

Between Words and Forms

The design project in search for the possible

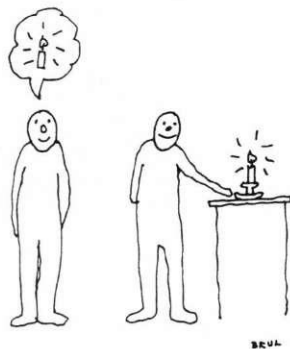
by Constantin Spiridonidis

*“Les images présentent le sens, les mots présentent l’image.
Pour tirer à jour un sens, il n’y a rien de mieux que des images;
pour mettre une image en plein lumière, il n’y a rien de mieux que des mots...
Celui-là donc qui parle pour éclairer les images il atteint les images et il oublie par conséquent les
mots; de même celui qui crée des images riches de sens,
il atteint le sens et oublie les images.”*
Wang Bi, Rêves d’architecture.

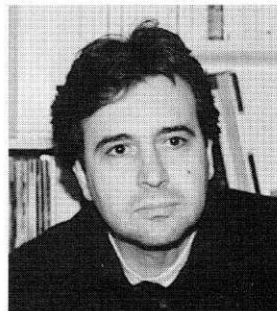
IN THE IMMENSE DIVERSITY OF WRITTEN TEXTS on the subject of built environment, on the urban space and its architecture, we may distinguish one discursive category that is worth considering in detail. It is a category which has been rarely analysed, scarcely discussed and often marginalised in doctrinal debate on architecture and the city. It’s about the specific discourse (principally written) of architects accompanying their presentation of architectural and urban designs. This kind of presentation has at least in contemporary practice become an inevitable obligation, almost institutionalised, and an integral part of the actual projected design. We will call this discourse a *discourse of legitimation*. The objective of this text is to approach this specific type of discourse by way of looking at it from two complementary points of view. One starts out to delineate certain basic and fundamental specificities of its content. To examine the articulations of this content with the design activity and specially with the form of the expression of the “conceptual” primary material which structures the beginning of architectural and urban design. The other point of view starts out to examine the contents of the discourse of legitimation as the means through which we can reveal the modalities and the conditions of the design process.

The words between conception and legitimation

The discourse of legitimation is characterised by a number of specificities among which we might distinguish four as the most significant ones:



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The first relates to the fact that this discourse has as its principal objective to produce the means for a better understanding of what in the designed form belongs to the architectural expression. It is referring explicitly or implicitly to a specific system of values and aspects, to a grid of ideas totalling the whole spectre of objectives and practices that within a specific given socio-cultural or historical context invades the work of an architect. In spite of the fact that its obvious referent is a concrete proposition of a space to be built, its ultimate aim is to concretise through the intermedium of words the fundamental principles of the project; to make the ideological and deontological background that surrounds the will and the intentions of the architectural action evident and which constitutes the intellectual sign differentiating the architect from the common builder.

A second specificity of the discourse of legitimation is its necessary complementarity with another system of references of a different nature: the designed or already built architectural forms. This discourse constitutes a framework of reference that never claims its autonomy in itself. Even if the expressive power of architectural forms are in themselves too poor to avoid the use of language to explain them, the resolution in the architectural forms of ideas of their creators, as reminds us Rivkin (1987:45), "in the same time too precise and too external for these meanings to remain enclosed in the nets of language and discourse."

The 'semiogenetic' character is the third specificity of the discourse of legitimation. The function of this discourse is to attach to the architectural form certain words that immediately indicates architectural signs, formerly inexistent as such, at least to the observer of the architectural *oeuvre*, drawn on paper or in built reality. This 'semiogenetic' logic is not limited to the level of formal description. It is also deployed at the level of the design process, in the process of creating architecture. By describing and marking the formmaking actions of space to be built, this discourse transforms them to significant, qualified and reasonable gestures.

A fourth specificity of the discourse of legitimation is its pretensions of truthfulness. This discourse acts by way of transforming the voluntary to the obligatory, the arbitrary to the necessary, the ideological to the objective, the false to the truthful. This transformation is subordinated to the principles of architectural doctrine, nourished by the rules and models dominating contemporary architectural practice.

