

# The advantages of a more objective view of how to be architects

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## METADATA

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By analyzing the way architecture is taught and practiced, we can clearly see that we are currently in a situation similar to that denounced by Viollet-Le-Duc in the middle of the Beaux-Arts period... something that, as history has taught us, cannot lead to anything good:

«Architecture is presently subjugated by a sort of intellectual government, more stifling than the one created by Louis XIV; it never went through the Revolution of 1789. It was isolated and little known. It was badly formulated and went from the tyranny of Lebrun – a tyranny which, at least, had its „grandeur“ and originality – to a vulgar and limited creation which has nothing to do either with the spirit of our era, or that of our Country. It was prohibited from following a certain path, but nothing was said about which path to choose; people howled that it had no idea of where it was going, but the potential guiding lights were hidden from view; what should not be learned is carefully pointed out, but no-one has the courage to declare publicly what people are supposed to know. From the official, convinced, tyrannical but at least powerful Lebrun of this world, there is nothing left but a servile existence under bosses as numerous as they are unqualified»<sup>1</sup>

Apparently the public outcries when new works are undertaken have no effect against this *architectural caprice* of the *modernist clique*: these architects, used to self-gratification, are so short-sighted that they do not realize that people feel only concern about- and resentment toward them.

Their belief that they are divinities that take many forms that *they alone are in possession of the World*, is seriously harming all the people: one need only think of the steady disappearance of master such as masons (those, that is, who build walls, arches and vaults in brick or stone), stone cutters, carvers, carpenters, smiths and the like. which happened as Modernism *the destroyer of all frills* came on the scene. For example, costs for maintenance of the historical heritage rose due to lack of competitiveness among the scanty ranks of artisans still capable of performing certain types of jobs. One need only think of the huge maintenance costs for the so-called *functionalist buildings* – which never function and are in permanent need of exorbitantly expensive maintenance work. Furthermore, transportation costs have soared as the traditional type of city was abandoned (*THE COMPACT CITY*) in the name of a modernist urban type (*THE SPAWL CITY*) which subjects us to what was imposed by Le Corbusier with the insanity of his *Ville Radieuse*<sup>2</sup> – as well as the need for automobiles.

I could go on for hours but I prefer to limit myself to these observations.

1 For the Italian translation: *Conversazioni sull' Architettura e* – Edizioni Jaca Book S.p.A. – Milan 1990

2 «towns will become part of the countryside; I will live 30 miles from my office, in one direction, under pine trees; my secretary will also live 30 miles from the office, but in the opposite direction and under other pine trees. We will have our automobile. We must use it until we wear it out, consuming roads, surfaces, and gears, consuming oil and gasoline. Everything needed for a large workload ... enough for everyone.»

In the light of what I have pointed out thus far, I would like to ask my colleagues a few questions:

- Is it possible that we make ourselves the butt of laughter and we do not wonder why?
- Have you ever reflected, as I have, on how embarrassing the image of the architect in the cinema is? ... we are more and more often portrayed as imbeciles, or, at best, as extravagant beings with strange tendencies and our heads in the clouds! ... Isn't there a reasons for this?

At this point, before going on to list the reasons for my dissent – a useless exercise – from Modernist, and, above all, contemporary Architecture, I prefer to clear up any ambiguity as to what my position is: it has nothing to do with obsolete and stupid concepts of style.

1. I do not think it can be considered a *universal language* in Architecture, (the main error of *Modernism – International Style* and, before that, *Neoclassicism*); that of Architecture is a *language* expressed in thousands of *dialects*, all of them worthy of being studied and respected. All of these *dialects*, up to our times, have helped keep alive the local economy – and a sense of belonging. Loss of these causes incalculable damage.
2. Architecture and Town Planning are closely interconnected and, as a consequence, are inseparable: beautiful Architecture in the wrong context, a perfect town design characterized by amorphous and/or monotonous buildings creates a certain uneasiness in any case.
3. Before beginning to design a piece of architecture, the environment must be planned, and, as such, it must be three-dimensional. Urban designs only on the master-plan level with bits of color and building indices are ridiculous. All they do is guarantee profits for speculators. Certainly they do not guarantee the quality of life of the future inhabitants.

