ARCHITECTURE NOW, BUT FOR WHEN?

Architects must not design a “future architecture”. He must create for the present, thinking with a long term approach. In the Italian Universities hard-working employees of the auto-referring theories are explaining, with exhausting mental constructions, the reasons for their operating, and especially the reasons for which the external world has to be in error. Economists, politicians, and the whole society try to reason for the short term. But real things are not made for the short term. If we succeed in giving a future to the society, when we will be there in the future, if we’ll be there, the new architecture will be there, waiting for us.

Keywords: durability, archistars, Italian schools of architecture
1. From upper left clockwise: the De Young Museum by Herzog & de Meuron and the Science Museum by Piano, in the San Francisco Botanical garden; the first one resembles an old great fantastical animal of a shape that has never been seen before but which looks like always seen; the second one is a giant open space, a big open square, one can see trough: technology allows a good space perception

2. The MAXXI Contemporary Art Museum in Rome, by Zaha Hadid, trying to show what a great and complicated building the architect was able to manage. Very different qualities: in works by H&dM and Piano we can find great morphological simplicity accompanied by spatial complexity; in Hadid’s we can find morphological complexity accompanied by spatial anxiety.
Sometimes architects create ideas for the future. Is the future of architecture predictable?

But, is the future in architecture worth bothering with?

I wouldn’t say so. The architect must not design a “future architecture”, he won’t succeed. He must create for the present, thinking with a long term approach: the good project will last in the future. At times only in the future you will understand and recognize a good project.

I believe that, from many point of view, the future doesn’t exist; and perhaps for the one that is focused on doing things, the past doesn’t exist as well. But the problem is to understand how much the present will last, how long the present is.

It is worth therefore to study because some works of architecture have so much strength, since their present is not of one day.

For a long time now we have been accustomed to speak of some architects as “archistars”. As we can see, all is done only to appear, even the language we use. The scene is more important than the building, but what lies behind?

When I first started to study the works produced by such so called “archistars” – of course in magazines – I thought they had been designed under the effects of the heavy jet lag that such high-flying architects must inevitably suffer, due to the constant travelling that goes with such great success. The way their work was presented was of the same kind.

But as for all things, beyond magazines, we can go there to the place, switch off the spotlights, forget the noise, and look around us.

The contemporary architecture seems to me actually filled by a sort of noise. A society made of noise, in the general, actual and technical meaning: a noise in the background coming fore, a continuous connective texture woven by interferences, a continuous overlap of things that don’t have anything to do with it.

Apparently, to approach a smaller context, to discover its values, means also to focus more on the contents, on things and sites, letting the magazines, the clamours, and downloaded news go.

But we can also go there and see. And there we can discover the entire world:

– A new architecture: global and speaking an international language, again, after so many years. An architecture always different, but nevertheless certainly international. It’s difficult to realize how such different languages seem to be able, always, to appear “international”. In the last centuries it would never have been possible to happen.

– A technology that redisCOVERS the values of life.

– Low and high technology, but always architecture.

– The designed form of space that remains the tool to solve the problems, therefore gives us “art”.

It helps us what we “studied” last year rereading Vitruvius and discovering that the famous Vitruvian triad in reality doesn’t exist.

In fact, after listing the aesthetical principles of architecture (but we see that he treats really of techniques), here he explains that:

There are three departments of architecture: the art of building, the making of time-pieces, and the construction of machinery. … The first principle will be respected if … built with due reference to durability (firmitas), convenience (utilitas), and beauty (venustas). …

As we can see the three most quoted parts of the Ten Books are only a few criterions, inside the contents of architecture, they are part of the ways this art comes true and lives.

We will succeed in answering these questions only if we are able to forget what is taught at the so called “schools” of architecture, at least in Italy.
In the Italian Universities, hard-working employees of the auto-referring theories are explaining, with exhausting mental constructions, the reasons for their operating, and especially the reasons for which the external world has to be in error. The building technologies taught in the engineering schools, and ignored in the architecture ones, are generally forty years old. The planning methods taught in the architecture schools, and ignored in the engineering ones, are generally forty years old.

Out of Universities, trying to be general but still in the centre of the debate, fashion speaks instead of design. The term “design” is by now omnipresent, and “omni-used”, therefore without any meaning. But inside the architecture schools, you have only to quote a sentence by Renzo Piano – that in the last sixties would simply be seemed as derived from a solid architectural formation – to instigate the uproar. In an interview for the summer supplement of Time 2005, destined to the Style & Design, where therefore was to be present something representing Made in Italy, in a very simple but clear way, Piano said some interesting things, among which:

Renzo Piano. The Italian architect who helped bring us the iconic Pompidou Center in Paris defends his continuing efforts to break the mould.

“Your buildings are very different from one another. Do you worry about not having a signature style?”

“I hate the idea of style, that architecture should become self-referential. If you do something like the Pompidou, then for 10 years people keep asking you for the same thing. Style in the negative sense, as a repetitive gesture, a kind of logo – this is the end of freedom for the architect” [1].

In its simplicity there is something true said by perhaps today’s most important architect in Italy, something that many think, but that very few “professors” in architectural schools in Italy, seem to be able to accept; the true, or at least reality, is not something to be interested in!

A sentence like that plays a very high treason to the questione del progetto or the matter of the project (to tell you the truth I don’t even know how that could be translated in other, less rhetorical languages); a problem to which all should be devoted, to become or to remain teachers, without getting one’s hands dirty, doing the work or craftsmanship, or becoming even real architects. Italian professors will always call their faculties “schools” (possible speaking in “boldface”), to make sure that they wouldn’t have anything to do with real Universities, to avoid undergoing the rules of all other universities, to consider themselves “masters”. On the other hand, they are there not to teach anything useful or to prepare for the future, but to give the impression of having a great mission, to present their own way of thinking and to postpone the problem of the real building realization. So they bring this problem instead, of more academic kind, the more consolidated (at least in Italy) and for them of the well known field: the “question of the project”. The term with which the problem has been individualized in the last 15 years, and which could be translated in a more plain language: how can I force others (convincing or obliging them) to understand that the only way to make architecture is mine? and how can I limit the technological tools that will necessarily be taught, to those (the old ones) that I’m able to manage?

As far as I’m concerned, it is too big and too ontological problem. So I’ll leave it.

It is not by chance that a large number of lessons being kept in the Italian architectural schools is still in fact constituted by the long turns of well articulated words, well organized and long-studied, fit to explain why the architecture by Piano or by many others (the best ones) contemporary architects is not a true architecture.
By now the schools derived from the sixties and early seventies have created own well structured academy: that is now estranging Italy from the real world.

But as we know, in the period of “virtual” reality, the “real” is a difficult problem to digest.

There is no reason in investigating what the future of architecture could be or what the architecture of the future will be.

This generation, perhaps the luckiest in history, at least in great part of Europe and Western world, with his political blindness, has “removed” the future from the following generations.

Economists and politicians try to reason only for the short term. The whole society do the same. But anything of great value is not made for the short term.

Our problem is to think about the long run, on all levels.

If we succeed in giving a future to the society, when we will be there, if we will be there, the new architecture will be there too, waiting for us.

ENDNOTES