

Readings/Rereadings

The City Crown, or the ‘Social Sublime’

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Reading/Rereading

I have read *La corona della città* (*The City Crown*, in english) (fig. 1) three times. The first time –but I don’t know if it can be considered valid– as a student, at the invitation of a Composition professor, who suggested: “Stop at Quaroni’s introduction, everything else is superfluous”. The complete reading took place a few years later, during my PhD years. I found the book flowing, at times amusing, thanks to the radical positions expressed in vehement tones. But the overall assessment was not positive: too many contradictions, excessive rhetoric and an underlying naivety, unusual for a theorist who was above all a militant architect. The third reading dates to last month; although the doubts about the work remained, I appreciated the way used by Bruno Taut to highlight the tensions and turmoil that animated European architecture between the two World Wars, instances of a disappointed generation that dreamed of changing the world. I had the impression of reading the book for the first time, discovering unexplored aspects; and, despite the fact that *scripta manent*, to experience that the contents conveyed by a text can always take on new meanings.

The aspiration to the crown

The idea supported by Taut is very simple: the modern city, unlike the



Fig. 1. *La corona della città*. Cover of Italian edition (1973).

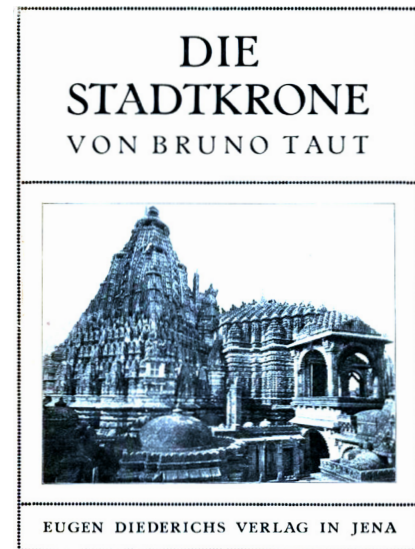
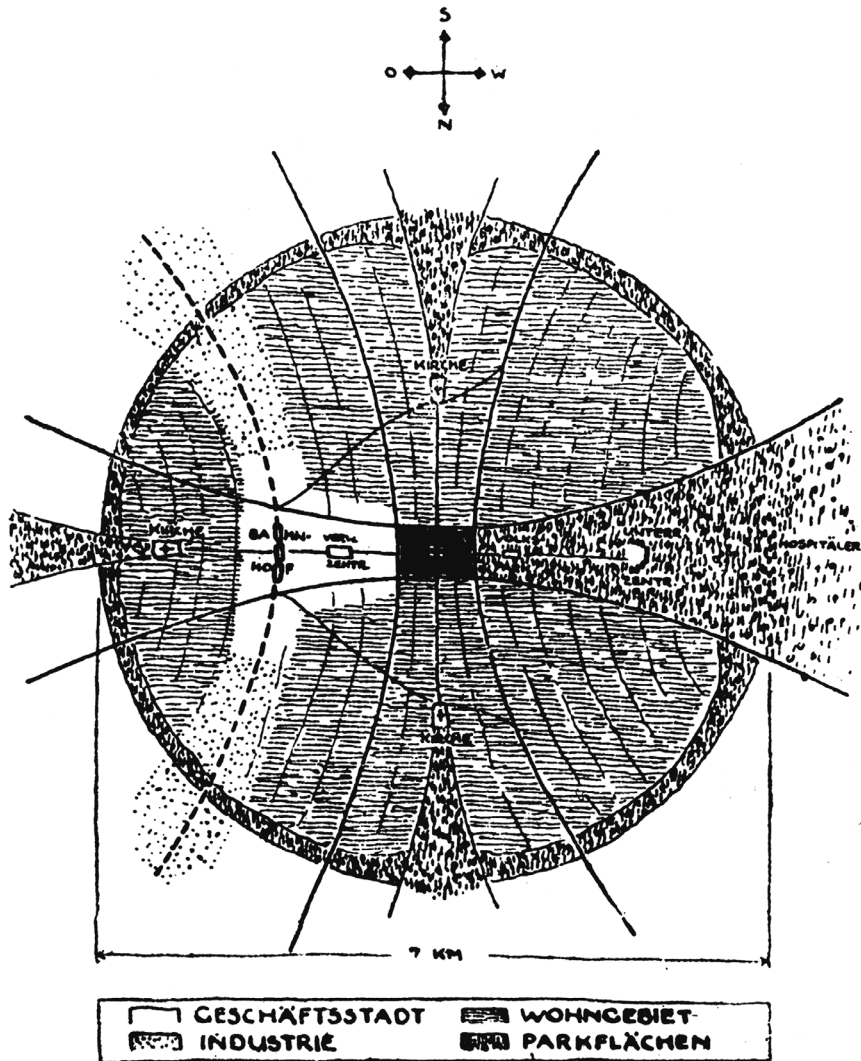


