

Paola Rizzi, Lorenzo Cotti\*

## LA BEAUTÉ...

### LA BEAUTÉ...

Zagadnienia architektury, rozumianej jako jedność z urbanistyką, mają swoje źródło w wykształceniu. W naszej profesji, niezmiennie pozostającej w kruchej równowadze między teorią a praktyką, wykształcenie oznacza szkołę.

Zanim powiemy coś o pięknie otaczającego nas świata trzeba powiedzieć coś o projekcie, a zatem o jego szkole. Należałoby, parafrazując tytuł artykułu Maxa Frischa, zacząć od pytania: „kto wam daje szkołę?”

Saying something about the beauty of the contemporary architecture implies or should imply, or could pre-suppose that

1 contemporary beauty means that it is of the present day

2 contemporary beauty means that it belongs to us, in an intimate manner and let's add that it has inter-national value.

Thus in the present day beauty would be an inner characteristic which crosses various differences - ethnic, cultural, social, temperamental...

But it seems to us that one day it did not appear that way (confused): there was French beauty, Italian beauty, Polish beauty and so on. These kinds of beauty corresponded to, or rather were a product of, certain taste. And so there was French taste, Italian taste, Polish taste etc.

In these domains the Swiss have always had problems (a nation composed of three ethnoses, and therefore three tastes and three beauties).

On this subject a fine essay, *Nationalisme et internationalisme dans l'architecture moderne de la Suisse*, written in 1975 by Jacques Gubler, explains how the Swiss managed to have a national style: simply by inventing national taste, common beauty (...).

It occurred fairly recently, in Geneva, at the occasion of the national exposition in 1898.

The widespread phenomenon of national expositions, of commercial nature, which is often disguised with taste of discovery and adventure, in Swiss case is enriched with the question of national identity, visibly in crisis.

Read today, the essay by Jacques Gubler, rather than a book about Switzerland, seems to be a text about contemporary, about contemporaneity, about formation, thoroughly political, of national taste, and thus about giving to the whole nation the right key for interpretation, but also for identity: this is what we are like. Therefore this is what we do like, and this is the right thing whereas the one that is different is wrong, etc.

Can *giving the right key for interpretation* be understood in its most ironic form?

In historical perspective this proceeding seems absolutely correct to us. Taste & beauty have always been supervised by the authority, who, being a single person, the king, or a king, dictated the rules. Prince's architect had, literally, a prince behind the back, and architect was all but executor of his views.

After the kings were gone, taste & beauty became more than ever a contemporary problem, hence, according to what is written above, of an intimate nature, and here intimate would correspond to national...

\* Cotti Lorenzo, arch., Locarno.

Rizzi Paola, urbanista, prof. universitario, Università di Sassari, Facoltà di Architettura di Alghero.



House of Antonio Calderara, Vacciago; *Maternity*, Antonio Calderara, 1969



Nevertheless if we take the couple *nationalism* and *internationalism*, as Jacques Gubler did, we could easily translate the dualism of *nationalism – internationalism* into *modern – contemporary*.

But we would have to digress from the subject, maybe to define or to specify the terms *modern* and *contemporary* as historical periods (most of all in regard to *modern*).

As far as we are concerned here, we will say that the two periods are clearly different.

They are different in their approach to the temporal or formal question; they have different characteristics which allow us to distinguish them, sometimes straining the differences, as we always have to do when we put things into categories.

Maybe we believe that the distinction lies in the presence of a territory, understood in physically or not (politics, knowledge, society...).

Contemporary architecture demonstrates that it doesn't have a territory any more, at least its own territory.

An example is the fact that many times the designers don't even carry out inspections of the places when they participate in a contest, this is an aspect which is getting more and more characteristic in the world of making architecture; and frankly we could well ask ourselves if the juries themselves are aware of the state of affairs, of the surroundings: the context.

If this architecture of ours hasn't got (a) territory any more, it has a difficulty to be in order, or to have an order, or even to follow orders, in the architectonic sense, but not only this. It could introduce an explanation of why the architecture is in a convulse search of the consent, and that is the reason why it is so widely discussed everywhere.