The specificities mentioned above reveals the full richness of the discourse of legitimation as a source of information and knowledge concerning work during the design, concerning architecture in the making. We may for example structure the history of this discourse at least from the 18th century onwards, when the oscillation between practice and doctrinal discourse, between architectural forms and words, between 'expression' and 'saying', becomes a basic condition

for the existence of architecture. We may also explore synchronically or diachronically the different types of arguments by help of which intermedium the architects supported their propositions. We may even compare the different system of values attributed to the way of making the project, the points of departure and methods applied, or even analyse the relations and the compatibilities between ways of architectural and urban thinking and ways of speaking about architecture and the city.

The fundamental conditions of the design project

A more detailed analysis of examples appertaining to this discursive* category leads us to establish the fact that design activity, at least during the twentieth century, is characterised by a limited number of fundamental conditions, among which, three seems to be the most significant ones, because they can circumscribe the modalities of the context within which the intellectual work of giving shape to the architectural and urban space is taking place.

The design project as a permanent recognition of crisis

The first condition is that the elaboration of architectural and urban form is an act, an endeavour nourished by crisis. If we define crisis as a questioning of a dominant system of values and principles, structuring a perception of architecture and at large of the whole world itself. Then we may easily establish the fact that architects almost always speak about a condition of crisis when presenting their projects. We may say that history (at least in recent days) of architecture is nothing but a constant recognition of crisis. All different architectural and urban projects developed along the years are described by their creators as answers responding to a state of crisis that in every case they, by way of projections or constructions, will overstep. In this way every period in the history of architecture constitute not only a way of thinking and morphologically structuring space but also, and principally, a way of defining a situation of crisis to be exceeded.

A more attentive reading of the texts leads us to establish the fact that this recognition of crisis, even if it is often presented as a simple point of departure in a creative and restructuring activity, finally penetrates the full spectrum of behaviours and representations that the architect is putting to work during the elaboration of the project. It is typical that with each recognition or re-definition of such a crisis we may read out explicitly or find out implicitly, a whole new definition of the act of designing.

* This article is based upon an analysis developed within a research project started two years ago. The purpose of the study is to analyse a body of texts reflecting this discursive category, that have appeared in architectural competitions during the last four decades.

The modern movement, for instance, may be considered as the recognition of crisis in the conception of space that occidental history made us inherit all up to the 19th century, defined as a complex and non-reproducible organism. The functional space and every version of it up to the sixties reveals a tentative of modelisation of urban phenomena and this model presupposes a type of space with coherent properties: "abstract Euclidean space, governed entirely by industrial quantities and repetitiveness, a space fundamentally characterised by homogeneity, isotropy and fragmentation and which presents itself as the absolute antithesis to the space of the 'historical' city" (Huet 1986:12). This fundamental antithesis influences the very definition of the act of giving shape to space. The notion of 'conception' used by architects since the classical age to define their work on the project, is replaced during the 18th century by the notion of 'composition' and later by the notion of 'synthesis'. They both imply that the design is an act that com-poses, that *syn-thétei*, according to the Greek word, in other words *putting together*. This logic of putting together implies the full acceptance of the idea that architectural and urban space consists of a certain number of well distinguished elements, ready to be combined, to co-exist in order to create a whole.

By the end of the fifties, we have a new recognition of crisis: The crisis of architecture and of the city as demonstrative fragments of an utopian perception of a new society structured from a simplistic model of general categories of social activities. In response to that, the search among architects for a new scheme structured by basic elements of activity and behaviour linked by quantifiable and objective relations, defined from rational criteria. The design in this instance is defined as a point of departure for the solution of a problem of decision-making and combination (Spiridonidis 1991).