Fig. 2. *Die Stadtkrone*. Cover of German edition (1919).

Fig. 3. Plan of the new city, with the City Crown in the centre [Taut 1973, p. 53, fig. 46].



ancient and medieval one, has no hierarchies. It could not be otherwise: there is no longer a civil or religious power to identify with, and therefore it is not possible to express this power through the magnificence of a cathedral or a royal palace. In the modern city, public and religious buildings are similar to private residences. Everything is unbearably homogeneous and the architecture, devoid of any spiritual component, is relegated to the resolution of banal constructive questions. However, there is an ideal that can symbolize the aspirations of modern man: it is 'sociability', the desire to participate in collective activities. The modern city, therefore, will have to be equipped with an imposing system of public buildings – libraries, museums, theaters – capable of accommodating these functions. Placed in the center of the urban space, it will be surmounted by an enormous crystal building which, like the bell tower of a Gothic cathedral, will soar above the building, symbolizing that 'social sublime' to which modern man aspires.

A collective work

Die Stadtkrone was printed in Jena in 1919 by the publisher Eugen Diederichs Verlag (fig. 2). The Italian edition was printed in 1973, in the *Planning&Design* series edited for Gabriele Mazzotta by Ludovico Quaroni. It is a collective book, divided into five parts written by authors who identified with the cultural movements *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* and *Novembergruppe*.

The first part, written by Paul Scheerbart, is entitled *Das neue Leben. Architektonische Apokalypse* (*The New Life. An Architectonic Apocalypse*) and is based on the fantastic novel *Immer mutig!* (*Always courageously!*). It is a fairy tale/parable, already printed in 1902 by the

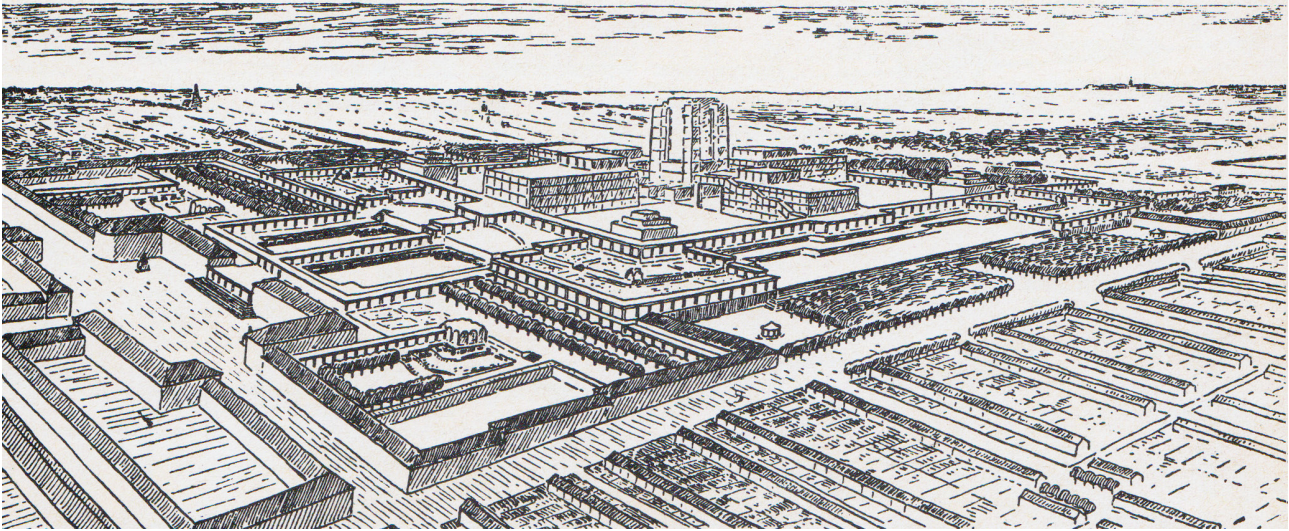


Fig. 4. *The City Crown*: perspective view [Taut 1973, p. 56, fig. 49].

