

POETICS AND POLITICS OF ARCHITECTURE:

STASIS OR CHANGE?

A paper on the discipline of architecture  
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by Maria Grazia Dallerba  
College of Architecture  
University of Kentucky

Center for Developmental Change  
University of Kentucky

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## Prologue

Both the words poetics and politics are open to equivocation. Poetics has become an evasive word; it seems unfit to 'describe' a liveable reality just as politics cannot 'prescribe' one.

The power which poetry (poiesis, the act of making) could exert upon time in ancient Greece, since poetry was the 'word' which described and created the future, was such that the Greeks, in lucid political intuition, gave the name of 'makers', poets, to those beings who put words and concepts and myths and futures together, thereby giving them the highest 'political' status, as the only creators of any significance.

As institutionalized 'reality' proceeded to immobilize verbal and iconic signs into fixed, conventioned meanings which would not threaten the power in charge, the dimension of change in society lost its meta-physical possibility, and became instead just quantitative and qualitative increment of known values and trends.

The real poetic message, agent of change, expressed by its own 'formal necessity' - catharsis of a desire, a vision - and by its potential for liberation from the subjection to any static power, is no longer available.

I say 'no longer' intentionally, because the poetry of the past was revelation of a pre-destined future; it acted in a comprehensive universal organization and was based upon divination of superior wills.

If poetry can now offer a viable hypothesis and an operational parameter, it is because of the tension between the possible, prospective experience, and the reality of present experience.

With no a priori beliefs or myths to verify, poetry insists upon expression of the wonders of life free from oppression.

That is why I equated architecture-as-discipline to poetry, and that is why I question the political ethics of the university environments wherein the discipline is pursued and transmitted.

Could architects today be poets? In a very heroic and difficult way, yes. But not without a lucid understanding that poiesis and politics, or poiesis and existence are not two separate 'jobs'. There can be little use or tolerance for academically disengaged architectural poetry.

The Greeks could afford a peace of mind because their universe of values accepted the inequality of slavery and privilege. But no true intellectual artist, poet, today can be relieved of assuming the political risks consequent to his hypotheses for change.

The paper that follows is probably more than anything else a letter to myself, with memories and thoughts I agreed with, crutches to go on.

What rescues the stasis of the architectures I chose for illustration, is the knowledge that they were poetry in the moment they were born, but they are for us now no more than phylologic ancestry.

We architects have to be the poets for the change that is in the air, in the 'creation', and for which we need to keep ready.

I speak of form as something elusive which keeps luring us on to the next day, and even if I think to express some of it in any work - designing or teaching - I hope it to be open enough to let somebody else envision his own future forms.

I would like to add, that, if it is worthwhile for architects to be 'poets', that is, to be the makers of fragments of reality, it must also be worthwhile to do it with a political existential dimension, whatever the costs, the loneliness, the losses.

*Maria Grossi Dalletta*

to Leonardo Ricci

After several phases of my life in which I have adopted alternate attitudes toward architecture, I am presently in the phase of being inexorably involved with its 'poetic' reality. I now propose the equation; as architecture, so poetry,\* in the meaning of poetry's intellectual reference to composition; to the configuration of a future.

Architecture is for me equated with poetry in process and finality, and not in the subconnotations of irrationality, romanticism, emotionalism. I know the hypothesis 'architecture-poetry' is a political instrumental choice, because a level is sought of intellectual energy, of ethical control of an existence in which the dimension of the future is more than escapism. Furthermore the analogy between architecture and poetry refers to the fact that each requires a language to construct its prefigurations of projected realities. Architecture uses a more hermetic and yet more obvious language of physical signs, or better said, function-signs. But like poetry, it pursues elusive ethical and aesthetical hypotheses.

The communicability of a poetic message by an architectural environment is clear if architecture is perceived as a representation of the real; an iconic interpretation of human need, expectation, and value in the course of history. Architectural objects are to be experimented with as communicative facts, functionality included, but more important than that, they are to be designed as intellectual objects, not assembled as utilitarian goods.

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\*Paraphrased from the humanistic theory of painting "ut pictura, poesis". See: Ut Pictura Poesis - by Rensselaer W. Lee.

Throughout the history of western culture, the mediation of art had granted to the object a position at the top of a pyramid, the base of which was constituted by the 'res naturae', the 'thing' of nature. The object (absolute but open form, or system of all possible relations), was clearly a result of the intellectual operations which abstracted it from the closed entity of nature. Art was the process responsible for the operational praxis of perfecting the "object". The industrial praxis of design has destroyed the cycle between the 'thing' of nature and the 'object of culture'. Today's objects are perceived and produced as goods and images. The artistic 'project', which from the moment of genesis of the idea of the object, controlled its expression, has now been replaced by technical programming for industrialized mass production. More than a project, this planning is a 'deduction' since the final produce is already known as image and is programmed as good.

