

The quasi-temple of Architecture

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The advent of modern capitalism has changed everything and Architecture is no exception. These last few decades, in particular, resemble an acute transition, when everything moves at a speed more and more difficult to track. The relocation of the world's centers, accomplished by the new geography of production and capital reflect a new balance that has also its own dark side of poverty and disparities.¹

Probably architects, in a very optimistic sense, still hope that creative work can always become a front to reverse the arising constraints in society. However, “creativity has always been absorbed by capital” and “the creative professional was never *outside* accumulation, but an essential part of it.”² To an economic and political supremacy corresponds a disciplinary mainstream, which works as an enabler of the establishment. Or, better said, it is the establishment itself.

Being dominant, the establishment is not absolute at all and that is why we have the moral obligation to challenge it. By formulating a possible way out that takes into account the obstacles raised by disciplinary fragmentation, I try to do so.

This essay is a contribution written in a specific circumstance and in a concrete geography, being contaminated by both. It is impossible to deny (and I do not intend to do that) the subjective and, in a sense, autobiographical dimension that a text of this kind acquires.

¹ Rather than confirm, this fact counters the expectations of the ecumenical progress and common growth dynamics that underlie and legitimize capitalism itself. The hope of *laissez-faire* has always been placed on the supposed benefits of the trickle-down effect, a concept that defines the redistributive potential of capital accumulation. But instead of being dissipated, in society as in the world, the differences have been deepened and, as Thomas Piketty recently argued, they have reached levels only similar to those of the nineteenth century.

² Goodbun, Klein, Rumpfhuber & Till, *The Design of Scarcity*, Strelka Press, 2013, p. 6.

Compartmentalization of the design process

As almost all disciplines, Architecture tends to a progressive specialization and herein lies a great paradox: if learning more about a certain specific subject can enable significant gains in knowledge, it can also make the architects lose control of the entire design process, being hostages of a very particular task or matter. Furthermore, to specialize the discipline of Architecture means, ultimately, to compartmentalize it.

Through the last decades, some major studios have changed the established procedures of the design process, yielding to the pressure of the entrepreneurial spirit. They started to break the common alignments, dividing them into isolated tasks and distributing them by their drawing laborers, mere executors, whose repetitive routine established an excessive gap between practice and criticism. Meaning a substantial increase in productivity, this can also be very advantageous to investors and to the Market engine because, if the project should always be a political act, the more isolated and absent architects are from an entire vision, the more the Market ideology can reign. And if it reigns, it will impose its own moral, aesthetic and constructive codes under a supposed objectivity.

Being slightly simplistic, I can find here a helpful and clarifier binomial between the market goals – profit and accumulation – and Architecture. And if, as Joseph Rykwert said, “Architecture is primarily

3 Joseph Rykwert, "Architecture and the Public Good", *Research and Practice in Architecture*, Alvar Aalto Academy, Helsinki, 2001.



Fig. 1 Johannes Vermeer, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, 1655.

4 Stefano Boeri, *Fare di più con meno. Idee per riprogettare l'Italia*, il Saggiatore, Milano, 2012.

5 To learn more about this: Aureli, P. V., *Less is Enough*, Strelka Press, 2012.

6 Walter Benjamin, "The Destructive Character", in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writing*. Vol. 2 (2), 1931-1934 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 541-542.

concerned with the Public Good (...), private profit can only enter into its calculation negatively to an extracurricular matter."³ Thus, to the compartmentalization of the design process and to the subsequent fragmentation of the discipline, the market will reply with an infallible cohesion.

Compartmentalization is also the result of the segmentation the merchant status imposes: while architects are highly specialized technical designers, customers become promoters or investors and dwellers become consumers. One could suppose that with the proliferation of *stakeholders* and *skills* (keywords of the market lexicon) the design process would become more discussed and diverse, but it doesn't seem to be that simple. Among all those *agents* there is a field of struggle and dispute of power and dominance.

While the Market rules the world, sometimes the architects themselves begin to occupy a peripheral space in the design process. This is the scenario of the second loss, when they are not victims of the specialization that I mentioned above, but victims of their own desire. Even if those Architects formally and legally maintain their centrality, they become pure bureaucrats of accumulation, whose mission is to apply generic trends to a specific geography. *Fare di più con Meno*⁴ (*Do more with less*), a very successful book by Stefano Boeri, is a good example of how an idea of Architecture can surrender to the dominant spirit of austerity, and then create a kind of new reductionist aesthetic.⁵ Instead of being, as it initially seems, a brand new speech, it remains an official rhetoric of the establishment.

Considering this paradox, I wonder whether it is possible for architects to formulate, in their own disciplinary space, a balance that implies at the same time, openness and cohesion, individuality and plurality, autonomy and commitment. Suddenly, the return to the Self becomes an imperative route.