Proper designing must necessarily take into consideration aspects such as:

- *urban sequences* (which are an introduction to a forth dimension) with public spaces needed where people can gather and socialize properly (*piazas*, open areas, small squares, arcades, etc.) are central reference points for those using them;
- the *containing of space*, in the sense of the proper ratio between the width of streets and/or squares and the height of the buildings bordering them;
- the *designing of edges or limits to the work performed* to prevent "sprawling" development;
- the *blending of functions* to obviate the social and environmental disaster resulting from the policy of zoning;
- the *need for variety in street fronts* built to prevent the ugliness of districts where constructions are milled out, one after the other, as if from the same mold. This variety should also be maintained where several buildings make up a single town block ... if there are several sets of stairs it means that there are several buildings and, in this case it is not clear why the same type always has to be cloned ... except when it is in the builder's interest to do so;
- Finally, the *social ramifications* of the works must be considered. New town developments should serve to *integrate* and *socialize* the inhabitants, rather than isolate them. The sociological studies performed at the beginning of the twentieth century – by Domenico Orano, for example, on acts of vandalism before public housing works on behalf of the Testaccio district in Rome – made people realize the Architecture and Town Planning play a social and educational role.<sup>3</sup>

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3 In 1918 the Director of the Roman Public-Housing Institute, Malgadi, , stated in the book "il nuovo gruppo di case al Testaccio": «To speak of art when speaking of Public Housing may seem exaggerated to say the least; but it is undeniable that in the decoration of public housing, seeking to create some effect, even with the simplicity imposed for financial reasons, that will make it seem, even to a minor worker, something different from the old and oppressive building where he had lived [...] Public housing, which brings together an

In the light of what has been pointed out above, it seems clear that the value of continuity in buildings, streets and piazzas needs to be reaffirmed, that is, among places assigned to private aspects of daily life and those designated for extended relations: new districts (but also existing ones that are renewed) should be conceived of as composite spaces in which buildings and/or special ones are only one component of the urban composition, important but not enough to satisfy the need for gathering together and for social relations!

This means that if things do not change, decisions taken on matters of Architecture and Town Planning cannot be left up to the *architect* alone, especially in the light of the results over 80 years of terrible – dictatorial and modernist – administration!

To sum up in one word my entire point of view on the subject, I can use the Latin term from Vitruvius and Alberti: *DECORUM*, or appropriateness, or, if we wish *COMMON SENSE*! This basic concept “has escaped” all those who have preached *Modernism*.

These 80 years of errors, in my opinion, are more than enough to bring about a change of direction, through self-criticism and *recognition of our sins*. Once the mistakes that were made have been understood, it will be possible to take up from where we had left off. In actual fact, we find ourselves in a situation similar to that of the early twentieth-century architects before Modernism came along.

On that subject, it is interesting to read what the chief editor of “*Architettura e Arti Decorative*” wrote at the end of 1927:

«[...] In this era of crisis in development, Italian Architecture could discover unexpected and original substance in the labyrinths of its own past and a point of departure for the future forms»<sup>4</sup>

## Escaping from the Blind Alley

A behavioral analysis of the younger generations brings out a considerable loss of any sense of respect and civil behavior. The example set by the consumerist era is that of selfishness, self-centeredness, arrogance and individualism. This is the message most often coming from TV and the cinema, and schools on their part tend to become culturally impoverished, unless there is a change of direction in the school system, starting with primary schools, our society risks being more and more ignorant and individualistic ... the social and cultural examples from the Countries most devoted to consumerism are clear to everyone, and one not need be a sociologist to realize that the system is carrying individualism to the extreme, resulting in the disappearance of a sense of the importance of community living.

I am not saying that the capitalistic and consumers' system is a total mistake. One must, however, consider the fact that if cultural bases come to be lacking, the system degenerates into the extreme examples I mentioned.

Through awareness, and thus teaching, it is indispensable to maintain a solid bond with History. The teaching of civic behavior is likewise essential and necessary for an understanding of respect for all that surrounds us.

The above-cited study performed by Domenico Orano between 1905 and 1910 at *Testaccio*,<sup>5</sup> shows us that the irreverence toward – and vandalism in the outskirts forgotten or ignored by the powers that be, are precisely the natural response of those who feel that these are *invisible*. Vandalism against other people's property or public property, then as now, are the expression of the repressed resentment of individuals. These people take it out on something which they do not feel belongs to

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*attractive outer appearance with the proper distribution of apartments is preferred to other types [...] and where this is to be found it can be observed that tenants take good care of their lodgings as well as all the community property of the same district [...] A house that one likes is better kept, which means that it performs an educational function for those who live there»*

4 Paolo Mezzanotte in *Architettura e Arti Decorative*, 1927–28, vol. II. Bibliographical note to p. 572 – 575

5 Op. cit.

them, and, furthermore, is identified as a symbol of the power which forces them to live in certain situations.

It is important to recall that the *area redevelopment* generated by the urban works of Magni and Pirani put an end to unrest in *Testaccio*. That was a true example of *redevelopment*!