publisher Bruns of Minden; it highlights the carelessness of men towards good architecture, a gift from the angels. Men no longer wish to welcome the “vivi-fying sun of architecture”; they prefer “their dinner with oysters and strong drinks, uninterrupted pleasures, coffee-concerts and sleigh rides” [p. 13] [1]. A fierce critique of capitalism and of an idea of the city subjected to the logic of profit.

We will discuss the second writing, which gives the volume its title, in detail below. Then there is the essay by Erich Baron, entitled *Aufbau* (*To Build*). In it, the theme of architecture is only hinted at, and is limited to the exaltation of glass as a material; the term “construction” is used metaphorically. It is a rhetorical essay, imbued with socialism, religiosity and a blind faith in the future: “we need to bow down in religious recollection before the greatness of the world” [p. 83]; “what we need is a program, not a

flag” [p. 87]; “in the dawn of the victorious sun the man rejuvenated in spirit advances” [p. 88].

Wiedergeburt der Baukunst (*Rebirth of Architecture*) is written by Adolf Behne. The author, starting from the consideration that modern architecture has reached the lowest level of its millenary history, expresses a typically expressionist poetic in which curved shapes and primitivism are exalted, hoping for a renewed unity between the arts (with the superiority of architecture) and refers to the completeness of oriental art, particularly Indian art.

The book ends with another short story by Paul Scheerbarth, *Der tote Palast. Ein Architektentrum* (*The Dead Palace: An Architect's Dream*), also taken from *Immer mutig!*, a dreamlike and enigmatic reference to the clash between the artist's aspirations and everyday life.

The City Crown

Bruno Taut's text, already written in 1910 but unpublished until 1919, is divided into paragraphs. In the first, *Architecture*, the author argues that the purpose of architecture is to respond to practical needs through artistic forms capable of promoting “the broadening of human horizons” [p. 31]. Architecture must leverage the spiritual component present in every man; however, it cannot express the spirit of its creator, as it is made through the concurrence of many individuals; it is intended for the community, and therefore must reflect the spirituality of an entire people. Collective spirituality is based on energies hidden in faith, hope and desires; it is these forms of energy, and not practical needs, that give shape to architecture. The paragraph concludes by stating that the elimination of differences constitutes “the disease of our

age" [p. 33], and that in art it is always necessary to maintain the distinction between large and small, sacred and profane.

The second paragraph, *The Old City*, shows how it reflects the spirit of the society that generated it. The most important building of a medieval city is the cathedral; with its oversized bell tower, it mainly performs spiritual functions, unlike castles, fortresses and palaces, which have practical purposes and are subordinate to the religious building in a coherent and cohesive system. The cathedral is the 'crown' of the medieval city and "reflects the highest thoughts: faith, God, religion" [p. 34].

The third paragraph is entitled *The Chaos* and explains how the vertiginous development of the modern city has not been able to merge the old with the new, nor to harmonize the new elements (factories, roads and railway networks, residential and commercial zones) that characterize it. With modernity "heaven, the homeland of art, has disappeared and hell has arrived, the homeland of the lust for power" [p. 35]. In the squalor of the modern city, the population leads a miserable existence, and only a God could solve this situation decisively: men of good will can only give partial answers.

The fourth paragraph, *The New City*, describes the attempts of contemporary architects (Camillo Sitte, Theodor Goecke, the English theorists of the *Garden City*) to give an adequate response to the needs of the contemporary city. Taut believes that these experiences, although animated by good intentions, are doomed to failure as they are based on formalistic theories. These experiences are like a *Torso Without a Head*, title of the following paragraph. Lacking an overall vision, they do not foresee an element that

dominates the rest of the urban space. Political power, once represented by a single, large monument, is today fragmented into countless, banal buildings, often located in the suburbs and even subject to the same rules that govern private constructions. It is therefore necessary "to invent completely new forms and contents in order to give this torso another head" [p. 39].

