

ANTONIO MONESTIROLI*

ARCHITECTURE AND ITS TEACHING

ARCHITEKTURA I JEJ NAUCZANIE

Abstract

Architecture cannot be the response to a particular demand. Like art in general, architecture has to ask the questions and formulate their answers at the same time. This is its necessary freedom, which does not mean detachment from reality but simply the freedom to know the reality in which it is inserted... to construct a new reality that knows how to interpret the values and aspirations of our time. The ultimate goal of architecture is to “touch the heart.” But what touches the heart in the forms of architecture, if not the recognition of their meaning? The relationship between form and meaning has to be established anew each time, in full awareness of the tradition, but with the freedom of thought that allows us to go beyond any pre-set relationship. Architecture is not superfluous, as many think, but necessary for the wellbeing of us all.

Keywords: teaching architecture, architectural composition, architectural form and meaning

Streszczenie

Architektura nie może być jedynie odpowiedzią na jednostkowe zamówienie. Podobnie jak sztuka w ogóle, architektura winna stawiać pytania i jednocześnie formułować odpowiedzi. Jest jej potrzebna wolność, która nie oznacza oderwania od rzeczywistości, ale wolność pozwalająca poznawać rzeczywistość, w którą architektura jest wkomponowywana... by budować nową rzeczywistość, zdolną interpretować wartości i dążenia naszych czasów. Ostatecznym celem architektury jest „dotknąć serca”. Ale co nas porusza w formach architektonicznych, jeśli nie identyfikacja ich znaczenia? Relacja pomiędzy formą i znaczeniem winna być ustanawiana za każdym razem na nowo, z pełną świadomością tradycji, a jednocześnie swobodą myśli, pozwalającą wyjść poza wcześniej ustanowione relacje. Architektura nie jest zbyteczna, jak wielu uważa, ale niezbędna dla dobra nas wszystkich.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie architektury, kompozycja architektoniczna, forma i znaczenie architektury

* Full Prof. D.Sc. Ph.D. Arch. Monestiroli Antonio, Faculty of Architecture, Politecnico di Milano.

In Hollywood they've always asked me to do things I don't know how to do. They've never been interested in the things I know how to do.

Robert Altman

If I could return to being a student, I would ask my teachers “what is architecture?”

I would ask everyone, in order to understand if the programs of the various disciplines that focus on architectural design, or only on knowledge of architecture, are consistent with the definition supplied.

Because in order to make architecture, it is necessary to have *an idea of architecture, to be able to give a definition of architecture*. One has to be able to describe the fundamental traits of the discipline whose foundations are supposed to be taught.

I have taught *Architectural Composition* for many years and I have to tell you that no one has ever asked me what – in my view – architecture is.

Mine is not an isolated case: no one asks what architecture is, any longer. Though in the meantime, in Italian architecture schools, the students and teachers continue to make projects, to discuss degree theses, and architects in their studios continue to make projects that are built, described and commented on in architecture magazines. But no one really asks “*what architecture is.*”

For years, an inexplicable silence has reigned regarding the reasons of a discipline that is practiced by each person in the way that suits him best. In the meantime, our cities grow and the quality of their architecture is increasingly neglected, even that of the historical cities that are damaged more and more.

Everyone blames the indifference of those who settle for mere economic profit through architecture.

Today, there are even businessmen who run organizations created for research on architectural culture and its dissemination, with results that are *utterly extraneous* to those aims, results that in the end have an impact on the community, which loses any opportunity for debate on architecture.

I believe the citizens are still convinced that architects, i.e. those to whom a precise task has been assigned, that of safeguarding the constructed heritage of the country and making it grow in keeping with the laws of architecture, *know* what architecture is. But that is not the case.

In these years, architects *have lost the cognizance of their knowledge* of the discipline they have been summoned to practice, *by community mandate*.

I do not know how this has happened, but I do know how architects practice their craft today, because I am an eyewitness of the results.

One part, the majority, has chosen the easy road, namely that of doing what the client asks them to do. And today there are many different types of clients: there are the small clients

who want to build the home of their dreams, *a house they already know down to the smallest details*, from the construction materials to the ornamental features. For these clients, *the architect is a technician at their service* who has to find the way to fulfill their desires.

