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ARCHITECTURE AND CONSISTENCY IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTAMINATION

In the changed contemporary context, the architectural discipline must to update its instruments, to produce theories, experiment with new ways and forms to re-live a more friendly city and landscape.

This paper identifies as possible strategies of the architectural and urban composition, the operations of *spacing*, that rediscover and take as central the theme of emptiness; *scalarity* that do not produce individual and autobiographical objects, but related and relational spaces; *contamination*, that interact with the existing through the inclusion of singular projects that trigger events.

In any case, the architectural design is responsible for reconfiguring sign and sense of the current and future situation, from a rediscovery of “antique” matrices able to open new perspectives.

Keywords: Architecture, Context, Contamination, Scale, Space

Architecture and consistency [1] in the context of contamination

The frenetic research of always different poetics, narcissistic and self referential, has had its day. The architectural discipline need to focus on its role and future, because the context has changed.

The context, *the surrounding area – city or territory – to which the object of designing – the project – seems ever more connected, as to make it increasingly difficult its indifference* [2], is today completely hybrid, difficult to interpret unambiguously, and this will be even more evident in the future.

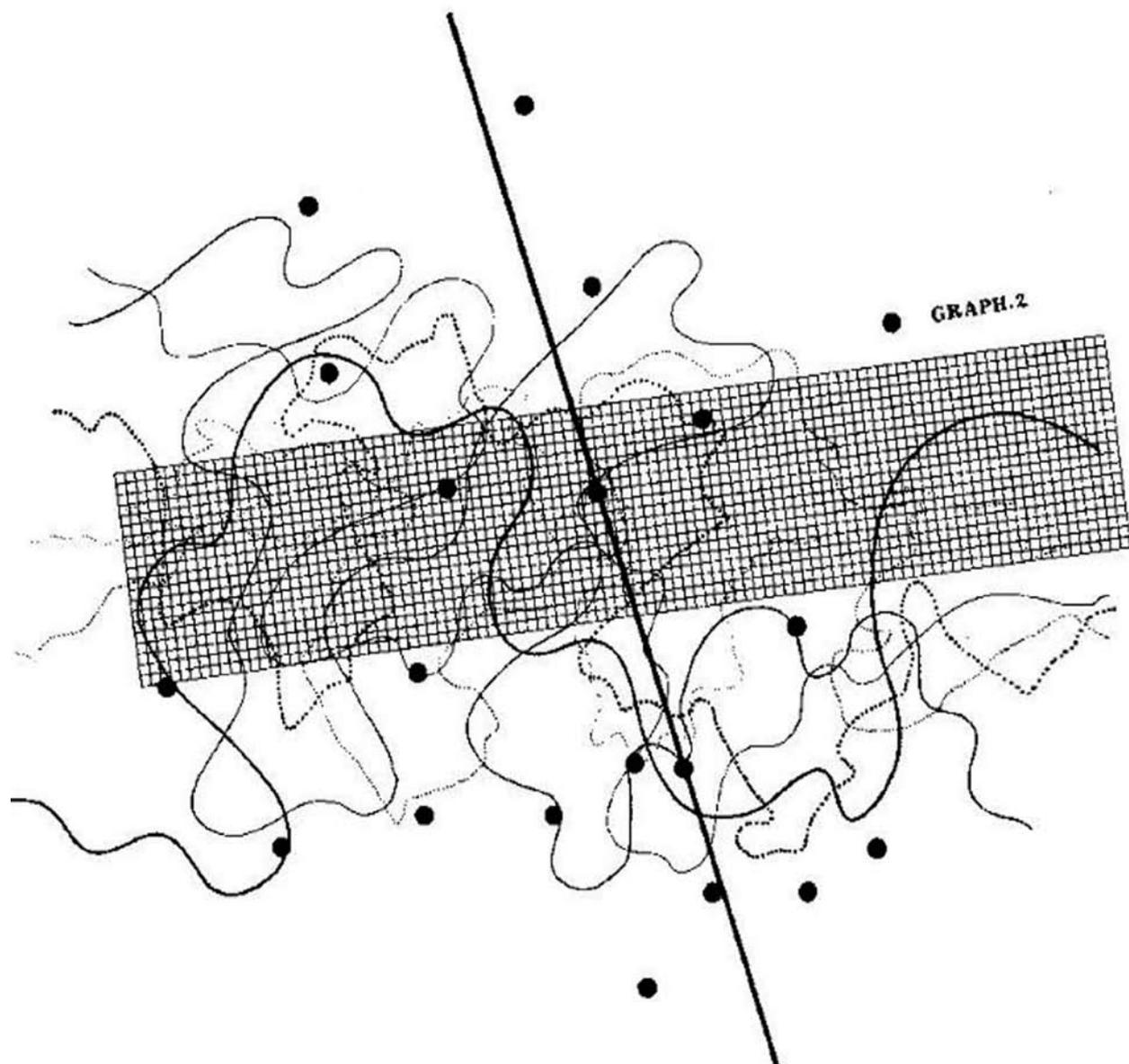
The fluid [3] and changing character of the contemporary context, suspended between nature and artifice, beautiful and ugly, clean and unclean, inhabited and uninhabitable, punctuated by increasingly relevant situations of environmental and social degradation, looks like an omnipresent artificial structure. This structure, built by man and already given, in

