FIN DE SIGLO

"Integración y cooperación en la arquitectura reciente..."
Decades pass rapidly. And using them, for better or worse, as units of time in order to reflect about changes in culture and therefore architecture, we find ourselves now at the close of the '80s. Which architectural interests have prevailed throughout this decade?

I would say that the decade began dominated by fragmentation. I realize that fragmentation is too broad a concept. I am also aware of how appealing a fragmented vision is today, when science is unable to establish a unitary model to look at nature and when society stretches more and more towards a diversity which makes an inevitable reference to a fragmented, broken world. Fragmentation is for us a formal metaphor to describe the reality around us. And therefore seeing things in such a way one would be tempted to say that a fragmented architecture mirrors today's world, falling once more in this inescapable trap of the zeitgeist to justify our work. The attraction to the metaphor is quite understandable. The world around us is broken and heterogeneous. Nothing suggests unity. Artists celebrate with their texts and their canvases an interrupted panorama in which reality is captured only fragmentarily. Why wouldn't architects be able to do the same?

Slowly but steadily this fragmentation has been discovered in more general atmospheres which lingers for a world without form, one characterized by fluxity, by an absence of borders, by constant change, where action is more important than any other quality. Action therefore has become a value in itself. It is now something that does not need a specific theatre. Almost as a result of this delimitation of action the architectural scene has become indifferent and even, I would dare to say, purposely without attributes. The prevalent fantasy is of a world in which form, as a category, is absent.

As a consequence, contemporary architecture caters itself as something broken, discontinuous, shattered, and fragmented or inapprehensible, unstable, fluid, and formless. The scene is imprecise and undefined. Not only in a figurative way but also in a literal one and therefore architecture today is about broken forms, textures, articulations, and reflection. Even the idea of the building as a single entity is under discussion.

The origins of fragmentation are uncertain. Some hints of what we understand as a "broken form" appeared in the work of artists like Giulio Romeo or later in architects like Fischer von Erlach in projects such as Karlskirche. But for our purposes the first clear evidence of fragmentation is found in Piranesi's drawings of the Campo Marzio. These show a clear understanding the destruction of unity which was deliberately pursued after the Renaissance. It has been emphasized repeatedly that what Piranesi sought was a potential form liberation. Tartini has written beautiful and illuminating pages on him and I wouldn't dare to challenge his words. So I will quote him directly describing Piranesi's drawings of Campo Marzio: "the clash of organisms, immersed in a sea of formal fragments, dissolves even the most remote memory of the city as the place of Form." ("Scontro degli organismi, immersi in un mare di fragmenti formali, dissolve anche la più lontana memoria della città come luogo della Forma"). Against whatever version of the city and, therefore, architecture as nature, Piranesi emphasizes its artificiality producing a collision of forms and figures that cannot be seen as an organic whole. "The exaggerated articulation and deformation of the compositions don't belong anymore to an era combination. The encounter of the geometrical monads isn't regulated by any preestablished harmony." Piranesi's attempt is to manifest the birth, necessary and terrifying, of an architect working beyond meaning, outside of any symbolic system, and foreign to architecture itself. Piranesi discovered what Tartini has called "autostasi del linguaggio", the authority of language. The objective is to show "the absolute arbitrariness of architectural writing, its alien condition to any natural origin." The idea of coherence, the idea of organic form is demolished once and forever.

For better or worse the XIX century forgot the Piranesian agenda. Its positivism led to a search for rules and norms abandoning those first steps of anxious freedom found in Piranesi's work. Architectural theoreticians were attracted by establishing norms and parts and as a result XIX century architecture became a collection of types. Only perhaps with some British architects interested in the picturesque did the idea of fragmentation survive. But it was always an indulgent appraisal of the visual qualities which prevailed. The mass of the single building is broken, trying to accommodate it with the diversity manifested in nature and so avoiding any afflux to authority or power.
Fragmentation reemerges powerfully at the beginning of the 20th century. Again painters will be those most sensitive to this current. We can perceive fragmentation when reflecting on all the early avant garde genres such as cubism, constructivism, neoplasticism, dadaism, etc. The unitary view provided by an organic theory of form and reinforced by the use of perspective as the only way of representing the world was demolished by the painters. The architects followed. And so we are not surprised if we use the term fragmentation when talking about Le Corbusier, Reinhold or even, in some of his projects, Frank Gehry. They create anomaly and the breakage of established patterns and norms Rowe's eyes are not the only ones who can see spaces that can be perceived as incomprehensible without the idea of the fragment. So modernism was rooted in fragmentation even though hidden or camouflaged in the fifties. As I reminded the students a couple of weeks ago it reappears in a blatant way in some works by Louis Kahn. And, later it is Robert Venturi who teaches us to appreciate anomalies and encounters, collisions and breakages, when observing architecture everywhere.

