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Introducing Meaning in Architecture, now*

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The connection between form and meaning has been so intrinsic that it has stayed mainly hidden for centuries. Then, around fifty years ago, the issue of meaning suddenly began storming in the architectural world, with many scholars and practitioners attempting to rebuild the fading link to the form. After the globalisation and the atomisation of thoughts of the last decades, debating the issue again could seem meaningless. The form is now a purely aesthetic feature or a counterfeit fetish for everchanging meanings. Yet, we continue to design, produce, and critique architecture, and attribute meanings, intentions, and hopes to its forms. We want, once more, to discuss and explore the elusive but, at the same time, inescapable connection between meaning and architecture.

*The whole conception of the issue is shared by both authors. The "answers" in parallel columns are by each credited author

One issue

We are used to looking at architecture as a bearer of meanings. For centuries, the connection between form and meaning has been so intrinsic that it stayed mainly hidden, implicitly inscribed in the stones, like an alleged premise relying on unexpressed – but jolly performative – social conventions. Through Egyptian, classical, mediaeval, baroque, renaissance, industrial and many other architectural times, this link survived till the Modern – where the meanings would be as new as the men to whom it was destined. It even lasted in the so-called Post-Modern architecture: in any case, shapes were expected to vehiculate a meaning of a kind – albeit a commercial, pop, or ridiculous one. But the streams of meaning were starting to scatter, questioning the unambiguousness of its link with the form.

The new problem suddenly gained fantastic attention in the world of architecture. Designers started to map everything in diagrams, critics and scholars began reading Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, and philosophers were invited to teach in architecture schools, all figuring out how to confirm what had been revealed as the paramount basis of architectural design. The storming debate is well represented in a book curated by Charles Jencks and Georges Baird: *Meaning in Architecture*, first published in London and quickly translated. It was a pretty uncommon book, collecting more than a dozen often contrasting texts that dealt with the issue of meaning in various ways. Some adopted a semiological approach, others were more phenomenological; some analysed case studies critically, others experimented ethnographic techniques; some used many images, others just some diagrams. The original point was that there was no communal basis: quite the opposite, the papers pushed opposite directions – with the conflict highlighted by the curators, who promoted a series of reciprocal comments on the texts, animating a written debate. So various were the alternatives that *Meaning in Architecture* resulted in a *map* of many possible interpretations of the main issue – even if all relied on the (indeed vain) belief that defining *a* relation between shapes and meaning was possible.

Half a century later, this debate on meaning seems relatively meaningless. Time has proved that the mission of Modernity, so absolute as to polarise any debate, eventually turned out to be aleatory; that the freedom claimed by the Post-Modern architecture was deceptive and evanescent; that those were just the first hints of a change that became overwhelming in the new millennium, with an overpowering globalisation and a mesmerising pulverisation of thoughts. The form is now perceived as a purely aesthetic feature, devoid of any deep meaning or, at most, as part of a system of communication of meanings: in any case, its unambiguity is given for granted. Or rather, it is considered absolute, endless time in different ways: in fact, as no judgement is absolute anymore, each can claim to be such.

Meaning resists: only, so multiplied and fragmented that cultural geography is not evenly possible anymore. New meanings – globalisation again, but also issues related to Anthropocene, gentrification, ecologies, resilience, gender studies, and many others – offer endless possibilities for theorising: still, they refer to practices separate from each other,

disconnected and void of any possible communication point. Such fragmentation is confirmed, too, by the evolution of art theories and the growing distance between art and market, meaning and experience, perception and understanding.

Yet, despite this overwhelming uncertainty, we design, produce, and critique architecture, and attribute meanings, intentions, and hopes to its forms. We continue to perform a relation between meaning and form, with the awareness of not controlling it. Once again, we want to discuss and explore this elusive but, at the same time, inescapable connection. And we wanted, too, to promote a debate again, just like Jencks and Baird did half a century ago: hence, fighting the solipsistic, atomising tendency of contemporary scholar works, all authors were invited to reciprocally comment on their papers, making meaning a living element all through the pages.

