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Explore Lab 21

Reflection Paper

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Designing with words

A literary approach to architectural design

The aim of this graduation is to develop an approach to architectural design that employs literature, understood both as a written text and as the act of writing, as a core tool for design. This intention stems from a double understanding of what a master thesis in architecture should be; on the one hand the conclusion of an academic path that leads to the formation of an architect and on the other hand the definition, for oneself, of what kind of architect one wants to be. In this sense, employing literature in architecture is a way of merging two profound interests into one, in doing so one reflects on the way in which architecture is produced and what are the position one takes in the larger architectural and social milieu. As such, the results of the thesis have first of all a personal value, the whole work has been carried out as a way of positioning oneself and defining that position, from theory to materials, approaches and methods.

In the approach architecture - and space more in general - is considered as the constituent aspect of our lives; not a neutral geometrical definition but one that is embedded of values and meanings, not the container of our lives but the matter of which they are made. As a result of writing the Theory Thesis on these themes, literature was identified as an extremely useful and powerful tool to approach these aspects of space, both to understand them and to create them. Many architects have used it in different and more or less obscure ways to drive, explain or understand their designs. Such examples, along with the reading of architectural theory and philosophy - especially from the branch of phenomenology - served as the starting point to define an approach to design that would employ literature and suit the designer. The research thus proved to be at the same time the exploration of a method and of the figure of the designer, one unveiling the other as the process of trial and error - of research through design - unveiled the workings of the approach and the way in which they could be fruitfully employed.

This exploration started as a "leap of faith", led by Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* as inspiration and Havik's *Urban Literacy* as academic grounding; the possibility of such an approach wasn't certain and most importantly the practical ways in which it could be

carried out were unknown. The research on the literary approach was therefore carried out with a “research through design” approach, where the use of the literary tools in the design practice and the reflection of their meaning and values influence each other and are carried out in parallel. The graduation was thus structured in three parts, mirroring its theoretical base; a part of practice defined by three architectural designs, a part of theory as a way to gain knowledge and grounding of the matter at hand and a part of reflection where to draw relations and conclusions. In turn, its theoretical base is roughly divided into three big pools of knowledge that equally take part in the exploration; that of philosophy - with an accent on phenomenology - that of architectural theory - made both of case studies and essays - and that of literature - both as matter to be employed in the literary approach and as literary theory to understand what literature can be and what it can do.

The whole thesis can be seen as a way of finding a mediation between these different disciplines, but also between the place and the function, between subjectivity and objectivity, between inspiration and logic. To find a mediation between the different matters and themes that compose an architectural work, to define their part and the ways in which they are substantiated into matter and space is nothing other than to find what the architect is. That is the goal that drives the whole exploration and that defines the graduation, to find how one can make architecture and what that means. In doing so one is forced to position himself in regard to a wide array of themes and problems, to take a stand and define oneself as an architect. Architecture being a creative art - among other things - makes it absolutely dependent from a self, as the source of that creativity, and it is fundamental to understand that self and its relation to certain modes of creativity in order to deal with architecture in a conscious and fruitful way.

In terms of design this led to an elemental approach, that is a strive towards the essence of architectural matters, be them formal, programmatic or material. Archetypes thus become milestones that lead the exploration and mark the infinite milieu of architectural possibilities, spatial configurations and the understanding of their relations to a program or an atmosphere are first stripped to the bone and then reconstructed out of a newly generated sensibility for the matter at hand. This kind of approach was helped and fuelled by the use of literature, in its many forms, throughout the design

process; a poem, to make a symptomatic example, reduces what it observes to the essence without though depriving it of its density of meanings and relations.

Practically speaking, this architectural exploration was carried out employing the two main themes of the design as the two opposite poles of a fluctuating movement; considering the architect as an authoring medium that translates into space a whole series of considerations - social, formal, aesthetic, technical and so on - in the design he is the pivot between the mountain and the book. That is between the place - Merano in the Italian Alps - with all its connotations and the program - a library - with all its values and meanings. Because of this, the design was divided into three libraries that “climb” the mountain, from the valley to its high ridges, passing from the foothills, thus exploring the merging of place and function, the application of an abstract idea - that of the library - to a palimpsest of meanings that is the place, the *Heimat*, the *genius loci*.

In doing so, the three designs, or rather the design in its three declinations, allowed for a more varied understanding of architecture, its relation to the methods of production and the place it takes in the world. Architectural devices and methodological tools thus become fixed points that lead the understanding of the architecture and the way in which it is dealt with. Again, literature proved to be an extremely useful tool in gaining this understanding and in leading this kind of approach; indeed language forces “a way of looking at things” which can be employed to structure an understanding of the design and its relation with its references and influences.

The final result of this graduation are thus not the three designs, which were always used as means to an end, but an understanding of architecture and its tools that covers the whole design process, from analysis to scenario and the relation between architectural problems and the ways in which different tools can be addressed. Each of the three designs are thus the result of a poem and three texts of different kinds, along with drawings and visualisation, and they are all tied together and with the research by a more general texts that sums them up and puts them in place. In doing all this the relation between the different tools, modes, materials, influences and techniques becomes clear and is made explicit in what is the end result of the graduation, a meta-book that is a gaze into the way of designing, tracing a mind map that is not a path or a hierarchy but rather a constellation with its myriad of different connections.

All of this can, or so I believe, be expressed in poetic form as well, and the poem that follows is the result of trying to translate academic thought, like the one above, into poetic one.

Reveries

To dream a world of words
and words that are worlds.
To play with memory and feelings,
the mind's hand searching,
feeling, grasping; scraping.

To weave like a spider with threads
of thoughts and colours
spanning textures over scales,
things and thoughts.
To daydream is to feel
on the skin of the mind.

To design is to inhabit a world
before its existence.
Dreaming is thinking,
reflection is a walk
along corridors in open fields.
Real and unreal;
a reverie of a memory
from a future time.

I step into this world
eyes open and hands forward,
the skin prickles with the gust
of a restless thought.
I breathe the atmosphere
of a universe of neurons
lungs, skin, hands, eyes.
I return with a stone in my pocket
dripping memories
and moods.

I feel around with many hands,
mouths, noses, ears,
it's all the mind's skin
no distinction, no lip or lobe
in a world of points.

Darkness smells, of musty rock
the sound of light entering windows
drips down the walls.
Walls made of memories and taste
like beach cabins I never visited
or flags I never saw.

Like a bird in its nest
my skin is the world,
and as I move it moves
and change
and I move.

One has to squint, to breathe
the thick air blown
by flickering images.
A sound moves in the air,
shapes the confines of my room,
the words of my speech.

Homeliness is but a flickering moment
between frustration
and exaltation.
Thus I move, looking for the balance
for a place that has to be
and is not yet.

It coagulates and explodes
again, like a storm of birds
Which cloud form is better?
When do you shoot the picture?
When the air vibrates and the skin
of the mind's body prickles
with the whole world,
the atoms are tuned
the crystal glass sings
a reverberation,

the song of the mind,
that is body.

I bring my body
with me in the pocket,
a compass to navigate
the density of perception.

I think with my eyes and ears
and with my hands and feet
and with my nose and mouth.
To think a flower is to see and smell it,
to eat a fruit is to taste its meaning.

I keep my memories
close at hand
to filter the
blinding light of the world
I create, at each blink
of my own many eyes.

To design, to dream, to live, to feel,
to sense your body
under the light of the world
in the cave of your brain.