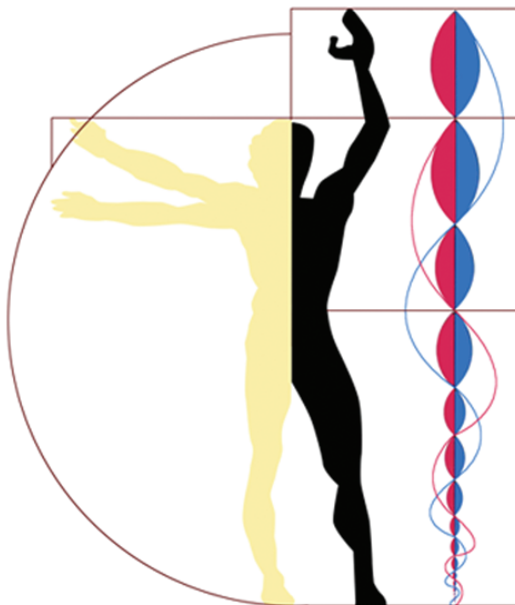


Fabbrica della Conoscenza

XIII Forum Internazionale di Studi

Le Vie dei
Mercanti

Carmine Gambardella



HERITAGE and TECHNOLOGY

Mind Knowledge Experience

Fabbrica della Conoscenza numero 56
Collana fondata e diretta da Carmine Gambardella

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Carmine Gambardella

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Le Vie dei Mercanti _ XIII Forum Internazionale di Studi

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Mind Knowledge Experience
Le Vie dei Mercanti
XIII Forum Internazionale di Studi

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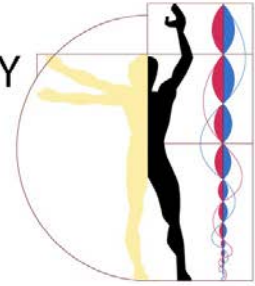
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Urban landscape and new venustas

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Abstract

For a long period, town planners didn't wonder anymore about the aesthetic value of the city. This lasting omission has manifold and complex causes. But it isn't so much the analysis of these causes that is important, but starting to see in beauty again - if we are able to - an important, maybe essential requirement of the city. Nevertheless, history teaches that in realizing beautiful cities men and ages took into account some rules, some canons that - even if not codified - were however shared and that strongly reduced the subjectivity of the esthetic judgment. In fact coherence making any *beautiful* city unique and recognizable lies in the relationship of tight integration between the parties and the whole. After the long lethargy of a town planning founded on quantitative and distributive reductionist often ineffective rituals, it is the moment to search and pursue urban beauty by trying to identify few but clear rules and above all by stopping project individualism that makes many post-industrial cities an unbalanced stretch of ugly things or of mediocrities surrounding events drawn by big names, but completely and often constrainedly self-referential. We must return and reason on beauty in the cities and on what kind of beauty, for whom and how to obtain it, with the awareness that the achievement of beauty is a casual event, since it depends on many luckily concomitant and hardly programmable causes, but also with the awareness that to obtain beauty in the cities we need to develop methods (urban aesthetics) like tools in order to ensure at least minimum conditions.

Keywords: Venustas, Urban Landscape, Urban Planning, Urban Design

1. Introduction

Recently the issue of city's beauty has taken a renewed powerful attention in the scientific debate. The issue is appealing but it is not a novelty: it is a rediscovery. The search for beauty unites all arts, but attention to the city's beauty, of the city that can be produced today, does not depend on one or few persons. In a complex society like modern society, it depends on the capacity of integrating and coordinating various skills and responsibilities, be it political, economic, cultural, administrative and planning at the different levels. Therefore, collaborative abilities between institutions and between citizens and institutions become prejudicial: by widening the subjects involved in building the city, canons of urban aesthetics, that once the prince's architect was depositary of, require sharing and can impress planning only as a consequence of a complex dialectical maturation between all the parties involved. In the last decades, town planners have considered the aesthetic value of the city as secondary to quantitative emergences that appeared in the second after-war period. Today it is important to recognize beauty as the city's essential requirement. History teaches that in realizing beautiful cities men and ages took into account some rules, some canons that - even if not codified - were however shared and that strongly reduced the subjectivity of the esthetic judgment. And those rules were valid even for a single building. In fact coherence making any beautiful city unique and recognizable lies in the relationship of tight integration between the parties and the whole. After the long lethargy of a town planning founded on quantitative and distributive - reductionist - often ineffective rituals, it is the moment to search and pursue urban beauty by trying to identify few but clear rules and above all by stopping project individualism that makes many post-industrial cities an unbalanced stretch of ugly things or of mediocrities surrounding events drawn by big names, but completely and often constrainedly self-referential.

