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Branko Mitrovi, Philosophy for Architects, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2011

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Branko Mitrović, *Philosophy for Architects*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2011.

It seems necessary to start the review of a 2011 book explaining why this book has been chosen to be reviewed more than ten years after it was published. First of all, the review's context. *Philosophy for Architects*, written by the architectural historian Branko Mitrović, who graduated with degrees in both philosophy and architecture, right from the title operates as a programmatic manifesto for the journal in which this review is published and that intends to explore the relationship between philosophy and architecture.

The title tells us something more. It is not a philosophy of architecture, nor some architect's philosophy and much less an architecture of philosophy – it is philosophy *for* architects. It is worth considering this more closely, given the second reason to write about the book, which is the interest of architects, architecture schools, and even the contemporary publishing market in philosophy. To give but one example: Routledge is publishing an entire series, *Thinkers for Architects*, with each volume dedicated to a different philosopher.

What can be said about the preposition *for* then, why should architects be interested in philosophy and philosophers? The author provides an answer in the opening pages: architects face philosophical questions on a daily basis, and pretending not to have to face them just because the architect moves on the level of practice is nothing more than acting according to some implicit philosophical premise or other; it is better, therefore, to at least be aware of these assumptions.

But this can be said for many other practices; after all, it is in the nature of philosophy to deal with foundational questions of the empirical sphere, in which they are grasped by other human activities. Having

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personally experienced the environment of two schools of architecture and being immersed in their theoretical production activity, I have ascertained that philosophy is indeed a very present discipline. Courses and bibliographies of architecture schools probably contain more philosophical references than of telecommunications engineering or biology schools. Yet, Mitrović writes about something even more specific, namely that among the philosophical problems that interest architects, he has selected only a well-defined class: the problems that an architecture student will encounter along his path of learning, coming up, for example, at an exam.

Still, this evidence – the references in the courses, questions during the exams – are a consequence rather than explanation, and do not answer why philosophy is a fact (something that happens) in architecture schools. Again, we cannot precisely say that the problems of philosophy concern more architecture than other human activities. Perhaps, we can find an indication by returning to telecommunications engineering and biology. These two disciplines have a scientific foundation of their knowledge in mathematical physics and the experimental method, something that can only be true for certain field of knowledge internal to architectural practice, but not for architecture *tout court*. Is it architecture's uncertain scientific status and the range of dimensions that it traverses in practice, from technique to legislation to aesthetics, which brings architecture to seek a foundational confirmation in philosophy? *Philosophy for Architects* does not problematize this question, having as its objective to provide an agile manual for students, professors and also for curious practitioners.

The book is organized by chapters that gather, around the main figures of the philosophical tradition (starting from the four greats of Plato, Aristotle, Kand and Hegel), a series of thematic paths that cross and cut through the history of thought up to debates in the 1900s; a solution that allows Mitrović to present both the classics and the most cited recent authors. Each chapter provides historical background and offers the main lines for which the philosophers treated have been canonized. Then, for each author, a question of particular interest is brought out. Finally, the philosophical question passes into the field of architecture, through what can be called an architectural application of different philosophical positions (e.g., Palladio's Platonism, Alberti's conception of beauty, the history of perspective, the end of the Euclidean system as the only geometry available, etc.).

Clearly, such a broad presentation of currents, histories, authors and topics has to simplify here and there: the position of Alberti, and Humanism in general, with respect to the advent of modern science, is a debatable and more complex topic than presented in the second chapter.[1] However, these are the limits of any manual; its purpose is to open up to knowledge, rather than to follow its ramifications in the direction of some specialism.

This quality is particularly evident in the chapter dealing with Immanuel Kant and aesthetics.[2] In fact, Mitrović takes the opportunity to focus on the notion of "beauty," clearly fundamental to the discourses that inform (education of) the practice of architecture. Here the central question is conveniently made evident to the reader: can we have a non-relativistic conception of beauty? Mitrović asks, after having retraced the Kantian arguments of the first part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, "what is, after all, the purpose of talking about beauty if one does not say how the judgment of beauty can be impartial"[3]? Even before answering, to ask the question is of the utmost importance for those who dedicate themselves to architectural design, and it is an essential preparatory moment for its formation.It should also be noted that although Kant's argument is logically sharp, to force the understanding that a question like this triggers, his reasoning could have been followed,

