as important as Florence, and not only the city of Florence but the Arno Valley, with other important towns such as Arezzo and Pisa, in other words a vast territory inhabited by more than a million people, can be put in a worse condition than it was by a similar accident during the 13th Century.

This means that all the urban structures of a territory as civilized as Tuscany, that towns as marvelous as Florence are no longer fit for the life of modern man. This means that all the historical centres do not satisfy any longer all the needs of a modern man, and that the new urban organisms which we have built are certainly very far from those that we could and should build.

It means that we, modern man, are not able to maintain the high testimonies of what mankind has given to us as a heritage nor to create our towns according to modern urbanism.

If my lecture succeeds in making a contribution in this direction I shall have reached my goal.

The urgent problems which we have got to solve in Florence and in the entire territory of the Arno Valley are of three kinds:

1. To restore as fast as possible and wherever possible the inestimable values of culture (paintings, sculptures, manuscripts, etc.) and to restore as fast as possible an entire economy which has been destroyed; that is, to help artisans who no longer have workshops, merchants without their stores, industries without machinery, and so on. But this problem is not of my specific competence. As a matter of fact, to the solution of the first part of this problem the entire world, and particularly the United States, has been giving great attention and is doing its very best. To the solution of the second part of the problem, I trust that political, social, and economic powers will also do their best.

2. The second problem consists of how to face the situation of an old city, as important as Florence, which belongs not only to the Florentines but to the entire world, and how to face a new urbanistic problem directly connected with historical cities and a territory which was shaped by centuries of human activities. It is clear that if we do not arrive at the definition of what are the values still alive for us and what is the total organism of the old cities and of their particular masterpieces of architecture, it is absolutely impossible to decide what to do in and for an old town. To maintain this town as a museum? To transform it little by little into a modern city? To keep the exterior aesthetic aspects of its monuments? To transform, however, the interior when certain functions have become obsolete? Critically speaking, to conceive of the beauty of a town only for the aesthetic value of its architecture? Or to conceive of its beauty in the context of the dimension and scale of the whole organism? Or to conceive of the town and its beauty in the largest aspect of its total culture and of its population? And I consider the meaning of the word culture to cover the social, historical, traditional, and anthropological significance.

There could be many answers—many choices. But in my opinion they will be arbitrary, gratuitous, and subjective, if we do not analyse the real significance of what a town is as a whole and in all its details. In the case of Florence, what is the meaning to us of its cathedrals, its domes, its wonderful churches, if by chance a large part of Florence's population were no longer to be Catholic?

What is the meaning to us of the Palazzo Vecchio, Palazzo Pitti, and of all the other palaces, of princes, bankers, and merchants, when the Medicis do not exist any longer and the civil power is represented in a different form?

What is the meaning of the Piazzas, of the streets which once provided the possibility of communication among people, places in which to work, to rest, to play, to talk but which have been transformed into parking lots for automobiles?

What is the meaning to us of the old city walls and of the old gates when we no longer must defend ourselves from neighbouring enemies?

In synthesis what is the meaning to us of the morphology of this town, and of the typology of its organisms when almost all the functions for which they

were once built have become obsolete?

And if we are being honest, and if we recognize that almost all real functions are obsolete, and only the rhetorical ones remain, still valid for a particular¹ kind of tourist, can we find real existential qualities for which we have to conserve this town?

Because if we do not recognize real and fundamental values, we should not care to conserve anything at all, but should courageously transform the organism in the same way that our ancestors did, before our incapacities, our and lack of phantasy, our weakness in vitality², forced us to forego the power to transform and to shape the world as we want it, but on the contrary compelled us to conserve in a poor way³ the treasures of a lost world. If we find existential qualities we must clarify what they are and must behave accordingly.

I have had for a long time definite opinions in this matter; opinions which were expressed in my book "Twentieth Century Anonymous" and in my articles and lectures. They are also expressed in my new book now being published. But if I had no opinion I think that the answer was given to me just now, during the flood and after the flood, by all people of high education and of low education, by people all over the world whose opinion coincides completely with mine.

Many floods indeed and natural tragedies have happened everywhere in the world. But never have we heard such a cry as for Florence, As if, instead of a city, it were a person, a loved one who in a way belongs to everybody and without whom it is impossible to live.

From this point of view I was very happy, indeed, that the help sent to Florence was for the conservation and the restoration of the town rather than help for the economic damage.

