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The Common and the Production of Architecture: Early hypotheses

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Architecture is not only what is built. Architecture is a shared knowledge out of which every architectural project (and every building) is made. While in ancient times this shared knowledge was embedded directly in the practice of *building* physical artefacts, since the 15th century architectural knowledge has taken the form of the *project*. Practicing the project means to put forward something that does not exist yet.¹ This act of anticipation has taken the form of all those means - plans, drawings, images, texts - that are necessary in order to construct the vision of a reality yet to come. It is exactly as an act of anticipation that the project is also a *reality* in itself, whose importance is often independent from its eventual *realisation*. The project is the *condition sine qua non* of the production of architecture: it gives form and reproduces a shared, and thus collective, knowledge which is irreducible to what is realised in the form of buildings and design objects.² This collective knowledge that any architectural project always implies can be defined as the *common* in architecture.

Traditionally the common are the *commons*: resources that are owned collectively and for this reason could not be made private property. The commons are water, rivers, forests, etc. But a very important kind of commons is knowledge: the product of shared and collective intelligence that allows a multitude to cooperate and work together. What we traditionally understand as the "discipline of architecture" - i.e. a body of knowledge made of experiences, historical examples, design and building techniques, ways to understand space and forms- is not the product of a few talented geniuses, but it is always collectively produced. Architecture can only exist as shared and thus common knowledge. It is not difficult to understand how the common becomes decisive within the production of architecture. To develop an ar-

chitectural project means to use and reproduce forms, traditions, codes, examples, and ways of perceiving and understanding space. For this reason architecture - understood as a body of knowledge, as a discipline - cannot be idealised or withdrawn into an exclusive space freed from political and economic constraints. On the contrary, today it is precisely the "discipline of architecture", this collective knowledge implied by every single architectural project, that is exploited and appropriated by capital.

Within post-Fordism those spheres that once were outside economy, such as imagination, affects and information, have become primary means of production. Moreover production, especially production of knowledge, emphasises cooperation as the fundamental *modus operandi* of our society. Within the production of architecture this is more than evident: every architectural project is made through collaboration between different actors who constantly rely on knowledge that is always collectively produced. And yet this reality of the architectural project clashes with the way the production of architecture is represented through the signature of individual authors.

The common is thus fragmented by the proliferation of styles, identities, and authorships that project the aura of *uniqueness* for everything being produced. This situation becomes critical especially in the way the production of architecture is communicated in exhibitions and publications. In this way the common is reduced to the point of convergence of individualities, which appear as resolutely different from one another. Against this reality we have to remember that the common is not the meeting point of different individualities, but the *pre-individual* basis for production that emerges as a singular form

any time individual actions take place. To think the *common ground* in architecture not as uniforming framework (like the concept of universality), but as a pre-individual reality that informs any singular gesture requires an understanding of what the philosopher Paolo Virno has defined as the relationship between what is *maximally common* and what is *maximally singular*.³

Virno refers to a situation in which a particular speaker, whose statements have provoked our approval or irritation, differs from all those who have taken the floor before or after him. Yet this speaker is different precisely because its speech reveals a common nature with them: the faculty of language. According to Virno:

The capacity for articulating signifying sounds - a biological prerequisite of the Homo sapiens - cannot manifest itself other than by being individuated in a plurality of speakers; inversely such plurality of speakers would be inconceivable without the preliminary participation of each and every one of them in that pre-individual reality which is, precisely, the capacity for articulating signifying sounds.⁴

In this process a historically determined reality gives rise to an extraordinary process of diversification of experience and practice. As Virno argues, "Far from cancelling each other out the common and the singular refer back to one to another in a kind of vicious circle".⁵