The sixth paragraph, *A Flag is Needed* opens with the assertion that even today the city should be represented by religious buildings placed at its top. But traditional religion is losing strength, the idea of God is disappearing and even the Catholic Church, which has always taken care of symbolic and formal representation, tends towards dispersion and decentralization. However, faith survives, and can never disappear because it is unthinkable that one lives only in terms of matter: "without religion there is no true culture, no true art" [p. 41]. The new faith is expressed through social thought: socialism –understood as an idea that unites men and makes them united– is the new Christianity. The city must 'crown' the expression of this new thought. The architect must "think of his great profession, solemn and divine; increase the treasure that is hidden in the depths of the human soul; penetrate the soul of the people; [...] to resurrect an ideal bearer of joy, materialized in buildings, which gives everyone the awareness of being members of a great architecture, as it once was" [p. 42]. The need for sociality, typical of our age, is the spirituality of contemporary man: it must be expressed in works that allow individuals to feel at one with their fellow humans.

We have reached the seventh paragraph: *The City Crown*, in which the style of the text takes on a more descriptive

and pragmatic tone. Taut hypothesizes the scheme of a city located on a flat site and devoid of natural elements (rivers, hills, etc.). The city has a circular shape (7 km in diameter); in the center there is a rectangular area of 500 x 800 m on which stands the City Crown (fig. 3). Taut defines the structure of the road and railway arteries and of the various urban functions, according to *ante litteram* zoning criteria; the volume and layout of the residential buildings follow the principles of the Garden City. The city has an area of 38.5 square km and can accommodate up to 500,000 inhabitants. The City Crown brings together all the buildings that respond to social needs and host artistic, social and leisure functions. It is made up of four large buildings, arranged in a cross "oriented towards the sun" [pp. 45, 46], and the buildings and spaces surrounding them: squares, arcades, gardens, buildings for carrying out collective activities. It represents "the concrete and symbolic expression of the best realization of the city" [p. 48]. But the cross formed by the four buildings is only the basis of the crown itself. The top of the crown is a sublime construction, empty, enormous and devoid of any practical function, because "what is supreme is always silent and empty" [p. 52]. "It is the crystal palace, which [...] shines in its exceptional dimension. [...] Crossed by sunlight, it dominates like a sparkling diamond" [p. 50] (figg. 4, 5). Thereafter, Taut describes the phases of construction of the city; it will develop starting from the residential and productive areas (the construction of which could continue for several generations) leaving the central area free, destined for the City Crown, to be built only when that "correspondence between time and need that produces harmony of style" [p. 52]. The forms, therefore, are

defined in a summary way: the City Crown is only “an emblem, an idea and a theoretical stimulus whose final solution offers an unlimited range of possibilities” [p. 53].

In the following paragraph, *Estimate for the Construction of the City Crown*, Taut quantifies the expenses necessary to build it (45 million marks, 15 of which for the crystal palace) and articulates them according to a summary timetable, divided into four phases (30,000, 100,000, 250,000 and 300,000 and more inhabitants). He argues that the crisis affecting all urban centers that lack identity will lead to their depopulation and the creation of numerous cities with City Crown, whose high construction costs will be easily met thanks to more efficient urban planning.

The concluding paragraph, *New Research for the Crowning of a City*, is dedicated to the description of the cases in which—especially in the United States—the tendency to crown the city with elements of marked monumentality emerges. The text closes with a critique of rationalism in architecture: the mind can perform a regulatory function, but true architecture “can blossom only from the heart, and it is only the heart that we must listen to” [p. 69].

