

REALITY, IN THEORY

Giovanni Corbellini

In the mid-seventies, Robert Venturi pointed to Alvar Aalto as his main source of inspiration:¹ one of the most influential critics of his generation, the author of at least two fundamental texts, declared to pay particular attention to an architect who, as Venturi himself highlights, “never wrote of architecture”.² Twenty years later, this text is published again in *Iconography and Electronics upon a Generic Architecture*, a collection of essays in which the American author, at the height of his career, credits himself above all as a practicing architect.³ The fact that Venturi distanced himself from a theoretical activity he clearly considered marginal by publishing one more book is indicative of a “complex and contradictory” condition, both with regard to his specific contribution, certainly more incisive in words than in bricks, and, more generally, to the cultural situation in which he operates. Something similar, for instance, comes also out of a book by Hal Foster, significantly titled *The Return of the Real*, which describes this situation from the point of view of the arts in the second half of the last century, “when theoretical production became as important as artistic production”⁴ but this critical approach was strongly intertwined with the conditions of reality and its interpretation, especially within the Duchampian neo avant-gardes, such as pop art. And the same, powerful attraction for the consistency of the real has recently fuelled the philosophical debate as opposed to the postmodern “weak

thought”⁵ and its interpretative vertigo.

Venturi’s example, both in spite of and thanks to its inconsistencies, shows very clearly how a similar “return of the real” has crossed the architectural debate at the turn of the millennium, focusing on the professional practice rather than on other disciplinary methods, even as a privileged place for research. The speculative proposals protagonists of the radical scene as well as the “autonomous” investigations on form, at the time responsible for tons of “paper architecture,” have gradually disappeared from the pages of major magazines. The latter have enhanced the role of images and, in parallel, reduced the space given to theoretical-critical⁶ texts, as happened for example in our *Casabella*. The same 1996 in which Venturi and Foster published the above mentioned books hails the new editor in chief of the Milanese magazine and a shift in its approach.⁷ The fact that the protagonist of this turning point is a historian only confirms a growing “realist” tendency, although the disciplinary clerics’ fascination for construction often reveals a vision of architecture as a concluded and self-referential act, in which the built world is separated from the reasons, accidents and consequences of its realization.

However, this path from utopia to reality, from theory to action, more than by cultural evolution and its fluctuations seems to be determined by the radicalization of the market economy as the sole planetary system of production and exchange. The pragmatism to which architecture was driven, in the reality of the profession as well as in its disciplinary self-conscious-

ness, entails nonetheless some unexpected loss of efficiency. The ever increasing space granted to commercial negotiations reduces simultaneously the space of planning. The environmental transformation is therefore subject to phenomena of deregulation, with the gradual withdrawal of the public hand accompanied by an overwhelming set of defensive laws, especially in countries like Italy where the cultural and professional fabric is particularly weak. The complication of our practice makes it extremely difficult to manage the profession individually or in small groups: due to the incapacity to withstand competition and the liberalization of fees, to cope with the insurance obligations and the constant updating of software licenses, to integrate in the design process the ever-growing, necessary technical and legal expertise. The result is an anomalous fragmentation of the design control among different subjects and in its early stages, one that is driven by regulations and even recognized within our specific discipline. On the one hand, for example, measures such as the so-called *Merloni Law* transform the way from concept to completion in a relay race in which the different steps from preliminary to detailed design, and to construction supervision are entrusted to different professionals. On the other hand, the same Institute of Architects has added other specialized categories (planners, landscape architects, heritage curators), recognizing from within the erosion of our coordinating role in the design process of the different forms of knowledge, times, scales and interests involved.