The Radical Self

The Self can be an irreplaceable field of work and criticism, as a minimum, indivisible and impenetrable compartment of the individual thought. The borderline of ambiguity and confusion which Architecture

sometimes reaches requires successive actions of retrospection and revision, where the architect, in an exercise of great concentration, seeks a kind of reorganization of his own speech.

It seems to me that there are great similarities between the importance of the Self to the discipline of Architecture and the religious concepts of Contemplation and Action. *Contemplation and Action* has been developed by several theological currents, based on the biblical episode of Luke 10:38-42 (*At the home of Martha and Mary*), where two sisters receive Jesus in their own home. Martha, the active one, engaged in the service, while Mary, the contemplative one, devoted herself to the Word of the Lord. From this episode and from the enigmatic assertion "Mary has chosen what is better", with which Luke concludes, numerous interpretations emerged, split into treaties, religious texts, works of art, ...

Beyond the religious calling of the scripture, I think it is essential to retrieve this simultaneously contemplative and active sense as a mutually complemented binomial. The active life is the current practice – I mean, the design work as we do it on a daily basis (details, construction projects, budgets, etc.). It remains an intellectual work, but it is totally distinct from contemplation. Contemplation is about reflection, synthesis and concentration; it is a great individual effort, limited in time, where the architect gets involved in his *Radical Self*. And I use "Radical" here not in its common sense. The *Radical Self* is an intellectual redoubt of revision and invention, placed in the roots of each person.

It is just in these crucial moments that the architect, the client and the user are exhaustively the same. Not because they are in fact the same person (they don't need to be, indeed) but because a kind of objective coincidence, or a contemplative state of fullness, may give back to Architecture its essential condition of pleasure and delight, like a "spectacle of deepest harmony."⁶ What I am speaking about is an incursion and a deep ethical commitment that the author sets with himself as an ethics that merges with practice: in other words, a nexus between Contemplation and Action. It seems to me that only the art or, rather, only



Fig. 2 The Chapel of Our Lady of Conception



Fig. 3 In this image we can see the isolated chapel and in the background the Convent of Christ, drawing by Albrecht Haupt, 1888

the artistic practice of design is able to promote the necessary conciliation of these two worlds.

In the pursuit not only of the reorganization of a speech and of a thought but also of the primary and essential condition of that speech and that thought, Architects made some works that can be thought as trials. To these syntheses that gather in the project a sought essence and, at the same time, become great experiments, we are calling *quasi-temples of Architecture*.

Quasi-temple

The quasi-temple is an inventory and a device of meditation, where the architect puts both a statement of principles and a symbolic universe. It is about anonymity and discretion, ethics and *métier*, like a laboratory – a space of experience and ongoing discussion – where he formulates and tries out his substantial speech.

I say *quasi* because the ideas of essence and sufficiency arise here as unreachable horizons and not as owned realities. In fact, the total temple is an impossibility as the absolute essence and sufficiency also are. So, from these exercises come up the possible temples.

I can collect numerous examples of quasi-temples throughout history that correspond exactly to this intention. Some of them are remarkable treaties or hypothesis and speculative exercises that defined turning points in the history of architecture: Laugier's primitive hut, Corbusier's Domino house or Rossi's Teatro del Mondo, just to remember three very obvious examples.

But, contrary to what one might think, they do not have to be merely theoretical manifestos or intangible works, neither world-famous icons. I am thinking, for example, of a small, enigmatic chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Conception, built around 1540 in Tomar (Portugal). Its authorship and the circumstances of its construction are clouded by uncertainty, which turned it into a kind of artefact of curiosities, about which several authors have invented multiple hypotheses. Let's follow, in my opinion, the most exciting of those, which has also been considered by contemporary scholars the most consistent.

In 1972, the American art historian George Kubler suggested⁷ that the author was João de Castilho, a royal architect who was involved in the main works

of the Portuguese monarchy in the first half of the 16th century. Among these works is the expansion of the Convent of Christ, a colossal religious complex whose construction went through many stages for an extremely long period.

Considering that the chapel is located just a few meters away from the convent, it can appear that the two works have been developed in parallel by the same author. Trusting on the recently presented thesis of Celso Ramos⁸, more than a chapel, the Conception was to be a mausoleum that never received the remains of the king who commissioned it, John III. And the Convent of Christ was a royal site, so, if Kubler's theory is correct, we would be facing two simultaneous works with the same client, the same author but two opposite statements.