A crystal-clear introduction

The brilliant *Introductory Essay* by Ludovico Quaroni opens with an analysis of the expressionist movement, particularly widespread in the Nordic countries of Protestant Europe; countries which, unlike the Mediterranean ones, have always been wary of the poetics of Classicism. In architecture, Expressionism established itself late compared to painting and literature and was characterized by constant contradictions, nonsense, “butting left and

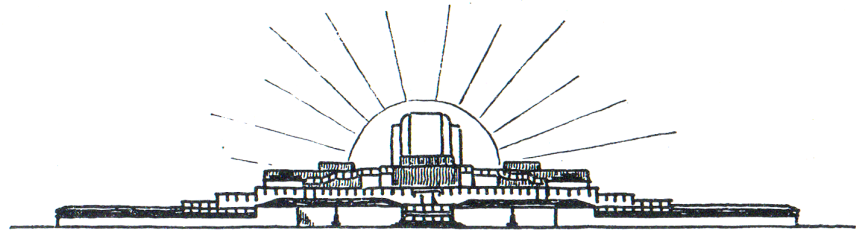


Fig. 5. View of the City Crown from east [Taut 1973, p. 49, fig. 43].

right” [p. X], a state of almost orgiastic excitement which, once the charge is exhausted, will lead almost all the exponents of *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* to merge—with varying fortunes—into the rationalism of Bauhaus. According to Quaroni, “every rationalist architect was first an expressionist” [p. XII], except for those of Latin culture. He does not consider Taut a leading figure [he defines him as a “failed master”, p. IX]; however, he credits him with having been the point of reference for all those German artists who, after the defeat of 1918, cultivated the desire for a better world through the union of the arts and the prefiguration of fantastic worlds. An art ‘that saves’ and which, through the partnerships of *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* and *Novembergruppe*, brings together all those who intend to react creatively to the horror of war and the humiliation of defeat. The Expressionists, according to Quaroni, are affected by a “pathology that tends to take them almost off the solid rails of the history of architecture” [p. XXI]. Although he considers *The City Crown* a “thin, made of almost nothing” book [p. XXVI], he believes it is important to publish it: to tone down the rationalist revivals of the early 1970s; to show the analogy between the bewilderment and crisis of architecture after the Second World War and those following the catastrophe of 1918; to explain how the

“expressionist larva” generated “the perfect rationalist insect” [p. X]; to oppose, to the religion of capital and bureaucracy, an idea of architecture permeated with social instances. But, above all, to prefigure to the new generations—the students—the risks of a world without architecture.

Faith, hope, contradictions

Faith, hope, contradictions: these are the keywords that emerge from reading this passionate text. The first two terms express positive values: trust in one’s convictions, commitment so that they can be realized. The third term characterizes the figure of Bruno Taut. In *Die Stadtkrone*, the contradiction is already in the premises: imagining that the new society can be based on a community model and on principles of public interest, despite the individual being described as selfish and abusive; reject the idea of hierarchy and re-propose it in the urban structure; affirm the superiority of spirit over matter, without hypothesizing a radical action of social renewal.

Next to the contradictions, the ingenuity. Among these: hypothesizing that the city develops by referring to a crown which, however, will only be built after the city itself has grown; prefigure a detailed urban development and consolidation program,

complete with a cost estimate, but without any economic, sociological and demographic data to support it. Taut's architecture, in theory, is based on the priority of the image; the theme of the crown offers countless ideas for dazzling representations, but the illustrations accompanying the text are sparse and poorly cared for. Taut is not a great draughtsman: "there is perhaps only one very beautiful drawing of his, and it is a drawing that does not seem to have been done by him, so sure is the sign, so

much does it transpire, from the few strokes for the masses, a mature taste that Taut never had," says Quaroni [p. XXVI].

Compared with other texts by militant architects, such as the coeval *Vers une architecture* by Le Corbusier, or the more recent *Amate l'architettura* by Gio Ponti –both still current–, *Die Stadtkrone* seems aged, perhaps because the passion that animates it does not renounce rhetorical prose, proclamations, to a singular form of lay religiosity. The German

crisis after the defeat pushed many idealists towards radical positions, aimed at longing for ideals of universality and spirituality well expressed by many Eastern cultures. It is no coincidence that *Siddharta* by Hermann Hesse was published in 1922, three years after Taut's *Die Stadtkrone*, and had renewed success in the years of maximum diffusion of hippie culture: the same years in which Quaroni edited this book, whose reading projects within a dream destined not to come true.

Note

[1] All quotations from Taut's text are taken from Italian edition [Taut 1973]: english translation by the author.

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