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## TEORIA. ROZWAŻANIA NAD ZAWODEM ARCHITEKTA

## THEORY. MEDITATION ON THE CRAFT OF THE ARCHITECT

W ciągłej transformacji kultury nastąpiła era komunikacji i prymatu obrazu. W wyniku tych przeobrażeń również architektura została zredukowana do swojego *czystego obrazu*. Odczytujemy rzeczywistość poprzez obrazy, jakie generuje, a w procesach poznania zaczyna brakować jakiegokolwiek refleksji nad związkiem między przyczyną, a skutkiem.

*Słowa kluczowe: manifest, porządek, piękno, przeciwieństwa, kryzys, architektura-miasto*

In the cycle of constant transformation of culture the time of communication and resulting visual image primacy has come. In consequence, architecture has been reduced to its *pure image*. Reality as a whole is interpreted through the images it produces and in the processes of knowledge of reality, what is lacking is any analysis of the relationships of cause and effect.

*Keywords: manifesto, order, beauty, contradictions, crisis, architecture-city*

### Foreword

This lecture approaches the question of Theory as a *tool* for design, as **meditation** on the *aims* of architecture and its *ways* of making an architectural project.

This is why we will examine *only the viewpoint of architects*, or of those who make, while overlooking – or considering only in terms of its influence on those who make – the viewpoint of philosophers, historians and critics who have focused on architecture.

The Theory of architectural design in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be seen in terms of a dichotomy between *complexity and simplification* that is also an opposition between the changing world of the *phenomena that form the basis of the architectural design* and

their reduction to the *essential*. An alternating dichotomy that only in certain fertile moments becomes a productive relationship between the *complexity of the real* and the pursuit of its *essential qualities*.

The passage *from the complex to the simple*, when it happens, takes place through **abstraction**, a principle that informed not just architecture, but all the artistic activities of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### The first treatise

The first **treatise/manifesto** of the theory of architectural design of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is undoubtedly *Vers une architecture* by Le Corbusier (Paris 1923).

In this little book Le Corbusier wonders if it is possible *to renew architecture*, freeing it of the entire

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formal legacy of the 1800s (the styles) and academic teachings. He calls for a return to the origins, to find a new definition of architecture, beyond any pre-set formal model.

A sort of *suspension of judgment*, a redefinition of objectives, a reformulation of principles, in order to construct **new forms**.

The text looks to the world outside architecture, the design of utensils, the rational laws of engineering, the relationship between form and necessity. This comparison between the *necessary forms* of utensils and the *academic forms* of 19<sup>th</sup>-century architecture revealed the fragile, inadequate nature of **styles**.

So the method applied was one of **comparison** between a fully developing formal world (the world of technical forms) and the new architecture *that had yet to be built*.

Nevertheless, while the passages on the production of technical forms might seem to reflect a purely **functionalist** viewpoint, for Le Corbusier architecture is “*pure creation of the spirit*”, belonging to the world of art, and responsible for the lofty task of **touching the emotions**.

So the comparison with technical forms is used by Le Corbusier only to establish a relationship *between forms and the reason behind their construction* which, for architecture, unlike utensils, is **to move, to affect, to touch the emotions**.

### The fatal order

But just what do we mean by “touching the emotions”? What moves, affects or touches us?

To answer these questions, Le Corbusier introduces the notion of **order** and, more precisely, of “**fatal order**”.

Fatal order is the order things take on when they connect with our life. It is our life that makes *the order among things* a matter of fate. Through this order, our life makes itself recognizable.

Le Corbusier writes: *Le table est couverte encore de verres, de bouteilles d’assiettes, l’huilier, le sel, le piovre, la serviette le rond de serviette, etc. Voyez l’ordre fatal qui met tous ces objets en rapport les uns avec les autres* (Le Corbusier, *American Prologue*, 1929, [in:] *Precisions*, Paris 1960, p. 9).

As in a page by Marcel Proust, on a table, after a meal, the arrangement of the objects conserves the traces of a completed experience. The forms intertwine with life and make it recognizable. This **recognition** touches our emotions.

Two major questions face each other, then: the first is that of **necessary forms**, belonging to the construction of the world of utensils, while the second is that of **forms that evoke** our life.

These two aspects of forms seem to be contradictory, but actually they are not. Le Corbusier considers these two aspects **complementary**.

It is clear that architecture must be useful and well-built, but *at the same time* its forms should be beautiful: they should **express its purposes**.

