

MEANINGFUL FRAGMENTS

define, re-read, design

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I INTRODUCTION

The relevance of research in the field of architecture, intended as the art of construction, is ambiguous yet crucial at multiple levels. The reason why research assumes primary relevance, in the work of many architects, and at least as an intention in mine, is the research for reasonⁱ and meaning as the minimum condition for the production of architecture.

From this consideration, research can be understood as a pre-condition for architectural production. It is what sets the framework for architectural exploration and meaning. Architects that look for meaning always find themselves between these two realities: a theoretical investigation and the contingency of the real world. "Production without meaning has no artistic value"ⁱⁱ if produced without any reason. The reason perhaps can define the programs and forms in the design process, developing deeper relationships with the physical context, even in a future vision of it.

This, of course, is one partial perspective on the field of architecture but from the understanding of a post-ideological situation, partiality is to be understood as the most meaningful perspective. Thus, the paper will never try to establish a general theory or a fixed research methodology claiming for absolute truth regarding the results but rather a free exploration able to stimulate and inform the designer.

Methodological reflection, especially as proposed during the lecture series, opens the understanding of the partiality of every reading and sets the challenge to absolute theories.

One quite obvious consequence is the understanding of fragmentation as the underlying condition to our contemporary practice where treatises used to be solid reference points for architects now are no longer able of dictating the norm, becoming a collection of "each and every tangential exception of the everyday within them"ⁱⁱⁱ.

However, fragmentation and disillusion towards dogmatic and self-referential explorations do not make research meaningless, rather encourage a deeper reflection on these themes. I believe a correspondence between reason and form still valuable; my perspective is a deep consciousness of the fragmentation but active research for meaningful pieces at different scales.

From this understanding of the state of arts in architectural research, my thesis challenges the idea of a difficult whole beyond the "formalization of universal forms and composition seeking for cultural context without having one"^{iv}. Moving away from the formalist result of the post-modern acceptance of the fragmented reality while challenging it not from a formal perspective but as the primary component of meaning in architecture.

Both the awareness towards fragments and the careful attention to the context are deeply rooted in my cultural background and in the intention statement of the *Urban Architecture Chair* where the tight link between research and design is encouraged and expected as part of the final assignment. The research structure in the studio matches my approach where theoretical explorations are combined with the production of artefacts being both tools to test the hypothesis and proof of concepts dealing with the complexity of the reality of making.

II DEFINE, RE-READ, DESIGN

From this duality of theory and production-driven research my approach can be divided into three main phases. Each one can involve different research methods, depending on the situation, that combined try to create a wider understanding of the topic, hence partiality here has to be understood as a value.

The first step is often the definition of the terms I am working on to avoid misunderstandings and to contextualize my position in the broader body of knowledge. By defining the terms of the discussion, I

already re-call a specific tradition where I place myself as researcher and designer within the specific topic. This first phase is, therefore, a theory led approach that I believe is necessary to set a solid base and understanding of the deep reasons and to avoid getting lost in the complexity of the contemporary condition.

From this first step a theoretical framework is acknowledged not as a dogmatic conclusion rather as the starting point for the research of meaning and reason. Here contradiction is often part of my research where dialectic elements are presented with the potential to widen the scope of the investigation. In this phase, the idea of the fragment is often used to challenge the definitions established in the beginning. These fragments are usually parts of the context where the project is taking place and become for me the tool to understand the context under a specific lens leaving outside all the accidents of the reality to focus only on this meaningful partiality.

Fragments become for me not only a way to look the reality but a tool in itself. Fragments are precious, they are key elements that “are able to resonate through its *pars* the feeling of *toto*, in its entirety.”^v Fragments can stimulate the conscience to reconstruct a lost whole.

“A carefully selected detail allows for an economy of the needed elements. This is how it is possible to feed six thousand people with six fish! Six details carefully selected can give the impression of a great event”^{vi} in the same way key fragments can recreate the understanding of a much greater piece of landscape, city, building through its meaningful and powerful partiality.

From all this pieces a collection is created, moving away from the positivist idea of the catalogue as scientific categorization under pre-defined parameters, towards the delicate patience of the collector who collects and creates its collection without judgment.

This collection becomes in the third phase a tangible thing by the production of artefacts that reflects upon the discussed themes. These artefacts come in different forms and medium depending on the situation, but they can be summed as pieces of writing and drawings exploring the relationship between elements to a higher level of reflection. They are often short pieces of text used to further clarify my position or drawings, that being the primary way to express architecture, plays the double role of being analysis and proposal at the same time. The design project as already mentioned for me begins with the re-reading of the place. Photos as well are often used in this phase, with particular interest upon the idea of re-framing larger compositions to highlight a different reading of the whole.

All these products move at the same time toward abstract reflection and extremely grounded field research about the ideas of meaning and object in their relation.

This specific interest in semiology is deeply rooted in my curiosity to understand the reason and the meaning of things and the way things work. In architecture, I found this especially in the role of significance and in its relationship with space in the element of character. The idea of character is becoming a taboo in the architectural practice as explained by Collin Rowe already in 1978^{vii}, especially when understood through the character as the minimum condition for architectural meaning. My research tries to go beyond the assumption of a univocal correspondence between character and model as understood by Giorgio Grassi^{viii} researching the character in fragments in an increasingly difficult whole represented by the landscape, the city or a building.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

I am recalling the idea of character as the minimal condition for meaning to be. But if it's true that “any building display character, whether intentionally or otherwise”^{ix} the question is about the possible correspondence between the object of the project and what it represents. This coherence is the aim of my methodological structure that, as presented, tries to embrace both abstraction and reality.