Indeed, there are in the world people who are much poorer than even the Florentines today and need much more help, but there is only one Florence in the world.

What was, in essence, the significance of this spontaneous answer⁴?

It meant that Florence, as with certain other towns in the world, represents the past of mankind, our roots, the signal of an evolution of man on earth, which transformed man from an animal into something which is still almost unknown to us and about which no one knows the future, neither in life nor in death.

This means that Florence belongs to mankind and not only to the Florentines nor only to the Italians. It means that if Florence were to be destroyed, mankind would lose a part of its blood, of its life.

1 In the original typescript "peculiar" was corrected with "particular".

2 Here the text could be corrected as follows: "lack of phantasy and vitality".

3 Here "in a poor way" could be corrected into "ineffectively".

4 Here "answer" could be corrected with "response".

Translated into urbanistic terms, it means that the historical town of Florence represents a "public facility" for all the world. Because (to use a phrase that I really do not like but which I am obliged to use in order to make myself clear) Florence is a "public facility" for the "leisure time" of mankind. I would prefer to use instead the phrase "free experience of the world."

These public facilities, if considered as a hearth for mankind and not only for the Florentines, would not be so expensive to maintain and would not be an absurd dead museum for tourists but a live experience for all man.

In fact, if we compare the number, the capacity, and the potential of the towns in the world which so intensively represent our background in this way, they certainly are -in comparison with the billions of men, and the billions of acres, and the billions of dollars which the totality of human settlements represent today and will represent in the future- not too many nor too large to save.

The new means of communication on the other hand will allow more and more the full fruition of these existential qualities of the ancient towns.

Fruition which could be completed not only in their urbanistic and architectural aspects, but also through the relocation of certain functions at present completely alien to their true functions. We could, for example, hear again the music of Bach in its original context, the cathedral, or of Mozart in the chambers of the palaces where it was supposed to be played and not, for instance, completely out of scale and measure in the Bowl of Los Angeles. Or we could hear the plays of Moliere, Shakespeare or Goldoni, in the theatres which saw the birth of their art. We could walk in a Renaissance Piazza having the marvelous sensation of being the subject of the objects around us, the focal point of the perspective created for us, or we could have the exalted sensation of an eschatologic experience in an old Gothic church.

And at this point I would like to launch the idea to Americans to help, if they really want to help Florence, to do a plan of Florence, arrived at scientifically and by interdisciplinary studies, in which the different needs are related to different cultures and populations. But about this I will say more at the end of my lecture.

Now I must speak of the third problem: The problem not of the new Florence but of the new organism which could comprehend the valley of the Arno River of which Florence is the historical center, though of only one aspect. Because if we really wish to save the old center, we must see to it that the old center is not made the heart of the new organism. Otherwise we automatically destroy the old town.

Since man already has new needs, new aspirations, new technological possibilities, new customs, and since he is nearing more and more accelerated and dynamic transformations of patterns of life, we must lay the foundations of a new town which could be in itself capable of containing the new needs and have at the same time the potential to contain the yet undetermined needs of men.

But what does it mean to build a new town, city, or megalopolis, in this case

in the Arno Valley?

Does it mean, for instance, to design a beautiful form over the whole valley without really knowing the necessity of men in the future life? Or does it mean to create through urbanistic standards, resulting from the statistical analysis of the life of a population and knowledge of some of the faults of the present urbanism, but still without knowledge of the real needs of this population because we would be using as models the social and economic standards of an obsolete society?

Or does it mean to plan only an economic, rationalistic structure which if it were possible, could only resolve some of the mechanical aspects of our life? Or does it mean to create, to invent a Utopian kind of living which would allow us to escape from the reality of the real evolution of mankind? Or doesn't it mean something else, which we do not exactly know but about which we can create certain hypotheses, verify them under the complex aspect of human organization, then match them to the experiences which can permit the creation of new alternatives for man? Doesn't it mean to create models which can represent a confrontation with the obsolete organism in which man lives today?

I think that today man has sufficient knowledge of the enormous deficiencies of our human settlements and sufficient knowledge of the probable new paths to lay the foundation of a new city, which I call the "Earth City."

At this point of the lecture perhaps I should synthetically give a panorama of the basic directional lines of the interdisciplinary research I am doing for a new urbanism, starting from the statement that no one city of the world can today actually satisfy the needs of man who has achieved a new dimension. But this would represent too big a departure from what I said before and it would be frivolous to attempt to explain briefly the process of research which is the result of a very long study and which will never be finished, because the more the research advances the more one will discover new problems to face and resolve.