2. The beautiful city in tradition

Villages, municipalities and city-states conform on the basis of unwritten rules, either according to shared principles of a tight integration and compatibility between the building scale and the urban scale (Classical Greece - Middle Ages) or as a creation of the artist-scientist legitimated by the prince (Renaissance, Absolutism) (Fig. 1-2).



Fig. 1: Miletos, model of the town, Pergamon Museum, Berlin.



Fig. 2: Leonardo da Vinci model of an ideal town, reconstruction from the drawings of Manuscript B, Institut de France, National Museum Science and Technology, Milan.

But, in order to make all this happen, definite and acknowledged canons were necessary, establishing themselves in periods of political stability and flourishing economy and culture, characterized by processes of progress in arts and techniques with the consequent stabilization of rules, not by chance systematically registered in the various treaties either of classical age and of Humanism. Although the Greek city is made up of different parts according to their function - acropolis, agora - it is defined by a compact, nature-friendly, well recognizable and measurable urban landscape, making it a unique being in which public buildings take a key role in urban setting; the features of uniqueness, of articulation and of balance with nature make the Greek city a universal model. Throughout history, periods of prosperity followed periods of political, economic and social uncertainty that have contributed to the loss of the rules and principles shaping and making city recognizable, hence giving it beauty. Just remember the period after the fall of the Roman Empire, when cities began to lose unity and the dialectical relationship with natural landscape that became an undefined space to protect from. *The search for the city's shape, based on big public settlement works failed and was replaced by a familiarity with imperfection, a tolerance to irregularity, to incompleteness, to*

contrast, that will remain lasting features of European cities (Benevolo). Europe of the second half of the XVIth century is characterized by a rebalance, and economic and technological advances together with new private interests contribute to a change in urban planning. The search for urban perception's forms is renewed and perspective is used as a tool to represent and perceive space (Rome, Palermo, etc.). The XIXth century marks the beginning of the separation between art and technique; in this period of big reforms, discoveries and economic liberalism, in which dynamism and speed of changes are more and more evident, the primacy of private property consolidates and the role of public power becomes more and more marginal. The decrease in the possibility of controlling these huge changes makes cities grow and grow creating a chaotic and disconcerting landscape. A strong need to shape the city prevailed with the birth of the industrial suburbs. They were made up of unliveable lodgings because of the lack of hygiene and services. Both for the rapid growth and for the particular soil consumption imposed by the new typologies of the factories, and also for the mixing of the workers' dwellings and the factories, traditional morphological canons turn out to be inadequate. Inviolability of private property does not allow a real possibility of replanning city, thus resulting in the utopian experiences of Owen, Fourier and Godin. At the turn of the twentieth century, after the utopian reaction to the industrial revolution, reformist theories inspired to morphological models that from post-Howardian formulations by R. Unwin and P. Wolf and from Ciudad lineal by A. Soria y Mata come to the colonization scheme (monofunctional poles) by Gloden (1923), to the city by radial sectors by A.T. Edwards and to the Cité industrielle itself by T. Garnier. Leaving aside functional contents generating the shape, the failure of the theoretical references considering the spatial planning of human settlement is followed by the functionalist approach of the modern movement, recognizing its epistemological base in the integration between shape and function. Le Corbusier denounces the presence of a *town planning still in arms and that has remained quite retrospective, museographical, mimetic, worried above all of a scenery considered as an ornament, clothing of zones, towns or villages: not a functional clothing, but a representation clothing*. The city's shape – hence its beauty – is given by: the attribution of specific spaces to each of the four urban functions par excellence – living, working, moving, taking care of one's body and mind -; from the reversal of the relationship between building and household typical of the post-liberal reformist city which replaces the generative element of the urban tissue – the intensive building subdivided into lodgings – with the household, dimensioned according to functional minimal points aggregated in housing units. These units are arranged to form a broken-line continuous ribbon (the city for three million inhabitants, *la ville radieuse*, the radiant city, Berlin's and Antwerp's plans), in order to remove the corridor road.