This implies the necessity of resonance between the object and its image. This idea derives from the Vitruvian's *proprietas* (book II), the definition of character from Quatremère de Quincy in the *Methodique Encyclopédie* and from the eighteenth-century tradition as observed by Colin Rowe in his "Character and Composition" 1974. The character allows for an ontological understanding of the architecture against the phenomenological experience of its representation. The idea of character claim for a complete match between the object and its meaning. This small difference in perspective is what differentiates architecture from its fictional staging.

This idea is core to the work of architects as Giorgio Grassi^x and his deep concern about the role of history in contemporary practice. In all these theories the object of the project was always the building as whole but as described above and as Rossi mention in its *autobiografia scientifica* "the adamantine correspondence between sign and meaning is, in modern architecture, hard if not impossible [...] Architecture should be characterized little, just as much as it is useful for imagination or action"^{xi}. I believe it is important therefore to be conscious that the character is not the panacea of meaning in architecture itself, and it is also the reason why my research aims to go beyond the dogmatic correspondence between the building and its character as necessity, looking at a smaller scale, questioning the assumed whole as the last reducible element introducing the idea of fragment. The idea of the fragment is of course not a new concern in architecture, especially if we think about the massive influence of Jacques Derrida and postmodernist thinking in architecture. But what interests me in this regard is not the general theory rather the possibility of understanding the whole through these elements, specifically, in their relations.

Relations that are explored already in the phases of collection and production of artefacts. The production of drawing and photographic material is an extremely common way to approach the architectural project and from my point of view it is architecture already. To approach this phase my main tool is the frame. By framing larger compositions, the fragment can be the true protagonist of the work without denaturalisation. This is a method largely used by Luigi Moretti in its editorial project *Spazio*^{xii} already in 1952. This idea of fragments and frame is obvious in the photos included in the magazine, often zoomed details, in black and white to highlight the dramatic tension between parts. The use of fragments and framing by Moretti was a careful process to find the right balance and tension between the photo and the page composition, revealing its ability to simultaneously manage large and small scales.

This tension between scales is something that my methodological approach aims at as primary result especially in the understanding of the collection as space for juxtaposition and contradiction. I believe that good production is often based on misunderstanding. In ambiguity, there is cultural production. And this is always a starting point in all my research projects. This openness to contradiction I believe it comes from the conscience of being part of a larger body of knowledge represented for me in the initial definitions mentioned in the previous chapter. These definitions allow for clarity and precise knowledge. This specifically allows me not only to locate myself in the larger scenario of history and the consciousness of being part of a process but also to keep track of my thought through the process and confront them with a higher level of consciousness.

IV THE ARCHITECT, THE ARCHITECTURE

I believe that my methodological approach as explained and discussed in this paper finds its roots in a wider context of theoretical and contextual reflection developed over the history of architecture. By recalling these definitions, I always recall a broader context of notions and people that are the condition for further development. I never place myself as the protagonist of the investigation as the person that will change something rather as a small contributor to a longer and larger tradition. I truly

believe that the contemporary architect should be humbler in the understanding of his work as part of a greater piece: the city and its construction and not as the product of his ego.

I agree with Adam Caruso where during an interview affirms that *novelty is nonsense*^{xiii}, and of course my interest in semiology is a confirmation of it. The research of reason and meaning as the primary strategy allows me to move forward in the research-design process seamless with an open structure that can be implemented by different disciplines or methodologies when the context requires them. Moreover, my research always starts and ends with architecture in mind. I believe that all the different disciplines are important to better understand the core of the complexity of architecture, but the central discussion for me is always architecture. This might seem unnecessary to be specified but I also find peculiar that often architectural discussion in contemporary practice involves everything around but the actual architecture and its logics.

To be logic my research approach cannot be completely fixed but require a clear framework as explained before. The re-reading of the subject becomes in my vision the key core of understanding of architecture involving all his levels of perception, from the cultural reading of the space to the perception of the spatial quality to its translation in sign, revealing all in one the layers of complexity and layer of meaning that are embedded in space.

This position led me towards the *Urban Architecture Chair* where architecture is understood as part of a bigger picture in the city and history. The chair particularly in its graduation studio called *Spolia* aims to this humble understanding of architecture and the project as an extra layer added to the place and its complexity. This approach implies, of course, a careful and meaningful understanding of the place as a whole and simultaneously as a collage of different, smaller pieces. This idea recalls to my mind the idea of Leon Battista Alberti "the city is like a great house, and the house in its turn is a small city"^{xiv} this understanding of the city in the same time in the large scale and in the small makes me always aware of the multiple dualities that dominate architecture: large and extremely small scales, theory and practice, drawing and construction.

END NOTE

ⁱ Andrea Benelli, 'Aldo Rossi and Reason. Architecture 1967-1997'.

ⁱⁱ Sitte, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Olmo, *Architettura e Storia*.

^{iv} Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.

^v Ejzeňstejn, Casetti, and Montani, *Teoria generale del montaggio*.

^{vi} Ejzeňstejn, Casetti, and Montani. p.258

^{vii} Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays*.

^{viii} Grassi, 'Il carattere degli edifici'.

^{ix} Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays*. (P62)

^x Grassi, 'Il carattere degli edifici'.

^{xi} Rossi, *Autobiografia scientifica*.

^{xii} Moretti, 'Spazio : rassegna delle arti e dell'architettura. Anno 3, numero 7.'

^{xiii} Adam Caruso.

^{xiv} Biraghi, *Storia Dell'architettura Contemporanea*.