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[1] The consequentiality between humanism and the scientific revolution is given in temporal terms, but beyond that, it could in part be a deformation of modern teleological reconstructions as regards the notion of "technical and scientific progress," as well as of German classical philology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries regarding the notion of *Kultur* and civilization. Thus, it seems that humanism is always a "functional to" moment, a presupposition of something else that will come later (see M. Cacciari, "Ripensare l'Umanesimo," in R. Ebgi (ed.), *Umanisti italiani: pensiero e destino,* Einaudi, Torino, 2016, pp. vii-ci). For similar concerns about architecture; see for example Françoise Choay according to whom a more properly functionalist conception (and therefore a scientific conception in the modern sense; Cassirer) is not in Alberti and arrives after him (F. Choay, *La règle et le modèle: sur la théorie de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme,* Seuil, Paris, 1996). In short, the question is specialized: regardless whether a book that has other ambitions has followed mainstream historiographical reconstructions, perhaps a set of notes for the more curious readers would have been an interesting addition.

[2] Mention is made of the fact that "during the eighteenth century, the very word aesthetics started to be used as a term denoting the problems of beauty and the arts" (B. Mitrović, *Philosophy for Architects,* p. 70), but it should be pointed out in the exposition of Kant's work, even if it is a presentation of the general features, that the term is not exclusive to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and indeed belongs to that of *Pure Reason* (with a specific meaning, not pertaining to the notion of beauty).

[3] *Ibid*., p. 86.

perhaps, by a critical analysis, rather than drawing direct consequences. Mitrović writes that for Kant

> beauty is not an objective property of a beautiful thing. Objective here means a property that belongs to the thing, such as "being hard" or "being fast." Rather, beauty is subjective, Kant says. Subjective here does not mean, as it does in everyday usage of the word, "relative to individuals." Rather, it means that the judgment of beauty is the result of the subject's (i.e., that person's) cognitive mental processes. It is sometimes said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder; Kant's position could be described as the view that beauty is in the mind of the beholder. At the same time, Kant does not say that judgments of beauty are generally valid for everyone or universal. However, he does point out that when people make judgments that are genuinely nonconceptual and disinterested, they expect that everyone else will make the same judgment as well.[4]

Mitrović thus shows readers how theoretically stratified is reasoning that (tries to) resolves the question of an impartial judgment on beauty. It would have been therefore very interesting to have an equally stratified literature that critically addresses Kant and the attempt to provide a scientific foundation of anthropology (see *Les mots et les choses*). The author chooses instead, and the choice is perfectly consistent with the structure of the book, to bring the discussion to the level that he believes is more relevant for architecture, writing about aesthetic theories rather than philosophical ones in the broadest sense, and to continue alternating theoretical proposals, even when in conflict with each other. One wonders whether a discourse on beauty today, such as when this term appears in funding schemes by the European Commission (New European Bauhaus), may rely on purely aesthetic theories, or whether an overview of more radical and foundational approaches is needed.

It is worth writing something more about the purpose of a philosophy textbook for architecture schools, something also Mitrović seems aware of, when he writes that knowing how to use reason, rather than conforming to the most common opinion, is one of the most important qualities of philosophy (much more useful than some notions to get a good grade at an exam!).

What *Philosophy for Architects* fruitfully discusses – and will make readers discuss – in its introductory part are the effects of this use of

reason for the (soon to be) architect, regardless of why philosophy is sought by those who teach and study architecture. Why is the ability not to conform to an opinion but try to use reason so important for architects especially? Because the main learning model in architecture schools is the atelier, where know-hows are in action much more than know-whats: follow what the teacher does, and imitate him. The student thus learns design methods and concepts following a principle of authority and looking at best practices: having the conceptual and logical tools to express, rearticulating and connecting what is transmitted by the authority at work in the ateliers, and therefore not taking this authority for granted but knowing how to compare it with other reasoning and with experience, are all invaluable skills for any student.

In a system of transmission of knowledge such as that of the ateliers then, where authority and example play a major role in the master-student relationship, the exercise of criticism in which philosophy trains becomes an emancipatory force; a necessary complement to the training of an architect who knows how to autonomously take charge of their work.

Finally, the third, and by far most important reason why this book is still worth writing about is that it is an excellent book: clear, rich and accessible, but also rigorous, and should be available in every architecture department.