### Beauty in architecture

Here Le Corbusier connects with the Enlightenment tradition in French thought which, with Denis Diderot, believes that beauty is a “**question of relationships**”, a question of meaningful proportions, those proportions that, like the fatal order, make us recognize the meaning of forms. Loos, too, in his famous definition of architecture (Adolf Loos *Architecture* [in:] *Spoken into the Void*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1982) links the **recognition** of the place of burial to the well-defined **proportional relationships** of the mound (*the tomb encountered in the woods was six feet long and three feet wide*) that make us recognize the sense of the man-made thing, the **purpose for which it was built**.

So Loos and Le Corbusier, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, set the terms of the reconstruction of forms

starting with **their ultimate goal**, beyond any reference to formal models to be followed. A leap into the void, an adventure whose results could not be predicted, firmly rooted in an idea of architecture whose purpose is known, namely to produce a world of forms in which it is possible to **recognize ourselves**, to recognize our humanity.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the whole world watched Le Corbusier. Everyone understood his extraordinary approach of analogy: with *nature*, with *technique*, with *history*. An approach that allowed him not to be mimetic, not to conform to the imitation that was part of the academic culture of the time.

Le Corbusier, together with Adolf Loos and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, redefined the basis of 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture, freeing it from a formal apparatus that had kept it imprisoned for a long time.

The choice of these masters who *redefined the basis of forms* was that of the rational procedure. The procedure of formal construction of architecture, to achieve its final goal, must have **characters of rationality**. The exercise of reason makes it possible to replace the old academic order of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century manuals with a **new order** based on **knowledge**.

“*Order is the arrangement of things according to their nature*”, says Mies van der Rohe, echoing Le Corbusier. So this is not an imposed order, but an order that is the result of a *cognitive process* through which to know the **nature of things**. A *continuously rediscovered* order that would become the obsession of Louis Kahn throughout his working career (Louis Kahn, **Order is** [in:] *Perspecta* n°3, 1955).

This new point of view makes a definitive break with *19<sup>th</sup>-century academicism* and opens the way for completely new research in which *everything is regulated by a system of meaningful relationships, by proportions*. Proportions allow us to recognize

the identity of forms, to identify the parts of the construction, to recognize the meaning of places and man-made things. At least this is the point of view of certain masters who worked to construct **a new theory**.

Reason is applied to know the reality in which we live and to construct, with architecture, new meaningful aspects of it. Not a functionalist reason, then, but one committed to **revealing meanings**, those meanings that belong to our existence and make themselves recognizable through forms.

### Exalted rationalism

It was Aldo Rossi, in the introduction to the treatise of Etienne-Louis Boullée *Architecture, essai sur l'art* (Padua, 1967), to make the distinction between **conventional rationalism and exalted rationalism**. Between the reason that constructs works that respond only to criteria of form and the reason that knows and represents the “**emotional nucleus**” of the work. Aldo Rossi wrote this in a moment in which *conventional rationalism* constituted the dominant line of thinking of industrial production and of the ideology it required.

But it would be reductive to equate the viewpoint of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with conventional or functionalist rationalism, as have many of its opponents.

The finest architects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century clearly understood the meaning of the **exalted rationalism** described by Aldo Rossi. A rationalism that pursues the meaning of things, of their nature, connected with their function, their practical basis; but instead of coinciding with function, it **goes beyond**.

The meaning is found *in the deeper reason for which a building is constructed*, in that **nucleus** of the work that, once recognized, stimulates **an emotion** in us.

So again we see *emotion* advanced as the goal of construction, as the ultimate reason for architecture.

On closer consideration, this objective can be seen to belong to *expressionism*, that movement of European architecture that, against the rule of technical things, proposes the *urgency of expression*.

We can say that there is no contradiction between a certain rationalism and the European expressionism of the early part of the century. This rationalism posits a *need for clarity* while recognizing, in equal terms, the need for an *expressive form*.

**All genuine modern architecture comes from expressionism**, says Guido Canella (*Note per una critica dell'Espressionismo*, [in:] Zodiac n°9, Milan 1993), underscoring the *expressive quality* of certain rationalist architecture. Contradicting Hilberseimer, who in his *Berliner Architektur der 20er Jahre* (Mainz 1967) does not acknowledge any link between “expressionists” and “elementarists”, first of all Mies van der Rohe. Yet it is hard to deny the *expressive impact* of the *earliest works* of Mies as well as the *last ones*, the projects for a skyscraper on Friederich-Strasse in Berlin, or for the Nationalgalerie, also in Berlin, projects that nevertheless do contain a strong character of rationality.

