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Archite(x)ture: texts and pre-texts of architecture for ruin

Abstract

The contribution is about the concept of architecture as a text, analyzing its syntactic structures and its semantic questions. Specifically, it is emphasized how the project for the ruin establishes a dialogue with the ancient remains on the basis of a language and a common sense, through interpretations, resemantizations and integrations. The combination between architecture and semiology allows us to identify - case by case - possible design syntaxes in the archaeological field. Abandoning the idea that the architect should only guarantee the survival and the transmission of historical evidence with minimal, reversible and recognizable interventions, it is necessary to define a methodological approach that returns to the ruins a new aesthetic, cultural and use value.

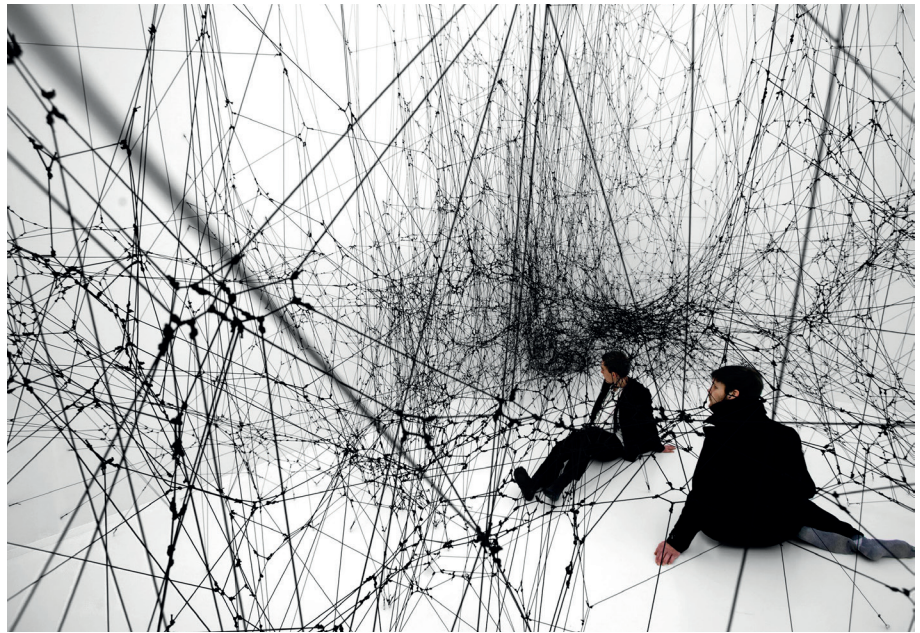
Keywords

Writing — Ruins — Palimpsest

Architecture is a form of language that aims to transmit messages: in the architectural text, observes Luciano Semerani, there is an intentional use of forms, a decision-making process that derives from the desire to achieve certain effects. Also the architectural work can be understood as a text to be decoded through the analysis of its syntactic structures and semantic questions, in order to reconstruct the process of formal choices that lead to a narrative construction¹. The combination between the narration and the architectural field turned out to be open and complex, as it is able to constitute a discursive system within which to meet different opinions and orientations². As Vittorio Gregotti writes, in fact, the story is one of the most concrete materials for architecture: «la narrazione architettonica (ma non mi pare molto diverso per gli altri tipi di narrazione) è un procedere dentro, per mezzo di un soggetto verso un contenuto che è anzitutto disciplinare, e muove attraverso di esso e per mezzo di esso, verso qualcosa che può divenire nel significato, oggi, domani o forse tra molto tempo, per gruppi limitati o per ampie collettività, senza che ciò possa essere in alcun modo predisposto»³.

The same idea of writing is nothing but the metaphor «dell'incessante spostamento e della conseguente, continua ricollocazione di materiali tematici e motivi formali, soggetti a una costante evoluzione»⁴, according to Franco Purini.

All architecture is presented as *text*, but only few cases are examples of *writing*: this is composed of *signs* but the difference between the linguistic sign and the architectural sign lies in the fact that in architecture there are no arbitrary signs because they have essentially a function - formal or structural - and they are always motivated, always present.

**Fig. 1**

14 Billions, Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm, T. Saraceno, 2009.

On architecture as a text much has been written, especially since the eighties of the twentieth century, thanks to the contribution of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida who has largely dealt with this issue. In architectural writing he experiments a writing able to subtract the elaboration of the sense of experience - therefore of thought - to the sovereignty of *logos*, understood as a living word conceived as *a unity of sign and meaning*.

