Antonio Monestiroli*

"THE WONDER OF ELEMENTARY THINGS"
(BORGES)

„CUD RZECZY PROSTYCH" [1]
Architektura, moim zdaniem, to kształt rzeczywistości. Jeden z możliwych kształtów, poprzez który wyraża się rzeczywistość. I odwrotnie – rzeczywistość ma swój własny kształt, swoją własną „architekturę", poprzez którą poznajemy siebie i świat, który nas otacza.

I think architecture is a form of reality, one of the possible forms in which reality represents itself. Vice versa, we can say that reality has its own form, its own "architecture", through which we can know about ourselves and the world in which we live.

Reality is everything we can observe, from our point of view or that of others. It is to a great extent independent of us, even existing before us, prior to our thoughts and actions.

I find that recognizing a certain separation between us and reality is something that comes with maturity. It enables us to observe reality, and ourselves, since we are a part of reality, from a certain distance, recognizing its *secret magic*. The reading of just one novel will suffice to learn how to see one's life from a vantage point located outside of it. I will return to this point later.

When I was a boy I was so immersed in reality that I wasn't able to know it. I can say that I endured it. Only theater gave me the sensation that a more objective, more knowable reality existed, and this made me happy, it comforted me somehow.

I remember that in my youth I had a passion for the theater of Goldoni. Not so much the Goldoni of the masks, but the one who put everyday life on stage, displaying it in a light that was capable, as Goldoni himself put it, of *making the caprice of a governess become eternal*. It cast a spell on me: the ability to transform a passing fancy into a *cha-racter* that seemed to have always existed, eternally. The happiness that type of theater gave me was due, I think, to this suspension of the time of our life, of my adolescent life, still so full of fears. It was due to the fact that this theater showed me my everyday life *from outside*, showed me every gesture as part of a story that had its own duration in time. My life, seen through theater, took on *its own duration in time.* Otherwise everything passes, leaving no trace, and that frightens us.

After theater came cinema. The cinema of Alfred Hitchcock, first, and then Robert Altman, confirmed and widened this sensation of the *theatrical nature of every-day life*. One excellent, direct example of this viewpoint on the world is the *facade of the neighboring building* in the film "Rear Window" 1954, where lights are turned on and off in many windows, which like so many screens frame stories that are different from one another, but all similar to our stories. In all of Hitchcock's films there is an observer who shows us reality from his or her vantage point, making it somehow objective and, as in the theater of Goldoni, lasting in time.

Robert Altman accomplishes a similar operation with editing. In his beautiful film "Short Cuts" 1993, he assembles pieces of real stories, complete in themselves. The spectator is an outside observer who, thanks to the editing, is never involved, maintaining the necessary detachment to know what the stories are telling.

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In an interview Altman has said that unlike television, where the spectator suffers because reality is shown without intermediaries, in all its dramatic becoming, in cinema, or in his cinema, the spectator does not suffer because he sees the characters suffering, and therefore attains the detachment necessary to know. The detachment necessary to avoid being snared by the tales, to go *beyond their particularities.*

The short stories of Raymond Carver, on which Altman's film is based, work precisely with this detachment that allows the writer to tell his story in a merciless way, because the suffering is entirely in the characters, leading the reader toward the final precipice Carver has been aware of from the start. Carver says he learned this lesson from Chekhov.

As I said, *the necessary detachment*, which makes it possible to put reality in the story, to widen its time and meaning, to grasp its lasting aspects, the ones of more general value.

After cinema, painting. The realism of Edward Hopper allows me to make one last observation on this subject. We know that Hopper worked for some time as an illustrator for a newspaper. Looking at his paintings, we can see from their organization that they are always very close to the model depicted. Of course his paintings go well beyond mere illustration. But what distinguishes painting from illustration? The answer comes from Hopper himself, in an interview, when he says that the distinction is a matter of *light.* Light is the revealing element. Hopper says reality can be seen when *light is shed upon it*. Otherwise knowledge of reality is impossible.

