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ON THE MARGINS OF PERMANENCE

This paper moves from the observation that the clear opposition between *durability* and *fleetingness*, advanced within the Modern Movement, is now outdated. Today, in the conscious impossibility of a *tabula rasa*, both physical and conceptual, the architectural project redefines its own scales and its morality in the ever closer meshes of existing reality. From this perspective, on the margins of what is already built, fragile and relational practices take on value, understood as the work aimed to creative permanence in the composition, also for the relevance of the sustainability issue.

Keywords: architecture, time, permanence, emotional, sustainable, relational practices

In order to reason about the relationship between the contemporary architectural project and the *durability/fleetingness* concepts, it is necessary define the vocabulary – given the multitude of possible declinations – to draw, as precisely as possible, the thinking limits and boundaries.

Etymologically, the two concepts are opposites. *Durability* (from the Latin *durare*) is the ability to endure, similar to inflexible, resistant, means that which continues to be, occupying space of time, which would resist the causes of destruction. *Fleetingness* (from the Latin *transitus*) indicates brevity of what passes, which survives for a short time and it is therefore temporary, brief, transient, fragile, momentary, provisional. In architecture, the two terms preserve this linguistic gap of meaning: the first refers to the Vitruvian *firmitas* and to an architecture designed to survive; the second recalls the events of an architecture dismantled shortly after it was built, the transmutation of features as a form of continuous adaptation to reality, moving through different places. Time is the element of convergence.

The principle of reversibility, which according to K. Abel [1] is at the origin of words and gives them a vi-

brant ambiguity, allows us to recognize the concept of *time* as the element that makes the two contents – *durability* and *fleetingness* – opposite but convergent. It is not insignificant if in the contemporary liquid [2] time, in which man appears sentenced to the impossibility to produce durable objects in absolute sense, the artistic experimentation conceptually operates right on this gap of meaning.

Starting from the de-contextualization of simple objects, residues, wastes, ordinary materials, etc., Art finds the re-conceptualizing possibility of the “recycling” practice such as contemporary poetry.

In this sense, the photographic works of cataloguing of rejected and residual spaces. That is how Stalker [3], through the reintroduction of the “urban dérive” [4], temporarily occupies and draws, by connecting them, one only *walkscape* [5] of what he calls “*current territories*”: transforming lands, at the margins of the rules and of their becoming “other-than-self”. A becoming “other-than-self” in which the series plan/realization/use/reject/find/fragment constitute the structure of a narration that is known, but of which it is more and more necessary to reconstitute the meaning: the *ready-made* of M. Duchamp [6]

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constitutes the action of reuse of the reject through the dislocation of the rejected object that allows it to gain a new meaning. The idea of a second life for the rejected things allows to reactivate the *dying body* (body/space *without quality*) treated by M. De Certeau [7] and to re-introduce it in the sphere of meaning of what is “other” than what it was originally, therefore rediscovering a new utility. Similarly, the re-functionalizations of G. Matta Clark [8], through a tectonic and architectonic collapse, produce a new significant residue, a fragment “between” the initial unity and the total dissolution of the architectural ruin.

Urban rejects and residues represent the living matter for the future of the city, through operations of removal of /in the built-up (like in the proposal of J. Derrida for the urban post-war empty spaces in Berlin) or, as proposed by K. Lynch [9] (in the plan of de-development for the American metropolis) and by P. Cook [10], through a containing architecture planned to be always usable, according to the idea that only the minimal actions (in size but also in flexibility and cheapness) are able to offer as a material to be recycled for new situations. The practice of creative “recycling” works on the temporal inconsistency of man-made wastes and residues, elevating them to new forms of permanence, a permanence of the “small things”, apparently useless fragments of everyday life.

A first declination of the relationship between *durability* and *fleetingness*, in the contemporary project, refers to the creative permanence of objects and spaces “recycling” from the waste of the ordinary, which allows them to resist (*re-exist/re-to be*).