3. ... for the modern city

Knowledge and research have always had a dynamic essence; they are constantly evolving. But in the past, evolution times were relatively long and allowed moments of accumulation, with the possibility of periodical systematizations and of stabilization of results and of their coding. Absolutely uncontrollable times of contemporary change do not allow moments of adjustments, of rethinking, of maturation and of synthesis. *Environment and daily life are defective in their imperfect state and in their dry need. Hence art becomes a shelter. In art people looks for beauty, harmony, which are missing in life and in environment. Thus beauty and harmony have become an unrealizable ideal: placed in art, they have been excluded from life and from environment* (Benevolo). It is no coincidence that urban landscape becomes a paradigmatic subject for expressionist, symbolist, futurist and metaphysical painters and drawers denouncing urban unease of the whole past century: just think to the expressionist sketches by Kettelhut for the famous Metropolis by Fritz Lang; to the suggestive futuristic view by the architects Sant' Elia and Chiattonne (1914), by Marchi (Fantastic City, 1919), by Andreoni (Sketch for metropolis, 1928), by Sironi and Depero, or to the squares and colonnades by De Chirico, where the spirit of Pontine cities and of the rationalist purism hovers; and also to the famous Stiglmaier square in Monaco (Heise, 1935) or to Twilight in Manhattan (Peruzzi, 1943) (Fig. 3).

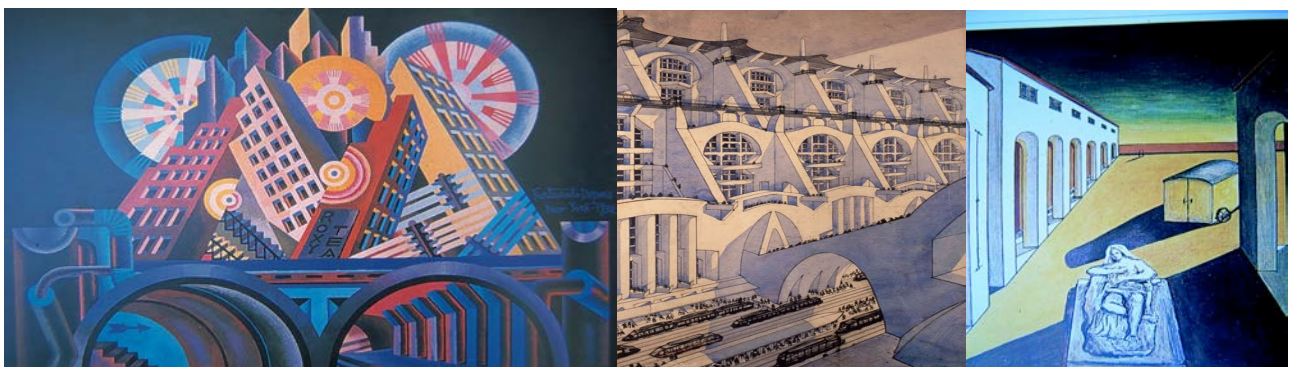


Fig. 3: Depero, Skyscrapers and tunnel - Marchi, Fantastic city - De Chirico, Piazza d'Italia with statue and caravan.

With the coming up of the quick urbanization, space in the city becomes contended; its centrality takes a defined market value from the economic point of view. The logic of the city's typically additive growth becomes indifferent to the possible physical relationships of both nodal and areal connection-continuity with the preexistent urban fabric. Centralized urban activities and functions increase; as a consequence also urban population dwelling in the borders of the settlement increases, with the consequent processes of spread, concentration and interstitial saturation. However the development of this additional part of the city presents some physical and social features that can be found as invariants in the different European geographical realities: the break of continuity with the preexistent city, the decrease in building density, the lack of connection of the urban fabric, low housing quality, monofunctionality, degradation and social monoculture of the inhabitants, the presence of disorder and casualness, the indeterminacy of peripheries, public space characterized by structural and morphological weaknesses and the consequent lack of identity and identifiability of places. The functionalist scheme proposed by the modern movement to face the new problems turns out in the reductionist model of zoning, which, interprets city as the sum of simple parts by setting a biunique relationship between place – the homogeneous zone – and function, under the delusion that the mechanistic tree logical model can represent the alternative to the ungovernable complexity. On the other hand, if we observe zonings of some proposals made on Le Corbusier's example, we can find the use of a *morphological* and not only *quantitative-monofunctional zoning*. In the rationalist notion of city, the refusal of the existing city – or *tabula rasa* – stems from the urgent need of post-war reconstruction and from the rapid urbanization, giving the opportunity to experiment new urban shapes, to plan and realize cities and parts of it from the beginning. A Town Planning sees the light privileging quantitative aspects rather than qualitative ones. In the ordinary professional praxis, less as culturally sensible interpreters and more as experts-bureaucrats, the simplified application of these principles to the city's expansion has represented the theoretic assumption of planning and building of *urban parts* that caused *the break of genetic and endogenous elements of urban growth and the introduction of exogenous criteria to the site* (De Carlo). Again, this was followed by the trend to control urban shape by quantities, ratios and parameters; but, although the illuminist value they were given, their unsuitability has been long understood, in particular in the passage from the town planning scale to the building scale. Starting from the after-war period, the devastation of so many cities has been made possible because of the delegation with unrestricted powers by weak and/or collusive institutions to a group of speculators with no scruples. Hence the detachment of politics from culture has irreversibly compromised the balance between nature of places and the settlement shape that has made many Italian cities and their surroundings famous in the world as they had come to the second world war.

