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AFTERWORD

The meaning of Meaning in Architecture, now

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A hundred thousand words, even if the questions from which the issue started stayed almost unanswered, some key points must be underlined. Despite any tentative definition, the spurious character of the ontological nature of architecture emerges as ubiquitous, and can be mapped out of the papers of the issue. Just as well, our idea that meanings far exceed forms proved true: only, this "far" was jolly underestimated. Finally, the richness and depth of architectural design result from the complex relationship between local and global trends, approaches, and imaginaries. Then, one more thing must be highlighted: the objective success of the virtual debate. Funny as it was to organise – and cumbersome to page – these comments are, to me, a hint of the deeper meaning of *Meaning in architecture, now*.

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There and back again

A hundred thousand words later, we can finally look back at the introduction and its four main questions – about new forms of meaning, new meanings of form, resilience of meanings, and resilience of forms. On the one hand, we could safely say that they stay open. No one has tried to answer them directly, but they continuously materialise *indirectly*, especially in debates. In my opinion, this indirect persistence confirms my idea that the meaning of architecture is something to deal with, more than to define; something that was so obvious that when it was conceptualised, half a century ago, it became a problem ontologically impossible to solve; something that we continuously irritate through our design actions, but stay on a level of the architectural system we cannot master – because we are inside it.

However, some conclusions could be highlighted, or at least some relevant points.

Four bells

— Architecture as a threshold

The first point is the difficulty of considering *architecture* ontologically. In the original debate, architecture was also continuously mentioned but rarely defined. In the same way, in the present issue, architecture is somehow given for granted: intended as the straightforward result of the work of architects, selected following the system of journals and prizes, evoked as the ethereal dimension of some preferred works, architecture is all but defined. This is evident in the fourth section, as well as the different contributions to the interview. I would say that this is perhaps the strongest confirmation of the spurious nature of architecture: all the theories that tried in the past to give a rational, scientific base just failed in understanding the nature of artistic nature of architecture – or, we could say, the meaning of meaning in architecture. Recalling Vittorio Gregotti's "Architecture Happens," Sarah Robinson's "Architecture is a Verb" goes in the same direction, though with a slightly different sense. In the first case, architecture is the (seemingly) casual result of the system; in the second, it is the quality of the building's performativity. I would say both are right, as they look at architecture from different points of view – from outside the system of architectural actions and from inside. In the first case, with a, let's say, cosmic perspective, architecture is a happening that gets a sense only *after* the changes; and here is, in my opinion, the problem of the ethnographic approaches, which risk changing evolutions into causes – *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, as we could say. In the second, we adopt an individual point of view – the designer's or another one. Hence, here, architecture emerges in the personal experience, and the role of the intentions seems much more relevant (this could recall the *gesture* definition of Wittgenstein); not casually, all architectural narratives stress these expectations, somehow telling us what we should feel and perceive. None of these two interpretations fully define architecture; instead, architecture comes from the interaction of the two dimensions. Hence, yes, it happens, but not casually: only, we cannot grasp its causes nor take both

perspectives simultaneously. This is why meaning in architecture is so elusive, and discourses about it are so disconnected, like each one is speaking of a different thing while calling it in the same way.

— A million and one meanings

The second interesting point is that the plurality of meaning needs to be recognised in the architectural discourses. We said that usually, two main perspectives are unconsciously adopted – the first being the cosmic one and the second the individual one. Yet, there are many more perspectives than this, and this rarely emerges in the present issue: or rather, it appears in negative, with some different perspectives that reveal the existence of this undercurrent plurality of meanings (see, for instance, the contributions of the third section). As a matter of fact, even the individuals – through their intentionalities and mainly unconsciously – attribute various, sometimes inconsistent meanings to phenomena. This assortment is raised to power in groups and communities. Moreover, everything has a recursive, distributed, more or less hidden agency: think of the sudden and explosive effect of the cancel culture, or the impact of the pandemic on design. In the same way, socio-economic issues at all scales have a role in changing our vision of the present and the future. Hence, this plurality far exceeds the denunciation by Manfredo Tafuri fifty years ago – and the following call to arms by Carlo Olmo and many others – precisely because the meaning has the same systemic scale of the society itself, which is (or appears to be) always more complex. The non-architectural meanings continuously, unpredictably irritate the system of architecture – and vice versa, albeit far less: this is why meaning emerges from the projects only after them, despite the narratives of architects. Three are the consequences. The first is that any attempt of "integral design" approaches, typical of the early 2000s, or the new efforts to set hyper-detailed norms, cannot but fail, as they miss the main point – that is, that most meanings cannot be designed at all. The second is that, conversely, any architect can find a niche for his architecture as far as he matches the corresponding system of meaning generation – the success in terms of market is, in fact, a matter of *positioning*. Lastly, this plurality is continuously increased by the fact that designers, in any case, constantly offer occasions of new meanings just by being architects – even if they choose to do nothing, as Cedric Price brilliantly demonstrated – and this, once more, highlights the unavoidable ethical side of architectural design and its *potential* role in the society.