The philosopher argues that we need to start from the spatialization of writing, understood as «irreducible condition of experience (...) constituted in relation to otherness in general, to the environment in which it inscribes, which it traverses, modifying it»⁵ and imprinting its own traces for the time to come. If on the one hand, it is possible to think of architecture as text, in which the different scripts have stratified over time, in the same way, observes Derrida, it is possible *to think of architecture as a writing subject*: «we can understand that architecture itself is writing, which is not only written [written on] but also writing, actively writing»⁶.

In light of this dual nature, he rediscovers the characteristics of a multi-dimensional writing capable of retracing the dynamics of experience as a formulation and of a proper syntax that does not depend on the sovereign *logos*⁷. Furthermore, it is possible to inscribe and articulate in architectural writing the experience in its multidimensionality⁸, since the factual dimension is included in the structure of the architectural device itself: sequence, open seriality, narrativity, cinematic, dramaturgy, choreography⁹. *Multitemporal* value is added to its multidimensionality: this feature - all within architecture - is even more evident when working within an architectural text, such as the ruins, which necessarily involves a reflection on the parts - existing and missing - to understand the changes over time.

The pre-existing *traces* in which architectural writing is woven, in fact, «no longer have the value of documents, annexed illustrations, preparatory or pedagogical notes»¹⁰ but contribute to constitute «a voluminous text of multiple scripts» - which is architecture -, an «over-sedimented textuality, stratigraphy without bottom, mobile, light and abysmal, stratified»¹¹.

This is particularly evident in the case of the project for archeology: this too is the hypothesis of a text that, as Francesco Rispoli writes, «orders successive 'postils'». As these become mute even the initial implant of the text and its final coherence is entrusted to the completion of this 'circular'



Fig. 2

Praça Nova Do Archaeological Site Castelo De São Jorge, Lisbon, J. L. Carrilho From Graça and J. Gomes da Silva, 2009.

rewriting operation¹², in which past, present and future coincide.

In contemporary culture, there is the idea that the figure of the architect has the task of acquiring in his own memory the data collected by the historian and the archaeologist, reading them as a dynamic process and seeking the values of permanence precisely in the reasons of the necessary transformations¹³ for the design of the new.

In his American lessons, Italo Calvino refers precisely to the theme of transformation as the main and vital characteristic of the literary work: «(...) l'universo si disfa in una nube di calore, precipita senza scampo in un vortice d'entropia, ma all'interno di questo processo irreversibile possono darsi zone d'ordine, porzioni d'esistente che tendono verso una forma, punti privilegiati da cui sembra di scorgere un disegno, una prospettiva. l'opera letteraria», e tanto più l'opera di architettura, «è una di queste minime porzioni in cui l'esistente si cristallizza in una forma, acquista un senso, non fisso, non definitivo, non irrigidito in una immobilità minerale, ma vivente come un organismo»¹⁴.

Like a literary work, even an architecture is such when it survives its time and transforms plastically and semantically to adapt to the needs and qualities of the epochs that happen to it. This concept is also expressed by Daniel Libeskind in *Radix-Matrix*, when he writes that «if I were sure (...) [that a] work will never be altered, then it would not be a work. A work must be left beyond your life, left exposed to manipulation or reinterpretation. This is the reason why you build. Fragility itself is part of the possibility of the work»¹⁵. The re-interpretation of which Libeskind speaks follows multiple interpretations that modify both the object of interpretation and the interpreter approach. This is because a relationship is established, a mediation that makes the investigated and interpreted past simultaneous with the present of the interpreter, with the contemporary unknowingly experienced by the designer¹⁶.

In this way, it is generated what Vittorio Gregotti calls 'semantic thickening' of a work, due to the narrative interpretation / modification of a context: the design of the new, therefore, must be considered in this light, as an interpretation of the relationship of mutual interdependence between *pre-text* (pre-existence, ruin, the past) and *con-text* (the landscape, the present and the history of places), because one manages to describe and give meaning to the other, in an always reversible process.

Alongside the interpretative role of the new project in relation to the pre-existence, however, it is possible to recognize a parallel and active role of

the project: starting from the reading, interpretation and understanding of the work just come to light, the project takes on a further meaning, becoming itself a text, because, as Torsello observes, «il comprendere non è mai solo un atto riproduttivo, ma anche un atto produttivo (...) secondo un ciclo produttore di senso che si rinnova sempre»¹⁷. It is by virtue of this operation of *rewriting of architecture* that the archaeological ruin can be described as an open and virtual work.

