Maison Dom-Ino – In Inconsistencies Dwells The Myth

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1 Pier Vittorio Aureli during the Symposium called The Dom-ino Effect at the AA School of Architecture, March 5, 2014. Source: youtube

A little more than a century ago, at the beginning of World War I, a very young Le Corbusier developed a new building system, whose goal was the rapid reconstruction of Belgian and French towns destroyed by the fights. It was named Dom-Ino, a compound word formed by *domus* (lat. house) and *innovation* (French). The name could also be interpreted as an innuendo to the game of domino: it was played with units long twice their width which could then be connected accordingly to specific rules.

Each Dom-Ino was a standardized, two-storey house made up of concrete slabs lying on columns and granted with a staircase. That was it: no walls, no rooms, just a skeleton. It was an open system to be completed by residents themselves. In fact it could be assembled by non-professional workers and it would be self-organized with walls and other architectural components from local resellers.

Although this project never found the interest of a client, it represented a breakthrough in the History of Architecture: a revolution. And, in order to transmit successfully the fundamental changes it was proposing, it needed a manifesto. Its declaration of intent, nonetheless, does not consist of construction drawings nor any clear practical instruction about the building process. There is no plan, neither a proper estimate about

any aspect of it, not even a single reference to the material of choice: concrete. There is just an idea, some sketches and among them a nice, almost naive, perspective drawing clearly inspired by the car industry's advertisements typical at the time. History made this sketch a mythological icon for architects and, as Pier Vittorio Aureli defined it, "an ever-present ghost in the contemporary city." [1]

Nevertheless a deeper analysis brings to light that this majestic silhouette, which has been haunting architecture for over a century, embodies a sum of intentions, managing to strength over its inconsistencies, which appear to belong to a level either *technical*, *compositional* or *architectural*.

The first of them includes details showing how the apparent simplicity of the Dom-Ino was actually very difficult to achieve. Although aesthetically the result is extremely powerful, since it appears to free itself from the bonds of gravity and technical constraints, on a technical level its putting in place look hardly possible: the pillars being too slender, the slabs too difficult to be built from prefabricated elements and the lever of the stairs way longer than feasible.

It should come as no surprise that Le Corbusier at the time suffered the lack of encouragement from Max Dubois, the engineer he was working with, who was

2 Tim Benson during the Symposium called The Dom-ino Effect at the AA School of Architecture, March 5, 2014. Source: youtube

strongly reluctant to support this idea, as he found it not interesting and prohibitive to carry it out just as Le Corbusier had conceived it.

The second inconsistency mainly regards the chain system, id est how the houses were supposed to be joined together. As illustrated in the drawing, the Dom-Ino is an independent unit that could not really be easily combined in a system end to end, despite what the name implies. Evidence of its intrinsic lonely nature can be found on multiple levels: what could one possibly do with the few centimeters left between the extreme columns and the edge of the slabbed storey? Doubling the pillar would sound pretty ridiculous. Not to mention the role of the staircase: are they within the single Dom-Ino or are they in between two of them? No matter what, the staircase forces the Dom-Ino into a singular unit, dysfunctional in sets.

In order to find an convincing evidence of a joining will, we may have to look up to the right top corner of the sketch: that little cut in the slabs could be our lucky guess. Unfortunately, it may not really constitute a functional architectural solution, but rather a winking "Fordist" symbol of extendibility.

The architectural expression conveyed by the representation could well be what the third level of inconsistency bears at its core. What emerges from the perspective is the intent to substitute load-bearing walls from being enactors of space, replacing them with columns and ultimately setting architecture free from the picky expectations of an assigned program. However, as proved from other sketches of the time, Le Corbusier's vision was still far from the elaboration of a *free space*. A sign of that is the shape of the columns. They are squared in order to sit the walls: the transformation to *pilotis* would happen few years later. Moreover, since walls and façades were actually planned, the elements present in the perspective *were meant* to be invisible: what is shown to us is an x-ray scan of the actual project. An utterly unreal point of view.

So how could we possibly interpret these three layers of dust upon this historic drawing? Tim Benson defined it "an entire legible aporia," [2] whose contradictions add intensity to the message instead of taking it away. He states that the contradictory peculiarity of its information is the reason for which this drawing has been so prone to misuse and misunderstanding.

It seems that Benson's *aporia* reflects the same point hinted at by the *inconsistencies*, and still the dust remains.

But is still fair to wonder: what would have Dom-Ino become in the universe of architecture if it had to withstand the trial of its construction?

It probably would not have had this much influence on the future generations: the lack of a client maybe was its greatest fortune, giving it the chance to lead the way. This is how the Dom-Ino system became, clearly, an example of fiction turning into a driving force for the author's work as well as for Architecture as a whole. Such a conceptually powerful idea that we are still using that simple drawing to describe something that is even more contemporary than what Le Corbusier could have ever imagined while tracing those lines.

In this icon we recognize an architecture capable to imagine, to fictionalize, to pursuit visions and not always interested in translating its ideas into the language of precise reality. An Architecture that is just as fictional as any other form of *media*, regardless of the fact that its consequences might be real.

Epilogue

A subtle proof of this peculiar condition of architecture is the experience of Valentin Bontjes van Beek, who built a 1:1 transportable model of the Maison Dom-Ino for the 14th Biennale in Venice. His goal was to give immanent form to the transcendent sketch, and, after an accurate examination, he faced the technical difficulties concealed within the simplicity of the drawing.

"We could reconstruct, as closely as possible in plan and elevation, what the Dom-Ino would look like," he said, ending the construction.

Marvellous: did Fiction eventually live up to the cumbersome nature of devil's details?

3 Valentin Bontjes van Beek. "Building an unbuilt icon.", Manijeh Verghese. AA conversations. Source: conversations.aaschool

"Which, to our surprise, did not really resemble the perspective" he finished.

Not quite. [3]

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