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F.A.T.

A conversation with
Fabio Don and
Marco Zelli
trans Redaktion

We meet in the lobby of Lochergut. Fabio and Marco have placed four chairs in front of the mailboxes. We sit down and start to talk. The pastries we had brought with us remain forgotten and untouched for the next two hours.

- TM What is the idea behind F.A.T.?
- FD Everything started with the observation that right after academia when you are out of ETH or any school you hardly have any theoretical exchange. When you start working you often forget about theoretical questioning and how to construct a theoretical discourse about architecture. We wanted to fill this gap with an independent program that is outside academia but in its methodology still raises the claim to be to be as scientific as possible. We define a semester topic and then send out an open call asking for texts, essays, excerpts of books, poetry, etc, based on which we then have round-table discussions. Until now we have had two semesters. We started in 2018 with the topic «On Permanence» and the current topic of the second semester is «On Revolution».
- MZ F.A.T. is a very simple idea: Technically, it's nothing else than a reading group, but the aim is fundamentally different. The idea is not just to understand the author but to distill the different positions of people. Architects often have intense discussion about architecture among themselves. With F.A.T. we give structure to this tendency. By keeping a record of the discussions and by defining topics, we set a framework that allows us to produce a discourse based on common understandings.
- FD The idea is also to give architects the chance to define their own positions more clearly. Especially in Swiss schools, you are so influenced by prominent figures that it can sometimes be difficult to build up your own position. Through discussion we can free ourselves from these masters, which is necessary to find our own path. Being outside of academia gives us the opportunity to question their work and their understanding of architecture from a critical distance.
- TM So, can F.A.T. be considered a reaction to a condition that is specific for Switzerland and Zurich?
- MZ Yes, because there is this tendency to have big preachers, which can hinder a discourse from developing. There are other contexts where theory is much more established and much more understood as something functional to practice. But this lack of discourse is also something more general. Even in Italy, where many architects are theoretically engaged, the idea of creating a discourse in terms of a shared platform is missing. Hence we don't rule out that F.A.T. might be a migrant project at some point.
- FD I think it has to do with the current situation. Until the late eighties, for instance, the role of a magazine was much more relevant. It was a platform where the architects would explain and defend their positions to a wider public. There was intense exchange in written form. Nowadays we don't have this sort of platform anymore. There is no space for confrontation, just uncritical publication for self-promotion.
- MZ We remark that right now there is a strong atomization of positions in architecture. A discussion on a rather common ground such as a text is something that offers the opportunity to develop a shared «vocabulary».
- FD In our manifesto we emphasize a horizontal approach to teaching and learning. That is why Marco and I do not see ourselves as the only teachers. Everyone is both teacher and student at the same time and roles are constantly changing. We call this «Each One—Teach One» model. The idea of teaching is of course to transmit knowledge, but in our experience in this process teachers learn just as much as students. Sometimes the naivety of a student can lead you to reconsider problems you thought you had solved some time ago. We question this ex-cathedra approach, which is still prevalent at universities. This kind of teaching does not seem to make sense anymore nowadays, as there are much faster ways of obtaining information than through a lecture at university.
- TM So, F.A.T. is also a critique of current Academia?
- FD In a typical lecture, the professor will speak for 90 minutes and then perhaps in the last five minutes you can ask questions and have a discussion. Our approach is the opposite:

F.A.T. starts where the normal lecture ends. We want to concentrate again on the art of debating and not on this ex-cathedra approach, which is always a top-down approach, a kind of «gospel truth».

