

# Valerio Paolo

Received a degree in architecture in Rome in 1992, and a Ph.D. in 1998. Since then, he has taught at the University of Rome and Pescara as an assistant, and become a contract professor at Istituto Universitario Architettura Venezia where he became a researcher and later an associate professor. He has been a visiting professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology and taught history of architecture at the Politecnico di Milano. He currently teaches at Università Iuav di Venezia (studio and theory of architecture) and at the University of Navarra in Pamplona (history of architecture). Mosco won three international design competitions as well as other awards. He has written several books including *Architettura italiana. Dal postmoderno ad oggi* (Skirà, 2017); *Naked Architecture* (Skirà, 2012); and *Contemporary Public Spaces, Zero Volume Architecture* (with Aldo Aymonino, Skirà, 2006). He is the director of the magazine *Viceversa*.

# Mosco

**ON TASTE,  
HAVING CHANGED BY NOW**



In *El Croquis* no. 187 in 2016, Alejandro Zaera-Polo attempts a synoptic interpretation of the present situation<sup>1</sup>. This comes ten years after another important essay of his, also published by *El Croquis*, that had the same intention at the time<sup>2</sup>. Both represent a praiseworthy effort: it is difficult, if not impossible, to rein in the contemporary with a series of categories that always, inevitably, have their exceptions. But the effort of synopsis is what has always set the finest critics apart, or at least the most courageous. After all, it is the only scientific method critics have with which to operate, if we are to accept the interpretation of the term “scientific” provided by Karl Popper, namely as a falsifiable product. Zaera-Polo chooses to focus on the architects of the last generation, the ones that began working in the midst of the Great Recession. He groups the many names in a circular diagram: each trend takes up a part of the perimeter, and the names inside the circle can be seen as more paradigmatic of a trend if they are closer to that perimeter, while those closer to the center are the ones that lean towards hybrid approaches, at least partially rejecting the trend of reference. The title of the diagram is meaningful: *Global Architecture Political Compass*, therefore a way of getting one’s bearings in the complex contemporary panorama. But what prompts a pause for reflection is that adjective, *political*. Zaera-Polo is convinced that architecture tends to express the political and economic conditions in which it is destined to exist. In this, we can sense the influence of Manfredo Tafuri, first, then of Rem Koolhaas, and definitively of the critique of ideology that is an evident part of his background<sup>3</sup>. His thesis is that before the great crisis, i.e. before 2007, the economic

<sup>1</sup> Alejandro Zaera-Polo, “Well into the 21st century. The architecture of post-capitalism?” in *El Croquis*, no. 187, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Alejandro Zaera-Polo, “Un mundo lleno de agujeros” in *El Croquis* no. 88-89, 1998

<sup>3</sup> The hypothesis of a continuity between the thought and action of Manfredo Tafuri and Rem Koolhaas has been raised by Marco Biraghi in *Progetto di crisi: Manfredo Tafuri e l’architettura contemporanea*, Marinotti editore, Milano, 2005

and political paradigm was neo-liberal, namely that of growth, debt, open markets and effective dependency of politics on economics. In architecture – and here his reasoning is acute – this meant equating architecture with a commodity, a fact also proven by the Bilbao effect, that of the impact of Gehry’s museum on that Basque city. First the bubble of the new economy, then that of the derivatives and of the weak economically sovereign states, led in less than ten years to what seems to be the implosion of a system born in the early 1980s with the Chicago Boys of Ronald Reagan. A presumed implosion to which the definitive rise of the digital revolution and the sharing economy have made a decisive contribution. Radical changes, then, that have outlined a new panorama, which given the nearly infinite variables produces a condition aptly defined as the “radical present,” in which the very idea of the future seems to implode in its own uncertainty<sup>4</sup>. Here lies the first paradox: radical changes indeed, but present and past remain in coexistence, the new advances because the old is in crisis, but the old does not vanish, and in fact at times – as demonstrated by the economic situation – it even seems to gain ground. A contradictory coexistence that is recorded by architectural taste, where the experiences of the recent past exist parallel to an utterly opposite architecture, that of the new generations<sup>5</sup>. Zaira-Polo provides an excellent definition of the architecture of the recent, pre-crisis past, ruled by the likes of Zaha Hadid, Frank O. Gehry, Ben van Berkel, Morphosis and others still: the “parametric generation,” namely that of *hyper-modernism* (a term coined by Manfredo Tafuri), totally focused on the paradigm of form a posteriori, devoted to a sort of

