

THE IMMEUBLE CITÉ

Architecture is subject to political authority; architects comply, explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously. Those who oppose the rule of authority find themselves unable to build: confined to the symbolic realm of the imagination, they can only project by conjecture and propose surrogate models. Their propositions (often labeled 'paper architecture') belong to a particular category that has formed a significant part of architectural history and are always predicated on alternative political ideologies. Often they are harbingers of the future.

There is a conspicuous feeling of restlessness and discontent, growing within the architectural community of today, as it has started to sense that the current political and economic policies of globalisation are breeding an architectural *culture* that contributes to a polluting environmental cycle: a prospect that threatens our survival; as a consequence, a large number of architects are beginning to observe that the most celebrated examples of this culture are emblems of a looming environmental threat: with values shaped by the necessities of the market, these examples are perceived as self-indulgent and self-celebratory 'icons' that are oblivious of and harmful to their context.

But while the fashionable architectural production begins to appear polluting, the very idea of the city, and that of architecture as *instrument* of the city remain elusive. On the one hand, the city itself is dissolving within the sea of *urbanization*, the generic habitat of absolute individualism. On the other hand, architecture seems to have become the exclusive domain of market forces.

By now, the statistics of urbanization growth have replaced the metropolitan consciousness that once formed the urban ideals of the great metropolis - and the city has become a mall, where pluralism and diversity are the features of its form. But architectural Form is the product of fabrication and sense of belonging to an idea that is incarnated in the city and its collective spaces. And today, as the loft of the middle-class, the city is the space of mass servitude to an existence nurtured by the market.

The phenomenon of urbanization does not exemplify an idea of human cohabitation; it is merely the methodical distribution of population on the territory, devoid of any social or political advantage: and in the current architectural jargon, the tendency to confuse the term 'Urbanization' with the City hides a symptom of post-modern culture that sees the city as an aesthetic category, applicable everywhere.

What syndrome afflicts us?

Dizzy from a cruel century of political turmoil and confusion, our insight into the relative values of architecture is deformed by an unprecedented disorder of bewildering contradictions, bigoted indoctrination and hypnotic conditioning, to all of which we have become the unconscious prisoners. In reappraising the priorities of our thinking as architects, we have blocked from our consciousness the fact that the essence of architecture's intrinsic

uniqueness is its *form*: that our primary concern must be the relative and pertinent use of form, its significance as well as its appropriateness to our public existence - and within the context of a political ideal.

It is peculiar how, in the framework of our profession's accepted wisdom, all this engenders a generic sense of *fear* to confront, rethink and modify our immobilized and conditioned reflexes.

The debate within the architectural discourse of today persistently revolves around a preoccupation with aesthetics: it is essentially all about unacknowledged 'aesthetic' anxieties, albeit against assertions to the contrary - and behind a pseudo-scientific pragmatic façade - a near-paranoia that has become a gloomy demonstration of deluded claims. In the name of analytical thoroughness it always comes down to a discussion of style, of big or small, 'human' or eccentric, 'original' or clichéd, modernist or post-modernist, fashionable or outmoded, with all the fears that this engenders.

It is a syndrome we have been handed down, I believe, by the fear of facing the paradox of our present day reality: the paradox of our unresolved conflict between democracy (as a publicly administered decision-making process) and our idea of democracy, or, our blind belief in the rights (and absolute power) of the *individual*. In other words, it comes down to our refusal to confront the paradox of pluralism, our surrender to liberalist tyranny. Prisoners to the predicament of the free market, we find ourselves uninvolved - and in a bind that immobilises our ability to decide; and architectural form is the object of absolute decision. Ultimately, within this realm of paradoxes, our desire to appear 'politically correct' and with a 'human' face, while subconsciously compelling us to submit to the pressure of the market morals, it manipulates our minds into renouncing the elemental principle of architecture, namely that it is (and has always been) in itself and by definition, like religion and ideology, a despotic and dogmatic enterprise; in our self-effacing and politically correct false modesty, we claim that architecture is *not* a top-down pursuit, as if it is a lay responsibility to inform us about it, or as if it can be devised by protocol, or 'designed' by committee...

But architecture is not an amateur's pursuit and, by virtue of the inescapable public responsibility of the architect to conceive and impart it, as well as the very specificity of its training, it is (and is expected to be) categorically a disciplined, top-down activity, a blatant imposition on the public, as all specialisations are, like medicine, engineering, the sciences, etc.

