

Sert and the Core

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Acknowledged as the father of urban design (Mumford, Sarkis, 2008), Josep Lluís Sert is a figure who has always remained somehow out of focus, in the background compared to the frontline ‘masters’ of the Modern Movement.

If prewar CIAMs are above all discontinuity – radical reform of building principles of settlement – in the postwar period the confrontation with the pre-existence – and its destructions – becomes an element of reflection and reconsideration for design research on a vital relational space rooted in the historical forms and contextual specificity of urban places. These general considerations can be argued mirrored in Sert’s biographical trajectory, in the time span between *Can Our Cities Survive?* and *The Hearth of the City*.

The publisher Plon issues the Athens Charter in Paris in 1943. Almost simultaneously, in 1942, José Luis Sert’s *Can Our Cities Survive?* is published by the Harvard University Press, which on the themes of the IV CIAM of 1933 represents «a personal and free reflection, the result of a change in his own thinking» (Rubert de Ventós, 1998: 276). «During our return [from Athens] and in Marseilles we formulated our point of view on city planning in the ‘Chart of Athens’ or ‘Town-Planning Chart,’ which is developed in a free form in *Can Our Cities Survive?*» (Giedion, 1942: x). In these words CIAM Secretary Sigfried Giedion, introducing the book that Sert gives to print in that 1942, condenses the clue and key to the evolutionary process of discussion and critical revision of functionalist principles that – *developed in free form* – will lead Sert to significantly different positions in the following decade.

Can Our Cities Survive? had begun as CIAM’s collective project for «a book on the functional city» involving the various national groups in a joint effort; but «Circumstances in Europe making the work more difficult, J.L. Sert was finally asked by the Congress to complete the layout and write the entire text of the book. Complete freedom was given him, and his later experiences, particularly in America, enlarged its material in many respects. The [...] text is exclusively the work of Mr. Sert» (*ibid.*).

The assertiveness and normative character of the Athens Charter in the version annotated by Le Corbusier (Le group CIAM-France, 1943; Le Corbusier, 1957) differ from the argumentative and comparative construction of *Can Our Cities Survive?* With an analytical approach to urban phenomenology, first European Mediterranean and now American, *Can Our Cities Survive?* reveals the specific interest and attention to a project that engages with the existing city and its evolutionary transformation. «The

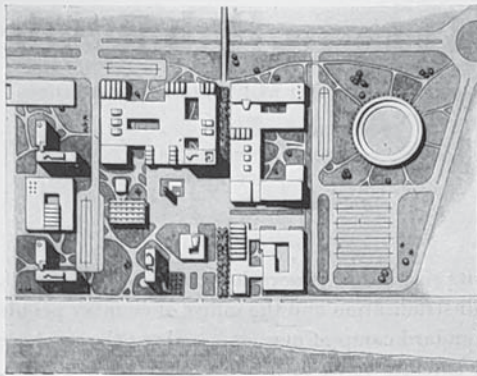
main merit of the book is [...] the ability to combine data, images, diagrams, statistics, technical dossiers, etc. to represent complementary aspects of the existing city, through comparison and contrast, allow conclusions to be drawn and provide arguments for the future city» (Rubert de Ventós, 1998: 281).

Thus, in his American landing, «Sert proposes new declinations of the IV CIAM city: a greater attention to topography, settlement patterns closer to the compact ones of the Mediterranean tradition, an organization of the project around civic centers, the articulation of open spaces small in size but invested with plural community relations» (Marchigiani, 1998: 42). It is a new tension and experimentation that, in association with Paul Lester Wiener, will be expressed most notably in the design of civic centers in Latin America (Bacon, 2008). Among these, the one destined to become perhaps the best known – the Civic Center for Chimbote in Peru – is presented at the 1949 CIAM in Bergamo: «Influenced by the characters of the spaces of the historic centers of ancient cities for their capacity to activate sociality, Sert began to work on Civic Center projects, on central spaces in the fabric of the new cities that were to express, albeit in the forms of modern architecture, those civic characters typical of the ancient hearts of historic cities» (De Matteis 2018, 48).