The public has been conditioned to consume images acritically and to use goods utilitarianistically, with no necessity to become involved with the moral qualities of form. It is our challenge, as XXth Century object makers and consumers, to accept the irreversibility of the modes of mass processes of production. But it is imperative to capitalize upon the redemptive potential that a formative process has when it is the outcome of an ethically and aesthetically engaged definition of 'project'. The 'project' must now reveal the phenomenology of existence, which is missing in technocratic planning.

The objects that we cannot anymore design with the framework of an accepted value of art, are still there - together with the 'things' of nature - for us to transform into the forms for a project,

into the forms of the future. Indeed, the architect is one of the few men left to believe that there is a mystery in the world, that the dark form of a tree in the night against a lighter sky is more than shadow, but a wondrous inversion of the accepted order of things - a discovery all over afresh, to be transposed into new geometric, spatial propositions. Today's real poet could be the only being able to live a poetic, joyful existence without writing poetry. I believe he does write it, however, to sharpen his and our capacity to perceive a new model in which a wordless joy of life would be the reality for everyone. So does the architect, the poet with a vocabulary of physical words; signs, icons, shapes, tactile signals. In trying to prefigure a pre-perfect physical world, in leading us all to envision it, the architect attempts to get us all there sooner.

If we accept as true that the core of architecture is really the necessary enigma of cultural detachment and physical symbiosis between men and their physical world, then the architect (moved as he is by the urge to perceive and construct forms for elusive propositions) delineates himself as a personage of the absurd, bound to poetic goals by a sisyphal discipline. Indeed, Camus writes that: "In that daily effort in which intelligence and passion mingle with and delight in each other the absurd man discovers a discipline that will make up the greatest of his strengths.<sup>+</sup> On the contrary, another architect<sup>\*</sup> says that while today's man proclaims himself a free poet whose instinct must suffice him, he instead knows only those things that he has neither discovered for himself nor yet even checked, because he is a man who has lost the vital energy to ask "why?"

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<sup>+</sup>The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus.

<sup>\*</sup>Towards a (New) Architecture, Le Corbusier.

To this false poet and to the still bourgeois society which is set to breed and perfect him as a consumer, a society for which discipline and engagement are no longer extant, the true architect, the man of the absurd, must give his poetic forms. It is another sisyphal task.

LeCorbusier himself, is a perfect example of an architect at times hermetic, at times folk poet; and once - perhaps - touched by grace, a poet without qualification. But as a humanist, his commitment to life is so total that he refuses to leave unexplored any formal phenomenon that confronts him, in spite of having to design for contemporaries I suspect he cannot admire. From the sun, the mountain and the sea, the square, the cube and the post-cubist cube, color, the architectures of the past, all possible iconic material is embraced by this true philologist. His more hermetic works, (garches, savoye,) "pure creations of the mind" are objects so intellectualized in their investigations of new spatial possibilities, as to seem 40 years later, ultimately cruel and almost uninhabitable, understandable only to the initiated. The Convent of La Tourette is where he achieves perhaps pure poetry, almost totally understandable to any sufficiently naive intellectual and all the "pure at heart". In this project, the iconic program and the purpose of the object adhere with the transparency of the masterpiece: a cube-vessel for the containment of the sky; a convent for intellectuals; a landscape loved but yet confronted as if it were a desert. The metaphysical desert is present even in the sweet south of France, and a post-cubist cube can still be reassembled as a quadratic prism, if the user is as ready as the architect to adventure at a poetic level. If only we could break the utilitarian,



technocratic architectural praxis that prevails today, and that not merely tolerates but even justifies any non-formed object for as long as it will comfortably accommodate the banal requirements of our sub-urban societies! There is no 'discipline' anymore if all there is to architecture is the utilitarian dimension, the cost analyses, the financial feasibility studies; if the architectural object is divested of its potential capacity for invention of new hypotheses about reality.

"The world, is not an object the constitutional laws of which once and for all we know, it is the field of all our thoughts and explicit perceptions".\* By this view, architectural environments may be regarded as becoming part of that field, generating continuous renewal of formal hypotheses, in carrying values over into the next historical time. They are not then to be syncretized into simplistic geometrics with stipulated functional labels. One of our discipline's tasks is precisely that of informing society that architectural objects must function. This is true, but more important is the mode, the form, by which the functions are communicated. Architects and their public, must both engage patiently in the rewarding activity of committing themselves to a phenomenic perception of the world. In such interaction - exchanging discoveries about the forms of reality, we could achieve the production of new forms - perceivable as phenomena, not merely the shapes of physical accommodation but rather the forms of human shelter, the forms of human habitat.

