

Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2016)

Heft: 29

Artikel: The poetics of the fragile corner

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-918804>

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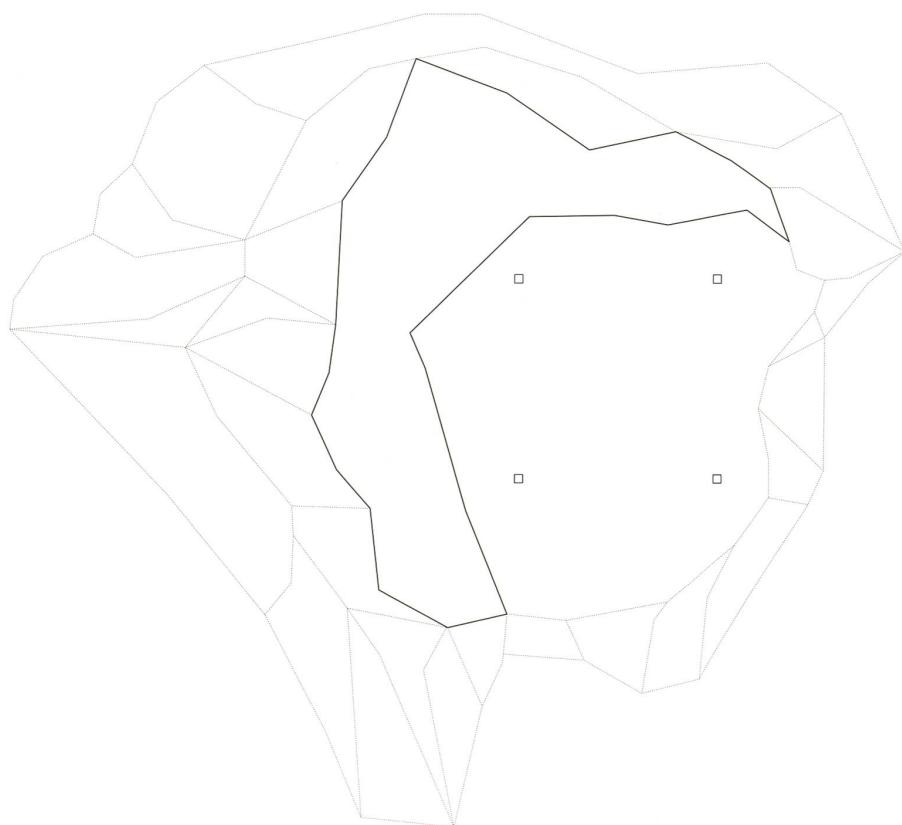
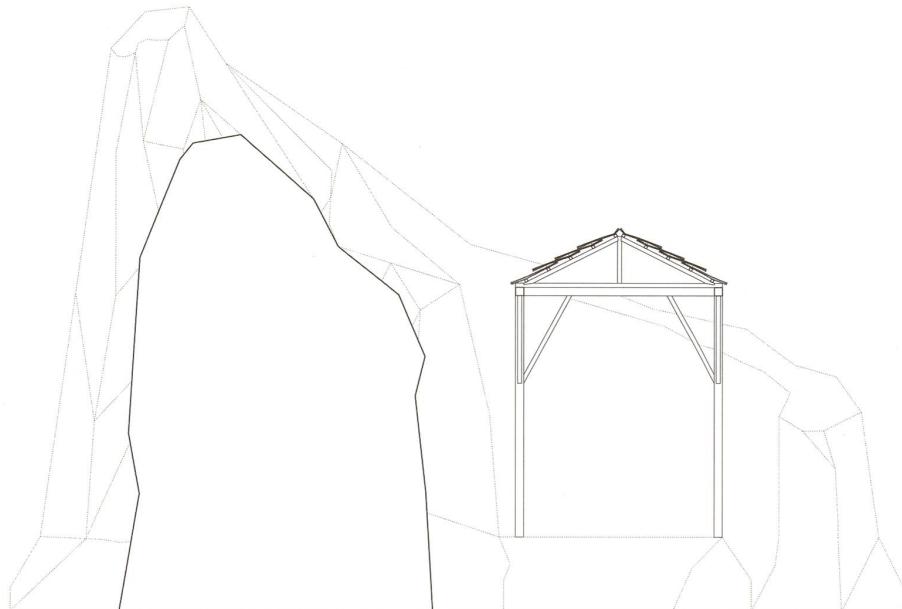
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The poetics of the fragile corner

