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Villa

THE ARCHITECT AS PRODUCER:

**PIER VITTORIO AURELI AND THE ARCHIPELAGO
OF ABSOLUTE FORMS**

“The very condition of architectural form is to separate and to be separated. Through its act of separation and being separated, architecture reveals at once the essence of the city and the essence of itself as political form: the city as the composition position of (separate) parts. [...]

Both the idea of architecture and the idea of the city as defined through the categories of the formal and the political are mobilized against the ethos of urbanization [...] the ever-expanding and all-encompassing apparatus that is at the basis of modern forms of governance. These modern forms of governance consist in the absorption of the political dimension of coexistence (the city) within the economic logic of social management (urbanization).

It is precisely within the rise of the space of urbanization that architecture as the project of the finite, and thus separated, form(s) can be read as critical, inasmuch as it both obeys the managerial principle of urbanization and its extensive logic of total integration, yet makes explicit and tangible the inexorable separateness of the city [...]

“The idea of separated parts links the possibility of an absolute architecture to the idea of the archipelago as a form for the city. The concept of the archipelago describes a condition where parts are separated yet united by the common ground of their juxtaposition. In contrast to the integrative apparatus of urbanization, the archipelago envisions the city as the agonistic struggle of parts whose forms are finite and yet, by virtue of their finiteness, are in constant relationship both with each other and with the “sea” that frames and delimits them. The islands of the archipelago describe the role of architectural form within a space more and more dominated by the “sea” of urbanization. [...]

[T]his book does not argue for the autonomy of design, but rather for the *autonomy of the project*, for the possibility of architectural thought to propose pose an alternative idea of the city rather than simply confirming its existing conditions. [...] In the idea of the project, the strategy exceeds the mere act of building and acquires a meaning in itself: an act of decision and judgment on the reality that the design or building of something addresses.

The possibility of an absolute architecture is thus both the possibility of *making* the city and also the possibility of *understanding* the city and its opposing force urbanization through the very finite nature of architectural form.”

Pier Vittorio Aureli,
From: *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*,
2011

Architectural form and its autonomy are one of the main focal points—if not *the* focal point—around which Aureli’s book revolves. The autonomy of form is here not to be understood in the sense of a self-referential formalism, but quite as the opposite: an intelligible boundary, a *figura*, the limit of which is at the same time a condition of description and of understanding. *Rerum videre formas* is no less important than *rerum cognoscere causas*, according to Cassirer¹; yet the two are depending on each other. The concept of *eidōs*, a Greek word that carries at the same time the meanings of “idea” and “form”, plays a central role in the investigations of the German philosopher. Moreover, it is here interesting to remark that *eidōs* comes from *hora* (to see), a root which is partially shared by “theory”, as being the composition of *thea* (the vision) and *hora*. “Theory” could therefore be translated as something that *makes things visible*, «*sichtbar machen*»: an approach originally defined in such words by Paul Klee, and that Aureli shares with other intellectuals that have been at the center of his investigations, like the Italian philosopher and founder of the *worke-rist* political theory, Mario Tronti².

In the specific case of architecture—and of the project—form is not only something to be *seen*, but also something that is actively *produced*. Tracing a line in the earth (*nemein*) and cutting an enclosure (*temenos*) out of an undefined space are the constitutive acts that stand at the very foundation of architecture as a form of order, be it political or religious. This close interconnection between an anthropological order and the formalization of space is well defined by Carl Schmitt in the opening chapter of *The Nomos of the Earth*:

¹ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on the Man. An Introduction to Philosophy of Culture* (Yale University Press, 1944), 216.

² Such an understanding of theory is highlighted by Aureli in his earlier book, *The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture within and Against Capitalism* (Princeton, 2008), 55.

Nomos comes from *nemein* –a [Greek] word that means both “to divide” and “to pasture.” Thus, *nomos* is the immediate form in which the political and social order of a people becomes spatially visible the initial measure and division of pasture land, i.e., the land-appropriation as well as the concrete order contained in it and following from it. [...] *Nomos* is the *measure* by which the land in a particular order is divided and situated it is also the form of political, social, and religious order determined by this process. Here, measure, order, and form constitute a spatially concrete unity³.

Such an act of *division* is particularly significant as the “cut” that it implies is understood as something profoundly connected to the act of *decision* (as from Latin *de-caedere*, to cut off), and therefore to the possibility of *judgement*.

