BETWEEN THE ORDINARY AND THE UNEXPECTED
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When we look at architecture, we feel drawn towards those buildings where the elements can be considered important independently, but become even stronger when they are considered together. We find this quality in an architecture that evokes a penetrating yet unceasing tension with its background, an architecture that holds expression beyond its mere appearance. Looking at the Z33 Kunstencentrum, the V&A Childhood Museum and the Corso Italia complex, we found a substantial reading of our assumptions, of what we believe to be tension inscribed in the act of building.

Within the medieval centre of Hasselt lies the beguinage, a former enclosed religious community and today home to Z33 Kunstencentrum. [A] One reaches the enclosure through a meandering passage north of the cathedral, meeting it at an angle. To the right, a 250 meter long masonry wall dating back to the seventeenth century folds around the corner. To the left, the ancient wall turns into a facade, characterized by a monumental gate and large openings above ground level. Walking further, the texture of the wall changes. The weathered clay bricks make way for rhombic clay tiles of dark-red pigment. Here the perforations are limited to three enormous openings positioned at both ends, abstracting the in-between to a solid front. Two of the openings extend to the ground and allow entry into the interior courtyard of Francesca Torzo's extension.

While entering the garden and walking on the gentle slope leading to the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood in London, an adorned pavilion stands confidently in front of the old Victorian building. [B] The extremely flat surface of the facade and its ornament allow the entrance to appear as a sign at the front of the museum. Every detail of the pavilion designed by Caruso St. John enhances the perception of this feeling of flatness. Both the alignment of the windows with the red-brown stone elements and the contrast to the unobstructed interior makes the entrance stand out like an object. The contrasting feeling between ornament and abstraction is what makes the pavilion's expression prominent.

In the northern part of Corso Italia, one of the main streets in the centre of Milan, a building seems to differ from its immediate context. A white corner prominently stands out towards the street. [C] Getting closer, it becomes apparent that the corner is part of a larger volume that rests on a receding podium. This carefully sculpted appearance characterizes the entire context. Three further buildings—less prominent in their appearance, but with the same stylistic characteristics—surround the striking volume and complete Luigi Moretti's ensemble. The buildings are set back from the street line, strengthening the power of the central volume, and giving it the appearance of a sharp edge superimposed on the podium, when viewed from a distance.

All these projects have in common that they manage the balancing act of adapting to their context while maintaining a strong independence. This form of positive antagonism seems to be the source of what we perceive as tension. The projects seem to stay in the background, they are almost absent; yet when one looks at them, when one gets closer, they become increasingly present and stronger in their own identity. The quality of the tension that is inscribed into them lies in the capability of appearing to be unemphatic at first sight, while purposely altering and re-defining the character of the context they adhere to. It is exactly this quality that we aim to convey so that it can be discussed and (re-)constructed.
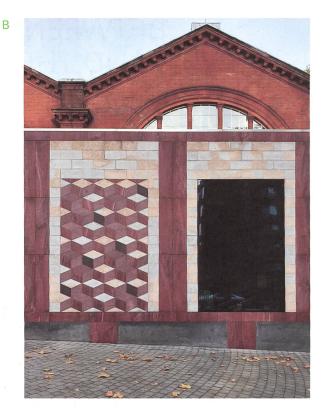
In order to examine this duality, it is helpful to consider two philosophical concepts that have found their way into architectural discourse, namely mimesis and gestalt. The former is defined as the relation of imitation between the creator and the existing Opera. Through mimesis the work appears by replication of an already existing entity. This act of imitation in architecture leads to the dissolution of a building in its context, it becomes one of many.

In contrast, in the philosophical concept of gestalt, the object is perceived through its form; the whole becomes greater than the sum of its individual parts. The implication of the architectural equivalent of gestalt is the distinct appearance of the object, which leads to a clear detachment from its context. The essence of the project lies in its strong form, and due to its imposing appearance, the building can transform the context into its background.

Whilst mimesis makes an object seemingly absent, as if it had always been there, gestalt gives a strong presence to it. It is by the juxtaposition of these concepts that we can identify the tension as a stable expression lying between the ordinary and the unexpected.

