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Project Concept Design

The Innovation of the Architectural Project

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Is the Project (or Object) “*nella testa dell’architetto?*”

Is There Anything “*nella testa dell’architetto, soggetto, autore?*”

Before I elaborate on my title, let me thank Giovanni Durbiano and Alessandro Armando for their kind hospitality, as well as all the doctoral candidates, who I know quite well by now and with whom I find it a real pleasure to work – it is indeed they who are the true engine of Giovanni’s and Alessandro’s engagement. The great book *Teoria del progetto architettonico* that lies at the foundation of this seminar, which we should celebrate always anew, as well as a project of a small book about the project that we have yet to realize, are important elements in the context surrounding our meeting today. Let me also thank Pierre Caye and Karim Basbous who agreed to come for a joint workshop. I hope that we will all meet again in Belgrade (for which I would like to immediately propose the date of April 12th, when Joerg Gleiter will be visiting), but also in Rijeka, Dubrovnik, Paris, Berlin, etc. And I am particularly glad to have Snežana Vesnić with us here: her doctoral thesis, which is to be published in English soon, is on the concept, and was written at the same time as Giovanni and Alessandro were working on their book. It was Snežana who unearthed Pierre’s and Karim’s texts at the RIBA library and drew my attention to them. Karim’s idea of “Le project comme recherche” fits in well with the title of our seminar “L’innovazione del progetto” (or what Durbiano and Armando call “Il sapere prgettuale come disciplina”).¹ It seems to me that this group is together capable to justify certain hypotheses or ideas found in our texts. In any case, we will shortly find out whether this group has a future.

¹ A. Armando, G. Durbiano, *Teoria del progetto architettonico*, Roma, Carocci, 2017, 43.

Which is why I would like to give a few reasons that might justify meetings such as this in the future. And of course, I would also like to warn of some difficulties. Let us ignore for a moment the first and most obvious difficulty that I am not an architect – my mentor, Jacques Derrida was also fond of repeating this – in a room of mostly architects, designers, historians of architecture, experts on aesthetics, Karim’s thesis supervisor was Yves Hersant, he is friends with Maurizio Ferraris, we were all here a few years ago... The greatest difficulty is the confusion and chaos that pervades so-called “architectural terminology.” Followed by the possibility or uncertainty that in the future there will even be anything that could be called “architectural terminology,” which is to say, it is uncertain that we are compiling anything of the sort with these doctoral candidates. Along with this, the language we use, the language in which I am now reading this is problematic: there is no one in this room whose native language is English. We urgently need someone who speaks this language well; and I am not certain that we can discount this language too easily and return to our own mother tongues, however present they may remain. And of course, there is a problem with architects and designers (especially them!) having to speak or write at all (regardless of language). A month ago, for example, in Berlin, Peter Eisenman – who is in one way or another a close presence to all of us – uttered the following sentences: “I am not able to write what I think,” and then “I can teach concept, but not project,” which is something he cannot explain because, as he puts it, “project [is an] elusive term in English.”²

Be that as it may. Here are three reasons why we should indeed continue working together. 1) The first is the defense of collective work, which necessarily implies the impossibility of existence of the project or design without group work and action (I would here like to insist that the concept is essentially a collective, cooperative entity³). The second reason refers to the great difficulties in translating various terms from one language to another. These difficulties are impossible to overcome without simultaneous use of multiple languages and thematizations of differences – it being a condition of revision of impossible linguistic

² Over two years ago, in an interview entitled “On the End of Authority” (which has still to be published), he says: “That’s how you teach project – by reading and thinking in the design studio; you can’t just have a history-theory sequence” (Manuscript, 2).

³ In this sense, young Corbusier’s language would be inexact when he writes in his famous letter of 22 November 1908: “mon concept s’établit” and “mon concept de l’art,” 248. Although there might be some concept that is “only mine,” its thematization and manifestation unfolds with others and before others. It is similar with the idea of the project produced by a chief of a group or an idea that promotes one as the group chief (*chef de bande*, as Alexandre Kojève puts it). “Il l’est devenu (chef de bande) parce qu’il a vu plus loin que les autres, qu’il était seul à avoir conçu un projet, les autres n’ayant pas pu dépasser le niveau des données immédiates.” A. Kojève, *La notion de l’autorité*, Paris, Gallimard, 74.

constructions and “theorems,” obscure and violent symmetries.⁴ And the final reason, particularly important for me since I have spent the last few years dealing with theory and philosophy of the institution, is what Eisenman (along with Derrida, to be sure) calls the “institutional aspect of architecture.” He speaks about this when writing about the critical dimension of architecture and about architecture as a social act.⁵

