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A new Vanguard

Notes on the Current Condition of Architecture

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The architecture of the age of globalization, the age characterized by a geopolitical system that seems to be heading towards its decline, is dominant today. Almost all architecture magazines, including some of the most prestigious ones, which in recent years have played an important role in carefully reading and presenting works in their pages without propagandistic intentions; many architects and many historians and critics; a large number of simple architecture observers and even a large group of its users consider the season of building as an exciting, advanced period capable of making the future present. Everything that is not classifiable as globalization architecture is considered traditional, backward, unable to express contemporary values and achieve important objectives. For many years, I have realized that this opinion on global architecture does not correspond to what is considered an innovative, prophetic reality with extraordinary meanings. What has been realized in cities and metropolises in the last thirty years is very similar to the architecture of *Eclecticism*, which in the last years of the 19th century and until the early years of the next century transformed all the cities of the West and some in the East, giving them a hybrid identity like in an *Esperanto*, an incoherent mosaic of different linguistic fragments. From here, hybrid, casual, gratuitous works, devoid of their own necessity expressed by the Albertian idea, which in true architecture should not add or remove any element. Therefore, I believe that the true current avant-garde is not that of global architecture but a completely alternative conception of building. This conviction has been suggested to me by an observation that I believe cannot be considered inaccurate or just the result of a subjective view. This conviction consists

of believing that architecture, in its first principles, which I will explain shortly, and in the authentic values that they produce, are invariant. In short, these principles are the same as when human communities first emerged. Architecture, in fact, shares the same birth as prehistory. The invariability of the primary principles, however, is confronted with social, cultural, productive, and technical changes that constantly occur over time. From this stems an endemic contradiction in building, which has a decisive and continuous positive effect. On the one hand, the primary principles always express the same human action, which serves to define living in all its breadth; on the other hand, the ways of giving utility, structural consistency, and form to interventions in the landscape-territory-environment, the city, and architecture constantly change. It is an essential task for the architect to keep this conceptual duality in mind, giving it a unitary representation that is a concrete and at the same time poetic mediation between these two conditions.

It is useful to briefly dwell on the avant-garde to define some aspects. It must first be clarified that they are as many *revolutions*, which question knowledge, convictions, ways of proceeding, types of writing, discoveries and affirmations of new visions. Furthermore, and this should not surprise us, they draw from the past determining elements along with new elements. Humanism and the Renaissance were revolutions compared to the Middle Ages, which in turn had experienced the Gothic as a reaction to the classical world. Mannerism transformed the Renaissance, favoring the birth of the Baroque, which had a continuation in the Rococo. Neoclassicism was configured as yet another avant-garde that, in the Age of Enlightenment,

would revolutionize the arts. In its own way, Eclecticism also represented an avant-garde, first overwhelmed by Art Nouveau, which paved the way for Modernism, and then by the various avant-gardes of the twentieth century. In summary, it can be said that these *serial revolutions* were as many avant-gardes largely nourished by the resumption of previous visions often brought back in a reinvented form, as happened to the movement that the Five Architects group gave birth to in the 1970s, which had rediscovered the architectural language among rationalism, the *spatial writing* of Le Corbusier and De Stijl.

