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transDebatte

Diskussionen und Meinungsaustausch finden oft nur unter Ausschluss der Öffentlichkeit statt. Mit der neuen Rubrik der *trans* bietet die Redaktion ein Forum für Debatten. Zur Eröffnung drucken wir einen Leserbrief als Reaktion auf ein Manifest von Elia Zenghelis ab. Wir möchten alle Leser und Autoren einladen, dieses Forum zu nutzen. die Redaktion

The City, Architecture and Starting-Points

Lately in architecture, any injection of idealism is considered a fruitless mission, irrelevant and removed from reality. As for the idea of a new beginning, it has never been so ridiculed as it is now by recent taste-setters. Yet as an idea, it has never been so pertinent and so much in need to be attended to. At roughly 30-year cycles, the tenets that guide the architectural discourse and ideology drift away from their historical origins and the product that results becomes the litter of taste; it is precisely this that has been happening in the last decade and its production has swelled, through a cumulative process of thoughtless cloning, into a festering pool of complex “sophistication”, a fata morgana that is as alien to architecture itself as it is to the manifold disciplines that it shadows.

The current framework of indoctrination in our profession originates in the post 1968 visionary movements that in the early seventies acted against the inertia left from the detritus of the 60s; in doing so, they willed to replace defunct doctrines whose ideals were removed from the reality of the time (and whose artlessness had by then been proven melancholically naïve) with an optimistic vindication of the excitement and worth in “Reality as Found”. The crucible for this was the theory of the Retroactive Manifesto in Koolhaas’ Delirious New York, where through the systematic application of critical idealization, reality was redeemed and elevated to a paradigm, shaping an architectural discourse that replaced modernism’s post 2nd World War revival. Redemption is the agent that supplies the enablement and essential critical tool: it gives the paradigm a potency retained for as long as it is critical. All serious art is critical in two ways: as counter-statement to what exists (re-thinking) – and as embodiment of a reflection on its own inheritance (mirroring). This redeeming and critical component has now vanished from the present architectural discourse, while in all other respects, the retroactive manifesto is still in place and practiced with – by now – a lot of know-how and no now-why.

Now in power, the ’68 generation may be responsible for the demise of its own positions, but its hold on power is waning, just as it becomes clear that it is about to be replaced by a new generation, willing to take up new positions.

Elia Zenghelis

Letter to the editors

Compared to other forms of ideological manifestation, the Retroactive Manifesto had significant political advantages. At a time when, suspect of irresponsible instrumentality, modernism was deemed incapable of delivering any substantially new contribution to urban culture, the RM made its appearance in order to collect the unclaimed fruits of its tree. By laying its stress on evidence rather than on promises, it proposed to push forward historical becoming from behind, instead of pulling from before.

It is incorrect (as Professor Elia Zenghelis suggests in his statement), therefore, to reduce the idea of a RM to a mere vindication of Reality As Found. If, as a consequence of what was perceived as a failure of the utopian sensibility, it partially lent itself to that sort of reading, then today one can clearly realize that the way in which its influence still lingers among us, is a completely different one.

Of late, this confusion has gathered considerable momentum. It assumes that taking a certain mode of “reality” as a point of departure, implies that this same mode will also constitute the point of arrival. It is evident that the RM never instigated that kind of behaviour.

The most acute problem that contemporary architectural culture inherited from the post-war period is that through the explosion of media and reflexive modernization, the concept of reality was mystified, entangled and removed from any previous form of immediacy. In the field of architecture and urbanism, this movement engendered, over the last decade, a pressing need to regain access to a domain of certainty and to a domain of commensurability. To interpret this evolution as a reactionary movement constitutes a regrettable misunderstanding.

Perhaps Manfredo Tafuri was right when he decried the architectural profession for having allowed its marginalization from the system. Because, in the end, 25 or 30 years of hermeneutics and critical iconography didn’t quite lead to a revitalization of the profession. Only through its immersion in the “muddy terrain” of material production was it able to achieve that deed.

The generations of architects of the 90’s and 00’s have not (yet) been completely deluded by the unsuccessfulness of their ideals. The game in which they were thrown had clear rules. They realized that even as a “construction of desire” – as was predicated in the RM – reality couldn’t be captured by the image. Reality proved elusive, but this did not deter them. They set out to research new forms of constructing it, in the belief that a redescription of the present always implies a transformation of the future.

The RM suggests today an argument that many of us still find relevant: that any force of transformation faces an inheritance – which needs to be defined ad hoc – that sets its scope of action and its frame of intelligibility. To neglect this inheritance (the need to construct it artificially) is as naïve as it is to be deterministic about it.

What has to be questioned of our own time is not the RM – which, as a matter of fact, rather belongs to the past – but its very own lack of manifestations. In that sense, Prof. Zenghelis’ statement – all too easily confined to the shelf of “curiosities” at the ETH – needs to be given credit for initiating a debate that seeks to drive our often stagnant critical culture beyond the aberrant querelle between the seemingly opposing camps of blobiness and boxiness.

Julián Varas