So I return to the problem of Florence. First of all, we have to admit that if a flood were able to endanger the life of this territory and another day of rain might have been able to totally destroy it, this clearly indicates that the whole urbanistic structure is obsolete.

Shall we engage all our efforts in the restoration of something which does not work? Or should we try to create a new structure which could represent an alternative mode of living—a new organization of human acts and activities and, as a consequence, a new town?

Having studied for many years the principal problems of the territory of the Arno River Valley, I have convictions which in certain aspects or certain details have achieved a form. But I prefer to show the method with which we could operate.

In the Arno River Valley, there live almost two million inhabitants.

These people are living, more and more, in a chaotic and alienated situation; some in the beautiful, historical towns like Florence, Lucca, and Pisa; some in horrible peripheries which increasingly devour the plain like a cancer; some in little villages in the hills or on the edges of the river. In any case, they live absolutely different lives as if they were persons of different historical periods, different cultures with different possibilities of choice. But none of these people can be at ease in relation to our own times. This happens in a territory only about 100 miles long and 20 miles wide.

All the newborn and arising needs of man create new situations which are increasing the chaos and rapidly destroying one of the most beautiful landscapes of the world, not only its natural qualities but also the beauty created by man through the centuries of work which transformed this valley. Roads are built at random to serve new settlements casually built.

Factories or tract houses are built upon land which perhaps should be allotted to flood water control basins. Beautiful hills are being defaced to construct any kind of building where the owner is not interested in maintaining trees and forests which could be utilized as watersheds. In synthesis, communication, transportation, habitats, public facilities, and services are mixed together without any principle of logic.

In this way in a few years not only will the territory be destroyed but also the historical centers, because they cannot support the growth of the towns, like the heart of a man could not pump blood to a body 10 or 20 times larger. This is the situation. Then a flood arrives and brings destruction.

But who is responsible for this flood? God? The devil? We are responsible because we have not yet understood that the organization of a territory can no longer go uncontrolled. Today the complexity of the organization needs programs. I don't say dictatorial and abstract plans which force man to a certain kind of living. I say programs which offer to the inhabitants the maximum possibility of choices and beauty.

It is not enough that the political man provide food, cars, refrigerators in a civilization of producers and consumers. The political man has to understand the importance of the environment in which men live. With food, cars, refrigerators we can satisfy the mechanical exigencies of our life but with food, cars, and refrigerators we can also remain alone, alienated in a life without meaning for which it is not worth living.

How to proceed? First, being the Arno River Valley territory, is one territory which could be considered homogeneous, though it has different qualities from the mountains to the sea; we could consider the whole territory as only one town of two million inhabitants. Only one town without distinction and separation between country and town, without alienation in different zones (residential zones for high, medium and low income, industrial zones, agricultural zones, commercial zones, and so on) which morphologically speaking mirror exactly the alienation of man of today.

One town in which all the human acts and activities are integrated giving everybody the same chances, offering to everybody the total sensation of a process of what men do, destroying the “anxiety of the unfinished” of which Marcuse speaks and the anxiety of the “foreign bodies” of which I speak, intending by this to say that we live not only in a foreign world among persons but also among the objects which men make.

A total new organism and dynamic structure which can evolve in time as natural organisms grow, which permits an exchange of functions as some become obsolete, which permit a global life of a unique society.

We have to start again. To start as if the Arno Valley territory was a virgin land. What now exists, historical centers included, has to be considered as objects: a hill, a river, a forest, which we have to put in relationship to each other.

To start again means starting to study the vocation of the territory. The real, intrinsic one. To find the places in which man can live better.

To find where the ground is better for foundations. To find where a new organized culture can live, where a new three-dimensional system of communication and transportation can exist, where certain points of concentration can be for what we call today infrastructures or public facilities. To find how to regulate the waters.

In synthesis to create the objective, open scientific realities upon which we can start to work, and from which -with awareness and not by chance- derives the background for a natural process that will bring us to a new natural form of town that we should no longer call a town, because in this new organism there can not exist the dualism of city and country, of workman and farmer. Thus I use the name “Earth Town” which means that there doesn’t exist any longer a contradiction between nature and man because man and nature have become a unity in reality: a wonderful town open to all the experiences, to the presence of all men. The product of a new civilization.