In its spatial and formal grounding, the *nomos* is not to be considered as a sort of positive law, but rather as a “frame” that allows for judgement and political decision. The archetype in which such framing has been the most manifest is the one of the Greek polis, where «the *nomos* limits actions and prevents the from dissipating into an unforeseeable, constantly expanding system of relationships, and by doing so gives actions their enduring form» the limitation of action ensured by the *nomos* inside the polis is considered by Arendt—whose work is to Aureli a declared source of inspiration—as the necessary condition in which political freedom can be achieved⁴.

³ Carl Schmitt, “On the meaning of the Word *Nomos*”, in *The Nomos of the Earth* (Telos Press, 2003 [1950]), 70.

⁴ Arendt’s elaboration over the concept of politics play a fundamental role Aureli’s book. She writes: «“Politics,” in the Greek sense of the word, is therefore centered around freedom, whereby freedom is understood negatively as not being ruled or ruling, and positively as a space which can be created only by men and in which each man moves among his peers» (Hannah Arendt, “Introduction into Politics”, in *The Promise of Politics* (Schocken, New York, 2005), 93-200).

Yet–Aureli argues–the contemporary condition is not at all the one of the “limited” Greek polis, but rather one of an «endless» urbanization, the model of which is not the *nomos*, but the one of the Roman *lex*. «While the *nomos*, by forming a limit, prevented the Greek polis from unfolding into a totality», it is instead «the inclusive concept of the *lex* that turned Rome from a polis into a *civitas*, and thus into an empire».⁵ In Aureli’s reconstruction, the rise of Roman law meant also the dissolution of a concept where order and form would «constitute a spatially concrete unity» and the adherence of *nomos* and polis was then broken in the dichotomy of *urbs*, «a universal and generic condition of cohabitation», and *civitas*, a «gathering of people of different origins who decide to coexist under the same law» and therefore shared a condition of citizenship. Such “disentanglement” was aimed at imperialistic expansion, and against limitation. If the *civitas* still shared the political dimension of the polis, the material dimension of the inhabited space, independent from any political sense, was instead the prerogative of the *urbs*.⁶ Once untied from the spatial constraints of the *polis*, the political dimension expressed by the *civitas* loses its “material anchorage” and is left exposed to the overtaking by the «economical impetus of *urbs*».⁷ This is, for Aureli, the principle that governs the development of the Western city, where the “infrastructural” support of the *urbs* binds together with the affirmation of the economical paradigm as a «total fact»,⁸ and overcome the city by the “monstrous” product of their

⁵ Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* (MIT Press, 2011), 5.

⁶ «Unlike *urbs*, *civitas* concerns not the materiality of inhabited space but the political status of its inhabitants». Aureli, *op.cit.*, 6.

⁷ Aureli, *op.cit.*, 7.

⁸ The definition of the economical as a «totalizing social fact» (*fait social total*) is a definition provided by Marcel Hénaff (*La valeur du temps. Remarques sur le destin économique des sociétés modernes*, in «Esprit», January 2010, 164184), that Aureli does not quote; this is not the place to discuss a parallelism between the two theories, which would nevertheless be undoubtedly an operation of interesting results.

union: *urbanization*.

To Aureli, the paradigm of urbanization relies in the «condition of limitlessness and the complete integration of movement and communication brought about by capitalism»⁹. An “apparatus” (the foucauldian “*dispositif*”) of capitalist power that has «no representative or iconic function. It is simply a device—it is what it *does*»¹⁰. As being a “totality”—like Marx’s *Capital*—it cannot be identified, but only conceptualized. Such “machinic” nature, moved by the “motor” of economic optimization, extends the space of urbanization in accordance to its technological and economic capabilities.

The powerful critique of urbanization—which stands as the *pars destruens* of the book—is achieved by looking at it through the key figures that made the some most significant efforts to formalize it in a “theory”: Ildefons Cerdà, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Archizoom Associati and Rem Koolhaas. If Cerdà is recognized as the first one to address of the “managerial paradigm” of urbanization, in his effort of providing a “scientific” ground to his project of an *ensanche* for Barcelona (1860), Hilberseimer’s *Hochhausstadt* (1924), Archizoom’s *No-Stop City* (1969) and Koolhaas’ *City of the Captive Globe* (1972) are seen as rather critical projects that «make visible» the paradigms of the modern urban condition.