<sup>4</sup> Shumon Basar, Douglas Coupland, Hans Ulrich Olbrist, *The Age of Earthquakes: A Guide to the Extreme Present*, Blue Rider Press, New York, 2015. The same concept is discussed by John Berger, who speaks of civic and historical amnesia that weakening the past weakens the future. John Berger, *Confabulations*, Penguin, London, 2016

<sup>5</sup> I am referring to the definition of taste provided by Lionello Venturi in *Il gusto dei primitivi*, Einaudi, Torino, 1972

iconoclasm for which form is the result of a process that is as conceptual as possible<sup>6</sup>. This paradigm of form a posteriori brought with it another ideology, that of infinite resources and the elimination of any limit, meaning in architecture any conventionalism, banished by the need to astonish, to perform. What has happened in recent years seems to bear out the law of Ernst Gombrich, and of Francesco De Santis some time earlier, by which taste tends to radicalize its expressions only to turn itself inside out like a glove, triggering a totally opposite reaction. A law we already saw in action thirty years ago, when post-modern historicism was replaced very quickly by the hyper-modernism of the deconstructivists. Today it is precisely the parametric generation that is being overthrown, so after years of “process”, form seems to once again be a priori, the resources once considered infinite seem to seek their limits, and the conventionalism (which from Koolhaas hence has been called genericity) challenged for years by means of astonishing, disturbing things returns, dictating what just a few years ago was considered utterly out of style. But the parametric generation has not vanished. It survives in major commissions for museums and corporate architecture, and it makes the rules in non-western countries that still have a need for astonishment and performance. So there are two parallel lines of architectural taste, as if taste itself, in this period, had ushered in a complex, if not pathological, diarchy between old and new, indicative of that state of uncertainty that reigns in our time. The fact remains that beyond the coexistence, the new generations seem to close ranks in their rejection of the parametric world, doing so behind the barricades of the academic world, which to an increasing extent acts to protect the antagonism that is spreading through the new generations. Zaera-Polo correct-

<sup>6</sup> See the chapter by Rafael Moneo on Peter Eisenman in *Theoretical Anxiety and Design Strategies in the Work of Eight Contempo*

ly points to Giorgio Agamben as the philosopher of reference for what is permeating the new generations, namely a resurgence of antagonism<sup>7</sup>. Agamben's research on the *homo sacer*, on nudity and a hermeneutics nimbly balanced halfway between materialism and idealism, has intercepted a generation, which as well as Agamben has rediscovered Simone Weil and Existentialism. The generation indicated by Zera-Polo is post-capitalist, as he puts it, or one that if nothing else yearns to get beyond capitalism through an attitude he defines – rather caustically – as “cute activism.” He sees two expressions of this cute activism: the first can be observed live, in the field, through self-construction and participation. If, as the most extreme French philosophers like Barthes and Deleuze averred, the project is an inevitably *dirigiste* action that implies compromise with capital, then it is better to return to a mythical Arcadia in which project, construction and life coincided, in which there was no wiggle room for manipulation. After decades of neglect, once again the precepts of Rousseau resurface regarding living in natural harmony with others through works (just consider the current revival of the Radical Design movement), and the imperative would seem to be the expression of the most total sincerity, granting dignity to self-construction and participation to the point of legitimizing one's approach at the level of the absolute protective immunity on which political correctness relies. Cute activism also has another spirit, its theoretical side. A political and theoretical banner brandished for some time by Pier Vittorio Aureli, which sees the return to the discipline as the means of countering the iconographic excess induced by financial capitalism, to definitely oppose the architecture-commodity equation<sup>8</sup>. The result is an ar-

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Meridian Crossing Aesthetics, 1998

<sup>8</sup> Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2011. Also see, by the same author, *Less is Enough. On Architecture and Asceticism*, Stelka Institute, 2014

