Chapter 1

Travelling Through History: The San Giovanni Archaeo-Station – Narrating the Tangible to Preserve the Intangible

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ABSTRACT

The construction of underground urban transport lines in Rome has provoked in the past years the discovery and the destruction of numerous archaeological sites. The last decade has marked a significant cultural change in Italy in the relationship between infrastructure and archaeology, thanks to the development of new methodologies and successful experiences; thanks to the excavations for the construction, it has been possible to realize the largest archaeological campaigns for decades and open new perspectives to the involvement of findings in the structure of the everyday city. The case study of the new metro station San Giovanni in Rome offers an example for the conservation of heritage through the tools of narration in a site where the archaeological layers have been removed but can still be perceivable thanks to a narrative system that envelops the passenger in a total experience, with a scientifically museum-like rigorous arrangement of information realized according to the speed of commuters.

STRATIGRAPHY OF THE COMPLEX CITY

Underground public transport is certainly the most logical solution for a demand for mobility that is becoming increasingly pressing, especially where the spaces of the existing city are not able to withstand traffic flows for which they had not been designed.

But, if in the case of cities with a relatively recent history the problems of integration concern exquisitely technical and engineering aspects, cities with a historical stratification oppose a different spectrum of difficulty.

The European cities have over time literally grown on themselves, constituting a real palimpsest, a continuous rewriting deposited layer by layer that constitutes the genetic heritage of the city, although normally invisible and unknown to the citizens themselves.

So the inevitable interferences do not require only a technical solution but seek above all for an adequate cultural approach, able to recognize the enormous potential offered by the opportunity to get back in touch with the history of their own origins.

The construction of new subway lines must therefore be grasped as an unmissable opportunity to introduce into the circle of everyday life an archaeological heritage which is, at best, likely to remain confined to some museum.

To do this, a cultural and political sensitivity is required that recognizes a positive prospect of integration right from the preliminary planning stage, starting to see opportunities, even economic ones, where until now only obstacles, delays and cost increases have been seen.

This is, however, a sensitivity matured only in recent years, along with a culture of heritage conservation that had to start to deal with the economic dimension, both the costs of safeguarding and the resources that can come from the enhancement of the historical heritage.

Only in recent times has the underground space design emancipated itself from the prevailing technical dimension to face significant revisions on at least two fronts: on the one hand, the technical expression itself has been the subject of updating with deliberate implications on the formal level; on the other hand the sensitivity has grown both towards a more elaborate spatiality, and towards the specificity of the places where the stations are inserted, pushing on the one hand to their “personalization” on the other towards the first timid attempts to interact with the archaeological and urban stratification.

It is in this direction, therefore, that must be grasped the great opportunity offered by effective contact with the physical stratification of the city; moreover, that of the underground is a frontier towards which the contemporary city is increasingly addressing, driven by ever more pressing motivations of space and economy.

In particular, mass mobility naturally finds in the underground the most efficient and direct way to overcome the problems of congestion afflicting the surface, especially in urbanized and therefore heavily stratified urban contexts.

But if in most cities underground transport normally meets just technical difficulties, linked to the nature of the land, water or buildings above, in some cases, however, the design of underground networks meets specific conditions, due to the more or less consistent stratification of archaeological layers.

This is the case of some of the major Italian cities that have literally grown on themselves, generating profound stratifications, particularly rich in Rome, which is easy to imagine the surface of the historical and archaeological heritage, known all over the world and primary resource of the tourism industry.

But the potential of Rome in terms of interaction between historical and archaeological heritage and the dynamics of contemporary life are still to be developed.

The immense heritage of the city has in fact its most famous and evident manifestation in the monuments that constitute the so-called Central Archaeological Area, which nevertheless remains a sort of enclave alien to the everyday city.

It is important to understand instead, that the whole city has been formed like a palimpsest, building itself depositing layer by layer; however, this condition escapes citizens notice, as they pass through it distractedly, little aware of its wealth and, certainly, not helped by infrastructures generally hostile to “archaeological surprises” and normally not very careful to grasp the opportunities.