We might as well observe the recognition of crisis in rational tentatives around the end of the sixties when architects supported by theoreticians of the project are persuaded that the preperceived units of activity and behaviour are not recognised by people themselves and that their manifestation also depends on factors of emotion and sentiment. (Cf. par Broadbent 1969:199-200). Therefore it is impossible to describe relations between them in measurable and strictly defined terms. When this was accepted, the design was no longer verbally described by architects as an endeavour of rationally combining predefined units but as an act of creation trying to combine prototypes and original elements, thereby assuring a wide range of behaviour, as much functional as emotional.

The logic of participation was nourished at the beginning of the seventies from the crisis in the preceding model. Architecture and the city could no longer be considered as a system of strong or weak relations between predetermined units. The acceptance of a rather relative social nature of behaviour and judgement, forces the

architects to develop a conception of space as a flexible network for possibilities in development and adaptation of social activities (Cf. Alexander 1976). Within the framework of this conception the design is projected in words as a political activity during which the society, through the intermedium of the architect, predetermines the terms of its spatial manifestation according to the image of its own future.

Post-modernism emerges from the crisis of modernism and of all its versions. The city and its architecture is no longer regarded as permitting specific behaviour and social practices, but something which imposes it by its capacity to inscribe, to transcribe and to bring history and culture to life. Architecture, urban culture and society is now presented as autonomous but intricately interlaced through the medium of meaning. In this case, the design project is considered by the architects as a combination of significant units, as the spoken word, as governed by rules of syntax.

"If something is unforgettable", once told us Jorge-Luis Borges, "we cannot think about anything else". The precedent examples make it quite clear that there are no unforgettable approaches to architecture and the city and that architects are readily capable to reorganise their strategies and points of departure derived from these standpoints, remaining with their main preoccupation of elaborating the project. To design cannot be considered a stable and unchangeable practice. There is no exhaustive definition and diachronic in the making of architecture and the city, but on the contrary, every period in history and each new culture introduces with certainty its proper way of understanding and applying new measures in the making of built space.

The design project as an exercise in excision

The second condition in the making of architecture and the city that can be derived from the analysis of discourses of legitimation is that the design project as an elaboration of giving shape to space is not necessarily and principally presented as a synthesising and creative activity but rather as resolute and analytic; as an exercise in fragmentation* of spatial continuity according to criteria, rules, knowledges, representations of more or less definite character.

The elaboration of the design project constitutes a transformative action transforming pre-existing spatial and social structures. Such an act presupposes a certain perception of the pre-existent; presupposes a knowledge of what exists already. The acquisition of this knowledge constitutes a labour that inscribes itself into the logic of the project when architects don't try to refer to it as a stage mobilised by

* The author writes *découpage* in French original and prefers *fragmentation* as a translation. The translator believes however *excision* is a more correct translation.

desire or by the obligation to design project. The objective of this labour is the fragmentation of the pre-existent in well defined spatial elements. These are in turn given as principal actors in the elaboration of the design project.

The modalities of this fragmentation do not remain stable. The architects of the modern movement were cutting out space following a general and unique logic according to which spatial elements thus object to fragmentation, that is to say functional units, can then in turn be reorganised in concrete units. The Modern Movement applied this logic in order to define social activities and the four basic functions introduced by that same theory in space. In the sixties we can once again find the logic of modernism active with the sole difference that in this case spatial elements cut out correspond to elementary units of behaviour (Cf. e. g. Alexander & Poyner 1973).

The movements of participation in the seventies are not residing in one sole logic, concrete and operational in order to produce a fragmentation of space. In spite of the fact that spatial behaviour constitutes the principal criteria of fragmentation, the participating public seemed the decisive factor in the definition of the spatial elements so cut out, that were then introduced in the design process.

The post-moderns are proposing an fragmentation of space, disengaged from obligations of one and only one general logic. As a consequence this proposition led to the disengagement and liberation of spatial elements from the strong relation formerly uniting them. This fragmentation permitted the coexistence of different spaces, of mixed functions, of a multiplicity of signification. The logic of collage technique, of superpositioning, of the city in the city etc., is displaying nothing else but this new logic of fragmentation.