— Same same but different

The third is architecture's obvious – but mainly unexpressed – glocalised nature, which overpasses the global dimension typically associated – and so often blamed – with contemporary architectural design practice and collective imaginary. On the one hand, in fact, the local nature of architecture emerges in the practices described in the interviews and in the last section's articles (albeit also the second section quite clearly highlights this dimension). It is, in fact, clear that the work of architects deals with local issues, problems, values and, ultimately, meanings. On the other, the very same examples show how global the approaches to design can be,

allowing architects to act everywhere while staying faithful to their ideas or schools, inevitably leading to an analogical application of theories, approaches, preconceptions and, ultimately again, meanings. This glocalised dimension is also evident in contemporary architectural education. Indeed, there is a global market for universities, a marathon where the ranking system plays a critical role. Just as well, the market of architectural jobs is international, with younger practitioners applying for experiences and employment in more and less famous firms. At the same time, each of these firms has its own approach to design, typically recited out on their website under a pretentious page named "mission" or "vision". The curious thing is that, besides marketing claims, indeed each firm does *have* a different approach, and a (maybe slightly) different idea of what the "mission" of architecture is. Only, his true success is often linked to his ability to export his internationally, while the "local" relevance is associated with good practitioners. Just as well, each university indeed has a different approach to teaching (and learning). But its importance – and ranking – depends on its international reputation and dimension. Hence, there is a constant irritation – using system theory terms – between: the local system of rules, norms, places, and meanings; the individual approach (where "individual" here identifies the firm, whether it was an actual individual or a team: then, this too is a sub-system), made of theories, skills, workflows, and meanings; and the global influences of architectural cultural and imaginary, which is experienced in any case locally and variously. And this irritation happens everywhere and continuously, globally. This is how architecture emerges: an emergence that only a systemic approach and a purposeful use of meaning to discuss architectural design can explain.

— Means and ends

The fourth point is the relative irrelevance of the means architects use – in the term's broadest sense. For instance, the rise of AI is mainly seen as just the last of a long series of tools; the self-promotion of architects does not take into consideration the sophisticated commercial techniques showed by many newer; the huge budget implied by most architectural examples nowadays is rarely questioned, just as it was presumed; moreover, never the workflow and the work conditions of architects have been cited. We could derive two main consequences of these "inattentions". The first is the idealisation of meanings. Indeed, meanings are automatically linked with the ideal. We struggle to understand that a normal house in a normal flat in a normal block is packed with meanings important to someone. Consequently, we omit considering the ordinary as architecture, save the case in which an architect designs it, adding some "special" meanings. Yet, architects can't decide meanings; hence, this is proof by contradiction that architecture can happen everywhere, and the definition of what is ordinary follows this attribution of meaning. Just as well, by "architect" or "designer", we typically refer to the author of the core concept behind a building, just as art descended from genial intuitions. This negates the long work behind any architectural work and underrates the roles of all other architects, mythicising a few individuals – the archistars and the wannabe ones. The second consequence is the association of

meaning with the result (or the ends) much more than the processes (or the means). On the one hand, this is obvious: just the result grants the success of the process. On the other, it could lead to a severe underestimation of many factors that strongly affect contemporary architecture and the collective architectural imaginary. Social media has changed our relationship with images; AI is revolutionising our way of producing projects; money, norms and non-architectural design issues enormously impact architecture; nevertheless, they are most often ignored in architectural discourses but in exceptional cases. Quite the opposite, what emerges from the papers – in all sections, more or less indirectly – is that meaning in architecture grows from processes exogenous or endogenous to architecture itself. Therefore, understanding the waves of meaning requires overpassing the idealistic illusions of contemporary architecture to valorise the reciprocal influence of the project and the process(es).

Long live debate

However, there is a last point: at least for me, the more paramount. The meaning of *Meaning in Architecture*, half a century ago, was the mapping of vibrant, international debate: a lively arena. It was a geography of thought, where papers and articles were criticised and discussed, where opinions were opposed and mercilessly fought, and where ideas on architecture defined schools and buildings. The contemporary world of architecture is, in fact, quite different. We have endless books and papers on architecture, but no arena exists for discussing it. We have infinite examples of good and bad architecture, but no discussion about what good and bad are. We have universities involved in an international race toward the first positions in various rankings but with a mercurial cultural position. In the age of endless possibilities, where all styles are possible, and never-seen-before wonders are inaugurated weekly, architects and scholars act, speak, and write like monads, congratulating reciprocally for whatever design. That is why the surprising success of the internal debate is so comforting. Thanks to all the authors who produced so many reciprocal comments – and with the perpetual blame of the graphic designer who had to arrange them – many papers have lived twice, and we got something that nowadays is so very rare: the possibility of an open debate. Questioning others' writing is implicitly hampered by the peer-review structure of contemporary journals, nor may there be a sincere interest in exchanging ideas, opinions and judgements – at least compared to the run to publish. Quite the opposite, here, the debate, made virtually by using shared documents to trace the comments, is the very core of the issue, its most original feature and, ultimately, its deepest meaning. The four conclusions highlighted becomes apparent precisely in the comments, where granitic certainties prove their ontological feebleness, where the disclosure of fractures happens through a Derridian *difference*, where plurality appears by the reciprocal deviating references, and where means and ends blur in a layered mixture. We no longer have the granitic certainty of the *Great Debates*, nor the absolute mentorship of the Masters of the past. Nevertheless, we can find new places, new ways and new forms of discussing architecture and its meaning(s), and this issue is a small but lively example. Debate is dead, long live debate.

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