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WITRUWIUSZ ŻYJE!

VITRUVIUS IS ALIVE!

Istotnym aspektem w witruwiańskim modelu architektonicznym – triadzie Firmitas, Utilitas, Venustas – jest stosunek pomiędzy wspomnianymi trzema kamieniami węgielnymi. Równowaga pomiędzy nimi jest w obecnych czasach poważnie zagrożona. Venustas przeważnie eliminowane jest jako zbędny luksus lub autonomiczne pole dla formalnej inwencji. Architektura potrzebuje zasad. Architektura bez zasad oznacza chaos.

Słowa kluczowe: utilitas, firmitas, venustas

The important aspect in Vitruvius' model of architecture as a trinity of Firmitas, Utilitas and Venustas is the conditioning relationship between these three cornerstones. The balance between them is seriously threatened today. Venustas has mostly been disconnected as a dispensable luxury or as an autonomous playfield of formal invention. Architecture needs rules. Architecture without rules equals chaos.

Keywords: utilitas, firmitas, venustas

Vitruvius is still well and alive. In fact, how and when did he die? Did I miss something? The fact that many architects today don't know about him or think they don't have to know about him does not mean that he is dead. In fact, we can look back at more than two thousand years of history and see that nobody has ever been able to prove him dead. I can't even think of somebody who seriously tried. On the contrary: A great number of wise men and women have, over the many centuries that have passed since Vitruvius put down his treatises, not only confirmed his validity, but have also developed and differentiated his theories.

Nobody will question that Firmitas, Utilitas and Venustas are still the three cornerstones of architecture, even though the meaning of the three has been

shifting over the time and in relation to time. Also, the relation and connection of the three among each other has been widely discussed and revised through many different theories. Depending on what one understands by Firmitas, by Utilitas, and by Venustas, it is obvious that the vision of the relation between the three is also variable.

I think that it is the balance, the relation and interaction between the three that really needs discussion and maybe some revision, not in contrast to what Vitruvius said, but in contrast to how the balance between the three is being generally looked at in our time.

Vitruvius has basically said that in architecture there has to be some sort of balance between the three cornerstones, between Firmitas, Utilitas, and Venustas.

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As a starting point to my argument, I would assert that today the balance between the three is seriously disrupted, if not lost, and that the reciprocal conditioning relationship between the three has moved out of sight, or is even being actively ignored.

I would like to reflect on how, in my opinion, these three cornerstones of architecture depend on each other, how they are connected, and why I think this model of theory has been distorted but in reality never lost its meaning.

To start with, it is necessary to agree on an understanding of what the three terms mean: As I see it, *Firmitas* is the physical stability of a building against the stress coming from gravity, climate, use and time; *Utilitas* is, in my understanding, the correct usability of a building for the purpose it was intended to have, or any other use that it might see during its lifespan, and its cost-for-use relationship; finally, *Venustas* is, from my point of view, the capacity of a building to touch the senses of the onlooker and/or user, causing a *vibration of the soul* as Kandisky put it.

The thesis paper to this conference that we got with the invitation makes it sound as if ethics are connected to *Firmitas* and *Utilitas*, and that *Venustas* is connected to aesthetics. It first seemed like a nice play of words to me, but I have some fundamental questions to ask about this: Are ethics and aesthetics opposites? Are *Firmitas* and *Utilitas* a question of ethics, while *Venustas* is just a matter of aesthetics? Are we as architects being unethical when we strive for *Venustas*?

I would never agree to such a simplistic interpretation. To start with, I am convinced that *Venustas* has a lot to do with ethics, maybe more so than *Firmitas* and *Utilitas*. It is mostly *Venustas* that makes a building talk and communicate, by giving it a meaning. It is mostly through *Venustas* that the artist tells his story and internally connects the user and onlooker to the building. It is firstly through *Venustas* that it is decided what the user and onlooker feels by using

a building or by looking at it, and if this is not an ethical responsibility I don't know what an ethical responsibility is. In fact, *Venustas* requires a very high degree of ethical competence, much more so than construction and function which require most of all technical responsibility and competence. Technology and function do not touch the soul, at least not as much as *Venustas* does. Do we feel happiness each time we see that a building does not collapse? Are we happy each time when we see that a building can be used for what it was designed for? What is this compared to the goosebumps that the airiness or the lighting of a room can give, to the tension and expression of a shape that we can feel with the ends of our nerves by just looking at? *Firmitas* and *Utilitas* alone will never be able to do this, unless they are consciously used for the purpose of *Venustas*.

Also, it seems that *Venustas* can exist without *Firmitas* and *Utilitas* being present. How else could we be fascinated by the ruin of a Greek temple that has long lost its *Firmitas* and *Utilitas* but that is still so full of *Venustas*? The same way, a building without use and without beauty can be very strong, and a functionally useful building can be at the same time frail and ugly.