But this aspect of rationalism, *exalted rationalism*, remained hidden. What seemed to get the upper hand was *conventional rationalism*, of the kind that would lead to the International Style. That *mechanistic rationalism* would end up being seen as an attribute of all modern architecture, generating a dual misunderstanding: that of making rationalism and functionalism coincide, and that of linking the notion of the modern to a particular moment in history.

Instead, rationalism goes well beyond functionalism, and by modern we mean **a way of being** connected with one's own time (from *modus hodiernus*) and therefore to all the moments of history. **“The ancients were modern too”**, says Ignazio Gardella (Antonio Monestiroli, *L'architettura secondo Gardella*, Bari-Rome 1997). The ancients, too, had the problem of adapting to their time.

So modernity can be seen *not as a choice but as an obligatory condition* for operation.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this dual misunderstanding generated a series of *movements* founded with the aim of opposing the supposed *mechanicism* of the Modern Movement.

### Opposing trends

The question of the *opposition* to conventional rationalism was raised, in particular, in an essay by Robert Venturi: *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York 1966). A work that contrasts what Venturi sees as the excessive simplification of modern architecture with the complexity of historic architecture, in a generalized vindication of the **complexity of reality**.

For Venturi functionalism, as the dominant thinking of the Modern Movement, leads to the **impoverishment of reality**, the denial of all its complexity and, as a consequence, the negation of all its **richness**.

This view is somehow similar to that of Luciano Semerani, who counters the functionalist reduction of certain modern architecture with a *magnificent functional quality*, a **“resplendent functionality”** deployed to grant enjoyment and pleasure (L. Semerani, *L'altro moderno*, Turin 2000).

Of course the architects of the Modern Movement kept in mind by Aldo Rossi when he speaks of exalted rationalism (Loos, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe) did not see simplification as a *loss of complexity* but as a **way to know it**, a way of knowing that **emotional nucleus** that contains it and represents it in every major work.

In the context of this debate, the position of Giorgio Grassi is an important point of reference. Grassi, in his essay *La costruzione logica dell'architettura* (Padua, 1967) speaks of **monumental simplification**

to indicate the process of simplification as one that leads to the knowledge of the **essential quality** of the work, a quality that lasts in time, a quality that makes the work **monumental**.

In like manner, Carlos Martí Aris believes that architecture has meaning only if it makes us recognize **that which lies at the basis of its reason**. Only in this way can its forms be eloquent and closely connected to our life (Carlos Martí Aris, *Silencios eloquentes*, Barcelona 1999).

So simplification can be seen not as the *denial of complexity* (as we might be led to believe by the word games based on the **Less is more** of Mies van der Rohe, ushered in by Venturi with his **Less is bore**) but, instead, as knowledge **of its essential qualities**.

Simplification as application of the principle of **abstraction** in architecture, a principle introduced by the artistic avant-gardes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also previously by G.W.F. Hegel in the *Aesthetics*, which guides us toward knowledge of the essential qualities of phenomena.

In the end, the relationship between *complex and simple* in architecture is not so different from the relationship between *phenomenon and essence* in philosophy. Two aspects of reality that *are not opposed* but linked to each other by a relationship of *mutual necessity*.

In any case, we can see how the reaction to *simplification as impoverishment* could arise from the **opposition** to functionalism. Just consider the magazine "Oppositions" (New York, 1973/1984), the relationship of continuity between Robert Venturi and Peter Eisenman, editor of the magazine, the rise of a series of movements, from the **postmodern** to **deconstructivism**, that spring from the "opposition" to that Modern Movement that had degenerated into the International Style (Paolo Portoghesi, *Dopo l'architettura moderna*, Bari 1980).

With respect to the Modern Movement, this opposition denies *any finality of forms*, challenging the idea of thinking of the project as an act with any purpose other than *reproduction* of the complexity of the real. This complexity is seen as **irreducible**, and architecture is seen as its direct expression.

So an **architecture of complexity** comes to the fore (*Eisenman Inside Out: Selected Writings 1963–1988*, Yale University Press. New Haven-London 2004) that rejects any simplification.

An architecture that **proceeds through contrasts**, that considers *the principle of contradiction* an escape route from any functionalist causality (Franco Purini, *Comporre l'architettura*, Bari-Rome 2000). Or a **narrative architecture** that makes complexity the object of an *endless story* (Pietro Derossi, *Per una architettura narrativa*, Milan 2000).

