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THE RESPONDING FORM.
PART TWO¹

FORMA ODPOWIADAJĄCA.
CZĘŚĆ DRUGA

Abstract

This essay is the second part of “The responding form 1. Short lecture on architecture” It is aimed at architecture students and all those who ask themselves what is the purpose for which architecture is built and what are the modes of architecture.

Keywords: history of architecture, architectural theory, theatre

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest drugą częścią eseju pt „Reakcja formy 1. Krótki wykład o architekturze”. Kierowany jest do studentów architektury i wszystkich tych, którzy zadają sobie pytanie, jaki jest cel, dla którego architektura jest tworzona i jakie są rodzaje architektury.

Słowa kluczowe: historia architektury, teoria architektury, teatr

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1. What are the modes of architecture?

To clarify, I will take an example from my work.

Designing a theatre for a competition in Udine in 1974, a lengthy reflection on the theme led me to conclude that in the theatre there are always two parts that face each other, and that the theatre's most general value lies in this confrontation. All the rest is secondary. What is important is the face-off between the seating area and the natural landscape, in the Greek theatre, with the fixed stage, a metaphor of construction, in the Roman theatre, with the magical place hidden behind a curtain, in the Italianate theatre.

This led to the formation of an initial, though vague, formal idea of my theatre: I thought of a place set between two opposite, fixed stages. For me, this was a very important starting point, which determined all the subsequent steps.

Had I not had the freedom to investigate the program, the possibility of reflecting on the general meaning of the theatre, I would never have reached the point of imagining this embryonic form, this typological scheme of the theatre, a scheme that is realized in its construction.

This initial form, then, does not come from other forms, but from reflection on what a theatre is, or what it could be.

This is the first, delicate passage of an idea that can also be expressed in words, to a form that, through construction, takes on a body. I believe that this was the procedure that led Ignazio Gardella to find the form of the theatre of Vicenza, perhaps his most beautiful design, where the place of the seating and that of the stage face each other in a space that includes them both, that has its own strong unity and geometry.

Shortly before that (in 1972), I did a project for a daycare centre, and again it was the idea of a daycare centre as a house for children that led me to think of a large enclosure that would contain the house and its garden.

I could go on in this way, to describe the genesis of the forms of all my projects, which has always happened in the same manner: thinking about the meaning of what I had to design, to define its character.

Of course in this passage from the idea to the form one is influenced, or more precisely aided, by all the examples that come to mind through similarities. But they would be of no help at all, and would just produce lifeless copies, without our pursuit, each time, of the meaning of what we are making.

It is in this initial cognitive phase that we can apply analogical thinking, both between ideas and the forms compatible with them, and between forms being developed and forms that already exist, that permit us to express a judgment on ours. A dual analogy that on the one hand allows us to test the validity of our ideas, and on the other helps us to avoid copying already existing forms.

In this initial phase the use of imagination is essential; the capacity, with respect to the formation of an idea, to imagine one or more *responding forms*. In this exercise we recall emotions felt through our experience of works of architecture of the remote and recent past. Not so much the forms, or not just the forms, but the emotions caused by them. The same emotions we want to be capable of causing, in turn, with our project. Thinking back on my project for the theatre of Udine, I remember that I repeated a sort of simulated experience of the place along the route that leads from the narrow lateral entrances directly to the centre of the two stages facing each other. Everything after that, each single move to construct that place, would have to obey that program. Every passage, from the construction to the form of the single parts, would have to underline that experience.

As we can see, in history forms are not transported (it is right that they remain in the time that generated them), but ideas and emotions are transported which we are able to glean from the forms. Only in this way, through the recognition of those ideas and the experience of those emotions, will we be able to find new forms capable of representing the values of our time.

Up to this point our work remains inside an imagined reality, the forms are still without a body, and to become real they will have to come to grips with the concrete factors of the place, with the requirements of the function and the rules of the construction. But we already know what we want to build, though not precisely yet, and this helps us to examine all the factors and to choose, among the many possibilities, the appropriate modes for the construction.

2. The modes for the construction

This is an important point in the discussion: our ability to hold the pre-set objective still. It can certainly be perfected during the course of the work, but it cannot be changed every time we run into a difficulty. Keeping faith with the programme we have outlined is the condition for the good results of our work. Without justifying choices based on unexpected events and accidental conditions of the places and obligations of the construction. When Mies designs the Convention Hall he is well aware of the problems involved in a roof with a 200-metre span on both sides of the hall, yet he does not let himself be influenced by those problems, he looks for the solution best suited to maximum display of the *vastness of the enclosed place* without contradicting, and instead enhancing, the unity of its form.