The core – and the civic center – is a theme (new and old at the same time) that highlights the perspective of continuity that in the post-World War II period brings together the revaluation of the relational richness of the historic city with the search for the quality of the living space of the Modern.

At the following Hoddesdon CIAM congress, a monographic outline related to Wiener and Sert’s project for Chimbote will be included in the case review documented in the second part of *The Heart of the City* (Tyrwhitt, Sert, Rogers, 1952). The Chimbote Civic Center is described there as «the Core [that] itself attempts to provide a modern extension of an old tradition» (p. 130). And this well represents «the evolution of Sert’s urbanism during the 1940s, with its shift from the ‘functional city’ to the urban core» (Bacon, p. 84), according to an attitude capable of embracing the issues of a «Mumfordian Social Practice» (*ibid.*).

While this speaks about a specific notion and matrix of Urban Design as a discipline that «grew out of an effort to combine art and science in the three-dimensional planning of urban environments» (Eric Mumford, 2009: viii), on the other hand the core – the civic center and its design – is an issue that questions the themes of legacy and genealogy, especially when looking at the context of the European city – and the Italian city in

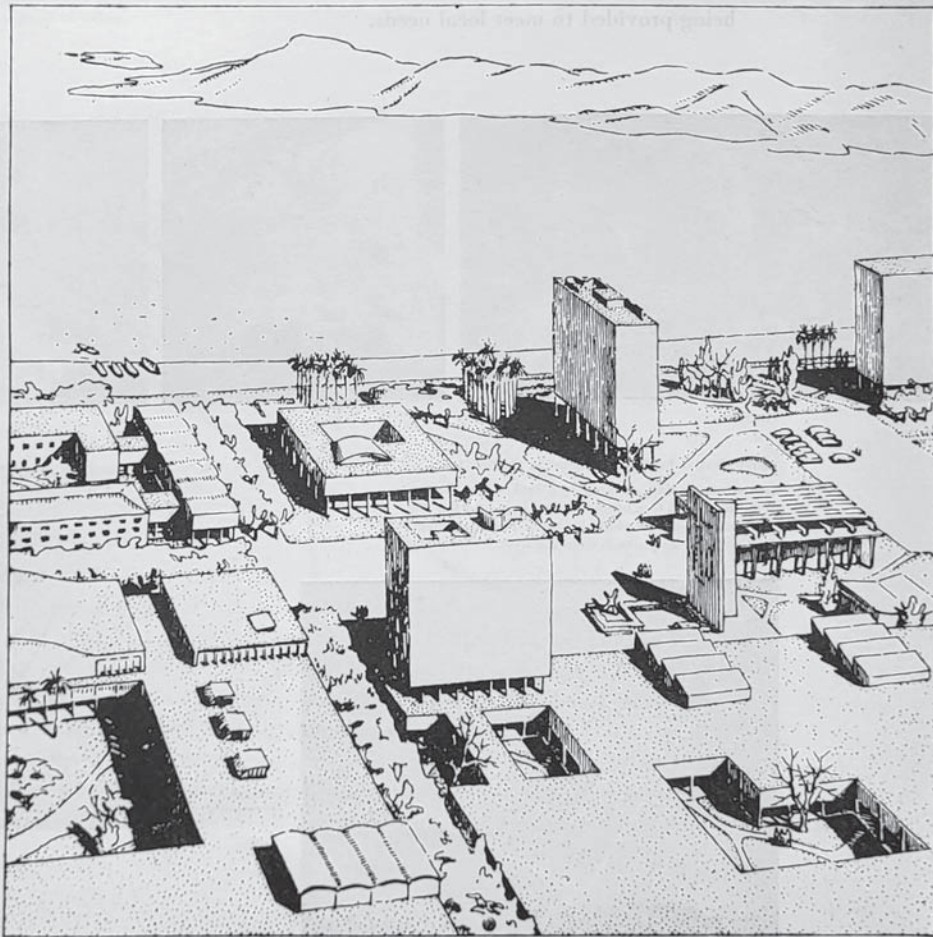


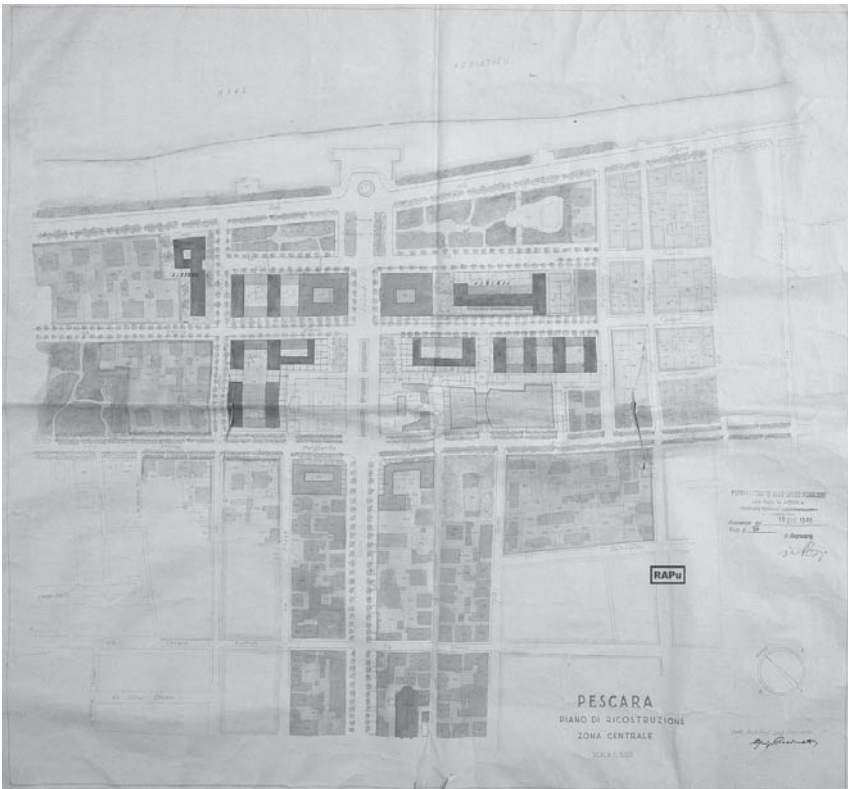
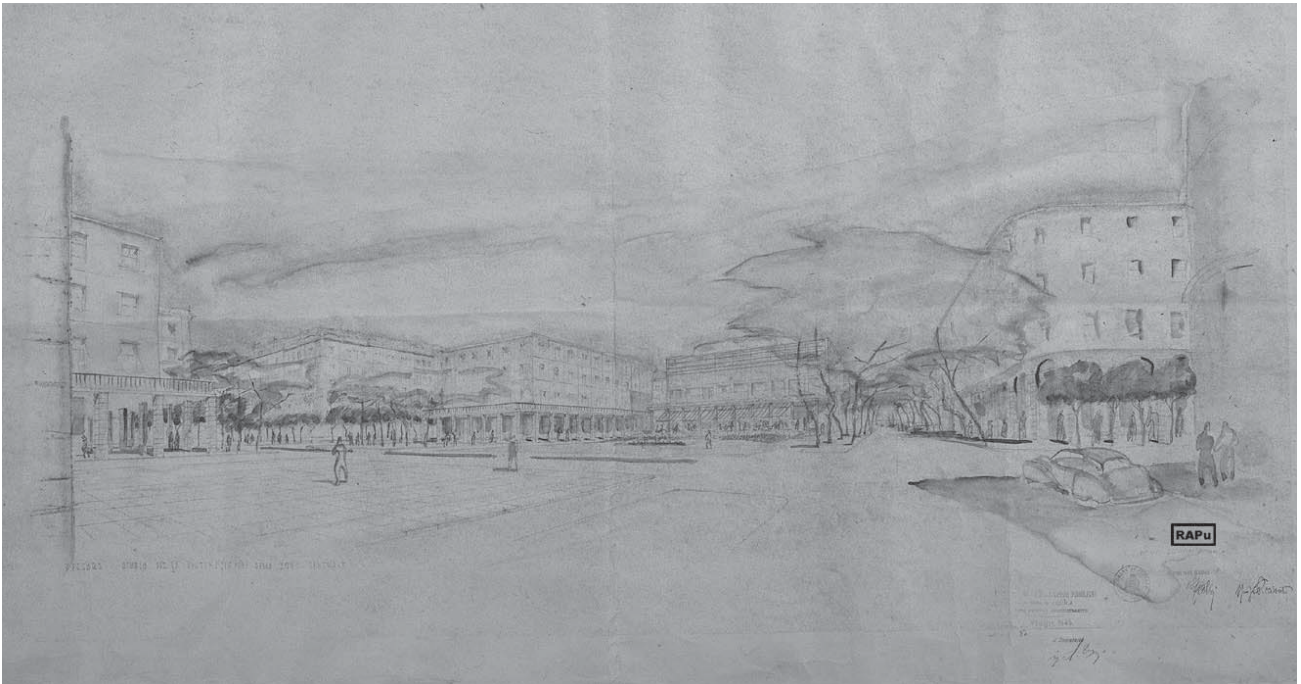
500 ft
100 m