Three premises

This whole issue relies on three methodological assumptions that we consider paramount.

The first is that today, far from disappearing, meanings vastly exceed forms. Hence, it is always and again possible to rediscover and redesign the relationship between them, and this relation will change continuously and unpredictably, depending on various systems whose mutual irritation often produces unforeseeable changes; nevertheless, it stays. Therefore, even if meaning trends are much faster than shape transformations, the second can intercept or anticipate them. Better said, shapes can make meanings possible depending on their design features.

The second is that it is impossible to separate architecture's practical and theoretical dimensions, or rather, theory and practice constitute what Derrida would have labelled an oppositive couple. Therefore, architectural design must always be understood through its performative dimension, and according to the effects it produces. To those effects, the distinction between *design* and *architectural design is* as closely as problematically bounded, as both bear meanings, albeit of different kinds.

The third is the systemic dimension of architecture, which intertwines sociological, technical and economic conditions. This net has always been there, but today, it implies a constitutive relationship with a pervasive neoliberal system, a confrontation with a productive dimension that completely cancels the traditional craftsmanship associated with architecture, and a profound change in architectural workflows that changes how design is conceived and developed – with fantastic effects on meaning.

The connections between these three assumptions – for example, the tension between individual action and the systemic dimension, from which the tactical and strategic sides of design emerge – are equally crucial.

Four questions

We posed four main questions, allowing the authors to answer with theoretical and practical approaches, using examples and case studies or elaborating a speculative perspective. Then, as usual

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— New forms of meaning

Places have always been gatherers of social meanings in symbolic and experience senses. How can this traditional practice of inscribing meaning into places match the continuous increase of new ways of concrete and virtual socialising (here considering from the metaverse to the visual turn) with the ontologic and practical dimension of design? In the wake of the rhetoric of democratising communicative, social, and relational processes, is it possible to graft meaning into public space, or do these co-design approaches merely make their participants *believe* they are doing so? Is it the *process* (or the program) that gives meaning to an architecture whose forms have no relevance but as a technical transposition, or, on the contrary, should architecture be considered and treated as a *palimpsest* that lives indifferently from its uses, just as a neutral backdrop? In between, an infinite nuance of practices and approaches.

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There is a very narrow road for architects to graft meanings into processes. On the one hand, any possible design actions define a boundary of what can and cannot be done, experienced and felt in a place – hence, a set of possible meanings. On the other hand, this possibility will remain in the future and cannot be explained in real terms; hence, those meanings cannot be pre-determined.

Processes tend to give the impression of reducing the risk that these "predictions" are wrong, as all involved people "decided" it – thus, they accepted sharing the risk. However, this way, we produce a *present-of-the-future* and lose the potential of what we don't know. Conversely, especially in the processes, designers can work with the *futures-of-the-present* by exploiting the tactical power of the project. This means passing from the ideal vision of architecture as a purely artistic act to a systemic dimension, where many (if not endless) ideal alternatives can be developed by maximising the situation's potential, merging design's creative and tactical sides.

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Renato De Fusco, in 1973, published *Signs, History and Design of Architecture*. A fundamental text definitively clarifies the binomial meaning and signifier in architecture. The focus of design intention is on the plan, which De Fusco describes as the leading figure of interior space. A space in the aesthetic sphere turns out to be the result of the union of form and content, which instead appears impossible in the semiotic sphere where sign and signified are divided. Architectural elements, such as signs, are thus revealed in the interior space, where everything arises as a more significant factor than the architectural sign.

In the light of De Fusco's far-sighted theorizing, we should reestablish synchrony between all the binomials that rational thought likes to disunite signified/ form, signifier/meaning, form/ content, interior/exterior.