This important and simple operation of *shedding light* on something belongs to theater, cinema, painting and, of course, architecture. The light illuminates surrounding reality and reveals aspects of it that seem to have been previously unknown to us.

A curious fact: Hitchcock had a passion for Hopper, so much so that he used one of his paintings as a model for the isolated house in the film Psycho.

Reality is nature, and also our nature; reality is the constructed world, made by architecture or otherwise; reality is the institutions that regulate our civil life; reality is the technology that produces our ways of living, etc. Reality, in short, is the world in which we live, with its structure and history, its past and present. We can imagine its future.

At this point, after this long introduction, we have to ask ourselves in what way architectural design establishes a relationship with reality.

First we need to say *why* architectural design relates to reality, and whether it has any possibilities other than this one. We must recognize the fact that today there are also different viewpoints that consider it possible to construct architecture as an *escape from reality,* as the construction of one or many alternative realities. An architecture that springs from a certain rejection of reality.

I say this to underline the fact that taking account of reality, in architectural design, is not an obligatory condition, but a *choice*. A choice of thinking that, I believe, belongs to a certain current of architecture, that of classical architecture, and then of rational architecture.

Naturally in order to take this route we have to acknowledge the fact that reality, as a whole, possesses *richness and complexity.* It is necessary to know how to look at reality, every time, as if it were the first time, *with the wonder provoked by unexpected things*. Reality, therefore, not as a habit, but as continuous discovery.

This is a sentiment that permits us to look at the world with a sense of wonder, just the opposite of those who see realism as being inured to the appearance of things.

So the problem becomes how to know the reality that surrounds us.

Starting with the distinction between essence and appearance, between what is constant and lasting and what is variable and fleeting.

There is no separation between essence and appearance, nor should they be seen as alternatives.

Knowledge comes *through the passage* from the appearance of things to their essence, through the principle of *abstraction*, a rational process that brings to light – as we were saying – the essence of the real (an essence that is always historical, that is always linked to the historical conditions of the process of knowledge and, therefore, is neither eternal nor immutable).

So a relationship to reality does not mean acritical adherence to the forms of the real as they present themselves to our experience; it means a relationship with a reality that is the result of our knowledge. This is what interests me: the extraordinary complexity that comes to light through knowing reality, which transforms a passive condition with respect to external reality (as I experienced it when I was a boy) into an activity that reveals its *values* and its *meanings.*

We can therefore understand why those who do not come to terms with this research, and stop short at the apparent insignificance of reality, tend to reject it or to construct (with fantasy) continuous alternatives. There are many architects who seek *alternative worlds,* building forms that distance us from reality, a kind of *architecture of escape* that then, paradoxically, becomes commercial architecture.

Instead, the objective is to represent, with the forms of architecture, the reason of a building, the deepest reason, which is not always easy to discover.

This will to represent distinguishes architecture from any other construction. A building can simply be built, or it can be built in *forms that represent its reason for being*.

This choice connects us to the reality to which the building belongs. For example, the design of a house, a theater, a museum, etc., all places for activities that belong to our real life, must be constructed in forms that represent the reality of the house, the theater, the museum. This reality should be investigated, as I said earlier, not by sticking with the conventional forms of these buildings, but by also shedding light on *unknown reasons* for the existence of these buildings in the present, *implementing* those reasons through architecture.

So architecture *implements* the reason of buildings. Reasons that belong to reality; the architect does not invent them, and he certainly doesn't impose them. The designer, if he is capable, *brings them to light.* Just as Hopper sheds light on the reality he depicts.