It could be said that the issue of fragmentation entered in the contemporary academic discourse with Collage City, the work of Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter. In coincidence with some points of Venturi's text, and likely familiar with the work of the Italian architects associated with La Tendenza, they celebrate anomaly and the breakage of established patterns and norms Rowe's eyes are not the only ones who can see the landscape of history: it is there where he finds in architecture something that inevitably is charged with social and ideological meaning. So what Rowe has learned from history, from the panoply of history open to his eyes, starts to be used as a procedure that promptly reached an extensive audience in the schools. Fragmentation, therefore, can be understood as an architectural tool which captures time: it is the satisfactory and indigent fiction of making history.

Popularized throughout the 70's, Rowe's and Koetter's historicist techniques were to be rapidly overcome in the 80's. Obviously those who saw the more direct and literal fragmentation as the new gospel were reacting to the excessiveness of Post Modernism. Promptly this sense of fragmentation was thought to be a new version of early Modernism. Critics like Bruno Zevi had been continuously calling for the breakage of the box—which was the hallmark of many architects at this time. And upon those architects interested in fragmentation felt the eyes of students and critics who sought to escape Post Modernism. Probably nobody represents this departure better that Frank Gehry. I don't think I exaggerate by saying that the sixties and the beginning of the nineties have been dominated by this powerful figure. On the other hand, fragmentation arrived from the hand of the French philosophers who with Deconstructivism were trying to dismantle the consistency of the canonical written text. The metaphor of the needed destruction of the text to posses it, which is in the base of the act of reading, was rapidly absorbed by some architects and theoreticians who thought it could be useful to label the new architectural trend. Since the 80's, Deconstruction, which in our simplified terms means fragmentation, surfaced both as a new aesthetic ideology and a new architectural procedure prevalent throughout the last decade.

But besides this movement of fragmentation it seems to me that there is another trend followed by more and more architects at the end of this decade. The fatal attraction of a work without form characterizes this end of the century. Formallessness is a new way of being in the world. The origins of such an attitude don't reach back as far as the Renaissance or the Enlightenment as they did in the case of fragmentation. This new attempt is, indeed, characteristic of the most recent years when electronic communication, global information and virtual imagery seem to have dissolved the interest men and women had in forms, and in their representation. Form connotes something frozen, static, a fixed order which limits our behaviour and is therefore useless and authoritarian. The world is about action so that we no longer need any iconographic scenery around us. Only action matters and it is valid and pertinent in whatever theatre. The process of globalization has brought the loss of value for what we have called until now the specific. Indifference and availability prevail. Life in the world is about experiencing a continuous choice. Form is related to permanence, hinderi
g the potential of the future, and therefore has fallen from grace.

Once more it is the painters who anticipated this approach. Painters such as Paunier and Dubuffet, Twombly and Fontana were pushing to the furthest extremes the visual and tactile experiences of the avant garde. The object that built its own entity dispossessed. In their work the canvas was still conceived as a screen but neither the attempt to re-invent forms, nor the indulgence of any representational intention appears. They speak more about information, a certain presence of matter, the uncontrollable mind, a lack of references, ignorance of the borders, and so on. They are reminding us about the issue of incomprehensibility, the world is close to us but whatever attempt to define it through representation is nonsensical. Painting is something private, which liberates individual energies and then is immediately absorbed by a world already invaded by memory's presence and which shares the same unspeakable condition reflected in the painters' canvases.