Sara Impera
Mauro Marinelli



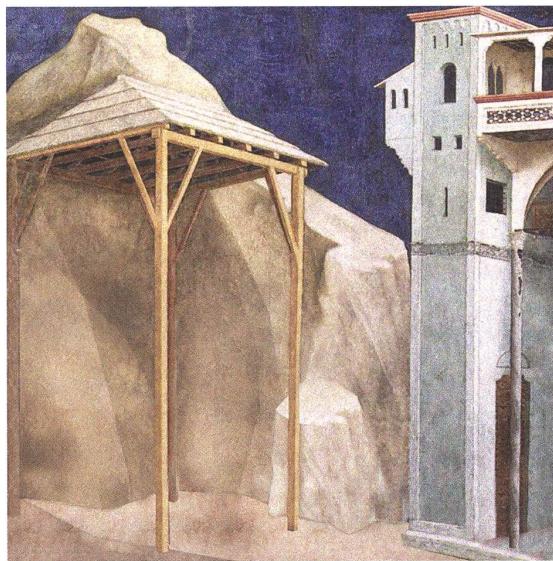


fig. a Elaboration from Giotto, *Storie dell'infanzia di Cristo, Adorazione dei Magi*, Basilica of Assisi, Assisi 1308–1311. Transformed by the authors

I.

Poetics of the fragile

An architectural artifact cannot aspire to express a durable and potentially permanent consistency: the orthodoxy of the «firmitas» on the one side is heretically denied by cultured experiences. In this respect it is sufficient to quote the work of Giulio Romano¹ to get a solid proof amongst the clearest. On the other side it becomes an option that is equal to others in a context where the construction expressiveness and tectonic dimension are elected to crucial aspects of the architectural poetics.

An architectural artifact can express fragility, instability, and insecurity as a direct result of an improvised and unpremeditated constructive process, as a result of lack of elements or used materials, or as a declared objective of a classically conceived project process.

The fragility of the artifact, therefore, is not attributable to the simple absence of stability, or to the denial of durable characters. Nevertheless it can be considered positively for its ability of being aesthetically expressed, in the constructive quality of the buildings, in their consistence, and in their materiality.²