The definition of architecture as a behavior of engagement in poetic form, a discipline of discipline, is incomplete unless the

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\*Phenomenology of Perception, M. Merleau Ponty.

architect is defined, for lack of a less equivocal word, as artist. Because his tenacity of pursuit is not that of the managerial technocrat, but that of an utterly absurd intellectual who serves, as Camus says of any artist -- "suffering and beauty", simultaneously. To quote Camus again "Art" - he says - "against its enemies, justifies itself by proving precisely that it is no one's enemy." Again, "By itself art could probably not produce the renaissance which implies justice and liberty - But without it, that renaissance would be without forms and consequently, would be nothing."\*

I am surprised at myself writing the words art - artist, after having accepted the possibility that art and artists were dead, but that was in the time when I believed that the political dimension of man was more important than any 'formalized objectual message' to the rest of mankind. More important to act for or against something than to prefigure or configure any object that would contain or render possible human acts! I still believe it valid to be in a state of revolt, and I thereby regard as 'dead' any 'artist' who from the Ivory Tower disengages himself from the boundaries of any chosen 'political' ethics! However, it is known to all that the time came when the words liberty, permanent revolution, etc. came to the mouths of too many on every side. Actions for or against anything are manipulated so that they may appear strangely similar; technical words cover realities of sorrow and deserts of tragedy.

Then is when I believe the artists have to come back again as they seem to do every time mankind is endangered, and this time is more difficult than ever because people have almost come to deny their

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\* The Myth of Sisyphus, A. Camus.

poetic perception and because the artists themselves have not exercised poetic and political discipline in their languages for a long time. That is why I feel it is extremely important to convey a message about the poetic reality of architecture, the mental as well as the pragmatic discipline involved in its making, and the potential capacity of its works in the process of liberating man. Architecture cannot and should not prevent revolutions who claim justice and liberty but, paraphrasing Camus, without formed environments to contain and express the renaissance implied by justice and liberty, that renaissance would be less visible and less livable. Accepting all the revolutions that have happened within and about art, it is clear that the language of architecture has undergone many changes as well. In front of us stand the unknowns opened by the knowledge that we are in a postcubist artistic reality of space, that we are in a post-gestalt perception of forms, that we are in the middle of a somatic revolution. We are however not yet in a "post-thinking" reality, thanks to any god. It seems perfectly licit to demand attention to the formal hypotheses that architecture and other arts propound, formal hypotheses which should not toy with life and death, but invite to aesthetic meditation upon these still enormously moving phenomena - spaces for the joys and sorrows of the living, meaning for the living that have gone before us.

Death as a parameter was the meaning of the inscription:

'Et in Arcadia, ego.'<sup>\*</sup> (Death is even in Arcadia). Later Goethe, after his trip to Italy, used it to mean: "I too have been in Arcadia," that half-dreamed, artistic land of poetic shepherds, which he thought to have experienced in Italy. Between these two poles of meaning lies our existential quandary - ethics and/or aesthetics? Whether or not humanist - with life and death as parameters - whether or not utopian - designing unattainable futures - are our Universities Arcadia? And the departments, what are they?

Indeed, what is the situation of the university today, and of ourselves, the sometimes intellectuals, within it? Generalizing, in spite of laudable efforts at self analyses in our dimensions of stasis and change, we are the most ineffectual of the powers within a society. Industrial, financial and political-bureaucratic powers have merged into a unique front with which we have no bargaining power. What is worse, if we cannot prevail with our values and priorities upon theirs, they can, and are, introducing and imposing their priorities and parameters in our research. It is enough to remind ourselves that our chief products - our graduates, are regarded as unfinished and retrained by technocracy. Indeed, all we now presume to offer technocracy is "bargains in brains."

The so called silent majorities (the dead ones for Dante, by the way) supposedly behind the master puppeteers, should instead be the public we could serve, engage in dialogue. But they are purposely

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\* Meaning in the Visual Arts, Part 7, Erwin Panofsky.

alienated from us, dead to us, because it is well known what happens when anyone appeals to the best side of another. People rise up from objection and start walking upon their materialistic values, as the Romans did when they left their rich status to become poor wretched Christians. So the artists, the true intellectuals, are now the new Christians. Unfortunately we do not have their post-terrestrial life-certainties to offer as a reward for an engaged-life on earth. We can, however, be even more fearless. What do we stand to lose anyway? In a post-affluent society, the only danger is that of becoming deprived of the capacity of inventing and thinking new realities.

By inventing them at the intellectual, hence political level, we exercise precisely the rights we should have conquered by now, that we have obtained freedom from want. If we are not permitted to exercise these rights, then we have been fooled. Not only are people still slaves to hunger in many places on this earth, but those like us, who are not hungry anymore, still behave as slaves -- slaves, moreover, to "Nothing."

