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It is often rightly said that one can only have a genuinely productive discussion with somebody who agrees. Or even better, if he agrees with the general flow of a creative argument, at least in part, it is a useful exercise to probe the differences and thus extract the possible indications for later artistic practice.

Oswald Mathias Ungers' good book *Architecture as Theme* (Lotus Documents, Electa, 1982) could have "How to Come to Good Conclusions by the wrong Roads" as a subtitle.

In substance, the central issue that preoccupies Ungers in the construction of a building is primarily the study and realization of a founding idea, and that such an idea should be within the limits of architecture as a discipline. "A building without a theme, without a supporting idea, is an architectural work without theoretical foundation" i.e. it is not architecture.

This statement points to the nub of the problem: but what is the nature of this "founding idea"?

Loos would probably replied that such an idea is always already determined, and the architect's job is it difficult rediscovery. Personally, I would say such an idea based on the study of a settlement principle able to connect architectural specificity with the context. Gropius would have talked about the rediscovery of the essence of the specific phenomenon with which the building intends to confront itself and that for him such an essence would have depicted the idea of the path between necessity and form.

Ungers prefers to list a series of preferred themes (transformation, assembly, incorporation, imagination) whose nature, if not completely homogeneous, is certainly rather too wide-ranging, and perfectly morphological-linguistic. Ungers intends to utilize in design the analogical-symbolic aspects that are connected to such a nature.

It is a matter of something wider than formal process with which it is possible a posteriori to characterize the architect's work through criticism, but on the other hand his series of themes do not have pretensions to the foundation of a pedagogy or a general methodology. Indeed he is against the idea of a method as a unifying process and declares so several times in the book. Instead there is the necessity to put into practice with specific cases in mind, a process that enables the definition of some structural rules able to guide an entire project at the various scales of definition. Secondary to these there then comes the choice among a series of stylistic variations. Such structural rules (such themes) are then ready to be applied in similar cases, given the presence of particular conditions. What is the foundation of this preference? He explains: the vindication of the autonomy of architecture against functionalism.

To develop these Ungers needs an enemy to fight. He makes one up for himself (a fairly frequent phenomenon among some genuine artists) and individualizes it in his very personalized version of functionalism. As Ungers describes them, the evils of functionalism would be so terrible that anyone capable of practicing them consistently and thoroughly, would become one of the greatest artist of all time. However according to Ungers, functionalism simply becomes everything that architecture should not be, to be called architecture.

Behind his interpretation lies the aggressive and vulgar spectre of the ideologies that presided over the reconstruction of West Germany in the 50s and 60s, and which even today probably hold the professional power in strict continuity with the establishment. In his argument against functionalism there is also the hidden falsification of the goals behind the various pressure groups in the defense of the consumer, a concept, which he rightly opposes.

However, the functionalism that Ungers describes and against which he hurls himself, has very little to do with the use (also the symbolic use) that was made of it in the formative years of contemporary architecture, and very little to do with the foundations of modern architecture with which this concept is connected. Modern architecture has never intended to commit itself simply to the forces of production but had the naive aspiration of controlling them in the name of collective reason and collective interests.

Nevertheless this new functionalism against which Ungers argues (which would be better to rename economic empiricism) is effectively a fundamental enemy to fight against, together with the other one which Ungers mentions i.e. “formal stylistics” that we think firstly as a version updated to the level of mass consensus and its means. And since it is clear to Ungers that for now this ideological force, to which he will not give way is presently leading by popular support vote, nothing else remains but to answer this dark moment in the history, by returning to the idea that representation is the real world (it would have been better not to drag in Kant and Schopenhauer here) and on this basis the architect also must act in order to continue to be.

I believe that our job is rather less glorious but at the same time rather more difficult. It is not at all a question of contributing by means of architecture “to transform the environment from pragmatic reality to the metaphysical world of ideas” as Ungers says, but of proposing the construction of different world through ideas.

It calls to mind the well-known exchange between Picasso and Braque a propos how to make a nail, either with iron or the idea of a nail. The attempt of modern design has been to understand that the idea of a nail is itself part of, and intrinsic to, by its physical being, the re-foundation of its means and ends, and therefore the invention lies neither only in the form of the nail nor solely in its material, but in the rethinking of the essence itself and in its aim in the specific case.

The problem of contemporary artistic practice is not sublimation at all, but truth: to show what things really are like, to keep the maximum clarity possible in their contradictory relationships so as to cause others that might be very old or new or simply richer and wider in significance. This provides an ideal “theme” on which to build the foundations of contemporary architecture.