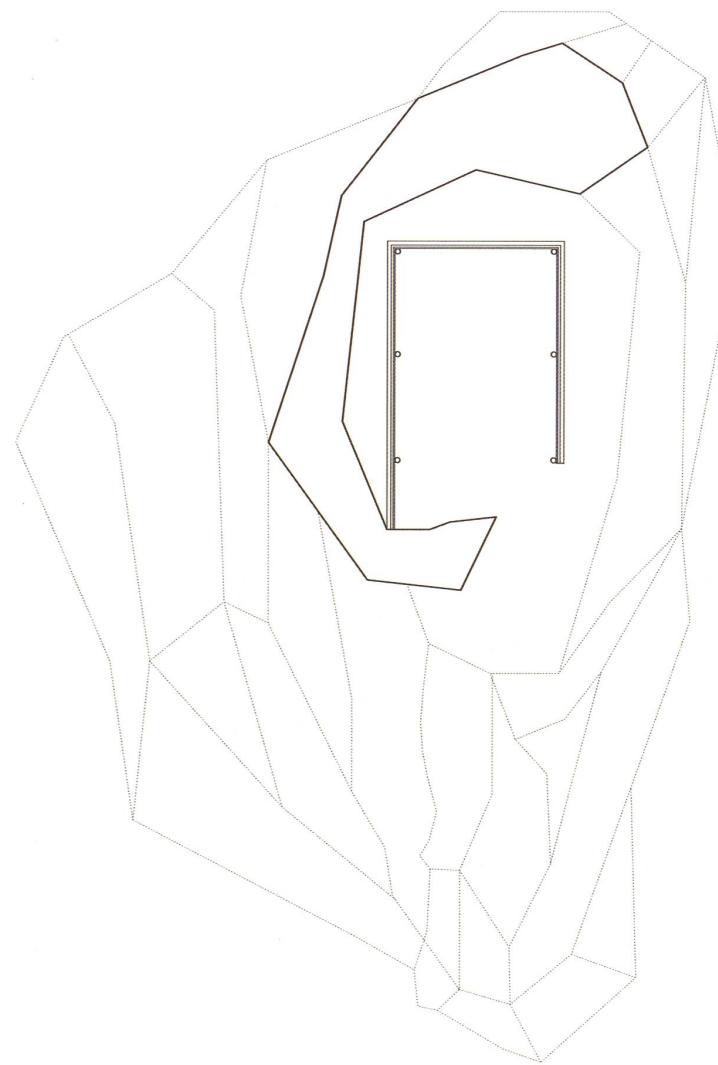
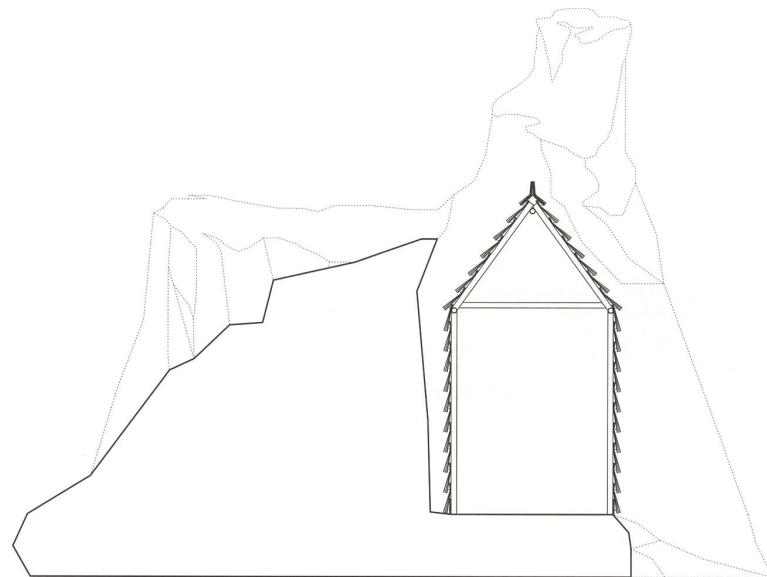
The fragile constructions are not vernacular, nor do they belong to a specific building tradition. Instead, they are determined by a temporary state of necessity. Beyond every picturesque, romantic, or nostalgic fascination, fragility, which can be recognised in the architectural quality of the building and in an open renunciation of the form, is linked not only to the concept of lightness, but also to the concepts of time and duration.³ Time and the relationship that the artifact establishes with it, plays a central role in the aesthetics of the fragility: the idea that the stability achieved is a condition designed to fail in the near future, is the centre of the poetics of the fragile. Its reason for being, therefore, lies in the uncertain future, moving between the present balance of the building and the inevitable forthcoming ruin, which will mark its permanent loss.

The fragility of the artifact can therefore be regarded as a reflection on time and the nature of the action of the building, which has largely to do with the perennial challenge against gravity, and finds its highest dramatization in the precariousness of the building process.

¹ Giulio Romano, in: Palazzo Te, Mantova, 1524: the details of the entablature voluntarily simulate a sinking.

² Even Gottfried Semper, in: *Die vier Elemente der Baukunst*, 1852, distinguished two traditional types of wall that are different in terms of material consistency and heaviness, connecting them to two specific German words and giving both the same dignity: «die Wand», indicating a light partition, and «die Mauer», indicating a solid reinforcement.

³ Enrique Walker, A conversation with Smiljan Radic, *El Croquis* no.167, 2003-2013, p. 11. Smiljan Radic, That's the beauty—to bring the inside outside, in: *Oris* no. 63, 2010, pp. 130–150. Smiljan Radic, *Frágil Fortuna*, in: *Quaderns d'arquitectura i urbanismo*, Col·legi d'Arquitectes de Catalunya, 2000, pp. 100–103.



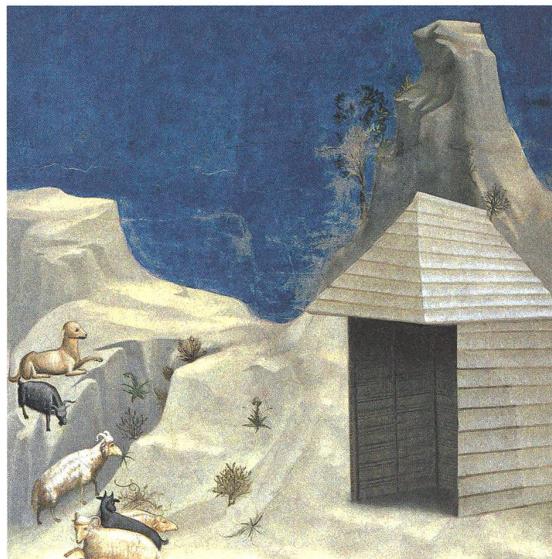


fig. b *Elaborations from Giotto, Il sogno di Gioacchino, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua 1303-1305. Transformed by the authors*