While the project of the Convent of Christ was subject to all formal and stylistic constraints that any royal work had to be, being supervised by intermediaries of the king, the tiny chapel appeared as an exercise of freedom and novelty. For Kubler, the Conception "recalls so many other kinds of building that it may have been intended as an architectural experiment or trial piece, never repeated, yet allowed to remain as a curiosity, like certain experimental ships and trains which need to be built only once."⁹

We can imagine Castilho confronting himself with the restrictions and failures of the super-ornamented style and of the resources that he had spent part of his life using. As Kubler pointed out¹⁰, *Manueline* rule was unsustainable and impossible to continue and Castilho could have realized it first than the others. In this sense, this early experience, advanced for his own time, was precipitated by the urgency of launching an alternative to the mainstream. The sequence of the historical events that followed proved him right. Conception was his own quasi-temple where, believing in what Kubler's current advocated, he worked until his death – as a final essay, which turned itself into an ideological and ethical testament.

I am quite sure that many troubles that people, and particularly architects, are facing in the present day, under the atrophy and the absence of alternatives, can find great parallels in the past. As Castilho did, now

7 Walter Benjamin, "The Destructive Character", in Walter Benjamin, Selected Writing. Vol. 2 (2), 1931-1934 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 541-542.

8 Celso Ramos, A Capela de Nossa Senhora da Conceição em Tomar, Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto, 2013.

9 George Kubler, Portuguese Plain Architecture: Between Spices and Diamonds, 1521-1706, Wesleyan University Press, 1972, p.33

10 Idem, lb.

we probably need to stop, rethink and start over again. It is very hard to find nowadays examples of quasi-temples, but it is not because they no longer exist or exist less. It is because, being a deposit of reflection and intelligence, a quasi-temple does not dispense, rather compels, the maturity that only time can give. And even if they are detached from a specific time or period, it requires a certain critical distance to find them and think about them. Not being particularly about style or appearance (but being also about both), as a new mannerism, a quasi-temple can be revealed in several expressions and authors. It is a complex construction whose interest lies in the intellectual structure that is behind each building.

By speaking of a new mannerism, it immediately occurs to me the work of the Chilean architect Cecilia Puga, which I have tried to follow with great curiosity (which is not easy considering the anonymity that she takes¹¹). She says her project is „sparing in formal elements, concrete in the technique employed”, and that tries “to avoid militant affiliation to a given historical or formal moment”. Behind these words lies a very strong proposition that is reflected in her work.

In San Francisco Lodge (2005), a low budget second residence located 300 km south of Santiago, Puga builds and makes explicit her paradox and takes it almost to the limit. Between an extreme, almost intimate, personalism and the enough contextualism, the project becomes a complex challenge with which herself engages.

I am sure that the true coherence of Puga’s project method is only fully understood in a global vision of her work. And although this conclusion may seem somewhat general and trivial, it makes perfect sense here. However, this project, in particular, contains an advanced exploration work on themes and elements that in Casa de Campo in Marchigue (2000) and Casa Bahia Azul (2002) were still clues. The building sits on a concrete plinth that clearly makes it stand out from the ground, as a great declaration of autonomy and emancipation, but, at the same time, it is committed to the geography, by having, for example, in the roof pitch a resemblance to the slope of the hill behind.

This is a work full of ironies – this one I referred

can be considered just one of many – where her statement, quoted above, is literally transposed. There is no real formal, material, historical, stylistic or technological commitment. Only a strong bond to the program and to the very idea of wide admission.

By translating her proposition into a specific project, Puga is, I would risk to say, working hard in her own *quasi-temple*.

...

The many political, economic and social crisis of the present days look like a huge destructive and unpredictable hurricane. Apparently it can be a blocking force to architects, but I must remember that it is also precisely in the eye of the hurricane that a strange feeling of stillness can suddenly become its reversal.

The quasi-temple is the celebration of the Architecture itself. It is not determined by the power of a state, or king, or market, and neither does it incorporate the ethical and moral values of each one of them. And although we must accept “the impossibility of an absolute value judgment”, as P. V. Aureli said, we can and must speak of an own disciplinary corpus with its intrinsic values, which underlies the so-called autonomy.

With this possible definition of a quasi-temple, I want to state that it seems urgent to me to rescue for the Architectural praxis the ability to question and challenge the status, rather than being a guardian of it. Now, the self-induced refusal of the impositions of a dominant mode and the pursuit of alternatives are acts of resistance and courage that are still scarce and increasingly urgent for Architecture. The best, if not the only, way to resist is to preserve the completeness and the integrity of the discipline. And the *Radical Self* is the proper field to do it, trusting that in the deepest individuality lies a real plural subject.

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Fig. 2 Photo Celso Ramos, 2013; Fig. 4 Photo Cristobal Palma

¹¹ It became easier after the GG monograph (2G; 53) and through Cristobal Palma impressive photographs.



Fig. 4 San Francisco Lodge, Cecilia Puga