It is exactly in response to this field of conditions that «the possibility of an absolute architecture» is evoked. “Absolute”—Aureli carefully remarks—not as something “pure” or selfreferential, but as «something being resolutely it self

⁹ Aureli, op.cit., 9.

¹⁰ Aureli, op.cit., 11.

after being “separated” from its other»¹¹. Precisely such condition of *separation* constitutes architecture as a «political form» by “framing” space, like the *nomos* frames action, architectural form reveals as a negative (*per via negativa*) the essence of the city and its «inexorable separateness». According to Aureli’s proposal, «the political is equated with the formal, and the formal is finally rendered as the idea of a *limit*».¹²

The architecture of Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe is an exemplary case of such separateness:¹³ through the recurring introduction of a plinth—a reminiscence of the Greek *stylobate*, in Aureli’s words—the German architect claims back the «finiteness» of his architectures; in doing so, the building is estranged from the flows of urbanization, allowing the dialectic with the city to happen again. Upon its *positioning* on the plinth, architecture provides the possibility to judge the city as *the other*.

In the accomplishment of such operation, architecture can—it *must*—obey the “managerial paradigm” of urbanization, in order to make it tangible. This *complexio oppositorum* is explained by Aureli through the complementary examples of Hilberseimer and Mies. On one hand Hilberseimer’s «diagrammatic minimalism» provides a «highly evocative rendering» of urbanization’s core-value of management and its distinctive character of being a «composition of systems

¹¹ Aureli, op.cit., ix. It is interesting to remark that, while Aureli here refers his definition of “absolute” to the one provided by Agamben, at the same time his refusal of “purity” seems to echo Tafuri’s claim over the “drama” of contemporary architecture: to see itself «obliged to return to pure architecture, to form without Utopia; in the best cases, to sublime uselessness» (Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia. Design and Capitalist Development* (MIT Press, 1976 [1973]), ix).

¹² Aureli, op.cit., 27.

¹³ Another example is the one of Aldo Rossi: «Against the presumed open-ended form of cityterritory planning, then, Rossi’s group opposed an urban space of finite, juxtaposed parts. The limitation implied by the circumscribed form of the urban artifact was seen as the foundation of the architecture of the city» (Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy*, op.cit., 65).

and flows rather than places and forms» on the other, with a similar attitude, Mies renders the same forces through the aesthetics of his buildings, by allowing no other “decoration” than the one of mass production and industrial technology.¹⁴ To Aureli, both seem to accomplish their task in a sort of *epochè*, without judgement nor comment. Such a lack of “political substance” (where “substance” is here to be understood as also opposed to “form”) recalls the words of Hannah Arendt when she states that « *man* is apolitical. Politics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*. There is therefore no real political substance. Politics arises in what lies *between men* and is established as relationships».¹⁵

It is then in this «in-between» that the image of the *archipelago* arises. The “maritime” nature of its metaphor emerges in direct confrontation with the object it tries to frame: the «sea of urbanization», a designation that seems again to recall Schmitt’s elaborations over the *nomos*:

The sea knows no such apparent unity of space and law, of order and localization. [...] On the sea, fields cannot be planted and firm lines cannot be engraved. Ships that sail across the sea leave no trace. “On the waves, there is nothing but waves.” The sea has no character, in the original sense of the word, which comes from the Greek *charassein*, meaning to engrave, to scratch, to imprint. The sea is free.¹⁶

¹⁴ According to Aureli, the gesture of Mies towards urbanization is one of profanation (Agamben), as it makes it graspable by extrapolating its transcendental aura and by placing it in a condition of normal use. «Mies allowed the attributes of industrial technology [...] to enter and envelop his architecture. In this way the forces of urbanization in the form of the mass production of building technology became the very appearance of his architecture» Aureli, op.cit.

¹⁵ H. Arendt, op.cit., 95.

¹⁶ C. Schmitt, op.cit., 42-43.