Architecture is the science of 'built' form. Form is the carrier of beauty in human culture. No work of Art, from literature to music, has ever been possible without it. But beauty has become the intangible concept nobody *risks* to declare, let alone define - this, being one more flotsam in the ocean of our fears: it is a *conditioning* that, ever since we consigned beauty to the psychological realm of perception - or more precisely, the realm of aesthetics - has now ripened into full maturity. An "invention" of the Enlightenment, when "Nature" was re-perceived as the object of individual contemplative activity, *aesthetics*, together with "*economics*" has increased the allure of consumption and with it, *fashion*. In the process, our consciousness of a tangible idea of beauty has been lost in a world where everybody can be

self-indulgent, in a carefree celebration of the individual, to lavish care on one's own pleasure and without reference to others. This has been, in the main, the drive of Art for over a century now and it is the prominent affliction of Architecture today. It has been a retreat, from the *symbolic* realm of the intellect, to the concrete, earthly and perishable world of nature.

To experience and define beauty, we need to have recourse to the time when things were recognised as being invested with it because they were *the idealised representation of a collective faith*. Beauty is the representation of an *ideal*, a matter of conviction rather than 'perception'. Inextricably tied to our senses, perception invokes our private insecurities and our behavioral conditioning towards norms, rules, competition and survival. Conviction on the other hand, being the outcome of our thinking consciousness, is tied to principles and ideals evolved from within the *collective* sphere and in consequence, it is a stable commitment, understood and (at least in theory) shared by all: it is not a personal matter of individual 'taste'. It is only within this sphere that we can make responsible decisions; within this sphere, *conviction has a primordially political dimension* and beauty is unspoken as well as recognised; outside of it, it is indecipherable; within it, it is a historical fact.

Meanwhile the fate of cities today, is in the hands of those who maintain that our current status (Liberal Democracy) is the end-of-(city)-history and who claim that this hybrid process has finally had the conclusiveness of reconciling the individual with the collective, arguing that what works for one person works for everybody: a process where anything goes and where the possibility of critical judgment is denied.

The city is defined by opposition. Today this opposition is diluted and one can no longer talk of city and countryside as two distinct entities, as they hardly exist as such; what we have instead, is the latent opposition between 'cityness' - the appearance of a dense and shared space - and 'urbanization' - the territorial consumption made out of individual dwellings. In present-day Europe, which is so densely urbanized, this covert opposition could nevertheless be made overt and explicit, if the cities contracted into clearly articulated, *bounded and intensely dense territories, within which, much of the outlying sprawl could be absorbed*: a transaction that, under our current economic system and mental habit, is as unlikely as it may appear undesirable.

At this stage of geopolitical history however, it is clear that our illusion about the virtues of our post-democratic condition should be over; that it is a pastiche of Democracy, the power of a small oligarchy that detains power, eluding its responsibilities. The celebrated "informality" of our contemporary cities (sprawl, "bottom-up urbanism", "self-organization" and other similar mythologies) is in the majority of cases a Trojan Horse for the manipulative politics of urban exploitation: an informal exploitation that reinforces the power of the market, a power in which everybody is welcome to participate as consumer, while nobody is invited as arbiter.

In this respect, the task of rethinking the European city and its present-day reality, offers itself as fitting test bed for conjecturing new ideal models, albeit theoretical ones, where the relative and pertinent use of form, its significance and appropriateness to urban life, can be considered within the context of a *political* ideal. As European cities have by now lost their homogeneous cultural constitution, and have become the home to diverse communities with

multiple cultural, political and spiritual allegiances (physically exemplified by their heterogeneous clusters of distinct parts) they have become the sanctuary of a dormant (and often overt) *conflict*: and this is now, their defining factor.

But this conflict also exemplifies the potential of their collective consciousness, if seen not as social hardship to be remedied, negative confrontation that requires reconciliation, or alien infringement in need of integration and absorption by the indigenous, but as *positive tension*, a component of collective coexistence that reveals the cities' contemporary public structure and hence their formal appearance - and thus illustrating the way present-day Europe can recognize itself assertively. Such a reinvention of the idea of the city of today and the recognition of it as the essence of our urban reality, can lead to a re-examination of the idea of the contemporary city as *the place where differences and oppositions can co-exist pro-actively rather than be absorbed into one another*.

There is no way we can absorb, or be absorbed by "the other"; what we have to confront, is not a clash of civilisations, but a *civic and responsive enmity* that embraces *the irreducible property of difference*. It is always within such oppositions that we can recognise ourselves and it would be a salient sign of civilisation to acknowledge the city's conflict as a positive conflict of ideals: an existential struggle that ferments action and invests the city with its political distinctiveness: this could be called 'cityness', seen as the re-embodiment of the "vita activa" of Hannah Arendt, a condition that categorically transcends the domain of the 'common'. But it would require a qualitative upturn of our consciousness: and in the field of architecture, it would inevitably lead to a re-examination of the position of architectural form, within the hierarchy of its criteria and values; and in its role of circumscribing the city's vision, it would redefine the city as a constellation of ideals and an archipelago of centralities.