Concrete slabs on posts act as a parasol and protection from the sun. Shops and cafés are freely grouped under this continuous parasol construction. The church has a *brise-soleil* on the roof. Two office and two apartment buildings are the only high structures in the city, which has also an hotel and a bull ring.

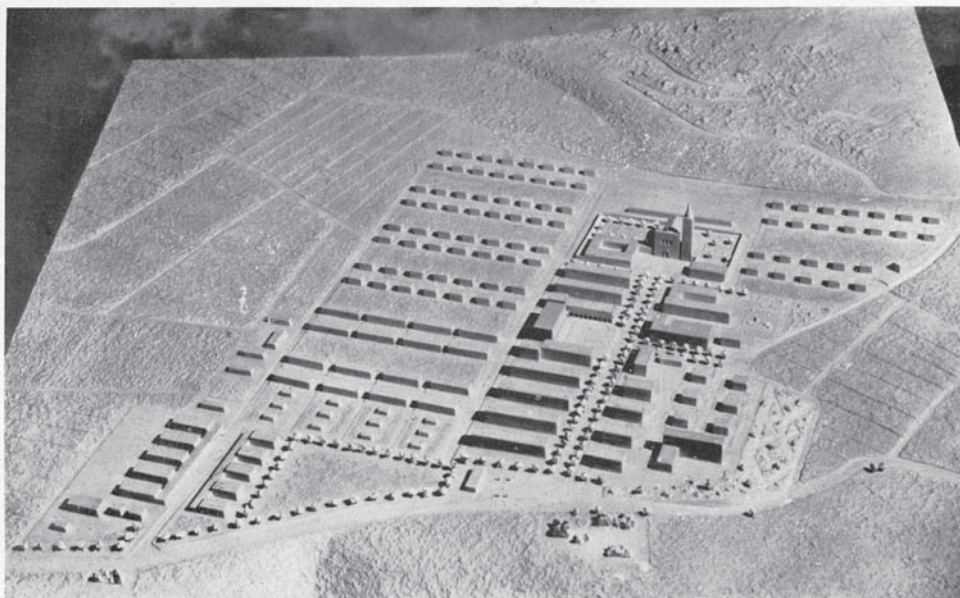
FIG.3A.

FIG.4A.





2. Pescara Reconstruction Plan (Luigi Piccinato, 1947): central area view (DiCoTer Plans Archive / RAPu Digital Archive - www.rapu.it).
 3. Pescara Reconstruction Plan (Luigi Piccinato, 1947): plan for the central area (DiCoTer Plans Archive / RAPu Digital Archive www.rapu.it).



nè dall'iniziativa privata nè dagli organi statali. Tuttavia qualche risultato pratico si è raggiunto. Il Q. T. 8, unità quartiere organizzato dalla Triennale di Milano, che già è in corso di realizzazione, è un esperimento di alto interesse che dovrebbe essere esteso.