A few months ago, when we held a joint seminar in Turin on the project, we attempted to provide a few of its elementary characteristics. One of them was that the project is necessarily an object. At the same time, a few of us were discussing the object in Belgrade (Snežana will today speak about the object in a similar context). And then in Berlin, in front of Eisenman and some others, I had to reconstruct how an object functioned in some of Eisenman’s texts. For all these reasons, the word ‘object’ appears in my title, along with the words ‘subject’ and ‘project’. The relations between these words are not my focus (at least not today); rather, I would like to situate the object as something that in person X’s head (as if this were a thing) ought to precede (or coincide) with the project, concept, design. More precisely, whether something that is ‘*testa*’, which it would seem is already material, or, shall we say, objective, can truly be the space for the object *as a* project, concept, design? What is this ‘*as*’ and how can we carefully connect the object with these three protocols? What is in someone’s head at all? What goes in and out of a head? My subtitle contains a few variations on words I have drawn from Durbiano and Armando’s book (“*nella testa dell’architetto, soggetto, autore*”⁶): their intention is to show that it is less important for architecture or epistemology of architecture whether something, if anything at all, is inside someone’s head. That is to say, their intention is not in their heads, and ‘intention’ as such is negligible in relation to facts,

⁴ I do not understand, or would not be able to explain a construction used, for example by Antoine Picon (“the project, an absent concept”) or Bernard Tschumi (“There is no architectural project without topographical, programmatic, budgetary, or political constraints. However, designing the Acropolis Museum involved perhaps the most unusual set of constraints imaginable. Constraints were the context of the project. Could these constraints be turned into a concept?”) B. Tschumi, *Color Red*, 495.

⁵ In the manuscript of a big book entitled “Eisenmanual” (sitting in Eisenman’s studio because of problems with copyright), which collects all important aspects of Eisenman’s work, on page 236, we find: “Eisenman finds that a critical practice and discourse should dislocate the institutions of architecture from within, rather than celebrating them: the architectural discourse should not only create institutions, but also transform and dislocate them from within, and prevent architecture from being institutionalized.”

⁶ “E la progettualità sono, molto prima che nella testa dell’architetto, nel’ambiente (fisico e sociale) che lo circonda.” A. Armando, G. Durbiano, *Teoria del progetto architettonico*, 15; “Il progetto ridotto a intenzione”: “Il progetto sembra essere rimasto rinchiuso nella testa di chi lo concepisce: il ‘maestro’, che detiene i segreti della forma, o l’esperto, che possiede la tecnica. (...) Intrappolato nella impenetrabile irriducibilità del soggetto, il progetto non è che un’intenzione. Priva di traccia.” *Ibid.*, 33. Cf. *Ibid.*, 40, 78.

documents or (social) objects, which are real, objective, and actually circulate among heads. The fact that there are two heads, and not one (as in my title), which is of course to say that, *vice versa*, two intentions, from two different heads, produce the social fact that someone's head is not empty only when it shares its intentionality with another head or other heads. The condition for something to be a fact (or object) is indeed a 'head' in the plural, that is, multiple heads or intentions reduced to collective intention that constructs reality. This construction of reality or joint production of facts unfolds in processes or steps (temporal intervals) which could then be named using words such as concept, project, or design. In any case, these words (acts, protocols) should not even exist in the head as object. (How) is this even possible?

To begin with, what is 'epistemology of architecture'? It comprises at least three things: that architecture produces some specific knowledge, different to other knowledge; that the architect or (better) architects create concepts that can be classified and ordered (words such as design, concept, project, plan, idea, platform are different from one another, we should not be using them arbitrarily; architects must learn from one another and learn to read, to harmonize their experiences). Finally, it means that the language of architecture is possible as such, that it has its own discourse and genre.

In a letter to Alessandro of September last year, Peter Eisenman writes: "I think my idea of bottega is different. For me bottega is in my head." The atelier, the studio, the laboratory or boutique – since etymologically *bottega* is a place (*un luogo*) meant for storing sundry objects – is above all in the architect's head.⁷

What are these objects or object in the head? The title I gave to the Serbo-Croatian translation of Peter Eisenman's collection of texts was "*Idealni objekt arhitekture*" [The Ideal Object of Architecture]. Lest we forget, "ideal object" or "ideality of the architectural object" is actually a paraphrase of the title of Derrida's 1957 unwritten doctoral thesis, "The Ideality of the Literary Object" (*l'idealité de l'objet littéraire*) – and Eisenman's text "Misreading Eisenman" contains the phrase "the object as ideal essence." Indeed, a few years ago in Belgrade, he differentiated between "object as a mental construct" from "the actual object." Derrida's sentence from "Introduction to Husserl's Origin of Geometry," "the ideal object is the absolute model of the object in general" (*l'objet idéal est le modèle absolu de l'objet en général*), implies that this ideal is actually regulative and opposed to objects not purely intentional or objects that are intentional *cum fundamento in re* (a distinction I borrow from

⁷ Armando and Durbiano mention 'bottega' a lot in their book. The basic distinction between 'bottega' and 'ufficio' is that the first is a "luogo degli strumenti," while the other is "luogo delle tecnologie intellettuali." A. Armando, G. Durbiano, *Teoria del progetto architettonico*, 160.