What I am trying to say is that I think the problem of saving Florence is not only the problem of saving some masterpieces of painting, sculpture, and manuscripts. This, of course, is important and we have to thank every country for their help, especially the United States, and in my case, here tonight, your Committee to Rescue Italian Art. But perhaps most important is to create in the Arno River Valley a new town which represents the real life of men who live in the 20th Century, who have hope for the future, and to consider the old center of Florence a public facility for mankind.

To reach this goal, not a Utopian one but one capable of realization, it is certainly not enough to have the concepts of a single man or a few men. We need the collaboration and participation of the most advanced minds in every discipline to permit us to construct models which really represent alternatives to the actual situation today in Tuscany.

Alternatives which we must study, prepare, design, experiment, test. But to

do this the normal operative channels of planning, and implementation in Italy are absolutely insufficient. At this point, I think that the duty of men of culture, seriously concerned with the future of Florence, is to study an objective and interdisciplinary plan (if we still can use this word) which, after being tested from all points of view, could become really operative. A plan to offer to Florence and its citizens, but also to Italy, to the other nations, to the entire world, to mankind. I would like to say -if these last words do not sound rhetorical- a plan which could demonstrate that the best way to repair the disaster of a flood is to prevent the flood.

To predispose the territory in such a way that this cannot happen again. To save masterpieces of architecture, paintings, and sculpture, we must act not in a sentimental way; rather we must find new existential meaning for all of us.

In sum, to conserve and save Florence the only way is to build a new one of which the old Florence represents only one aspect which belongs to everybody and not only to the Florentines.

What could be the real destiny of such a plan? Nobody knows and nobody can know.

At best it could happen very swiftly in a fast social transformation if the political powers could be made to understand the importance of this kind of experiment and make possible in whole or in part the activation of this new organism.

At worse it could happen that such a plan would be considered a Utopian and theoretical prophecy of intellectual men. But one thing is sure. This is our duty as intellectual men.

Our duty is not to say from an ivory tower, "You politicians are conservative, and we advanced." Not to make prophecies of a still unknown future. Not to become dictators of the life of others when we are able to acquire a certain power or to be slaves when we don't succeed. Our duty is to put ourselves at the service of the society to which we belong. To offer her the results of our research, studies, capacities. In synthesis, to tell to the centers of power. Now towns are built by chance in an absolutely chaotic and arbitrary way. Nothing is built according to scientific possibilities. Nothing is built with imagination and hope for the future. Nothing is built to eliminate the loneliness and anxiety of man. We offer a possibility, scientifically tested from all points of view -social, economic, aesthetic- which represents a better environment.

"If you don't permit the birth of these new possibilities it means that you have not yet understood that to offer an environment in which man can live in well being is not a private responsibility but a collective and political one. It means that your outlook is old and you will survive for only a short time (and the phenomenon will be stronger than you)."

Returning to the problem of Florence I think that this lecture could become the beginning of this new plan.

Before coming to the United States, at the kind invitation to do this lecture, I had intended to create such a plan with my assistants, and students of my Institute of Urbanism at the University of Florence.

But as professional planners and architects can understand, the result of such a study would remain abstract and could not represent a real alternative to the existing situation because to do such a plan we need experts in every discipline. We have to arrive at a model which can be compared with the existing urbanistic structure also in an economical way.

When Dean Dudley, who had invited me in the program of his school to lecture to architects and students, called me in Montreal and asked me to change the program and give a talk in conjunction with the CRIA program, for a moment I was in a fix. How was I to combine a lecture on the town of the future with a lecture on how to save Florence? But I believe in happenings.

This fact suggested to me that such a plan could be created as an experiment which could be the beginning of a new kind of planning through new methods and different channels from those in which normal plans are done.

If among the beautiful efforts which the American people are making to help Florence, giving millions of dollars for Florence, they also could offer the chance to do such a plan, it would represent a very little sum compared with the total being raised and be very effective in every sense, practically and culturally. I cannot, in concluding this lecture, offer a program.

I can only launch the idea. But it would be really marvelous if we could in one or two years prepare a new model of urbanism. This might be done directly in connection with Los Angeles, which could give us also its experiences in a world that is technologically very advanced.

Tonight perhaps, while we are joining together in contributing to the rescue of the art of Florence, we could at the same time start something which also represents a spontaneous act of love for Florence, a gift of the intellectual to the culture, and a solid help to Florence. Everybody who will work practically for this effort or will sponsor this effort certainly will have the joy of being at the service of society and of making a very strong contribution in the direction of a better life for man.