chitecture that is so shriveled, so stripped down as to seem toneless, relegated to the background, hieratic, collective, deliberately monumental. Zaera-Polo correctly points to the fact that the two forms of cute activism are glaringly distant from each other, yet again according to that paradigm of co-existence, they seem to live in a situation of mutual respect that is otherwise lacking in the political transfigurations of the two factions. In theoretical cute activism, the myth of the Bloomsbury Group returns, of the “significant form” that as opposed to the past draws its legitimacy from a political commitment that at least in its intentions tends to push the aesthetic value of its configurations into the background<sup>9</sup>. The author also makes another perceptive observation: though at first this attitude might seem to link back to minimalism, that is not actually the case. Minimalism, like the art that first brought it to our attention, was based on the paradigm of composition, through reduced to a minimum, and on a deliberate elitism: only those well-versed in the progress of contemporary art could understand and appreciate the works of Donald Judd or Richard Long. But the theoretical monumentalism does not set out to address an elite: the images it proposes are as accessible as possible, even banal, as if hatched by a puerile unconscious that has a considerable debt to the Aldo Rossi of the later period, in a word the pop period. An iconic accessibility that speaks to us about how the desire to communicate with an audience by now fed up with complex, multifaceted works remains stronger than ever, despite the sulfurous theoretical lucubrations. An audience that wants to get back to a candor whose behavioral models can be traced back in literature to the wise and messianic idiocy of Count Myshkin or the sweet gullibility of Felicité, the character in a famous story by Flaubert cited not

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah Berlin in his book on Romanticism has unmasked, with excellent arguments, the Romantic tendency to legitimize actions and forms with lofty sounding political programs. See Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001



by chance by Aureli<sup>10</sup>. Complexity and contradiction, then, no longer appease the radically changed taste that wants to replace the over-design of the recent past with the present over-simplification. And there's more. The new taste produces a new figurative approach from which Zaera-Polo, beside the simplifying stylization, gleans another aspect, the composition using already existing figures, almost considering the project a ready-made, often a collection of ready-mades. As he suitably remarks, there is a similarity here between the new taste and that of the post-modern historicism of thirty-odd years past, but while the latter leaned towards a redundant figuration, referencing the courtly aspect of architecture and shifting it into pop, today sobriety instead gets the upper hand, and the generic past prevails, as if in a passage from Empire Style to Biedermeier. Yet there is one aspect, of some importance, that he does not grasp. Essential, stylized, immediate, evocative, monumental, ready-made forms are certainly nothing new. At the start of the 19th century, specifically in Germany, a group of philosophers, poets and artists deliberately opposed positivist disenchantment with a project: that of re-enchanting the world precisely through the proposition of this type of figuration. Novalis, Schlegel, Schiller and others, namely the first Romantics (*Frühromantik*), championed precisely these aesthetic values, theorizing them with a clarity that seems very timely today. As Novalis and Schiller urged, they "thought in images" in such a way as to activate an emotional and empathic communication with the audience: images that could be facile (just consider moonlight) but also archetypal, accessible and imponderable at the same time<sup>11</sup>. These images in sounds, words or other guises had to be spontaneous, not composed using the tricks of the trade. Goethe, at the start

<sup>10</sup> In this regard we should mention the verses of Hölderlin: "fearless becomes the man who stands alone before God. His innocence protects him."

<sup>11</sup> On the archetypal power of essential, synthetic romantic images see: James Hillman, *The Soul's Code*, Random House, New York, 1996

of his career, in his Romantic period, when with Werther he issued the poetic and behavioral directives for an entire generation, repeated that precisely composition was the downfall of art. No longer composed but imagined, as in a whole, the images would thus activate that flow of similarities and correspondences without which the world would lose its emotional fragrance, becoming merely arid. The program of the first Romantics was therefore to transfigure reality starting from the usual, even from the archetype, to then slip into the unusual, possibly suggesting the invisible essence that is concealed precisely in banal things. The words of Novalis are emblematic in this regard, and offer a concise statement of poetics that could become the caption of many of today's projects: "By giving the common a higher meaning, the everyday a mysterious semblance, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite the appearance of the infinite, I romanticize them"<sup>12</sup>. H. Corbin, pertinently cited by Franco Rella in his book on the Romantic aesthetic, speaks of "active imagination," or a noetic or cognitive function that allows us to access a forbidden region of being, opening us towards the *mundus imaginalis*, a world that lies halfway between the intelligible and the sensible: a world where a single law, that of analogy, is in effect<sup>13</sup>. And images of the *mundus imaginalis* can perhaps be glimpsed in various projects by Caruso St. John, Barozzi Veiga, Renato Rizzi, Tham & Videgard, Dogma, Kerez, Olgiate, not coincidentally often represented with utterly romantic, languid, dreamy pictorial effects, in an atmosphere of air emulsified by moonlight. Zaera-Polo insists on the fact that this evocative instantaneity is in tune with the media, with Instagram and Facebook, that it works well for the "likes" that swarm