I do not know how many architects are working in this direction today. It is clear that many contemporary designs of houses, theaters and museums pay no attention to the reasons behind the buildings they construct, but *attribute* to those buildings reasons that are not properly theirs. We can say it again: *commercial reasons.*

To paraphrase Loos, I mean that when a generation of architects capable of making architecture *in agreement with reality and knowledge* emerges, a new architecture will be born in which everyone will recognize a new culture. Today, what I have called *architecture of escape* or commercial architecture*,* in order to survive, produces forms that age quickly, because they correspond to nothing in reality.

Deeper reasons, I was saying, meaning essential reasons that are implemented through simple, clear forms. And here I will repeat a concept I never tire of

repeating: the *simplicity* of forms is useful for the recognition of the *complexity* of what they represent, for the recognition of their identity.

This complexity is revealed through forms, it becomes recognizable, and when we recognize it we learn about ourselves.

This is the aim of art, as of science. This, for me, is also the ultimate goal of architecture.

When Marx, the philosopher, in the "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts", says: *"man contemplates himself in a world that he has created"*, he means that work is a mode of knowledge. This is particularly true in the case of architecture. Marx wrote that phrase in 1844. Three years after the death of Schinkel, thirteen years after the death of Hegel, who said some extraordinary things about architecture.

As his point of reference of classical architecture, Hegel takes *the house.* The house (built by man for ends that belong closely to him, using forms in which he recognizes himself) is the prime example of architecture as self-knowledge. And it also contains the objective of every project, that of seeking the form that represents the meaning of what is built with the project. That meaning in which we recognize ourselves and our culture.

The house, according to Hegel, is built for ends that belong to the life of man*. Its beauty consists in its response to those purposes, and in the transfiguring into beauty of what is simply responsive.*

Our job is to make this respondency recognizable.

In all these years I have not been able to find a more convincing, more necessary objective than this one. Every other, as I have glimpsed in the many other trends that have passed over time, seems to be of little interest.

In architecture, I think realism is the only possible choice.

I insist on saying that all classical architecture, ancient or modern, is realist architecture. It starts from reality, from its problems, its contradictions and aspirations, and constructs architecture as representation of a better reality, a *concretely possible* reality. Realism and the classic have always been connected by a common program.

Realism involves knowledge of reality and "*the revealing of its magic"*, as Borges would say. This is the extraordinary aspect of this trend of thinking: it approaches reality as an endless source of knowledge, as the place of **infinitely many discoveries.**

So the imagination comes into play. In this procedure the imagination allows us to go beyond the appearance of things, to find similarities between formal worlds and cognitive processes, to construct forms that are analogous to our cognitive processes. Without imagination any procedure of induction, the formulation of an idea and of forms suitable for its representation, would be impossible. Imagination is a necessary practice for realism, without it realism would simply be an act of conforming to the banality of the real, not a cognitive process.

Nevertheless, we should repeat that imagination (in realism) is applied to reality in order to know it, not to escape it. Imagination not of worlds extraneous to our life, then, but of a world in which the meanings of our life are revealed.

On this subject, Ignazio Gardella offers an excellent example. Speaking of the limits of imagination, he says: *they are like those of an acrobat who can perform all movements but one: he cannot throw his arm into the air. Unless he has an artificial arm, that is».* Gardella was a realist architect in the proper sense of the term. He believed in imagination, in its total freedom, against any dogma, as he said. He believed in an imagination concretely directed toward

knowing the nature of human beings and of the world they have built.

The project of a cemetery in Voghera.

Finishing the construction of a project that began eight years earlier brings with it a sensation of fulfillment, not only for having completed the work, but also for having kept faith with a commitment made with a series of precise, detailed drawings. The drawings contained all the information required for the construction (as in many other projects). We made a wooden model, and with the drawings and the model we got very close to the qualities of the project that were recognized and discussed when it was published.

Then the construction, which began two years after the project (1997) and was completed recently, revealed other characteristics that were all contained, in hidden form, in the drawings, but not recognizable before the work was built.