It happens therefore that the more architecture becomes realistic the harder reality restricts its ambition and delimits its action within the analytical, sectorial dimension typical of other disciplinary approaches in-

involved in the environmental transformation. Unlike the latter, architects have always supported their specific technical skills with the need to mediate between conflicting views, keeping together social responsibility and impulses of individual affirmation, not only their own.⁸ Each architectural project attempts a synthesis between unstable and contingent, potentially conflicting plans: customer satisfaction, in economic, functional but also aesthetic and representative terms,⁹ and collective protection of rights, health, safety and, particularly today, of landscape and environment.¹⁰ The interpretation of the friction between private and public needs gives the opportunity to make room for experimentation, looking for the innovative solutions that the discipline considers as an indispensable ethical function of the architectural project. When the latter is able to set new paradigms, it takes prominent positions in historical reconstructions even regardless of its successful realization. Many “rationalist” masterpieces have resulted in buildings of dubious habitability, for inherent conceptual flaws or unwary executions. So much so that, according to Mark Wigley, “the sign of technical incompetence becomes the sign of artistic brilliance”,¹¹ and both were claimed as the two sides of the coin of quality in architecture: “If the roof doesn’t leak”, declared Frank Lloyd Wright “the architect hasn’t been creative enough.”¹² Of course there are also examples of “signature” technical problems nowadays, from the infiltration of the villa Lemoine¹³ to the cracks of the Guangzhou Opera House,¹⁴ until Viñoly’s “burning glass” in London.¹⁵ However, apart from the disappointing performance of various “sustainable” buildings, the ideological link between experimentation and failure that characterized the heroic phase of the modern seems to be getting feebler. In comparison

with Wright's leaking rooftops, to which the architect gave a key role in symbolic terms, more recent functional failures appear more as side effects of excessive complication than signs of a research one should be proud of.

It is also true that the growing mistrust of architecture towards the processes of its implementation can be read as a result of a kind of "original sin" of the discipline. The modern architect's identity is in fact based on overcoming the shared responsibility and the substantial uncertainty of the medieval construction: according to Leon Battista Alberti and for us, the heirs of his authorial vision, a building must be an exact copy of the architect's project.¹⁶ This determinist idea is also reflected by the law, for which built results cannot be different from the projects approved. So much so that the place and time in which the project negotiates more closely with the reality of its materialization also represent a threat to its integrity, something to which a strenuous resistance must be opposed. The architect should learn from the process, but the experience gained will be available only on subsequent projects, producing a structural gap between the incidents and the opportunities offered by the building site and their interpretation.¹⁷ The volatility of contemporary technical offer, with continuous variations of the available materials and their characteristics, requires however that the project deals with an increasing need for rapid adjustments, even and especially in the construction phases. However, such need is limited by a number of adverse reactions (cultural, regulations etc.) that, in fact, have progressively reduced the margin available to the architect to provide the appropriate modifications. The strategies we need in order to create this margin, to extend it and exploit it intelligently, become

therefore more and more sophisticated.

Recent innovations, whether they are consistent with technological developments or mere formal experiments, generally provoke a widespread suspicion, occasionally exacerbated by technical faults but clearly present even when everything works as planned. The proliferation of regulatory constraints that affect the profession is also indicative of a kind of immune response of society towards the mutagenic ethics of architects. Designers, apart from rare occasions of great scope, run their practice within strictly controlled tracks by codes that seek to hold together indications of hygiene, privacy, energy and structural performance with the type - morphological - material - aesthetic continuity that still represents the dominant ideology of the current cultural debate (even of large sectors of our discipline), of political negotiation and planning.¹⁸

The internal contradictions in each of these aspects are even more evident in their interaction, so much so that buildings pedantically abiding by the norms end up betraying deeply their sense and, above all, participating in increasingly widespread picturesque masquerades.¹⁹ Technology, which in itself has no ethical intention, plays a decisive role in accelerating this situation by providing materials and finishes that promise to hold together cost, performance and nostalgia. The current, exasperated stratification of walls, in addition to analytically ensure compliance with the most diverse requirements, reflects the fragmentation of the design process we have mentioned above, with architects addressed to take care of surfaces and walls to progressively increase their thickness.

It is not easy to regain control over the "black section"²⁰ of the buildings and produce architectural innovation starting from construction techniques, apart from rel-

atively simple and limited situations. Equally difficult is to propose an experimental research locked up in the role of decoration specialists in which the contemporary reality forces us. In order to get reacquainted with this same reality and pursue a progressive function it seems then necessary to practice a certain detachment from reality itself. In other words, it is vital for us to interpose a critical distance from tools, objects and procedures of environmental transformation and derive from the concreteness of our limits the space for imagining a new reality.