- MZ People have to think to argue or defend a position, and this helps them build their own critical thinking. The word comes from the Greek «krino», which means to judge. To be critical means, in fact, to perform an act of judgment. If the instruments you get have already been synthesized for you and you simply take them without judgment, you can only reproduce them and there is no real added value.
- TM In the ETH lectures you are talking about, professors often give lectures in front of a crowd of up to 150 people. Doesn't this kind of size make direct confrontation difficult?
- FD That's true. Since we are usually between 15 and 20 people, confrontation is definitely more direct and easier. But if you think about other forms of discussions, for instance in a parliament, there you have 400 people discussing on one topic. Another example we can recall is the one of the court: in terms of typology this is often a circular or semi-circular space and the basic method by which lawyers describe the position of their clients is through the plea, which essentially is a type of debate. The idea of horizontal confrontation is also possible on a larger scale.
- TM Can you imagine F.A.T. approaching the size of a parliament?
- FD We're working on it. (laughs)
- TM It sounds to me like your approach is also very playful. I can assume a variety of roles: I can defend the text, I can confront it, but I can also exchange my position with someone else's.
- MZ Yes, you can switch or you can even take a position you don't stand behind but you should try to make it as consistent as possible. The goal of this methodology is to bring an architectural argument to its very end. We as moderators, try to push different positions to generate friction and to raise the temperature. So, sure, playfulness is there. I'm sure many people embrace a position just to create a debate and not because they really deeply believe in it. It's a kind of a dialectic contest where we all play a stress test for ideas.
- TM How do you come up with your semester topics?

- MZ We like to work with constructive ambiguities. For instance, in the first semester we choose «on Permanence» which relates on the one side to the witnessing of what resists the historical process, material or immaterial. On the other side it carries a wish for eternity which is deeply embedded in architectural practice, and more generally in the idea of project, as the human activity par excellence. This turns it into a brilliant parameter to distill topics worth engaging with. During this first semester we filtered out some issues that seemed relevant during the sessions. Some participants were looking for a more dynamic component and were talking about «newness», for example. Therefore as the second semester topic we chose «on revolution», trying to capture their feedback. Again, we were interested in the double meaning of the word: Revolution is usually associated with a political upheaval, an idea of overturn, but it also has the meaning of a circular journey of an object back to its initial point. In this regard it can be understood as something quite conservative. The play with oppositions laying in the very «figure» we analyze, offers the opportunity to generate debate.
- TM You primarily work with text. I'm interested in your attitude towards images.
- FD The influence of images is even stronger today than it was 10 years ago and is reinforced by platforms like blogs and other social media. Our focus on text is based on the idea of working in the realm of ideas: being iconoclastic is just a result of this attitude. These ideas are certainly there to be then translated into form, but in order to produce ideas, we have to step back a bit. Also, we are not saying that through images one can't create new ideas—there are many great examples of architects that work with images and create a discourse out of that. It's simply that we have a different approach.
- MZ Our preference for the written form has to do with the etymological meaning of the word «Theory»: «to contemplate, to look at». It has to do with the observation of an ideal world so it is also a matter of perception, but of an intellectual kind. Meister Eckhart says to this concern: «Subtract the mind and the eye is open to no purpose.»
- We believe that images easily trigger emotions and you need to get rid of them if you want to investigate the way form gets produced instead of investigating formal manipulations. Texts are more abstract and for this reason they provide a bigger speculative freedom. Theory is ultimately a tool for prediction, it's something that

allows you to frame reality in certain terms and to deal instantaneously with its complexity. It has in itself a projective vocation. Of course during our session we also use drawings and pictures but we try to look past the superficial layer right to their very essence. We could say we approach them as texts themselves.

TM You're saying that theory helps us frame the reality we live in by helping us deal with its perception. So it works like a filter, does it?

MZ Yes, it's an intellectual construct and the way you build it will necessarily influence the way you interact with reality. If you don't build it, you will just react. Architects, for example, are subject to a number of market pressures. Theory helps them to produce a space of strategic relevance to deal with these conditions. In this context, the construction of theory generates a space for action instead of sheer reaction. The management of this space is

crucial for the architectural stance. In fact, it is all about this gap between perception and reaction.

FD There is this widespread misunderstanding that theory is something that stands in opposition to practice. With F.A.T., we want to emphasize that the two realms are very close and related, because there is no practice without theory. You need to develop a vision and practice the «seeing» of things in order to produce a project. F.A.T. is a program made by architects for architects and most of the people that attend F.A.T. aim to be building architects. We are not only interested in books for their own sake, but we want to practice, and discussing them and their fundamental ideas prepares us for this. It's an active understanding of theory.

In this sense we claim that F.A.T. is a political project.