Each of us should reflect on the fact that, if we call for respect, we must, above all, set a good example. Those who make the laws in Italy and administer the country must realize that it is not possible to treat the idiots who smear the walls of buildings as criminals then, at the same time allow the building of structures aimed at offending people who are around them. The statement of the architect, Odile Decq concerning his abominable frieze in Giovanni's Peroni Brewery is typical: «[...] we were told we had to keep both façades, and, therefore, we removed a small bit in the corner to feel that we existed as well!»<sup>6</sup>

So, in view of the program to rescue our Country, it is necessary to rediscover all those values that our (non)civilization is allowing to disappear. Architecture, like a spoken language, must rediscover its regional characteristics, dialects and all that has made our Country unique. Can a healthy reawakening of love for one's country give a new start to the Country's economy in a way that is inoffensive? Can it do so without depending on the global market? Have we an artistic, cultural and tourism vocation? Let us take advantage of these!

In my attack on the institutions, in my heated remarks against the School of Architecture and Engineering, my intention was not to attack individuals, but rather, the method. Sorry for anyone who can claim to be offended. I invite them to do some self-criticism and ask themselves: is mine a blind folly, or it is just the courage to express what no-one has the courage to say?

Before moving ahead with my program for a relaunching of Architecture, starting from the way I believe it should be taught, I think it is useful to clarify a few points:

## A CIVIC SENSE

As opposed to the fascist imbecility previously cited in "*Instructions for the Restoration of Monuments*" that specified: «For obvious reasons of historical dignity and the necessary clarity of present-day artistic awareness, the building of edifices in "ancient" styles, is absolutely prohibited, since they represent a double falsification, of the ancient and recent history of art» I maintain that urban or architectural works, for people in any context whatsoever, must carry on a dialogue with and respect history as well as traditions there. On that subject a reflection on the words of the late, lamented Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy is essential:

«I maintain that beautiful Architecture is an act of consideration toward those who enter the building; it bows to you from every corner, as in a minuet ... any ugly or senseless construction is an insult to anyone who passes by it. Every building should be an ornament and contribution to the culture from which it comes. Since the decision to abandon the past was taken, insofar as the past is irrelevant, items of incalculable value have been lost or destroyed. The knowledge revealed in the essay has now been replaced by modern analytical science, and machines have replaced the skills of craftspeople».<sup>7</sup>

## MODERNISM AND TRUE MODERNITY

Renaissance and Baroque architects were extremely modern even though they based their expression on the artistic heritage that had been passed down to them. Only modernist architects have been so presumptuous as to do without all that ... and the results are in plain view!

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6 For more complete information a reading of the article/interview of Odile Decq is recommended. The title is Museo Trasgressivo, available on-line at the site [www.exibart.com](http://www.exibart.com) and the various comments on this from the readers.

7 Hassan Fathy, *Construire avec le peuple*, Sindbad, Paris, 1970

If a *rebirth* of the queen of the arts is to take place, it is necessary to rediscover our origins. Our future is in the past, as Edmund Burke wrote «**a healthy civilization is one that keeps the relations with the present, the future and the past intact. When the past nourishes and sustains the present and future, an advanced society is involved!**»<sup>8</sup> That applies equally to architecture.

## A MORAL DUTY

To express what moral duty of architects should be, especially in view of a new start for the arts to which their work is related, there is nothing more elucidating than the words of Jože Plečnik, needless to say, an architect boycotted in his time, but whose expression of modernity related to history was very great. Indeed, he had a very clear idea of the scenario that we are facing today and that we have had the moral duty of combating since the dawn of the *modernist era*:

«an Architect, at the highest level, has the duty of bearing witness to what is based on solid foundations. This means that architects, on their own level, must take upon themselves the task of presenting themselves as the spirit which lays the foundation for the good, so that the good and the beautiful will share the same destiny: in view of this design, which the architect puts in order, the broadest possible group of various types of artisans must be made to cooperate with one another. The mission of architects in the name of architecture and beauty consists in upholding the operational dignity of all the participants in the act of building, who are threatened by industry.

Arts and Techniques blend together only when architects assure that they are brought together and organize them. Tradition in the crafts and corporations – smiths, stone carvers, engravers, potters, stucco decorators, carpenters, floor layers – can be supported only through the total and diversified harmony of the work of architecture, and rejecting that modernity that “the economy principle” represents, which is destructive of art in its very essence.

A work of architecture must be the expression of the resolution of this wholeness, entirely designed, shaped, constructed, operated, even in the parts of the building that are not visible, a microcosm in which all the materials the universe can offer are gathered and given a form.

Art can be a determining factor in the creation of a better world»<sup>9</sup>

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8 P. Langford, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1981

9 Sergio Polano, Jožae Plečnik. Aforismi sull'Architettura, in “Domus”, n°696, July-August 1988