Another characteristic of this activity of splitting pre-existing space into pieces, in order to introduce them later in the development of the project, takes on a series of different nominations: the pioneers of modernism calls it 'analysis', the methodologists of the sixties 'problem definition', militants of creativity 'sensation', the participationists 'comprehension' and the semioticians of the seventies and eighties 'reading', the deconstructivists 'disjunctions'. To analyse, to define, to sense, understand, read, disjoin, all these are just different forms of approaches to the pre-existent spatial and social structures and to prescribe new strategies, attempts and avenues of approach in order to bring form to the architecture of the city.

The design project of phantom reflection – simulacres

A third condition that we may discern from the analysis of discourses of legitimation is that the project is nourished and mobilised by phantom reflections, of *simulacres*. It's a fact in the realities of architecture that it emerges and is concretized from image references which in turn are becoming real beings (Guiheux 1988). The building and

the city is constructed, or is reconstructed, from an imaginary level composed of multiple representations and is then again represented and manifested in forms and sayings. This way, the image, the imaginary, sometimes even the spectacular, the phantom reflection, *le simulacre*, is becoming the true framework within which the development of the project is realized.

We can make two observations concerning these metaphoric images (or not). The first one is that these are never contradicting the two other conditions we have examined above. The second observation is that these are not only structuring the thoughts of the architect but also influencing different attempts applied throughout the design process.

The human body physically perfected the building and the city during the renaissance period: The design project was primarily oriented towards the aesthetic dimension of the urban art of building. The human body psychologically in balance during the modern movement: The design was primarily oriented towards the functional balance of zoning. Molecular structures in three dimensions formed the base foundation for elementary units during the sixties: The design project was now oriented towards the rational combination of basic functions. To design meant to put in relation. The societal body for the participationists: the design devoted to the expression of the general social will. Expressive clothing for the society in the eighties: The design devoted to the expression of the cultural character of the urban.

Figures of the architectural and urban being (Ostowetsky 1980:139–172) but also major rules on how to concipiate architecture and how to make architecture come to life. The building and the city are put to constant evolution in space and time, still accompanied by their doubling in speech, their fundamental and profound character concretized through the intermedium of words that each historical period attach to them.

Contemporary dynamics in the making of the project

Let us now try to give the contemporary expressions for the three conditions of the design project that we have examined, the way they emerge through the discourse of legitimation in our time.

About the first condition, we can say that what could be defined as the crisis of the practice of the project is the impossibility to define an acceptable definition to this crisis. It is all about a special crisis, a crisis of the crisis. There is a vast plurality of crisis recognised by the architects in their speeches on their projects. No more grand recitations as they were discussed by François Lyotard (1979), no tolerant aphorisms, no violent polemics. We reach the conclusion with Paul Virilio (1976:27) that “ the grand recitations of theoretical causality (beginning of the century) are succeeded by minor recitations of

practical opportunity (in the middle) and then finally amounts to micro-recitations of autonomy" nevertheless still claiming to remain tolerant and polemic.

We are affronted with the decisive decline (progressive?) of generally shared ideals, architects with recitations more or less restrained are gaining from this. These recitations are linked to the autonomous development of the individual, towards a dominance of personalized architectures, pointing towards discourses of legitimation very difficult to categorise in typologies. The consequence for the practice of the project are that from now on emphasis is shifted towards "means" rather than on "ends", on the particularities of applied points of departure rather than on the expressive coherence of the architectural product.

Concerning the second condition, e. g. the fragmentation of existing reality, we can state that the issue of fragmentation has nowadays become the essential problematic of giving shape and form to space. In all approaches mentioned above, it is easy to identify types of codification related to excision. If excision is more or less taken for granted, emphasis is put on the way of treating elements produced in this process. When these elements were functions, the project was considered an act of composition. When these elements were significant units, the project was considered a syntactical act.

In our time, the crucial problem for practice is no longer the choice between composition, syntax or conception but the excision itself. The act of excision becomes a more important question than the act of putting together, the representation becomes a question far more essential than the actual construction. This importance is derived from the fact that the excision in itself has become an object of invention, a project in its own right in the making of architecture, a place where the personal character of the work of architects finally is precised, developed and declared. We are living through a period in architecture that Gilles Lipovetsky (1983) defines as a process of personalization.