Following Duns Scotus and Gilbert Simondon, Virno affirms that the relationship between the common and the singular can be explained as the relationship between *potentiality* and *actuality*. Potentiality is the infinite range of possibilities not yet determined into finite things, the historically determined *reality of the possible*. Actuality is the determination of what is potential in the form of finite things and events. What is important to stress is that what is actualised (an event, an object, a person) can never exhaust the range of possibilities offered by what is potential. In other words what is determined -the individuated individual- does not in itself encapsulate the potential infinity inherent in what is common. At the same time the individuate individual- the singular - is not the residue of an infinite sequence of oppositions and delimitations. Being the actualisation of what is potential, the singular always remains within the common. For this reason the common, meant as the pre-individual, is in radical contrast with the category of the Universal. As Virno argues the Universal is a *nominalist* category, it is a product of verbal thought, which abstracts certain characteristics that uniformly recur in already individuated entities. The Common instead is a *realist* category because it addresses the pre-individual reality that makes communication between individuals possible.⁶

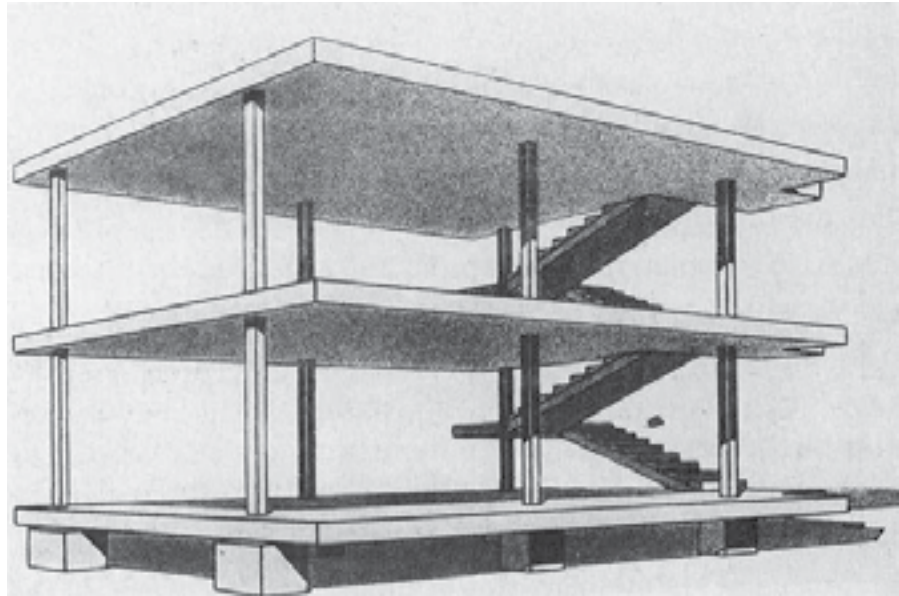
To make the common explicit means to theorise architecture not as the product of individual contributions, but as a collective force, as a *pre-individual* reality that is both the productive basis of architectural production but also something autonomous, something that exceeds its technical and commercial determination and which addresses and manifests our collective understanding of the space we live. Looking back over the history of architecture it is not difficult to find attempts to define the common of architecture. Here I would like to put forward two examples.



Aldo Rossi, La Città Analoga (1976)

It is possible to affirm that the French architect and theorist Claude Perrault was the first theorist to offer a theory of architecture that emphasised the common. Perrault's *Treatise on the Five Orders* published in 1663 can be understood as a theory that has profound implications for the relationship between architectural language and its pre-individual social dimension.⁷ As is well known, in the famous *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, Perrault affirmed that it was not possible to associate the grammar of the five orders to the imitation of nature, and thus it was not possible to refer to a transcendental principle. For example Perrault noted that the theorists that defined the proportions of the five orders could not agree on a universal standard and each of them proposed a different interpretation. This led Perrault to the conclusion that beauty of proportions does not derive from some universal a-priori but is the product of shared customs and habits. As Perrault concluded, "Any architecture has no proportions true in the themselves; it remains to be seen whether we can establish those that are probable and likely founded upon convincing reason without departing too far from proportions usually received".⁸ What is crucial to understand is that within Perrault's theory, the production of architectural form is a process of actualisation of a common pre-individual potential made by the customs, the habits, the knowledge of a specific historical time. With Perrault, architectural language for the first time is understood not as imitation of nature, but as an arbitrary system of signs whose evolution responds to the ethos, the modes of sociality, in any a given period.