Then there are the larger and more important clients, those who build entire city parts: public buildings, residential settlements, urban infrastructures. They are never alone; they are always accompanied by big investors, and unlike the small clients, they do not want to build the city of their dreams, because *none of them dreams of a city any longer*. For the most part, they make economic programs, and all of them, *including public administrations*, by necessity, come to terms with what can be gained from any real estate operation.

It is understandable that in these conditions no one cares about knowing *what architecture is*. Actually, if there is an architect who knows the rules of the craft, that of the community mandate I mentioned, he has to be put into a position where he will not cause problems.

But what can be done, then, to safeguard the *urban quality* that is increasingly invoked in conferences, and in newspapers?

The simplest measure would be to hire an architect who knows how to do his job, but as we have understood by now, this choice is nearly impossible. The focus is on the fame of the architect rather than his expertise, on the one hand, and on the fact – and this is a true contradiction – that not everyone is capable of understanding architecture, meaning that the quality of a project is hard to recognize.

In this state of more or less guilty ignorance, the choice goes to a few architects known on an international level, usually with close ties to the businessmen, who commit themselves to responding to the demands made on them by the businessmen, who are the very ones that establish their fame through communications media. So the circle closes and, as can be understood, space for *true, disinterested* expertise of the architect, *that expertise that is laboriously constructed through knowledge of the specificity of the discipline*, does not exist.

Some say that the way to get out of this vicious circle is *negotiation and compromise*. In effect, we live in an age of compromises. I recently read a nice definition of compromise, which says that *compromise makes things much easier, but much less interesting*. I agree with this definition, and in any case, I wonder why the economic players should be interested in finding a compromise with architects, when they can get along very well without it.

Speaking of compromises, I have heard that there are architects who state their willingness to design only the facades of their buildings. To me this does not even seem like a compromise, but like a true *capitulation*.

I believe there is only one path that can be taken, the longest and most arduous, the most extraneous to the world of business: *it is the path of knowledge, interested only in defining the reason of architecture, its most general purpose, its real clients who are the recipients of the meaning of the architecture and nothing more*.

While some may see this as a naive statement, it is actually the hardest step to understand and to make understood to all those who are interested in this problem.



How is it possible to make all citizens the beneficiaries of architecture? All those who do not have the tools to make their *architectural intent* explicit?

To do this, architecture cannot be the response to a particular demand. *Like art in general, architecture has to ask the questions and formulate their answers at the same time.* This is its *necessary freedom*, which does not mean detachment from reality but simply the *freedom to know* the reality in which it is inserted, to recognize its essential aspects, to express a judgment, to put forward a critique to construct – I want to emphasize this word – *to construct a new reality* that knows how to interpret the values and aspirations of our time.

If this is our task, why should we limit our field of action to the interests of every client we come across along the way?

There have been *great clients*, such as Adriano Olivetti, who *asked* architects for a *modern idea of the city*. But they wanted that idea to go beyond the demand they themselves were able to offer. Only in this way was it possible to propose *types and languages* capable of responding to the commission received.

But today things are no longer like that. Today a technical response is requested to a particular demand.

Instead, in the process of knowledge of reality we have to *go beyond a particular character* (beyond the *accidentality* addressed by Hegel) to know the fundamental aspects and to build our project on them, and only on them.

So who is our client?

I believe our clients are only those who are interested, *truly interested*, in constructing the cultural values of an entire community of citizens.

In this way, we can understand what is the true conflict we are experiencing today with the culture of consumption, a culture focused on satisfying *individual impulses* and utterly disinterested in what is all too nonchalantly called “*the common good*.”

A culture that has brought about *the mutation of our profession*, that has erected theories appropriate to itself, like the *Postmodern or Deconstructivism* that have made it possible to propagate the most disparate (we could also say *desperate*) forms, which are greeted as being *distinctive of a particular character*. Of the particular character of those who commission them.

A system that has seemed to work well over the last 30 years: *for a clientele made of many particular interests, a professional class has responded by producing many particular languages, also induced by the constant new production of construction components.*

I personally do not believe this system can continue for much longer.

Places or buildings are no longer constructed in which we can *recognize a collective thought* that has always been, and still is, the reason for which architecture transmits a feeling of belonging. When we say that buildings are ugly and that the places where they stand are without form and therefore without identity, we never take sufficiently into account the fact that this leads to *disorientation, disaffection, a sense of not belonging to the places we inhabit, a sense of solitude that makes us unhappy.*

"Aesthetic pollution," said Ignazio Gardella, meaning that *"ugliness is a health hazard."*

Which is also a way of saying that architecture is not superfluous, as many think, but necessary for the wellbeing of us all. Not considering this makes us culprits.