If architecture's *finiteness* constitutes the possibility of framing and limiting the spatial apparatus of capitalism, then the «archipelago» that emerges from the constellation of these finite forms in the «sea» of urbanization can open a way towards the constitution of a «project of the city», as Aureli calls it. In support of such argument, he dedicates the *pars construens* of his book (four chapters out of five) to the architects whose work, in his view, could be read in the light of this “insular” construction. The works of Andrea Palladio, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, ÉtienneLouis Boullée, Oswald Mathias Ungers and—to a certain extent—Koolhaas’ and Zenghelis’ «Office for Metropolitan Architecture» (O.M.A.) are here presented as attempts to build an archipelago of «examples» of architectural interventions in response to the «overwhelming vastness of urban scale».¹⁷

Such an interpretation—Aureli states it clearly—is not moved by a quest for historical or “philological” truth: the selection of these «exemplary» figures is rather motivated by the affinity of «an architect interested in the work of other architects».¹⁸

In the light of such “subjective” note, it is perhaps interesting to take into consideration—amongst all these examples—Aureli’s formalization of Boullée’s architecture as a «state of exception». In order to argue for such a definition, he borrows Rossi’s definition of Boullée’s «exalted rationalism», defining it as an approach that, instead of relying on norms that would «automatically produce their application», would rather operate through the definition of «exceptional moments» that would themselves provide a new normative framework. Such distinction—according to Aureli—can be compared to Schmitt’s concept of the «state of exception», as being the true source of production of order, and the-

¹⁷ Aureli, *op.cit.*, xiii.

¹⁸ Aureli, *op.cit.*, xii.

refore of norm. Yet, in Schmitt's formalization, the state of exception is not itself the *subject* responsible for the establishment of order: it is rather an *adjective* of it. The real subject detaining such potentiality is the *sovereign*.

For Schmitt, order rests not on the exception, but on its *decision*.¹⁹ Decision, like judgement, presupposes in this case not only a subject, but a *political* one.

The point here is not to discredit or contest Aureli's formalization of architecture as «a state of exception»: this is probably a discussion for philosophers and lawyers, not for architects. What is interesting to take into account here is that the highlighting of such "omission" brings our attention to the other focal point of the book, the one of the architect as a *political subject*.

A "subjective" stance that reflects the equally subjective (and authoritative) position in which the book is situated, from which it speaks, and to which it addresses: the one of the architect as an author. The interrogative to which Aureli is responding through this book is probably the one posed by Walter Benjamin several decades ago:

Rather than asking, "What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?" I would like to ask, "What is its position in them?" [...] It has perhaps struck you that the train of thought which is about to be concluded presents the writer with only one demand: the demand to think, to reflect on his position in the process of production.²⁰

¹⁹ ««Like every other order, the legal order rests on a decision and not on a norm» (Carl Schmitt, "Definition of Sovereignty", in *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (University of Chicago, 1985) 10).

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer. Address at the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Paris, April 27, 1934", in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1931 - 1934 (Harvard University Press, 1999), 770.

The reflection over one's *position* goes hand-in-hand with the definition of boundaries: the necessity of *form* is prior condition to any dialectics.²¹ If—as Schmitt explains—through the figure of the “enemy” we recognize the negative of our identity and our position, it is through the autonomy of form that we can be «liberated»—in Arendt's terms—by the economical as a «totalizing social fact». If we follow Aureli in his argument for the *formal* and the *political* as overlapping categories, the *auto-nomia* of form is the precondition for political freedom, that is to say the possibility of judgement.²² It is precisely this kind of freedom that, according to Aureli, distinguishes architecture from design or crafts. The *project* not just as «a simple act of building» but, as the etymology of the word suggests, a true possibility of modification of the existing reality; *theory* not just as a possibility of understanding, but also of making.

The question then is not—or not simply— *what is architecture?*, but rather *why* do we make architecture and what *position* can we assume, as architects, inside the all-encompassing totality of the capitalist production, where the role of the architect seem to be destined to social and political irrelevance and architecture «to be obliged to return to *pure* —not absolute— *architecture*».²³ By defining architecture as a «state of exception», and placing *decision* as its foundation, Aureli claims back the role of the architect as a political subject, arguing against its dissolution and advocating for its renewed *sovereignty*.

²¹ To this regard it is interesting to report Aureli's transposition of Mario Tronti's thought: «in order to seize this possibility to engage in direct negotiation with capitalist institutions, the workers had to discover their own nature in the most radical way, through the very form of the working class» (Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy*, op.cit., 36); the stress

²² Discussing the concept of freedom in the context of the Greek polis, Arendt says: «The crucial point about this kind of political freedom is that it is a spatial construct» (Arendt, op.cit., 119).

²³ M. Tafuri, op.cit.