First of all, the size of the courtyard. The three sides of the courtyard are composed of two volumes of different heights; the lower volume, containing the burial niches, protrudes with respect to the upper, creating two levels, one further forward than the other. In this way the three sides of the courtyard are defined by the lower, inward volumes, in which a thousand white stone plaques are set, reflecting the sunlight, making the courtyard look larger than it does in the drawings. We should also add that the three sides of the courtyard face a reflecting pool that flows slowly around a central lawn. The stones are reflected in the water and the reflected light dematerializes the borders of the courtyard, dilating it even more. The fact that visitors must follow particular paths to cross the reflecting pool –which otherwise prevents the approach to the stones- at certain points creates unexpected vantage points for the courtyard, which in the drawing appears static. The unexpected position of the ossarium, a large portal that leads visitors inside the enclosure, complicates the symmetry of the place, focusing attention toward that point.

The bright stones reflected in the water are aimed toward all the citizens, who know that each of them corresponds to a tomb. In the courtyard the stones are all equal, marked by a cross engraved at the center, but each of them corresponds to a second stone, facing toward the inner galleries, the place of worship for family members. The second stone contains the distinctive characteristics of the person, making it recognizable. The double stone, one facing toward the city, one toward the family, makes it possible to establish a different relationship between the citizens and the place of the dead: on the one hand, citizens can recognize, in that place, a unified sentiment regarding death; on the other, relatives and family can have a unique relationship with each tomb. Two indispensable aspects of devotion for the dead. The ossarium is built with the same principle of the two stones, one facing the city, the other facing the family. Here again the construction revealed a surprise in terms of scale. The different size of the stones, much smaller than those of the niches, seems to distance this building from the courtyard. It is a perspective effect that is not fully predictable based on the drawing.

Walking in the courtyard all these factors combine, ad the result is a large setting, open to the city and the countryside, which meet at this point.

The aspect of illusion of the setting is accentuated by the movement of the water and the reflections that barely move the image of the thousand stones, each bearing witness to the presence of a tomb. A real presence, nurtured inside the galleries by the care supplied by relatives, but evident from the outside in the multiplication of images that all confirm the sentiment entrusted to this place: a sentiment of respect for the place of burial

So we return to the wonder mentioned at the beginning.

The wonder of which Borges speaks, *the wonder distilled from elementary things*. Wonder is the sentiment that allows us to recognize the magic of the real. The capacity for wonder belongs to all the artists who draw on reality for their art, that see their art as knowledge and representation of reality. Architecture is implementation of reality and staging of its meanings. With architecture it is possible to evoke that magic that is hidden in our life, which architecture makes visible and lasting in time.

I would like to conclude with the words of Roberto Calasso on this theme: "*Magic has been slandered. First of all by all those who have equated it with creation, thinking that creation operates* ex nihilo."

Then Calasso quotes from Kafka (the Diaries): *"Life's splendor forever lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off. It is there, though, not hostile, not reluctant, not deaf. If you summon it by the right word, by its right name (for our discussion, with the right forms), it will come. This is the essence of magic, which is not created, but called."*

The sea

Before our human dream (or terror) wove
Mythologies, cosmogonies and love,
Before time coined its substance into days,
The sea, the always sea, existed. was.
Who is the sea? Who is that violent being,
Violent and ancient, who gnaws the foundations
Of earth? He is both one and many oceans;
He is abyss and splendour, chance and wind.
Who looks on the sea, sees it the first time,
Every time, with the wonder distilled
From elementary things-from beautiful
Evenings, the moon, the leap of a bonfire.
Who is the sea, and who am I? The day
That follows my last agony shall say.
<div align="right">Jorge Luis Borges 1899–19"</div>

Translated by John Updike in Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems* 1923–1967, (c) Penguin Books 1965.

PRZYPISY

[1] Por. Jorge Luis Borges, *Morze*, tłumaczenie K. Jeżewski, [w:] „Kontakt" nr 7/8, 1991, s. 37.