I believe that this is an ideological strategy that would reclaim the symbolic power of the city over the generic immanence of territorial appropriation: for in the present-day process of urbanization, we witness the gradual loss of any clear 'appearance' to the city, while older towns and villages are being gradually swallowed up by a relentless sprawl of private dwellings. On the one hand, historical distinctions between town (as a centre) and country (as the space between centres) are being eroded by this quagmire, and, on the other hand, the new settlers' "raison d'être" for this option (finding private seclusion in the serenity of the countryside) is being cancelled out, having become a self-defeating enterprise: environmentally, this inexorable process forms part of a broader entropy, the logical conclusion of which is the potential obliteration of life on the planet.

Therefore it seems to me that our present priority towards our Art - and our responsibility - is to anticipate by conjecture, a possible future that would be an alternative to the one whose consequences are implicit in the present state of uncontrolled urbanization and environmental decay.

As living conditions become more and more unbearable, it is inevitable that our mental habit will have to gradually change, with the luxury of private consumption withering away, in front of a painful realisation that life not only becomes unlivable, but is also threatened with obliteration. Our consciousness is already being roused to the apocalyptic danger we are

facing and it will have to gradually begin to consider radically new priorities: priorities that no doubt are alien - and may even be repugnant - to today's heavily conditioned and cosseted European dweller.

In the process, political circumstances will necessitate transformation. Without wishing to predict the form this will take, one thing seems certain: the processes of individualism and consumption at the expense of the collective - and of survival - will eventually no longer be possible and politics will not be sustainable as the by-product of the present, familiar, market motivated, capitalist economic system. Leaving aside the fundamental steps needed to check the entropy of global warming (and the political and economic reversals these will entail) and only by considering the quality of urban life, one can confidently conclude that what is city and what is not, will have to be (symbolically and physically) separated into two *distinct* - related, but juxtaposed ecologies. It seems inevitable that the need for cities to be confined into *limited*, coherent and clearly defined entities will become a capital political issue: city-limits will become a prerequisite to the integrity (and survival) of cities.

Nevertheless, this predicament could be the catalyst for a return to a genuine concern for the 'collective' and an enticement for the re-activation of a public domain in which the life of each member would become, by necessity, an active and conscious act of participation in a collective transaction: simply because without this essential mental transformation, a life of enforced coexistence would become untenable. In such a scenario, the City, instead of being merely a geographic place-name, could regain its eminence, not only as desirable centre, but also, given the application of an appropriate ideological, social and environmental vision, as a real form-place of unprecedented beauty.

It is this and similar scenarios that the architects of today should be prepared and in anticipation formulate the appropriate visions; moreover, they should renounce any drive towards the self-indulgence of the contemporary 'Star Architect', who, today, is no more than the slave of neo-liberalism's economic power, and whose realised work only contributes to the visual and environmental pollution this generates. Against the mania of over-designed buildings, it is urgent that we aspire to a radically simplified architecture: *an architecture without originality*, but an architecture that becomes strategic. An architecture that employs a common language, that is communicable, understood, accepted and observed by all, as it has always been throughout history: given the low level of importance granted to it by a recalcitrant public that is being treated as guinea pigs, architecture could, in this way become appreciated and valuable, both in the eyes the public and of itself: thus, an architecture that is more important and less self-important.

Against the present-day self-referential and narcissistic structures that are emblems of the market - such as 'landmarks' or the so-called "Iconic Buildings" - we could, in the meantime, consider the corrective instrumentality of architectural installations of unprecedented size, punctual, limited and simple large-scale urban forms - a kind of *topographic acupuncture with a big needle* - capable of absorbing the urbanization of the sprawl. These would be simple monumentalities that make their intention clear by means of their form (or the way their intention is instilled by the form) and their strategic positioning, as logical conclusions of the topographic dynamic and the social geography of the location, what I call *the intelligence of*

the place. These could respond to the need to either underscore-and-punctuate the *centralities* mentioned above by formally articulating them, or, by virtue of absorbing the sprawl, to act as landmarks that demarcate the cities' *limits*.