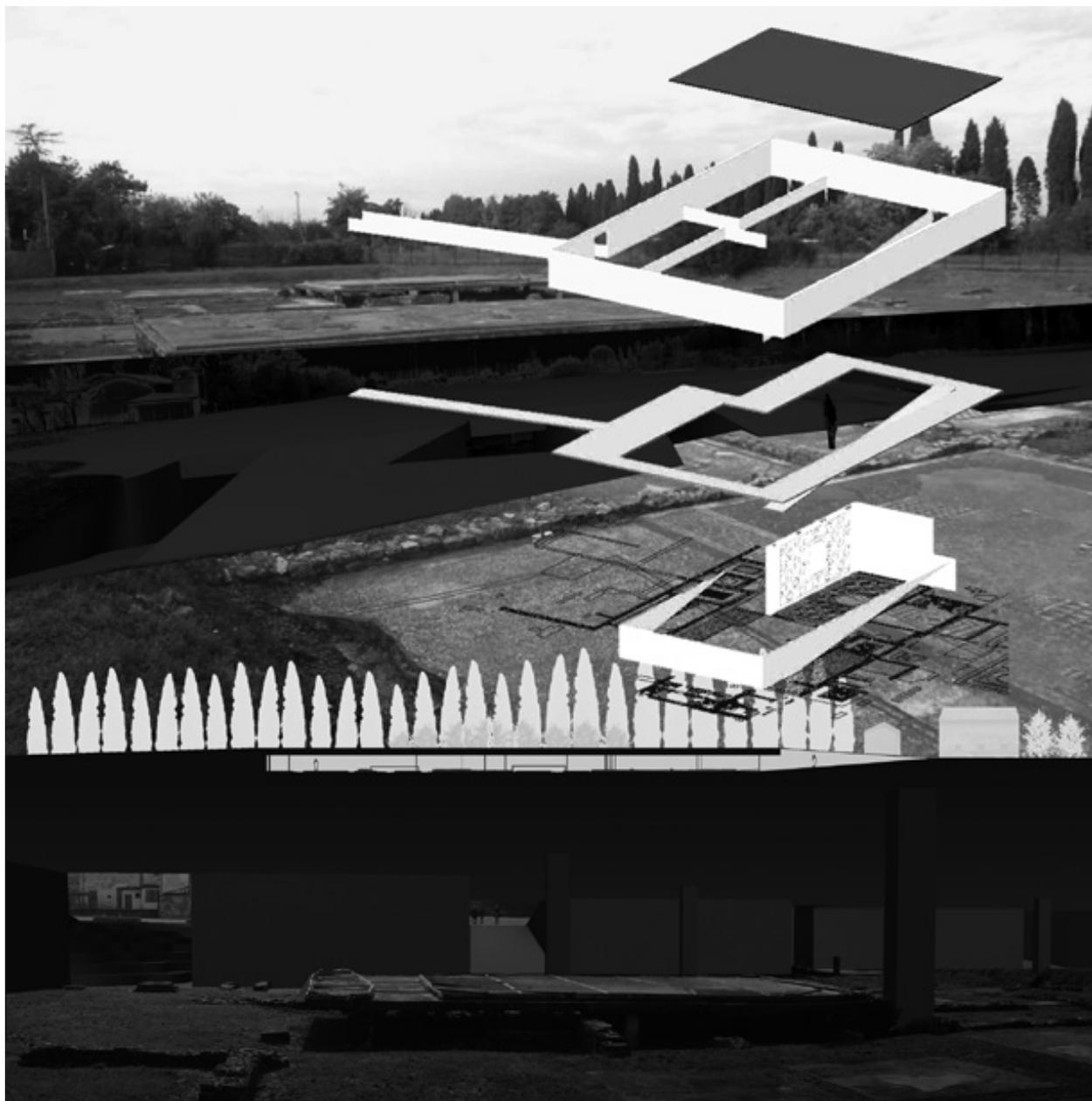
Similarly, the description of the temple built by the Israelites to preserve the Ark of the Saint Alliance resists in the collective imagination, an example of itinerant temporary and ephemeral architecture of the Bronze Age, to which we can contrast the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, symbol instead of an architecture built to endure.

The permanence, in some cases, is independent from the simple physicality of things, it can exist in memory. In this sense, Aldo Rossi’s lesson of the Teatro del Mondo is still relevant, in which the experientially and symbolical importance is not diminished by the space-time lability: what was built for a physical endurance of few months is destined to durability in the collective imagination. In other cases, the permanence is an unintentional result, such as the works that today we recognize durable and even if they are designed to be *events* (from the Eiffel Tower to the Cloud by Diller-Scofidio). In any case, as suggested by J. Chapman [11], the liquid [12] time where the duration of construction is only commensurate with the profitability of investments, an emotional-experientially project is necessary.

The Tumulo of New Grange, the Pyramids, the Parthenon, the Pantheon defy the centuries, but will the recent architecture and our landscape resist to today’s arrogance? In other words, is it possible to return to the morality of the project? J. Chapman points out the way of an *emotional durable design*. On the one hand it is clear that it does not make sense to design the physical durability of consumer goods – the argument is also true for architecture – if consumers do not have the desire to keep them, on the other hand, new strategies should be developed for *emotionally durable* objects and spaces. This means designing through minimal actions, to engage users on a deeper level, offering sophisticated and intense experiences that penetrate the psyche of the user more slowly, for longer periods and more satisfying over time, reducing the use of resources, by increasing the relationship between people, spaces and things.