Concerning the third condition we can mention the absence of a concrete image as a possible source of inspiration for the architects. The city is fading as an image of the living and is converted into cuts and excisions, artificial pieces, dynamic systems, stripes, geometry, axes etc. The building distinguishes itself more and more from obsolete organic discourse and becomes an object open to any signification, as a pure object of design. The moment when a strong image of the city no longer prevails, the question of image becomes an essential problem of our time. The constitution of an image of the city through the intermedium of architecture is not only a new legitimacy of contemporary reflections concerning the urban, but also an essential imperative for architectural practice, recomposing the city, formerly impossible to administer and totally out of control, resetting

the whole scene through the image. Nowadays, to intervene in the city means to invent, to structure and to project a new image through architectural forms and expressions. In our time, to take control of the city signifies to construct its image. (Guiheux 1988:24).

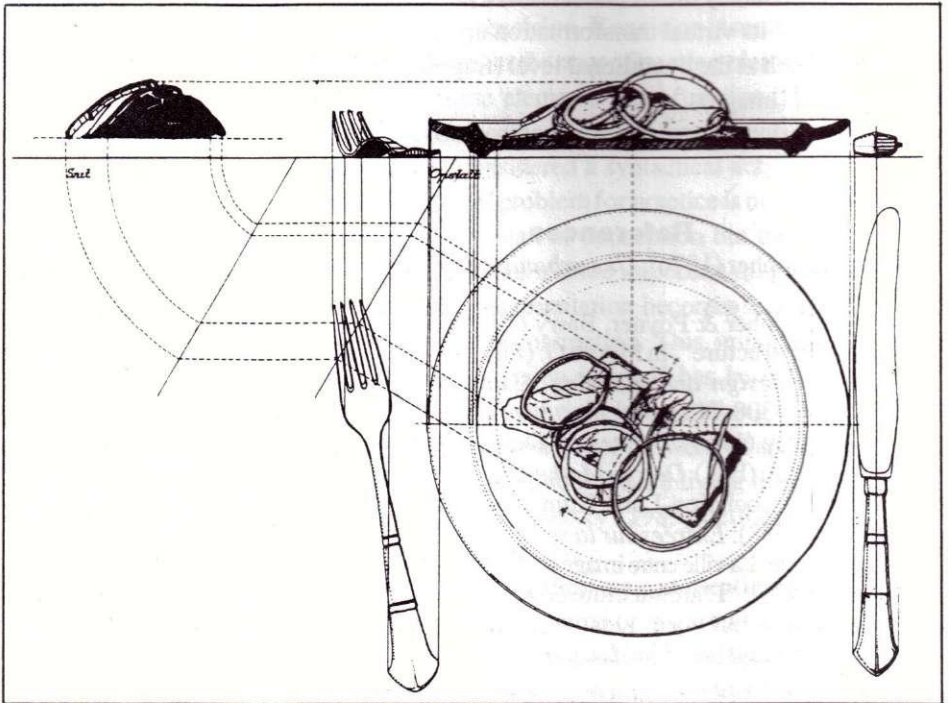
The contemporary characteristics of these three conditions of the project describe some essential dimensions of the internal logic in the making of architecture and the city in our days. This logic is nothing but a dynamic situation where its own transformation is the fourth fundamental condition, as much in the definition of its being (être) as in its appearance (paraître). We might say that the reality of the built environment is nothing but a virtual truth relative to the way each and every epoch understands and accepts it. The being of architecture and the city is confronted with a situation of permanent movement, where speed is raised in every moment and even more accelerated when approaching the contemporary era. We can also say that the synchrony of architecture could be defined as the questioning of all preceding approaches (the crisis) by the architects or as a prefigurative vision in their own minds of its virtual transformation up to the limits of what is possible, as much at the operational level (fragmentation) as at the discursive level (image).

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Translation from French
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