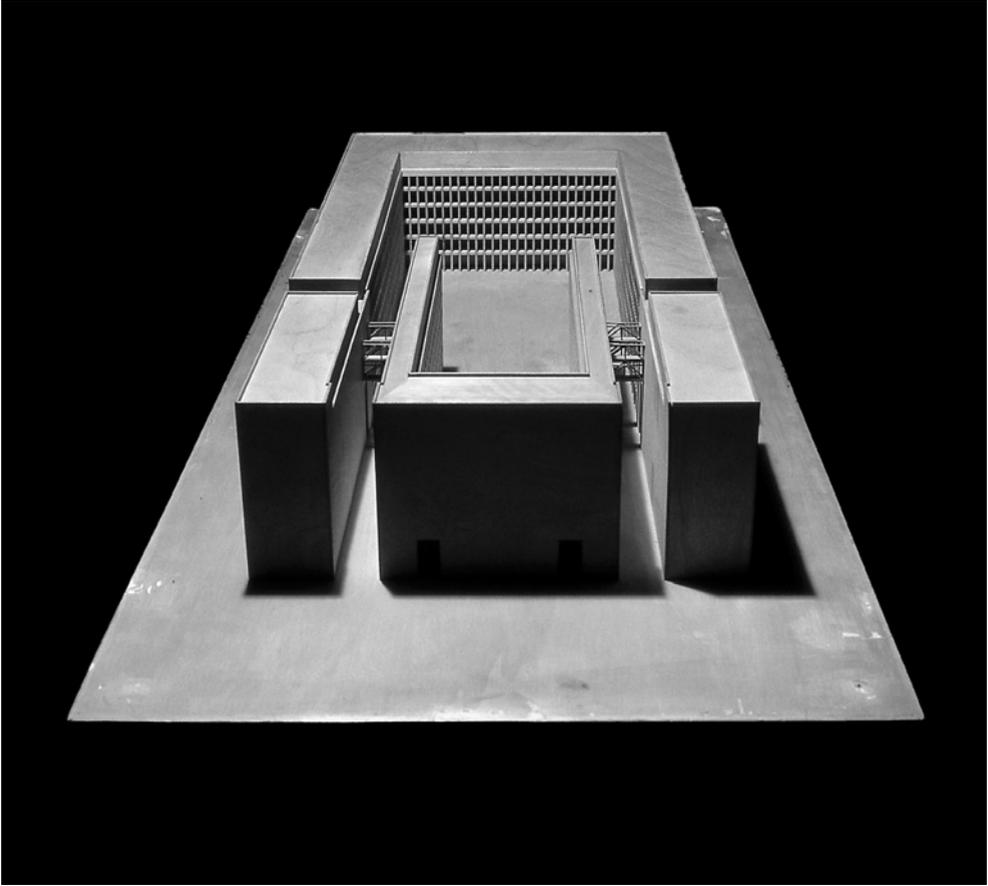
The construction obliges us to make the project idea real, to implement its character. It is not overlaid on the idea, nor does it replace the idea. Its task is to make the idea a reality.

There are many examples from ancient and modern times. Just consider the technical problems involved in building a dome during the Renaissance. Yet when faced with this task, construction technique developed in order to reach its goal. For the architects of the Renaissance the construction of the dome was not just a technical challenge, it was also the realization of a form similar to the dome of the sky that extends above the heads of all citizens. To achieve this programme an appropriate technical solution had to be found, at all costs.

Someone might say that the programme is made real gradually, together with the advance of construction techniques; but without a precise idea of what we want to build, construction in itself has no value. Today not everyone agrees with this statement. Many people, today, conduct sophisticated technical research, convinced that it is architectural research, in an unprecedented confusion between means and ends. The theory of the primitive cabin returns to the spotlight, understood as the supremacy of technical forms. But architecture is not directly construction, in the most highly evolved mode it is representation of the act of construction and of its most general motivations.

The temple, not the cabin, makes the passage from construction to its metaphor, and architecture is born with the construction of the temple.

What can we say about this statement today? It is necessary to repeat that construction has a goal that is external to it, that lies in the idea of what is to be constructed, which must be displayed as clearly as possible. Gardella said that “*architecture is the construction of an idea*”. To perform this task the construction has to make its role recognizable, the logic of its parts, of their measurements and relationships. In the cabin the construction parts have the



form of natural elements, tree trunks, crossed branches, etc. In more evolved architecture, the parts are recognizable by their form that is representative of their role (the column and its components, the architrave and its components). Even when the classical orders are no longer utilized, except for ornamental purposes, the parts of the construction (pillars, architraves, the wall, vaults) will be recognizable, together with the idea they implement.

The recognizability of the elements is not the property of a single mode of construction; it does not coincide with the classical orders or their simplified forms. It is always possible, even in construction systems that are very different from one another. One example will suffice: that of the Cathedral.

There are many reasons to be amazed when one enters the cathedral of Chartres on a sunny day: the light that crosses the structure of the naves, the choir loft and the rose window on the facade, the size and proportions of the main nave, a magnificent space in the literal sense of the term (a space that “magnifies” those who enter it), and finally, for those interested in understanding the modes of that extraordinary undertaking, the logic of the construction.