1. Robert Venturi, *Learning from Aalto*, in Id., *Iconography and Electronics upon a Generic Architecture. A View from the Drafting Room* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996), pp. 77-79, previously published as *Alvar Aalto* in "Arkkitehti" (July-August 1976).
2. "But Aalto's most endearing characteristic for me, as I struggle to complete this little essay, is that he didn't write about architecture." Ibid., p. 79.
3. I have intended these essays and aphorisms to derive from informed experience – that of living and working – and not from researched knowledge." Ibid., p. xiii.
4. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real. Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996), p. xiv.
5. See Maurizio Ferraris, *Realismo positivo* (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2013). Ferraris' proposal has been widely discussed on Italian newspapers. Umberto Eco framed it with his usual lucidity in *Il realismo minimo*, "La Repubblica" (March 11, 2012), p. 46.
6. "the 1990s saw the emergence of a critical practice of architecture, whose 'death,' in the meantime, has been announced by advocates of 'post-critical' and 'post-theoretical' positions." Tom Avermaete, Christoph Grafe, Klaske Havik, Johan Lagae, Véronique Patteeuw, Hans Teerds, Tom Vandeputte, *Editorial - Constructing Criticism*, in "Oase", 81 (2010), p. 4.

7. Vittorio Gregotti quits as editor in chief of *Casabella*, replaced by Francesco dal Co, with one of the monographic double issues that characterized his mandate (630-631, 1996, *Critical Internationalism*).
8. See Tom Spector, *The Ethical Architect. The Dilemma of Contemporary Practice* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), and Barry Wasserman, Patrick J. Sullivan, Gregory Palermo, *Ethics and the Practice of Architecture* (New York, NY: Wiley, 2000).
9. See, between ethics and economics, *Design Professionals and the Built Environment: An Introduction*, edited by Paul Knox and Peter Ozolins (Chichester; New York: Wiley, 2001).
10. See *Ethics and the Built Environment*, edited by Warwick Fox (London, New York: Routledge, 2000).
11. "The sign of technical incompetence becomes the sign of artistic brilliance". Mark Wigley, *Learning from Leaks*, in "CLab File", n. 3, *Leaks*, p. 1, allegato a "Volume", n. 4, 2005.
12. Ibid. On Modern architecture technical failures, see Peter Blake, *Forms Follows Fiasco: Why Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1977).
13. See the movie by Ila Bêka & Louise Lemoine, *Koolhaas Houselife* (Living Architectures Series, 2008).
14. Malcolm Moore, *Guangzhou Opera House falling apart*, "The Daily Telegraph", 07.08.2011, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8620759/Guangzhou-Opera-House-falling-apart.html, accessed 01.23.2015. See also larryspeck.com/architects/zaha-hadid/, accessed 01.23.2015.
15. Oliver Wainwright, *The Walkie-Talkie skyscraper, and the City's burning passion for glass*, "The Guardian", 09.03.2013, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/sep/03/walkie-talkie-skyscraper, accessed 01.21.2015.
16. "In Alberti's theory, a building is the identical copy of the architect's design; with Alberti's separation in principle between

design and making came the modern definition of the architect as an author,” Mario Carpo, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2011), p. x.

17.

About this open and indeterminate condition I remember an old article by Francesco Venezia, which was also dedicated to Le Corbusier’s Swiss Pavillion, see *Incidenti a reazione poetica*, “Domus”, 681 (1987).

18.

The problem of overregulation in territorial transformation is not an Italian exclusive: see the monographic issue of *Volume*, 38 (2013), *The Shape of Law*.

19.

See my text *Imparare da Sappada/Learning from Plodn*, “Paesaggio urbano/Urban Design”, 3 (2013), pp. 4-11, republished on the web in O11+, www.zeroundici.it/2014/12/17/imparare-da-sappada, accessed 12.17.2014.

20.

“The more sophisticated the building, the greater the expansion of the inaccessible zones...: the section becomes battlefield; white and black compete for outright domination.” Rem Koolhaas, *Last Apples*, in Id., *SMLXL* (New York, NY: The Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 664.