

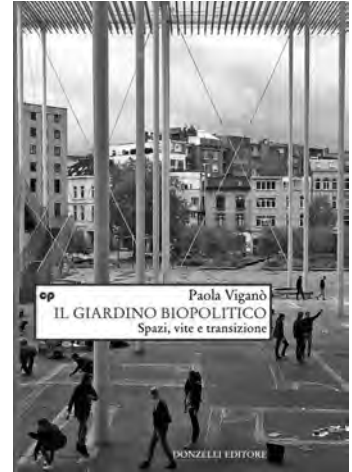
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Paola Viganò, *Il Giardino*

***biopolitico. Spazi, vite e transizione*, Donzelli, 2023, 272 pp.**

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In an urgent moment of ecological transition, where life is captured and separated into *bios* and *zoé*, how can architects and urban planners restore in the project a united form of life which is not merely object but acting subject? In a transversal inquiry which spaces through architectural theory, urbanism, and political philosophy, a necessity to consider the emancipatory potentialities of biopolitics emerges. Thus, the biopolitical garden as a space of resistance, experimentation, and transformation is proposed as the new axiom for designers to structure projects where even the notion of space is infused with life and agency. *Il Giardino Biopolitico* by Paola Viganò places this question at the core of a profound reflection on public space. Speaking of space in relation to the deep crisis of the urban and of urbanization already implies a critical stance – a stance that reclaims the role of space in building new relations between life and power. These two dimensions – life and power – form the conceptual backbone of the book, which offers a powerful and original lens through which to reconsider the relationship between spatial design and the living.

Looking back at modern and early modern architectural theories and practices, the “problem of space” is analyzed into three modes, each with its own conceptions of freedom, aesthetic, and continuity. Firstly, the “functional space,” where rationalism and the machine dominate; then, a “spazio natura” (p. 19) which explores nature as form of dwelling, as expressed by Aalto’s “forest town” Sunila; lastly, the “social space,” focused on integrated structures thought to support new forms of cohabitation proposed by projects such as New Babylon. These three categories represent a rupture with the nineteenth-century city and provide critical tools for understanding today’s urban crisis – not only in its material aspects but also in its social and ecological dimensions.

From this proposed archive, a common trait can be identified: space is not only the background against which power and life act, but it actively determines the conditions of possibility and emancipation of life; space “acts and reacts, [...] on life, on bodies, on emotions and relations, including those of power” (p. 102), therefore space is not only a passive element which enables or hinders certain practices, but is an active agent in processes of individuation and subjectivation.

In this context, the concept of positive biopolitics is introduced, following Roberto Esposito’s new, affirmative reading in contrast with Foucault’s disciplinary conception. The biopolitical project of space does not only protect life but determines the conditions for its emancipation; this theoretical moment is essential to understanding the book’s intent, which is that of overcoming a traditional practice of urban project as a simple response to material needs, in order to replace life – in all its forms – at its center.

Viganò then presents some of her recent projects and introduces the idea of biopolitical gardens (“giardino biopolitico”), accurately placing them into their geographical, economic, and social territories. Among the analyzed cases, Peterbos, with its morphological, topological and social challenges (one of the largest social housing estates in the Brussels-Capital Region), the decline of Appalachia (a geographic region located in the central and southern sections of the Appalachian Mountains in the eastern United States, related to coal mining and production), a soil project for Rennes.

All examples illustrate how the biopolitical garden, as a positive and active force, can translate concrete and innovative practices to transform space in a social and ecological way.

While the idea of garden is traditionally associated with ideas of care, and responsibility, thought of as a space to cultivate man “separating it accurately from that which is hurtful, to protect him his purity and safety” (p. 249), Viganò proposes a new meaning where “coexistence, ambivalence, ambiguity, heterogeneity, blendedness, constitute... the focus of a project of coexistence” (p. 249). Therefore, the biopolitical garden is the answer to two main questions, which arise from the heritage of modernity: which aspects of the urbanistic theory of the XX century can still be recovered? And how can the project urgent matters of the ecological and social transition? This project consists not only of a renewed attention to consuming and polluting, but it is also “a new reflection on existence, on the life we have in common, on the forms of life, and their agent spaces” (p. 253), and it is inevitably biopolitical. There is a substantial shift in perspective, according to which design becomes ontological, as Arturo Escobar states.

From a formal point of view, *Il giardino biopolitico* is not a simple theoretical essay, nor a portfolio of Viganò’s projects. It is structured in a way which reflects the complexity of the discussed themes, with a language which combines theoretical precision and graphic experimentation. Many pictures are included, from technical drawings to conceptual diagrams, which contribute to create an engaging atmosphere, in spite of the density of the contents.

In conclusion, *Il giardino biopolitico* offers an original and stimulating addition to the field of contemporary urban studies, proposing an innovative reading of public space where resistance and transformation take place. Through an approach which manages to weave theory and practice, Viganò invites the reader to rethink and reevaluate the role of open space in the project of cities of the future, placing it at the center of the strategies of ecological adaptation and transition. This book is addressed not only to urbanists, architects and researchers of social sciences, but also to whoever may be interested to explore new modes of interactions between space, nature and society.