A second declination of the *durability/fleetingness* concepts can thus refer to this *emotional permanence*, to the idea that minimal actions/weak gestures/transitional operations lead us to find

On the margins. Design experimentation for the Aquileia archeological ruins. From the exhibition "Other visions", Aquileia, July/September 2011



well-being in places where it usually does not exist: in the urban interstices and residual spaces, not in a monumental and more expensive construction. Only through an architecture that does not intercept money or notoriety, that requires fragile and relational exercises, you can find space for moral and emotional architecture.

A morality that we cannot find in the golden enclosure of the private house project or in the assignments of the “archistar”, but in the public space, to experience and not to privatize, in which one re-synchronizes new architectural figures of permanence with a more sustainable contemporary state. In fact, the permanence/sustainability relationship is a deeply contemporary concept. If in the past the permanence was a battle against Nature, now it is a necessity for the preservation of Nature [13].

In the traditional definition, sustainability is “the development that satisfies the needs of today without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs” [14]. It is a definition of general character in which environmental protection is considered as a necessary condition for a sustainable development rather than a constraint to it. This aims to ensure the growth of society and the collective and individual well-being by putting the *limit* of the environmental capacity to sustain this development.

Permanence and sustainability are issues of a big creative opportunity for architecture. They require a new idea of beauty linked to the re-discovery of a moral vision of the building. This new understanding – based on the need to integrate the principles of sustainability, the integration between technical choices and new linguistic possibilities, the necessity of energy conservation and environmental protection, the need to design objects and spaces in which emotional relationships are possible and where the opportunities for open socialization are clear – re-defines the *materials* of the contemporary project.

It is with these *materials* that architecture can be innovative, working on the physical and/or conceptual margins of this *sustainable permanence* – the third declination of the *durability/fleetingness* relationship – a compositional tool to rethink the living spaces “between” the increasingly narrow existing spaces. Due to the fact that the spaces available to receive the New are gradually running out, similarly to other precious resources, the project of architecture, essentially, is called to interact with what already exists. The attempt to resist to the passage of time – which underlies all those design practices that work with/on the existing – in the case of architecture this means to graft a new life in what now appears obsolete, rather than freeze a specific moment of its life.

This is also the main theme of the recent discussion developed in Italy around the contemporary intervention in the archaeological landscapes, obsolete places for excellence, where excavations and ruins lie in a relative state of abandonment [15]. In these sensitive contexts the project is forced to test the creative, emotional and sustainable new architectural figures of permanence.

A permanence, therefore, that it is not *lifting*, but a fragile and relational *graft* as result of rethinking the nature of residual things and spaces, that is the only way to survive to themselves, to live not one but several lives, transitional *durability/endure fleetingness*. Fragile and relational practices that are inseparably linked to the materiality, the physicality of these residues. Hence the constant and implicit reference to the question of the *time*. What we hope for, is a project of the “many times” that will be configured as a time of change/transformation of the existence and in the existence: emotional architecture that generates alternative objects, able to reduce the use and the waste of resources, by increasing the relationship between users and spaces, people and places, an architecture made of minimal acts. A poetic architecture.

ENDNOTES

- [1] K. Abel, *Der Genensinn der Urworte [Significato opposto delle parole primordiali]*, 1884.
- [2] Z. Bauman, *Modernità liquida*, Laterza, Milano 2006, original edition: *Liquid Modernity* (2000).
- [3] Stalker, laboratory of urban art and research on territory (see www.stalker.it).
- [4] S. Salder, *The situationist city*, MIT Press Cambridge, London 1999.
- [5] F. Careri, *Walkscapes. Camminare come pratica estetica* (2002) Italian edition, Guido Einaudi Editore, Torino, 2006.
- [6] Cf. M. Duchamp *Le grande Verre*, 1926.
- [7] M. De Certeau, *L'invenzione del quotidiano* (1990), Laterza, Milano 2001.

- [8] Cf. G. Matta-Clark in *Conical intersect*, 1975.
- [9] Kevin Lynch, *Deperire. Rifiuti e spreco nella vita di uomini e città*, Cuen Editore, Milano 1992.
- [10] Cedric Price, *Re: CP*, edited by H. Ulrich Obrist, Birkhauser, Verlag, 2003.
- [11] J. Chapman, *Modern Life is Rubbish'*, in *Blueprint, Article* 2006.
- [12] Z. Bauman, *op. cit.*
- [13] K. Touw, *Firmitas re-visited: Permanence in Contemporary Architecture*, Canada 2006.
- [14] E. Brundtland, *Report for the European Commission*, 1987.
- [15] Emblematic is the case of the archaeological area of Aquileia in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region.

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