Spaces inhabited, experienced, and experienced all confront all that is perceived and introjected beyond the dialectics provided by confirmation

— New meanings of form

There are some transversal and substantial meanings that likely impact architecture strongly. The first one is sustainability. How could we overcome aestheticising practices or, conversely, purely performance-based approaches, to develop an authentically ecological dimension of design? Is it a matter of norms, culture, actions, techniques, methods, forms, strategies, or other factors? The second meaning is the so-called design-for-all. This approach collects practical measures – to gran accessibility, for instance – and cultural ones – such as gendered urban studies – and yet, curiously, it substantiates in variously normed bureaucratic limitations only: as if the design did not, ontologically, define the limits of *some* freedom. How could we overcome this view, clinging to the logic of protecting minority groups while developing the theme of freedom *in* design and *in* shapes?

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Periodically, new trends likely revolutionise architectural practice. Sustainable design has been studied since the fifties, and traditional architecture has been often described as sustainable *de facto*. Many design-for-all proposals negate solutions considered inclusive and ethical just some years ago. Understanding those trends in their systemic dimension is paramount in the neo-liberal system that connects politics and the market to unprecedented levels. Sustainability protocols are the clearest example, pushing a set of connected solutions whose combined effect condemns building costs to incredible levels. The fragmentation of the sciences reinforces this shift, continuously updating unrelated technical norms. Hence, sustainability would be far more effective if it was less mediatic and technical but based on design, and design-for-all should be developed in the opposite direction, that is, designing-for-*any*, as any definition of groups ontologically produces exclusions. However, those collective tendencies undoubtedly originate meanings, but their relation to forms is always, again, to be defined in the project.

Aurosa Alison

Taking up De Fusco again, the architectural sign would belong to a cultural intention and not a natural symptom. The associative role of *Einfühlung* remains at the basis of the transcription between subject and object. The empathic contribution of the meaning of architecture is not placed in the background but is revealed as an advocate of a whole, where forms assume the role of meanings and vice versa. In the case of the relationship between architecture and atmospheres, the fundamental union of design, which becomes such only if it is perceived, becomes evident. From Harry F. Mallgrave to Lao Tze, what happens within a space is (or is configured) the reality of architecture. Schmarsow reminds us that architecture is a creative discussion with the subject; in that creativity, the most fruitful exchange takes place, which is that of existence. In this regard, forms take on new meanings by illustrating the mutual relationship between designed space and lived space. De Fusco's enclosure is no longer such now when form and meaning intercede for new forms of living in a unified message.

— Resilience of meanings

There is architecture, and Architecture. Most designers never really deal with extraordinary works (like theatres, churches, museums), the buildings we typically think of as bearers of shared meaning. Instead, they work on ordinary, much less exciting constructions. A remarkable ordinary is explored in little, advanced *Architectural* experimentations – an élite issue managed by leading architects as they were proofs of concepts. However, we are speaking of the most annoying routine works, and of the meaning that arises from ceaseless variations and repetitions, in real estate projects just as in slums. Devoid of any Architectural semantic layering, we just have architecture: perhaps far from academic discussions and glossy magazines, this immensely performative architecture shapes our world. Ontologically and practically speaking, is Architectural design different from architectural design? And how the advent of AI-based tools will impact this last one?

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In my life, I have designed many ordinary buildings and some extraordinary ones. My firm belief is that nothing changes from the point of view of architectural design. In any case, there are functional and non-functional requirements, and expectations of various kinds. In any case, the challenge is to define an architectural idea while controlling so many technical issues. In any case, the final building will be "alone", entering various systems of experience and communication. What truthfully changes is the system of meanings that sustain and somehow inflate the buildings. In extraordinary cases, narratives will be mainly about big abstract concepts and supposedly shared (or politically relevant) meanings, while in ordinary cases, there will be meanings of different kinds, close to the relevance for the individual – think of how important it is to buy a house for most people, or how relevant are production systems and the indirect meanings they bear. *Architecture*, and *architectures*, shape all these direct and indirect meanings, composing everchanging systems. the design will be just as challenging, meaningful, and potentially successful – where the success is the possibility of making people's lives better.