Ma è necessario compenetrare di questo spirito le grandi attività collettive, soprattutto quelle statali, e conquistare la fiducia dell'iniziativa privata facendo comprendere come la vera Architettura non sia affatto in contrasto con la sana speculazione.

Quanto all'attività statale, è chiaro che non è possibile pensare di introdurre direttamente lo spirito di cui parliamo negli organi stessi tecnico-burocratici dello Stato che sono quello che sono, nè possono essere rinnovati in breve tempo e, a parte gli indiscutibili meriti amministrativi e

tecnici di cui hanno dato prova, sono troppo legati a consuetudini di ordinaria amministrazione per far fronte da soli all'emergenza del problema della ricostruzione. La funzione del Genio Civile dovrebbe essere limitata al controllo tecnico amministrativo dell'attività edilizia sovvenzionata dallo Stato, e non darne le direttive.

E' ben vero che le recenti disposizioni legislative ammettono, anzi consigliano, una larga partecipazione dei professionisti privati alla progettazione delle opere pubbliche, ma l'applicazione di queste disposizioni si rivela in realtà molto limitata e difettosa. Prima di tutto, il solo fatto di ricorrere all'opera di professionisti privati non è sufficiente garanzia di buoni risultati. I progettisti dovrebbero essere opportunamente selezionati in base a concorsi o altri titoli di designazione.



In alto, Piano di ricostruzione del centro urbano di Pianoro, in provincia di Bologna. (Progetto Ing. Giuseppe Cenacchi e Arch. Alberto Legnani).

In basso, a sinistra, Rovine di Pianoro. *A destra*, Veduta generale di Pianoro nuova.

particular – as a historically deeply-rooted nurturing field of that settlement form.

Thus, when looking at the coeval history of Reconstruction Plans in Italy, some similarities are suggestive. Reconstruction plans are introduced by an emergency decree in March 1945 as a simplified planning tool for rapid recovery from wartime destruction. In the period between that decree and the end of 1954, 427 Reconstruction Plans were drafted and approved (see: Piccinato, 1955; Oliva, 1993). This is a little known and little studied documentation, but of which the design for the urban core constitutes a recurring theme in several cases. The redesign of the system of urban centralities appears in many projects from its modest and minute manifestations to the most ambitious declinations – enlarging and reshaping central spaces, opening up new squares inside and outside the pre-existing urban nucleus, designing real new ‘civic centers’ (Bonfantini, 2021).

Looking together at the drawing for Chimbote’s civic center by Sert and Wiener (1946-48) with those of the central area and civic center in Piccinato’s Pescara Reconstruction Plan (1947), or even with the model of the Reconstruction Plan for Pianoro (1947), by Giuseppe Cenacchi and the CIAM member Alberto Legnani (Vaccaro, 1948), is an allusive move not without fascination. It speaks of a changed cultural climate, which in the design of relational spaces recovers continuity and dialogue with the existing city and its qualities, for vital urban places. It prepares also for later developments in urban planning research in the project of spaces for social service provision and distribution, and for the organization of the neighborhood as a relatively self-sufficient unit.

On the other hand, however, this same way of doing things – *combining art and science in the three-dimensional planning of urban environments* – brings us back to the European tradition of the Civic Art and *Edilizia cittadina* that at the turn of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries imposed itself as an «entirely new way of designing the city starting from its public places and the potential of existing structures», like that «art of building urban scenes» (Lupano, 2001: 33) that distinguishes, for example, the design practice of Marcello Piacentini, for the civic center of Bergamo as well as, later, of piazza della Vittoria in Brescia.

In the 1940s urbanism, the civic center seems to represent an original convergence of interests and alliance between a new American tension towards pedestrian vital cores of the city and a European recovery of ‘continuity’ (Rogers, 1999; López Reus, 2009) with the historical features of the existing city, and its qualities and values. «You have united the Mediterranean spirit with the New World», Walter Gropius wrote to Sert in May 1969 (Rovida, 2000: 7).

This convergence is emblematically embodied by the biographical path of Josep Lluís Sert.

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