This consent seems to be obtained only by iteration, therefore the search for a definition of the architectonic form, by work of formalism, which makes it recognisable. The recognisability is its quality ("beautiful... but mistaken!") because this is where the

consent arises, or rather where it finds its commercial consent, or its mediatic consent.

So it is about a formal consent, therefore a-critical, a-territorial, a-contextual. Nevertheless mediatic and mediatizable.

What's more, it is about constructions that, imitating some contemporary politicians, put on shoes with high heels to seem higher.

But all these, the high heels, the problem of consent, they all may be a part of a chronicle, which goes by quickly, in convulsions and with certain regularity. The chronicle is marked with deaths and births. Generally the deaths are violent and often they happen in infancy because of the lack or collapse of the consent.

This is due to a social form which in many aspects is closing, re-hierarchising. Probably in order to regain social control.

Also contemporary architecture suffers from being conceived and considered in this hierarchisable manner, like a tree, but "a beauty is not a tree" ("a city is not a tree").

It is the title of an essay by Christopher Alexander from 1965, *A City Is Not a Tree*. Alexander criticises the abstract structure of a tree, in which each part interacts with the whole through a hierarchy of a branched-hierarchical-pyramidal type, according to the logic of a tree and/or also according to a direct cause=consequence relationship. Alexander talks about a city which he calls "natural", the one which have arisen over many years, organising itself as a "semi-lattice", that is as an open structure: the elements are linked in a criss-cross way, in various systems of interrelations. The critique is made on the main points of the modern/modernist design which aims at the separation of functions, while a "semi-lattice" structure allows an open system with numerous and undefined connections.

Beauty, city, architecture, design may be terms which can be united in a single "semi-lattice". In this

semilattical state, the state in which the relationships are even becoming redundant, permeable and a bit anarchoid. Should beauty & architecture be put in competition with the system of consent, the latter will win. The failure of beauty & architecture means that the semilattice is impeded, it stiffens, it turns into a tree.

We believe that in a way this is our time, we are right there where, among other things, the consciousness of the fact that we are all part of a single ecosystem, is kind of lost.

Also architectonic problems, in which architecture is understood in continuity with urban planning, are deriving from education, in fact for our profession, continuously in precarious balance between theory and practice, education means school.

We believe that in order to say something about the beauty of the constructed world, we have to talk about the project and therefore about its school. Maybe it would be good to start with a reflection – paraphrasing the title of an article by Max Frisch – “who gives you a lesson?” where the school is an integral part of the project.

The project is pervasive and enlarged, but who gives life, stimulus and food to the project? And what is the scale for this project? Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, less inquiring than Frisch, saying „on dirait que l’hom-

me est destiné à s’exterminer lui-même après avoir rendu le globe inhabitable” (1820) presupposes that there may exist a plan to make the earth inhabitable.

This exterminatory plan is given, by definition, by the school (and by who else?), and in our case by the schools of architecture because they are concerned with planning for the living.

Already Vitruvius, writing about the architecture, expresses the need of a unitary project, as synthesis and a meeting point, and not by chance he wrote it in the preface.

This concept of synthesis is what is missing today: the excessive attention paid to the architecture and its sign and the quality of a “global project” which is the aim of the architect designer, figure introduced already by Vitruvius in his work.

And Samonà, Sicilian, who in coherence with his concept of the unity architecture/urban planning courageously picks up again in the sign of his school the Vitruvian triad, which not by chance disappeared nowadays. Perhaps this triad disappeared as a symbol of a broad articulation of knowledge and of the figure of the architect as its synthesiser.

Synthesis that we apply, to come back to the title and to close, maybe without the general consent, contemplating the dadaist citation by Marcel Janco: „la beauté c’est de la merde”.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ch. Alexander, *Note sulla sintesi della forma*, Milano, 1967.  
 J. Gubler, *Nationalisme et internationalisme dans l’architecture moderne de la Suisse*, Lausanne 1975.

