

# Some issues about architectural project and its aims

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## Abstract

*Through an examination of approaches and real cases, the contribution summarizes some reflections regarding the architectural project and its main aims, paying*

*particular attention to the analysis of the modern conception of architecture and to the deepening of the notion of project.*

Before dealing with the topic of our meeting, concerning *The project quality for architects*, drafting a list of basic categories of modern architecture may be useful. This list can be used to call to memory some major issues which, since *avant-garde*, starting with the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have been and keep guiding our work, even with the unavoidable point-of-view changes on a range of aspects, both theoretical and operational, resulting from the succession of different social and cultural conditions during more than one century. This synthetic categorical outlook will be followed by two more preliminary considerations.

These categories are ordered regardless of their importance. They are: i) *speed*, as a futurist myth; ii) an *overall vision of the building process*, both in the broad De Stijl terms as interpreted by Piet Mondrian and in the functionalist ones, expressed with the famous slogan "from the spoon to the city"; iii) the choice of *atopy* to replace the continuity of spaces or the creation of new ones with the generality of settlements; iv) the *simplicity* of forms and details, seen in strict Loosian legality of "Ornament and Crime" as well as in the plastic Le Corbusier's vision and in the Ludwig van der Rohe's constructive one, both architects being interested in

transposing the classical ideal into modernity; v) the *novelty*, accompanied by rejection of memory and history, as in the *gropiusian* Bauhaus; vi) the tendency to constantly broaden the definition of architectural and project scopes, which is already present in William Morris's architectural vision. In recent decades, two new thematic-programmatic scenarios have already made the described framework more articulated, thus justifying their addition to those just mentioned. Such scenarios are: (i) the ecological issue, with well-known environmentalist theses such as the *limitation of land consumption, sustainability, recycling, use of renewable energies*; and (ii) the digital world, with its revolution in architecture.

The digitalization in our profession, anticipated by Moretti's theories on "parametric architecture", has had very important and still evolving outcomes. Some, like Bruno Zevi, believed it to have opened new cognitive and inventive spaces; others, with whom I agree, consider it to presently be a vital tool, far from being, however, crucial to architectural discoveries.

These choices – including the one, which I support, of no longer considering architecture as an art but an advanced answer to functional and constructive problems – were

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contradictorily experienced, also when individual stories of modern-architecture protagonists are taken into account. Conceptual contrasts have seen functionalism to differentiate from rationalism, concreteness from idealization, mass production – especially in housing- from search for strongly individualized buildings.

The second consideration concerns a problem facing architects during their whole activities. They have to reconcile two opposites. The first one is the subjective expression, namely the establishment of a personal language, that is recognizable and – in some ways- constant; it is a commitment they have the right and duty to build. The second one is the necessity of taking into account that their work must be *communicated* by complying with existing reading conventions. Moreover, despite the designers' willingness to be understood by as many users as possible, it cannot be guaranteed that everyone approves. Consensus on a building is always partial, thus inevitably creating a conflict between appreciation and rejection.

The third and final comment concerns the relationship between the architects' knowledge of their own subject and of other ones. Architects need broad education-and-training, as Vitruvius already clarified in his treatise. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century this cultural expansion was defined as interdisciplinary, thus indicating a compromise between different knowledge, which was already implicit in Gustavo Giovannoni's idea of a *complete architect*; it is based on organically combining the scientific and artistic aspects of constructions.

In addition, I believe we should speak about *multidisciplinarity*, which, in my opinion, is the ability of knowing where to turn to solve some problems rather than the capacity of acquiring knowledges to be applied in our work.

While these categories permeated modern architecture, a series of phenomena significantly affecting architects' conceptions and practices have been occurring since the beginning of the last century. Among these: i) the contrast between materialism and spiritualism in the idea of architecture; ii) the historical lack of integration between center and periphery, city and countryside, and, at a higher level, between the urban and the territorial-landscape dimensions; iii) the abnormal extension of urban settlements, following the abandonment of agricultural areas due to industrial revolution; iv) the spread of an architectural anonymity resulting much stronger than the attempts to *adjectivise* the architectural language; v) the subdivision of urban structures into monofunctional zones; vi) the diffusion of specialisms that sectorialised architecture in its entirety; vii) the progressive and increasingly-strong presence of media in architecture; viii) globalization and its consequent homologation of different building-construction cultures aimed at fostering a questionable and ineffective architectural *esperanto* made of random fragments of different languages.

The accidentalities of modern architectural concepts, having duly challenged their conceptual construction, have been briefly summarized. This was the consequence of the differences and the national-and-international ambiguities that led to the conflicts emerged in the various CIAM, the International Congresses of Modern Architecture.

I would now like to submit some questions about the notion of project.

This word, born between France and England – even if its epistemological root is Latin- and probably dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, denotes a set of functional, technical and formal choices, recalling the three Vitruvian specifications of the architectural ratio concerning the construction of buildings, urban settlements, infrastructures, green areas within the cities and landscaping interventions, of objects and transitional architecture. These three components must not remain separate in the framework of the project and in the subsequent built work, having to be unified in a semantic synthesis that makes them necessary and transcends them in an expression of aesthetic value.