Another theoretical contribution that can be interpreted as an attempt to define the common in architectural language are the urban studies developed by Aldo Rossi between 1956 and 1976; from the publication of his first important study on the transformations of the city of Milan at the beginning of 19th century to his unfinished



project, the *Citta Analoga*.⁹ What characterised Rossi's research is the fact that it was focused on the *whole* city, and not just on authored architecture. Rossi explored all kinds of urban conditions that were accessible to him in Italy and Europe between the 1950s and the 1960s, from the city centre, to the post-war periphery to other emerging urban formations such as the new 1960s suburbs. At the beginning of the 1960s Rossi searched for a methodology that would help him systematise this knowledge and resurrect the concept of typology. Rossi believed that such a concept would allow him to avoid both the reduction of architecture to the individual contributions of the "great masters" and the technocratic universalism of late modern architecture. In his work on typology Rossi found inspiration in Quatremère de Quincy's definition of type.¹⁰ For Quatremère, type is not a model to be mechanically copied, but the idea that gives origin to a manifold of objects or buildings. Therefore a type cannot be imitated but only *actualised* into tangible forms. Yet Quatremère defined type in universalistic and essentialist terms when he stressed the fact that type is an a priori principle, "a kind of nucleus around which the developments and variations of forms to which the object is susceptible gather and mesh". Though Rossi was clearly influenced by Quatremère definition, his theory of type is slightly different. For Rossi type does not reveal a nucleus or the origin of something, but is simply the potential of a structuring prin-

ciple. Such a structuring principle depends upon the social and political conditions of a particular place in a particular time. For this reason type, which is a historically (and thus politically) determined reality becomes tangible only through what Rossi identifies as the *singularity* of the urban artefact. And yet just like what is common and thus potential cannot be exhausted in the singularity, no type can be identified with only one form. "even if all architectural forms are reducible to a types".¹¹ The urban artefact is thus the *singularity* that actualises the type, while type remains the common, the summation of all social habits and customs understood as a structuring principle. In Rossi's terms typology-the discourse on type- is thus not what is commonly understood as a particular building type, but is instead the analytical moment of architecture, the conceptual framework that allows us to understand an urban artefact as the tangible expression of a much wider and inexhaustible domain. This domain is the historically determined common, the sharing of habits, customs, ideas that allow a multitude of individuals to exist and to which Rossi never assigned a preconceived form. On the other hand Rossi identified this common in the finite terms of architecture: by assuming the urban artefact as its tangible actualisation. In Rossi's theory, form becomes what for Virno (following Scotto) is the *Principium Individuationis*, the process of actualisation of what is potential. It is for this reason that Rossi theorised the urban artefact through the in-

dividuality of the *locus*: that is the place as a finite, limited, singular form. Against the organicist, ecologically-oriented theories of design which were very popular in the 1960s and which focused on the possibility of dissolving architectural form within the continuum of urban space, Rossi postulated the urban artefact as a singular event which does not exhaust the potential of the city. It is instead just a mark of the city, resolutely different from anything else and whose difference is made possible by belonging to its common, to the structuring dynamism of the city itself.

As we have already said, post-Fordism is a mode of production that puts to work all the faculties that characterise the human animal such as language, imagination and affect. Here it is important to insist on the fact that while a building, or any other product of design, is a defined, finite form, its process of production, and its use, is a reality that cannot be reduced to a single object or to the authorship of one single office or person. If the project is always a gesture in a social space, this gesture is nevertheless rooted in knowledge, which is by definition collectively produced. This reality is at odds with the emphasis on individual identities and authorships claimed by individual architects and offices, but also (and especially) with the increasingly precarious conditions of the multitude of who produce architecture behind the facade of individual signatures. What is increasingly shocking is the regime of scarcity that emerges when it comes to the redistribution of economic benefits derived from this wealth of ideas and creativity.