many points is saturated and fragmented such as in the crowded metropolis, in other places is still wild or will become inhospitable, for example exploited and then abandoned regions, or areas with phenomena of desertification, coastal reduction, etc.

In these contexts, architecture is even less a design of singular objects of/in the tabula rasa; it cannot search purity but need to focus on the re-writing of/on the many existing signs [4]. In other words, if architecture wants to survive and contribute to political and economic processes, it must take place in – and interact with – this artificial structure of our contemporary life, by acts of *contamination* [5] with the existing. The contamination, which *allows* a writing not close within the attitude to repeat its structure and way to form [6] is the genesis, for its ability to recognize and interpret the diversity, establishing relationships and harmony, enhance the dissonance [7].

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John Cage, Fontana Mix, 1958



It is not a simple grafting of a body to another but *an design practice through the insertion of new elements* [8] – spaces, relationships, architectural bodies – in the existing context, that improves the capacity to be habitable [9].

From the theoretical interest for the architecture of the contamination, compared to levels of lower complexity in relationship with the existing – from the typo-morphological dialogue [10] with *context*, to the hybridization [11] practices – which may be the instruments of the project?

This reasoning identifies three design strategies, related to three issues, that are read through a specific figure of musical writing, the *music staff – pentagramma* – (from the greek *penta*, five, and *gramma*, line) used as a metaphor of the man-made structure that is the contemporary context.

By definition and its configuration, the music staff is composed of signs, lines, and spaces, between lines. Lines also identify the harmonic scale of the song. In the music staff, musical notation written by other signs – the notes – a melody that is impossible to read and practice outside the mutual necessity between the three components – spaces, scale, notes – of its writing. The music staff metaphor is the useful and strong image in our reasoning, for its natural ability to contain and configure itself through spaces, scale and notes: signs, which ensure its significant role and the reason for its existence.

Spaces

The first issue regards the saturation of the staff, and underlines the reasons of space, or better, the need for spacing. If architecture is the art of building spaces, what space do we need today?

In the contemporary condition, in which the artificial structure of the *context* is dominated by the superimposition of images, sounds, and objects, the first aim of the project is to make space, working on

physical and conceptual subtraction, rather than the additive construction of objects.

This means “freeing spaces” without feeling the need to fill them, working from within, to change what is already there, densifying and tearing it down. In reaction to the use of earth and resources, the void is a resource, a value rather than a disvalue.

The empty space “available, virgin material and full of potential, rare but prolific” [12] becomes the real material of the composition, fluid space such as in Mies’s pavilion, dynamic space of his urban projects, such as the Berlin’s towers, the court houses, the towers of New York. In these places, the re-invention of the void, which otherwise is what remains between the buildings, becomes the principal element for the construction of city and territory. This absence has its reason related to a space where physical and visual flows intersect. The vacuum of the project is the space that allows the movement of people and view, and at the same time it defines the specific character of these architectures.

The empty space is complex and mobile because the vacuum created by spacing, such as the pause in the song, is also a place that contains the event and the exception within the saturated continuity – the imperceptible background noise of John Cage [13] – and the different possibility of being. It is a flexible space for various and unexpected uses.

This attention to the void, that characterized the artistic experiences of Suprematism and Constructivism, and which it was a strong idea for Mies, is at the center of Sanaa’s architecture. In their researches the void, such as a space of movement and unexpected, is the reinterpretation in contemporary ways of the traditional Japanese concepts of transitional space of the house and space between the buildings in the city [14].

Scale

The second issue concerns the concept of *transformability* [15] of the elements of context that the project is able to carry out, and consequently, the necessity to define ways and relationships between existing and new objects.