Roman Ingarden), or opposed to ordinary physical objects (which Eisenman also calls “things in themselves”). Can the head then (the same head that also ‘ideally’ shares nothing with another head) contain an ideal fictitious object or a kind of mental construction? How could this be explained? And what would be the connection of ideality with the project, concept, design? We could also ask, “what should the head do,” and “what emerges from the head” or how distribution of various objects is conducted from the ‘bottega’. In a word, what is a project and how do we project, that is, design? We need another phenomenologist here to understand Peter Eisenman. Levinas’ book on intuition in Husserl contains the phrase “*une structure idéal de l’objet*” and it displays rather well the nature of the ideal. The head (Eisenman’s and other) does not contain objects (this would be nonsense), nor even the ideal or ideas (for this would be trivial as everyone has ideas, heads are brimming with ideas – such an explanation is insufficient). Rather, it contains the ‘ideal of the object as such’. The idea of something that has physical presence is precisely the conceptual or the concept. In his famous text on conceptual architecture, Eisenman finds that “the idea within the thing itself” to be synonymous with the “conceptual structure” of the thing itself, and finally that “physical reality itself does have a conceptual aspect.”

What is the novelty here? Projecting (to project is to throw something forth, in front of oneself) is not projecting/designing an object (one does not throw forward an object). The object is, rather, discovered, revealed, selected, exposed, presented before (*vis-à-vis*; *Gegenstand*) by way of concept. In that sense, the project is a projection of the concept that is always the concept of the object (the ‘ideal of the object as such’). The task of architecture is to reveal the concepts of physical things and realize objects in time (only at this point do the twin protocols of process and design appear). If we reconstruct the connection between project and object in the context of Eisenman’s reflections on conceptual architecture, we can say that “having a project” (Eisenman’s mantra in the last few years; as only a small number of architects “have a project”) means being able to objectivize the concept or the ‘ideal of the object as such’.

Not only should the uncertain origin of these two positions – that there is something in a head and, conversely, that there is nothing in head, but that everything takes place as a product of coordination and joint cooperation of multiple heads – be examined and reconstructed in detail, but it would also be useful to uncover the option in which they are complementary, forming something new. What does Eisenman mean by pushing a kind of sophisticated pseudo-Platonism? In my head there are no ideal forms that in absorbing the world, subjugate and alter it, bringing it closer to the ideal. Rather (since we are ignorant indeed of the nature of this

power and the nature of the abilities of this 'head'), there is an ability to subsume these objects such that they, 'on their own', find their ideal structures (concepts) in the human spirit.

How this is possible needs to be verified and then harmonized with various texts that hint at and ground the 'interior' or the 'myth of the interior' of (having something in) 'the head'. How is it possible to perceive the object as such? How is it possible to constitute an ideal structure of the perceived object? How is it possible to project a concept (an ideal structure)? What is the role of design in this process?

Alberti, *praescribere in animo et mente* (Pierre Caye) 1452

Antonio Filarete *Concepto* 1464

“De suerte que se puede definir el concepto: es un acto del entendimiento, que exprime la correspondencia que se halla entre los objetos.” The concept is a mental act which expresses the correspondence between two things.

Baltasar Gracián, “Agudeza y arte de ingenio,” *Discurso II* 1648, in: *Obras completas*, tomo II, Turner, Madrid, 1993, 320.

Defoe « faculty of projecting » 1692

Christian Wolff, *Deutsche Logik, Von den Begriffen der Dinge*, 1713

« Qu'est-ce que l'architecture ? La définirai-je, avec Vitruve, l'art de bâtir ? Non. Il y a dans cette définition une erreur grossière. Vitruve prend l'effet pour la cause. Il faut concevoir pour effectuer. Nos premiers pères n'ont bâti leurs cabanes qu'après en avoir conçu l'image. C'est cette production de l'esprit, c'est cette création qui cons [...] Boullée, Etienne-Louis 1780

Schopenhauer *Die Vernunft ist weibliche Natur; das Objekt und Maennliche* 1819

E. Husserl *Ideen* 1907 *Intentio*

Let us consider a familiar example. A band of kids gather to play. One of these kids proposes to go and steal apples from the orchard next door. Immediately, by doing so, he casts himself in the role of the band's leader. He became this leader because he saw *further* (*plus loin*) than the others, because it was he alone who thought out a *project*, while the others did not manage

to get beyond the level of immediate facts.” A. Kojève, *The Notion of Authority*, London, Verso, 2014, 63; A. Kojève, *La notion de l’Autorité*, Paris, Gallimard, 2004, 74. 1942

Bertrand de Jouvenel dessin dénote une image formée dans esprit 1964

Paul Virilio Images mentales 1981