Within this context the excessive forms of authorship through which architecture is commercialised reveal the way in which architectural identities are instrumental to capital. Capital uses these identities in order to fragment the common and appropriate it for its own sake. *Divide et impera* is the way in which architecture as collective knowledge is appropriated and mystified by capital as the product of individual authors in the form of parades of iconic buildings. Against this situation a commitment towards the common has to be directed at first towards its political acknowledgment as a productive force, as the core of architecture itself and as the truly "common ground of architecture" This acknowledgment implies a basic income for those who *de facto* pro-

duce architecture, and that today live in a state of increasing economic and existential instability.¹² Basic income would free cooperation among architects from the straightjacket of individually driven offices in which collaboration is merely a force to support the individual signature. Such an economic reality would allow the evolution of the discipline of architecture to be autonomous from market constraints. A commitment towards the common also means that the production of architecture itself - in terms of forms - must acknowledge the pre-individual origin of any architectural form instead of masquerading them with the pretension of novelty and originality at all costs. In order for these forms to make evident their common origin, they must exhibit their *principium individuationis*. An example of such architecture would be projects such as Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-ino and Mies' "skin and bones" building technique. In these examples the pre-individual datum of architecture - the industrial techniques that were necessary for their realisation - is not hidden, but fully exposed as the very image of architecture. This means that architectural language must be thought as a *generic* language that engenders singular forms. Only when architectural language assumes in its aesthetic appearance the reality of the common will it be a true manifestation of a *potential* architecture. In opposition to the enclosing of architecture as collection of individual expressions, a common architecture will be architecture that in every singular manifestation of itself - in the form of a drawing, a building or a text-will put forward its public form. It would thus be architectures as it was defined by the Italian critic Edoardo Persico who, paraphrasing a famous passage from St Paul's letter to the Hebrews, stressed the potential dimension of architecture as the "substance of things hoped, the evidence of things unseen".



Top: Claude Perrault, Planche 1: Proportions communes à tous les ordres (1683)
Opposite page: Le Corbusier, Maison Dom-ino (1914)

NOTES

1. On the category of the "Project" see: Massimo Cacciari, "Project" in: *The Unpolitical: On the Radical Critique of Political Reason*, edited by Alessandro Carrera, translated by Massimo Verdicchio. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009, pp. 122-145
2. Project comes from the Latin word *projectum* which roughly means "something thrown forth"; production comes from the Latin word *producere* which means "to bring forth"; both words are similar to *proficere* which means "to put forward"
3. See: Paolo Virno, *E così via all'infinito. Logica e Antropologia*. Milan: Bollati e Boringhieri, 2010
4. *Ibid.* p. 197
5. *Ibid.* p. 197
6. *Ibid.* p. 205
7. Claude Perrault, *Ordonnance des cinq espèces de colonnes selon la méthode des Anciens*, translated in English as *A treatise of the five orders of columns in architecture: To which is annexed, a discourse concerning pilasters: and of several abuses introduced into architecture. Engraven on six folio plates adorned with borders, initial letters, and tail-pieces English by John James*. London: Gale ECCO, Printed Editions, 2010.
8. *Ibid.* p. 25
9. Although never made explicit, the idea of the common seems to pervade all Rossi's writings on the city up till the mid 1970's. See: Aldo Rossi, *Scritti Scelti 1956-1972*, edited by Rosaldo Bonicalzi. Milan: Clup Edizioni, 1976.
10. Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura della città*. Padua: Marsilio, 1966; translated in English as *The Architecture of the City*, translated by Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman. Cambridge, Mass: U.C. MIT Press, 1982, p. 40
11. *Ibid.* p. 41
12. On the issue of "basic income" see Philippe Van Parijs, *Arguing for Basic Income*. London: Verso, 1992

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