If in the first issue, the music staff was seen as saturated, to design thought the void, now it is investigated as fractal and divided, to be built by scaling able to generating new relations between things.

It is, to investigate the *relational character of architecture*” where such, as wrote Jaap Bakema *the relations between- and in- the things are more important than the things themselves* [16].

Some recent research about *landscape urbanism* and *landscape architecture* (17) re-actualized, through the theme of the landscape [18] – from the city to the vast territory – some studies about the polycentrism, in particular theories and projects developed by G. Polesello and more generally by the School of Venice [19].

The relationship between architecture and forms of urban landscape, is investigated in the light sculptures *D-Tower* by Nox Architects [20], that maps the emotions of the inhabitants of Doetinchem in various parts of the city, or in the infra-structural spaces of *Touch of Evil* by Nio-Architecten [21] who inhabit the places of mobility flows, such as railway bridges and tunnels, through folding and artistic treatment of their surfaces. At territorial scale, the interest for the relationships is central in the new interpretations of polycentric network by M. Gausa and Actar, in research concerning the Spanish metropolitan systems, such as *Hiper Catalunya* and *Multi-Barcelona*, based on infra-spaces [22] territorial system, usually less considered for role or quality, rethink as natural ecological networks – system of parks – and new artificial places with functions even small or nomad.

Notes

The last issue is about the project-specific ways, the necessity of an architecture for re-inhabit the land, with different logic yet to be explored, without the need to colonize space and Nature.

The music staff that in the first issue was seen as saturated for spacing, and in the second as divided to relate, is now investigated as an inhospitable and largely uninhabitable place.

Refused areas at the margins of mobility infrastructure, abandoned or contaminated industrial sites, rejected or inaccessible structures, are the physically or mentally uninhabitable spaces, usually large and with less quality, where the architectural research must to produce new ideas and experimentations.

In these places the architectural strategies of contamination are essential, because the project has to argue the possibility of its existence with everything already exist. Alternative settlement logics provide nomad architectures [23] – architectures with legs – for concept and status, put in their context as the notes in the musical staff. This means new architectural ways in which events [24], whatever their duration, are related to existing structures of various kinds – infrastructures, buildings, degraded geographic elements, etc. – in continuous movement between being and not being.

Reminded of the nomad architecture of John Hejduk [25], as *Land/marksmann* or the studies for *Riga*, swarms of small buildings designed for places already inhabited or completely uninhabitable, some of these are building only for a limited period, designed to be rebuilt elsewhere, others designed to be stable.

In contrast with a rigid definition of architecture, is preferable to use settlement models that accept the nomadic and mobile condition, able to respond better to the continuous movement of the contemporary world. Reactivating the urban utopias by Archigram [26] or the prototype-houses on wheels by Buckminster Fuller, whose tradition is part of the research

of Hejduk, these small nomad buildings [27] – like the *High life* by Front Architects, the *Trailer tricks* by Gollifer Langston Architects, or some projects of Nox Architects – repopulated the interstitial spaces of city and landscape. They are radical architectures by settlement logics and small dimensions, devices for living and seeing places that now are uninhabitable.

We are attending these places because they make possible a new beauty, the beauty that became corrupted by the *context* and that contaminated it. An architecture that, operates through spacing, scaling and singular notes, is able to re-inhabit the music staff and to sound, like Cage's lesson, the Heidegger's sense of the human being on the earth.

ENDNOTES

[1] Consistency is the title of the lessons, written before but unfinished, by I. Calvino, *Lezioni Americane*, 1993.

[2] V. Gregotti, *Il territorio dell'architettura*, extended edition, Feltrinelli 2008.

[3] Z. Bauman, *Modernità liquida*, Laterza 2006.

[4] R. Bocchi, *Progettare lo spazio e il movimento*, *Scritti scelti di arte, architettura e paesaggio*, Gangemi 2009, p. 20.

[5] We refer in particular to F. Purini, *Architettura virale*, in *Lotus n.133*, 2009. The term contamination belongs to the discipline of genetic engineering, and he refers to the notion introduced by H. P. Lovecraft in his stories: *contamination is the site of what is sick, confused, monstrous, wrong, unthinkable, especially impure*.

[6] *Ibidem*.

[7] R. Bocchi, *Progettare lo spazio e il movimento*, *Scritti scelti di arte, architettura e paesaggio*, Gangemi 2009, p. 20.