Even though the search for related work in architecture has established some connections during those years—such as that related with 'situationism'—it seems to me that only at the end of the eighties and during the nineties has the lure of such an approach been felt. How has this aesthetic, if the word can still be used in talking of this approach, been absorbed in architecture? On the one hand we could talk about an architecture which ignores objects, corpo
structural elements, etc. which is concerned with creating the conditions favoring life and action. It makes sense to speak of an architecture as landscape, which enhances mobility, without meaning in life. Such a process architecture incorporates issues raised by the megaliths, but instead it is inescapable, indescribable. It is more about recreating topography: in some ways, in spite of its awareness that only artifice counts. It is a sure way of replicating nature. But the architect of such an architecture enjoys nothingness, a world without form, something unnecessary and anachronistic in today's world. In much recent art the floor of the gallery has become the new canvas where decontextualized objects become protagonists. In today's formless architecture the twisted and manipulated horizontal planes receives some articulation allowing protection in a literal and figurative way to provoke easier life.

Because architecture isn't anymore communication, it has given up old commitments such as creating languages. Architecture today prefers to live ignoring any reference to concepts such as language, manner or style. Some pupils of Ren Koolhaas, Asians and Europeans, seem to be attracted by such a trend largely published in architecture magazines.

Yet in addition to this way of dissolving architecture in a formless construction I should mention others. I recalled how the masters of the fifties rediscovered expressive value of matter, regardless of its appearance. If some architects longed for formless architecture identified their work with what I will call 'field-production', others attracted by the minimalist experiences looked for abandoning form while proposing the construction of pristine volumes where only their materiality appears. The solution of whatever architectural program in an innocuous prismatic container seems a deliberate effort to reject any commitment with a particular form. If Tafuri talks about the silence of leaving things to speak freely for themselves, here we could speak about a real silence coming from the nude condition of the primary forms. We are so close to its origin that the work doesn't yet exist. Construction, then, becomes the primary and solitary means of expression. The continuity between form and matter becomes the most substantial issue and the transition from the material to the almost nonexistent form is the passage which these architects celebrate. Priority is given to the skin. The surface prevails. Architecture emphasizes the shallow, artificial reflecting surfaces which seem to be where the design resides. This glazed, reflecting architecture mirrors ourselves, denying any formal identity to the built volume which disappears in the perception. Some of the most brilliant recent works belong to these worthwhile attempts. I mention Herzog and de Meuron's work just to illustrate the architecture I am thinking about.

Once we have arrived to this point where the two architectural trends which characterized the nineties have been to some degree described, I would like to question myself. Are those two ways the only ways of doing architecture? This is the question I would like to answer with the project I will quote now.

I am aware of the impact that the zeitgeist has in all our work. We have learned throughout our art history how a certain continuity establishes itself among all the human activities and we indeed recognize that whatever visual expression in a period of time isn't alien to the interests particular to that time. But such recognition doesn't imply a single direction, an only way to provide testimony of the reality around us.

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Having said that I would like to recognize and to say it promptly that it isn’t possible today to return to the idea of an organic form. We have learned to look at architecture and cities with a less indulgent eye, able to see the diversity of the rich world around us and thus preventing any unitarian description or representation of it. While I am still talking about form, I am not searching for an organic, Platonic sense of form. That is difficult to think in the immanency of form and therefore almost impossible to look for archetypal creation is something architects have learned to live with. And yet the awareness of form is needed for whatever construction. The concept of “formativiteit” used by the Italian theorist Ponzio seems to me crucial for understanding how a work of architecture is built.

The inevitable commitment of the designer in whatever architecture ought to be remarked confirming their responsibility, as well as their freedom that prevails over whatever temptation of determinism. But the exercise of freedom can happen without building a formless world. This is the point that I would like to underline today. Architecture can be manipulated with freedom, without being driven by fortuitous results which used to come with undiscriminated fragmentation and without ending in the flat landscaped architecture which seems to be the target of those pursuing a “formless” world around us. In other words we can still attempt an architecture which rather is forcibly fragmented nor reduced to a new topography. There is room for an architectural world liberated from symmetries, parts, authoritarian axes, and all those devices which “Beaux Arts” theoreticians tried to transform in an articulated body of knowledge. That architects enjoy freedom within the boundaries of the principles of the visual discipline which we call architecture is what I would like to show through my projects.

