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Apollonians and Dionysians in the face of mass architecture

Five theses in twenty-five paragraphs

A prologue or summary

Confronted by the great challenges of the end of the century, architects are uncertain whether to adopt Apollonian reasoning which impels them to provide answers, or Dionysian passion which leads them to pose questions. Providing answers is sociologically correct; if you are not part of the solution you are part of the problem. Asking questions is individually correct; the independence of judgement demands that one questions the rationality of what is real. Torn between their professional condition and their intellectual condition, between disciplinary technique and undisciplined art, between rationality and irrationality, architects run the risk of being split between autistics or hysterics.

This global caesura between designers corresponds to an internal fracture in their works. Split down the middle into their tectonic components and symbolic components, works of contemporary architecture show, unselfconsciously, the scars between construction and image, between the demanding form of production and absolutely free forms of consumption. Abstraction which establishes a norm, and singular formation, coexist without cross-fertilization, in a schizophrenic fight between the universally generic and the locally specific, between the environment of need and freedom.

The family as a thousand year old point of reference, dissipates in the megalopolis, worn away by the dual influx of technical and social change. Whether technopolis or telepolis, the contemporary city aims to provide comfort, mobility and privacy to a scattered mass of individuals; but the conventional morphologies of habitat and the forms of sociability and grouping remain stubbornly resistant. The habitat is habit, custom, the obstinate inertia of living. A tenacious nucleus of privacy and permanency, far removed from the hurly-burly and change, it survives under the diversity of languages or climates.

It is this bitter, pertinacious almond which makes the dwelling "a house for life", a succulent fruit of pleasure or suffering, the frame of a painted, tremulous canvas depicting the ephemeral and sacred, the profane and eternal human comedy.

Structure and skin, the support and message, space and occurrence are set against one another—necessary and opposed—just like the frame and canvas of a painting. The house finally becomes the setting for the exceptional nature of the commonplace, revealing itself and seeing itself through theatrical masks. Laughing or crying like old pairs of philosophers, satirical or fearless like Velázquez's Menippus or Aesop; the house is the place where both types of knowledge intersect.

Maybe the wisdom of this time lies in resisting the rifts of the century, endeavouring to stitch up the wounds instead of celebrating fragmentation. The cracks in architecture are also fissures in the individual and collective body of architects. Today, there are a greater number of architects alive than there are dead; the exponential growth of the population has meant that most architects who have existed are our contemporaries. It is not certain, however, that present-day architecture is more abundant than that of the past; and it is, of course, far from being as healthy.

Hysterics and autistics: architects faced with the century's dilemmas

The architect is a two-faced animal. Intellectual and technical at the same time, his attitude to the world cannot help but be simultaneously critical and propositional. As an interpreter, he considers, assesses and judges; as a professional he projects, manipulates and alters. It would be a consolation to think that these two facets of his activity are performed in succession as different stages in an identical process of knowledge and transformation of reality. More frequently, both attitudes are segregated in antithetical and exclusive poles of observation and intervention.

Observation is gratuitous and capricious, endless and restless; it reflects the voluble mutability of the onrush of things, and borders on the uncertain domains of artistic expression. Intervention is systematic and tenacious, finite and guided; it shows the geometrical clarity of logic, and approaches the instrumental terrain of political ordering. Artifice or artefact, the art of the unexpected or the art of the necessary, the division of the conscience brings with it a division of objects.

Fragments, cracks, rifts, dislocations, fluids, vapours: such is the formal and fractal crop of the hysterical eye which aspires to reflect the desperate order of the world. Hermetic solids, minimalist abstraction and immaterial transparencies: these are the materials used to represent the project for the disappearance of disciplined and disciplinary autism. Nevertheless, Apollo and Dionysus breathe with the same fine membrane, they are nourished by the same intestinal labyrinth, they walk on similar robust legs; only the uncertain head looks in two directions.

The cracks in the work: between global reason and local image

The architectural work, which is split in two, fails to unite its tectonic logic with its symbolic will. Constructive reason demands payment of its standard toll, whereas expressive capacity demands compositive freedom. The order of production establishes factories and bodies, standardises space and gives rhythm to time: the disorder of consumption provokes variations, fosters diversity and summons up desires. An insurmountable gulf opens up between the essence of construction and the accident of the image.

This old conflict has been dressed up in many different ways. Reason called for an abstract incarnation, whereas emotion was only aroused by figurative connotation; the generic was responsible for things which went beyond customs, landscapes and climates, while the specific fed on the unrepeatable condition of place. The universal anointed itself with the violent sacrament of the necessary, whereas the local condition had the privilege or blemish of unforeseeable and divergent fate.

Beyond the cracks, the work awaits or summons a compact future which stanches the flow from a wound and reduces fractures. The architectural work can aspire to mediate vigorously between reason and image, avoiding material and dialogical dislocation and without rejecting the energy-giving tension of opposite poles, muscular and alert like a colossus straddling a bay. This tense rhythm of outstretched limbs equally represents the divided author and the city in movement.

Habits or shifts: the transformation of the contemporary city

The world moves beneath the feet and over the head of the city. Changes in means of transport and the telecommunications revolution have devastated the traces of the traditional city, but have not yet outlined a different kind of city. Urban convention has become blurred without a renewed urban life becoming clear, while scattered communities in the connection networks try out ephemeral sociabilities beyond physical space and far from material contact.