Before delving into the topic at the center of this writing, I believe it is necessary to clarify some aspects of knowledge and interpretation that are at the basis of my reflection, which due to the nature of the subject itself is quite complex and challenging. The first consideration that accompanies my discourse is the impossibility of understanding the city in its thematic extension. There are in fact many areas of knowledge that intersect with it. I will list some of them, apologizing in advance for any unintended omission. Philosophy, religion, climatology, sociology, economics, anthropology, botany, medicine, physics, statistics, politics, environmental engineering, geology, astronomy, geography, legislation are some of the areas of knowledge about the city. To these we must add others such as history, literature, poetry, media, without forgetting the science of flows, transport organization, infrastructure, the hydrographic system, and industry in its various articulations. To think of arriving at a synthesis between these areas of knowledge is very far from being realized. Claude Levi-Strauss defined the city as "the human thing par excellence," but its meaning, which tells of structures, forms, and purposes, does not seem to have been fully grasped yet. For this reason, I am convinced that we can only achieve a *partial and transitory knowledge* of the territorial and urban organism. Hence the insurmountable limit of urban planning, projected over long periods of time, and the *positivity of architecture*, which is designed and built in relatively short periods. The second consideration consists of wondering whether cities have a *plan for their existence*, a constant purpose, or whether they evolve through random events. Perhaps both vital processes of cities can merge in particular temporal situations. It is probably more convenient not to have to choose between the two perspectives: the intention of making its historical objectives a reality, the *adaptation to what happens*, but realizing the interaction between the urban will to realize the vision of its future and the incidental positive and negative occasions that follow the life of the city continuously. The third consideration, descending from the second, consists of deciphering the *character of a city*, understood as a constant category to which history, literature, and the arts allow us to approach, even if such a category will remain largely inexplicable. This reflection tends as a whole towards a *synthesis* that, if not formulable, allows us to sense the presence of an area of meaning. It is a clue that, in its own way, reveals something important and lasting to us. Perhaps only the urban project, expressed by architectures tuned to the city, can give us some signal about the future that goes beyond this mysterious and happy warning.

As for the architecture of globalization, it is necessary to list some characteristics that make it recognizable. The first is a radical neo-functionalism that focuses on analyzing the uses that the individual parts of the building must accommodate. The preeminence of function over other elements of architecture is an inheritance of the Gropiusian Bauhaus, which, in my opinion, was a choice between materialism and practicality, not entirely positive. The second characteristic is a *totalizing conception of technology*, a term that has overshadowed the more proper one of *technique*, which I have always preferred. The difference between the two words lies in the fact that the former, the most recent, affirms a cognitive primacy considered as a sort of mysterious knowledge that only a few know, while the latter indicates the ordering, organizational modalities, and concrete actions of building with which the expected result is obtained. The content of technology, if what I have said is correct, would then be the existence of a surplus value that the discourse on technique produces with respect to technique itself. Technology is, therefore, an *augmented technique*, so to speak, a higher state of the concrete dimension of doing. The third feature of global architecture is the *disappearance, in construction, of the fundamental relationship between the city and architecture*, which involves the two further cancellations of the *relationship between urban analysis and architectural design*, and the primary relationship between typology and morphology. In short, urban studies are now almost completely absent in faculties of architecture, as well as in the profession. Closely linked to the previous characteristic is the denial of places in favor of a random dissemination of buildings. Places are the result of the dialectic between site and history, they are archives of memory, narrative fields of settlement events, outcomes of complex and often formally prestigious interpretations of the soil in a plastic transformation that is always subjectively understood and interpreted. The fifth characteristic is recognized in the *excessive importance of communication in architecture*. The landscape, the city, and the serial or special buildings that it hosts have always communicated something, but what they expressed, almost in a spoken message, was contained within appropriate limits that did not involve the totality and uniqueness of the work. The age of mass media has profoundly changed the idea of a building as an entity that no longer dialogues with other architectures, but is primarily a message that concerns either consumption or the celebration of an industry of which it becomes a *flashy urban advertisement*. Every building today wants to present itself as an entity completely different from the others because it is involved in a competition whose result must be the *absoluteness of its identity*. A revealing example of architecture's communicative intentionality is the view of London from the Thames towards Christopher Wren's St. Paul's Cathedral, whose precious monumentality is overwhelmed by a forest of skyscrapers which, behind it, offer the unpleasant spectacle of a loud and continuous architectural discord. A set of almost always bizarre, anti-typological towers, equally spectacular, produce a chaotic ensemble, foreign to the city, where buildings fight against each other to assert their presence. If