II. A manifesto of fragility

The issue of the fragility of the architectural construction appears in many works of Giotto (1267-1337). In the selected frescoes of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, and in those of the Basilica of Assisi, Giotto paints small wooden structures built from the juxtaposition of elements that are slender, stuck and jointed in a measured and carefully precarious manner. These small shelters can be considered as an unconscious and early manifesto of fragility. They define modest spaces and their consistence reveals, nevertheless, a great constructive attention that emerges in the joints and supports, where the function of each piece is explicit, sufficient, and constructively necessary.

The artifacts, designed in wood and straw, are always represented in relation to big-sized natural elements, made up of rocks and barren mountains: the fragile architectural element would not exist without the rock background, which supports and define it. The dialectical and antagonistic relationship with these bare and massive presences serves to enhance the slenderness of the architectural elements, in constant duality between the tectonic of the structure and the stereotomy of the base.⁴

The proportions of the elements make these architectural buildings nearly impossible to build and unsuitable to gain a physical substance that goes beyond their simple representation. The design solutions that Giotto pictures, are so well conceived, that they almost seem impossible, although probably hyper-realistic. This is entirely in line with the typical attitude that Giotto's paintings reveal, to not only appeal to the tactile imagination, as much as real objects do—especially human figures—but in fact do it much more, with the inevitable consequence of transmitting a sense of reality and life similarity to the contemporary population, much more direct than the actual objects.⁵

Giotto's architectural works are here redesigned according to the codes of architecture, through free interpretation and far from any philological or historical desire. This was accomplished by using the classical and encoded instruments of architecture, drawings in orthogonal projections, tracing a path of discovery distinguished by an almost anatomical character, and attempting an approach to the poetic essence of their image represented.

4 Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture. The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*, Chicago 1995, p. 23.

5 Bernard Berenson, in: Serena Romano, *La O di Giotto*, Milan 2008, p. 11.

6 Henrich H. Tessenow, Giorgio Grassi (ed), *Osservazioni elementari sul costruire*, Milan 2013.

7 Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture. The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*, Milan 1999, p. 21.

