LEARNING FROM MODERN UTOPIAS

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Exhibition
History of Portuguese Architecture
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Utopia and Vision.

Learning from Vienna and Frankfurt
By definition, a utopia cannot be realized; at the same time architecture needs a “place”. Within this contradiction, modern architectural utopias have conceived of and developed spatial solutions to implement their principles. The spatial analysis of modern utopias allows for the identification of the relationship between architectural features and social organisation. Through this relationship, it is possible to establish when a utopian model becomes an urban and architectural model.

The objective of this article is the comparison of different types of urban and architectural space that modern utopias have produced. Indeed, in the organisational logic of the urban fabric, spaces assume different characters depending on social contexts. In this sense, the social housing experiences in the 1920s are of particular interest not only for their utopian idea of society, but for their ability to realize a model of collective organization at the architectural and urban scale.

Starting from the theoretical notions of “utopia” and “realism”, which have already been discussed by historians and critics of architecture, it is possible to identify different spatial features that, through the project, assume specific architectural forms. The comparative approach that animates this article allows the analysis of several examples through homogeneous tools, but especially through direct observation in order to raise questions still current today. In this sense, the utopian character of the architectural models of the 1920s has a spatial and social “vision” that we can evaluate critically in the current conditions of the contemporary city.

The European social housing experiences

The different spatial forms adopted in several experiences in Europe during the inter war period are based on a politico-economic and institutional system: it was conceived to solve a real problem. On the one hand the housing shortage, on the other the unhealthy conditions of the blocks and buildings of industrial Großstadt: the right to a modern living for all people became a tangible purpose. New projects for the urban development reflect the ideals of mass society: they are projects pour le plus grand nombre (Secchi, 2013).

“What was clear [for architecture between 1920 and 1930] was its “political” role. [...] From the standardized element, to the cell, the single block, the housing project and finally the city: architecture between the two wars imposed this assembly line with an exceptional clarity and coherence. Each “piece” on the line, being completely resolved in itself, tended to disappear or, better, to formally dissolve in the assemblage» (Tafuri, 1976, p. 100-101).

The city and its architecture take on a new appearance, in which each component of the mechanism, through the rationalization of everyday life and the use of modern technology, is part of a huge social machine (Tafuri, 1976).