one compares this view with that of Canaletto's, from more than two centuries ago, one can understand how much has been definitively lost. No coherent relationship binds the skyscrapers, *celibate phantoms*, one could say. The sixth characteristic consists of a radical denial of the relationship between tectonics and architecture, which is the *native place* of an authentic architectural language. The seventh characteristic is identified in no longer considering the *forma urbis* as a value, as a visible representative of the city, a constant, individual, and collective narration of its human story. Through a distribution of architectures that no longer follows the implicit and explicit, evident or mysterious orientations of the evolution of the city in its various and intertwined temporal phases, the existence of the city itself as an incessant narrative of the community that inhabits it is effectively denied. The new urban parts or those rebuilt in abandoned or recently demolished areas are not in solidarity with each other but are involved in a permanent conflict. The *forma urbis* is the expression of the ancient Roman culture of the morphology of a city but it is also something more. While the word morphology, coined by Johann Wolfgang Goethe in relation to the natural sciences and then adopted by architects, structurally describes the city, the ancient term *forma urbis* reveals its essence, the symbols that animate it, its mythologization, its hidden sides, the harmonic or dissonant rules that generate it. The global city is no longer a real urban reality, but the juxtaposition of autonomous building plots which, instead of building a harmonious settlement unity, confront each other, displaying their unmistakability with the others in a game that is more than risky, useless, unpleasant, and ephemeral.

The first principles that constitute the essence of architecture, from its appearance alongside the first human communities until today, have been in recent years, as I have already said, set aside as a heritage considered now to be forgotten. The architecture of globalization has, in practice, erased them. The first of these principles is the organic relationship between *landscape-territory-environment*, cities and architecture. Living is the realm that encompasses these three scales of intervention. A realm that is not only physical but also narrative, full of memories, in which a mysterious sublimation of its physical contents takes place, acquiring a mythological dimension and an essence that proceeds from *utilitas* to intellectual understanding and finally to the sphere of the spirit. The second first principle is the relationship, *harmonious or dissonant, between tectonics and architecture*, a dialectic between loads and supports, as philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer asserts, which is a conceptual and exclusive space of architecture, the only one from which the authentic language of construction can arise. The third principle is the creation or renewal of places by architecture. The place is the result of the relationship between the site and history, a profound and, using an adjective loved by Le Corbusier, *indescribable relationship*. Places are the central nodes of living, in which its meanings are exalted, totalizing and elevating the value of what surrounds them. From the places emanates an *artistic energy* that transfigures the built environment idealizing it, giving it also a constant permanence over time. The fourth

principle prescribes that every design choice must correspond to a *higher necessity*. The essence of architecture is both the goal, to be made evident, of thinking about it without any addition or subtraction, and at the same time the result of a compositional process in which this necessity is expressed by exposing Mies van der Rohe's idea that "less is more." In architecture, necessity not only involves the economic and constructional aspects, limiting, for example, any unnecessary addition to the building, but also asserts that an *architectural work is only what it must be*. Necessity is therefore, first and foremost, a higher purpose. The fifth principle concerns the duty that a building has to represent the institution it houses, as Louis Isadore Kahn has reminded us, and continues to remind us. Hence an idea of typology not so much as a *classificatory category*, but as an expression of the architectural meaning of a particular human activity that takes place in a building. In short, architecture is understood through three readings. The first is practical in nature, concerning uses and construction methods; the second is an intellectual interpretation through which we can see what its contribution is to urban space and its value according to the community that desired its presence in the city; the third is its spiritual significance. A value that we may not be able to understand, but which, once we know of its existence, will be for us an extraordinary gift, even if it remains incomprehensible. The beauty of architecture lies precisely in the awareness that it is with us, like a precious gift, even if it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully decipher it. One final consideration on what has been said in this paragraph. As it is a duty, now almost universally shared, to preserve biodiversity, it is equally necessary that architectural languages are in tune with the cultures of their countries, which give life to globalization. This is a condition that, by the way, I believe has exhausted its primary cycle or perhaps its final phase. It is necessary that the history of places resumes making architecture more vivid and authentically expressive, for a long time a mysterious and humanly poetic medium between the past and the future. A medium that lives and will always live in the present.