<sup>12</sup> Rüdiger Safranski, *Romanticism: A German Affair*, Northwestern University Press, 2014. Also see Franco Rella, *L'estetica del romanticismo*, Donelli editore, Roma, 1997-2006

<sup>13</sup> Henri Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989

through social networks. But he does not consider the fact that at the start of the 19th century, from the advent of the bourgeois society, Instagram architecture already existed. So the present taste tends to rediscover, completely unconsciously, Romanticism and the picturesque inseparably linked to it, a synthetic, anti-compositional picturesque that reminds us of the paintings of Ottone Rosai, Mario Sironi and Edward Hopper, a picturesque in which (and this is the point) the image grants itself entirely, at a single glance<sup>14</sup>. This would explain the current return to drawn architecture, a phenomenon that attempts to restore, precisely through representation, or the staging of the hypostasis of architecture, a disciplinary aura that deconstructivist disenchantment attempted to delegitimize<sup>15</sup>. So while the parametric generation embraced exhibited disenchantment, the new generation displays an equally ostentatious re-enchantment, doing so by evoking a *Stimmung* in which, through the stylized, simplified form that immediately grants its comprehension, the romantic ecstasy is possible, the albeit fleeting apparition of the original essence of which Hölderlin wrote<sup>16</sup>.

Two other points are of particular interest in Zaera-Polo's essay: populism and existentialism. It is hard to understand how the populism that infests politics is translated into architecture. Zaera-Polo sees cute activism as an expression – though a veiled one – of populism, in its hieratic forms discussed above, but also and above in what he calls “te-

<sup>14</sup> “The romantic does not imitate nature, but creates it in the form of evocative landscape,” György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1971

<sup>15</sup> Zaera-Polo suitably notes the strong influence today of the drawings of John Hejduk. In this regard see Renato Rizzi, *John Hejduk, Incarnatio, Marsilio, Venezia*, 2010

<sup>16</sup> Concerning the capacity to evoke the archetype, Walter F. Otto writes: “But the poetic forms are simply metaphors of the original myth, given the fact that they can act on our inner being, but to a great extent no longer possess the power with which ancient myth made man the witness of his own truth.” Otto thus explains the melancholy languor of romantic figuration, in which the evocation of the

chnocratic populism,” namely that architecture that seems like a simplified replica of deconstructivism of the various BIG-Bjarke Ingers Group, MAD or Rex, architects the author correctly describes as proposing a “caricature of the generative process of the form,” to the point where this too can suggest ready-made figurations. This is a trend whose paucity is equal to its vociferous and empty insistence on *performance*. The existentialist sensibility, on the other hand, is decidedly more interesting, and sets out to act as a complement to the romantic sensibility described above. Years ago, precisely in the moment of the change of taste, I wrote a text whose title, citing Agamben, was *Nude Architecture*<sup>17</sup>. In it, I discussed the tendency that was emerging of a return to the material nature of the work, expressed in a predominance of rustic over finished elements. So while previously, for the parametric generation, what counted was the principle of cladding, the new taste expressed an opposite leaning, of clearly symbolic value, that of stripping down architecture through the elimination precisely of claddings and finishes. The moment of consecration of this new trend was the opening of the renovation by Lacaton & Vassal of Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2001, in which the architects simply completely stripped the interiors, in such a way as to reveal the rugged, bare surfaces. The result was the apparition of a skeletal, rough architecture, industrial in character, definitively a ruin of great expressive force, an operation that seen from today’s vantage point seems like an indictment of the overdressed architecture of the likes of Libeskind, Gehry, Morphosis, Hadid and others. An indictment that had repercussions, becoming the forerunner of the taste the drives the new generations. That fact remains that as in early Romanticism, in the new taste the contradictions are far from lacking. We know that at the time, in spite

<sup>17</sup> Valerio Paolo Mosco, *Naked Architecture*, Skirà, Milano, 2012. The title took its cue from the book by Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, Stanford University Press, 2010.

of the great theoretical efforts of the Germans, the sense of what was romantic spread in all kinds of directions: it began as revolutionary and was twisted into conservative views; it started from the appeal for unity of the human race and then exalted the myth of one race; it called for pacifism and intimism and then dreamt of sacrifice for the homeland. The same is true today, so we can expect a series of landslips and transformations. Taste, especially in romantic times, cannot bear being stabilized; it fears rest and therefore often sets forth without knowing where it is going, simply following its own instinct. And we follow suit, hesitantly, because some resistance has to be summoned against blind determination.