4. From shape to Contemporary Urban Landscape

For many years outskirts have represented a fundamental and marginal part of the city, from which only recently, in a post-industrial age – a new stage of modernity? – the problem of redesign was posed. The unsolved issue of outskirts could turn into the reconfiguration of the urban shape not by adding, but by requalifying existing spaces, without pursuing their homologation to the center's features, but by applying new rules, by making use also of extensive demolitions in order to transform shapeless expansions. This challenge is made possible by the big transformations of production and of its plants and applies to suburban areas that, unlike consolidated city, where renovation scopes have been drastically reduced, become the transformation context par excellence of contemporary city. Urban voids, abandoned areas, are not only marginal; they often are central places once occupied by big plants and present a higher degree of difficulty in resolving addresses. Timekeeping of interventions and relationships with the surrounding fabric have suggested the way of the (town) plan as an alternative chance to the plan, that has also been charged of the inability to ensure the continuity in the scale passage from the city to its parts, - inter alia because of the excessive dependence from quantitative parameters rather than qualitative indicators. However the beautiful city cannot be the summation of circumscribed, though wide and above all signed, episodes of redesign. There is the need of different rules in order to return to the city as a unitary and coherent system. The study and the control of the city's shape is an elective research field for town planners and architects, but except the few cases of the foundation cores contextually designed, the shape itself is never the result of a single project, but the consequence of a continuous and heterogeneous aggregative process in causes and effects. Therefore it is necessary to clarify if it is possible or correct to point out the features of the beautiful city, in the absence of canons and general references. To this purpose some remarks on shape and urban landscape could be useful. The shape of an object is the external appearance given by its outlines and, in the case of several objects, the shape of their complex is the figure they compose. On the contrary the notion of landscape is related to the way a place is felt, in particular with sight (looking/seeing) but also with the other senses, to the sensory and mental elaboration of what is felt after seeing, listening, experimenting. It is a synthesis' process allowing the name of a city to correspond to a set of images in our minds, that cannot be classified according to opposed categories of esthetic judgment - beautiful/ugly - but deriving from suggestions induced by the environmental complexity (composed of streets and means of transport, paths,