In these conditions in which a necessary craft is denied, we have to find a way to reclaim it. Not individually but collectively, and this can only be the job of the School, a *lofty and noble* job, a job that enables us to contribute to the quality of our life.

Because through architecture it is possible to make the places of our life recognizable, to make citizens feel like an *integral part* of a community.

Romano Guardini, the theologian appreciated by Mies, said, with Immanuel Kant: *"What is essential for a work of art is to have a meaning but not a purpose. It exists not for technical utility, not for economic advantage, but to be a form that reveals. It has no aim but it means, it wants nothing but it is."*

R. Guardini, *L'opera d'arte*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1998.

I can remind you of Kant's definition of beauty, which says: *"Beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, in that it is perceived in it without representation of an end"*.

I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 1790.

For Kant *the goal of art and therefore of architecture is the expression of its meaning* and not of its purpose. As you can see, the positions of Kant and Guardini are very close to each other.

Naturally, today the difference between *meaning and purpose* is hard to explain. It is very hard in a time in which there is talk only of purpose or even, as I was saying, of particular purpose, *an individual purpose*.

A frequent position today is the one that states that the meaning of the forms of architecture coincides with their purpose, that there is no difference between purpose and meaning. And this has always been the thinking of the *functionalists*.

Then there are those who say that *every form brings its meaning with it*, that form and meaning are inseparable and therefore the problem of expression of meaning does not arise. For those who think that *the relationship between form and meaning is given once and for all at the origin of architecture*, the problem is simply that of finding the form suitable for the function of the work of architecture, choosing from the many already existing ones, in a sort of *catalogue of forms* and their possible combinations.

Instead, I think that the relationship between form and meaning has to be established anew each time, in full awareness of the tradition, but with the freedom of thought that allows us to go beyond any pre-set relationship.

I repeat: *the relationship between form and meaning has to be established anew each time.*

I have spoken and written about this problem many times; today I would like to underline one aspect of this delicate but fundamental passage.

I believe that what changes in time is *our interpretation of the themes of architecture*. I believe that our idea of the house is not the same as that of the ancients, but is different because our culture is different.

Paradoxically, the house is the same from a functional standpoint. What changes is its meaning, the meaning we attribute to it.

Think about the difference between the relationship with nature in antiquity and that of the present. *In antiquity, it was necessary to protect ourselves against nature, while today we turn to nature for knowledge and consolation. We recognize ourselves in nature; we recognize the nature in us.*

The relationship of the house with nature in antiquity has changed today, and our idea of the house changes with it.

If we compare the ancient Domus with the Villa Savoye of Le Corbusier, we can see the difference of the forms and, together with them, of the meaning. Yet the concept of appropriation of the place does not change: the house is the place to stay, he who dwells there appropriates that place, and fills it with the objects of life.

The Domus *closes* around the peristyle, while the Villa Savoye *opens* to the surrounding nature. In this sense, Le Corbusier is an extraordinary interpreter of the values of his time (on a par perhaps only with Mies van der Rohe). Among the values, first of all there is the relationship with nature.

Many have admired him for his language, for the relationships he was able to develop with the figurative arts of the 20th century. And this aspect of the architecture of Le Corbusier should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, I have always been attracted by his ability to *make explicit*, to reveal, Guardini says, the culture of his time. The values of his time permit him to re-form, *to give new forms* to architecture.

I say new forms to remind you that *form is always new*; even when it resembles old forms, it is new. By this, I mean that things are constructed not by dragging along old forms, but through the *manifestation of meaning*.

I remember an apt definition of art by Heidegger, who said (as above) that *art is the manifestation of truth*.

I have always been fascinated by the passage from an abstract concept like truth to a concrete, material form that is “*manifested*” or embodied.

It is the passage from an immaterial world like the world of ideas to a material world like that of construction. A sort of *metamorphosis of the idea*.

There are no fixed rules for this passage. If anything, there are recommendations. One of them is that ideas and their meanings have to be *profound and not superficial*, and the forms of construction have to be *simple and clear*.