Economic and political migrations uproot many people, and the break in family ties disperses whole towns, giving rise to cracked societies: detached from their geographical canvas and broken up by infinite tiny cracks. The intimate landscape of this shredded humanity corresponds to a disconnected and heterogeneous physical landscape, which expresses its disunion through its discontinuous nature.

Nevertheless, the persistence of the inhabiting habit permanently reconstructs placebos of urban living and ephemeral imitations of habitual sociability. Dissatisfaction with the insular biography which the fragmentation of the world flings us towards, grows like a slow, persistent pain, taking the form of nostalgia or awareness of the void. Choral biology demands payment, and the resistant, scant threads of the social fabric spread themselves over the cracked territory.

Residence on earth: the home as the setting for life

In the city the water scalds and the absent father reduces the family to ashes. Urban and demographic cracks also break up the home; nucleus and meeting cell for relatives. Residential histology shows metastasis and necrosis, from the home built for one person to the wide range of

collective accommodation which forms or simulates the family habitat. Healthy tissue changes or perishes with the interruption of generational irrigation; the house survives without its bones or in steroidal, advertising replicas.

Nevertheless, the house is the framework and setting for our journey in the world, the place for celebrating the shining body and also the place for the acceptance of the aching body, the protective shell for the dreamt life and dreams experienced.

The house is the structure for the everyday skin, the support for domestic messages and the area where habitual events take place. It is the environment where the unforeseen and the habitual, intimacy and reflection, vicissitudes and shade, cohabit. When it breaks up, life splinters like a broken mirror.

Humble or bombastic, this puppet show gives us lodging and shelter and in this comedy theatre we play our part successfully or without talent. We are both actors and audience in this theatre, and in it we triumph or fail. It does not deserve to die. The framework of the house builds and invents intimacy; if we take away the walls, the secret life spills out beyond the edges of the canvas, and as the public and private become enmeshed, the limits which give meaning to words and things become blurred.

Curative building: in favour of an architecture which soothes and alleviates

Art heightens perception and represents the world. Perhaps it is because of this that many give architecture the artistic mission of delving into the cracks and probing the wounds, representing the fragmentation of society and territory through fractured forms. Perhaps architecture is a medicinal art, and as such, aims to heal rather than describe suffering; or a useful art which is therefore more involved in repairing the world than evoking it.

If this activity were bound by a Hippocratic oath, surely the health of the city, the welfare of its inhabitants and the technical and economic consistency of its factories would be part of it. It happens only too frequently that buildings are an affront to the urban environment or landscape, to the comfort and convenience of the users or to constructive logic and economy. It is reasonable to assume that architecture would blend in more successfully with its service dimension if the shamans were replaced by doctors.

This curative building is exempt from heroic profiles; it assuages the conscience by alleviating suffering; it prefers efficiency to excellence and carefully avoids adventure and risk. An architecture like this will hardly be able to explore the chasms of art; but what it loses in emotion it will make up for in responsibility. Few look to the surgeon for inspiration, yet nevertheless everyone expects him to be skilled and competent. Perhaps the architect should also be judged more for his skill than for his genius; neither the fabric of the city nor the flow of life will be weakened by this.

Axiological epilogue

We have dwelt too long on the narcotic comfort of heuristic architecture and it is high time we established ourselves on the demanding terrain of axiological architecture. The passage of memory to values is also a journey from history to ethics. It is easy to lose one's way or become tired on the arduous journey which takes us from what we think we have been to what we think we should be. Just like Espinosa's Asclepius we should be guided by the stringency of reason and the passion for truth.

This pathway to perfection exudes a heady perfume of saintly piety. Anybody who is aware of the risks of fundamentalist and ill-tempered rigorism, will temper their behaviour and judgement with melancholy and tolerance. Nevertheless, there is nothing more exacting in its demand for universal respect than the ironic relativism of hazy, simulated, weak and chaotic post-structuralism. Showing convictions and adhering to values is, in this day and age, intolerably severe and indecently subversive.

My fellow countryman, Gracián, suggests we "feel with the least and talk with the most" thus avoiding showing personal dissent from the majority opinion in public. The cynicism of advice

cannot be reduced to the condition of an "old and laborious triviality" as Borges once described the conceptualist prose of the Aragonese author. On the contrary, he expresses with extreme eloquence, the Baroque sensitivity in which we are ensconced; the sensitivity which makes furtiveness and duplicity the navigational compass of modern survival.

Axiological architecture makes it compulsory today to "feel with the least" and, due to the public nature of its work, it is incompatible with the wariness of "talking to the most". An architecture which takes values on board moves on to take sides in the sphere of the collective, planning voluntary futures instead of extrapolating necessary pasts. Dissenting from the intellectual chorus, but choral in its social purpose, this ideological architecture can only prosper in the fertile humus of human reason which orders the world.

Nevertheless, the demands of rational stringency cannot lead to the implacable perfection of mineral exactitude. The unforeseeable flow of life is frozen on the chilly latitudes of hyperborean reason, and the rigour of thought is transformed into the rigour of death, geometry and silence. "Master, you are perfect", they said on one occasion to the poet Aleixandre "I want to want to be so", he replied, "but I wouldn't want to be so."

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Note

The title of these aphoristic theses refers simultaneously to NIETZSCHE, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, 1872, and Eco, Umberto, *Apocalypitics and components in the face of mass culture*, 1965.