To the current and ever-present fear of one of our taboos: *monumentality* (a fear that can be added to the list of our insecurities) one can reciprocate with several arguments:

To begin with, the history of architecture, the knowledge and understanding of which is an essential prerequisite for architects, has been essentially a history of monuments; throughout history, big artifacts have always displayed the rituals of the city, symbolising urban life and exemplifying the property of "cityness", as defined above: a property that cannot be sustained under present day preconceptions, restrictions, rules and regulations – preconceptions that are blind to history and persist in retaining an aesthetic view of the city as exclusively frozen heritage.

Moreover, given the predicaments of the present, and assuming the necessity -for environmental reasons- to re-group the reciprocal entities of city and countryside (albeit an artificial countryside) into distinct and separate but interdependent ecologies, it seems logical that the *small footprint* that large populations would have to occupy, will necessitate structures that would acquire outside proportions.

Because of their very size, these structures would inevitably contain all the logistical, infrastructural and communal components of a city, and be thus (to paraphrase Le Corbusier) as "*immeubles-cités*", endowed with a pronounced public appearance: they would in fact be cities in the form of a building. For these reasons, they could be architectural symbols of a *resuscitated vision* of the city. As for the prospect of their image, this is offering a priceless opportunity for the architects' renewed symbolic imagination.

Reminiscent in scale and calling to mind of the austere and daring visions of the critical radicals of the 1960s in Europe, those prophetic harbingers, such as Superstudio, Archizoom, Cedric Price and Oswald Mathias Ungers, these would be pro-active and site-specific rather than Utopia oriented. Critical visions such as the Continuous Monument (1968), Oswald Mathias Unger's theoretical projects of 1963-69 for Berlin, or the Rossi-Meda-Polesello archetypal project of 1972 - the 'Centro Direzionale' for Torino, symbolically named Locomotiva 2; these were not simply affirming the autonomy of architecture as precondition of engagement with the city, but especially the possibility of using critical large-scale architectural interventions with which to formally enrich, while politically questioning the city and the forces that make it.

It is clear that in the present need for radical visions, any mark of Utopia in this scenario is not about Architecture; *it is about politics*. The big needle in the proposed urban acupuncture is required to represent both the public (institutional) and the private (collective) realms; such visions could be buildable, even today, *given the political will*. They are already needed; they simply do not rely on the precept of market opportunity. But for the time being, a lingering question emerges: what governs us today, *politics* (in the intrinsic meaning of the term) or economics?

In the meantime, projects engendered by the proposed '*immeuble-cité's*' strategy, would not need to invent programmes, or indeed rely on programmes; conceived as *paradigms* for a system of urban and formal acupuncture, they would need to be strategically inserted into the passive and still surface of the existing urban pond: objects of *Absolute Architecture*, seen as a strategic system of walls and partitions - architecture's quintessence. In this way only, Architecture can embody the idea of the City, since the latter is neither "given", nor devised by protocol. It is a new archetype, the by-product - and the resulting form - of a conscious and collective allegiance to the makings of its own history; by and large it is manifested through Architecture. And it is put forward against a poignant realization, that our present political system cannot sustain the city: on the contrary, it dismantles it - and is incapable of designing it.

In short, whilst taking a deliberate position against the current political-correctness of pluralism, complexity and fragmentation, the proposal's thrust stipulates the endorsement of the Big Scale project within the cities: a project removed from aesthetics, located once more, in the political domain. The big scale project, as a system of punctual interventions that confront the given, individual patterns of the cities, can in this way hone in to the real vitality of political action: not a limp amalgam of good intentions, but the confrontation between collective desires and individual conduct.

This is a position that I believe must be articulated as a general polemic on the future inevitability of a new monumental urban form, whose aim would be to rearm the present post-urban world with a renewed vision of the city.

We have a challenging task ahead and an inspiring incentive: to formulate a radical strategy and paradigm for Architecture in the 21st century City. It is worth remembering that, like the rest of the Arts of the human establishment, Architecture proved unable to keep pace with 20th century culture - if, out of the din of the 20th century, something is extracted that can be claimed to be a culture representing it. The violent upheavals, radical reversals and unsettling riddle of an ever-present and unthinkable relativity that implied (albeit without revealing it) a new paradigm, stripped the established Arts of their former stable principles and left them in a state of permanent instability, triggering a cultural anguish: representing an age of distress and confusion, the Arts were immersed in the un-gratifying agony of having to wrestle with the illusive effort of identifying "The New". It is not surprising then, that in this cultural conundrum, it was only the "New Art" of the celluloid - the movie, that was able to fulfill this mission and become the Art that represented with symbolic lucidity and vision the 20th century's vicissitudes. If we took this challenge to heart today, and envisioned the pro-active role that Architecture could play in the near future, it may find itself becoming the Art of the 21st century.

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