[8] F. Purini, *Architettura virale*, in *Lotus n.133*, 2009.

[9] Cfr. M. Heidegger, *Saggi e discorsi*, 1954. In particular we refer to the concept of inhabit, as the aim of architecture to make land available to dwell there.

[10] Reference is to research on the project as a typomorphology dialectic with the existing *architectural facts*, investigated in particular by E. N. Rogers, A. Rossi and the group of the School of Venice.

[11] Deserve a greater research some contemporary architectural practices based on the inclusion of new bodies and structures in the existing urban structures (cfr. *Parasite Paradise. A manifesto for temporary architecture and flexible urbanism*, Rotterdam 2003; the project *Las palmas parasite* by Korteknie & Stuhlmacher, 2000; the projects by Coop Himmelb(l)au).

[12] Fernando Espuelas, *Il vuoto. Riflessioni sullo spazio in architettura*, Marinotti Editions, 2004, p. 233.

[13] E. D. de Melo Pimenta, *John Cage. Il silenzio della musica*, Silvana Editoriale, 2003.

[14] See for example the *Moriyama House*, Tokyo, 2006 in which the spacing between the spread bodies of the residential unit, is the emptiness and connective structure of this new architecture, in a continuum of empty spaces available to unexpected uses, between urban and micro space of the house.

[15] This concept is already present in theoretic and projectual researches by Giuseppe Samonà, see in particular *L'unità architettura-urbanistica, scritti e progetti 1929-1973*, (edited by) P. Lovero, 1975. In particular the concept of *trasformabilità* of the territorial elements refers to the analysis of *emergenti* – dimensional and qualitative parameters of an environment – which is defined in relation to their capacity to transform in accord to the urban design motivations.

[16] Jaap Bakema, *Relations between Men and Things*, in J. Tyrwhitt, J. Sert, E.N. Rogers, *The heart of the city: towards the humanization of urban life*, CIAM 8, 1952.

[17] This refers to the Landscape Urbanism as a theory that replaces the *static view of things in the landscape architectural practice, open procedures and layers* of the landscape to organize the city of tomorrow, of which Charles Waldheim, James Corner and Alan Berger are the principal theorists. See in particular: *Landscape urbanism*, Topos n. 71; Charles Waldheim, *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2006. For the Landscape architecture that analyses, designs and maintains open spaces, from the garden to the park and landscape, see in particular the interpretations of landscape design through the theories of picturesque by Inaki Abalos, *Atlas pintoresco*, Vol.1-2, 2006.

[18] The term comes from an Anglo-Saxon and Germanic vision of summarized in the word landscape, consisting of land + shape (shape of the land) and land + schaft (graft, construction of the soil). According to the European Landscape Convention (2000) *landscape designate a portion of territory, as perceived by people, whose character derives from natural and/or humans actions and their interrelationships*. According to this definition we consider not only the beautiful scenery but also the ordinary spaces of everyday life that are designed and modified through a process of management of the man who inhabits them.

[19] Cfr G. Polesello, *Per un'architettura del policentrismo* (edited by) P. Barbarewicz, *Progetto Kazimierz. Venezia-Cracovia*, 1999.

[20] See in particular L. Puybroek, Nox. *The architecture of Continuity*, V2_/NAi Publishing, 2008; L. Tramontin, Nox, EdilStampa, 2006.

[21] Nio Architecten, *Snake space*, (edited by) M. Brizzi, Mandragora, 2005.

[22] For the infraspaces see M. Gausa, *Multi-Barcelona. Hiper-Catalunys.Strategie per una nuova geo-urbanità*, List, 2007.

[23] We refer to Deleuze and Guattari that in the *Trattato di nomadologia: la macchina da guerra*, in *Millepiani*, [1980], 2003, distinguish between “permanent” space and “nomadic” space.

[24] The term event is used to indicate the architectural nomadic predisposition, and to describe the apparent or real mobility of these structures.

[25] See in particular A. Vidler, *John Hejduk: architettura vagabonda*, in *Lotus* n.68, 1999.

[26] S. Sadler, *Architecture without Architecture*, MIT Press, 2005

[27] For more recent experimentations of micro-architectures refer to Phyllis Richardson, *XS E: big ideas, small buildings*, 2001, Phyllis Richardson, *XS Green: big ideas, small buildings*, 2007, Phyllis Richardson, *XS Extreme: big ideas, small buildings*, 2009, Ruth Slavid, *Micro: Very Small Buildings*, 2009.