To work with the ruins, it is therefore necessary to carefully understand the orientations that they are able to offer, in order to transform them into sympathetic entities of the contemporary¹⁸: the way in which this process is implemented can not be univocal because univocal is not the meaning of ruin. Among the possible approaches there is what Andres Hild calls “*continue to write*”: this idea does not worry if continuity or recourse to innovation is necessary, but «is concerned with all its internal reason and not its linear classification»¹⁹.

The “*continue to write*” considers, in fact, architecture as a form of writing with its own internal rules but open to different interpretations, in which archeology becomes an active and foundational matter: archaeological ruins therefore present themselves as shreds of ancient texts, words that need to be re-circulated, through new languages and new narrative rhythms that have changed over time.

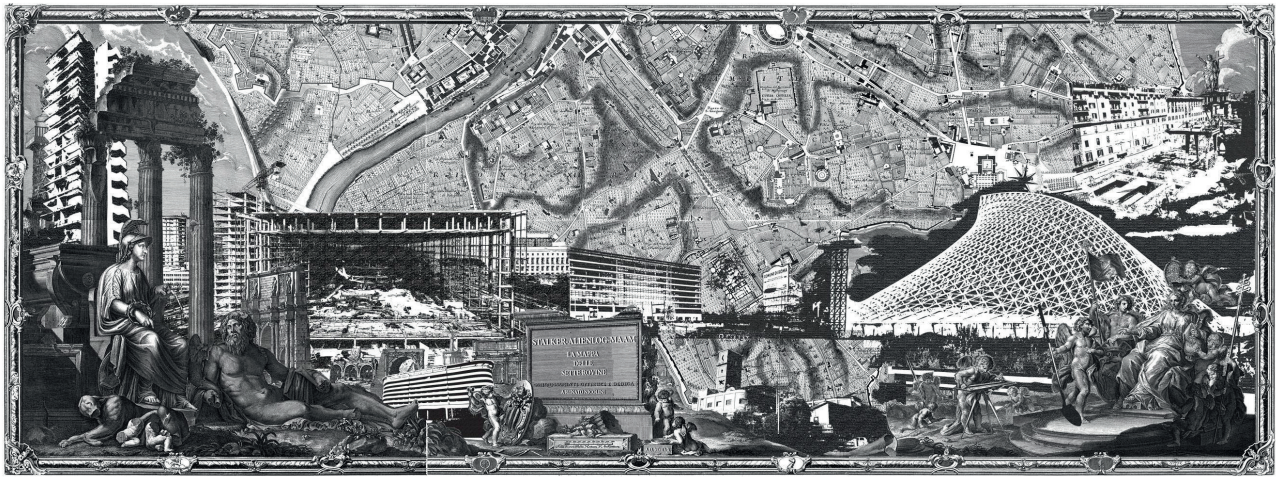
As Raffaele Panella writes, in fact, if we do not consider considerano «i resti (...) come materiale del progetto moderno, per essere più chiari, se essi non sono declinabili nello stesso sistema semiologico dell’architettura, è come se lavorassimo ad una grande tela con dei buchi. Abbiamo fatto un passo avanti notevole nel senso della continuità risolvendo le connessioni, i bordi (su cui in ogni caso c’è ancora tanto da esplorare), ma se dobbiamo entrare (...) in quello che Manacorda chiama “lo spazio archeologico”, con l’obiettivo di comunicare attraverso l’uso e la forma, quale che sia, il senso di quel luogo, non c’è altro modo che considerare i resti, i pezzi (...), come materiali manipolabili dall’architettura, in un rapporto che non può essere altro che di contaminazione. D’altra parte, tutte le grandi opere che testimoniano di una continuità realmente realizzata sono effetto di una contaminazione»²⁰.

The great temporal distance between the past of archeology and contemporary poses the question of the language and the different interpretations of stratified texts at the center of the compositional problem. The overlap of the architectural layers manifests itself in the quality of the relationship - or of the relationships - between the new and the existing.

A possible choice, rich in unexplored potential, of designing in the archaeological field is precisely that of accepting the logic of the project itself as a linguistic act that, starting from the objects it has, ie the ruins - the same objects that Claude Lévi-Strauss would call *les moyens du bord*²¹ - and from which it turns out to be disposed, it determines new sorting relationships, new forms that are critically modifying and meaningful, just as the *bricoleur* does.

Interacting with the pre-existences, with the relationships between the parts, with the materials and sometimes with «simple clues emerging from the interstices of torn plots»²², necessarily involves the selection of some available elements, some signs, to organize them according to criteria and techniques that determine hierarchies and sequences, through a *narrative rhythm*.