Since there are no rules in the passage from ideas to forms, there are also no certain references. The risk is total, in the sense that when the passage is not made, the meaning does not appear.

The definition of the idea comes prior to any form.

By idea, I do not mean the idea of the project, but even prior to it the *idea of what the project has to achieve*: the idea of house, theater, museum, etc.

This first phase of the project, which I have always extensively addressed, is the most difficult and demanding one, because without having an idea of the house it is impossible to design a house, and so on.

The idea on which the project is constructed cannot come from the mind of the designer; it has to be rooted in the culture and in the material conditions of a society. The culture of the house, the theater or the museum in the countries of northern Europe will be different from that of the Mediterranean countries, and based on these ideas different houses, museums and theaters will be built.

This adherency of the idea to reality is well described by Erwin Panofsky in his extraordinary essay entitled Idea. Panofsky says: “The idea is not preconstituted in the spirit of the artist, prior to experience, but is generated based on experience, produced a posteriori. As a result, it a certain sense it is no longer like a given content or even a transcendent object of human awareness; it is a product of human awareness.”

E. Panofsky, *Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der älteren Kunsttheorie* (1924; translated into English as *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*).

So the idea is a product of awareness, of awareness of the theme of the project. We must be able to describe the meaning of the theme of the project *before we begin to look for the corresponding forms*. We know about it as it presents itself to our experience, but also and above all to our *desire for a better world: the house I would like to have, the theater I would like, the museum I would like*.

This is how we form an idea for ourselves of the *objective* of what we have to build, *which is the meaning* of the theme of the project.

But how can we find the corresponding forms? How does the passage from idea to form happen? What I have called the *metamorphosis of the idea*?

This is the most obscure passage of the procedure, but it is also the one that makes our craft fascinating.

The fact that an idea of the house is transformed into a house is the most authentic creative act of the whole procedure. An act that cannot be bypassed, passing directly from the historical repertoire of forms to the new form. An act to which we entrust *the authenticity of the work*.

Certainly, the first and foremost archive of forms is history. It is in the architecture of history that we can recognize the relationship between a form and the idea that drives it. Nevertheless, this is not the only place we can seek the corresponding forms. There are other places: the world of nature and that of technique.

Just consider what Le Corbusier *found* in the world of technique and nature, which perhaps is the world of forms that has most influenced architecture, from ancient times to the present.

Nature, technique and history are the systems of reference to which we turn when we are seeking the forms that correspond to the meaning of our project theme.

Of course, we will not find the forms we are searching for directly in those worlds, but we will find *what we need* to construct our own forms, by analogy, though still in an embryonic state.

Starting from these embryonic forms, we have to come to grips with the aspect of our project that is considered – rightfully, in my view – the one that truly pertains to our discipline: *the construction*.

The construction stages the idea, as Heidegger would have put it. So it is not free to combine its parts in the way best suited to its own laws because it has to perform a task, which is that of constructing a building and revealing its meaning.

Although the construction has laws it must obey, its own disciplinary statute that must be known, it is important to emphasize that the construction is *the skeleton*, the basic form, the essential form of a building, and therefore it has to *already contain* its meaning.

I do not recall who told me – I think it was Francesco Venezia – that Leonardo always started from the skeleton when he painted a figure. Though it was later hidden by successive layers, the skeleton *already contained a large part of the final expression*.

The same could be said of Mies van der Rohe, who thought that all the acts coming after the construction of the skeleton of the building would only obscure its clarity.

You will certainly have understood that in all the passages I have described there are many degrees of freedom of the designer, that is is necessary to shoulder many responsibilities, and that the choices made in the process have many moral implications. That the role of the subject, the autobiographical role, is very important and impossible to deny.

And here I would like to conclude with the last aspect of this long and winding process, namely the question of recognition: *the recognition, in the forms of architecture, of their meaning.*

Again I can turn to Le Corbusier, who in his extraordinary treatise on architecture says that the ultimate goal of architecture is to “*touch the heart.*”

But what touches the heart in the forms of architecture, if not the *recognition of their meaning*? That meaning that is the beginning of every project, that meaning that belongs to our life, before it belongs to the forms, a meaning we have to know how to transmit to the forms of the buildings we design?

What touches us is the recognition of our life in the forms of buildings, a recognition that is also the proof – perhaps the only proof – that our project has managed to express its objective.