It should be recognized that the Modern Movement, as a whole, has not managed or not been able to renew itself starting from its most authentic roots, those that entrust knowledge of the real in all its complexity to **reason**, assigning architecture the task of representation of its meanings.

But this is not true of all the masters of the Modern Movement. There are 20<sup>th</sup>-century works in which the recognizability of the *emotional nucleus that generates them* is loud and clear. Works that sweep away any functionalist misunderstandings, works that are made **monumental** by the *simplification of forms*.

In the Modern Movement there is a viewpoint rooted in **classical thought**, perhaps the only thought that over time has produced a **theory of design**, seen as a *meditation* on the *aims of architecture* and on the *modes of its construction* (Antonio Monestiroli, *La Metopa e il Triglifo*, Bari-Rome 2002).

### The reasons behind the crisis

Why has the research not continued in this direction? Why has architecture given up on any

theory capable of giving rise to a new phase of modernity? Fundamentally there are two reasons, one external to the discipline, the other internal.

The first has to do with an overall transformation of the culture of time. From the time of **industrial production**, in which the notion of construction was assigned a profound, *even epic* meaning, that of **construction of the world**, we have moved on to the time of **communication** and of the resulting **hegemony of images**.

In this passage, architecture too has been reduced to *pure image*, simultaneously reproduced all over the world by the media of information and communication.

Reality as a whole is interpreted through the images it produces. In the processes of knowledge of reality, what is lacking is any analysis of the relationships of **cause and effect**.

Together with the notion of **construction**, the notion of the **project** also loses its importance. The architectural project is no longer a *project of transformation of reality*. The **hope** of a better world is no longer its constituent reason.

The project, deprived of an ideal character, becomes a way of reproducing reality as it presents itself, in its most immediate garb. The reason behind the project becomes the **reproduction** of what already exists.

But what remains of architecture, and of art in general, if they are deprived of the **hope for a better world**? That world in which *it is necessary to believe, for once*, as Ludovico Quaroni says (*La torre di Babele*, Padua 1967). What remains of the extraordinary definitions of architecture of Edoardo Persico, **substance of things hoped** (Edoardo Persico, *Profezia dell'architettura*, 1935 in: *Scritti critici e polemici*, Milan 1947), or of Ernesto Nathan Rogers, **utopia of reality?** (various authors, *L'utopia della realtà*, Bari 1965).

Any utopia is buried, any **idealism mistaken for ideology**, that ideology accused of having ossified the research of the modern architects.

But idealism and ideology are not synonyms. Architecture without any ideals loses its main reason for being constructed.

From the period of the *critique of functionalism* we have thus moved on to the *supremacy of language* as production of images. The language is oriented toward visible forms of the world: the world of natural, technical and historical forms, taken as *separate forms of reference* that produce *languages analogous* to them.

In particular, when *construction* loses its global value and is reduced to mere *technological research*, technical forms are seen as *necessary solutions*, to the point of deserving acknowledgment of an *autonomous value*. The *modes of construction* gradually become more important than *what is constructed*. This, at least, is the viewpoint of those who avoid the complexity of the project in order to approach only one part, that of its technical construction, making it into a *virtuoso exercise* to gain competitive advantage on the world construction market.

We can say similar things about the new naturalists, those who take natural forms as their only model of reference, enlarging them and complicating them beyond bounds, or the new historicists, who are reluctant to accept the fact that historical forms *cannot be imitated*.

In classical thought, architecture is constructed by looking at nature, technique and history as three *united and necessary* worlds of reference. Architecture takes its cue from nature, becomes concrete through construction, and comes to terms with history. Instead, the separation of these three major systems of reference has led to **separate languages** that have caused an effect of *disbanding* of the architectural form.

Reality is taken as it presents itself, in its most immediate appearance, without subjecting it to critique, without that *process of reduction* that characterizes the knowledge of the finest architects of the Modern Movement. **Appearance** takes over and tends to replace the identity of buildings. The text by Rem Koolhaas *Delirious New York* (New York 1978) is the most direct evidence of the hegemony of reality in its pure, overwhelming state of appearance.

And here the circle closes, after a route that started with the defense of the complexity of the real, and winds up by making us recognize only its apparent forms.

The second reason behind the crisis of theory during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has to do with the **architecture-city** relationship, which changed profoundly in the wake of World War II.

The relationship between buildings and the contexts of historical cities was completely altered by the **new size** of settlements, the radical transformation of infrastructures, the new relationship between **open spaces and constructed spaces** that, as Giuseppe Samonà asserts, is no longer a relationship between two recognizable entities, the city and the country, but an overlapping of realities that intersect each other, creating a completely new landscape in which architecture can play a decisive role.