These relationships redefine connections with the ruins, revealing the potential and value of the places full of memories, rather than foreseeing a

**Fig. 3**

La mappa delle sette rovine,
Stalker, Alienlog, MAAM, 2014.

foregone contrast between old and new. Through the signs of the ancient, significant traces received as an inheritance, the designer identifies the permanencies and *long lasting* elements that determine the project, interpreting their past.

Considering the project as a narration and as a linguistic act, necessarily leads to analyze those that are the basic techniques of this process: the compositional control of new architectural ensembles comprising pre-existences and made up of different parts, linked by strong formal, functional and constructive additions, takes place in this light on the basis of linguistic, syntactic and typological techniques²³.

Imitation, quotation, autonomy, hypothesis, parataxis, analogy, hybridization and contrast become the tools through which the designer can define a possible path that avoids mechanically finding its definition elements in the pre-existing contextual field and at the same time avoids referring to abstract models without any memory of the place²⁴, continuing to write with the past future tales.

Notes

¹ Marzo M. (2010) - "Postfazione". In: M. Marzo (a cura di), *L'architettura come testo e la figura di Colin Rowe*. Marsilio Editori, Venezia, 201.

² Purini F. (2012) - "Scrivere Architettura". In: F. Rispoli (a cura di), *Dalla forma data alla forma trovata*. Luciano Editore, Napoli, 57.

³ Gregotti V. (1987) - "Della narrazione in architettura". Casabella, 540, 2-3.

⁴ Purini F. (2012) - cit., 58.

⁵ Vitale F. (2012) - "Tracciare Disegnare Pensare. Jacques Derrida e la scrittura architettonica". In: F. Rispoli (a cura di), cit., 77.

⁶ Cfr. Derrida J., Eisenman P. (1993) - "A proposito della scrittura. Jacques Derrida e Peter Eisenman". Any, 0.

⁷ Cfr. Rispoli F. (2012) - cit., 80-81.

⁸ Cfr. Tschumi B. (1994) - *Manhattan Transcripts*. Academy Group, London.

⁹ Cfr. Cuomo A. (2015) - *La fine (senza fine) dell'architettura. Verso un philosophical design*. Deleyva Editore, Roma, 64.

¹⁰ Derrida J. (1986) - "Point de folie - maintenant l'architecture". In: B. Tschumi, *La case vide. La villette*. Architectural Association, London.

¹¹ Ivi.

¹² Rispoli F. (1990) - *Forma e Ri-forma. Interpretare/ progettare l'architettura*. CUEN, Napoli, 100.

¹³ Cao U. (1995) - *Elementi di progettazione architettonica*. Università Laterza Architettura, RomaBari, 3.

¹⁴ Cfr. Calvino I. (1988) - *Lezioni americane*. Garzanti, Milano.

¹⁵ Cfr. Libeskind D. (1997) - *Radix-Matrix*. Prestel, Munchen-New York.

- ¹⁶ «L'essenza dello spirito storico non consiste nella restituzione del passato, ma nella mediazione, operata dal pensiero, con la vita presente». Gadamer H. G. (1986) - *Verità e metodo*. Bompiani, Milano, 207.
- ¹⁷ Torsello B.P. (1997) - “Conservare e comprendere”. In: B. Pedretti (1997) - *Il progetto del passato. Memoria, conservazione, restauro, architettura*, cit. in V. Bagnato (2013) - *Nuovi Interventi sul Patrimonio Archeologico. Un contributo alla definizione di un'etica del paesaggio*, Tesi di Dottorato in Proyectos Arquitectonicos, E.T.S.A. di Barcellona (Universidad Politécnica de Cataluña).
- ¹⁸ Cfr. Izzo F. (2014) - “Sostenere la civiltà. Contemporaneità e topografia del tempo”. In: A. Capuano (a cura di) (2014) - *Paesaggi di rovine. Paesaggi rovinati*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 276.
- ¹⁹ Intervista riportata anche in Hild A. (2012) - “Gedacht/ Gebaut. Valutazioni architettoniche”. *FAMagazine*, 21.
- ²⁰ Panella R. (2014) - “Per la continuità”. In: A. Capuano (a cura di), cit., 66.
- ²¹ Cfr. Derrida J. (1971) - “La struttura, il segno e il gioco”. In: J. Derrida, *La scrittura e la differenza*. Einaudi, Torino.
- ²² Rispoli F. (2016) - *Forma data forma trovata*. Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, Salerno, 131.
- ²³ Cfr. Cao U. (1995) - cit.
- ²⁴ Cfr. Rispoli F. (2016) - cit., 134.

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