So, we have to understand that the three cornerstones don't have to be connected, but they can be connected to the advantage of each other and of the whole. I would say that the presence of this connection is what distinguishes architecture from non-architecture, and this is the real sense in Vitruvius' theory. Not only have the three aspects to be treated one by one, they also have to be connected and interacting, making use of each other for their own purpose and for the common purpose. Thinking of the advantage of the user and onlooker, in terms of *Firmitas*, *Utilitas* and *Venustas* in an interwoven way: This is the ultimate ethical responsibility of the architect. Or in other words: To produce *Venustas* by resolving the aspects of *Firmitas* and *Utilitas*.

So let's do away with splitting the three elements into two ethical and one merely aesthetical. This is exactly what is wrong about today's situation in architecture: Venustas has, in most cases, been disconnected from Firmitas and Utilitas, as something fundamentally different and independent from the two, Firmitas and Utilitas, which are becoming more and more the same thing. Venustas has been cut off, isolated; it has become something dispensable, something that could be involved but could as well not be involved.

Let me explain this more concretely: A building is being planned and built, a lot of experts, coordinated by an architect or not, are calculating and working on the technical (Firmitas) and economical (Utilitas) side of the operation, and at the very end, when everything about Firmitas and Utilitas is decided, if he is lucky enough, the architect is allowed to add some "beauty", without touching or questioning the ever so important Firmitas and Utilitas. And what happens? He decides about a nice colour – that certainly does not effect Firmitas and Utilitas – or he might decide to round off a corner to make the shape "more interesting", without invading the realm of Firmitas and Utilitas of course, or he might decide that a window looks cute when it is round instead of square, always admitting that the accountants allow him to do so.

Disconnected Venustas is so vulnerable and defenceless. It can only be defended through its connection to the other two. As long it is connected in sense and reason to Firmitas and Utilitas, it will be so much harder to treat it as something that could be dispensed of. As long as one can explain Venustas through Firmitas and/or Utilitas it will be almost impossible to kick it out.

In the same way, it is of course also wrong to disconnect Venustas from Firmitas and Utilitas in the sense that architects only busy themselves with Venustas and leave Firmitas and Utilitas to the engineers. I see this problem mostly in young architects

and in students of architecture in particular. It happens to me that students ask me why they have to study so much technology and planning when they think they should become genius artists whose business it is to invent beautiful shapes. My answer in this case is always the same: *How can you create beauty without basing it on and connecting it with Firmitas and Utilitas? Beauty is not born out of empty space. Beauty is no aim to itself. We are not against beauty, but we have to anchor it into sense and reason. Beauty is something that can be explained and justified; it is born in the head and not in the belly, and we are lucky that there is Firmitas and Utilitas because they provide us not with all the reasons, but with many reasons. You will only be a complete architect when you don't disconnect Venustas from Firmitas and Utilitas.* This is why my teaching aims at a top priority of Venustas which is only obvious because Venustas is the architects responsibility and nobody else's; for Firmitas and Venustas we have engineers. Venustas, however, can also find its reasons in those of Firmitas and Utilitas.

Of course Venustas has also its own autonomous set of rules and principles that are completely independent from Firmitas and Utilitas. Vitruvius tells us about them in terms of *ordinatio*, *dispositio*, *eurythmia*, *symmetria*, *decor* and *distributio*. All these are, in my understanding of Vitruvius, the inherent criteria of Venustas, even though they could all appear in Firmitas and Utilitas as well. Here again, we see that the three cornerstones of architecture are very closely connected, and that the same principles and criteria can be applied in all three of them.

A few last words about rules: I have just used this term myself, and it appears quite frequently in the thesis paper that we have been given before this conference. The paper at one point states (maybe in a provocative manner) that rules have been replaced by *the intuitive search of forms*, and wonders if it is *still possible to return to the rules*.

When we hear the word “rules” it is all too easy to hear its negative connotations like order, authority and restriction. I would like to point out the positive side of rules: Guaranty of equal rights for all parts concerned, security of planning etc. Life is a game, a play, just like making architecture is ultimately playing. Yet you can’t play without rules. Imagine playing chess without rules, soccer or whatever game for that matter. Not very satisfying! A real nightmare! Without rules, things move into chaos, and this is exactly what we observe in today’s architectural discussion: Anything goes; they invent without rules; they do nice shapes without knowing what they are doing and why

they are doing it. Arbitrariness is the enemy number one of architectural quality, and of artistic quality in general. *Arbitrariness is the prelude to monotony*, Luigi Snozzi has said; I would add that rules secure freedom of choice and expression. There is no democracy without rules. Who negates the necessity of rules negates the necessity of equal rights and democracy. Simple as that.

So Vitruvius is still alive. He never died and I am sure he never will. The deviations of our times do not detract from this in the long run. His theory is still the status qua non in what we know about architecture, and I feel it will be so for quite a long time to come.