Aurosa Alison

In *Structuralism and Semiology* (1974), Gillo Dorfles takes up the concept of shelter and necessary protection as essential factors in constructing a space. In the question of shelter, there is, according to Dorfles, no need to communicate something; somewhat the need to defend oneself. In responding about the need to protect oneself, Geoffry Broadbent uses the metaphor of the visual clutter around us. Perhaps that disorder is precisely the order of the contemporary, in which symbolic factors have taken over the pragmatic side of reality. Architectural significance, for Dorfles, remains non-conceptual and non-rational but symbolic. What remains of architecture is it taking on ethically and aesthetically original and revolutionary aspects, public and private, substantive and decorative. It is all part of a single system that, over the years, has been tried to split but which history describes as indissoluble, unique, autonomous, self-producing and self-regenerating. The hope remains that we can start talking about architecture again, not through new forms and meanings but through a new multidisciplinary network capable of introducing and manifesting the same language.

— Resilience of forms

The built environment is incredibly resilient. Indeed, this particular kind of resilience does not always fit uses, or meanings. The Italian case is epitomic in this sense, with the continuous calls to regenerative processes opposed to desperate heritage safeguard measures. *Palazzo dei Diamanti* in Ferrara or the *Meazza Stadium* in San Siro, Milano, raised impressive media storms, but they are the tip of an immense iceberg: the fight between different values and meanings layered on shapes and in shapes. How can this clash be solved? Should the correct answer be pursuing the quality of the project or, rather, of the process? Does the problem originate in bureaucracy and procedures or, rather, in management and devising skills? And how do diverse conflicting meanings – for instance, the usage of historical buildings, seismic safety, energy saving, the cost of interventions, fire safety, accessibility, and so on – intertwine in the shapes?

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The cultural dimension of the past depends a lot on place and time. Until some decades ago, the possibility of changing heritage balanced the preservation issues that now seem much more pronounced. This is only the last and strongest result of the *crisis of critics*. Indeed, never in history have there been so many possible styles, nor has architectural judgment been so tricky. Hence, how can we properly evaluate the past? The result is the rise of an over-precautionary approach – indeed, a bureaucratic drift. All buildings over 70 years old are now automatically considered "important" in Italy. Minor modifications are allowed, but not on their "principal" features. Consequently, urban-scale radical changes are now impossible, and every new building must be "compatible" with this enlarged heritage. No surprise that contemporary architecture in Italy is so weak. Nevertheless, we can (and must) overcome this general situation only *through* design. Mastery in architecture is precisely the ability to tactically exploit the constraints to merge the resilience of form with new meanings, pursuing new architectural aims.

Aurosa Alison

As an architect should feel a duty to ask what happens or what should happen within their projects, let us also take a step forward concerning the concept of form. Form is not solely what appears but is realized through what happens in space. Gillo Dorfles, in the introduction of *Sense and Meaninglessness in Today's Art* (1971), emphasizes the mutual relationship between sense and meaning. To this day, he dwells on a clarification that is still very important, namely, to the refinement of common sense. What we now like to call society has for years been described through the collective figures of meaning: collective imaginary, collective sense. This means that what happens within the meaning (architecture) is the form. The form, in turn, is reflected in its envelope. Picking up on Vico, Dorfles defines collectivity from not only the people or a nation but also from humankind. Humankind possesses the pre-existential form of dwelling, which, echoing Vitruvius, builds huts to defend itself from the wilderness. Even today, we are a genus inclined to protect ourselves and share meanings.

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Two terms

The four questions were variously answered, even if rarely in a direct way. Hence, we organised the contributions into four main sections, based on the reciprocal and traditional articulation between *theory* and *practice*. Aware of the conceptual prejudgements that this distinction implies and the problems it poses, the four sections work more on the relation between them than on their definition. In other words, we used this oppositive couple (theory-practice) to articulate their in-between. Hence, the first section articulates a continuous shift between the two categories. In contrast, the second, third and fourth ones illustrate a gradual balancing, with more theoretical papers – where the references to practical cases sustain a conceptual position – to critical analysis of case studies, where the practice has the central role.

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