buildings, traffic, signs, human presences and attitudes, materials and colors, noise, prevailing weather conditions) and personally experimented through our presence in that city or through the images we have seen of it. Hence, while shape is an objective property of place, landscape is the way the shape of the place appears, is caught and felt by the observer. This is particularly evident in the different way the nature of different cultures is perceived. In fact, for some of them – just see central and northern Europe – nature is the welcome place (mother) of man, while for others – just see the South of Italy – it is a stepmother and hostile to the life of its inhabitants. Recent studies on landscape tend to reduce the distance between objectivity of shape and subjectivity of landscape through methods of reading and evaluation founded on objective criteria and procedures, like the analysis of characters, of invariants and of constituting elements. With reference to a defined territory, either natural, urban or the former and the latter put together, the two notions of shape and of landscape take a dynamic connotation because the territory is a constantly changing system. The different consolidated interpretations of the notion of landscape can be brought back to two big trains of thoughts of the XXth century: the idealistic-spiritualistic thought– following Croce’s aesthetics – and the geographic-naturalistic thought of positivism, based on the analytical knowledge of physical, biological and anthropic elements (Humboldt). The aesthetic notion of landscape makes the search for instruments of judgment in order to define natural beauty and landscape itself difficult although attention to its changeability and dynamism had already revealed themselves in the 60s’. Thereafter the approach to reading and interpreting landscape based on sensorial perception, in particular visual perception has prevailed. In this perception, the cognitive datum is processed through the observer’s cultural tools by making a synthesis between the material datum and his/her knowledge. Later on the distinction between *natural* and *anthropized landscape* arises, specifying that the *anthropized landscape* par excellence is the urban landscape, although to date wide non urban landscapes are anthropized. Recently landscape has been included among environmental components as cause and effect of complexity. Hence the term landscape acquires many overlapping meanings: the one of sensible expression of the ecosystemic order and of its evolution and the result of the interaction between natural and cultural elements or again of overlap and of alternation of concentrated human activities. Urban landscape is dynamic and as the city is the artificial place par excellence, where the impact with nature has already taken place and has already been overcome, it contains in its origins themselves the assumptions for the rapid change through growth, gathering and transformation. It is for this reason that it keeps its strong characterization and constitutes a landscape in the landscape. Subjectivity of perception can make the city appear dramatic – that is attractive – for its dynamism and greatness in a tragic meaning, for example because of the abnormal spread of favelas – exalting – the big cities of historic renown, harmonious, for the balance between its parts and the inclusion in the context – irritating – for the aggressive spread of speculative building close to the historical center and to the prejudice of surrounding natural areas – chaotic – for the unrecognizableness of development criteria – inaccessible – for the meticulous routes with no free or green areas, medinas). *Shape* and *landscape* are strongly interdependent: man defines the former but perceives the latter; while urban shape is the result of a work of many hands, where now and then some creating individuality can be detected, landscape is not completely configured by man, but prevalently by the relationships between artificial and natural spaces. The environmental awareness obtained has broadened the attention to territorial transformations; with the birth of environmental right, landscape and shape of the territory rise to issues of public interest. Unlike other historical periods, contemporary difficulties are not creating new utopias, but each time they put qualitative and quantitative evaluation tools side by side to traditional tools. They point at active and direct participation of citizens to some decisional processes, in the perspective of a social share granting choices the right authoritativeness due to the pursuit of public interest. Thus, listening, communicating and their interpreting synthesis fall within the new town planner’s jobs as contribution to his/her *expertise*. A new notion of beauty has to be related to these dynamics of transformation, that cannot be based on an aesthetic contemplation of Croce’s *idealistic root*, but has to draw on the urban space’s capacity to represent the essence of the time we are living. Many people recognize in fragmentation the characteristic feature of contemporaneity and relate to it both the increasingly growing gap between community and society, and the difficulty of the former to produce and recognize itself in shared forms of the latter. The difficulty to define common rules for civilized living remains the unavoidable assumption and becomes the real obstacle to recognize shared rules to regulate the building and/or transformation of the physical environment.

5. Towards the new beauty

In times of cultural fragmentation and nihilist individualism, it becomes an ethical duty for people on the ground to propose settled community some guidelines to pursue the lost beauty of contemporary urban landscape. They must not and cannot consist of pre-established rules that nobody could be strong enough to impose, but could consist of general directions to adjust to local contexts and to the peculiarities of the cases. Heterogeneity and disorder are characteristic features of contemporary landscape. But this can be considered as a huge experimental laboratory, where original forms of compatibility and mixtures are to be found, through new relationships between the parties. Contemporary landscape can be compared to a flexible body, that can offer higher degrees of freedom to invent places that have not yet been realized in

order to allow a dialogue with the actors of the change. But this requires a common language, interpreting and addressing users towards solutions of project contributing to living quality by overcoming the episodic nature to involve the whole urban system. Cultural and operational complexity of the building process of places must be positively reconquered to plan and to project, by relating some aspects of beauty to the integration between natural and artificial components, that is between: *landscape movements; attitude; natural reliefs; green areas; river flows and the sea* (legible order) and: *the identification-reinterpretation of places* aiming at their *identity* (limits, conformations, geometries); the *change* in the way of accepting *functions* and their possible combinations in order to improve their efficiency; the *strengthening* of compositive and morphological distinction between public spaces (civil architecture) and private spaces (new living shapes), *redrawing* and redistributing open spaces; *rethinking* spaces for mobility; *optimizing* productive functions; *using* abandoned areas; *recovering* borders and peri-urban areas; *measuring* and re-dimensioning existing areas; *coherence* between urban and architectonic scale; the *city's design* (alignments, heights, voids/solids relationships); *quality of architecture*. Beauty can independently belong to natural or artificial components; while the integration of both components causes a multiplying effect and makes the site unique and unrepeatable (Unesco sites). The new beauty cannot represent an autonomous quality of city neither can it exist leaving aside other connotations to be considered as essential such as recognizability, functionality, liveability, comfort, that are far from traditional perceivable aesthetic values. It can turn out to be easier to identify all that the beautiful city must not be. A list of principles aiming at pursuing the new beauty would be nicer. Nonetheless, the risk has to be run. It would be useful for this conference to end with the beginning of a long and difficult research work, of a necessary challenge that has to be accepted by all those who are tired of the long disciplinary idleness on this front. It is legitimate that culture pursues ambitious objectives, that it dreams. Hence, together with the criteria that will come out from the other contributions, it is possible to propose some general criteria to the examination of the disciplinary debate as *macro-objectives* of the planning tools (plans) to entrust the task of identifying the right choices for the specific territory:

- the *recovery* and active safeguard of historical fabrics (also by identifying rules guaranteeing a suitable inclusion of contemporary architecture);
- the *preservation* of identifiable borders and the configuration of uncertain borders for a harmonic integration of natural and artificial components towards the definition of contemporary landscape (Fig. 4);
- the *reduction* in building sprawl in landscape (Fig. 5);
- the *acknowledgment* of landscape units as guideline criteria for safeguard and improvement;
- the *landscape-environmental restoration* of endangered natural areas to restore upset balances and identifying the possible evolutions;
- the *coordination* and *territorialization* of big infrastructures, of primary urbanizations and of technological plants.

In contemporary city, beauty has become a rare quality: the role of plan as unitary design has failed; coherence/continuity between the architectonic and urban scale has failed; quality of architecture, if present, has not guaranteed the quality of city. Contemplative beauty of idealistic/spiritualistic matrix of the first years of the XXth century must be replaced by a landscape's beauty where the settled community can identify itself, maybe placed at the intersection between environmental patterns and the legitimate aspiration to beauty, which is peculiar of each culture.

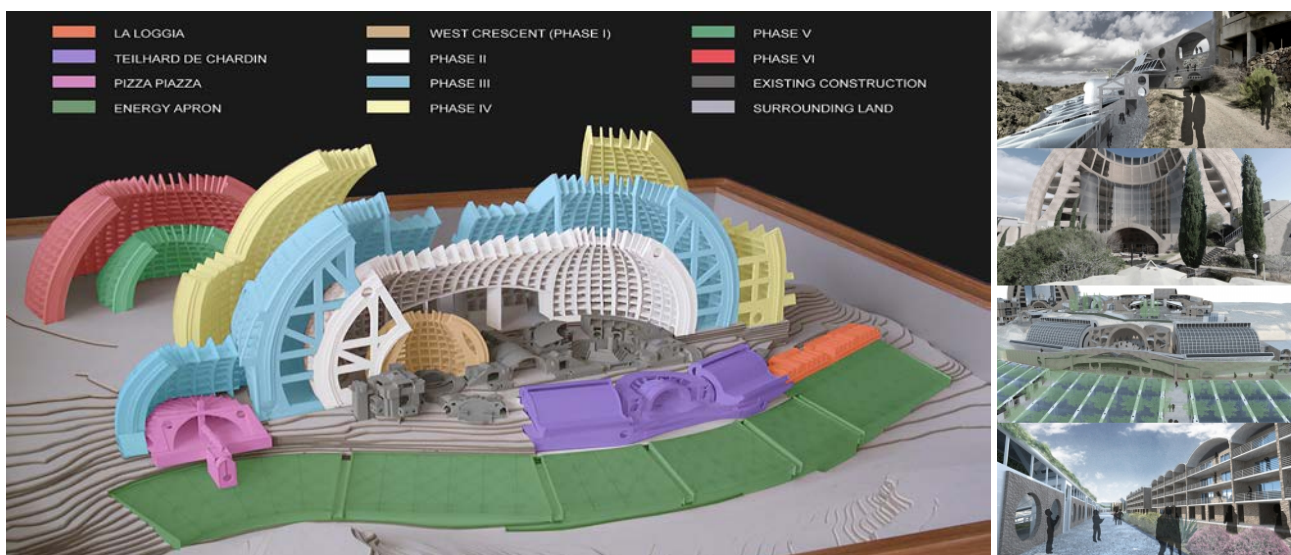


Fig. 4: Model of Arcosanti project, Arizona, in grey the existing construction, Paolo Soleri.



Fig. 5: Model of **VErona-MAntova**, city for 30.000 inhabitants, Tenth International Exposition of Architecture Venice 2006.

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