It is not a coincidence that Vittorio Gregotti defines architectural activity as an "artistic practice", thus highlighting that the purpose of a building is not just to be functional, solid and beautiful, but to merge these three characters into an emotional work characterized by aesthetic, mysterious, simple and, at the same time, complex content, to be considered as well as allusive of the cosmic order in its dialogue between finite and infinite. All this in a kind of alchemical and lasting metamorphic attitude.

For a project to be valid, it must be technically exposed with the necessary clarity, in order to be performed according to forecasts; it is necessary to refer to techniques and materials with a duration compatible with the times of its translation into something concrete and to be aware that the project cannot concern just the construction of a certain artefact, exhausting its purpose in this scope. On the contrary, it needs to concern also the implementation of a space to be active for all its own duration. In this context the project has consider how to provide to its possible modifications, to be achieved in harmony with the genetic code that characterizes it, its tectonic essence and its shape. Finally, the project must contain reliable information on the re-use of building construction elements once it has completed its existence.

Architect must keep in mind that choices made during the project activity, even if careful and detailed work has been done, never manage to completely solve the problems of a building; this aspect is not currently taken into consideration by the provisions on the standards concerning the realization of a project.

I think it is quite realistic – this is my personal experience, not an incontestable conviction – an architect can manage the seventy-five or eighty percent of the

issues/decisions. For this reason, some problems project issues will always remain open; their solution will depend on the building site management.

Architect must obviously do everything possible to define the future work both in the details and as a whole but some issues of the project will show up only during the works. I will give just one example about this important peculiarity of our work. Proportions of the parts, reaction of materials to light in terms of texture values, the quality of outdoor spaces and mostly of the internal ones, the building shape and its relations with the space, all of these are elements visible only with the realization of the work. So they are the results of the designer's ability, which is manifested in its entirety just after a fine tuning.

This is a process foreshadowed through the drawings, the first sketches as well as the executives, and completed with the feeling of the constructive moment. Just an example: Casa del Fascio designed by Giuseppe Terragni. Before the one we everybody know, the architect of Gruppo 7 realized several projects. I believe that some elements of this magnificent marble half-cube have been matched each other in their magical union only through the assiduous presence of their maker in the Como factory.

Now let's talk about another particularity of architecture, which is always concerned with the project quality we are discussing today. When a building is under construction, there is an initial phase at which it shows the condition it will assume when it becomes a ruin. Maarten van Heemskerck's drawings representing the new San Pietro di Michelangelo under construction, show it as the ruin of an Ancient-Roman architecture. It seems to observe large thermal remains in their abandonment, covered with a millennial time. Actually that great construction will have to wait a century before to be completed, experiencing changes compared to Michelangelo's proposal. The Maison Domino designed by Le Corbusier is another the example both of something to be completed and the remains of a building that was duly finished.

It means that a project does express not only the beginning of an architectural life but also its end, as if this, under construction, had been prophesied. In a charming and deep circularity, the project schedule is taught and overlap. It makes the current and prevailing neo-functional interpretations of our profession – which cannot for any reason disregard its most authentic expressions and its primary aims –, partial, ineffective and deceptive. Expressions and purpose that Friedrich Hölderlin explained with his famous quote "Poetically man dwells".

The *Multidisciplinarity* I mentioned at the beginning of my comments is strictly linked to the issue of *participation*. Giancarlo De Carlo was in Italy its leading theoretician and the strongest supporter, especially during his work concerning the construction of Quartiere Matteotti in Terni.

Participation cannot be understood by the architect just as the reception of a new series of requests and information to be used for drafting its proposals. It is a structured dialogue on several topics, aimed to outline the building program in all its aspects. In my opinion, after this dialogue architect has to go back to its work assuming the responsibility to provide his client with a comprehensive response to the issues about the relationship with its stakeholders. It has to be a cognitive, proactive and creative response. Still talking about the project, something needs to be said about the *professional updating*, now mandatory. I believe the best update is the one architect achieves by doing his job well. In fact, the continuous updating of specific knowledge should not concern technical, or *technological*, knowledge, as almost always happens in the frameworks of the professional-orders' activity. For me, update in case of architect should mainly concern a steady improvement of its own way of designing, working through the experiences gained at a local, national and international level. Experiences which have to be used not for the imitation of external examples but in order to increasing the awareness of his own language, in a comparison with other models of architecture.

In conclusion, I would like to propose as a definition of our work the one that, since the beginning of my career, complements my disciplinary experience. "The primary aim of architecture is to express, through its secondary aim – the art of building – the sense of living of the human being on earth". It implies the necessity of cherishing the built memories of the community, as a primary tool for the future of the communities themselves. It also means living needs to be increasingly free-and-welcoming for all, so as to ensure to individuals to find in it the chance to realize their own expectations or, better, their dreams. This concept of living – no longer considered as a sole right for natives but as an environment open to welcoming others – must allow i) conflicts to be governed by recomposing them, even if temporarily; ii) conciliation of continuity and discontinuity in a vital dialectic; iii) to find, through harmony, the energies necessary for its own improvement; iv) to implant genetic mutations into it. I believe this is the true horizon for project which, let us not forget that, is for architect always a challenge to be accepted and won.

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