A Conversation with Pier Vittorio Aureli
trans team

Wall, from the series «Synthesis and Destruction», radiograph on paper, 35×17.6 cm.
Drawing: Pier Vittorio Aureli

trans had the opportunity to meet Pier Vittorio Aureli in Brussels. He is one of the founders of Dogma. Strongly committed to teaching, he wrote several books on urbanism and architectural theory and contributed to different design competitions. His intrinsic fire for the profession of the architect could have been as much a criterion to invite him as his sparkling theories which led to various research and design projects.

TT   Can you remember a book that had a big impact on you when you were a student?

PV   One of the books that had a big impact on me when I was a student was Peter Eisenman's «Houses of Cards». It's an impressive book, and a beautiful object. It's about Eisenman's first ten houses. The book contains three densely written essays: one by Eisenman himself, one by Manfredo Tafuri and one by Rosalind E. Krauss. The one by Krauss is particularly impressive, perhaps one of the best essays on formalism. The graphic design was done by Massimo Vignelli, who was responsible for the art direction of the journal «Opposition». When I told him that the book was the best thing he ever published he was disappointed. After 1987, when the book was published, he was moving on to the better known deconstructivist part of his oeuvre and considered his previous work no longer relevant. The book is very controversial because it is unashamedly formalist. For me «Houses of Cards» is one of the best books ever published by an architect.

TT   You define yourself as an architect and not a theorist. Nevertheless, in your professional and educational work theory is important. How would you describe your architectural position?

PV   Although it makes sense that I'm addressed as a theorist, I feel slightly uncomfortable with this label. Most of my teaching, from which then my writings emerge, is historically oriented. In the last ten years, I taught mostly history of architecture rather than architectural theory. This happened because of two experiences: one was that I was asked by one of the former AA directors to teach a survey of architectural history for first-year students. Preparing the course, which was delivered through lectures, forced me to reconsider what we mean by history of architecture. Mainly, because most of my audience was made up of students who were from many different parts of the world. This inevitably led me to question the manner in which most architectural histories are taught, namely through canonical monuments and the individual architect as a protagonist.

When I started my course, I adopted this traditional approach, of course, because it was the way in which I was myself educated to architectural history. Then, gradually, I started to problematize this established approach by including many non-Western architectural traditions, and by placing more emphasis on domestic architecture where, in fact, the role of the architect until the end of the 19th century is almost non-existent. This became an interesting challenge, because I could not rely too much on 20th century theoretical discourse. My frame of references became more and more the work of historians, anthropologists, archeologists. This forced me not to abandon architectural theory, but to somehow move a bit aside. When theory becomes important in my teaching is perhaps the moment when it is not strictly historical in a philologist manner, but offers a critical overview, a synthesis, and even an extrapolation of certain concepts which may resonate with contemporary problems.

TT   What could then the image of the architect be, with this historical and theoretical knowledge in the background?

PV   Perhaps the goal of this way of teaching history is to discourage the tendency towards historicism. Since Leon Battista Alberti, historicism has been a fundamental way through which architects legitimize their work. To oversimplify one can say that today historicism consists of looking back to history as a kind of shopping mall of references which you then apply to your projects. This is the approach to historical precedents that you see in the work of architects such as Robert Venturi. For him, history was a Wunderkammer of historical buildings and he used them to enrich his architectural vocabulary. I am critical of that approach, which recently seems to be re-emerging, especially through the use of social media. Architects share images of vintage buildings, things like ancient mosques from Iran, modernist buildings from Milan: within the same scroll you see all these nice images, completely decontextualized from the political and social context that has produced them. For me this

kind of separation of form from the forces that produce it, is a real problem. You become totally unaware that a certain building, a certain use of materials and a certain form was the product, not only of the will of the architect, but also of the historical circumstances, in which this architecture was produced. In my teaching, I try to reconstruct these circumstances, at least how I read them, because they are an essential aspect of how form is produced in architecture. History is neither something to copy nor a ready-made narrative of the past to be used in order to make a project more erudite, on the contrary: History can be a way to understand how a project reacts to certain problems, repeats certain issues, or adds something different.

TT   Why are you interested in simple forms?

PV   Because architecture is never simple. Actually, it is quite complicated. Using simple forms means to reduce the number of decisions and moves so that design intentions are both clear and legible to many. By simplifying architectural form to something concise and simple a project can be more easily accepted or rejected. That's why we are interested in the use of simple forms, not because we have a fetishistic attachment to simplicity. Moreover, I'm convinced that in using simple forms the relationship between architecture and its context becomes clearer. In our work there is this constant dialectic between the relentless use of generic forms and the attempt to adapt these forms to a specific context, not just the physical context, but also the social use of a building. A good and well-known reference for this kind of approach is the work of Donald Judd. In his installations, the object itself is abstract, he even used extremely artificial materials to reduce the naturalness of the object itself. But then the way he positioned these abstract objects becomes specific, because it carefully reacts to specific situations. So, as paradoxically it may seem, the more you use generic and simple forms the more you become sensitive to context.