To express this feeling of tension, the architectural project requires both mimesis and gestalt within the process leading to its being. The two contribute equally to the determination of the building's character, and tension arises as its ultimate quality. Only through the constant oscillation of being perceived as the ordinary

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A   Francesca Torzo Architetto, Museum Z33,
     Hasselt (BE), 2019, view from the street.
     Photography: Siebrent Willems, 2019

B   Caruso St. John, Victoria and Albert Museum
     of Childhood, London (UK), 2002–2007, entrance
     pavilion. Photography: Federico Taverna, 2019

C   Luigi Moretti, Residential and office complex on Corso Italia, Milan (IT), 1949–1956, view from
Piazza Bertarelli to the central building. Photography: Federico Taverna, 2019

and/or the unexpected, tension can be established as a permanent condition.

Although tension can be pursued, it is not a quality that can be preconceived, but one that will only be achieved through perceptual conditions that will occur over time.

Since tension itself is an end state and cannot be used as a foundation, it is necessary to start strictly from either the realm of gestalt or mimesis, and to build the values of the project further towards the ordinary and a strong presence, respectively, and to inscribe one into the other in order to achieve tension.

The values and expressions that constitute the applied mimetic and gestalt conceptions, can arise from both the immediate context and from a much wider architectural cultural code. By working within the immediate context, the result is represented as variety; and by working within the wider cultural code the absoluteness of the applied elements is enhanced. Whilst variety is achieved by altering the definition of the coded elements, absoluteness arises from the application of certain elements defined by a wide architectural set of codes. [1]

Once the project is realized, the values it acquires will give it its own autonomy that allows the project to move from the condition of mimesis or gestalt, towards the condition of tension.

It will no longer be possible to identify mimesis or gestalt independently, since the feeling of tension will be the predominant condition of the building. The autonomy and the values that constitute the tension will ensure that the object is independent without being iconic, figurative without being spectacular, specific without being unique. Once the project gains its own autonomy, it will supersede the mimesis and gestalt, settling itself right in the tension in-between, which is only perceivable in the experience of it. [2]

Therefore, the way a project comes into being and expresses the feeling of tension is achieved due to its movement from mimesis or gestalt towards its autonomy, which takes place either in the immediate contextual field or in the more widely established one. The spectrum of nuances that the project will highlight between these two contrasting situations, is what constitutes the feeling of tension and its possibility of being perceived.

In the archaic addition to the beguinage at the Z33, the adhesion to the context is achieved through the replicated experience of the enclosed facade. In order to be autonomous from its context, the mimetic is pushed into gestalt through abstraction of its elements. The monotonous materiality, the massivity of the surface and the abstracted openings show inherently local mimetic characteristics acquired through meticulous inventories of the surroundings, buildings and the city's morphology.

In the attempt to acquire an object-like presence, and thus moving from gestalt, the figuration of the entrance pavilion at the V&A Museum of Childhood has been pushed beyond the edge. The flatness of the facade enriched by the ornament, combined with the stone materiality and its expression acquired by the cultural set of codes referring to historical public buildings, are gestures that conferred on the project the autonomy necessary to move towards the tension.

Luigi Moretti's complex in Corso Italia started with the precise intention of moving from the condition of gestalt. In the careful assembly of four buildings, the centrepiece gains enough autonomy to transform the (self-constructed) context into its background. Therefore gestalt is only implied in the shape and expression of the central volume, while the three other buildings mediate through stylistic and formalistic similarities with both the central volume and the Milanese cityscape.

Although tension cannot be pre-supposed but only pursued, these examples show how carefully considerate gestures can push a project beyond mere mimesis or gestalt and figuratively move it towards its autonomy.

To reach tension, inscribing the qualities of mimesis into gestalt and vice versa is necessary in order to allow the movement towards that feeling. Through carefully considered gestures the tension will arrive at its being by virtue of balancing between the two conditions. When mimesis becomes unexpected, and it acquires an object-like presence; when gestalt becomes ordinary, and it seems as if it has always been there.

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