The ramification of the stones that support the vaults, their reunification in the composite columns of the naves, make everything seem so natural that our attention is captured above

all by the general beauty of the place. A place where many different things happen, but one that produces in us a unique sensation of wonder.

Here we do not find the walls, columns and architraves of the classical orders. Yet in the Cathedral too the logic of the construction is clearly comprehensible. It is represented in an exemplary way, we can understand its objectives and it communicates the pride of those who made it, stone by stone.

We might say that the display of technical forms, which today is the only form of construction in some way comprehensible, also communicates the pride of the builder, with a single, major difference: that in the Cathedral the construction displays its most general goal, which is that of giving form to an appropriate place, and of expressing its magnificence. Technical construction, as it is widely used today, seems to fail to take what is to be constructed into account. The pride of the builder today lies in the originality of the technical form and not in the quality of the building that must be built. In this way, the question of construction remains separate from the typological definition of the buildings it erects.

Mies van der Rohe clarifies this problem, saying that the logic of the structure must be aimed at bringing out the reasons behind buildings. There has to be a very close connection between the reason for a building and the systems chosen to construct it.

In his buildings with halls, in the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, Mies deploys the technique he considers most suitable for the character of the building, and in this procedure he defines the elements of the steel construction and the form that best displays their role.

In short, the theme of construction goes well beyond its technical quality. The construction adapts to the aim of the architecture.

The museum in Berlin takes form from the relationship between a large coffered roof and eight cruciform pillars that support it. This relationship, which nevertheless has an important technical value, plays an expressive role directly connected with the space defined by the roof. *To stay under the roof*, recognizing the structure and the system of supports, gives us a strong experience of the place. A single place shared by all visitors, who are protected by the great roof together with the works contained in the hall. In this case the enclosure that borders the hall is reduced to a transparent glass wall, leaving the function of defining a common place up to the metal roof that can be seen in its entirety from every part of the hall.

The roof of the museum in Berlin evokes an idea of protection of the people and things below it. A strong idea, made evident by a simple, clear formal system.

3. The principle of decorum

The fact that the construction parts should express their role implies their identification, the definition of their identity. It is necessary to give them a form that is appropriate to their identity, capable of making it recognizable.

On this subject, it is impossible to forget Hegel's words about the classical column. "*The column has no other determination than that of bearing ... with this ultimate aim of bearing, the thing of foremost importance is that the column should convey, in relation to the weight that rests on it, the impression of responding to it, and therefore that it is not too strong nor too weak, that it is not overburdened, nor does it rise so high and with such ease as to seem to be playing with the weight it bears.*"

The principle that regulates this process of identification of the elements is the principle of decorum.

“Decorum is a way of bringing out the reality of things”, says Rogers, and by saying this he calls into play the function of this ancient principle in the pursuit of the appropriate form. The decorum cannot be separated from the construction (according to Rogers, no passage is separable in the architectural project). The decorum *gives form* to the elements of the construction.

I have already spoken, regarding Mies, of the difference between a support and a column: the support fulfils the practical function of bearing, while the column, that performs the same function, takes on the appropriate form for its representation. The cruciform pillars Mies designs from the start to the end of his work are the result of the desire to find the appropriate form for this element.

This is true of all the elements of architecture in all the eras of its history. Architecture always, through decorum, takes on the appropriate form for its purpose.

It is incredible that for a very long time decorum (decoration) and ornament have been confused with each other. Ornament is not part of the construction, it is overlaid on it and, in the worst cases, takes its place, making the entire procedure incomprehensible.

“He who disguises a pillar commits an error. He who makes a false pillar commits a crime”, says Perret, and this is why Adolf Loos considers ornament a crime: because it makes it impossible to recognize the sense of the whole and its parts. Unless it is limited to spaces set aside for it, as in classical architecture or the Gothic Cathedral, where the ornamentation narrates secondary stories.

On the other hand, decorum is an integral part of the construction, it defines its form that expresses its role. Decorum, according to Perret, *“makes the resting point sing”*.

But decorum does not apply only to the construction elements: as a principle of identification, decorum is part of the process of definition of all the forms in architecture.

In this sense, decorum is a vividly recognizable principle in the work of Loos, the greatest enemy of ornament. It is seen in all his works, it is present in the designs of his houses, built through the skilful play of relationships among the parts. Each part relates to the others, displaying the general character of the house.

In the houses of Loos the places of domestic life are represented, from one to the next, as if they were the scenes of a single performance.

Finally, it is decorum that gives form to the burial mound encountered in the woods, leading to the famous definition of architecture, also by Loos, the most beautiful definition, in my view among the many formulated in the history of architecture.

The proportions of the mound, together with the material from which it is made, are such as to make its purpose recognizable. *“We become serious”*, Loos narrates, *“and something in us says: someone was buried here. This is architecture.”*

Decorum, then, leads us to the *responding form*, permits us to recognize the sense of what we build and provokes, in us, an emotion connected to that recognition.

This, and perhaps this alone, is the purpose of our work.

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