With the eclipse, which I hope is not definitive, of the primary principles, the meaning of living has been lost, which I have summarized in a passage from the preceding paragraph. I believe that a militant orientation needs to be substituted for the widespread conviction that contemporary architecture is highly advanced, primarily through digital means, which is now not only mythologized knowledge but a genuine religion. Along with these primary principles, a reaffirmation of the human value of living expressed by the beauty of architecture needs to be put in its place. Such beauty is neither *elegance*, or the result of good execution, nor the wealth and nobility of materials, nor the formal results, which are gratuitous or casual, taken from other arts, but especially industrial design. As I have said, the true beauty of architecture is an *absolute form attained* within the dialectic between the structure and its being coherent with the plastic modeling of volume and the correct consistency of materials. All of which is resolved in a composition that is aware of itself and at the same time is the bearer of mysterious con-

tents that, although incomprehensible, move us. Reintroducing the primary principles and the totality of living understood as a great poetic text on human communities, laden with memories in the present and projections in the future, is a revolutionary act that, by subverting the current subjection of architecture to market logic, once again reveals what building should be for us. I repeat that this position is not directed toward the past but is an urgent commitment to the future. To those who think that what I am proposing reflects a traditionalist idea of architecture, I want to clarify that it is my belief, elaborated over many years, that a *new avant-garde* is needed today to reaffirm the truth of architecture, its *authentic ratio for being*, the Vitruvian *raison d'être*, against the current drift that denies the real foundations of building in favor of completely self-referential whimsical experiments. As in every creative activity, it is necessary for an author to have a personal, recognizable, *autographic* language, but it must be based on shared foundations expressed through *genetic* selections among the elements of architecture. In short, architecture must invent its *own lexicon* but at the same time must be understood by the greatest number of people who will know or inhabit one of its works.

One aspect of globalization's architecture that concerns teaching is that the knowledge related to building is no longer considered a unified entity. For some decades now, this knowledge has been considered a set of separate, autonomous, and specialized disciplines. This has fragmented the idea of architecture, taking away its true essence. At the same time, building is no longer believed to be an art that expresses the nature and sense of dwelling. The concept of beauty, as discussed by Vitruvius, has often changed throughout the history of architecture. The beauty of Renaissance buildings is not that of the Baroque period, just as it is not that of Neoclassicism. Modernity has reaffirmed the concept of beauty through the multiplicity of its aspects, characterized by an enigmatic conceptualization, as was modified by Romanticism, which added the opposite of what was considered beautiful. Currently, beauty, or *architectural form*, has assumed new aspects, but its origin from the grammar and syntax of building is still its native scope. The beauty of architecture, as I have already said, must not be reduced simply to the technically *well-executed*, to the communicatively media-savvy, and to the logical correctness, but it is something whose presence is recognized and at the same time *inaccessible*, a dual reality that introduces us to a condition of surprise, waiting for promised discoveries, harmony with the world, potential understanding of the sphere of the transcendent and the timeless. A beauty that is also capable of regenerating and, for this reason, capable of being up to date season after season. Palladio's architecture is an unsurpassed proof of this, being what building really wants to be, beyond time.

As I come to the conclusion of these reflections, I believe that an architect must invent a *personal language*, a way of *writing*, before beginning to design. However, an important contradiction must be considered. Once a personal *style* has been identified, using a term that is no longer used, the lexicon that we have created must be, as I have already said, but unfortunately

as we do not want to accept, understandable for everyone or, more realistically, for many. This contradiction is vital and positive, making the work not only *speak* instead of being *silent*, following a consideration of Paul Valéry, but also *sing*, thus generating a harmony that is a form of beauty. In order to do our job, we also need a constancy in research, more precisely an *obsession*, which of course must be disciplined, controlled, and in some cases even accelerated, as well as a conception of architecture as a cosmic representation. Finally, the references we choose should not be cited, that is, reproduced in our own projects as they are. They must be experienced as precedents on which to do an interpretive work, transforming them into our own statements.

