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THE UP-AND-COMING NEO-ROMANTIC ARCHITECTURE

Elvira Reggiani

We are faced with the emergence of a new architecture which might be called neo-romantic in that it expresses strength, if not courage, through strong and immediate sensations produced by synthetic forms that you can understand at a casual glance. This new course of architecture is interesting for many reasons.

With the complicity of the financial crisis and a growing dissatisfaction with the repetitive architectural products of several recent archistars, it is evident that in architecture things are changing. An inexorable if piecemeal change in taste is heralding the new architecture.

«A new theory, however special its range of application, is seldom or never just an increment to what is already known. Its assimilation requires the reconstruction of prior theory and the re-evaluation of prior fact, an intrinsically revolutionary process that is seldom completed by a single man and never overnight.»¹

The emergence, as the philosopher Thomas S. Kuhn would say, of a «revolutionary science» is intimately linked to a conception that sees in modernity the effort for transformation of «crises into value» in a tension that, because it is historically rooted and motivated, cannot but be directed towards an aesthetics of rupture and change.

Crisis, from the Greek word «krinein» meaning to separate, decide or judge, was used by Thucydides to mean outcome-solution and by Aristotle to mean choice. It is

clear, etymologically speaking, that the word indicates a separation between a before and an after and suggests that with this separation, choices are made, outcomes are revealed and solutions are found. The difficulty consists in perceiving the new climate before it is overcome and solutions already found.

In architecture, due to the modernist legacy, we tend to believe that changes must be led by several emergent personalities or ever more rarely by some of the masters and teachers of the art. But today things are different. In the era of globalization, architecture has become «superfluous» because it has achieved most if not all of the goals set in modernism.

Its accomplishment long since well-noted, architecture has, in a crisis of identity, been trying to identify more and more with cultural fields from which it has traditionally always maintained a good distance, such as the figurative arts, fashion and communication. Architecture has agreed to enter show-business, allying itself with art performance and installation, and has chosen to express the varied and rapid cultural fluxes that ripple across the

globe. However, in doing so, it has in some way left behind its representation of that which is stable and constant in society's production.

Today, in the midst of the information revolution, we are exploring an idea of architecture increasingly focused on the central presence of subjectivity, customization and communication. We no longer talk of 'Existenzminimum' for an architecture that fulfils needs, but rather of 'Existenzmaximum' for an architecture that broadens possibilities and desires. We no longer work for discontinuous and overly intricate structures, but more and more often for continuous and enveloping structures. We no longer have an idea of the city as a world-conquering machine but rather are working progressively among the folds of existent cities into new gaps, through new crossings, onto new outcrops, along new drifts. We are trying to convey messages and meanings to achieve second level metaphors, for an architecture capable of telling stories which treat interactivity as a crucial value.²

Significant changes now, not only in architecture but also in economics and politics, are no longer directed from above, but are driven from below as unstoppable cultural landslides, powerful yet subtle, which we can understand the sense of only in retrospect. From this perspective, let us now consider some architectural projects of recent years.

Mansilla+Tuñón's 'Museum of Cantabria' (2006)^{fig. b} strives to echo the mountains that can be seen on a clear day beyond the Las Llamas valley with its sharply uneven outlines. Collective ideas such as the free, agreed sum of individual desires is expressed in these large skylights, each one equal but different from the next, yet arising from a regular, orderly web. This 'natural' shape creates empathy and lets the individual find his or her own freedom. In the same way, Valerio Olgiati's 'Museum of Perm' (2008)^{fig. a} timelessly expands on each floor. The form follows the stacking of different functions in mixed sizes of floors. This pragmatic idea idiosyncratically transforms the building's appearance into the expression of a place of cult, its size making it a landmark in the urban and suburban context, while the interior space catalyses and extends the emotions of visitors.

Instead, Vázquez Consuegra's 'Museum of the Medina' in Saudi Arabia (2008)^{fig. f} is voluminous, introverted and yet characterized by compactness compared to the fragmentation that the project might otherwise suggest. At the same time, the fascinating combination of simple but multiform geometric shapes dreamily sweeps the visitor off into a fantasy world, an oasis in the desert, a paradise of palms, a sacred, mysterious place.



fig. a
Museum of Perm, Valerio Olgiati, 2008 © Valerio Olgiati.



fig. b
Museum of Cantabria, Santander, Mansilla+Tuñón, 2006 © Mansilla+Tuñón.



fig. c
Greenland's National Gallery of Art, Nuuk, BIG, 2011 © BIG and Glessner.



fig. d
Alhambra, Granada, Aires Mateus, 2010 © Aires Mateus e Associados.



fig. e
Rolex Learning Centre, Lausanne, SANAA, 2004-2010 © europaconcorsi



fig. f
Museum of the Medina, Medina, Vázquez Consuegra, 2008 © Estudio Vázquez Consuegra.