In all of them I tried to respond to specific conditions with the help of architectural devices. Each deals with an idea of form that accepts some limits dictated by the circumstances, asking for some architecturally foreseen answers, that open the door to explore more precise architectural devices.

All projects have in common a certain pleasure in compactness. The issue of compactness is not a new one. To build maintaining the restrictions of a rather regular precinct always was a goal pursued by architects: whoever builds knows that to enclose the biggest volume in the smallest surface is always desirable. There is a formal virtue in this intrinsic economy. A truth of the present as much as it was in the past. It is easy to find in Roman architecture, for example, plan strategies which consider the interior use of the space without missing the articulation of the different elements, adjusting all of them to creating a mosaic that defies conventional compositional devices. Muslim architecture also offers wonderful examples of compact architecture. The perimeters of Muslim cities are able to receive the most diverse architecture, accommodating regular figures without following the tyranny of the perspectival axes. Later, an architect like Scarpa or Risom shows also clearly how the regular surface is able to be decomposed in a series of figures consisting of walls and courtyards, windows and stairs, lounges and rooms, filling with an admirable contiguity and continuity the space without respecting a previously established part. And in recent times, Taneg has offered to us admirable tokens of an architecture which saturates the plan, enjoying the interstitial spaces and always ready to provide exciting architectural expression. Compactness, therefore, is not a discovery but an enduring way of approaching architecture. Compactness as a way of answering to a double edge reality, one the urban fabric, the other, the urban fabric, the other, an autonomous inner world. Therefore, my buildings have been conceived in an attempt to reply appropriately to what could be called the urban fabric. All these projects try to be respectful of the site and pretend to be included in it, creating a new perception of the given conditions. Consequently, these built masses are often divided instead of being the result of a process of aggregation. But beside that all these buildings keep alive an interior reality, able to sustain the animated life of whatever building.

The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston is a clear example of such an approach. I didn’t see any other way of acting but to intensively use the site. Houston is a city that doesn’t allow the perception of buildings except from the car and that in my view prevented the possibility of considering the Museum as an object to be enjoyed as the result of a walking experience. The building is split in a series of rooms and spaces, connected by a hidden thread. The Museum exploits the roof both to enhance its own profile as well as providing light to the galleries below.

In the Don Benito Cultural Center compactness appeared as the result of a very intense use of the site. It forced me to overlap five floors. And yet I was able to provide light to most of them through a skylight system.

In the Murcia Town Hall, a building closes the space of a remarkable plaza, accepting the prismatic condition. Yet the building itself breaks up, maintaining the rectangular perimeter, emphasizing the fragmented collection of columns which offer a renewed version of an old Spanish retablo out of the traditional sense of order.

In the Museum of Modern Art and Architecture in Stockholm, the set of rooms stand on Skeppsholmen Island with great freedom, maintaining the prismatic character of all the previous construction. The rooms literally form packages, whose compactness maintain the associations within each collection, and gives to the building its due scale. Obviously, to live together with the other buildings of Skeppsholmen and to maintain intact the skyline of Stockholm was here an issue.

In the Kumsal Auditorium in San Sebastian the issue of compactness and fragmentation requires a more sophisticated explanation. We should recognize here that the material plays an important role. And yet all together it seems to me that we are offering an alternative approach to both fragmentation and minimalism. One first glance could bring us to think in a fragmented structure, but a closer appraisal brings us to consider that the so called “fragments” are carefully consolidated to create the spaces we are looking for. There isn’t any place for chance. On the other hand, compactness appears as well as the generous program is embedded in the pristine volumes. Its simplicity would bring us to speak again of minimalism.

I have finished. Let us go to the documents and images to make more clear this commitment to an architecture that still has faith in both the use of the principles and the mechanisms it has had as a discipline throughout time. I believe that there is among the school’s duties to discover such mechanisms and principles throughout the study of what architecture is and has been. But I realize I said outright I should have said pleasure. I am sure to study architecture captivates the reader in the same way it does me. I hope that the presentation of my work is able to illustrate the inevitable attraction I feel for those issues I consider to be in the heart of all architecture.

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