8 Peter Zumthor, *Pensare Architettura*, Milan 2003, p. 12.

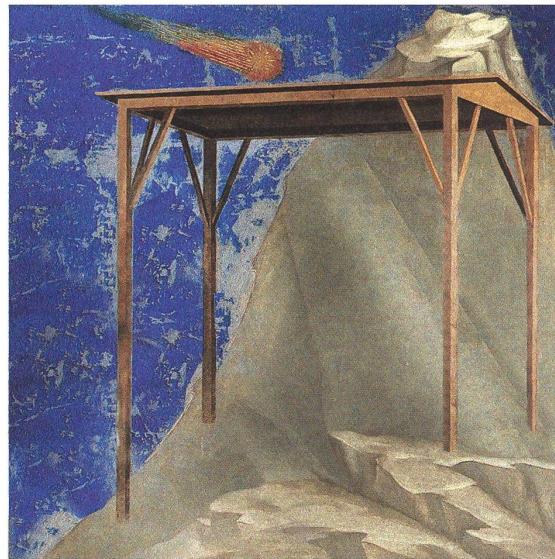


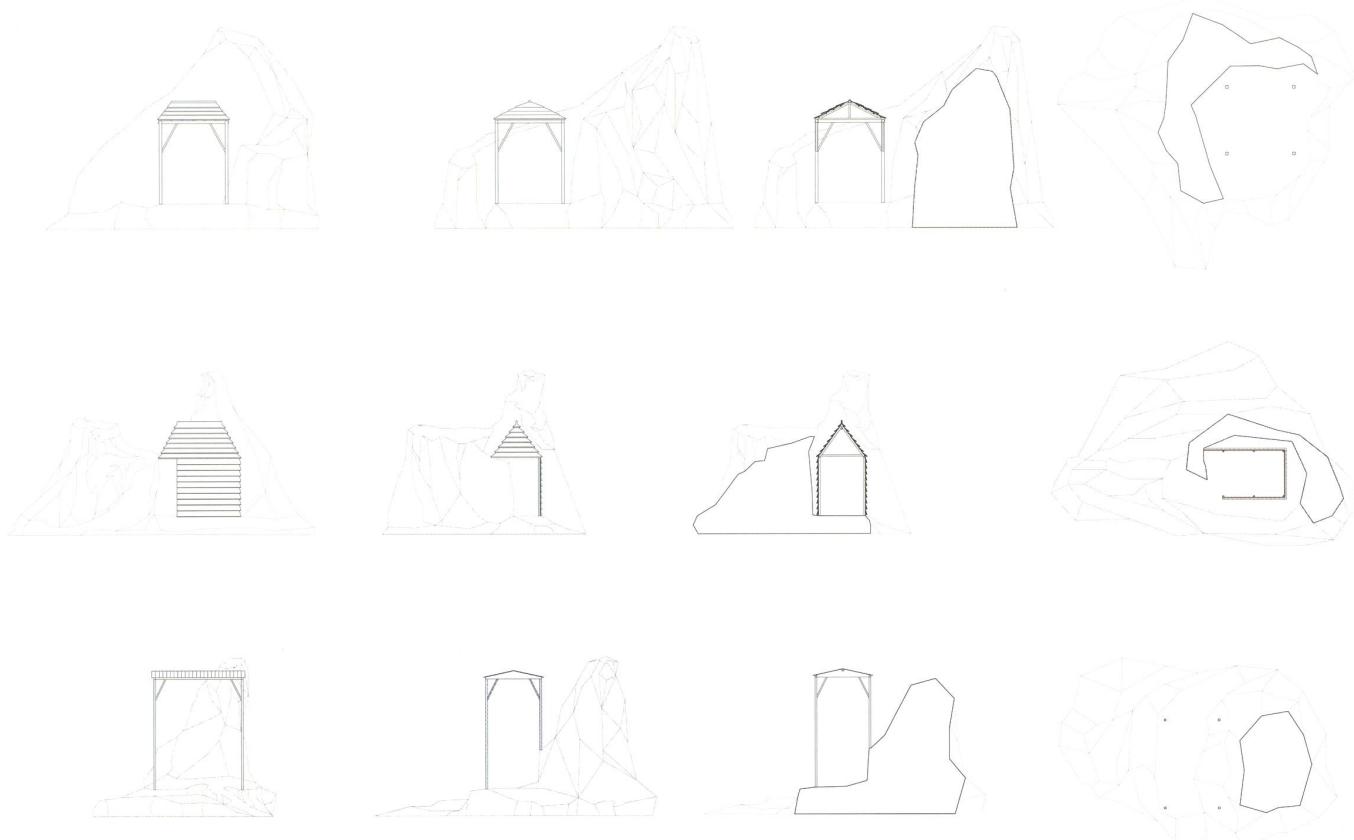
fig. c Elaborations from Giotto, *Adorazione dei Magi*, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua 1303-1305

III. The fragile corner

In the corners of Giotto's imagined architectures, the search for an immature and childish beauty reveals the poetics of the fragile, which makes them archetypal of an «elementary»⁶ architectural conception that is essential for the building practice.

The corner is the geometric point of contact between different lines and planes, and in architecture it is the place where elements and different material consistencies create relations. Architecture, intended as an art of construction and a tectonic practice, finds its materialisation and the exaltation of its ontological fragility in the corner. The corner, regarded as synthesis of the tectonic complexity of the artifact, is its most fragile part; it is no coincidence that classical architecture contrived numerous language expedients to express stability and permanence, to strengthen the corners or soften their intrinsic fragile condition. The practice of joining and connecting is so inscribed inside the building practice, that it could also be detectable in the etymology of the term «architecture». The fragile quality of the corner is thus expressed in the surprising correspondence between form, necessity, and function, in the point of simultaneous contact between all structural elements. In the definition of the corner detail, the aesthetics of fragility defines and verifies a general goal in which the architectural conception of the entire structure is revealed; it is in fact necessary to conceive reasonable constructions and forms for the edges and joints—where different materials meet—and the details express what the project idea requires in that particular point of the object: union or disjunction, tension or lightness, friction, solidity, or fragility.⁸

Passing through Giotto's representations, the drawings show three small architectures that summarize different constructive approaches to the detail of the corner. By means of a process of abstraction and spatial simplification, these objects become tools, selfishly designed to investigate the fragility as an architectural theme in its expressive forms. Thus Giotto becomes a mere pretext, and his wooden and rock architectural buildings conquer, as it were, their own autonomy.



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Sara Impera, born 1984, is an architect based in Paris. She got a PhD in 2014 at the Polytechnic University of Milan on the topics related to the modification of abandoned peripheral territories.

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