The urgent need for a new avant-garde that rebuilds the unity of architecture against its current and harmful separation into multiple disciplines requires a theoretical and operational reflection on various problems. We must try to progressively eliminate the homogenization of architectural languages by rediscovering the fertile diversity and engaging autonomy of the individual building cultures, which must certainly interact, including the influence of different lexicons, but always remaining aware of their own identity. We must also increase experimentation without mechanically imitating orientations far from the usual ones. It is also necessary to ask ourselves what *duration* means in architecture today, a valid concept over millennia but currently considered an outdated notion, replaced by an ever more rapid succession of architectures in the same parts of the city or by equally continuous and radical modifications of buildings of considerable quality. Furthermore, the ever more imposing flood of images must undoubtedly be contained, which ends up consuming itself, thus giving rise to a problematic *age of the ephemeral*. The idea that architecture has a long duration is intrinsic to the nature of building, even though a building may have a short life.

In summary, duration is a *conceptual aspect* of construction itself that may not correspond to a true continuity of architecture that can be destroyed or demolished. Therefore, the possibility for each architectural work to be preserved over time remains authentic, obviously by resorting to necessary maintenance. Finally, one cannot avoid reformulating a reasoned list of the languages in which *creativity* is a central element. In fact, it is no longer clear what the arts are, whose multiplication is now impressive, as are literary forms or cinema. All in duality such as material and ideal, real and virtual, complex and simple, existing and non-existent, true and implausible. Another aspect to which the avant-garde, of which I am delineating the problematic field, could give a new meaning is that of morphology. It has been replaced in the modern city by an informality that is not devoid of structural values, relationships with the landscape, foundational relationships, and artistic expressions. Values that are not recognized or completely forgotten today, even though they are still present and operating in the city. It is therefore necessary to rewrite the morphological theme in the light of the new and numerous characters that are defining the current cities, starting from the artificial geography of

infrastructures. Perhaps it is *psychogeography*, created from an intuition of Sigmund Freud described in the book "*Civilization and Its Discontents*," and from another of the situationist Guy Debord in his manifesto "*The Society of the Spectacle*," that with its drifts can show us the *urban invisible, the form of the formless, the secret and inaccessible side of dwelling*.

I have already mentioned that I am not against experimentation, just as I believe in the digital revolution, but it seems to me to be proceeding so quickly as not to allow us to get used to the changes it produces. I do not separate the past from the present and the future, but I believe that these three declinations of time must coexist. Recalling Pier Paolo Pasolini, I am for "progress" and not so much for "development". I also think that without a utopian tension and a visionary attitude, one cannot make a good stretch of road. Returning to the digital world, I have understood for some years now that the diffusion of BIM (Building Information Modeling) is not so much an agile tool, as one would expect, but a *priestly rite* that forces the project into a cage of consolidated solutions. In the digital universe, composing no longer seems to be an act that descends from the imagination of its author, but from the core of the notions that BIM proposes. All of this with the implicit conviction that today the virtual is the true real, while this is nothing but its simulacrum. Moreover, that today linguistic homogenization caused by a questionable Esperanto has won is not a simple opinion but a reality that is all too evident. Living the contradiction between the plurimillennial permanence of the first principles of architecture and the changing conditions in which they are confirmed is an innovative, advanced, and urgent choice that, in addition to a necessary correction of the *efficientist materialism* of the prevailing neofunctionalism and the reduction of the environmental dimension to its sole aspects, we are experiencing considerable and worrying critical moments. This requires logical clarity, great confidence, and remarkable courage. Architecture as the "substance of hoped-for things", remembering Edoardo Persico, will certainly be able to preserve, renew and give a new soul to living. What I have said is addressed to people like me who are about to conclude their journey in architecture, as well as, above all, to young architects and students. It will be up to them to decide whether to build their path in the architecture of globalization or to return to the origins, where creative energy, the conception of the nascent form, and the revealing totality of the project are still capable of illuminating living and its future.

The article was translated from Italian to English by Dr. Valerio Perna.