We find similar goals in Aires Mateus' competition project for the Alhambra (2010)^{fig. d} which commits itself without imposing an entirely new presence where the weight of history has long been inscribed. The sensory and vibrant architecture invokes the momentous thickness of the past immersing us intensely in its homage to the Alhambra monument.

Last but not least, BIG's winning project for the 'New National Gallery of Greenland' (2011)^{fig. c} combines art history and contemporary art in one dynamic institution, which communicates the continuous project of documenting and developing the Greenlandic national identity through art and culture. The building, with its simplistic coarseness and seemingly age-old harmony with the surrounding landscape, is symbolic of the current independent Greenlandic artistic and architectural expression.

We may note some obvious traits that tie together these projects: above all, an oneiric if not folkloric sense of shape and form, as if the works belonged to a world in which the sole purpose of architecture was to strike the imagination and make us dream with our eyes open. Today more than ever, with an increasingly cynical economy apparently reigning over the world, we must, as the philosopher Friedrich Schiller often said, «have the courage to dream». These architectural projects fully capture this admonition and offer to be its medium, flauntingly epic and dreamy, as if they were scenes prepared for some amorphous drama or refined science fiction comic strip, seeming to aspire to an archaic timeframe, formed of thaumaturgic ruins.

To achieve this effect, these works rely on an extremely synthetic shape, with minimized composition, where intermediate steps are skipped and any complexity is banned, as demonstrated by the effective project plans of BIG, which coincide almost perfectly with the final design.

Now, to highlight further the distinctive features of these architectural projects, we might compare them to those of Gehry (first among all the Guggenheims), Libeskind or any other name from a decade ago. The 'Bilbao Guggenheim Museum', contrary to the examples above, has an extremely complex structure whose design was only possible using the most modern design and calculation software. It launches twisted trajectories into the atmosphere, shaking and vibrating it through bodies that cling and soar with mechanical virulence. An intuitive, sentimental or culturally harmonic agreement with those that inhabit the space is entirely absent.

The conceptual distance between these projects, which are temporally only a decade apart, is enormous, but nonetheless the new architectural course, based on

oneiric simplicity, has not so obviously imposed significant breaks with tradition. With the same levity and unfussiness, it has emerged from the increasingly arbitrary abuse of deconstructionism and mannerism in the architecture of wrappings, casings, shells and cocoons, which has imploded due to its own inflated success.

Beyond the prevailing architectural production, we are therefore experiencing the emergence of an architecture that could be called neo-romantic, an architecture not of ideas, nor of composition (as might be deconstructionism or minimalism), but of sensations, which inspire an emotional involvement, or what in other times was called empathy.

The new architecture demonstrates the need to communicate strong feelings, but at the same time it remains accessible, conveying a clear and immediate message. It is an antidote to an increasingly complex and incomprehensible reality. It exalts formal simplicity, or rather synthesis. Unlike deconstructionism, which has proceeded not by synthesis but by stratification, demonstrating all the contrasting uncertainties of contemporary life, the new architecture aspires to a much simpler world.

The need for straightforward sensations puts human feelings centre-stage and totally overturns the old perspective. The new architecture endeavours to return to a past where there was no separation between nature and architecture because they were of the same substance. This does not wipe the slate clean of technological progress, but insists on using it to respond to the needs of modern man to see his own reflection in architecture and to immediately grasp its meaning.

So, if more than ten years ago, Gehry's Guggenheim was considered a monument to the exaltation of complexity, today the 'Rolex Learning Centre' in Lausanne designed by SANAA^{fig. e} might be considered the forerunner of this new neo-romantic architecture: a monument to an altogether different feeling, to a radically changed sense of taste. Architects must respond to this change. What else, if not this, is the main challenge for architects today?

- 1 Kuhn, Thomas S.: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1962.
- 2 Saggio, Antonino: *Architettura e Modernità. Dal Bauhaus alla rivoluzione informatica*, Carocci, Roma, 2010. (Translation Elvira Reggiani)

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