TT   You place your work in the tradition of rational architecture. Could you define the term rational?

PV   To be rational in architecture is to be as much as possible logical in terms of design decisions. I definitely think that the work of Dogma belongs to the tradition of rational architecture which started in the 18th century. To a certain extent we follow in the footsteps of architects such as Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Hannes Meyer, Hans Schmidt, Giorgio Grassi, Gianugo Polesello. They represent an idea of architecture which, in order to be effective, needs a certain degree of logic as a modus operandi. These architectures can be both taught and practised without having to rely on your private obsessions. Of course, there is an important issue to be aware of when talking about rational architecture. The origin of the rationalization of architecture is the result not only of the attempt to produce architecture through a logical use of elements, but also of the optimization process driven by the rise of capitalism, especially noticeable with industrial buildings. I believe that the factory is the form of architecture that had the biggest impact on everything that was built later, from housing to anything else. The form of the factory can be considered the most radical example of rational architecture. This is just to say that I feel deeply rooted in rationalism, but at the same time I'm aware that the rational cannot be understood simply as the attempt to make things more logical. Historically speaking, rationalism is also the manifestation of a way to produce architecture that arose with the industrial mode of production.

TT   Do you relate the idea of a rationalisation of architecture to the concept of a generic architecture?

PV   Yes, you can say that generic architecture is the product of the rationalization of architecture when the latter had to be optimized in order to fulfil its own role, not just as a use value, but also as something that would increase profit for those that employed such a generic way to build. For me, one of the most powerful examples of generic architecture is the English terraced house, which is one of the first examples of a house built for the sake of making money. The architecture of the terraced house is reduced to its structural system, two party walls, facades and a very simple internal subdivision with almost no difference between the front and the back. With the terraced house you have the most generic and bare form of architecture ever produced until that moment. This was not for the sake of being generic per se; it was a way to make architecture almost a kit of parts that any developer without even the need of an architect could build in large quantities in order to raise profit. We have to be aware of these rather controversial origins of both rationalism and the generic. But this doesn't mean that you cannot use this kind of architecture. In an article about architecture and mass production, the Swiss architect Hans Schmidt took Bedford Square in London – one of the most speculative developments of terraced houses in London – as a model for socialist architecture. This position shows that it is possible to appropriate something and
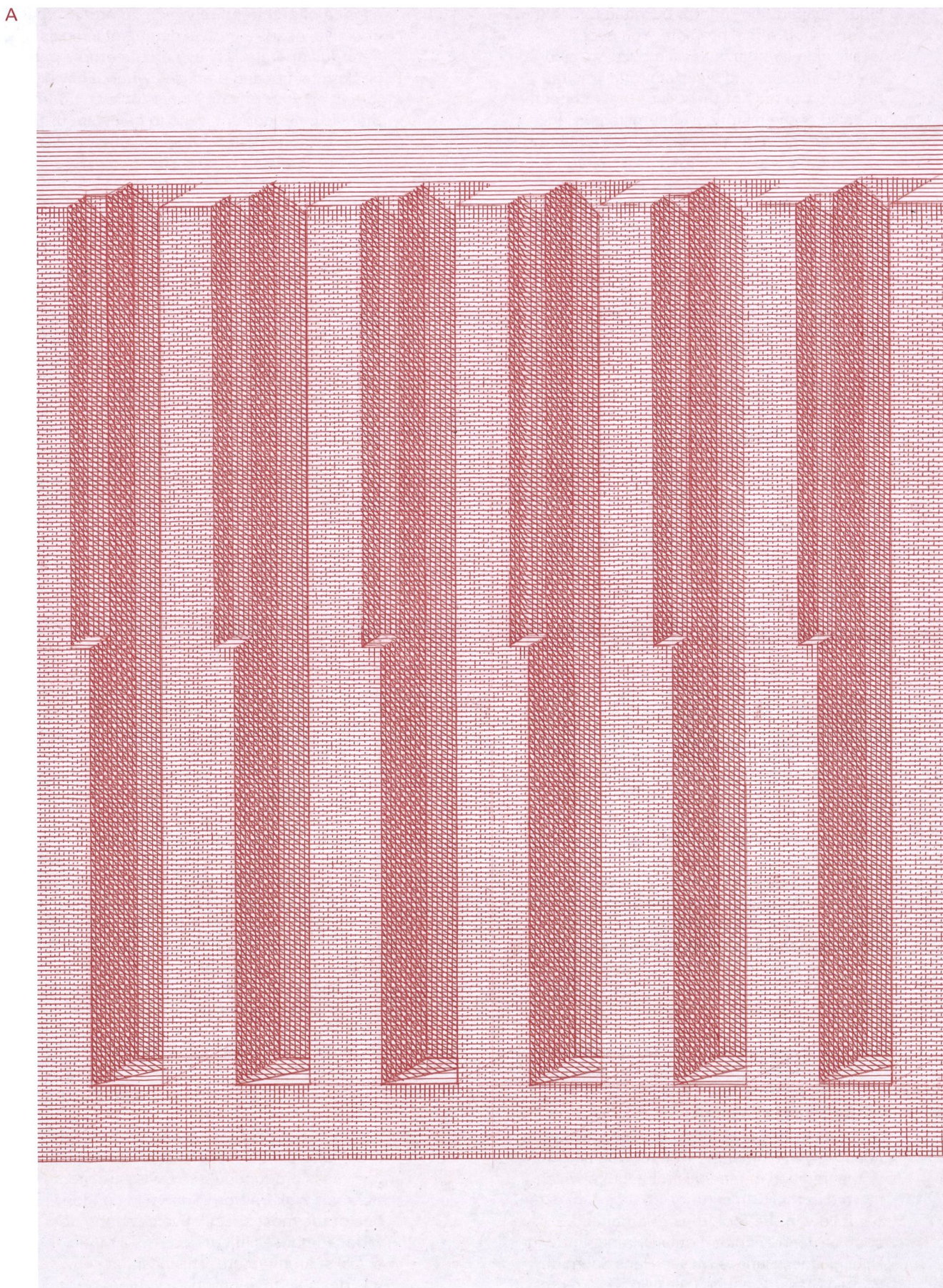
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give it a completely different direction, once you are aware of how it came into being. This is a challenge. Before industrialization, architecture would never be generic, it would always be charged with symbolism, with rituals. Even when architectures were simple structures and looked generic, they nevertheless were charged with specific liturgies, rituals or symbols. With the advent of architectures like the mediaeval townhouse which is a precursor of the English terraced house, and then the factory architecture was reduced to what it does, to the bare structure.