This new urban reality, which ought to suggest new modes of construction of architecture, seems to reject any relationship with it, or seems to accept architecture as a vehicle of information, a surface for advertising images.

Let's compare three books published from 1966 to 1972 that analyze the relationship between architecture and the city: *L'architettura della città* by Aldo Rossi (Padua 1966), *Il territorio dell'architettura* by Vittorio Gregotti (Milan 1966) and *Learning from Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi (MIT, Cambridge 1972). Three completely different ways of defining the relationship between architecture and the city.

The first sees urban form as the result of a historical process, a store of the civil values of a society. A position that approaches the theme of **urban structure** and sets the objective of knowing its **laws of formation**. Aldo Rossi sees the *forma urbis* as the context of reference of architecture and the source of the constituent elements of its formation.

The second approaches the theme of the *architecture-territory* relationship, of the role of architecture in a territorial context with new dimensions, introducing the notion of **landscape as figure**, while making reference to the *theories of perception* whose leading exponent, at the time, was Kevin Lynch.

The title of the very influential text by Lynch *The Image of the City* (MIT, Cambridge 1960) introduces, at the start of the 1960s, a term (image) that does not belong to architecture and triggers a procedure of **interpretation of the landscape** (and of the architecture that is a part of it) **through images**.

This was just the beginning of a process that would radically alter the relationship between architecture, its knowledge and its construction. A process lucidly described by Venturi in his *Learning from Las Vegas* and further developed in the years to follow.

The focus shifts away from the *body of architecture* that Giuseppe Samonà, but also Saverio Muratori, see as inseparably connected to the city (Giuseppe Samonà, *L'urbanistica e l'avvenire della città negli stati europei*, Bari 1959). Attention is no longer paid to the constituent laws of the urban form discussed by Carlo Aymonino (*Origini e sviluppo della città moderna*, Padua 1965), or to the purpose, the modes of construction, the character of buildings and the places they contribute to define.

In the end, even the city is reduced to **mere appearance**. Las Vegas and Manhattan are the two urban realities utilized as examples, two realities that impose their immediate form.

### Toward a new rationalism.

From the architectural research of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is possible, then, to extract two continuously conflicting positions.

One position sees architecture as **knowledge of reality**, constructed based on the reasons that produced it, with the aim of making those reasons recognizable in the construction.

This position is linked to the **rationalism** that belongs to the entire classical heritage of architecture, with its *stated objectives, displayed modes of construction*, and works that *adhere to those objectives and modes*. Evidence of the development of this position exists, and is useful to continue to research. We can state that this position has produced a **theory of rational architecture**.

A second position, antithetical to the first, believes in the need to stay close to reality in its continuous state of becoming, in its mutable complexity, or we might say in its **phenomenic particularity**. Accepting this particularity as adhesion to reality taken as an **irreducible** given, to avoid the risk of losing the richness that particularity contains.

The first position sets out to make a **critique** of reality itself, to extract essential, constituent aspects that stand out from more ephemeral or accidental aspects. Often this position comes into conflict with the reality it knows, a fertile, productive conflict that permits deeper knowledge, that *goes beyond pure visibility*.

The two positions show us a conflict between **phenomenon and essence, particular and general**. Their reciprocal accusations are of *abstraction as separation from the real*, on one side, and of *acritical acceptance of reality* on the other.

This opposition, which I would like to see in a positive light as an expression of a problematic area rooted in the reality of our time, can be resolved only by implementing a procedure that permits the **passage from the particular dimension of phenomena to the general dimension**, from the perception of the appearance of things to the knowledge of their essential qualities.

A procedure that makes it possible to lose nothing of the richness of reality, but at the same time one that is not limited to monitoring and acritical acceptance of reality's apparent manifestations. A position capable of investigating the **structure of the real** and of constructing upon it a new, modern *architecture of reality*.

This will be for those who believe that architecture is *knowledge of the reason behind buildings*, that *reason* that links architecture to our real life, and which is represented in clear, intelligible ways.

I would like to conclude this note on theory in architecture with the words of Le Corbusier: *Evidemment le problème est, à travers les complexités, d'atteindre à la simplicité. A travers les destructions de la vie, de poursuivre un rêve éperdu: non pas celui de rester jeune, mais celui de devenir jeune* (Le Corbusier, introduction to the *Oeuvre complete 1952–57*, Zurich 1956).