Should we in the colleges of architecture, teach only within the parameters of this curse, so that the 'nothing order' of technocracy may not be disturbed? So our disciples may learn that there is a slot-answer for everything, that no mystery, no invention are necessary anymore? If we want them to offer marvelous forms - poetry to our society - should we either induce their drop-out to some desert, where they may dream, or as some do, smoke their poetry out? Or should we create just rebels, since we cannot give them any help to enable them to become true revolutionists.

The adjustable, all-purpose technocrat is a product we cannot perfect because architecture is not quantifiable in recipes and formulae,

and, for that matter nor are people. By now I must sound like a Cassandra, or worse.

I am not a pessimist and I do not advocate bloody revolution, since, as the probable last hope left to mankind, the University has never been less able to afford either pessimism or masochistic revolts. Indeed, I also refuse to do any chest beating about the knowledge we still may have to achieve before we can impart any. We do have knowledge that must suffice, and competence in our discipline, and should we prove inadequate, then at least we were inadequate with passion. The only problem is how to render this evident in an operation which will engage our students, departments and "society," so that old knowledge may be reacquired when needed and new knowledge may be created together. So what should we stand to ask and propose? First to regard the schools of architecture and urbanism as places in which "the production and transmission of technologically exploitable knowledge" - paraphrasing Habermas" are not the main and only scopes - issues.\*

This would immediately prepare the path toward instituting an intellectual dialogue with other disciplines, which would go beyond interdisciplinary purposiveness, beyond mere passive instrumentality, and would put our discipline back in the perspective of the liberal and liberating art that it is. And as occasions arise, by engaging in ethical-political and aesthetical-poetic confrontation within and especially without the university, with the disciplines of the sciences and of the "other arts", we would be enabled to communicate and qualify

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\* Towards a Rational Society - Jurgen Habermas.

the profound significance of architecture, at all its scales, for the life of man. "Taking possession of space is the first gesture of living things, of man and of animals, of plants and of clouds, a fundamental manifestation of equilibrium and of duration. The occupation of space is the first proof of existence,"\* is again a quote by an architect - but I would like to add that, for architecture to be enabled to give forms to the spatial existence of man, it is necessary to establish parameters of quality by which the operations of the architect ought to be measured. And furthermore I submit that the architect must be perfected for the mission of providing spaces for a poetic life, which is at least as serious a proposition as that for a 'useful' life, and perhaps even more so.

The Arcadia we carry in our minds must cease to be suspected of being an evasive dream because it is really a subversive project aimed to introduce into life the dimension of poetry, which is ultimately that of a future which has the forms of justice and liberty. We should instead begin to construct toward this Arcadia which holds life and death as parameters, and which we must prefigure differently from the 'ready made' utopias promised by technocracy. And I do not believe we can simply lecture men about the moral necessity to live an aesthetically committed life. The University can, and will have to, do more than that. I would like sometimes to see 'us all' in one of our universities, engage in exchanging hypotheses about the qualities and forms of the space that as twentieth century men we ought to dwell in, . . . perceive and invent. We may want to commit just a decade

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\* New World of Space - LeCorbusier.

to verify some of these hypotheses, just to build a new space for the university and its men. Physical, metaphysical, intellectual, political. . . 'poetic' space.

Should we 'project' into a future, or let ourselves be designed by a technocratic fate? Should we 'architect' a present with vision? We can choose! We must choose. "It is a question of a continued profanation of our space or a reassertion of its 'sacredness', and a quest anew for its transformation to that end".\* I hope we will choose. The masochistic revolts we have witnessed in the universities in the past decade are forewarners of the repression which dooms any revolution which negates the necessity of envisioning forms with which to oppose those that now breed death and boredom. Leonardo Ricci, a poet architect says: "The word 'vision' has as its root-meaning 'to see', not to foresee. It is enough to see - . . . the earth, at times, has seemed to me a tiny little thing, . . . and even tinier when my mind soared to still loftier heights . . . It appeared to me as it might to a god, a thing created, capable of transformations on the eighth day . . . When it was up to man, that is, to continue with life after God had finished his creation . . . But at all times, I have seen . . . forms that could be built and become tangible."\*\*

Throughout the "eighth day" of creation, we have instrumentalized the Earth almost to its death. We have searched it through for myths, gods, grace and reason. What we have found is the potential infinite

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\* Letter to the Author, Anthony Eardley.

\*\* Anonymous XXth Century, Leonardo Ricci.



of our quest and the finiteness of our technocratic answers. The spaces of our search have always been formed with the fear of damnation, the nostalgia for a former paradise, and now with the one dimension of technical survival. The time may be right, now, for us, to architect and reconstitute to this earth which may again be "awaiting as the whole of creation", the spaces we, as imperfect beings, need still to form in order to contain and express our existence - so that we may later, beyond the rationale of poetry and politics, walk into a wordless, formless, spaceless joy of life.