TT   What is the political intention that you are looking for in your projects, especially in the urban field?

PV   The most important political intention is to make urban space visible and legible on its good and bad terms, without too much rhetoric or complacency. But this is very difficult. Within our Neoliberal economy the design of space, especially public space, often ends up valorizing the land value around it. You design a beautiful park, a necessary infrastructure for civic life, but it inevitably increases the land value of all the housing around. In a way, something that we as architects believe improves the city does not make the city always better. In the Renaissance, in cities like Florence and Rome public space such as streets or squares were often designed with this intention. A way to counter this problem would be to improve the public space of a city while also taming value by introducing rent control. So you prohibit landlords from increasing the rent for the people that live there. Unfortunately, this doesn't happen, because often public spaces are designed exactly to increase the economic value. Lately, I have become very interested in this question of land and appropriation, and how architecture is deeply influenced by these factors. When the city wants to increase the security and economic value of certain areas, they often create public spaces such as a museum, a garden, a library, a park or a new street. The way in which these civic infrastructures end up being Trojan horses for gentrification is one of the biggest political challenges today. Architectural practices are generally too politically ineffective in confronting these challenges: to counter the commod-

ification of urban space would require not just architects, but city authorities and policy makers. The problems are organized on these different levels which goes beyond architecture itself. Yet it is urgent to address these problems today, even if they seem far from the scope of architecture because they have a major impact on how we practice architecture.

TT   How could the architect contribute to this problem in a positive manner?

PV   I think the best way to understand the present is through its history. The present has strong continuities with its past. To study the history of a place or a social situation allows us to think and reflect on how to establish alliances with potential actors that are not the usual clients of architecture. This requires institutional support. I think schools of architecture can play an important role in raising awareness of the problems I mentioned before, but it seems to me that they are passive although they have both infrastructure and funding to mobilize and support alternative, non-profit approaches to architecture. Another important actor that can play a major role in countering the commodification of cities is the state and city authorities. At the moment they are only supporting real estate developers. Thus, I am very sceptical of the public sector. With public space, they just put a cherry on the cake but everything else is the product of the real estate machine. In schools there is very little awareness of these issues, not just among students, but also among professors. We tend to idealize ideas of community, social interaction and so on. But we don't consider how political economy is a crucial layer in the making of cities. It's symptomatic of the state of architectural education today that urban planning has been removed from the curriculum of many schools. To remain within Switzerland, one of the figures that I've become very interested in recently is Hans Bernoulli. His theory of the urban ground as a public good and the importance of its non-profit use is one the most radical theories of the city ever advanced in the 20th century. If you look at the history of urban form it is not as Aldo Rossi assumed, the product of collective memory. It's constructed by the property regime. This fundamental aspect is often overlooked when we study the city.

Pier Vittorio Aureli was born in Rome in 1973. He graduated in Architecture at the Università Iuva di Venezia. He earned his PhD at the TU Delft in 2005. Aureli's main research focus is the relationship between architectural form, political theory and urban history. He teaches at the Architectural Association in London where he is both Diploma Unit Master and Director of the PhD Program «City-Architecture». Currently he is Louis I. Kahn Visiting Professor at Yale School of Architecture and, most recently, became Associate Professor of Architectural and Environmental Theory at EPFL Lausanne.